

Joseph LaFave Feature Writing Portfolio W09

Tower power: Strasburg residents tap into their creativity

By Joseph LaFave

The Northern Virginia Daily

What started as a simple Facebook post has grown into something of a phenomenon in the town of Strasburg.

Hundreds of people flexed their creative muscles and posted their own memes of the town's water tower, which is currently undergoing exterior renovations and can often be seen wrapped in its beige potato sack-like shroud.

The popularity of the posts prompted Olivia Hilton, Strasburg's Director of Strategic Initiatives, to start a small competition that allowed the town's Facebook users to "vote" for their favorite designs.

On Friday Hilton announced the winner — an image designed by Samatha Tierpack depicting the now infamous water tower as the star of the pivotal pottery wheel scene in the 1990 romance film "Ghost," starring Demi Moore and Patrick Swayze.

"It kind of worked out perfectly with the shape of it and that scene of the movie," said Tierpack.

Tierpack also confessed that her entry was a joint effort with her husband Kevin, the same man who posted the original image of the water tower that sparked the competition.

"He took a video of the water tower and did a funny reel on Facebook," Tierpack said. "He took a screenshot and drew something funny on there and put it in the comment section and told everyone let's have some fun, and a lot of people started doing it."

The second-place image presented the water tower transformed as a "minion" from the "Despicable Me" franchise and was created by Beecher Bowers.

Coming in third was Tom and Colette Mazingo with their picture of King Kong battling an airborne armada of biplanes atop the water tower.

Tierpack said it was great to see the community come together and do something fun.

"I think it was a fun thing for everyone, it was good to see everyone come together, especially during the holidays," she said.

Hilton admitted that the town staff had fun with the competition as well and used the event as an opportunity to engage with the community.

"It's not common for a government entity to have an opportunity to almost poke fun at ourselves a little bit and make light of something that's like the elephant in the room," Hilton

said. “I think it says a lot about our community that they were so eager to have something positive to interact with one another.”

Hilton said it’s not a surprise how much thought some people put into their designs.

“We’re an extremely creative community, we have artists and makers and creators all throughout town,” she said. “It’s nice to see them all put their own spin on it.”

The water tower has stood over the town since 1930, and the interior of the tower was renovated in the last few years.

The current work on the tower involves stripping off the old paint and applying new coats. According to Jay McKinley, the town’s Director of Public Works, the current schedule shows the work being done by the middle of January.

“It’s gonna last another 100 years if we take care of it,” McKinley said.

McKinley is the one who originally suggested that Hilton make a competition out of the pictures after his wife showed him all the memes on Facebook.

“It’s a lot of people having good fun with an image and sharing it, and I like what Olivia has done with it by making a competition,” he said.

Besides town-wide bragging rights and a place in Strasburg lore, the winners of the competition received gift certificates to the Strasburg Visitors Center.

Loads of love: Strasburg woman gives her neighbors the gift of clean clothes

By Joseph LaFave

The Northern Virginia Daily

With the temperature rapidly approaching 40 degrees on a recent Wednesday night, many residents in Strasburg found themselves curled up on the couch with a warm blanket, a festive beverage and good company.

But one woman spent her evening standing inside the Valley Laundromat on Massanutten Street, ensuring that those in-need would have enough quarters to do their laundry.

For four and a half years, Jennifer Roszelle has been running the town’s only Laundry Love night. Armed with a bag of quarters and a Laundry Love T-shirt, she fills the machines’ quarter slots for anyone who will accept the help.

Laundry Love is a charity that helps people facing financial hardship do their laundry.

The organization is based in California and was founded in 2003. There are currently just five Laundry Love locations in Virginia — two near Blacksburg, one in Norfolk, one in West Falls Church, and the one in Strasburg. The organization is not highly structured and each location is independent of the others.

Roszelle said she stumbled upon the organization by chance and with a little help from YouTube algorithms.

“I had insomnia and I was on YouTube,” said Roszelle, who has lived in Strasburg since 1999. “You know how YouTube just recommends videos for you to watch, and one was about LaundryLove.org. And that’s what I was looking for! A way to serve my community, and I’m like, ‘I can do that, it’s not a huge time commitment, it’s not a huge financial commitment.’”

Since then Roszelle has been running her Laundry Love night once a month — the last Wednesday of the month from 6 p.m.-8 p.m. She also provides soap and dryer sheets.

“They handle their own laundry, I just put the quarters in, and knowing how hard finances are, I try not to limit people on it, but if we have a lot of people in need, we might have to limit it to two loads per family,” she said. “These are about \$8 [per load].”

Roszelle says the people she helps come from a variety of backgrounds and circumstances. Many are single or young mothers who are pinching every available penny to make ends meet.

“I have two and one on the way, so this helps a lot,” said Shelby Gillespie, 27, of Strasburg as she motions to her two blonde toddlers racing each other across the room. “Especially when they’re sick; it adds so much extra money to what we’re already trying to keep up with, so these days really help.”

Gillespie, along with her mother are folding clothes and keeping tabs on the pair of children. It’s their second time at Laundry Love night and Gillespie is all smiles as she explains how helpful the charity has been during the holiday season.

Roszelle said she knows how difficult it can be to balance expenses as a single parent.

“I used to be a single mom and had little kids and people don’t realize how much it costs,” she said. “We estimated it’s probably like \$150 a month for a small family. You got a single mom with three kids, it’s a lot of money down here.”

Roszelle said that others who come frequently, those she calls her “regulars,” are older and live alone. She tries to keep in touch with her regulars by texting them a reminder when it’s time for Laundry Love night.

“They’re giving me their information so that I can text them, so I respect that. I don’t contact with other things, it’s a reminder.”

Roszelle said donations are accepted at the organization’s website www.laundrylove.org.

Another way to donate and help is to just show up at the laundromat with quarters on the last Wednesday of the month. Roszelle said sometimes other people in the laundromat donate their leftover quarters.

She hopes with the opening of the bus line, more people in the area will have easy access to a laundromat, and that other people will become interested in helping her with her night, or starting their own at their local laundromat.

“If we had a round of volunteers and we could circulate people, that would be great. And if there are other businesses that would like to support it,” she said.

Skyline Soaring Club glides into Front Royal-Warren County Airport

By Joseph LaFave

The Northern Virginia Daily

At first, at least to the uninitiated, the sight of a Schleicher ASK 21 glider aircraft coming in for a landing at the Front Royal-Warren County Airport can be a bit jarring. Unlike a traditional aircraft, this one is completely silent.

It has no engine or motor. It's much smaller than a normal airplane, and its wings are longer and thinner.

As the pilot brings the tadpole-shaped plane around in a tight clockwise bank-and-turn, as to approach the runway from the east, the wings of the airplane wobble, first to the right, then the left, as an errant breeze blows through the valley.

The aircraft is moving faster than one would guess a plane with no engine could go, and as it closes to within feet of the runway, it's traveling nearly 50 mph.

Suddenly two orange blocks spring from each wing, killing the lift and the plane hits the runway. It's not a graceful landing, the plane tips over onto one wing and spins around, coming to a stop facing perpendicular to the runway.

The spectacle is called soaring, or gliding, and the Skyline Soaring Club has been practicing this peculiar discipline of flight here since 1999.

“Gliding is the best-kept secret in aviation, there's only about 12,000 glider pilots in the United States,” said Jim Kellett, one of the club's founders and a current flight-instructor.

Every weekend, weather permitting, aviation enthusiasts come from all over northern Virginia to take advantage of the area's near-perfect conditions for gliding.

The steep sides of the Appalachian mountains provide stunningly powerful air currents, allowing the gliders to reach heights of over 6,000 feet on a good day. The club record for altitude in this area is 16,000 feet.

“The most common type [of air current] we have out here is called thermals, every time you see a puffy white cloud, there's a bubble of warm air that has been heated by the ground and has risen until it gets cool enough for the dew point to form a cloud,” Kellett said.

Riding the thermals as well as other air currents that are formed by wind hitting the sides of the mountains is what gliding is all about. While most of the club's flights are short training

flights of just a few minutes, glider pilots have been known to travel hundreds of miles using nothing but the wind.

To get off the ground though, the glider must be towed by another aircraft. Although it looks like a tractor with wings, the Piper Pawnee that belongs to the club is more than capable of getting the aircraft off the ground. The former crop duster is also flown by club members and is one of two tow planes the club owns.

The club was started in 1991 by a group of glider pilots who decided it made more sense to pool their resources. The organization moved to Front Royal in 1999. Now the Skyline Soaring Club not only provides current glider pilots with the infrastructure necessary to get these birds off the ground, but now also includes a training program, ensuring that the art of gliding will be preserved for generations to come.

The Skyline Soaring Education Foundation also provides a club scholarship to aid recipients in high school and college in attending glider school.

According to Kellett, someone as young as 14 years old can fly solo in a glider, provided of course they have passed their tests and check rides.

Many of the club's members are current or retired airline pilots. Kellett said that many commercial pilots turn to gliding to improve their skills and return to a more traditional style of piloting.

"In gliding you're actually flying, you're doing stick and rudder flying, your knowledge of the weather becomes much more keen," Kellett said.

The club completes about 1,500-1,600 glider flights, called sorties, annually. Most of these are shorter training flights, allowing club members several opportunities to practice both take-off and landings.

The club currently has a long wait list for new members, but the club can be found at the Front Royal-Warren County Airport most weekends. The Skyline Soaring Club is one of about 140 clubs nationwide.

The club's parent organization, the Soaring Society of America has more details and information for those looking to soar for their first time.