

## **Lohmann: For Nick Kafantaris, the man who made Joe's Inn what it is, a final trip home to Greece**

As his father underwent treatment for leukemia, Michael Kafantaris broached an uncomfortable subject:

What did he have in mind as far as a final resting place?

His father, Nick Kafantaris, the man who made Joe's Inn what it is, said he didn't care. Spread his ashes on the Byrd Park VITA Course, which he walked every day, he said.

No, Michael said.

"First, I think that's illegal," he said, "and second, I'm absolutely not going to take you to the VITA Course."

Then Michael had an idea: what about the little mountain village in northern Greece where Nick and his restaurateur sister, Stella Dikos, as children, spent a summer of wonderment and joy, an all-too-brief interlude of happiness in an otherwise sad and dreary childhood. Decades later, Nick and Stella still talked about that summer, the memories as warm and vivid as ever. In recent years, Nick had taken Michael to visit the village, Paraskevi.

Nick scoffed at the idea: "It's too far, it's too expensive. You don't need to do that."

But the words of the stubborn old Greek belied what his face said.

He smiled.

"I knew 100% when he smiled," Michael recalled. "I just knew that was the place he wanted to go."

And after some time Nick acknowledged that, well, yes, “That would be nice.”

So, when Nick Kafantaris died in November 2020 at age 76, Michael knew what he and his Aunt Stella had to do. But carrying out their mission proved a challenge because of the pandemic and other logistical conflicts that arose, but, finally, over this past summer, almost two years later, the trip finally happened, and Michael and Stella took Nick home.

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**When I profiled** Nick Kafantaris for the Richmond Times-Dispatch (“No Ordinary Joe,” April 7, 1996), he was recovering from surgery to remove a benign tumor from his brain. I asked him what was the first thing he did after he awoke, groggily, from surgery.

Multiplication, he said.

“I just wanted to see if my brain still worked,” he said.

During the course of several interviews for that story, Kafantaris recounted how difficult his childhood had been. His mother died when he was 2; his sister, Stella, was not quite 4. Their father, a tailor, did the best he could, but it wasn’t enough to lift the family out of poverty. They lived in a one-room stone house with a grandmother. There was almost no money and little food.

“You can’t imagine hunger,” Kafantaris said. “You have to feel it. You have to go to bed with no food.”

Kafantaris dreamed of leaving his hometown, Trikala, a four-hour drive northwest of Athens, getting out into the world and making something of himself. Stella left first, coming to the United States in 1962 to join her new husband, Stavros

Dikos, who was already in Richmond, operating The Village Café on West Grace Street.

Nick did a stint in the Greek military, then the Merchant Marine service and, on a stop in 1967, found himself in New Orleans, and he phoned Stella, whom he hadn't seen since she left Greece.

"I want to see you," he said.

"Do you have any idea how far that is from Richmond?" Stella replied, retelling the episode with a laugh. "Poor thing, he couldn't comprehend how big this country is."

So, Stavros flew to New Orleans and fetched Nick back to Richmond. He stayed 24 hours, and then they put him on a plane back to New Orleans. Short visit or not, Nick knew this is where he wanted to be, and he told Stella he intended to jump ship and come back to Richmond. She told him, don't do it. She said, finish your obligations to the shipping outfit and then she would take care of things and bring him back to the United States legally.

"It was the *only* time my brother listened to me," she said with a laugh. "Never again."

Stella kept her promise, sponsoring Nick's return to the United States in 1970. He worked at The Village and found other restaurant jobs, and eventually purchased Joe's Inn, on North Shields Avenue, in the Fan. It was a narrow place: booths on one side, Formica-topped bar on the other, a sliver of a kitchen behind the wall where Kafantaris would cook seven days a week, 18 hours a day. He kept a cot nearby to catch quick naps.

When he closed on the purchase, he recalled, a lawyer asked him how much operating capital he had.

“What’s operating capital?” he replied.

His “operating capital,” he recalled in the 1996 article, turned out to be about \$35 in pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters scavenged from beneath sofa cushions and his children’s piggybanks.

In 1980, he bought the restaurant next door, knocked out the wall and more than doubled the size of Joe’s. At one point, he thought about renaming Joe’s Inn, but when he went to City Hall to make the change, he discovered he couldn’t afford to. Fate, he said years later, was looking out for him. Changing the name “would have been the single biggest mistake I could have made.”

Kafantaris retired from the restaurant in 1998, but never really left. He lived upstairs and ate all his meals at Joe’s and saw his friends there, said his daughter Tina, who owns Joe’s now. He kept himself busy running errands for the business and “telling us how we were doing everything wrong,” Tina wrote in an email, quickly adding, “I say this lovingly.”

“He loved the place so much he could not quit, no matter what,” she said.

In the 1996 interview, Kafantaris said that after surviving the early rocky times, “Every single day, it got better. We never looked back.”

But from time to time, he and Stella did look back — way back — when they reminisced about the carefree summer they spent as children with relatives in the village now known as Paraskevi. It was 1953, the year Stella turned 11 and Nick turned 9, and it proved to be a welcome respite from their lives in Trikala.

“We had a very hard childhood,” Stella said, and that summer “was so different.”

The village was a place they knew — their maternal grandparents had lived there — but hadn’t visited in years, Stella said, because their father couldn’t send them.

Paraskevi, built on a steep hill above the Haliacmon River, is little more than 30 miles north of Trikala, but it took some doing to get there. They took a train to a point, Stella recalled, then went the rest of the way on foot or horseback.

Once there, it was a different world for the siblings.

Stella remembers going into the forest to gather wood with her grandmother, who taught her how to bundle and carry it back along a rocky path home. Her grandmother taught her how to pick wild greens and wild fruits and how to make spanakopita. She recalled playing on the boulders in the crystal-clear river while their grandmother did laundry.

People were friendly and hospitable. There were community meals and music, singing and dancing.

“Those are the memories that stood out for us,” said Stella, now 80 and mostly retired, though she still works part time for the market on Lafayette Street that bears her name, Stella’s Grocery.

“Being with friends and neighbors who were including us. Very fond memories, and we didn’t get very many.”

Nick talked about that picturesque little village and that summer his whole life, Michael said.

“They ran, they played games,” he said, recalling stories of that summer his father and aunt told him. “It was definitely a departure from Trikala, which is more of a city and a hustle every day. They went to school, then went to their father’s shop and had these chores to do. Just hustle all the time. But when they were [in Paraskevi], they felt free to be kids.”

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**Last August,** Michael took Nick’s ashes and met Stella in Athens, where she had traveled for a wine tour. They went to Trikala, the old hometown, then up to Paraskevi, a mostly pleasant drive except for a mountainous stretch of white-knuckle driving on the skinny, twisting road — the kind of road where if you’re going up and a truck is coming down, you might have to back up a kilometer or more to find a turnout so you can move over and let the truck pass.

“But we did not have to go backwards, thanks to all of the gods and angels and my dad looking out for us,” Michael said with a laugh. “We had no issues, no accidents, no problems. Everyone was very nice. When anybody drives near someone that’s clearly from another country, they know.”

Paraskevi, a village of perhaps 100 full-time inhabitants or so, is “gorgeous,” Michael said. Little stone houses with gardens in the front. There were flowers and baskets of mountain herbs. An ornate church, constructed hundreds of years ago by traveling stone masons, anchors the village, which was enhanced by the aroma of baking bread.

Once there, Michael and Stella went to the outdoor plaza, a dining spot and generally the village’s gathering place. Within

a few minutes, their visit changed in a dramatic and unexpected way.

"We were sitting there, and this gentleman comes over and says, 'Welcome to the village,'" Michael said. "Stella starts telling him her name, and he points and says, 'Your second cousin is sitting there.'"

The cousin comes over and tells Stella that Stavros' nephew was sitting on the hill. He comes down, and, as Michael said, "Next thing you know, we have about eight people gathered around the table. Everyone knows Stella, and everybody knows the story."

It turns out that Stella knew the relatives from many years ago, but had not kept up with them. They own their homes in the village, Michael said, but live in the United States and return to Paraskevi for only a couple of weeks every summer. Michael and Stella just happened to hit the right time to visit.

"It was unreal," said Michael, who left Joe's in 2010 and is a partner in Rudy's Exotic Mushrooms and Produce. "What are the odds?"

The plan had been to spread Nick's ashes on a mountainside overlooking the valley below that Stella had described as a beautiful spot.

No, no, said the newfound relatives. His ashes should go with all of his extended family in a mausoleum, a small stone building with a terracotta roof, at the local cemetery. They said they would arrange for a box and a plaque that will bear his name and picture, just like the others memorialized there.

“He’s going to be here with all of his relatives,” they told Michael and Stella, “and it’s a place for you guys to come back and see him in the future.”

The whole thing was “beautiful,” Michael said. “Stella was crying, I was crying.”

When they return to Paraskevi, Michael and Stella can also visit a little spruce tree they planted near the river, surrounded with white river stones, in Nick’s memory.

The trip proved to be more than Michael imagined. He had envisioned motoring up the mountain switchbacks in the little rented, stick-shift Suzuki and finding a “ghost town.” Instead, they wandered into something akin to old home week.

Stella found it all “very touching” the way the trip worked out. Michael described it as “serendipitous.”

“It seemed right,” he said.

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### **Lohmann: One more for the road**

I know it might sound ridiculous, but the night before we left, I felt like a kid on Christmas Eve. I was so excited I couldn’t sleep.

It might have been indigestion, but I’m going with excitement as the reason.

Bob Brown and I were hitting the road one more time.



Brown, the celebrated photographer, [retired last spring after a remarkable 54-year career with The Times-Dispatch](#). Over the years, he and I put in a lot of miles together on the road, chasing good stories (and also pies) all over Virginia. In recent times, our traveling had been curtailed by a number of factors, including most notably the pandemic, so it's been a long while since we were able to ramble around the way we used to.

We've been itching to make one more road trip, and the opportunity arose last week to do just that.

So, Brown came out of retirement for, as he suggested calling it, the "End of the Road Trip." (*HOLD UP: We've both decided that sounds kind of grim, so we're going with "One More for the Road Trip."*)

We loaded up his 18-year-old Volvo with its "VA ROADS" license plate and departed for Southwest Virginia on a mission to update a long-ago story that includes one of our all-time favorite places operated by some of our all-time favorite people, and to once again enjoy seeing what we might find as we traveled around the commonwealth.

And, if we were lucky, there also would be pie.

Spoiler alert: mission accomplished.

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**It's been 20 years** since an editor asked if Brown and I might like to write a few stories about U.S. 58, the longest road in Virginia, which runs for about 500 miles across the southern tier of the state, from Virginia Beach to Cumberland Gap.

A "few"?

We took that idea and ran (amok), traveling the length of the road (several times) and producing story-and-picture packages every week for six months.

We met a lot of great people, visited a lot of new places and had way too much fun. When that series came to an end, we kept the stories going, branching out to all corners of the state, furthering our shared ambition to stay out of the office as much as possible. A true friendship was born.

We might have been out of practice last week, but we hadn't forgotten how it worked. Within a few minutes of setting off, we quickly fell into our familiar pattern of good-natured banter, including considerable smart-mouth commentary about everything and nothing and reminiscences of our past trips — like the time we visited veteran actor Robert "Call Me Bobby" Duvall at his Fauquier County farm and he insisted we see his pumpkin patch, which was stellar that fall because of the fertilizing work of an elephant named Bubbles.

We recollected about the roads we've traveled: the gravel roads, the dirt roads, the roads with cattle gates, the roads that narrowed into what Brown likes to call "pig tracks," such faint imitations of actual roadways that we were inspired to turn around and return whence we came.

Then there was the "Mystery Meat Stew" lunch in St. Paul a few years ago, when we were presented the annual "Ferriners of the Year" award ("annual" in this case meaning, I believe, the first and only). Seven steaming bowls of homemade stew, no labels. Unknowingly, Brown's stew had moose, mine groundhog. Yes, groundhog. Once was enough.

On the other hand, once was not enough when it came to visiting [Cuz's Uptown BBQ](#) in Tazewell County.

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**Housed in an old** dairy barn in the community of Pounding Mill — known to some as Pounding Thrill — Cuz's is a restaurant like no other I've visited.

It's a little difficult to describe, but how about this: a combination folk-art museum and restaurant with a down-home feel, though the fare is a lot more elaborate (hand-cut steaks, a variety of seafood and distinctive touches such as cheesy egg rolls and mac-and-cheese made "skanky" with the addition of blue cheese) than what you would normally find in a restaurant described as "down-home."

It's decidedly quirky and unstuffy with its vibrantly colored walls, hand-painted booths and myriad artwork — some donated by customers — decorating the place. It also is open only four days a week (Wednesday-Saturday) and closes every year for the winter, between Thanksgiving and March, adding to its eccentric feel.

The food is outstanding, and the people are warm and welcoming — yet it's a place at which you probably would never stop if you were merely passing by and saw it from the highway.

Visually, it's not particularly enticing or even easy to notice when you're flying past on the fairly empty stretch of U.S. 460. Which is exactly how it was first described to us 15 years ago when we visited Tazewell to do a story on Burke's Garden, a hidden valley a 40-minute drive to the east.

Our friend and Burke's Garden guide, Charlotte Whitted, now-retired director of the Historic Crab Orchard Museum in Tazewell, told us we should most definitely plan to stop at Cuz's. We'd never heard of it, but she explained what a

wonderful place it is, despite the somewhat suspicious appearance: an old barn guarded by brightly painted ceramic pigs at the entrance and a pig-shaped weather vane spinning atop the roof, with no signage to speak of except for a ramshackle fence emblazoned with the words: "This is hit."

She described the food as "great" and the atmosphere as "funky."

"Go there," she said.

We did and loved it. I wrote a story about Cuz's and the restaurant's happy buzz, as founder Mike Thompson used to describe it, and the unlikely manner in which Cuz's came to be.

Though a bit off the beaten path, Cuz's is far from a secret. It was selected by Urban Matter as among the "[15 Best Remote Restaurants Hidden Around the World.](#)"

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**We've visited Cuz's** several times over the years, always feeling it was kind of a home away from home, but I hadn't been there in almost a decade.

When I suggested to Brown we make another trek there, he readily agreed, saying, "The only thing that would bring me out of retirement is a trip to Cuz's" (while I'm not sure this is entirely true, it is true that when his wife, Evelyn, asked where he'd like to eat dinner on his 75th birthday a few years ago, Brown had to explain where Pounding Mill is, and then they made the five-hour drive from Richmond).

On our original visit, we found ourselves seated next to highly entertaining co-founder Mike Thompson, the artist/chef/character who regaled us with stories, explaining

part of his motivation for why he and his wife, Yvonne, started the restaurant in the first place.

“Historically, Southwest Virginia has been perceived as the lesser part of the state,” Thompson said. “By God, I just wanted to show them how it was done.”

And, by God, he did.

By the time we reached Cuz’s in 2007, it was already a regional institution with diners driving many miles — some even flying in on helicopters, landing in an adjacent field — and making regular, as they call them, pilgrimages from other states for dinner.

The Thompsons even built a pair of hand-hewn log cabins on a hill above the restaurant to accommodate those who have to travel far.

I asked North Carolina writer Lee Smith, who grew up in Grundy, an hour away from Pounding Mill, and was one of Cuz’s more famous fans to describe the restaurant, and she called it “a masterpiece.”

But back in 1979, when the restaurant opened, it was far from an instant artistic triumph, and barely anyone knew it was there. The inspiration? A family friend whom everyone called “Cuz” had suggested a restaurant would be a good use for the idle dairy barn on Mike’s family’s property. Running a restaurant sounded better to Mike than farming — Yvonne warned him it wouldn’t be easy — so the Thompsons started inauspiciously with four tables and two employees, including the cook from the Tazewell bowling alley, which was closing down, in the vacant bottling building next to the barn.

“When we first started, we never had any future plans,” Yvonne said. “It’s all grown organically, year by year.”

Over the years, they renovated the barn itself, expanded seating to 175, constantly refreshed their already interesting menu, built a loyal following, rebounded twice from major fires.

The biggest blow: Mike's death in 2018 following a bicycle accident just before he turned 70. Through it all, Cuz's has continued.

"All because of the support and love of the customers," Yvonne said. "It's just wonderful."

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**Mike, the prep-school-**educated art history major from Vanderbilt, was the restaurant's bigger-than-life personality: fun and irreverent and a "genius" in the kitchen, according to Mike Oder, the restaurant's long-time head chef who came to be known as "Little Mike" to Thompson's "Big Mike."

Though he had no formal culinary training, Thompson could taste a dish and then go into the kitchen and replicate it by teasing out the flavors and mixing the ingredients in just the right amounts to come up with precisely what he wanted. Kind of like a concert pianist playing by ear.

Yvonne had a most interesting story herself.

Born in Hong Kong, she came to the United States as a teen under sponsorship of an uncle who operated a popular Chinese restaurant in St. Louis, where she worked briefly (and where she learned the restaurant business was hard).

She majored in journalism at the University of Missouri in Columbia and had two job offers when she graduated: one with a weekly in Lexington, Ky., and the other with the Richlands News-Press in Tazewell County.

She took the Richlands job and arrived in this lovely but fairly remote part of Virginia in 1976 with all of her belongings packed in a Volkswagen.

She figured to stay a couple of years and then move on to a bigger newspaper, but an editor set her up on a blind date with Mike. They married in 1977 and opened the restaurant in 1979.

From Hong Kong to Pounding Mill is an unlikely life's journey, but it is Yvonne's.

"I used to think I was just made to go into this business because Mike wanted to cook," she said. "I always said it was a tough business, and it is hard, but I really have learned to fall in love with the job and the place."

As Mike battled health issues in his later years, Yvonne took over much of the day-to-day operation of the restaurant.

After he died, she thought seriously about shutting down Cuz's and retiring but, instead, decided to keep going, even through the pandemic.

She brought in Oder as her business partner to help run the business — with the idea of him eventually taking it over — and found comfort and satisfaction in keeping Cuz's going.

She always did some cooking, exerting her influence — our friend, Roanoke author Beth Macy, another fan, once deliciously described Cuz's as "a hillbilly-Asian place that is a tiny speck of funk in the rolling hills of Tazewell County" — but her role in the kitchen has expanded since Mike's death. Even after long days at the restaurant, she likes rising early to bake pies and cakes and experiment with new dishes — such as the wonton soup that was on the menu as a special when we visited.

To an outsider, it sounds a little on the grueling side, but she appreciates being fully immersed in what she considers “my life’s work.”

“It’s important to me because ... I don’t feel like slowing down yet,” said Thompson, now 67, whose two children and four grandchildren live out of state.

She also felt a responsibility to her rural community, the people who like eating there — customers now include three generations of some families — and those who work there, some of whom have been employed at Cuz’s for many years. There’s a loyalty and an affection that cuts both ways.

“It’s hard work,” said Teresa Dye, who has worked at Cuz’s for 34 years, “but it feels like home when you come here.”

Oder, who started as a busser when he was a teen and has now worked at Cuz’s for 38 years, remembers being mesmerized watching Mike Thompson cook and thinking, “I want to do that.” He kept moving up and never wanted to leave. Toiling side by side with the same people for so many years, he said, makes working at Cuz’s feel like “family.”

Which is also the feeling customers often get.

“First time you come through the door, you’re a stranger,” Oder said. “After that, you’re family.”

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**Lohmann: At Agecroft, Rocket the cat embraces his role as 'lord of the manor'**



On slow days when [Agecroft Hall & Gardens](#) is closed to the public, Rocket will hang out with the gardeners, hopping from one freshly dug hole to another in the flower beds. Or he might choose to hitch a ride in their utility vehicle, happily sitting on the lap of a member of the horticultural staff.

On busy days, when there are visitors around, he likes to greet and mingle and pose for photographs, seemingly thrilled — if cats can be “thrilled” — to meet new friends.

Otherwise, Rocket, approaching the age of 14, sunbathes where he wishes and roams where he wants, never venturing far from [Agecroft](#) — although there was unfortunate episode a few years ago when he disappeared for a few months soon after he arrived, which we’ll get to shortly. He is loved and appreciated, and he returns both in full.

He also strolls around like he owns the place.

And he sort of does.

“Rocket is the most popular member of the Agecroft family,” said Anne Kenny-Urban, Agecroft’s executive director who says this and many other nice things about Rocket, despite being allergic to cats. “No one gets more likes on social media.”

In addition to his Facebook and Instagram fame, Rocket was part of an advertising campaign for Agecroft’s Shakespeare Festival last year

“He tolerated me posing some of the gift shop items with him,” said Laura Purvis, marketing and development manager. “He’s got the sweetest temperament.”

Rocket doesn’t mind strangers petting him (“as long as they’re not pulling on him too much,” Purvis says) and

generally loves the attention, and, of course, riding in the John Deere Gator.

He seems particularly well-suited for his role as “Lord of the Manor,” a tongue-in-cheek title he’s embraced.

“He was born for it,” Purvis said. “He was meant to be here.”

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**I learned about** Rocket from reader Peggy Doughty after she visited Agecroft last month with her grandson, Will. They encountered the cat, and they could tell right off that Rocket is “extremely affectionate and much loved by the grounds staff.” Doughty wondered if Rocket might make for a good story.

I wondered, too, so I contacted the folks at Agecroft — the stately Tudor mansion built in the 16th century in England and moved piece by piece in the 1920s to Richmond — where it was reconstructed on Sulgrave Road. It served as a private residence for decades and now is a house museum on a 23-acre estate featuring gardens designed by Charles Gillette.

Kenny-Urban put me in touch with Katie Reynolds, manager of tour services, who brought Rocket to Agecroft in the first place.

Reynolds told me Rocket was born in the spring of 2008 to a feral mother in woods behind a Chesterfield neighborhood where her sister lived. Reynolds’ sister, Elizabeth, adopted two of the kittens, including the one who would become Rocket, and Reynolds adopted two others.

Rocket lived with Reynolds’ sister’s family for several years until the family moved out of state and was unable to take Rocket, who went to live with Reynolds where Rocket didn’t

get along with Reynolds' other cats who weren't his brothers. ("I promise, I'm not a crazy cat lady," Reynolds said with a laugh, "but we actually have four cats — two that were Rocket's brothers and two other cats.")

About a year into this experiment that wasn't working well, Reynolds heard Joseph Day, head of Agecroft's horticulture and maintenance department, mention there used to be a couple of cats that helped keep the mouse population down in the greenhouse years ago and how he'd like to have another on the premises. Rocket came to live at Agecroft soon after.

However, Rocket had been at Agecroft for only about a week when he disappeared. Reynolds and others searched Windsor Farms for weeks. They put out a notice on the neighborhood's email list about the missing cat. For almost three months, they heard nothing.

"Eventually, we were sure that he was either lost for good or had been the victim of the foxes or coyotes who live near the river," said Kenny-Urban. "Then, all of sudden, we got a call from someone in the neighborhood telling us Rocket was in her garden!"

Reynolds went to fetch him, and, sure enough, it was Rocket, though he was emaciated from months of having to scavenge and beg for food. They fed him back to health, and made a point of keeping him in the greenhouse so he would become accustomed to his new environment and not get lost and confused again.

That was about five years ago. Rocket hasn't left since.

“He learned life is good here on The Croft,” said Kenny-Urban. “He is now literally a fat cat enjoying life on the manor.”

Rocket’s home base remains the greenhouse, where he is kept at night, but during the day he has the run of the place. His current skills as a mouser are uncertain, as he’s ascended to the role of garden ambassador, and his duties have evolved, but there’s no doubt he knows where he belongs.

Every afternoon around 3:30 p.m., when his friends in the horticulture department begin to knock off for the day, Rocket knows to start making his way back to the greenhouse for a treat and to get settled in for the evening, maybe even catch a ride with his favorite person on the horticulture staff, Susan Edwards.

“She is the one who really dotes on Rocket,” said Reynolds. “If she’s going somewhere on the property, she’ll make sure she takes Rocket with her.”

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**Reynolds thinks** Rocket’s sociable approach to life probably comes in part from his early years of living with children when he learned to be tolerant of all sorts of things such as weird noises and attempts to be placed in a baby stroller.

But it might just be his personality, Reynolds said.

“Because other cats just wouldn’t do what he does,” she said. “He’s much more outgoing than some of my other cats. He will make a point to walk up to a group of visitors where another cat would run and hide.”

The only visitors on the day we visited were photographer Alexa Welch Edlund and I. Before we left, we stopped by the

Sunken Garden for a few pictures of Rocket tiptoeing through the tulips. He seemed quite at home, both as a model and as a resident of Agecroft.

“He tried the big world,” said Kenny-Urban, “and then came back and has committed to his life here.”