

In a hoop house on a Middlebrook farm, grows an heirloom tomato called Peg O' My Heart

Monique Calello Staunton News Leader

<https://www.newsleader.com/story/news/local/2023/09/06/in-a-hoop-house-on-a-middlebrook-farm-grows-an-heirloom-tomato-called-peg-o-my-heart/70695047007/>



Peg Davis and her brother Roger Davis at the Staunton Farmers' Market on Saturday, Aug. 26, 2023. *Monique Calello/The News Leader*

MIDDLEBROOK — Peg Davis might say her life blossomed with a seed but her brother Roger says it began when she was a teenager collecting eggs on a farm in upstate New York.

"It made her feel important," he says. "She was valuable. So I like to say she grew up on a farm."

A family friend had a farm they would visit for one week in the summer, and Davis ended up going all summer year after year, he shares.

A retired teacher, generations have blossomed thanks to Davis. You might remember her as Ms. Gerber.

“I have a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Marietta College, a Bachelor of Science from Virginia State University, a Bachelor of Arts from Mary Baldwin University, and an MFA in poetry from Goddard College in Vermont, and I’m a street vendor,” she says with the perfect balance of wit and humor, on a Saturday morning at the Staunton Farmers' Market.

This is a special year for Davis. An heirloom tomato she has nurtured for most of her adult life, called "Peg O' My Heart," has been accepted into the Seed Savers Exchange. Located just outside of Decorah, Iowa, the Seed Savers Exchange preserves more than 20,000 varieties of rare, heirloom, and open-pollinated seeds on 890 acres at Heritage Farm.

Peg O' My Heart



Peg Davis with her daughter Aidan Gerber at the Staunton Farmers' Market on Saturday, Aug. 26, 2023. *Monique Calello/The News Leader*

Fifty years ago, while teaching horticulture, a student gave Davis four seeds of a tomato that her grandparents had grown in Pennsylvania. 'This was my family’s tomato from my parent’s own garden,' she told Davis.

"The student's family was German, the root of the seed," says Davis. "And so, I started growing it."

Master gardeners describe an authentic heirloom tomato as an open-pollinated variety that has been passed down through generations of families and farmers for at least 50 years. "It's really special," says Davis, who gently cups one of her Peg O' My Hearts in her hands.

"You use genetic selection year after year. You don't want to lose a lot on the top and you want to have it so you can get the most slices and flavor," she says.

To have an heirloom seed considered by the Seed Savers Exchange, you have to have grown it in one place and used genetic selection to make your improvements, explains Davis. It then takes seven years until the seed is in their catalog.

"It's such an honor," she says. "It makes me cry a little bit because I really worked on this tomato. And I've done it for my customers. They love it."

Davis would return to her roots and decided she wanted to raise her six children on a farm.

First, the family lived on a farm on the Middle River in Verona, Roger says, as Davis wraps her arm around him. Then they moved to a farm south of Middlebrook and opened Snow Spring Farm on Campbell's Hollow Road.

"Half a mile from the middle of nowhere," she says, laughing with her brother.

In the hoop house where Peg O' My Heart grows, is an heirloom tomato that has been cherished year after year by Davis and her family, and it shows how much one seed can impact so many lives. Just stop by Snow Spring Farm's tent at the farmers' market and see for yourself.

Her best friend stops by with her grandchildren for a visit. An artist talks with Davis about when he is going to paint a BLT with one of her Peg O' My Hearts. She then takes a moment to hug her daughter for a picture. Her brother is behind a table, and like two peas in a pod, they are finishing each other's sentences while the rest of her now-adult children are either back at the family farm or sharing their love of locally-grown food with others like her son and daughter-in-law, John and Gloria Gerber, who own Gloria's Pupuseria in downtown Staunton.

The Peg O' My Heart is more than one seed's story. It is a beautiful life story. A family's story. A farmer's story. And now it's a story we can share with others in the Shenandoah Valley.

It's also one heck of a delicious tomato.

Color opens up worlds for artist Noelia Nuñez and for viewers of her paintings

Monique Calello Staunton News Leader

<https://www.newsleader.com/story/news/local/2023/03/08/artist-noelia-nunez-brings-bold-color-to-staunton-art-fans/69984510007/>



Artist Noelia Nuñez sits alongside her first downtown business display at By & By coffee in Staunton. Sage Hastert/Submitted

STAUNTON — Artist Noelia Nuñez captures what she loves in life onto canvas.

A cross country runner and then coach at Riverheads High School, some of her favorite pieces bring her back to running on the trail.

Using vibrant colors and painting with large brush strokes to create movement, she loves working with acrylic paint because they are fast-paced materials. It feels natural to her, she says, and allows her to release energy within her and pour it into her work.

We are on the path with her and can feel the dance of light amongst the trees with warm earth tones underneath guiding the way.



"Light the Way" from Staunton artist Noelia Nuñez Photograph Of Art Taken By Brian Arthur

But it took a long time for Nuñez to switch paths and fully immerse herself in her work as a full-time artist.

Originally from South America, her family immigrated to the United States when she was 9 years old and in 2003 moved to Staunton. Her family's beauty shop is Bonitas downtown where her identical twin sister Sophia works.

It was Sophia who convinced her to stop hiding her art in sketchbooks and share it with the world.

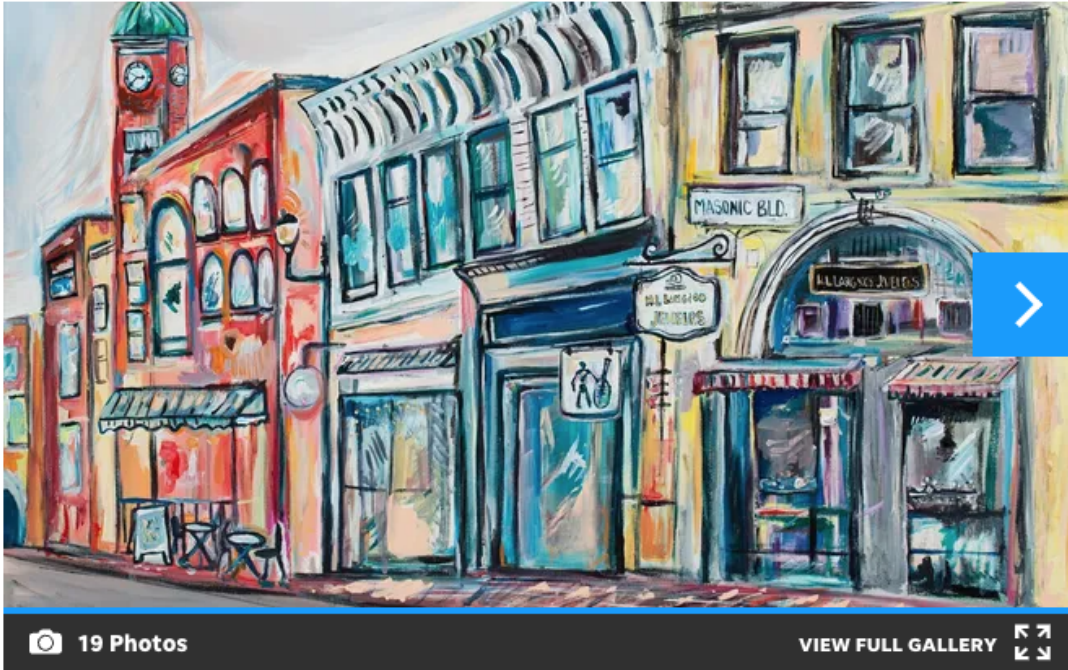
"I would hide a lot of my stuff in my room and nobody would see it," she says. "Art has always been there as a thing that I would do because I felt I needed to do it."

The first time she shared her art was at a street festival downtown. And then she started working as a barista at coffee shops and began to display her artwork on the walls. Her first commission was to paint the By & By.

"For a long time, I worked in coffee shops and then I started adding my art into those worlds."

At first she thought people were just being nice and offering encouragement but when more people asked her for specific paintings and drawings, she began to move in a different direction.

“That's how I started doing all the Staunton series,” Nuñez says.



PHOTOS: Staunton artist Noelia Nuñez

Color opens up worlds for artist Noelia Nuñez and for viewers of her paintings

Other than an art class in high school and painting class at Mary Baldwin University, Nuñez is primarily self-taught. The skills she developed running cross country allowed her to create the structure and discipline needed to learn and grow as an artist.

It was her coach at Riverheads High that encouraged her to do something where she felt like she was helping herself as well as helping the kids. This led her to working on her art while doing her barista job and volunteer coaching all in the same world.

“And then I started doing more shows. People were inviting me to do more. Can you do a collection of paintings and bring them into whatever place that was.”

She thinks what drew them to her work was the vibrancy of the colors she uses. “People wanted color which was fun.”

At first Nuñez thought it had to be a certain type of art and then people encouraged her to just use what she felt she needed to use.

“And that was me,” she says. “So that was really cool to see that people really want the color and the vibrance and the movement of color and the light.”

Her work as an artist was increasing and she was doing a little bit of everything, she says. And then the pandemic happened.

“And that's when my yoga world started opening up. I needed something to center me physically as well as mentally and so I started doing that through the pandemic.”

She'd set 30-day challenges for herself and noticed she was getting strong physically and strong mentally. When Briohny Smyth's Aligned Yoga teaching program opened up online, Nuñez put in the 200 hours to become a certified yoga instructor.

It was also during lockdown that Nuñez decided to take the risk to fully immerse herself into her art. When restrictions started to lift, she said goodbye to “her kids” on the track team she coached. She still misses them, she says.

“I love the kids, and I loved working with them, but I knew that I had to do my own thing and I couldn't let them go. But then the pandemic happened and realized this is the time to do it.”



Photograph taken in 2018 of Staunton artist Noelia Nuñez when she received "Coach of the Region" for the boys cross country team at Riverheads High School when the team won the region championship. *Noelia Nuñez/Submitted*

As more and more restrictions were lifted, Nuñez took a yoga class downtown and met Megan Burrows, owner of Burrow & Vine on Beverley Street. Burrows opens up her second floor as a teaching space. One of the classes offered there twice a week is yoga.

Nuñez asked her if she could teach yoga in Burrows' space and she said yes.

Burrows had also seen her art. Before long, Nuñez was teaching painting classes there, too.

“We have group classes. I provide the canvases, the paint and the easels and we recreate one of my paintings step-by-step and hopefully we all have a painting at the end that we can take home with us.”

She tries to create a space where people can have a little fun, paint and enjoy themselves, she says. “Enjoy color and maybe learn something new about themselves.”

Nuñez likes to have fun and play with her own artwork, experimenting with different mediums and giving herself permission to paint big.

“That's the goal. To create these bigger than life pieces that you can kind of walk into. Hopefully I'm headed towards having a space where I can do that.”

Right now, she is focusing on her art and yoga. Teaching classes helps her to feel more solid financially, she says.

“I think I'm at a point where it's still scary to take this risk, but I feel there's enough trust that I can do it,” Nuñez says. “And this is the time to do it if I'm gonna go for it so I try to seize the day as much as I can. I feel like that's where I am with my art.”



Staunton artist Noelia Nuñez teaches yoga on the second floor of Burrow & Vine downtown on Beverley Street and at Blue Ridge Community College in Bridgewater. Noelia Nuñez/Submitted

Noelia Nuñez teaches group yoga and painting classes in Staunton and at Blue Ridge Community College. To connect with Nuñez and see her artwork, visit <https://noelianunezart.com>. You can take her yoga class and see her paint live on Saturday, March 11, during the Queen City Women's Day festival.

Shops opening at Staunton's Wharf bring life back to area devastated by floods

Monique Calello Staunton News Leader

<https://www.newsleader.com/story/news/local/2023/07/12/floods-shops-opening-at-stauntons-wharf-bring-life-back-to-area/70395549007/>



Eclectic Retro, Gates Estates and O'Brien's Antiques & Art are located at the Wharf in downtown Staunton. *Monique Calello/The News Leader*

STAUNTON — It was two months after the August 2020 floods when Wes Wyse came to the Wharf.

Wyse was looking for a space to open his vintage shop. First, he looked at a basement space but the damage was so extensive he chose the space upstairs at 6 Byers Street.

“I was here first,” Wyse says, about businesses taking a chance and setting up shop in an area that was devastated by two floods. “The people that I talk to that are interested in opening down here are still pretty skittish about the flooding. But as time goes by maybe that will get less and less.”

The floods happened during the height of the pandemic after lockdowns had been in place for months. People were afraid to venture outside as the first wave of COVID spread across the

country like wildfire. Businesses were struggling to make rent when 17 years to the day, Staunton had a flash flooding event it hadn't experienced since 2003. Two weeks later, another flood would undo any repairs and efforts made by businesses and community volunteers to recover.

On Aug. 8, 2020, the first flood devastated 164 public, residential and commercial properties totaling an estimated \$3.1 million in damages. Two weeks later on Aug. 22, 2020, another flood. Only the insurance companies know the exact amount of dollars lost, says Scott Garber, emergency management coordinator and fire chief for the city of Staunton. Any additional damage to those same properties flooded a second time was not reportable, he says.

The Wharf district was one of the hardest hit areas. Byers Street Bistro and the Public Defender's Office were completely underwater and shops like The Wine Cellar, Blue Mountain Coffee and Artful Gifts sustained so much damage that ultimately they closed their doors at the Wharf or moved to another location.

The Bistro had just recently reopened after closing down in March 2020 due to COVID. During the months they closed the business, they had refinished floors, repainted and made renovations.

"All that was pretty much washed away," the restaurant's general manager Gio Cannata said at the time.

The Wharf, along with Augusta and Johnson Streets, are declared regulatory floodway zones. As cars washed away, so did the dreams of shopkeepers who brought Staunton some of its favorite places. The hardships were too many.

Eclectic Retro



Wes Wyse, owner of Eclectic Retro, on 6 Byers St. at the Wharf in downtown Staunton. Monique Calello/The News Leader

It was a big deal when Wyse decided to open Eclectic Retro, even if it is upstairs. It would lead to him having conversations with two other shop owners that would decide to open up at the Wharf, too.

Eclectic Retro is a vintage shop, as in secondhand, says Wyse. “We call it eclectic. We’re more interested in style and character than we are about age or value or antique.”

Wyse has always been interested in vintage and had owned a store in Ashland County, Ohio. His favorite part is searching for great finds. When he moved to Staunton to be closer to his folks, he opened his shop soon after.

“What we find over the years is that people like to have the stuff that their grandparents had,” says Wyse. “And now their grandparents had all this cool mid-century retro weird stuff and that’s what the younger people like these days.”

He also partnered with another business, Idle Threadz, that has a room filled with vintage clothing with a 1970s retro vibe, he says.

“The woman who does the vintage clothing has an amazing selection of stuff from the '70s to the '90s that's been really popular so far.”

O’Brien’s Antiques & Art



Frederick O'Brien, owner of O'Brien's Antiques & Art, on 14 Byers St. at the Wharf in Staunton *Monique Calello/The News Leader*

One of the people who talked with Wyse and decided to open a shop in the Wharf is Frederick O'Brien. A year and half ago, he opened O'Brien's Antiques & Art at 14 Byers Street, a basement space that had been damaged by the floods.

“Who’s to say it won’t happen this year again?” says O’Brien about the possibility of another flood. “But what’s life without a little risk? And we live close by and it’s a beautiful area and you have a restaurant right next door.”

O’Brien has been in the antique business for almost 37 years. Over the years, he’s owned shops in Vermont, Connecticut, Charleston, South Carolina, and now Staunton. He specializes mostly in 18th and early 19th century antiques and listed art. A lot of English, American and folk art and Americana pieces, he says.

“And then I sort of mix it up,” says O’Brien. “You’ll see some other things in here that I just couldn’t resist like a chandelier which is mid-century. I try to keep it interesting. Something for everybody.”

And there’s two other shops, he adds. “So we have three now.” O’Brien and Wyse opening would lead to another shop owner taking a chance and opening in the basement space that was once The Wine Cellar.

Gates Estates



Tim Gates, owner of Gates Estates, located at 8 Byers St. at the Wharf in downtown Staunton *Monique Calello/The News Leader*

“I did talk to Wes,” says Tim Gates. “He’s been there for two years, and Fred’s been there for over a year now.”

One of the reasons Gates chose the location, he says, was how well Wyse and O’Brien were doing. “Because that customer was already coming here.”

What's interesting about the three shops is that they are all very different but attract a similar customer base. For Gates, it's estate sales.

"I carry what you bring me," says Gates, who opened at 8 Byers Street a few months ago. Right now, a great portion of what you see inside his shop is coming out of homes in Richmond where he has another store, but he's starting to see some locals begin to bring him things.

"The reason that I initially brought things from Richmond is so there would be something here, but my end goal here is to have local people bring me things."

The timing for Gates was everything, he says. Both his parents had passed away and his wife's family lives in Waynesboro.

"It was just better to be nearby. During the coronavirus, my in-laws didn't go to the grocery store or Costco or Lowe's. We did all that for them."

Unlike an antique mall, a consignment store is something else, says Gates.

"In the antique mall, you have to maintain your own little space. So, you have a corner over here or a circle in the middle, and you have to stock it, price it, bring things in. If it doesn't sell, you have to take it out, bring new stuff in. It can be daunting for people who don't want to spend a lot of time doing it."

Gates takes care of all of that while also collecting and reporting state, sales and use tax.

So far, Gates feels very encouraged, he says. He has owned an estate sales company since 2010, and this is his first real foray in the Valley.

"I'm not an antique shop," says Gates. "I have things from 1690 and I have things from 2010 and everything in the middle. And I have an assortment of things from four dollars to \$2,000."

He loves the space he's in and it shows. The ballast stonework reminds him of places he's visited in Savannah, Georgia, he says smiling.

For the community, seeing life return to the Wharf is a welcome sight. People are strolling on its brick sidewalks, sitting outside at the Bistro and stopping inside shops to say hello and maybe leave with a shopping bag, or two. Tourists are back and small businesses are feeling a sense of normalcy return. After so many hardships, it is a long time coming.