

# young

(and youngish)  
in Rappahannock

A FOOTHILLS FORUM • RAPP NEWS SPECIAL REPORT



Hannah Rosenbaum, 30,  
teaching yoga in Sperryville.

BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

With energy, wisdom and optimism, the county's next generation collectively offers a more nuanced take on the challenges of living in our aging community. ▶ **Bob Hurley reports starting on Page 12**

# young (and youngish) in Rappahannock

## ‘You can make your dream come true in Rappahannock...you just need to use your imagination.’

A LOOK AT AN AGING COUNTY’S NEXT GENERATION



“Nature here really feels like home,” says Hannah Rosenbaum on the bank at Rock Mills, where the Thornton and Rush rivers converge.



Ted and Tom Jenkins: “We were taught growing up that if you learned a trade you’d never starve.”

BY BOB HURLEY for *Foothills Forum*

**N**ow age 30, **Hannah Rosenbaum** graduated from Rappahannock County High School (RCHS) with the Class of 2009. After earning a college degree in Richmond, she spent the next eight years traveling and working in Costa Rica, California and India, acquiring and perfecting her skills as a yoga instructor and wellness consultant. In 2019, she returned to Rappahannock where she teaches yoga and integrative health while studying herbalism, locally, and to be a clinical psychologist. “Having a rooted support network made building a business easier, and I missed the small town feel of the county,” she said. “There is something very nourishing about returning home.”

**T**ed and Tom Jenkins, 34, never left. The twin brothers, who work at Shaw’s Services in Sperryville, graduated from RCHS in 2005. “We love everything here; hunting, fishing, the outdoor life,” said Ted, who lives in Washington with his wife and two children, ages 11 and 7. Said Tom, who lives in Page County with his wife and three children, ages 13, 10, and 8, but is planning to move back to Rappahannock and build a home once construction prices come down: “We were taught growing up that if you learned a trade you’d never starve, so we’ve always had job opportunities here.”

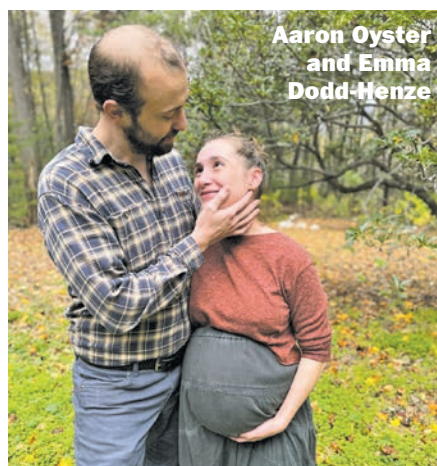
**E**lena and Mark Kazmier, both 40, moved to Flint Hill with their four children, ages 13, 10, 7, and 4 from Fredericksburg just over a year ago. “Shenandoah National Park and Rappahannock is where we’d always come to escape suburban life,” said Elena. “This place is a gateway to everything we love; the mountains, art, and people who have a shared appreciation of the land and its beauty,” said Mark.



Elena Kazmier with her son Owen at last year’s Fodderstack race.

**Y**ou’ll hear it repeatedly in Rappahannock County – with a median age of 50.1, one of Virginia’s highest – this aging community has little to offer young people who want to make it their home. And, so it’s repeated of those in their 20s, 30s or even 40s. With few sustainable jobs, a housing stock that’s comparatively limited and costly in the region, why live here? With such disadvantages, including shrinking school enrollment numbers, what’s the draw? And how might more young people be attracted to the county?

A sampling of stories gathered from more than two dozen interviews with “young” people who have chosen to return to Rappahannock or have opted to make it their home starts to peel away the layers. Collectively and individually, their stories and choices challenge common assumptions and speak to a more nuanced take on the county’s future.



FACEBOOK.COM/AARON.OYSTER

### “We want to give back”

Aaron Oyster and Emma Dodd-Henze, both 30, live in a small cabin in the woods outside Sperryville with their 15-month-old son. Since

graduating from RCHS in 2008, both have held jobs in local agricultural and food service businesses. Oyster, a certified personal trainer, has lately shifted his professional focus to health and wellness and launched a new business, Autonomous-Wellness, from their home.

Over the years, both have observed the difficulties employers face keeping employees. “What we’ve seen in our various jobs is a transient workforce of people commuting into Rappahannock from areas outside the county where housing is more affordable,” said Oyster. “Often they don’t stay in those jobs. That makes it hard for business owners to invest in their employees. We need to find ways to build a local workforce and sustain it. Growing small businesses that support tourism and services for locals is one way, but you also need to address the cost of housing as well as reliable internet access if young

people want to work and live here.” Oyster is almost completely recovered from serious injuries he sustained last fall. While walking through the woods with his wife, and young son strapped to his chest, a tree limb fell on him, breaking his pelvis, cracking ribs and causing internal bleeding. Fortunately his son and wife were not injured, but he was airlifted to UVA Hospital in Charlottesville. Friends helped set up a GoFundMe campaign to assist with medical and other expenses. “The support we received from the community has been overwhelming,” said Dodd-Henze. “People we barely knew stepped up to help.” Added Oyster: “This is such a strong, supportive, tight-knit community. We want to give back and help build Rappahannock into a place that will attract young people.”



**Stephenson Fletcher and Caleb Brown, in front of the Inn at Little Washington. Brown was the hotel's housekeeping manager in 2020.**

After graduating from Roanoke College in 2017, Castleton native Emily Percy, 26, returned to the county. Recently married, she now commutes daily from Greene County to her job at Stonewall Abbey Wellness in Sperryville. "It's expensive to live here, but our goal is to move here permanently," she said. "Rappahannock has economic opportunities, especially if you are interested in working at a small business. I value a healthy life-work balance and you can find that here as opposed to some faceless corporation."

Percy discovered that discussions of community issues have changed

compared with her growing up years. "I think people have become burned out on social media. We need to have more in-depth and in-person conversations about the future of the county. A lot of young people here want to talk about issues like housing and jobs, but aren't sure what steps to take. Forums on community issues would help identify those steps and hopefully build positive communication and consensus."

Percy would urge young families to move to Rappahannock. "Growing up here has given me a healthy perspective on life I could not have gotten elsewhere. It is a safe and supportive community for kids."



**Emily Percy at work in Sperryville.**

### "Living here is like winning a trophy."

Stephenson Fletcher, 24, lives on his family farm in Tiger Valley near Washington that goes back several generations. After graduating from RCHS in 2016, he decided not to attend college and remained in Rappahannock, working various jobs in Warrenton. "Finding a decent paying job here is not easy, so you have to work very hard to make a go of it. If you are able to stay, it is like winning a trophy," he said.

Fletcher, who treasures the county's rural environment, is concerned that once longtime county residents pass away, their children may sell off their property, making it ripe for development. "Let's not transition this place to the city, let's keep the country the country."

Fletcher's stepbrother, Caleb Brown, 23, graduated from RCHS in 2016. Brown recently moved to Warrenton to be closer to his job, but plans to return to Rappahannock permanently. "No doubt finding housing here is difficult, but once I get my degree in business leadership there will be opportunities here," he said. "You can make your dream come true in Rappahannock. There is plenty to do here, you just need to use your imagination."

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Photos by  
**LUKE CHRISTOPHER**  
for Foothills Forum

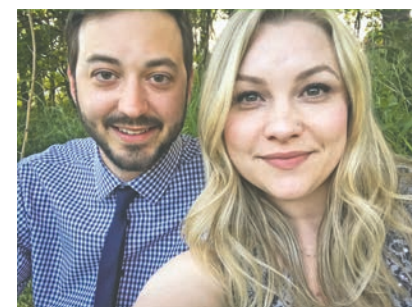
## voices

The two dozen people interviewed for this story – all under Rappahannock County's median age of 50.1 years – come from all walks of life. Many grew up here, stayed, or returned to make this their home. Others recently moved here and are excited about being new members of the community. Some are single and have to work two jobs to make ends meet. Others are families who want their kids to experience growing up in the country. Some are just scraping by. Others are in better financial shape. All are deeply interested in the future of Rappahannock and the challenge it faces to remain a unique, rural scenic landscape just 60 miles from the Nation's Capital. Below are some common themes that emerged from the interviews.

### KEY TO THE FUTURE

→ "Often we focus on controversy; that's human nature. But, in my view, there is a broadly held and shared vision for the future of this county, and that is thoughtful development in the villages, open working lands in the countryside, with agriculture and tourism as the primary economic drivers. There may be disagreement on how we get there, but it is a shared vision. We are lucky; a lot of places don't even have a shared vision."

– Kate Wofford, 44, lives in Sperryville with her husband and two children.



COURTESY PHOTO

**Trey Williams and Tiffany Matthews**

→ "I think Rappahannock can resist major changes like what we are seeing at Clevenger's Corner. But you can't wall off the outside world forever. We live in a changing world where there is growth and development and we need to share ideas and strike a balance between development and protecting what we have here. If we are going to attract young families to the county there needs to be more amenities like a grocery store."

– Trey Williams, 36, lives in Chester Gap with his wife and two children; works at Ayrshire Farms and teaches meat cutting at Rappahannock Center for Education.

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# young (and youngish) in Rappahannock



PHOTOS BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

**“We were very intentional about living here. The community reflects our values,” says Leah Childress, who lives with her husband Evan and their son in Harris Hollow.**

## voices

→ **“No one knows what the future will hold**, but I want to stick around and raise a family. Our generation has a real opportunity to make the county better both from an environmental standpoint and getting affordable housing.”

– Wesley Minder, 30, lives in Sperryville and works in construction at Hillcrest Contracting.

→ **“Broadband is one of the biggest issues** in the community at the moment. Reliable and affordable internet and telephone service is badly needed in many places. Right now, I’m paying \$600 per month for a patchwork of internet and telephone services for my business because I can’t rely on any one service. I’m in the real estate business and my clients always ask about the availability of internet.”

– Aron Weisgerber, 37, lives in Sperryville with his wife and three children; a real estate agent with KW Solutions - Keller Williams Realty.

### COST OF LIVING IN RAPPAHANNOCK

→ **“Returning to Rappahannock after 10 years**, I’ve noticed some big changes. A lot of people who grew up here want to stay because the scenic beauty and small-town atmosphere can lead to a much less stressful way of life. But it has become so expensive. Many have to work two jobs to make ends meet.”

– Caroline LeVans, 34, lives in Slate Mills with her child; works as a fitness trainer at Stonewall Abbey Wellness.

→ **“Seems like a lot of the young people** living out here have difficulty buying a home, but they don’t want to leave. A lot of the local jobs don’t pay enough to make a house affordable. Two years ago, with the help of my family, we were able to scrape up enough money to purchase a home. Even though I work as an electrician in Northern Virginia, and my wife is a full-time Montessori teacher, we have a hard time making ends meet, especially with a three-year-old son. We love it here and don’t want to leave, but it’s difficult.”

– Taylor Leotta, 34, lives in Sperryville with his wife and child; works for Benfield Electric in Manassas.

### ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

“It was always our plan to come back and farm. We are doing biodynamic gardening, pasture-raised poultry and beef, and learning restorative agriculture practices. We want to create products that are meaningful to growing our family and the greater community. Many of my childhood friends see opportunity here and have stayed or are moving back. I hope the children

## NEXT GEN

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After graduating from the College of Charleston in 2020, Greg Czekaj, 28, got a call from Jimmy Swindler, then the principal at RCHS. The two had reconnected in 2017 when RCHS students went on a field trip to the college. “I was an ecotourism guide after college when I heard from Mr. Swindler, asking me if I wanted to move back and teach,” he said. “Since I was considering a career in education, I felt this would be a great place to start. If you love the outdoors, as I do, Rappahannock has to be on your short list of where to live.”

Czekaj joined the high school faculty, teaching biology, earth science and anatomy. He tells his students to take advantage of opportunities at the school. “There are so many activities, clubs, and sports kids can join. Because it’s a small school they can easily participate in a variety of activities. I had such a rich school experience doing that. It’s something students don’t always get at larger schools.”

A resident of Amisville, Czekaj and his partner recently started Piedmont Permaculture, a “market garden” aimed at providing local residents with fresh produce. His goal is to buy a home, teach, and farm in Rappahannock. “It’s not like you’re giving things up moving back here. Growing up we were used to the lack of amenities you find in more populated areas.”

### “It takes a special kind of person to live here.”

After graduating from RCHS in 2008, Will Sonnett attended college, traveled the world, and worked in Richmond. Now 31, Sonnett returned

to Rappahannock two years ago to work in construction for Hillcrest Contracting. “It’s great to be back with friends and family,” he said. “We take care of each other and respect the rural environment. It’s kind of like living at the beach – no one is rushing hard like they do in the city.”

That said, Sonnett muses over why people would move here. “It takes a special kind of person to live here. Someone who is not bothered by a lack of amenities and services. It’s expensive. You live here because you want to enjoy the natural beauty, the people, and the quality of life.”

Sonnett’s views mirror those of Leah and Evan Childress, ages 38 and 37 respectively, who moved in 2020 from Oregon to Harris Hollow with their 3-year-old son. Evan took a job with Shenandoah National Park as a biologist. Leah, a social science researcher, works remotely.



**Will Sonnett at the old Pen Druid Brewery, summer 2020**

of the generational farmers come back to Rappahannock and carry on the work of their families.”

– Isabelle Heydt, 28, lives in Flint Hill at Rucker Farm with her husband and son; works part time as a resident counselor for the Center for Holistic Psychotherapy in Warrenton.

→ **“I was going to move to Northern Virginia** to look for work but was offered a position here. It’s not always easy to find a job in Rappahannock, but I do think there are opportunities if you look hard for them.”

– Cierra Chambers, 23, lives in Castleton; works at Headwaters Foundation.

→ **“Rappahannock isn’t the kind of place where you can live and work.**

A lot of people who live here, especially those with families, have to find work elsewhere. That’s not necessarily the case for those who can inherit land or a home from a family member. We looked around for three years before we found a house we could afford.”

– Tiffany Matthews, 34, lives with her spouse Trey Williams and two children in Chester Gap; finishing her master’s degree in public administration at Old Dominion University.

**COMMUNITY LIFE**

→ **“If we know someone wants to move back** to the county, we help out, since finding a lot of jobs and housing is by word of mouth. Helping and watching each other succeed is a cool way of life. That’s why I’m staying here.”

– Samantha Schwar, 30, lives in Washington; works at Pen Druid brewery.

→ **“We were lucky to settle down where I was born and raised.** There is no place in the world like the natural beauty, rare sense of community and unique opportunities of Rappahannock and Virginia.”

– Dr. Andrew Kohler, 32, lives in Amissville with his wife, Krista, an emergency room doctor; Fauquier Clinic board member; assistant professor, UVA Health; vice chair of medicine, UVA Community Health.

→ **“After a pretty bad accident on the job in southern Virginia, I returned home** to recover at my parent’s home. The community came together and helped with a GoFundMe campaign, and the support I received from my old friends was amazing. All of this made me realize how important it is to have roots here.”

– Smith Clifton, 28, lives in Sperryville; works as a trainer with Totality Martial Arts in Sperryville; does landscaping as well.

→ Learning Center in Washington, and will eventually be enrolled in the elementary school. “We’ve heard declining enrollment may impact school funding,” said Evan. “A lot of active involvement will be needed to make sure the funding is there so all kids have access to a high-quality education. You can’t do this without getting more families to stay or move into the county. That means more services like broadband for remote working. I’m hopeful we can do that without sacrificing what this place is all about.”

**S**erendipity played a role in the Volmrich family’s return to Rappahannock four years ago. Shauna, 43, and Brian, 45, moved to Flint Hill from Pittsburgh after Brian had taken a position as a chef at a restaurant in Clarke County.

“We became familiar with Rappahannock 10 years ago when Brian was a sous chef at the Inn at Little Washington and wanted to move back to the area,” said Shauna. “Finding a place to buy or rent was near impossible. I called the Mountain Laurel Montessori school in Flint Hill to see about enrolling our sons and, as luck would have it, they had an apartment in the building to rent. We took it sight unseen.”

The couple eventually purchased the building housing Mountain Laurel Montessori and adjacent land with plans to make Rappahannock their permanent home. Both their sons, ages 12 and 10, attend public schools. Shauna, a property manager, serves as secretary of the Parent Teacher Organization and recently started a ski club for students in 5th through 12th grades. Brian has started Peak View Gardens, growing and selling produce to restaurants and stores, as well as offering private chef dinners.

“Rappahannock has so many opportunities for kids. Programs offered by Headwaters, the Nature Camp, Commit to be Fit, community theater, and support from



Stacey Glemboski

PHOTOS BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR Foothills Forum

**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](http://foothills-forum.org)

**What do you think?**

Send feedback to [editor@rappnews.com](mailto:editor@rappnews.com)

foundations like PATH, are unique for a rural community,” said Brian. “I would like to see more young people living here but also like to preserve what we have. It’s a delicate balance.”

**S**arah Raposa and Karlos Leopold were weekenders from D.C. for six years until the pandemic hit. In their 40s with two children, they decided

to move to Rappahannock last year. “Covid brought us out here and it has been one of the best years of my entire life for me and my family,” Sarah said.

Sarah works remotely for the World Bank Group. Her husband Karlos is a restaurateur who is developing new projects. Their children, ages 11 and 8, attend Wakefield Country Day School.

“Our kids love it out here. Our daughter loves horseback riding and we’ve met many wonderful families through the recreational soccer league. However, it can be a bit isolating at times and it would be nice to have more ways to foster community connections. Regardless, our roots here are now too deep to go back to the city,” said Sarah.

**“I want to show respect for those who have lived here.”**

Stacey Glemboski, 44, has lived in Rappahannock on and off since 2015. In 2020 she made the decision to live here permanently. A former public school teacher who lived in Oregon Florida, and New Jersey, she is an audiobook narrator who works from her home in Washington.

“When I wake up in the morning it feels like this is the place that was meant for me,” she said. “I have no interest in going back to the hustle and bustle of the city. Having a garden, enjoying the beautiful outdoors, being able to work from home, and building relationships with neighbors all reinforce my decision to make this my home.”

Glemboski has joined a group of tennis enthusiasts at the county park and is easing into community life. “So many people in the county go back many generations and I want to show respect for those who have lived here,” she said. “I want to get to know the community better before I ‘cannonball’ into the deep end and get into lots of civic activities.”



Smith Clifton