

The Virginian-Pilot

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2023 | PILOTONLINE.COM | Our 158th year | \$4.50

THE NAVY IS WORKING TO TEAR DOWN ITS CULTURE OF STIGMA SURROUNDING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES — BUT CHANGES ARE TOO LATE TO HELP KODY DECKER



Robert Decker speaks April 12 about his son Kody, a 22-year-old Norfolk-based sailor who died by suicide in 2022. STEPHEN KATZ/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT PHOTOS

A SAILOR'S SUICIDE

Editor's note: If you or someone you know is struggling with thoughts about suicide, please contact the national suicide and crisis lifeline by calling or texting 988. There is also an online chat at 988lifeline.org.

By Caitlyn Burchett | Staff writer

Kody Decker's Navy service began in 2018 with excitement and anticipation for the future. "Look at his smiling face," said Kody's father, Robert Decker, motioning to a framed photo in his Chesapeake home. "That was during boot camp. The kid was very excited."

A tri-folded flag given to the family at Kody Decker's funeral now sits on the mantel in the living room. Next week, Oct. 29, will be the anniversary of the 22-year-old's death.

A wave of suicides among sailors has brought the tides of change to the Navy. The service is

Turn to *Suicide*, Page 18



A portrait of Kody Decker, a 22-year-old sailor who died by suicide in 2022, sits on the mantel in the Deckers' Chesapeake family home.

Va. Beach council taking look at fests

Some members want more rigorous process for event promoters

By Stacy Parker
Staff writer

VIRGINIA BEACH — A detailed analysis of city-sponsored festivals revealed this week that not all of them produce an economic return on investment, but several City Council members agree the robust lineup should continue in 2024.

First, though, they want to improve the process of qualifying for sponsorships and establish more accountability on how the money is spent.

They also want to reconsider logistics of large-scale festivals, including Something in the Water, that closed off portions

of the beach for weeks.

Nearly 200 special events including festivals, races and parades were held in the resort area this year with 35 of them encompassing more than 10 blocks, according to the Virginia Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau.

Vincent Magnini, of the Institute for Service Research, provided an analysis of five festivals the city sponsored in 2023 during a council meeting Tuesday. The city had expenditures of \$3.5 million for the five festivals. His report laid out the economic impact, tax revenue generated, hotel room nights booked and return on investment of each festival.

The city financially benefitted from its sponsorships of Pharrell

Turn to *Festivals*, Page 4

INSIDE

Gaza aid trickles in

The border crossing between Egypt and the besieged Palestinian territory opens. **Nation & World**

On the road in 'Aladdin'

A York County native is playing Jafar in a touring Broadway musical coming to Norfolk. **Sunday Break**

Boxing brothers hail hometown

After winning in the ring, Keyshawn and Kelvin Davis hold a community day in Norfolk to celebrate. **Sports**

MOSTLY SUNNY AND BREEZY

High: 70 Low: 43



Details on the back page of sports



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'Don't put it off'

Sentara program helps patients identify high breast cancer risk

By Alison Johnson
Correspondent

This past spring, Kimberly Mikel's annual mammogram came back normal for the fourth straight year. The Hampton resident felt her usual sense of relief, given that her older sister had battled an aggressive form of breast cancer in her mid-40s.

Then Mikel, 43, got an unexpected phone call from Mary Berry, a nurse practitioner with Sentara Health's new high-risk breast program. Launched in March, the program identifies patients who may be more likely to develop breast cancer and offers extra support and testing in hopes of catching the disease earlier.

Mikel was a program candi-

date because of two risk factors: her family history and the fact that she had never been pregnant. During an hourlong initial appointment, Berry recommended a breast MRI as a precaution.

That advanced scan found multiple suspicious areas in Mikel's right breast. Further tests confirmed she had breast cancer, too, although not the same type as her sister.

"I was absolutely devastated and terrified," she recalled. "I'd been there for everything my sister had been through — she was diagnosed in 2020 — and it was so awful. All those memories came flooding back. But I was also grateful. I felt like the MRI maybe saved me."

After a double mastectomy and breast reconstruction surgery, Mikel now goes for checkups and breast scans

Turn to *Cancer*, Page 12

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The Virginian-Pilot

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LEARNING LOST A PILOT ANALYSIS



Lorraine Conant, an English teacher at Bayside 6th Grade Campus in Virginia Beach, works with 12-year-old Patrick Jones, left, and Enzo Carter, 11. After reading a story titled "Rain And Fire," Conant posed questions from the story and the students wrote to answer the questions. **BILL TIERNAN/FREELANCE**

COVID'S LASTING CHAOS

Examining the pandemic's continued effects on public schools in Hampton Roads

By **Kelsey Kendall and Nour Habib**
Staff Writers

Helen Pryor remembers the day in March 2020 she and everyone else at Chesterfield Academy was abruptly told to go home to wait out the coronavirus outbreak.

It would last for a few weeks, everyone thought. Teachers and students had to find places at home to set up computers and figure out a host of new online programs and teaching resources. Worksheets were sent home. Teachers

set up Zoom classes. Districts had to determine how to get computers and Internet access to students who didn't have them.

But it wasn't an outbreak, it was a pandemic. Three years ago this week, COVID-19 was declared a national emergency, and governors across the country, including Virginia's Ralph Northam, ordered schools closed. Today, schools, students and parents are still sorting through what happened and finding ways to help students catch up. The effects can be seen in virtually every part of public education — student achieve-

ment, morale, behavior, staffing.

The early chaos of the pandemic is long gone, but the overwhelming consensus among education experts and families is that the lasting effects in each of these areas can be factored into what has been termed learning loss.

Hard decisions

At the beginning, some families were ready to hunker down, but there were hard decisions to make about their children's education. Would they homeschool, accept

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first of a two-part series about learning loss in Hampton Roads. Look for Part 2 on Wednesday.

virtual learning or push to return things to normal?

Melissa Suer's son was slated to start kindergarten in fall 2020. But after the single mom weighed her options, she decided to hold him back a year.

"Virtual kindergarten just wasn't

Turn to Learning, Page 18

Bill has hemp industry worried

Shop owners say tightening regulations could shut them down

By **Katie King**
Staff Writer

Savana Griffith wakes up every day worried about her hemp business.

She loves helping her customers and running her shop: The Hemp Spectrum, in Virginia Beach. But she's scared recent legislation will spell its doom.

"We put our whole life savings into this," Griffith said. "We've been doing things the right way and now they're going to put us out of business and into debt."

The General Assembly recently passed a bill that would tighten regulations on hemp products. Supporters say it would protect children from accidental ingestion and keep consumers informed. Others argue it would have the opposite effect — shuttering shops and pushing customers to seek questionable products from the black market.

"It feels like a stab in the gut; it would knock out 90% of the products in our store," said Griffith, whose shop sells a mix of items, including teas, salves and edibles.

If signed into law, the bill would require businesses that sell industrial hemp extract, or food contain-

Turn to Hemp, Page 19

HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL

Banner day for Hampton Roads



The Princess Anne girls held off L.C. Bird of Chesterfield, and the Woodside boys rallied past Patrick Henry of Roanoke to capture Class 5 state championships. **Sports**



MAINLY CLOUDY

High: 50 Low: 40

Details on the back of news



Medical tourism: Each year, millions of Americans visit Mexico and other countries to obtain health care. **Page 8**

MEAC champs: The Norfolk State women turn back Howard to earn their first NCAA Tourney bid in 21 years. **Sports**

Provocative exhibition: Virginia MOCA hopes Kara Walker display will spark dialogue on tough issues. **Sunday Break**

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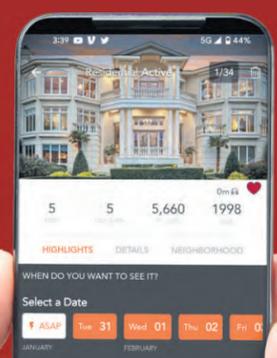
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A late-afternoon storm Sunday brought severe damage to the Great Neck section of Virginia Beach. **BILLY SCHUERMAN/STAFF**

DAMAGE IS DONE

More than \$15M in residential losses caused by EF3 tornado in Virginia Beach, officials say

Meteorologist: First of that magnitude to hit city; 400 yards wide, 4.5-mile path, 145 mph winds

By **Eliza Noe**
Staff Writer

VIRGINIA BEACH — Trees were ripped from the ground, their roots pulling up slabs of the concrete sidewalks in front of some homes. Windows were completely blown out. Several cars had been completely crushed by fallen debris and limbs, and yard decorations were scattered.

In front of one home Monday morning in Virginia Beach's Great Neck area, where an EF3 tornado touched down the night before and ripped neighborhoods apart, a trio of teenage girls sat on a stoop surrounded by debris. At another, a couple assessed the damage at their house while their young son kicked at fallen branches. A woman stood teary eyed in front of her residence as workers cleared her and her neighbors' yards.

Tara Frey, who lives in the neighborhood, told The Virginian-Pilot she was washing lettuce from her garden last night when she heard

the tornado alert, which prompted her family to hunker in place with their two dogs.

"I could literally feel the pressure drop in the house and I looked out the back and the wind picked up and the rain started and I just knew it in my gut that it was coming," she said, adding that it lasted about 10-15 seconds.

Frey said she saw her neighbor's boat fly by her window before it landed across the street in front of her home.

Sunday's storm prompted City Manager Patrick Duhane to declare a local state of emergency. The city said the number of homes damaged was estimated to be between 50 and 100, with nine homes destroyed and 36 rendered uninhabitable. Initial estimates include more than \$15 million in residential damage and \$731,000 to public properties. No injuries have been reported.

"It is indeed a miracle," Mayor

Turn to Storm, Page 4



Residents of the Great Neck neighborhood in Virginia Beach start the long process of cleaning up Monday morning after a tornado ripped through the area the night before. **STEPHEN M. KATZ/STAFF**

Hired hit man gets max sentence

Stoner killed Virginia Beach woman, her 7-year-old son in 2004

By **Jane Harper**
Staff Writer

A man who killed a Virginia Beach woman and her 7-year-old son as part of a hired hit nearly two decades ago got the maximum sentence allowed on Monday: life without parole plus three life sentences and 63 years.

Circuit Judge Steven Frucci told Richard Stoner the horrific circumstances of the 2004 double slayings of Lois Schmidt, 29, and her son, Jonathan Vetrano, made the maximum penalty seem



Richard Stoner testifies in 2018 at a preliminary hearing for Christopher Schmidt in Virginia Beach Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court. **WTKR**

insufficient.

"These actions were so evil and so egregious and the loss so incalculable," Frucci said. "I've never seen anything as bad, as evil and as disgusting as these actions were, Mr. Stoner."

Before the sentence was handed down, Stoner, 48, told the judge he also was at a loss to explain his actions.

"This crime is so far outside my character, it's hard for even me to comprehend it was me," he said. "I feel horrible about this crime. I

Turn to Hit man, Page 3

Summer at Paradise Ocean Club unlikely

Owner cites slow progress on lease discussion

By **Josh Janney**
Staff Writer

People hoping to party at a waterfront beach club at Fort Monroe this summer may be out of luck.

Baxter Simmons operated the Paradise Ocean Club on fort property for the last decade before the National Park Service forced its closure. While Simmons has been tapped to begin negotiations to reopen the business there, he said progress has been so slow that even if a lease is approved, it will be too late to open for this year's summer season.

Simmons said Monday he had not received a draft lease from the park service. Because he hasn't been given a lease, he said negotiations over the terms haven't actually begun.

The Fort Monroe website

says the park service expects to have a new partner to operate the former officers club by the beginning of summer.

However, Simmons said, "I don't think we're going to be in there this summer."

"If they haven't given us a draft lease yet, they're obviously not worried about getting anybody in there for the summer season," he said.

Simmons' popular beach club was forced to close last year after Labor Day weekend when the park service abruptly ended the club's lease negotiations.

The club was at the end of its 10-year lease and seeking to renew. The park service subsequently issued a new request for proposals to reopen bidding to lease the site to other businesses. Proposals were due by

Turn to Club, Page 2

INSIDE

Tag — he's it

A York County angler has caught and tagged 93,000 fish, tops in a Virginia program's history. **Sports**

Seized and sold

Regulators take over a troubled bank in the latest move to soothe industry turmoil. **Nation & World, Page 6**

Conductor reconnects

Norfolk native Anthony Parnter is back in town to lead the Virginia Symphony in "The Music of Star Wars." **Daily Break, behind Sports**

BREEZY, SOME SUN

High: 69 Low: 47

Details on the back of news

