

The immense toll a childhood disease took on two Rappahannock families

Cancer patient Anne Genho, 7



BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOHILLS FORUM

‘CANCER IS MESSY’

BY RANDY RIELAND *For Foothills Forum*

It's like being struck by lightning. That's how Lynniece Genho describes how she and her husband John felt last June when they were told their then six-year-old daughter, Anne, had cancer, specifically T-cell acute leukemia. It was both inconceivable and devastating at once, a numbing flash that would change their lives in ways they couldn't yet imagine.

How could this be, they thought when trying to be rational. How could their little girl have cancer?

Six months later, another little girl, a grade ahead of Anne Genho at Rappahannock County Elementary School, was diagnosed with brain cancer. She's Farrah, daughter of the school's

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principal, Lisa Gates and her husband, Jeremy, who is learning facilitator for the school district's Commit to Be Fit program. Like the Genhos, they juggled disbelief and dread.

"The only time I could get relief was when I fell asleep," Jeremy remembered. "If I woke up in the middle of the night, the first thing I would think about is that we might not have a daughter next year. That's all I thought about."

Life gets messy

"Cancer is messy."

It's a phrase often associated with childhood cancer since the disease can so profoundly roil day-to-day life. Overnight, a family's routine can be taken over by medications and reactions to them, doctor appointments and lab visits, and hours on the phone determining who's covering what expenses... or not.

Appropriately, "Cancer is Messy" is the name of a free event scheduled from 1 to 5 p.m. on Saturday, May 14 at Eldon Farms. Genho said it's meant to celebrate all cancer survivors and their families, but it will feature activities geared to childhood, rather than cancer — a slip and slide, petting zoo, bounce house and a mud pit. Anne Genho will be there. So will Farrah Gates.

It will be a chance to reclaim a sense of normalcy, particularly for the Genhos, whose immersion in the knotty tangle of cancer began about a year ago with what was thought to be a reaction to a tick bite.

Anne said her neck hurt, and during a family vacation in the Great Smoky Mountains, she woke up crying most nights. She said it was hard to breathe when she was lying down. Something clearly wasn't right. A trip to the pediatrician brought a scary diagnosis of Rocky Mountain spotted fever. Anne hadn't spiked a fever or developed a rash, but she started on an antibiotics regimen.

Then, all five Genho children tested positive for COVID-19. But the family made it through quarantine, and started back on their busy schedules. That included a ballet recital for Anne, and it was then, when she was wearing her ballerina outfit, that they noticed the lump near her neck. Another visit to the pediatrician prompted a recommendation that they take their daughter to the University of Virginia Medical Center in Charlottesville.

During their long wait in the emergency department there, Anne practiced ballet.

"A shell of a kid"

They would soon learn that she had a four-inch-by-four-inch mass in her chest. That's why she was having trouble breathing. It was pushing her heart and esophagus to the side, and had collapsed her left lung. A biopsy confirmed that she had a rare form of childhood leukemia.

"This is a kid who's terrified of tweezers, and there now were all these tubes poking out of her and all this stuff going at her," said Lynnne. "It was a shock."

She remembers her daughter's first month home as an "ugly blur." Anne was put on a heavy dosage of steroids. That shrunk the tumor, but also made her gain weight, and even worse, induced diabetes. So Anne had to start taking insulin and getting pricked regularly to have her blood sugar checked. She withdrew, barely spoke. Lynnne and John thought that once she was home, Anne would find her old self, the girl who liked to catch salamanders and swim in the pond.

"But it was almost like she was a shell of a kid," said Lynnne. "You see all these pictures of cute, bald kids smiling and laughing, but she hadn't smiled for a month. I told John that if the cancer didn't kill her, this is gonna kill her."

Once she got off the steroids, though, Anne slowly started to bounce back. And when she turned seven last July she had a party of sorts. Five of her closest friends were driven by the house and waved happy birthday from their cars. →

First Person // How our family lives with cancer

BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

The Genho family: Nathan, 15, Ava, 17, Adele, 9, Lynnne, Anne, 7, John, and Elias, 13

BY AVA GENHO
For Foothills Forum

For almost a year, my little sister Anne has been battling leukemia.

At times, our family's life revolves around it. On days when Anne has an appointment for chemo, one of my parents has to drive her to the clinic at the University of Virginia.

There have been weeks when Anne is really sick. For a while, her arms, legs, and body were alarmingly thin. We've also had emergency visits to the hospital because she had a fever. A few months ago, Anne stayed in the hospital for 25 days, with my parents switching off who was home and who was with her. It was tough to be home and going about my normal life when Anne was suffering there.

Sometimes I hate the questions the most. Well-meaning people ask, "How is she doing?" and don't realize how difficult it is to answer, over and over again: "She's still in the hospital." I don't know anything more than they do. (Note: a hug and "I'm thinking of you" is a great alternative for anyone dealing with a family illness.)

Other times, there's guilt. It's not me going through cancer, or sitting with Anne in the hospital room, so I feel like maybe I don't have as much of a right to be sad. Some days, this cancer thing seems like a breeze. When Anne is home and happy, playing and watching movies and hanging out with us, it's easy.

This is my senior year of high school, and it looks a lot different than I ever imagined. Like other kids my age, it's a busy time as I

squeeze all the memories I can into my last year of childhood. I've also been helping my family as my parents devote so much time to taking care of Anne. I drive my siblings to school and often pick them up from sports and such

'If anyone could have laid out our lives, they wouldn't have chosen for Anne to go through this.'

after my after-school activities. I've become a spokesperson for our family when people ask how we're doing, or what they can do to help.

This year has been memorable, but not just for the classic end of high school experience. My mom has told me several times that this isn't how she planned for my senior year to go. If anyone could have laid out our lives, they wouldn't have chosen for Anne to go through this.

But it has been an experience that my whole family has gone through together. We've had really challenging times, but also happy days. I think we've all learned to enjoy the small triumphs. In the end, we are still a team, even if we're pulled in a million different ways each day. Anne's journey through cancer has fused us even closer.

One of my favorite moments from the past few months happened several weeks ago. I was sitting on the piano bench before bed, scrolling through my phone. Anne suddenly popped up and wrapped her arms around me. She held onto me tightly.

I turned my phone off, tossed it on the table nearby, and hugged her back.

Ava Genho is a senior at Rappahannock County High School



Anne Genho above on May 7, 2021, before her official leukemia diagnosis, and right, at the end of her 25-day stay for low blood counts in March.



A scary seizure

For Lisa and Jeremy Gates, the lightning strike came as they were about to celebrate Lisa's birthday last December. They had flown to Nashville for the occasion and left their daughter, Farrah, with Lisa's mother and stepfather near Richmond. But on that first night out of town, during a FaceTime call, Lisa's stepfather told them Farrah was acting strange.

She had a stomach bug and seemed lethargic. But more disturbing was that she didn't appear able to focus. They said both of her eyes were turned to the side and that she struggled to speak beyond one-word answers. When Farrah came on the screen, Lisa and Jeremy could see something was wrong. They told her grandparents to take Farrah to the hospital.

While Lisa and Jeremy, 600 miles away and feeling helpless, waited for news, they worried that maybe it was a reaction to the COVID-19 vaccine Farrah had received a few weeks earlier. But they told themselves that once their daughter was checked out at the hospital, she would be fine.

Their calm crumbled with the next call from Lisa's mother. Farrah had had a seizure, she told them, and doctors wanted to transfer her by ambulance to Children's Hospital of Richmond at Virginia Commonwealth University.

"Then we really started getting really worried because we were so far away and we couldn't get home," said Jeremy.

"It was awful," Lisa remembered.

They managed to find a flight out the next morning, and early on Lisa's birthday, they flew to Charlotte, then Richmond, then grabbed an Uber to the hospital to see their daughter who had suffered what the doctors had called a focal seizure. It was a term they had never heard before.

A brain surgery

Once they finally got to see Farrah, they were relieved. She seemed herself, aside from lying in a hospital bed with an IV in her arm. They felt even better when a doctor told them he was pretty sure that nothing was wrong. But he did want to do a few more tests.

The first, an electroencephalogram, or EEG, showed "slow activity," on the right side of her brain, according to Lisa. The doctor then ordered an MRI. Afterward, he asked if he could speak with the couple in a private room. "My stomach just dropped to the floor," Jeremy said.

His angst was justified. Farrah would need brain surgery to remove a tumor, the doctor told them. He reassured them that once it was removed, he thought she would be fine. But it was brain surgery.

"She's had strep throat a couple of times, but really she's never been sick," said Lisa. "It was like 'What? What did you say?'"

Given a choice of having the surgery done before or after Christmas, the Gates chose the former, first to have the tumor taken out before she suffered another seizure, and also to allow Farrah to recover among family during the holidays.

They both remember that the operation seemed to last forever. But the results were good; the surgeon felt she had been able to remove all of the tumor. Still, there would be more waiting. This type of brain cancer is extremely rare in children. So a sample was sent to a pediatric brain surgeon at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis.

The Gates had been told at VCU that the tumor might have been at a Grade 3 level, meaning it was malignant and fast-growing. But ultimately, the expert at St. Jude determined that Farrah's case was less serious. She wouldn't need chemotherapy, only a seizure medication. The family also has emergency medication they can inject if she has a seizure.

Otherwise, Farrah is back to her pre-surgery self. She didn't miss any school after Christmas break. She's playing softball and doing gymnastics, riding her bike just like before.

"She came back so quickly," said Lisa. "She never lost her balance. We had to tell her, 'You can't do handstands yet.'"

A recent MRI showed a small spot on Farrah's brain, but it's thought to be scar tissue. Doctors will take another look next month.

An old soul

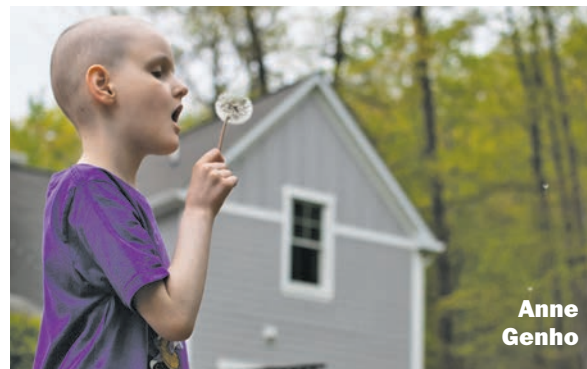
For Anne Genho, it's been a more daunting slog. She gets chemo infusions at a clinic in Charlottesville once a week, sometimes more often. She's been in the hospital seven times since last summer, including a 25-day stay in March when she spiked a chemo-related fever that made her body unable to fight infections. Lynnne said she or John have slept in the hospital more than 50 nights since last summer.

Anne hasn't been able to attend school, but she did, at the beginning of the year, leave a stuffed shark on her desk to remind the other second graders that she was still their classmate. Instead, she's been receiving lessons at home from elementary school special education teacher Kristin DiLello, about whom Lynnne said, "I could sing her praises for days."

Most of the time, Anne has managed to stay positive through this ordeal, said Lynnne. Sometimes, though, the fight can feel too much. Not long ago, when her immune system had pretty much shut down, Anne buckled. "I'm done. I don't want to do this anymore," she told her mom. "I could just die."

"To hear a seven-year-old tell you that," said Lynnne. "And I'm like, 'You can't because then you let cancer win.' But that's a real hard conversation to have because she knows there are kids who don't make it."

The American Cancer Society estimates that nationwide close to 10,500 children under the age



Anne Genho

THE EVENT

"Cancer is Messy"

A celebration of all cancer survivors and their families, featuring a slip and slide, petting zoo, bounce house and a mud pit.

- When: Saturday, May 14, 1 to 5 p.m.
- Where: Eldon Farms, Woodville

PHOTO BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

of 15 will be diagnosed with cancer this year. It predicts roughly 1,050 will die, but survival rates vary depending on the type of cancer and other factors.

The survival rate for children with Anne's type of leukemia is above 85 percent. But her treatment involves a complex, multi-stage regimen of chemotherapy, including a maintenance phase that could last another two years. And, it's not unusual for long-term chemo to cause other health issues, such as hearing loss, nerve damage and cognitive disorders. Anne also will likely be more susceptible to infections due to a shortage of normal white blood cells.

From the beginning, Lynnne and John have talked openly with Anne about her cancer. She understands her situation, said Lynnne, and, in fact, has become a real advocate for herself in her care.

"Anne is a quiet, introspective kid who can be pretty insightful," said Lynnne. "She's very mature. An old soul."

A stronger bond

That said, she's also only seven. So she's looking forward to the "Cancer is Messy" party, more at the prospect of a mud pit than being a center of attention.

The event has its roots in a community service project of the high school's Leo Club, whose parent organization is Lions Clubs International. "At first, it was just a small idea, maybe just some fundraising at school," said Meredith Siqueiros, the club's president. "Then the idea started rolling into an event. First, just a T-shirt sale, but it kept growing."

After Farrah Gates was diagnosed, the planners broadened the focus to cancer in the community. But it soon became clear that the Leo Club would need help in pulling it off. The Lion's Club jumped in, and it will be providing hot dogs, bottled water, and its signature yellow and blue tent. It also will create the much-awaited mud pit. That's in addition to another team of volunteers who will lend a hand.

It's the latest example of the goodwill and generosity both the Genhos and Gates say has helped them weather the trials of the past months. They say they've been touched, and even a bit surprised by the level of support they've received. It's made them feel a stronger bond with the community.

"Before, it was like this isn't where we're from," said Jeremy Gates. He and Lisa only moved to the area from southwest Virginia in 2019 after she was hired as assistant principal at the elementary school. "But this has really sealed me in this area. I love it here. I really feel like we're a part of this community now."

The Genhos have lived in Rappahannock since John was hired to manage Eldon Farms 17 years ago. But they, too, now sense a deeper connection.

"We feel it, and I think our kids feel more connected, too," Lynnne said. Even people with whom she hadn't been particularly close, have been warmly sympathetic and openly compassionate.

"They'll come up and give me a big hug. That has been great."



BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM; COURTESY PHOTO



The Gates family:

Lisa, principal of Rappahannock County Elementary School, and husband Jeremy, with their daughter Farrah, who had surgery to remove a brain tumor.



BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOHILLS FORUM

Rose Williams, a support coordinator at S.E.E. Recovery Center in Culpeper, takes a break from administering a detox medication to patients and chats with program manager Cory Will. She uses acupuncture points in the ears that help reduce cravings.

‘The situation is even worse than it was a year ago’

As the pandemic wanes, its impact on addiction and recovery continues

BY RANDY RIELAND
For Foothills Forum

The worst of the pandemic would seem to be behind us. Unfortunately, not all of it.

In fact, an often-overlooked impact of COVID-19 — an alarming rise in drug and alcohol use — could be one of its darker lasting effects. For many, the months and months of isolation, stress and uncertainty proved to be a toxic combination. More than a few of those in recovery

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have relapsed.

“I think the situation is even worse than it was a year ago,” said Jan Brown, executive director of SpiritWorks Foundation Center for the Soul, which operates a recovery center in Warrenton. “There’s been a lot of despair and hopelessness in the recovery community. And some of that is about the relentless nature of the pandemic.”

Brown will be the main speaker at a special program, “Addiction Recovery 101,” next Wednesday, March 23, between 5:30 p.m. and 7 p.m. at the Washington Fire Hall. People can also attend online on Zoom by registering at: bit.ly/Recovery101March23.

The event is not just for those struggling with substance use, but also for families, friends and others in the community who want to better understand the pathology of addiction and alcoholism and the complex challenges of recovery.

“There are multiple pathways to recovery. And there are multiple pathways of recovery,” Brown said. “Most people know about the 12-step programs, and they know about in-patient treatment. But there are many other options.”

Persistent stigma

Few statistics tell the story of COVID-19’s repercussions on substance use as starkly as overdose deaths. In 2019, a total of 1,627 fatal overdoses were recorded in the state, according to the chief medical examiner for the Virginia Department of Health. During 2020, the first year of the pandemic, that number jumped 42% to 2,309 deaths. The final total of fatal overdoses for Virginia in 2021 is still being compiled, but it’s projected to climb another 15% to 2,660 fatal overdoses. That’s 86% higher than it was just five years ago.

Nine of the 17 overdose deaths in Rappahannock since 2007 have occurred in the past two years, according to the health department. Through just the third quarter of 2021, Culpeper had 21 fatal overdoses, compared to 15 in 2020, when the number had already jumped 67% from 2019.

A big reason has been the infusion of the powerful painkiller fentanyl into other drugs, including heroin, oxycodone and cocaine. It has played a role in almost 75% of Virginia’s fatal overdoses during the past two years. But Brown feels it’s become too easy to blame the spike solely on fentanyl. Stigma, she said, remains another huge factor.

Too many people still view substance misuse as a moral failing, rather than a medical condition. That, Brown suggested, can even include doctors and nurses in emergency departments who watch overdosed users die, or revive them only to see them brought back in a few days later. She encourages those patients to go back at some point and thank the people who saved their lives.

“They need to let these people in



FILE PHOTO BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

“You need a lot of support. But people don’t want to invest in something they think will fail,” said Sperryville’s Cara Cutro. “There is a rate of failure that comes with this because of the nature of the disease. So, you have to prepare people for that.”

the ER know how they’re doing now, because they don’t know that anybody ever gets better,” Brown said.

Cory Will, program manager of the S.E.E. (Support. Encourage. Empower) Recovery Center, which opened in Culpeper last August, said he understands the lack of empathy for those who misuse substances, particularly among their family members, who often bear the brunt of the emotional and financial damage of addiction.

“When you see someone who is still actively engaged in their disorder, and they’ll do anything to fulfill that need, you have people think, ‘Why should I care if they don’t care enough to stop?’”, Will said. “They see it as a choice. But it’s a disease.”

He continued, “Families can have

the hardest time accepting this. Even if someone stops using, there’s always the fear that it will happen again. Maybe last time, they had their bank account drained. Or this happened. Or that happened. You hear the horror stories.”

The reality of relapse

Cara Cutro, owner of Abracadabra Massage and Wellness in Sperryville, knows firsthand the persistent challenges of recovery. She’s been clean and sober for 10 years now, but 20 years ago, when she was living in Seattle, Cutro was a daily drinker and used heroin. She stopped using for a few years after moving back to Rappahannock, but then relapsed.

Almost all who misuse substances

relapse. That’s the reality of addiction. But it’s one more thing, said Cutro, that sustains the stigma. “You need a lot of support. But people don’t want to invest in something they think will fail,” she said. “There is a rate of failure that comes with this because of the nature of the disease. So, you have to prepare people for that.”

Brown makes the point that recovery is much more complicated than “removing the substance from the person.” Those who misuse substances or alcohol often have mental health issues that haven’t been addressed or physical conditions that plague them, such as chronic pain. And, after they stop using, they still have to deal with daunting real life ramifications of their former lives. Brown said that even after →



Staffers at S.E.E Recovery Center assemble “harm reduction kits” that include NARCAN and fentanyl test strips. “The point is to keep people alive,” said program manager Cory Will.

BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

➔ being clean for 25 years, she had trouble getting health insurance.

The stigma around addiction also carries over into objections to harm reduction practices, such as providing clean needles or fentanyl test strips to drug users. Even people who support those programs can have unrealistic expectations about their purpose, according to Brown. They see them as a pathway to recovery. But the truth is that that can take a long time, and some users will never stop.

“If it helps people stop using, that’s great,” Brown said. “But the point is that people are going to use, and we want them to be safe. We don’t want them to die.”

She drew a comparison to someone considered a “functional” alcoholic. “They know they’re not going to drink and drive, and they only drink on weekends so they can work through the week,” she said. “Those are examples of harm reduction strategies.”

Safe space

Based on the response to the S.E.E. Center since it opened last summer, there’s a need in the region for a place where people can get support from peers to deal with substance use and mental health issues. Almost 6,500 visits have already been recorded at the facility, operated by Rappahannock Rapidan Community Services, according to Cory Will. While that total includes repeat visitors for the regular Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings, he said about 20 percent of those who come in are new.

In addition to a staff of peers who themselves have wrestled with substance use and mental health issues, the center has spaces where visitors can meditate, do yoga or create art. There’s also a darkened room with a sound machine where people can go to decompress. It also distributes harm reduction kits that include fentanyl testing strips, two doses of Narcan, sterile water, gloves and first aid supplies.

The staff didn’t start tracking its visitors until January and, not surprisingly, more than half live in Culpeper County. So far, he said, about 5 percent have come from Rappahannock, but that number has doubled this month from last, and that the majority have been there over concerns about substance use.

Will acknowledged that the fear of being stigmatized is driving some of the visits to the recovery center from other counties.

“There’s the familial shame,” he said. “In a small community, everybody knows when it comes to light. People will tell us, ‘I can’t do this in my area. People won’t know me in Culpeper.’”

The Addiction Recovery 101 event is sponsored by the Mental Health Association of Fauquier County and Rappahannock Rapidan Community Services.

Where to get help



HELPLINES

24/7 Crisis Hotline: Deals with mental health, health and substance use situations. 540-825-5656.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255.

NeverUseAlone: 24/7 peer-run call line. 1-800-484-3731.

Peer2Peer Regional Warmline: Not a crisis line, but callers connect with peers with experience in mental health and substance use issues. 833-626-1490.

THERAPY AND RECOVERY SERVICES

Boxwood Recovery Center: 28-day residential substance use recovery center in Culpeper that provides individual, family and group counseling. 540-547-2760. www.rrcsb.org/boxwood-recovery-center/

Herren Wellness at Twin Oaks: Holistic residential addiction recovery center in Warrenton. 844-443-7736. herrenwellness.com/locations/virginia

Rappahannock-Rapidan Community Services: Agency that provides outpatient mental health and substance use counseling and clinical assessments to determine treatment needed. Warrenton clinic: 540-347-7620. Culpeper clinic: 540-825-3100. 24/7 Crisis hotline: 540-825-5656. www.rrcsb.org

S.E.E. Recovery Center: Offers a range of free recovery-oriented groups and meetings and access to peers who can discuss substance use or mental health recovery. (540) 825-3366. SEEReccovery@rrcsb.org

SpiritWorks Foundation Center for the Soul: Peer-to-peer addiction recovery support. Warrenton office (serves Rappahannock): 540-428-5415. www.spiritworksfoundation.org

RESOURCES AND FAMILY SUPPORT

Al-Anon: Online meetings for those affected by the alcoholism of others. al-anon.org/al-anon-meetings/electronic-meetings

Center for Motivation and Change: A guide for parents and partners to people with substance use disorders. the20minuteguide.com

Come As You Are Coalition (CAYA): Fauquier nonprofit that maintains online listing of resources, treatment options and support groups. www.cayacoalition.org

Culpeper Overdose Awareness: Comprehensive online resource of treatment options, recovery meetings and support groups in the region. culpeperoverdoseawareness.org

Families Anonymous: 12-step program for relatives and friends of

people with drug or alcohol issues. www.familiesanonymous.org

Mental Health Association of Fauquier County: Nonprofit that provides information and guidance on mental health and addiction resources and treatment for Fauquier and Rappahannock residents. 540-341-8732. www.fauquier-mha.org

Nar-Anon: Support chat rooms for those affected by another’s addiction. www.naranonchat.com

ParentsHelpingParents: Virtual meetings for parents of children with substance use disorders. www.parents helpingparents.info/virtual-chapter

Partnership to End Addiction: Website for parents seeking help for their children. drugfree.org

SMART Recovery Family and Friends: Secular, behavioral-based program that offers online meetings for families and friends of those with substance use disorder. www.smartrecovery.org/family

Youth for Tomorrow: Offers a range of outpatient mental health counseling services for children (ages five and up), adolescents, and families. For appointments: 703-659-9900. www.youthfortomorrow.org/Warrenton-Behavioral-Health,

PEER SUPPORT GROUPS

Regional meetings: www.culpeperoverdoseawareness.org/meetings

Alcoholics Anonymous: Find a meeting: 866-641-9190. findrecovery.com/aa_meetings/va

Narcotics Anonymous: Find a meeting: 866-801-6621; findrecovery.com/na_meetings/va

WHAT IS FOOTHILLS FORUM?



Foothills Forum is an independent, community-supported nonprofit tackling the need for

in-depth research and reporting on Rappahannock County issues. The group has an agreement with Rappahannock Media, owner of the Rappahannock News, to present this and other reporting projects.

► More at foothills-forum.org

What do you think?

Send feedback to editor@rappnews.com

Now Accepting
Nominations for REC’s



BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The Rappahannock Electric Cooperative (REC) 2022 Director Elections nomination process officially opened March 1. **Director Elections will be conducted this year in the following three regions:**

- **REGION I** – the counties of Frederick, Shenandoah & portions of Page, Warren and Rappahannock. Currently represented by Michael W. Lindsay.
- **REGION VI** – Caroline County. Currently represented by Linda R. Gray.
- **REGION VII** – Louisa County. Currently represented by J. Mark Wood.

Nomination Packets are now available. To obtain the candidate nomination packet, visit myrec.coop/directorelections, email directorelections@myrec.coop or call 540-891-5889.

REC members who wish to become a candidate must reside in the region to which they wish to be elected, meet director qualifications and complete the nomination process.

Director elections will take place on Aug. 10 at REC’s Annual Meeting. The nomination process must be completed no later than 5 p.m. on April 29. No nominations can be accepted at the Annual Meeting.



BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER

Erica Jennejahn walks the hallways of Rappahannock County High School with Principal Carlos Seward.

Rapp Schools' new social worker to focus on impacts of student isolation

BY RANDY RIELAND
For Foothills Forum

When students returned to Rappahannock's two public schools last week, all indications were that finally things were back to normal.

No more masking. No more social distancing. Kids could go to classes, eat lunch together, hang out in the hallways like they did in the days before anyone knew the word COVID.

But the impact of the pandemic lingers in more insidious ways. How much was lost academically during the many months of online learning? And, perhaps more concerning, how has spending so much time in social isolation affected the mental health and behavioral growth of kids in the community?

That concern, says Erica Jennejahn, will be a focus of her role as the new social worker at Rappahannock County Public Schools (RCPS). After a six-month search, Jennejahn was hired to replace Kathy Sickler, who resigned as RCPS' first social worker last December.

'It's really going to be important to help kids know how to connect again in person'

annock County Public Schools (RCPS). After a six-month search, Jennejahn was hired to replace Kathy Sickler, who resigned as RCPS' first social worker last December.

"I think it's really going to be important to help kids know how to connect again in person," Jennejahn said. "I anticipate seeing a lot of need for supporting students in navigating those face-to-face interactions with each other and with the staff."

"The mental health needs of kids have absolutely been exacerbated by the pandemic."

RIPPLE EFFECTS

It's an opinion shared by RCPS Superintendent

SOCIAL

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Dr. Shannon Grimsley. She pointed out that in addition to hiring Jennejahn, the school has also brought on a second full time behavior interventionist to work with struggling students.

“We don’t know yet what the ripple effects will be on the emotional well-being and mental health of students,” she said. “But what we do know about young people is that they can be super resilient. And, given the tools as early as possible, they can really bounce back quickly.”

One advantage Jennejahn noted is the small size of the RCPS community. She previously was the prevention services program coordinator for the Albemarle County Department of Social Services, but before that had been a social worker for Culpeper County Public Schools.

“I think that’s going to provide me with the opportunity to get to know students and their families at a much deeper level than I was able to in Culpeper,” she said. “My role is to help families and students have their needs met outside the building, so when kids arrive at school, they’re prepared to learn and be successful academically.”

While Jennejahn will work directly with students, classroom issues will more often be handled first by the behavior interventionist, then escalated to her, particularly if they’re seen to be related to factors outside school.

“If there are mental health or family needs – financial, housing, things like that – that impact the children here at school, then that’s the appropriate time for me to get connected,” she said.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Another element of the school district’s efforts to help students deal with stress or impulsive behavior is its continued focus on social and emotional learning, said Grimsley. At the high school level, that could include morning classroom meetings where students can talk about the anxiety they feel before taking a big test.

“It’s helping them to build coping strategies, and realize that anxiety and stressors are normal,” she said. “But also, it’s helping them understand when it can get to a point where these feelings can be dangerous, when they should tell a friend or a teacher or seek help.”

At the elementary school, more emphasis tends to be placed on how students interact with their classmates and teachers.

“Basically, social and emotional learning comes down to how we help our kids learn to manage their emotions and feelings and still be productive,” said Jennejahn. “All of us know what it’s like to be sitting somewhere and getting frustrated, or being tired or hungry. But we still have to finish the task at hand so we can move on. That’s what we want to help them with.”

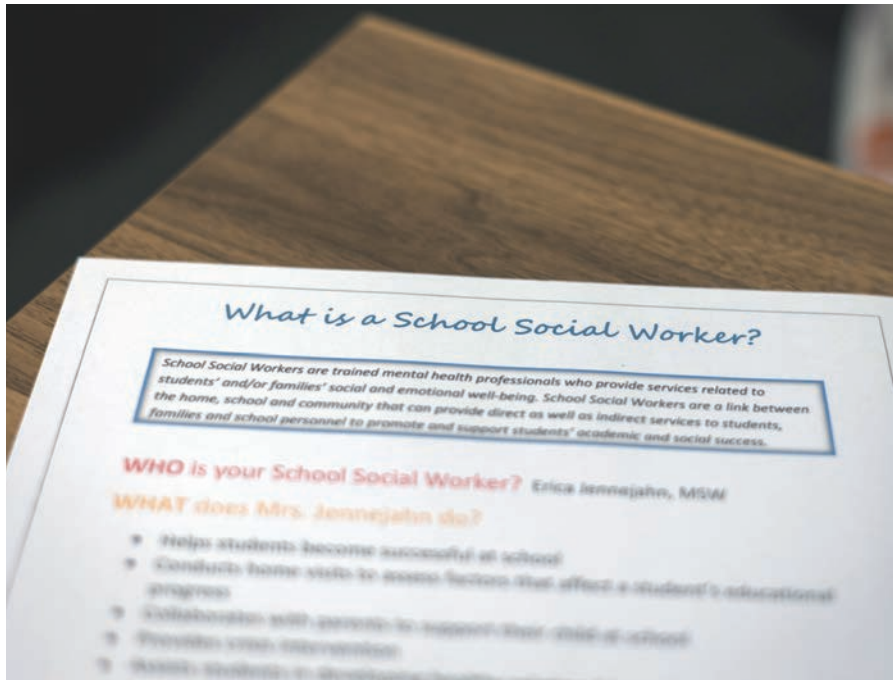
“I think the other piece that’s really important with social and emotional learning,” she added, “is not only teaching students how to use it, but also teaching parents so they can reinforce it at home.”



SEEKING HELP?

The Rappahannock County Public Schools Student Support Hotline: 540-683-0437.

Erica Jennejahn at Rappahannock County High School: 540-227-0745 or ejennejahn@rappahannockschoos.us



PHOTOS BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER

Erica Jennejahn started her new role as social worker at Rappahannock County Public Schools amid a pandemic-spurred mental health crisis. Jennejahn replaces Kathy Sickler, who resigned as RCPS’ first social worker last December.

A LINGERING STIGMA

According to the school district’s assistant superintendent, Dr. Carol Johnson, more than 100 students – or about 14 percent of the RCPS population – were served by the district’s behavior interventionist or its social worker last school year. While that’s concerning, both Grimsley and Jennejahn acknowledged that it also reflects more open-

ness among students when it comes to seeking help.

“It’s not that mental health challenges are new,” said Grimsley. “It’s just that they’ve been so heavily stigmatized that there’s been a huge barrier to getting help when those issues arise.”

“What we’re trying to do is to normalize it in the same way you would deal with a medical issue,” she added.

WHAT IS FOOTHILLS FORUM?



Foothills Forum is an independent, community-supported nonprofit tackling

the need for in-depth research and reporting on Rappahannock County issues. The group has an agreement with Rappahannock Media, owner of the Rappahannock News, to present this and other reporting projects.

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“If someone has an ailment or a broken arm, no one would question talking about it and getting treatment right away. Some of these mental health challenges need to be looked at in the same way.”

Jennejahn sees the openness to addressing mental health challenges as a big step forward. “I definitely see it as a positive that kids are able to step up and say, ‘Something’s not working for me. I need help. I would like it to be different.’ I think it’s still something that’s hard for a lot of adults to talk about,” she said.

“My hope is that we can continue to help parents who are reluctant to seek services for their kids to better understand why their kids are asking for help.”

She pointed out that there are more therapy options than in the past, such as telehealth sessions.

“It’s not just going somewhere and laying down on a couch and talking,” she said. “I’m hopeful that we can learn from our kids that this is okay, and that we start addressing the stigma around mental health.”