

## ECONOMY

# From grade-school struggle to college president

*Roanoke College's new president says his transition is 'the most shocking thing you could ever imagine.'*



by **Randy Walker**

June 28, 2022



Shushok, pictured on the front quadrangle, has "a deep interest in people," said Nathan Hatch, president emeritus of Wake Forest. Randy Walker photo.

Frank Shushok was in first grade when his teachers noticed him struggling with reading. He was diagnosed with dyslexia and an auditory processing disorder. For the rest of elementary school, he was pulled out of his classrooms for remedial instruction.

“The interesting thing about that is, as I moved through the schooling process,” he said, “I began to take on an identity... that I wasn’t smart. I wasn’t good at school.”

He doesn’t recall being stigmatized by other kids in his hometown of McKinney, Texas — no stoplights, two Dairy Queens — perhaps because of his outgoing personality. Still, he saw himself as less capable than his peers.

“By my sophomore year in high school, I failed two classes, and was required to go to summer school just to catch up to make it to my junior year,” he said. “So there were times in high school that I really did begin to wonder whether I would even graduate from high school.”

At least one teacher told Shushok he wasn’t college material. But there were two others who didn’t buy his low self-image. “These are people who saw, in me, my potential before I saw it myself,” Shushok said. They convinced him his issue wasn’t intelligence, but learning style, and encouraged him to find ways to succeed. “And slowly, late in my junior year in high school, and early into my senior year in high school, I began to unravel some of my learning challenges.”

Shushok took Keith Christian’s Algebra II class his senior year at McKinney High School.

“I didn’t really know his background,” said Christian, retired after 38 years of teaching. “I just expected him to perform, like I expected all of my students to perform. And when he was underperforming, I just kind of kicked him in the seat of the pants and said, ‘Hey, you got to do better. I think you’re capable of more.’”

“He played on the tennis team and was pretty good. And I can remember bargaining with him, saying, ‘OK, look, if you’ll give me this amount of time working on Algebra II stuff, then I’ll come play tennis with you. And we’ll play a set or two.’”

Another teacher who made a difference was Gail Pack, who taught Spanish. “I failed her class as a sophomore in high school, but she insisted I was smart,” Shushok said. “She insisted I work hard and do better.” He retook Spanish II as a senior. This time, he got an A.

Pack died in 2019, but her legacy is very much alive.

“Having one or two people believe in me was enough to change the course of history for me,” Shushok said.

The former special ed student, who went on to earn a B.S. in history from Baylor University, an M.A. in higher education and student affairs administration from The Ohio State University, and a Ph.D. in higher education policy, planning and analysis from the University of Maryland, becomes Roanoke College's 12th president on July 1. He replaces Michael Maxey, who is retiring after 15 years at the helm of the private Lutheran college in Salem.

In an interview on the Roanoke campus, the first thing Shushok did, after offering a wide smile and firm handshake, was ask numerous friendly questions about the reporter's background and interests.

"He has a deep interest in people," said Nathan Hatch, president emeritus of Wake Forest University, where Shushok served a one-semester fellowship in 2017. "It's not a role that he's playing, it's who he is. And I think that will serve him very well. Because I think, in any of these [administrative] positions, trust is so critical. You've got students, faculty, alumni, community, all of that. And if you can be who you are, and people trust you, that's the most important coin of the realm."

With his gift for interpersonal relations, Shushok might have taken any number of paths after high school. The YMCA, along with his two influential teachers, pointed him toward college.

"I spent my summers in a YMCA summer camp," Shushok said. "And there I received just incredible mentoring and coaching from people. And I had this desire to go to college because I wanted to be able to go work for the YMCA, professionally. And I knew that I couldn't go work for the YMCA unless I had a college degree. So all of a sudden, I realized, I got to figure out a way to go to college.



Frank Shushok (center) with his son Christian and his Spanish teacher Gail Pack. "It was so important that I took my son Christian to meet her because I think he got his love of learning from me — and she helped me understand how much I was a learner. This is how I think education transforms people and also their families." Frank Shushok photo.

“I talked my way in to Baylor University [in Waco, Texas] and asked them to give me a chance. And I went to summer school before my first year, and I was required to pass two classes in order to matriculate into the first year class.

“Very quickly I learned for the first time in my life that I loved learning. It’s the most shocking thing that you could ever imagine, that a guy like me, who didn’t think he was going to graduate from high school, would end up loving school. And I ended up being an incredibly successful student at Baylor and deciding that I wanted to spend my career in higher education because it was so incredibly transformative for me. It literally changed the course of my life.”

Shushok has 30 years of work experience in higher education, the past 13 at Virginia Tech in posts that included associate vice president, senior associate vice president and vice president for Student Affairs.

Having taken a different path through the school system than most high achievers, Shushok has more empathy for students who don’t fit the mold. “Our elementary and high school system is very much designed as if everyone was on a single developmental track,” he said. “And the reality is, we’re more like a kettle of popcorn, we pop at different times.

“Empathy is about putting oneself in other people’s shoes. My life experiences have helped me do that — and I work on that every single day. Empathy is malleable — we can make ourselves more empathetic with intentional effort.

“One of the things that I think that places like Roanoke College are doing, and can continue to do, is to teach and facilitate an environment where young people, all of us, build our empathy skills, and the research is pretty clear, we can grow our capacity to be empathetic.”

Emily Norton, class of ’23, was part of the committee that interviewed Shushok. “He definitely had a strong presence in the room, but not in a way that was overpowering at all,” she said. “It was definitely in a way that kind of encouraged conversation, and was quite engaging. I just I’m excited because I think he’s very kind and genuine.”

Shushok’s background has also given him a special interest in how people respond to setbacks.

“It’s how you respond to those failures, and makes all the difference in the world, and how you frame how you think about a failure,” he said. “So if you think about a failure as innate to your character, and who you are, then that can be quite debilitating.

“Another way is to think about, ‘Well, I just learned something really important. That helps me think about my life and the way that I interact and what kind of resources I need, that allows me to take another run at it.’

“A place like Roanoke College is fundamentally about helping people be in this experimental learning laboratory, and to learn to take risks, to make mistakes, to be reflective about that, and then to go at it again. So then when they go out in the world, they’re resilient and they’re not afraid of problems, because this is a very unpredictable life we live.”

As a college president in the post-COVID era Shushok will have no shortage of problems to address. At Roanoke College, these include “growing enrollment, raising funds for the [planned] Science Center and ensuring the next generation of students, those who missed important steps in their development due to the pandemic, are well-cared for and able to succeed,” said Malon Courts, chair of the college Board of Trustees. “During the presidential selection process President-elect Shushok conveyed to us the need to be bold and move at a deliberate pace in order to address the challenges and embrace opportunities at Roanoke.”

New Roanoke College President Frank Shushok on the porch of the Administration building. Randy Walker photo.

At Virginia Tech, Shushok was a member of the president’s cabinet. Tech president Tim Sands was asked to speculate on how he might impact Roanoke College.

“Frank is a proponent of the strengths-based approach to the development of individuals,” Sands said. “I expect he will do the same at the institutional level at Roanoke College. That is, he will work with stakeholders – faculty, staff, students, alumni and partners – to identify the strengths of the College, and he will look for opportunities to double down on those strengths.

“He will also look for new growth opportunities for Roanoke College to build on their foundation. Based on my observations, partnerships across sectors and other local institutions will be an emphasis with President Shushok. Expect Roanoke College to engage with the local community at a high level.”

Shushok said Roanoke has done a good job of changing with the times since its founding in 1842. “But you can’t ever rest on your laurels.

“All institutions, at any given moment, are mostly designed for a previous generation of students. So I hope my mark is to continue to inspire and support all of us in continuing to innovate and remake ourselves in a way that is in service of the current generation of students and those who will come. Any organization, any institution, entity, that is not constantly interrogating itself, and its relevance to the current environment, is going to fall behind.”

Shushok did not want to predict whether he’d retire from Roanoke.

“I just have no idea. One year ago, I could not have ever imagined that I wouldn’t be at Virginia Tech this next year. But life poses some questions and opportunities that landed me here. And I’m thrilled about that. And what I’m not doing is trying to plan out the rest of my career. What I’m trying to do is to wake up every day, and to apply my life in pursuit of loving people well, and helping them become their best self. And right now that’s at Roanoke.”

The Shushoks (L-R), Kelly, Christian, Frank, Brayden and Ivy Anne. Frank and Kelly are high school sweethearts who have been married for 30 years. Kelly has served more than 20 years in ministry, most recently as pastor at “edges,” a progressive United Methodist community

in Blacksburg. Brayden, 22, a 2021 graduate of Virginia Tech, works at Morgan Stanley; Christian, 20, is a junior at Sewanee: The University of the South; and Ivy Anne, 17, is a senior at Blacksburg High School. Courtesy photo.

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## CULTURE

# Martinsville marker dedication to highlight a 'miscarriage of justice'

*Pardoned in 2021, the Martinsville Seven will receive a historic marker on Sept. 10.*

by **Randy Walker**

September 7, 2022



The Martinsville Seven historic marker, seen here in its shipping crate, will be dedicated on Sept. 10 in front of the old Henry County Courthouse in Martinsville. Photo: Eric Monday.



In the history of Martinsville, it was the event that nobody wanted to talk about.

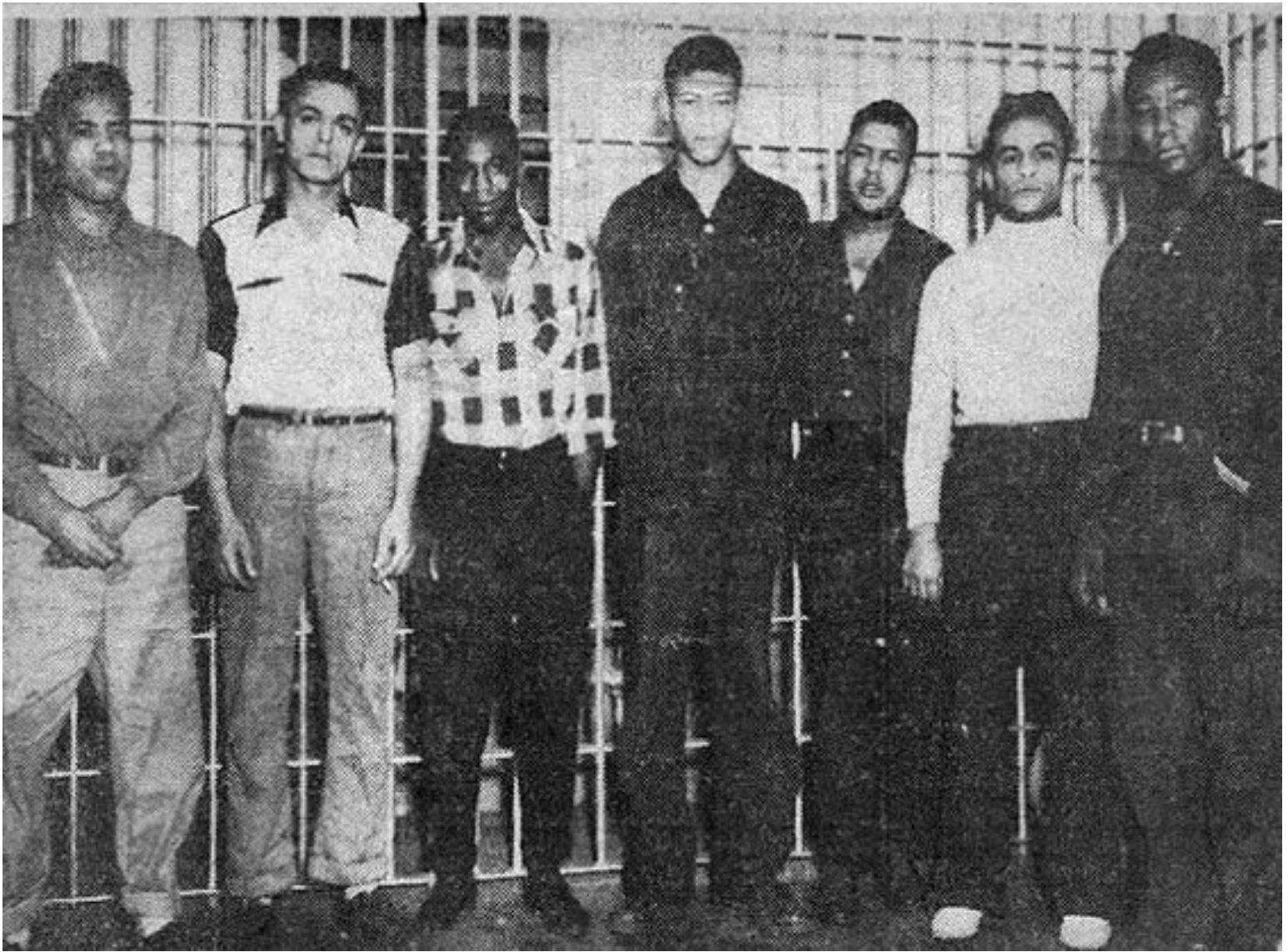
On Feb. 8, 1949, a white woman, Ruby Floyd, entered a predominantly Black neighborhood in Martinsville to collect money for some items she had sold, according to a historical display in the old Henry County Courthouse in Martinsville. (The account here of events from 1949 to 1951 is taken from that display.)

Shortly thereafter, Floyd alleged to police that she had been raped. Based on Floyd's account, police arrested seven Black men: Francis Grayson, Frank Hairston Jr., Howard Hairston, James Hairston, Joe Hampton, Booker Millner and John Taylor. All suspects signed confessions, and all admitted to being present during the incident, "but each differed as to the level of involvement of the others accused."

Trials for the "Martinsville Seven" began in spring 1949 at the Henry County Courthouse with Judge Kennon C. Whittle presiding. The prosecution vetoed the inclusion of any African American jurors. The cases were heard by juries composed solely of white men. "The prosecution presented evidence against the accused showing that non-consensual sex took place. The defense argued that everything was consensual and that the accused were coerced by law enforcement to sign confessions that were not written by them. The 'Seven' also claimed the signed confessions differed from when they were signed to when they were presented in court ... All of the defendants were found guilty and sentenced to death in the electric chair."

The NAACP and the Civil Rights Congress appealed, arguing that the location of the trials influenced the jurors, that no white person had ever received capital punishment for a rape conviction, that the subjects were reportedly intoxicated during the interrogations, and that law enforcement had refused to allow legal counsel during the signing of the confessions. The appeal failed.

Between Feb. 2 and Feb. 5, 1951, all seven members of the Martinsville Seven were executed at the Virginia State Penitentiary in Richmond. "This marked the largest execution for rape in the history of the United States," the historical display states.



The Martinsville Seven. Courtesy of Virginia Department of Historic Resources.

Eric Monday grew up in Martinsville, where both of his parents were lawyers. He went to the University of Virginia for his undergraduate and law degrees, and returned to his hometown, where he's the city attorney and the assistant city manager.

“If you grow up in our Black community, you don't hear it talked about because it's a very painful memory,” he said. “If you grow up in the white community, you don't hear it talked about, because it's an embarrassing event in our history. This just isn't discussed. It's not talked about in schools, it's not talked about socially. And it nevertheless happened.”

But the Martinsville Seven were not forgotten.

Faye Holland, who runs a tax and accounting service in Martinsville, started the Martinsville Seven Initiative in 2019 to challenge injustice for people of color, seek closure for the Seven, and create exhibits

in memory of the men. In a coalition with several other organizations, Holland's group petitioned then-Gov. Ralph Northam for posthumous pardons.

"I originally got drawn to the project," Holland said, "because my niece was visiting a museum in the D.C. area, and when you're in museums, you just kind of walk around and talk to other patrons, and she was having a discussion with a gentleman. And she told him she was from Martinsville. And he was like, 'Oh, what about the Martinsville Seven? My niece had no clue what he was talking about. She's 28 years old. And so it just kind of hit me then that the story really, really needs to be told.'"

On Aug. 31, 2021, Northam granted pardons to all seven members. "While these pardons do not address the guilt of the seven, they serve as recognition from the Commonwealth that these men were tried without adequate due process and received a racially-biased death sentence not similarly applied to white defendants," the governor's press release said. It also noted that "from 1908 to 1951, all 45 prisoners executed for rape in Virginia were Black men."

Eric Monday, Martinsville city attorney, submitted the marker nomination along with Vice Mayor Jennifer Bowles. Randy Walker photo.

The petition for pardon was endorsed by the Virginia Bar Association, Eric Monday said. Monday was on the VBA board and helped secure the endorsement.

Faye Holland helped lead a petition drive which resulted in then-Gov. Ralph Northam pardoning the Seven. Courtesy Faye Holland.

Among the many aspects of the case that troubles Monday is the failure to change the venue despite “extremely vitriolic and incendiary coverage” in the local newspaper.

“Frankly, it’s kind of amazing that there wasn’t a lynch mob,” he said. “There wasn’t, thank God. But nevertheless, that type of coverage would have certainly tainted a local jury pool and in a modern context would have made it practically impossible to hold the trial in the local setting. Your change of venue should have absolutely occurred.”

Monday and Jennifer Bowles, Martinsville’s vice major, decided to submit a nomination for a historic marker to the Virginia Department of Historic Resources.

“Jennifer’s significantly younger than I, but both of us had spoken at various times about how, although it’s a very regrettable situation, it is the most historic event that has occurred in Martinsville, Henry County. For that very brief time back in the late ’40s and ’50s, Martinsville was the subject of international demonstrations against this miscarriage of justice all over the globe. You know, you got to talk about the bad as well as the good and your history and you have to acknowledge that it happened, and we both felt that it was very important to do so. And so while we’d been talking about it, we really kind of cemented the idea of doing it as soon as the governor’s pardon was issued.”

In December, the Department of Historic Resources approved the marker (see photo for text).

“I can’t speak for every Black resident,” Bowles said, “but for those who speak with me, they suggest that this being the governor pardoning the Martinsville Seven, and realizing that the punishment was too extreme, is somewhat finally redemption for these gentlemen. It’s not a measure of guilt or innocence. It was about the severity of the punishment. And also, the feeling that the city and the local government and the police department and all of the typical processes and procedures that you would go through was unfair. And they feel that this is finally a time that Martinsville can at least admit, hey, we could have done this differently, hey, racial prejudice was prevalent at this time, and now for the local government to acknowledge that, and our state to acknowledge that, is a huge deal, and can bring some semblance of justice to the families into our area, and all of our residents.”

Rudy McCollum, a former mayor of Richmond, is the nephew of Martinsville Seven member Booker Millner.

Vice Mayor Jennifer Bowles submitted the marker nomination with Eric Monday. Courtesy Jennifer Bowles.

“It clearly is for us a relief,” he said in a phone interview from Richmond. “Because, you know, this is something that our family has had to live with, I know, for me, of course, most of my life. And it was just a travesty of justice for it to have occurred and to have gone for so long, to take seven decades for it to happen. But we are relieved, and we’re happy that there’s been some final resolution in recognizing that justice had been denied for these gentlemen.”

After 70 years, many of the people who were directly impacted have passed away. But some remain, including McCollum’s mother, Ida Millner McCollum, 87.

“She was a young teen when her young teen brother was executed,” Rudy McCollum said. “This wasn’t something that was much talked about when we were young, and to be frank with you, my mother has a difficult time talking about it even to this day.”

Courtroom in the Henry County Courthouse where the Seven were tried. Randy Walker photo.

The marker will be placed in front of the old Henry County Courthouse. “That’s where the trial occurred,” Monday said. “And the courtroom has been completely restored. It’s exactly the way it was when the trial occurred.” Monday paid for the marker personally.

Dedication is scheduled for 11:30 a.m. Sept. 10. “Marker will probably go on the pole the day before, and will be covered until the dedication,” Monday said. The speaker will be attorney Victor Cardwell of Roanoke law firm Woods Rogers Vandeventer Black. Cardwell is the first Black president of the Virginia Bar Association.

“I do hope that this marker can be a bridge between those residents who may be feeling white guilt,” Bowles said, “and for those Black residents who have been impacted in a negative way by this. We know systemic racism is real. I do think that there are already conversations in my generation, trying to break

down those barriers, and have meaningful conversations and understand that everybody has a different viewpoint. But I do think this is another step forward, another step towards progression and cohesiveness as a community as a whole. I really think that this can help stop the white-versus-black or any type of racial divide, that this is a first step towards unity, and realize that we are all citizens of Martinsville, and we all should work together and come together.”

Jury box where the all-white panel of jurors heard the case. Randy Walker photo.

CULTURE

# Bohemian Rhapsody

*Bird lovers wax lyrical over unexpected visitor.*



by **Randy Walker**  
 February 11, 2022



Ed Kyle took this photo with a 500 mm telephoto lens. The Bohemian waxwing is on the right. It lacks a yellow belly. The others are cedar waxwings.

The mysterious visitor was first seen on the morning of Friday, Jan. 21. She (assuming it was female) was keeping company with at least 15 other individuals. She was wandering very far from her northern home, and her traveling companions weren't immediate family; you could call them cousins. She was the odd one out.

She was a Bohemian waxwing. And her appearance in the backyard of a house in Roanoke County has caused a flutter among Virginia bird enthusiasts.

Ed and Barbara Kyle are birders who live (appropriately) on Falcon Ridge Road in Hunting Hills. Their wooded backyard is furnished with a birdbath and four feeders stocked with seeds, suet and mealworms. On winter days, the Kyles enjoy watching and photographing from inside, through a 12 by 16 foot glass wall.

"Friday morning, we were just enthralled with a large flock of cedar waxwings," said Ed, a retired clinical psychologist. "We think they're absolutely beautiful, so I was clicking away."



Cedar waxwings, related to Bohemian waxwings, aren't rare in Virginia, but the Kyles don't see them often. With puddles and ponds frozen, Kyle figured they were drawn to the open water in his heated birdbath. Up to 15 at a time were visible through his 500 mm telephoto lens.





As Kyle was studying the photos on Sunday, Jan. 23, he noticed that one bird was bigger than the others. It also lacked the yellow belly of a cedar waxwing.

Kyle knew of Bohemian waxwings, although he'd never seen one himself. He found an online article comparing cedars to Bohemians. By this point he was pretty sure — the big one was a Bohemian. But what was it doing here?

Ed Kyle on his back deck. The now famous birdbath is behind him. Randy Walker photo.

I knew it was greatly out of place, he said. Closest it would normally be to here would be about South Dakota. We're more likely to have a snowy owl from the Arctic than we are to have a Bohemian waxwing. I put it on my Facebook page to share with my friends, and a couple of them are Bird Club members and some saw it."

Betty Burke, secretary of the Roanoke Valley Bird Club, encouraged him to post it on eBird, a website managed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

Kyle's post quickly got the attention of Matt Anthony, an eBird data review volunteer for Virginia. "If a bird is reported outside its normal geographic range...it'll be flagged by eBird," Anthony said. "And that will prompt us to follow up and get the documentation for those sightings."

Anthony requested and received Kyle's photo. Then he typed out this message to Kyle:

*Hi Ed.*

*This is fantastic! That photo certainly leaves no doubt about the identification. Congratulations on a truly amazing find! To give you some context, there are only two previous records for Virginia and the most recent one before your bird was in 1975. As far as I know, this is also the first photograph of a Bohemian Waxwing for the state.*

Map by Robert Lunsford.

*This is a pretty spectacular find, and I know a lot of other birders (including myself) are going to be interested in trying to come and see it...*

Anthony works in student services at Eastern Shore Community College, in Accomack County. He asked his boss for a day off, and made a quick trip to Roanoke with two birding pals in hopes of sighting the Bohemian.

Meanwhile, word was spreading among Bird Club members.

Club president Kent Davis recalled the reaction. "Some of us, it was disbelief. It was like, wow! It is a very rare bird." The Kyles issued an invitation for club members to come by.

"We became quite popular," Barbara said.

On Monday morning, when the Kyles got up, birders were already on their back deck.

"Some birders are positive thinking and others are negative thinking," Davis said. "I thought our chances were slim to none of seeing this bird. As a birder and chaser of rarities we had to go and give it the old college try."

Betty Burke and her husband, Bob Crawford, came twice. "We saw the sandhill crane, that's a rare bird, at the sewage treatment center, and that was a grand thing to see because you just don't see them. But to have this Bohemian waxwing, that no one in my adult time of birding has seen or recorded in Virginia, and here it was in Roanoke County, was really thrilling."

The name "waxwings" comes from the red, waxy tips on some of their wing feathers. Other markings include a black mask over a peach face, white rectangles on the wings, a yellow tail tip, and a rusty undertail.

Males and females differ just slightly. Kevin McGowan, creator of Cornell's All About Birds website, examined Kyle's photo for Cardinal News.

“Based on the fuzziness of the bottom of the black throat patch, I would guess this is a female,” he wrote in an email. “Not super confident of that. I cannot tell from this photo if it is a first-year bird or an adult.”

What’s certain is that this bird is living up to her name. One definition of Bohemian, per Merriam-Webster, is “vagabond, wanderer.”

“The bohemian wanderings of this waxwing make them a little unpredictable to find,” All About Birds states. “Bohemian Waxwings are movers. One waxwing banded by researchers in British Columbia was recovered 13 months later in South Dakota. Another individual flew 280 miles in 11 days.

“Bohemian Waxwing’s nomadic nature makes it difficult to predict if and when they might show up in your yard. True to their name, Bohemian Waxwings wander like bands of vagabonds across the northern United States and Canada in search of fruit during the nonbreeding season.”

It’s not unusual for them to take up with flocks of cedar waxwings. But what possessed this adventurer to travel so far from home? The obvious answer is perhaps the only one.

“Because birds have wings and they sometimes wander,” McGowan wrote. “Bohemian Waxwings are variable in how far south they come each winter, based on the food supply in the more northern part of their range. This year does not seem to be [a] particularly heavy irruption [unusual migration] year, but there are many birds around the US/Canada border and just to the north at this time. The Virginia bird is way out of place.”

Long story short, neither the Kyles, nor Anthony and his friends, nor the bird club members, saw the Bohemian again after her celebrated appearance on Jan. 24. For all they know, she has flown to the next landing spot in her vagabond life, leaving the Valley’s birders aflutter.

If nothing else, she provided an opportunity for birders to flock together on the Kyles’ back deck. “It’s just a fun experience,” said Burke. “It’s both fun socially, and it’s fun to be in different places where you can see birds so well.”

Birdwatching is a safe activity during the pandemic, she noted.

“Our membership has grown, and we’ve seen more people who are interested because people are getting out more during COVID, and we’re getting younger members. This article is a timely one for people who are looking for things to do in this time of isolation.”