

COMICS THE RICHMOND WAY

FEATURING:



KELLY ALDER



SHANNON WRIGHT



TOM DE HAVEN



W

hile it may not be Metropolis, or even Gotham City, Richmond has established its own special place in the world of comic books. With veteran artists, budding young creators, independent retailers, long-standing conventions and one of the largest academic collections of historic comics in the country, Richmond is not only fertile ground for the funnies, it's also where the panel borders are being transformed and expanded — pushing the medium into new forms and in front of new audiences.

PANEL DISCUSSION

Richmond's comic artists are breaking norms in a tough business

Chris Pitzer believes we're living in a golden age of comics. "Any type of comic book you want to read is out there," he says. "Horror, sci-fi, human interest, autobio, anything you want. You've just got to find it."

And Richmond is just the place to find it, adds Pitzer, who founded AdHouse Books, a celebrated independent comic publisher that recently shuttered after 20 years. "I couldn't think of a better place for a person who likes comics, with all of our comic shops and conventions," he says. "We can probably thank the amount of colleges that are in this town — VCU, of course."

The talent has always been here, he says. Artist Michael William Kaluta, a prolific cover illustrator also known for work on "Batman" and "The Shadow," and illustrator Charles Vess, who collaborated with celebrated author Neil Gaiman on the comic-book series "Sandman" and "Stardust," both attended VCU, the former when it was Richmond Professional Institute. Today, there are many working comic artists living in the city, from veterans such as Marvel Comics colorist Jason Keith and acclaimed graphic novelist Dash Shaw to relative newcomers such as Theodore Taylor III, the award-winning creator of "When the Beat Was Born: DJ Kool Herc and the Creation of Hip Hop," and Scott Wegener, the artist behind "Atomic Robo."

"It's an affordable city," Pitzer says. "Comic creators don't make a lot of money, so I think it's easier to be one here than in Washington, D.C."

When artist Jim Callahan attended VCU in the late 1990s, he says, Richmond's affordability "fostered a creative subculture in comics. It wasn't unlike how the music scene grew. People were able to work a part-time job and exist and put a lot of their energy into their passion."

That spirit is still alive today, he says. "It's inspiring."

Callahan has found a niche combining skateboard culture and comics with his Barf Comics imprint. He's also a muralist and skateboard designer (and he created the images opening this feature on Page 71). Aside from time in Los Angeles, he's



SARAH SCHULTZ-TAYLOR, COURTESY SHANNON WRIGHT



Shannon Wright, a 2016 VCU graduate, is a prolific illustrator who recently published her first graphic novel, "Twins."



JUSTIN VAUGHAN



worked in Richmond for 20 years, mostly self-publishing but occasionally jobbing for companies such as Marvel and Dark Horse. "The interest in independent comics has grown," he says. "With the expanded audience, there is more room for specificity with target niche stories."

Kelly Alder, who teaches illustration (including courses in how to make comics) in VCU's Department of Communication Arts, says that it's a different landscape from when he attended the school in the early 1980s.

"There were a lot of superhero comics, not a lot of adult alternative comics," he says. "Now, suddenly, every kind of comic you can imagine is being made. The diversity that the field is experiencing in general is reflected in the classroom."

Pitzer says, "The fact that Kelly Alder is teaching a comics class at VCU, to me, means that this is a comics town."

Shannon Wright was one of Alder's students. She graduated from VCU in 2016 and has since become a prolific professional illustrator from her home studio in Richmond. "I specifically learned sequential art and comic-making from Kelly," she says.

A Fredericksburg native, Wright prides herself on working with a host of clients and media, from newspapers to animation. But her real love is comics, and lately she has been creating short comics for Scholastic magazines. This year, Scholastic's book imprint Graphics published her first graphic novel, "Twins."

"Twins" follows two sisters, Maureen and Francine, through sixth-grade crushes, homework and other family drama. "Suddenly you have one sister, Francine, who wants to break away from her other half," Wright says. "Maureen is having a difficult time separating." She pauses and laughs. "And they both end up running for class president."

In Alder's Comics 1 and 2 courses, students are taught to put together their own books, from concept to printing. Instead of a tale of costumed superheroes, as a student, Wright drew a pensive story of a son reflecting on his mother's difficult life. >

"My favorite comics are slice-of-life character examinations," she says. "I'm interested in the everyday life of the character, trying to understand their decisions and life choices. What I love most about comics is that they can be about anything."

Bizhan Khodabandeh is another illustrator who loves the wide-ranging possibilities of comics. The assistant professor in VCU's Richard T. Robertson School of Media and Culture, Khodabandeh self-describes as "a full-time teacher who also does these things here and there" — comics, magazine and book design, posters, logos, even a beer label for Richmond's Final Gravity Brewing Co.



Above: A page from a comic by Kelly Alder
Below: A page from Bizhan Khodabandeh's "Little Red Fish"

One recent project was "The Day the Klan Came to Town," a graphic novel collaboration with writer Bill Campbell that tells the fictionalized account of a real 1923 event in Carnegie, Pennsylvania, when a community pushed back against a violent Ku Klux Klan march. Khodabandeh's first comic, "The Little Black Fish," was published by Campbell's Rosarium Publishing; it's an adaptation of a classic Persian children's tale about an inquisitive fish.

Khodabandeh, who freelances under the name Mended Arrow, is now working with a British writer, Christopher Heath, on "All Things Accounted For," a comic told from the perspective of a vampire's butler. "I would love to do more comics, but it's not worth it, unless you are a fast artist," Khodabandeh says. "Cartoonists are often paid in royalties or page rates where for each page you illustrate, you get X amount of money, and it's not a lot."

Back in 1983, Alder inked a Superman comic for DC Comics, working with his friend Michael Kaluta, but "I didn't pursue comics aggressively because of the money," he says. "I

went the illustration route. The pay for comics was embarrassingly bad."

Over the years, he's managed to work on comics when the money was right, such as with a "conflict resolution" strip he drew for a corporate consulting firm, written by "It's Superman!" author Tom De Haven (see interview, Page 79). Alder is currently creating a six-page comic for "The Old Farmer's Almanac for Kids," geared toward 8- to 12-year-olds. "Next, I'm doing a comic on the first alien abduction by a UFO," he says excitedly.

But high-paying comic projects can be few and far between. "When I first started working, I wanted it to be the only thing I devoted my time to," says artist (and Richmond magazine contributor) Chris Visions, who has worked

for a gamut of comic publishers, including Marvel and DC, and counts the late VCU professor Kerry Talbott as a mentor. "But even when I was trying to break into comics, I was work-

ing in graphic design and for marketing companies. I haven't found many people who do comics who don't have some sort of subsistence somewhere else."

In between working on issues of "International Iron Man" and "Spider-Gwen," Visions, who is also a noted muralist, does more lucrative illustration work for Disney, the Obama Foundation and the NBA. Visions also teaches art at Cristo Rey Richmond High School and works with kids at Binford Middle School through an Art 180 residency.

You've got to love to make comics to make comics, he tells budding artists. "And don't be constrained by the medium. I love being able to pull references from the Renaissance and other art periods, which makes the world fresh." ■



TOP LEFT: COURTESY KELLY ALDER; BOTTOM LEFT: COURTESY BIZHAN KHODABANDEH; OPPOSITE PAGE: JUSTIN VAUGHAN



BUY, SELL, TRADE

Where to find comics in Richmond

Alpha Comics and Games
1601 Willow Lawn Drive,
804-282-5532

"We sell everything from modern and vintage comics to manga," says Alpha co-owner Brianna Beebe. "Each staffer has a particular specialty."

Cerebral Vortex
Regency Mall,
804-640-8130

Veteran dealer Jason Hamlin opened Cerebral Vortex during COVID-19 closures, when comic conventions ground to a halt. It has become a key stop for those looking for independent titles and back issues. "I've been to a lot of shops across the country, and it's one of the best I've seen," says Brian Baynes, publisher of locally produced comic zine "Bubbles."

Paper Tiger
7522 Forest Hill Ave.,
804-658-0527

This newly opened shop from Don't Look Back co-owner Hamooda Shami specializes in high-end, "graded" comics, variant covers and art prints.



Richmond Book Shop
808 W. Broad St.,
804-644-9970

Once owned by the grandparents of Vince "Breaking Bad" Gilligan, this shop with roots dating back to 1929 stocks collectible comics along with all kinds of antique printed material. Limited hours.

Richmond Comix Inc.
14255 Midlothian
Turnpike, 804-594-2845

RCI focuses on back issues and graphic novels. "We're probably the largest store in town, at 3,000 square feet," says owner Phillip Hillis. It also hosts events that showcase local artists. The next is Nov. 12.

Stories Comics
9040 W. Broad St.,
804-874-1829

Richmond's oldest all-comics shop has been open since 1980. "We probably have the largest selection in Richmond," says co-owner Sal Filingeri. "We make a point to always carry local independent creators."

Third Eye Comics
11575 W. Broad St.,
804-716-0378, and 6102
Brashier Blvd., Mechan-
icsville, 804-789-1875

"We carry current comics as well as trade paperbacks and hardcovers," says Leigh Bartlett, the manager of the Short Pump location of Third Eye, a five-store chain based out of Annapolis, Maryland. The Mechanicsville store also sells back issues.

Velocity Comics
819 W Broad St.,
804-303-1783

"Velocity is like going to comics church," says artist Chris Visions. Owner Patrick Godfrey says that the 20-year-old store "specializes in the good stuff, from off-the-beaten-path independents to mainstream superheroes."

VA Comic Con
vacomicon.com

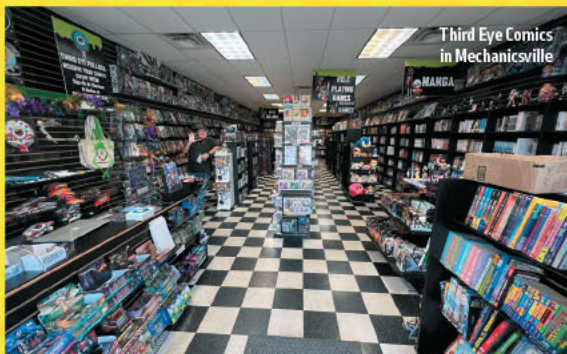
"We're kind of like Richmond's established veteran show," says VA Comic Con co-organizer Dan Nokes. Held once or twice a year — the next event is Nov. 19 at Richmond Raceway — this confab, started in 1986, can boast up to 90 comic dealers.

Richmond GalaxyCon
[galaxycon.com/
pages/richmond](http://galaxycon.com/pages/richmond)

This annual summit, held at the Richmond Convention Center, features comic vendors and artists but bills itself as "more than a comic con, it's a three-day festival of fandom." It returns next year, March 24-26.

Time Capsule
205 E. Broadway, No. 1/2,
Hopewell, 804-458-4002

Time Capsule shares space with a game store, the Silver Unicorn. "My half is comics, both new and vintage," says owner Rick Ralsten.



THE VAULT OF FUNNIES

VCU's Comic Arts Collection is super, indeed

The oldest comic book in Virginia Commonwealth University's Comic Arts Collection is "Histoire de Mr. Crépin," a rare work from 1837 by the Swiss caricaturist Rodolphe Töpffer, who's often credited as the creator of the first comic book that same year. Housed in the Special Collections and Archives department of James Branch Cabell Library, the brittle 88-page periodical may not look exactly like the comics we know today, but it does feature illustrations enclosed in panels accompanied by text to convey a sequential narrative.

Töpffer's proto-comic is only one of the thousands of rare specimens in VCU's 175,000-item collection, which includes approximately 65,000 comics — from Capt. Marvel to Mr. Natural — in addition to graphic novels, magazines, scholarly journals, fanzines, minicomics, books about comics, and even "Tijuana bibles," short pornographic comics that often parodied popular comic strips of the day. There's also one-of-a-kind bric-a-brac. Among the holdings are materials donated by the former secretary of Bill DeBeck, the creator of the classic Depression-era comic strip "Barney Google." "They have the door to DeBeck's office in the collection," marvels Tom De Haven, who used the collection when he taught at VCU. "He painted Barney Google on it. It's amazing."

In an email exchange, Yuki



Yuki Hibben in VCU's comics archive

Hibben, senior curator and associate professor at VCU Special Collections, recently offered some insight into this cartoon treasure trove, the largest such collection on the East Coast.

RICHMOND MAGAZINE: What does the Comic Arts Collection consist of?

YUKI HIBBEN: In addition to comics and publications related to comics, we collect original works of comic arts and the personal papers of notable figures in

the comic arts. Our unique materials generally have ties to VCU and Richmond. For example, we have over 230 works of original artwork by the award-winning illustrator and VCU alumnus Charles Vess. His work includes illustrations for "Spider-Man," "Swamp Thing" and Neil Gaiman's "The Sandman" series, among many other comics and fantasy publications. As far as archival materials, we have the



Rodolphe Töpffer's 1837 comic "Histoire de Mr. Crépin"



RM: What are some of the rarest, most historically important comics in the collection?

HIBBEN: That's a difficult question because we have so many. Examples include "Famous Funnies: A Carnival of Comics" (1933), considered by many to be the first modern American comic book. There's "All Negro Comics" (1947), the first comic book produced by a Black publisher, writers and illustrators. It features Black superheroes and protagonists. And "It Ain't Me Babe" (1970), feminist underground "comix" and the first comic book created entirely by women.

RM: What about new comics?

HIBBEN: The newest titles in our collection are probably from the Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards. VCU Libraries serves as the repository for this award and receives hundreds of books each year that won or were nominated for this illustrious award.

RM: How did VCU acquire the collection?

HIBBEN: The collection started in the 1970s with the donation of materials that belonged to Fred O. Seibel, an editorial cartoonist for the Richmond Times-Dispatch from 1926 to 1968. Dr. M. Thomas Inge, who I mentioned earlier, was teaching in the English

department at VCU and championed the expansion of the collection. For several decades, the Comic Arts Collection relied almost entirely on donors such as Dr. Inge and VCU alumnus David Anderson, who donated our copy of "All Negro Comics" and many others to build the collection. We still accept gift books but also have an acquisition fund and are building a Special Collections and Archives endowment to support the future growth and preservation of the Comic Arts and other collections at VCU.

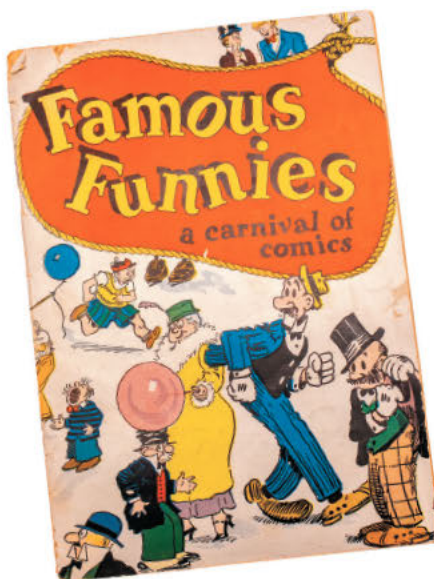
RM: Can you talk about the tireless work that now-retired curator Cindy Jackson did to help build the collection?

HIBBEN: Cindy Jackson processed comic arts materials for Special Collections and Archives from the 1990s until 2022. She personally reviewed and inventoried tens of thousands of comic books donated to the library and had an intimate knowledge of the collection. Cindy also taught classes visiting Special Collections and Archives about the Comic Arts Collection and participated in events such as the Richmond Indie Comics Expo. She shared her expertise with countless students, scholars and comic artists during her time at VCU and is highly regarded by the comics community.

RM: Who uses the collection?

HIBBEN: For many years, comics were undervalued in academia, but comics scholarship is really hot right now. We have many students and scholars from VCU and beyond studying and writing about comics. We can learn a lot about history, politics, culture, you name it, from comic books. ■

personal papers of the late, great Dr. M. Thomas Inge, who passed away just last year. An English professor who taught at VCU, Randolph-Macon College and other institutions, Inge was a world-renowned scholar of comics and popular culture. We focus primarily on publications and archival materials that are used for research, teaching and artistic inspiration.



The VCU Comics Collection is housed in the Special Collections and Archives department, on the fourth floor of the James Branch Cabell Library on the Monroe Park Campus of VCU. 804-828-1111. Search the collection at libraryvcu.edu/research-teaching/special-collections-and-archives/collections/comic-arts.



The Richmond Indie Comics Expo on Nov. 13 will feature established artists exhibiting alongside VCU students and alumni.

FRESH TALENT

Two local expos showcase independent comic creators

The ballrooms in the Virginia Commonwealth University Student Commons will soon be festooned with fantasy, crammed with color and mighty with manga.

The third Richmond Indie Comics Expo, set for Nov. 13, isn't a comic convention. It's a comic creators' convention. The free expo features VCU alumni and current students setting up alongside local comic artists to showcase their work. And for those attendees interested in learning about comics as an art and an industry, there are educational panels and workshops. One of the talks this year, for example, will explore comic lettering.

"It's like a farmer's market, except, instead of produce, they are selling art," says Bizhan Khodabandeh, the VCU illustration professor who, along with fellow professor Kelly Alder, helped to kick-start the expo, which is now entirely run by students. "It's one of the few venues where you'll get to read these different kinds of books. And you can get the artist to autograph it and talk to them about the art."

"We've got fantasy and sci-fi and horror, and then we have people exploring history and science or current events," adds VCU senior Alexander Tyree, this year's lead RICE organizer and the editor-in-chief of VCU's student-run comic anthology, *Emanata*. "You can put anything in a comic, and you'll see that at the expo."

More than 130 artists will be on display, Tyree says, adding that, of the scheduled vendors, 40% are alumni, 25% students and the rest local comic creators with no VCU affiliation.

Comic Arts Richmond, another showcase for independent comic creators, is slated for Dec. 10 at Strangeways Brewing.

"RICE is a student-run organization, and we're independent," says CAR co-organizer Francesca Lyn, who teaches gender studies at VCU, including

a course on gender in comics. "There is some overlap, of course, because the comics community is pretty tight-knit. We are geared toward independent comics, so there will mostly be comics creators, particularly those doing self-published work."

As with RICE, there will be a lot of fantasy on display at the second CAR showcase, as well as takeoffs on Japanese manga, but there will also be more small-scale, personal work.

"It's big. I taught a class

Comic Arts Richmond organizers Francesca Lyn and Christine Skelly



TOP: KEVIN MORLEY/VCU; BOTTOM: COURTESY FRANCESCA LYN; OPPOSITE PAGE: COURTESY TOM DE HAVEN



'IT'S TOM DE HAVEN!'

Author Tom De Haven talks comics

on autobiographical comics last semester," Lyn says. "A lot of the comics that people consider very important, not just within comics circles but in the mainstream, are autobiographical. Art Spiegelman's 'Maus,' Allison Bechtel's 'Fun Home: A Family Tragicomedy,' Marjane Satrapi's 'Persepolis' ... those are all about lived experiences."

Lyn says her favorite work by Richmond's emerging comic creators reflects that kind of style. "There's definitely a wider range of subject matter available now," she says. "The difference is the accessibility. You are able to get a copy of these things a lot easier. And the way in which we can access things virtually also makes it different."

If you attend these showcases, one thing will be clear: Comics isn't a boy's club anymore. There are just as many female or nonbinary artists as male, and they often explore topics beyond the Marvel Universe.

"The biggest names out there are DC and Marvel," says Diana Thien, a VCU graduate who works in animation design and one of last year's RICE organizers, "but there's so much more that comics have to offer in terms of genre and representation. I'm not much into superheroes. I'm inspired by what I started reading, slice-of-life stuff, mixed with fantasy, drama and supernatural ... character-based stories that focus on relationships."

Fellow 2021 RICE organizer Claire Deely, who identifies as nonbinary, will exhibit '70s underground-flavored work this year at the expo. Deely says independent comics "can be a fantastic medium for marginalized creators that haven't been included in the mainstream comics industry. Here, we get to share those stories that historically haven't been heard in a lot of media." ■



Author and comics historian Tom De Haven retired from teaching creative writing (and comics) at VCU in 2018, but he's hardly been idle. Currently at work on two novels — including one set in Richmond — the New Jersey native behind some of the greatest fictional works about comics and the comics industry, including "It's Superman!" and "Funny Papers," recently became a comic character himself in his favorite strip, "Dick Tracy." We spoke to De Haven about the current state of comics.

RICHMOND MAGAZINE: Do you still read contemporary comics?

TOM DE HAVEN: Yeah, but comics are so vast now. You can't keep up with it all. I don't read monthly comic books, but I'll still buy an anthology or something by a creator I like.

RM: What strikes you about modern comics?

DE HAVEN: We were talking the other day about how these young creators are doing self-publishing and doing things outside the traditional publishers. And they draw on screens. It's another way of doing comics, very different from what I'm used to, working on Bristol board and pen and ink.

RM: A lot of today's comics — and a lot of Richmond creators' comics — are small-scale realistic stories.

DE HAVEN: It started to get really autobiographical in the '90s, to the point where it was being mocked as "navel-gazing" comics. Today's autobiographical comics are much broader. ... It's not just about a coming-of-age story, it's about gender identity and racial identity, while it's also very teenage- and young adult-oriented. But there's also an explosion in horror comics. Very good horror comics, very sophisticated.

RM: You've done as much as anyone to canonize Superman. Was your novel "It's Superman!" an attempt to demythologize the character?

DE HAVEN: No, I wasn't demythologizing at all. I just liked the Superman who couldn't push planets around. I like the original guy, the one from the 1930s — he was a one of a kind. Now there are more superheroes out there than humans. [Laughs.]

RM: You've now become a comic character yourself. How does that feel?

DE HAVEN: Yes, the characters in my first book, "Funny Papers," are going to appear in "Dick Tracy," and they are going to actually cartoon me in the strip. I don't think they realize the irony of that. It's how I got involved in creativity in the first place, discovering Chester Gould's "Dick Tracy" when I was 6. ■



Richmond Indie Comics Expo
Nov. 13
10 a.m. to 6 p.m.
The Commons at VCU,
907 Floyd Ave.
Free

Comic Arts Richmond
Dec. 10
Noon to 5 p.m.
Strangeways Brewing,
227-A Dabney Road
Free



Doctors in the House

Richmond's Randolph family exudes excellence

By Don Harrison

Here's a pitch for the perfect feel-good TV show. Call it "Meet the Randolphs."

The show follows an African American family made up largely of distinguished, respected physicians. The 6-foot 7-inch patriarch, David, answers to "Poppy." He and his middle child, David II, or "Little David," lead a respected oncology clinic. They could be mistaken for twins, except dad is 3 inches taller.

Mom, Renita, is a top-rated dentist who graduated with honors from dental school while raising two small children. While the two Davids are often in the spotlight in local and national media — the former high school cheerleader prefers to rah-rah from the sidelines.

Eldest sister, Jessica, is a retinal surgeon married to Joe, a mechanical engineer. They have adorable 18-month-old twins. One running gag has Jessica playfully bickering with Little David, her college roommate, about the relative importance of their chosen fields — "I restore

sight," "But I cure cancer," and so on.

Little David's wife, Morgan, works in oncology too, as a pediatric clinical pharmacist, assisting with young cancer patients. They have a son, David III, and a daughter on the way. Morgan hails from Tennessee and, at 5-foot-3, stands many inches shorter than the rest of the family.

There's a younger brother, too, Doug, who is kind of an Alex P. Keaton character.

Everyone in the family is athletic — Little David played basketball for the University of Richmond, Jessica was a University of Virginia high-jumper. Financial advisor, Doug, 28, was a college football standout at Notre Dame. He turned his back on medicine, even though dad thought he was a natural for it.

Along the way, the Randolphs have endured, and prevailed against, long hours, difficult cases and racist roadblocks.

Sounds like a can't miss show, right? I didn't even get to the part where Poppy stops the runaway Cadillac with his bare hands. >



THE BACK STORY

"I was always a sickly kid," says Dr. David Randolph, a radiation oncologist at the Sarah Cannon Cancer Institute at Johnston-Willis Hospital. "I had congenital hip dysplasia, where the hips don't form properly, I walked pigeon-toed and had asthma and I did not get medical care." It was a cultural thing, he says. His parents didn't believe in doctors. "So basically, I was allowed to suffer."

Growing up the sixth of 13 siblings in rural Charlotte County, near Appomattox, Randolph, 62, attended Randolph Henry High School, "Named after the slave owner that freed my relatives," he says. His father had a fourth-grade education and swung a 15-pound sledgehammer at a foundry. "He was an incredibly powerful man and I wanted to be like him. I would pray, 'Please God, let me be big and strong.'" He grew tall but skinny, he says, and had poor nutrition. "It was only when I went to VCU and got on the meal plan and started lifting weights that I began to bulk up."

He graduated high school in three years and did the same at Virginia Commonwealth University. "I was dirt poor," he says. "I didn't pledge fraternities and I didn't go to parties. I studied." He also worked multiple jobs, including one at the VCU Computer Center, mentoring underachieving students.

One night, in the throes of his last exams, Randolph looked out his window and saw a vision, he says. "There was a step show in front of my apartment, and in the crowd I saw the most beautiful woman I ever saw in my life. I went outside and walked in her direction, but she drove off."

But it didn't end there. "We were introduced by a mutual friend in the Pantry Pride on West Broad Street," recalls Dr. Renita Randolph, a dentist at Grove Avenue Family Dentistry. "We did not hit it off. I thought he was rude." The Thomas Jefferson High graduate was then attending Virginia Union University on a full academic scholarship; her mom was an accountant, and the family owned a North Side general store. She did not suffer fools.

"I wasn't trying to be rude, I was too nervous to speak," David Sr. explains. A short time after he started medical school at Eastern Virginia Medical School in Norfolk, they met again. "After he settled down and actually talked to me, we hit it off," Renita says.

After a long-distance romance — Renita was not allowed to marry until she finished school — the newlyweds lived in Norfolk's Ghent area, where David built their furniture and finished medical school. "I was 2 weeks old at his graduation," says daughter Dr. Jessica Randolph, an ophthalmology specialist and vitreoretinal surgeon at the VCU School of Medicine.

"We've always been exposed to medicine," she says. "Even when we were young, we'd be out at grocery stores or church and people would recognize our parents from their offices and early on it affirmed the importance that health care had on other people's lives."

David II was born in Lynchburg, where the Randolphs moved for Poppy's family practice residency. His goal was to be a family doctor. "But I was frustrated," he says. "I had an idealistic view that everybody would flock to the doctor, and I'd make everyone feel better. But I couldn't make the inroads. I couldn't get people to exercise, eat right, or improve their situation. No, if they wanted to lose weight, or to lower their blood pressure, they just wanted me to give them a pill."

He found inspiration in a charismatic father figure, Peter Hulick, then the radiation oncologist at Lynchburg General Hospital, who was laser-focused on treating cancer. "We had these optional one-month rotations and I did a month with him, and I was so impressed with the difference he made in people's lives. I wanted to be like him," David says.

The family returned to Richmond so that David could do his radiation oncology residency at VCU. These were hectic, sleepless times. "We made it because I was board certified in family practice," he recalls. "So, I would work two 12-hour shifts in the emergency room, and that was enough to pay for childcare."

Renita enrolled in VCU School of Dentistry, eventually graduating with honors. "I did it with a whole lot of prayer and gumption," she says. "My classmates were twentysomethings and footloose and fancy free, and when I got home, I was mom. Our children have always come first. I didn't start studying until they were in bed."

"She's amazing," Jessica says. "She had two small children at home and was still first in her class. And that was at a time when dental school wasn't very friendly to Black people."

"My whole family, we've worked very hard and achieved a whole lot despite racism, sexism and all the isms," Renita says. "I experienced it. But I had the wherewithal in dental school to stand up for myself."

Before moving the family to Roanoke, where he and Renita each set up practice, Big David became the first African American to finish VCU's radiation oncology program. He's more vocal than his wife about the racism he endured.

"One day my chairman looks at me and laughs out loud. He was German and said in a thick accent, 'You're blecch. You'll never get a job.' " An earlier department head had accused Randolph, apropos of nothing, of pimping women and selling drugs. "All but one of the chairmen there were a--holes," he says today. "But they could not intimidate me."



BELOW AND OPPOSITE PAGE: JAY PAUL

FAMILY TIES

"My dad was my superhero," says Dr. David Randolph II. "He's so larger than life. I grew up wanting to be exactly like him." Father and son now work side by side as radiation oncologists at HCA Virginia, the third-highest rated radiation oncology program in the HCA network, treating blood, brain, breast, skin and other cancers. "He knows all of my patients and I know all of his." He says he's seen



his dad do incredible feats. At 10, he watched him stop a Cadillac, barehanded, from rolling downhill. "My Poppy is Superman," he reportedly exclaimed, and he still seems in awe of his father.

"It's remarkably unusual to have a father-son duo like that, in practice together" says Dr. Mark Jones, an orthopedic surgery specialist and longtime family friend who knew Renita in high school (and is head of his own remarkable family of doctors). "When David Sr. was in Roanoke, he was known as the Mayor of Roanoke. He just has a magnetic personality ... and his son is one of the nicest people I know."

In February, the two Davids taped a segment for NBC's "The Kelly Clarkson Show," celebrating "Rad Dads." Not to spoil anything, but bring a hankie when it airs (it's slated for June). "I told my dad how much I loved him and what he meant to me," David II says.

Morgan Randolph, who met her husband at Wake Forest while they did their residencies, thinks that her husband and her father-in-law have earned the attention. "It's about the way they take care of patients, and how they run their clinic and that's always been admirable to me," says the 34-year-old clinical pharmacist at VCU Health.

"I think it is so cool that they are blowing up and getting recognized," says Doug Randolph, the baby brother who works for Merrill Lynch in Washington. "Both are groundbreaking in their own respects, dad with the experience and my brother with the advanced training. It's wonderful to see."

He and Jessica offer up comments about their parents that echo Little David's: "They were always our role models, and they never pushed medicine on us. They were always saying, 'It doesn't matter what you want to be, just be the best at it.'"

Mom and dad set other examples too, Jessica says. "My dad does woodworking on the side. He's made all of the furniture in my house except for couches and chairs. One of the special things he makes are wooden crosses that he gives to patients."

"I just gave a cross away to a woman this past Monday," confirms David Sr., who learned woodworking in high school and has made and gifted dozens of crosses inlaid with distinctive, personalized hearts. "This lady's oldest daughter had died in a car accident and I wanted to comfort her. The wood that I chose was purpleheart."

He often crafts the pieces at his "haven," a workshop on the family farm, which rests on the Charlotte County land his grandfather bought in 1901. Amid goats, sheep and a field of irises his grandmother planted, he makes tokens of love that are functional and lasting. "All of my children sleep in beds I've made," he says, "and I tell them that my arms are always around you." **■**

(Above) Dr. David Randolph Sr. with a patient; (below) The Randolph Family, from left, Doug, Renita, David, Jessica and David II





Dreaming

The science of sleep, from lucid

All Over

dreams to the benefits of REM

the Place

BY DON HARRISON | ILLUSTRATION BY CATE ANDREWS

Robert Waggoner likes to tell the story of a stressed-out woman who had a recurring nightmare of being chased by a train.

“Her psychiatrist learned that she had lucid dreams,” says Waggoner, the author of “Lucid Dreaming: Gateway to the Inner Self.” “He convinced her to allow the nightmare to occur [and to] become lucid and change one thing.”

In her next dream, as documented by the *Israel Journal of Psychiatry and Related Sciences*, she stopped running from the train and threw the track switch instead. “The train went elsewhere,” he says. “The psychiatrist said that she seemed a changed person after this.”

It might sound like a plot device from the 2010 film “Inception” or a trope from a Philip K. Dick story, but lucid dreamers do walk among us — you may even be one. The American Psychological Association defines a lucid dream as one “in which the sleeper is aware that he or she is dreaming and may be able to influence the progress of the dream narrative.”

It’s a very real concept, confirms Dr. Edward Peck, a Richmond-based neuropsychologist who treats conditions such as dementia, memory loss, ADHD, traumatic brain injury and various sleep disorders. Not only is lucid dreaming recognized by science, he says that its use as a therapeutic pathway is only one of many promising recent health discoveries in dream science.

“It’s a fascinating area, given today’s technology and what might be available in the future,” Peck says. “I think lucid dreaming therapy or guided imagery through dream therapy may be another one of the wonderful ways that the human body can learn to take better care of itself.”

Waggoner, a lucid dreamer himself, is an enthusiastic pied piper for dream consciousness. The Iowa resident, who has a bachelor’s degree in psychology, insists that lucid dreaming techniques can be taught, even if the process isn’t for everyone, especially those with very serious mental health issues. But for phobia sufferers and patients with sleep issues resulting from nightmares, lucid dream therapy can be beneficial.

Waggoner notes how he encouraged a woman who was a

lucid dreamer and had a fear of flying to go to the airport in her dream and see how it felt. “If that went OK, I suggested over the next several nights that she enter the airport, buy a ticket and board a plane,” he says. “And if all of that felt OK, the next time she should take off. After five lucid dreams, she felt secure enough to buy a real plane ticket,” Waggoner says. Then he adds with a laugh, “She even wanted a window seat, so that she could see if the experience was like the one in her dream.”

Scientists are already tapping into the dreamscape. Northwestern University researchers, working with subjects in the U.S., France, Germany and the Netherlands, released a study in February 2021 on how they managed to establish communication with vivid sleepers as they entered REM state, even training them to solve simple math problems by using eye movements as signals. The researchers wrote in the journal *Current Biology* that their findings present “new opportunities for gaining real-time information about dreaming, and for modifying the course of a dream.”

SLEEP, DREAMING and the PANDEMIC

Scientists are learning a lot about dreams these days — what they are, what they do and how we might be able to control them — and the timing couldn’t be better.

There’s been a sharp uptick in sleep-related maladies, including nightmares, during the COVID-19 pandemic, says David

Pomm, clinical psychologist at the Central Virginia VA Health Care System. “The reasons are largely unknown, probably linked to the stress of the coronavirus.”

Pomm does not deal in dream therapy. He treats sleep-challenged patients with CBTI, or cognitive behavioral therapy. “If people are exhibiting bad dreams, we can coordinate care with a psychiatrist or neurologist, or medication could help,” he says. “But we prefer to get them back to better sleep habits, and getting the sleep cycle reset to what it was designed to be.”

According to Dr. Tushar Thakre, associate professor of psychiatry at VCU Health and the director of its inpatient medical psychiatry program, the average sleep cycle consists of four stages that rotate and repeat throughout the night. “There’s rapid eye movement sleep, or REM, and three that form non-REM sleep.” These stages are determined based on brain activity, and they exhibit distinct characteristics during sleep.

The first stage, N1, lasts only a few moments and is called the “dozing off” stage. In the N2 stage, the sleeper enters a subdued mode, which includes a drop in

temperature, relaxed muscles, and slowed breathing and heart rate. “About half of our sleep occurs in the N2 stage,” Thakre says. N3 sleep is known as deep sleep. Here, muscle tone, pulse and breathing rate decrease as the body relaxes even further. This stage is critical to restorative health, he says, allowing for bodily recovery and growth. It may also bolster the immune system and other key body functions.

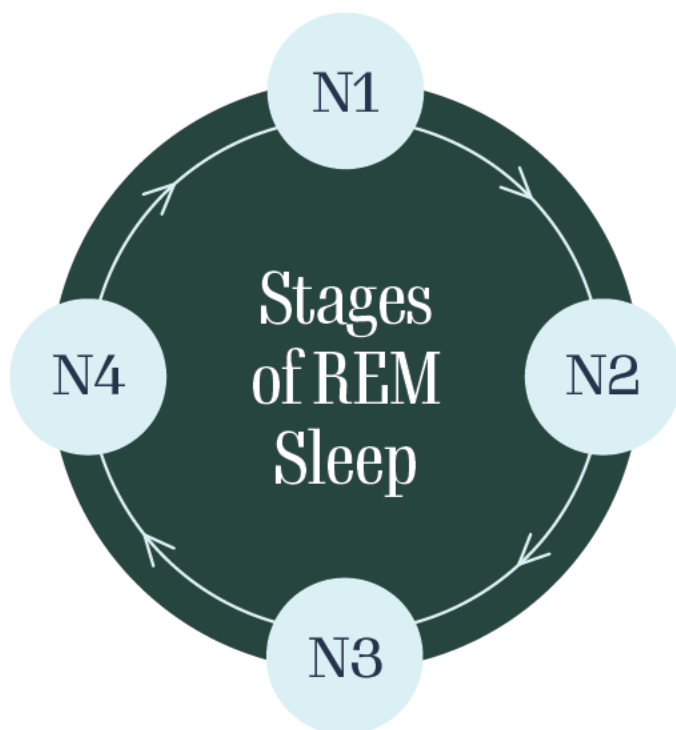
During the fourth stage, REM, “there is a temporary paralysis of the muscles, with two exceptions — the eyes and the muscles that control breathing,” Thakre says, adding that REM sleep is believed to be essential to cognitive functions like memory, learning and creativity. “While we are able to dream in all of the sleep stages, the dreams in REM are more vivid and are more likely to be remembered.”

During the REM state, Peck adds, “there are psychological processes that occur, if we look at brain waves or bodily functions, they are actually near what they are when we’re awake, so sleep is a very active process. Our brain is constantly going.”

While we may not know what dreams signify, Pomm says that all signs point to REM sleep as imperative to well-being. “We know that this is the stage that often aids in memory consolidation and emotional regulation, so if you aren’t getting good sleep, and depriving yourself of that REM stage, it’s affecting your emotional regulation and memory and mental health in general.”

Insomnia and a lack of REM sleep have been on the rise during the COVID-19 pandemic, but so has too much dreaming, concludes Diedre Barrett, assistant professor of psychology at Harvard Medical School.

In a recent survey, Barrett found that the lack of an alarm clock meant more time spent in the REM state of sleep. “It correlates with long, vivid dreams,” she told the Harvard News last May. Those bed visions include nightmares about the coronavirus itself. “[There’s] a fairly common dream where the person is short of breath or spiking a fever ... [and] there’s a big sub-cluster of bug dreams. I’ve just seen dozens and dozens and dozens of every kind of bug imaginable attacking the dreamer.” >



N1

- Lasts only a few moments
- The “dozing off” stage

N2

- Subdued mode
- Drop in body temperature, relaxed muscles, slowed breathing and heart rate
- Half of sleep occurs in this stage

N3

- “Deep sleep”
- Muscle tone, pulse, breathing rate decrease
- Key to bodily recovery and growth

N4

- Temporary muscle paralysis
- Essential to cognitive functions
- Most vivid dreams

HEALTH and SLEEP

The new go-to book on the correlation between dreams and mental health is “When Brains Dream,” by Robert Stickgold, director of Harvard’s Center for Sleep and Cognition, and Antonio Zadra, professor of psychology at the Université de Montréal. While the authors don’t definitively solve the big question — what are dreams? — they do offer up a new way of understanding the sleeping brain called NEXTUP (Network Exploration to Understand Possibilities). It postulates that since serotonin, which aids memory, is blocked off during the REM stage, our dreams are shaped by the brain reaching inside its neural connections to find mental associations — sometimes absurd — to reconstruct those memories.

“The takeaway of the last 10 years of various dream studies,” Peck says, “is a better understanding of the importance of persistent restorative sleep habits.” A 2017 Rutgers University report concluded that “the more REM sleep [a] subject had, the weaker the fear-related effect” they felt when awake. Last year, a joint project between the University of Geneva and the University of Washington found evidence that so-called scary dreams during REM can actually be beneficial coping tools — Tufts University researchers even gave this a name, The Overfitted Brain Hypothesis — assisting sleepers in responding well to emotional crises during waking life.

“The mind may be gaining practice for confronting potential dangers,” Thakre says. “Nightmares aren’t necessarily bad,

Lucid dreamers aren’t in total control of their dreams, Robert Waggoner says.

“The sailor does not control the sea, neither does a lucid dreamer control the dream. It’s a *hybrid state* of consciousness where you *lucidly engage* the unconscious and *learn* from it.”



Robert Waggoner, author of “Lucid Dreaming: Gateway to the Inner Self”

but if they are interfering with social functioning, they can become a disorder that needs treatment.” To that end, he thinks lucid dreaming is a subject worthy of attention. “I don’t think it’s bogus science at all, I think there is some scientific basis to it. If we are able to change some people who have traumatic nightmares, there’s some clinical value in it.”

Lucid dream therapy has been shown to help patients with post-traumatic stress disorder, Waggoner points out. “Recurring nightmares seem to be one of the persistent symptoms of PTSD,” he says. “Also, anecdotally, lucid dreaming has helped people overcome other phobias — fear of insects, fear of heights, anxiety and habitual problems such as drug abuse.”

At the end of the day, Peck says, “the body is the key to the mind.” What we chalk up as a psychological experience, he says, may just be the body telling us that we have a chemical deficiency, or that we had too much to drink before we went to bed — our blood sugar levels fluctuate wildly when we sleep, affecting the cycle — or that our sleepwear is tight and confining, hence that dream about being trapped.

“The safe answer is that we’re still figuring it out, what dreams really are,” he says. “If you talk to a psychoanalyst, they are going to tell you about the psychological meanings of dreams, and then you have the school who thinks that dreaming is a physiological manifestation. I mean, they are each correct. And I think it’s best when you have both sides of the debate shaking hands, because there’s knowledge to be shared.” ■