

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).

Communities Prepare for an Uncertain Future

October 7, 2022



Scott Ziemer gathers pepper from his garden. Ziemer's background in adventure travel has convinced him of the need to plan ahead. Photo: Malcolm Andrews.

It's not hard to expect bad news, especially after watching the devastation caused by Hurricanes Fiona and Ian. And there truly is bad news: according to the World Meteorological Organization, humankind now battles five times the natural disasters we did 50 years ago.

But there's good news, too. In the same period, deaths from disasters decreased to less than a third of what they were, despite unplanned urbanization, widespread poverty and population growth.

Better forecasting has helped, and so has more advanced fire and rescue training and equipment. There are also better ways to keep people informed by emails, voice and text. Albemarle County's office of emergency management, led by Crozet native John Oprandy, released a bulletin during September (designated as emergency preparedness month) detailing ways every citizen can better prepare for an emergency and urging each county resident to sign up for the county's "code red" service, which allows emergency teams to reach you with messages about bio-terrorism alerts, boil-water notices, missing child reports, and localized weather threats.

John Oprandy is the director of the recently reorganized Department of Emergency Services of Albemarle County. Photo: Albemarle County.

Certain kinds of disasters seem more likely than others. Oprandy said most long-time Crozet residents know where flooding is likely, but others may not. This is important because people who die in floods make up a large proportion of deaths from natural disasters. "Folks try to drive through water that to them doesn't appear so deep," he said. "It takes very little water to float a vehicle." His advice: "Turn around and go back. If you can't, then try to get up on the roof of the car, where we can come rescue you."

Part of the mission of Oprandy's recently organized office is to recognize and incorporate future tools for rescue. "It won't be long before we'll be able to send you a drone bearing a flotation device," he said. "That would get to you a whole lot faster." Another high-tech solution is placing sensors that would measure rising water and instantly power signs warning drivers of danger ahead.

The county's September bulletin urges people to have a plan: "It makes so much sense to have a plan for how your family can get in touch in an emergency," Oprandy said. Communication is a key part of planning, and

experts suggest investing in a radio that works on batteries, so you can keep up to date on safety bulletins during a blackout.

Families should also plan for food, light, heat, water and necessary medical and sanitation supplies. "Have some supplies in your car, as well," Oprandy said. The county's emergency preparedness bulletin, linked at the bottom of this article, will take you to dozens of resources for communications and supplies.

Another crucial step in keeping communities safe is to anticipate the likely scenarios ahead. Albemarle County worked with the Piedmont Environmental Council and the D.N. Batten Foundation to assess future risks facing our region.



On its face, the conclusion seems contradictory. We are experiencing—and will continue to experience—both drought and flooding. Heavy rains will fall, but they'll be interspersed with periods of higher heat and longer spells of dry weather. Milder winters and less snow may sound attractive, but these conditions are optimal for pests, which in turn cause crop damage and spread disease among plants, animals and humans. And too much unseasonable warmth in the spring causes early bud break, which can then be followed by frost, a terrible scenario that our fruit growers understand all too well.

Intense summer heat is another danger to community health and safety. At an extreme level, it lowers productivity, increases costs of cooling for homeowners, buckles roads and railways and causes energy blackouts.

The report listed other changes to expect: reservoirs, pollinators, and erosion-prone slopes will be affected, as will homes, schools and businesses in the expanding flood plain, all in ways we can't exactly predict.

But we can try. "You'd have to be naive to think we won't have some kind of emergency in our future," said Scott Ziemer, who lives in rural Albemarle County. Ziemer belongs to a small local group of Crozet-area preppers, people who are taking judicious steps to ensure the future health and safety of their families in case of an emergency.

In fact, Ziemer pointed out, we've already experienced an event that would justify careful planning: the beginning days of the pandemic, when people were panicking and finding many products in short supply on the shelves. Even as Virginia expects record fruit, peanut and field crops this year, farmers in the West and Midwest struggle with drought, terrible heat, inflation and supply chain problems, as do the people of Europe, China and Africa.



Although the Partlows have electricity, Anna likes to figure out how to cook everything on her wood stove. This is a Thanksgiving dinner. Submitted photo.

Ziemer talked about the survival rule of threes. You can survive three minutes without breathable air; three hours in extreme heat or cold; three days without drinkable water; and three weeks without food. It's a generalization, but people facing an emergency can use this guide to determine some order of priority.

As a builder and an outdoor adventure travel guide, Ziemer became a judge of potential hazardous weather as well as a thoughtful observer of the many things that can go wrong. He's well aware that things can go wrong at home, too.

"As we see more gigantic rainstorms, there's a greater chance we'll be isolated for days," he said, noting that whatever direction he might take to leave home brings him across a bridge. He's also ready for longer periods of isolation and has food supplies for several months. Much of his stock comes from his garden; others are staples like dried beans and rice that will provide nourishment over the long haul. His family has a modest store of water, as well as a filter that removes chemicals and bacteria from creek water.

Food isn't the only necessity considered by preppers. Many people remember the derecho that hit locally ten years ago, when five million people were without power, some for many weeks.

Although short-term energy blackouts aren't usually dangerous in our moderate climate, they can threaten life over the long haul, especially for those who need oxygen delivery or who care for frail elderly, infants, or others with special needs. Many people have generators, but a long-term disaster might also lead to a gas shortage.

The Ziemers have a small solar setup, not enough to fill all their energy needs, but enough to power a refrigerator. They've also invested in some solar lamps, have a wood-burning stove and a beautiful old cook stove. In his group, preppers also talk about first aid, cleaning supplies, clothing and assembling what's called a "bug out" bag, in the case of an emergency that

requires leaving the area, as is the case for families who left coastal Florida ahead of Hurricane Ian.

"It's not my intention to be a fear monger," Ziemer said. "It's easy enough to store a little at a time."

Many very rural families have years of experience of living with an eye towards the future and have always been self-sufficient. John Oprandy said that when rescuers battle high water to check on the residents of the areas of Sugar Hollow prone to flooding, they invariably find them well-supplied, comfortable and taking care of their neighbors.

Anna Partlow is someone who has always believed in self-sufficiency. She lives on a fairly isolated homestead in the mountains west of Crozet. She and her husband, James, require very little that they can't raise, preserve, hunt or otherwise make for themselves. "I don't exactly consider us 'preppers,' Anna said. "We just don't like having to depend on someone else for everything."

Anna cans venison from the plentiful deer near their property, raises a huge garden and preserves it in a variety of different ways, using an old-fashioned corn dryer on her wood stove to dry vegetables. She and James have also raised and butchered their own chickens and hogs, and helped their neighbors with supplies of meat. With a number of other old-fashioned gadgets, they've worked out a way to cook on the same stove that heats their home.

Many rural people look to the Amish and Mennonites for mechanical, rather than electrical, solutions to make homesteading chores easier, and items like the dehydrator, food grinders, and portable wood-fired ovens are still available.

The Partlows have made many of the same plans as preppers, and Anna has also studied the medicinal properties of local herbs, lore that she's learned

from family members as well as books. She keeps a large bottle of aspirin as an all-purpose anti-inflammatory and pain reducer. Otherwise, herbs and teas provide comfort during minor illnesses.

"If we have a long period where we can't get to the doctor, or can't buy first aid products, we'll have to make ourselves comfortable with what we have," she said.

Like the Ziemers she has a root cellar and stores root vegetables for months into the winter. "We've learned that we don't have to have everything in every season," she said. "We're okay with what we store, grow and make." She's learned how to bake almost anything, using an oven that rests on her wood-burning stove. They also have a variety of kerosene and solar lamps.

As part of its doctrine, the Church of Latter-Day Saints asks its members to have enough food, water, bedding and medicine to last for three weeks, with an eye towards stockpiling staples for a longer term, rotating supplies on a regular basis. The church asks members to stock up on things they normally eat, reasoning that a drastic change in diet in an emergency is likely to have some side effects. Also included is advice for financial security as well as traveling in an emergency.

The material linked on the county bulletin, much of which comes from the website ready.gov, also recommends having some games, toys and books for children saved with your supplies, all of which should provide some comfort. Grown-ups need comfort, too. Anna Partlow said she would find it wasteful to store a great deal of food that doesn't provide any nutrition, but "chocolate can always cheer us up."

Both the Ziemers and the Partlows stress the need for cleanliness and hygiene in the case of an emergency and have thought out ways to dispose of household and personal waste if plumbing and trash disposal fails. Most preppers stockpile disinfectants, soap and paper products. "We get along fine with baking soda, bleach, vinegar, peroxide and one kind of soap we can

use for everything," Anna Partlow said.

The materials linked by the county, the church and by the national preparedness website, ready.gov., stipulate that being prepared should not be a terrible expense, but accomplished over time. And all agree that being part of a community that looks out for each other is a huge step towards future comfort and health. "It doesn't seem like it would do a whole lot in a food shortage, for us to have a home garden," Scott Ziemer said, "but what if everyone who can, did some gardening? We'd all be so much better off in an emergency."

Ziemer said he'd be glad to talk to any small groups meeting to discuss this topic, and also to help anyone interested in starting their own group. "We're all in this together," he said.

Religion News: Quiet: A Spiritual Path Less Traveled

December 2, 2022



Sister Sophy checks the inventory of Gouda rounds made by hand at the Monastery.

A School of Happiness

We honor the beloved religious figures who plunge into the chaos of the world, uplifting the unfortunate with healing, preaching, or eloquent calls for social justice. There's another kind of ministry, though, that's often misunderstood. The Trappist-Cistercian sisters at Crozet's Our Lady of the Angels Monastery, who go about their quiet life of cheese-making, prayer, and community, see their path as a way to intercede for all the world's suffering. "There's a limit to the good you can do for individual people," said Mother Kathy Ullrich, the monastery's prioress. "I wanted to do something upstream that would have a wider impact."



Work, especially manual labor, is a traditional cornerstone of monastic life. At Our Lady of the Angels, sisters

She's talking about the prayer that threads through the monastery's daily schedule, beginning at 3 a.m., and continuing throughout the day, interspersed with meals, chores and personal projects. "But we don't see prayer as separate from our work," said Sr. Maria Garcia. "It's all prayer, all worthy." The sisters make beautiful rounds of Gouda cheese, devoting several hours each day to this work or other work that sustains the community of 11 women: cooking, cleaning, gardening, shopping. They rotate tasks week by week, said Mother Kathy. "That way, everyone learns every job." In addition to maintaining the community, they set aside money to support good works.

Like their lives, meals are simple, normally free of meat. There is some of their own cheese, but they ration it, and fish is served twice a week or so. Elders get extra protein in shakes or smoothies. Many of the ingredients are grown in their own garden, Mother Kathy said: "We did get pretty tired of kale last year." After lunch, most of the sisters have a few minutes for a siesta before their afternoon ritual of prayer and work.

From the outside, the cycle of hard work, rest, wholesome food, companionship and prayer seems like a healthy life, and the sisters confirm that sickness is rare at the monastery. Sister Barbara Smickel is 85, participates fully in community life, and radiates the energy of someone much younger. "You should see her at work," Sister Maria said.



Our Lady of the Angels is a community of 11 Trappist-Cistercian sisters, who come together for prayer and work throughout the day.

Sister Barbara said they welcome questions about their lives. "We want people to know we're here and to understand what we do." She said their interactions with the outside world are overwhelmingly positive. "We wear our habits when we shop, and people stop us to ask for our prayers." The requests might be very specific, for someone who is sick, or just general in nature, but they honor them faithfully. They keep track of events in the world without becoming obsessed or distracted. They vote in elections and pray for those they see suffering from war and natural disasters.

Sister Maria had been a missionary in Ukraine and, before that, a social worker. Sister Barbara joined the order shortly after high school, and Mother Kathy was in the Air Force and had a private pilot's license. She misses flying, but she sees all of their past occupations and concerns as being replaced by something bigger. "It's like when you're a kid and you can't imagine Saturday mornings without cartoons," she said. "You soon find

something that's more important."

It's that realization—the idea that there is something more important—that unites the sisters, all from very different backgrounds, in their vocation. They knew they were called at a young age. Sister Barbara understood what she was to do right away: Mother Kathy and Sister Maria said it took them a while to figure out exactly where they should be. They're committed to keeping their minds and hearts open to receive God. He's not just in the chapel or the garden, Sister Maria said. "When we make cheese, He's there; when we forgive someone for a minor hurt, He's there; when we celebrate special days, He's there."

Living closely with a number of women from vastly different backgrounds is sometimes a test of patience, the sisters admitted, but they see this as spiritual growth and another blessing of their way of life. They believe freedom from the constant noise of today's world has made them more able to see God's beauty around them and to accept the warmth and companionship of a close-knit community. "People sometimes call monastic life a 'school of love,' Sister Maria said. "I think it's also a school of happiness."

Sitting in Silence with an Open Heart

"There are many doors and windows to God, and many types of prayer," said Debbie Scott. She's the director of Mountain Light Retreat, a lovely compound she and her husband David bought and restored a little more than a year ago. Scott served as the spiritual director at St. Paul's Episcopal Church for more than a decade and became interested in centering and contemplative prayer.



Mountain Light Retreat Center offered a Celtic Eucharist to celebrate All Saints Day.

"You'd be surprised what you can learn if you sit quietly before God with an open heart," she said. As she learned more, she assisted the congregation in beginning a Celtic mass and other activities incorporating stillness, ritual and contemplation at St. Paul's.

Scott welcomes groups to use her center for retreats, and she also serves as leader for events sponsored by Mountain Light Retreat. Recently, she asked those who had attended a retreat how their experience could be improved, and the most common answer was that they would have appreciated another day. "It takes a while for people to gear down," she said.

Scott sees her personal contemplative practice as the force behind her decision to provide a peaceful place for those who need it. "You can't always see God's hand in your life at the time," she said. "But then you look back

and think, 'of course!'"



Harp music by Eve Watters adds to the hushed stillness of the All Saints Day service at Mountain Light Retreat Center.

She has some guidance for those who find it hard to free their mind of everyday worries and logistics in order to be receptive to both the beauty around them and God's voice in the universe. "No one can empty out all their thoughts at will," she said. "Start with a shorter period of time." She quoted Thomas Keating's response to a beginner, who was frustrated by the intrusion of unrelated thoughts 10,000 times during a short prayer session. Keating, himself a Trappist monk, responded: "How lovely, to be able to return to God 10,000 times."

Find out more about Our Lady of the Angels or order a round of Gouda at olamonastery.org. Sr. Barbara suggests those interested in cheese for the holidays call for availability before ordering.

For a schedule of retreats, or to plan you own retreat at Mountain Light Retreat, visit mountainlightretreatva.com.