

HOPE ON THE HORIZON

**Despite higher interest rates and an ongoing supply squeeze,
the housing market stays strong**

By Claire Fortier / Illustration by Adam Ewing

A year ago, there weren't enough hours in the day for real estate agents to show houses to those who wanted a personal visit, even as the prices of homes in Virginia soared 42% in five years to the 11th highest in the country. Buyers were lined up, anxious to buy and often engaged in bidding wars. "It wasn't unusual to put a home on the market and get 35 offers," says Shana Bloom of Bloom Real Estate.

The push to purchase drove up prices, but higher prices did little to quell demand. "2020 was a record sales year. 2021 was another record year," says Laura Lafayette, CEO of the Richmond Association of Realtors and the Central Virginia Regional Multiple Listing Service. >

That changed last summer when the Federal Reserve began raising interest rates. Mortgage rates more than doubled, sending the local real estate market into a plunge worthy of a King's Dominion roller coaster. "That was the slowest I've seen in my 17-year career," says Jason Burke of the Burke Realty Group of Long & Foster. "If homeowners are looking at interest rates that were 2.5 to 3.5[%] last year and now are 6 to 7%, why are they going to move?"

"Historically, 6 to 6.5% isn't a bad interest rate," says Lafayette. "It's just, after 3 to 3.5%, it feels high. A lot of it is psychology."

Although rates ticked up another quarter of a percentage point in May, the Federal Reserve indicated that it could be the last increase for the year. And perhaps it's psychology, perhaps it's old-fashioned optimism, but as spring ushers in prime real estate season, phones are ringing again in local real estate offices — although, says Bloom, "It's certainly a different market than last year."

GOOD NEWS?

There's no question it's still a seller's market. In March, there were 1,051 new listings of single-family homes in the Richmond metro area, which includes Chesterfield, Hanover and Henrico counties and the city of Richmond — down 26% from March 2022. "Buyer demand continues to outstrip supply. Right now, we have less than a month's supply," says Lafayette. A balanced market — where supply meets demand — is five to six months' supply of homes for sale. "I don't ever see that happening in this area. We would be lucky to get a three- or four-month supply," she says.

That said, the market has "decelerated since last July and August," according to Bloom. "Property is continuing to appreciate, but at a more normal rate. The prices started to taper a bit, but it is still a great time for the seller."

This year, though, there's better news for buyers, as well. In 2022-2023, the median house price climbed only 3.6%, not the dizzying 11% that marked the 2021-2022 real estate season, according to the Central Virginia Regional MLS report. In addition, the percentage sellers got for their homes dropped 3.8% to nearly 100% of the listing, which indicates fewer bidding wars. Houses are staying on the market a little longer, 27 days as opposed to last year's 16, giving buyers more time to see what's available.



EXPERT ADVICE
FOR BUYERS

Shana Bloom
Bloom Real Estate

Be ready in advance with a pre-approval letter from a reputable local lender or with a proof of funds letter from your bank for cash purchases. A local lender's pre-approval letter is typically stronger than an online or national bank, which deal in high volume.

"Richmond is in very good shape with good employment numbers," says Vernon McClure, president of Main Street Homes, the second-largest home builder in the Richmond area. "Our market, even though prices are still up so much, has been really good. Prices for houses around Richmond are not bad if you look at real estate to the north of us, or even across the country."

THE SQUEEZE

While the regional real estate market is starting to normalize, there is still a significant squeeze on low- to mid-price housing. In Richmond, the median home price is \$365,000, according to Central Virginia Regional MLS, and the average sales price is \$414,225. "That's really impacting those looking for affordable housing," says Bloom.

One rule of thumb advises that a household should spend no more than 41% of its income on debt, including the mortgage. With interest rates at 6.5%, online mortgage calculators suggest a salary of \$112,000 would be needed to afford a \$365,000 home. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the mean hourly wage in the Richmond region is about \$27, or \$54,000 per year.

In the usual real estate cycle, young adults purchase a starter home, move to a family home when they have children and then downsize later in life. However, the cycle has been disrupted, creating a dearth of houses priced under \$300,000. "If I have a 3% mortgage on my \$300,000 home and I want to upgrade, I'm now looking at a \$600,000 or \$700,000 home and a 6 or 7% mortgage rate. That has a lot of people holding steady where they are," says Mark Cipolletti of Keller Williams Richmond West.

Adding to the problem are empty nesters who aren't leaving their nests, because a smaller house or a unit in a 55+ community can be as expensive as the family home they would be selling. In Britlynn, a 55+ community in Glen Allen built in the last five years, the least expensive unit is \$520,000. Even communities that started at lower price points have appreciated beyond many budgets. "In Cross Ridge (a 55+ community in Glen Allen), a unit going for \$350,000 five years ago is now \$500,000," says Burke.

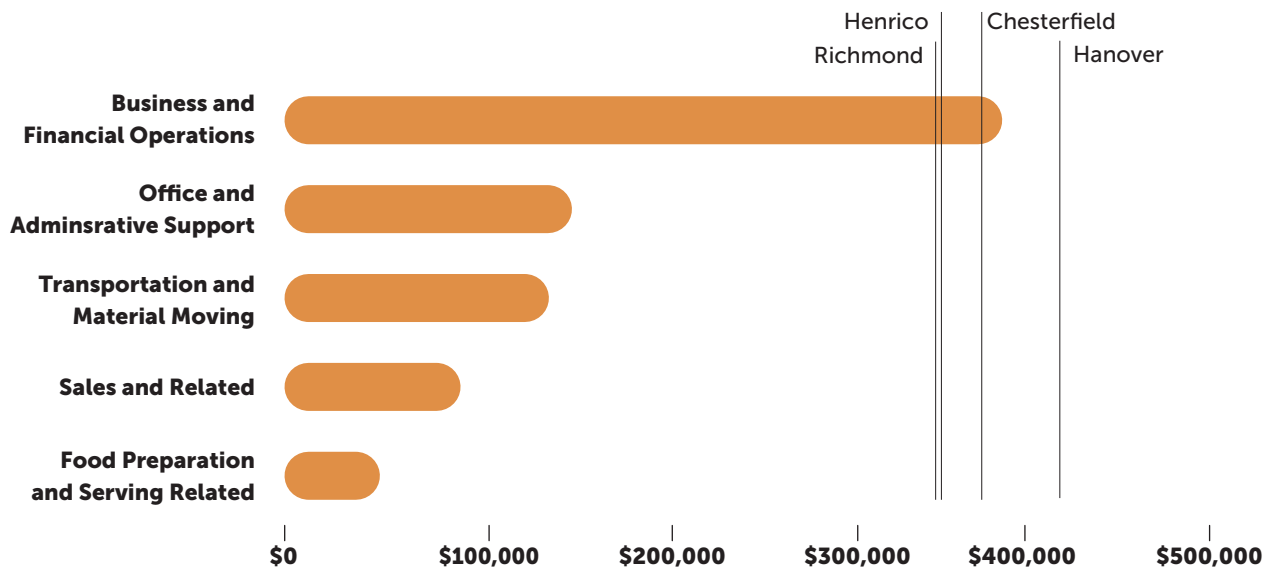
ONE SOLUTION

Condominiums or townhouses may be a solution for some. They seem to be springing up all over the metro area and, in fact, new listings are up more than 77%, with 1.4 months' supply of inventory available. At \$337,482, the average price of a condo or townhouse is both lower and growing more slowly (0.1%) than that of a single-family home.

"We have had the best start of the season ever," says McClure. "I think we are going to continue to see denser development. There is a real demand for smaller homes. People are having fewer kids and having them later in life."

But, he adds: "Affordability is a real challenge right now. We are building more townhouses, and they are priced in the

MAXIMUM HOME PRICE BY MEDIAN OCCUPATION WAGE VS. MEDIAN SALES PRICE



Sources: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics; CVR MLS.

\$370,000 to \$500,000 market. It's crazy that that's now affordable housing, but such is the way things are."

McClure says his company, Main Street Homes, is offering loan options like buydowns, where the seller pays to reduce the interest rate for a prospective buyer. "We pay between \$10,000 to \$14,000 to buy down about three quarters of a percentage point on a loan. It can be a big help to new homebuyers," he says.

BUILDING THE MARKET

Lack of inventory has been a chronic problem for the Richmond area. "We have underbuilt for so long," says Lafayette. But, she cautions, "we are not going to build our way out of this."

When the housing market crashed in 2008, building halted. In Richmond, several developers who had purchased swaths of land simply didn't build. "A lot of these had the zoning approval but the economics didn't pan out from 2008 to 2012," says McClure. In addition, "a lot of developers left the marketplace and haven't come back," says Bloom.

Then COVID-19 hit, supply chain problems ensued and the cost of building soared. "During the third quarter of 2021 into 2022, construction materials got so high that builders had to charge more," says Thomas Tyler, director of Integra Realty Resources. Lumber prices have come down since then, says Bloom, "but there are a lot of other things in the supply chain that are still impacting building."

Even when materials are available, building takes time. "It takes three to four years from a land purchase to lots on the ground," says McClure. "Everything is taking a lot longer to do. It's hard to get the zoning done, particularly in an election year.

No one wants controversy."

Finding large tracts of land suitable for building single-family homes is pushing development farther out from Richmond. "There hasn't been enough raw land, particularly in the suburban areas, for developers to develop what they could have," says Tyler. "Developers are running out of land in western Henrico and Chesterfield. New Kent is a lot more active."

The good news, Tyler says, is that a number of properties purchased prior to the COVID-19 pandemic are either under development or ready to open. Many of them "are townhouses or condos, or include multifamily developments in the project."

Tyler speculates that home prices may start to drop. "It feels like the prices are at a point now that there is going to be some resistance to further increases."

To those still on the fence about buying, McClure says, "If you want to buy a house with inflation the way it is, buy now. Interest rates will come down and you can refinance." ■



**EXPERT ADVICE
FOR BUYERS**

Jason Burke
Burke Realty Firm
— Long & Foster

You could wait this market out, but who knows how long that will take. The downside to waiting is that prices could go even higher over the next couple years and price you out of the market totally. Yes, prices could come down too, but our market hasn't shown any signs of that happening.

EXPERT ADVICE

Local real estate agents share their top tips for negotiating the modern market — whether you're a buyer or a seller.

ADVICE FOR BUYERS AND SELLERS



Tonya Leeper
*TL Realty at Keller
Williams West*

My suggestion for buying or selling in this market is work with a real estate professional whom you trust and who understands the market. You need a Realtor who can teach you ways to strategize and who can be a great negotiator on your behalf.

ADVICE FOR SELLERS



Alicia Kim Soekawa
The Collaborative

You cannot use comparatives from last summer because interest rates have doubled. Pricing has become more normal now. You need to use the last two or three months. Price is the biggest driver, but if you want top dollar, you need to show your house in top condition.



John Daylor
*The John Daylor Team —
Joyner Fine Properties*

Proper preparation and a concise pricing strategy will be the difference between getting a good price for your home and a great price. Homes that have done some basic preparation and price attractively in the market are still generating multiple offer scenarios, with sales prices well above the list price and very advantageous terms to the seller.

ADVICE FOR BUYERS



Elizabeth Hagen
Joyner Fine Properties

My advice for home buyers in this current market is not to fall in love with a property until the keys are in your hand. Many times, buyers have to submit offers on multiple properties in order to get under contract, so having a thick skin during the process allows your agent to better negotiate on your behalf.



Elizabeth Ford
*Shaheen, Ruth,
Martin and Fonville*

Not too long ago, first-time homebuyers had the luxury of viewing multiple homes — then had time to weigh out the pros and cons for each property. Those days are long gone. Knowing what you really need vs. what you want becomes crucial, especially if you must decide on a home very quickly. ■

MARKET SNAPSHOT

NEW HOME CLOSINGS AND AVERAGE SALES PRICES BY LOCALITY

JURISDICTION	2021		2022		CHANGE IN CLOSINGS		CHANGE IN AVG. PRICE	
	CLOSINGS	AVG. PRICE	CLOSINGS	AVG. PRICE	NUMERIC	PERCENT	NUMERIC	PERCENT
Caroline	195	\$342,638	188	\$389,006	-7	-4%	\$46,367	14%
Chesterfield	2,111	\$430,753	1,855	\$489,391	-256	-12%	\$58,638	14%
Goochland	244	\$536,518	262	\$622,931	18	7%	\$86,413	16%
Hanover	602	\$472,616	607	\$574,100	5	1%	\$101,484	21%
Henrico	845	\$438,279	842	\$440,710	-3	0%	\$2,430	1%
New Kent	309	\$378,067	379	\$422,304	70	23%	\$44,237	12%
Powhatan	128	\$479,535	107	\$564,611	-21	-16%	\$85,077	18%
Richmond	304	\$373,641	299	\$443,067	-5	-2%	\$69,426	19%
Total	4,738	\$433,452	4,539	\$488,359	-199	-4%	\$54,907	13%

Source: Intega Realty Resources-Richmond

TOP 10 SUBDIVISIONS IN CENTRAL VIRGINIA RANKED BY NEW HOME CLOSINGS DURING 2022

RANK	SUBDIVISION	JURISDICTION	NEW HOMES CLOSINGS	AVG. NEW HOME PRICE	PERMITS ISSUED
1	Magnolia Green	Chesterfield	186	\$618,540	158
2	Rountrey	Chesterfield	179	\$638,736	69
3	Giles Farm	Hanover	137	\$548,084	86
4	Wescott	Chesterfield	133	\$316,120	129
5	Harper's Mill	Chesterfield	132	\$592,633	155
6	Retreat at One	Henrico	121	\$358,185	154
7	Foxcreek	Chesterfield	107	\$445,691	103
8	The Groves at New Kent	New Kent	107	\$337,964	112
9	Mosaic at West Creek	Goochland	97	\$569,600	111
10	New Kent Vineyards	New Kent	85	\$471,882	54

Source: Intega Realty Resources-Richmond

SINGLE-FAMILY HOMES

Average sales price: \$414,225 (+4.3%)
 Median sales price: \$362,750 (+3.6%)

Percentage of original list price received: 100.2% (-3.9%)

Inventory of homes for sale in March: 881 (+4.4% over March 2022)

Days on the market until sale: Now: 27 Then: 16

Months' supply of inventory in March: 0.9

Change in closed sales: -23.6%

(+28.6% over March 2022)

CONDOS & TOWNHOUSES

Average sales price: \$337,482 (+0.1%)
 Median sales price: \$330,225 (+2.2%)

Percentage of original list price received: 99.7% (-3.1%)

Inventory of homes for sale in March: 302 (+77.6% over March 2022)

Days on the market until sale: Now: 27 Then: 30

Months' supply of inventory in March: 1.4

Change in closed sales: -9.2%

(+100% over March 2022)

Unless otherwise notes, all figures are year-to-date averages for the Richmond Metro area, which includes Chesterfield, Hanover and Henrico counties and the city of Richmond, and were sourced from the March 2023 Central Virginia Regional MLS Report dated April 10. Comparisons reference the year-to-date figures from March 2022.



Ablaze with Blooms



Flower farming is making a comeback
as gardeners grow a local niche

By Claire Fortier



In the humid haze of an early summer morning, Ash Hobson Carr walks up and down rows of snapdragons and delphiniums, expertly snipping long stems of bright blooms. On the 6 acres in Highland Springs that she shares cooperatively with two other farming enterprises, Hobson Carr's Hazel Witch Farm flower business is blooming.

So is Jenny and Paul Maloney's Wind Haven Farm in King William County, where Jenny's love of flowers went from a front-yard garden 10 years ago to a thriving wholesale flower business on an 11-acre farm with 7 acres in production.

"When I first got into (the local wholesale flower market), there was just me and one other guy," says Jenny Maloney. "Now there are a slew of people selling wholesale. It has exploded in the last 10 years."

"We are constantly out there harvesting," says Britton Barbee, who with her husband, Walter, runs Prospect Hill Flower Farm, producing flowers on about 2 acres of an old cattle farm in Louisa County. "I was surprised at the demand."

From Bumpass to Williamsburg, from Mechanicsville to Powhatan, everything's coming up ... well, not roses, but dahlias, cosmos and zinnias as flower farmers reclaim a beautiful business. >

TOM RAFALOVICH





Ash Hobson Carr of
Hazel Witch Farm



Once flower farms in the United States were prolific, particularly in California. Then, in 1991, the U.S. implemented the Andean Trade Act, which removed tariffs for 13 years on South American agricultural products. The intent was to limit coca farming, the key ingredient in cocaine, in Colombia and create jobs in a country ravaged by civil war.

The U.S. is still the world's largest consumer of cut flowers. But now most of those blooms come from Colombia. It's the largest producer of cut flowers in the world, exporting more than 660 million stems in 2020.

U.S. flower farmers suffered another blow when the United States signed the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement in 1992, eliminating trade barriers with Canada and Mexico. "The trade agreement made it cheaper to ship in cut flowers from outside the United States than to get them from inside the U.S. Tons of large commercial flower farms went under or moved abroad," says Jenny Maloney.

As the local food movement has grown in the U.S. and consumers are becoming more aware of the environmental and financial costs of a global food system, flower farms are making a comeback. Flowers can be grown almost anywhere and require less gardening space than vegetables.

"My first garden was a terra-cotta pot garden. I had a big window but no access to outside space," says Hobson Carr, who left a career as a globe-trotting photographer to settle into her passion for flowers and medicinal herbs. "Then we moved into a row house in

the Fan, and I filled the backyard. I used raise beds and wicking gardens, because I was keen on growing Western medicinal herbs and didn't want the soil toxicity. My husband had grandparents in Varina, and I planted a garden in their yard."

She describes her flower quest as "a slow hobby that became a rabbit hole I fell down."

The same is true for Jenny Maloney. During the 2008 recession, she couldn't find a job that utilized her art degree from VCU, so she went to work for her in-laws at their vegetable farm. She found her calling in blooms. "I sort of gravitated toward the flowers, probably because of my art degree," she says. "I

Clockwise from top: Rachel Williamson of Wind Haven Flower Farm; Claire Smith of River City Flower Exchange helps Renato Seixas unload flowers from Sweet Greens Farm in Scottsville; poppies at the River City Flower Exchange





methodical. “We started in 2015. My husband is Bolivian, and we moved back to the U.S. from Bolivia. We both grew up on farms. We knew we wanted to farm, so we did a lot of research before purchasing property. We wanted to maintain and preserve farmland and grow sustainably. We don’t use chemicals on our farm ... We want to protect the flora and fauna and create an environment that is positive for them. You are in this for the long term, and that means being a steward of the land.”

Justine and Aaron McFarland of Tupelo Farm & Garden in Urbana were organic farmers with Walker Farm in Vermont, which has operated since 1770 and evolved into a horticultural destination for flower lovers. Justine managed eight of the farm’s more than 20 greenhouses before they relocated to Richmond for a job and started their own farm in 2019. “We were astonished at the variety we could grow.”

Then, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and “it was the perfect storm” for flower farming, says McFarland. “Gardening gives people a chance to be outside, to dig in the dirt and reconnect with the earth’s beauty and bounty.” Suddenly gardening, and particularly flower farming, became a huge hobby.

“I needed to do something that brought some joy and beauty into such an ugly, hate-filled world of COVID,” says Rachael Watman, who with her husband, Max, owns Swan’s End farm in Powhatan. “I started growing flowers until I had more flowers than I could fill my house with, so I put something on Facebook and started having people come to the end of the driveway to pick up little arrangements I made. Going into the second year, I decided I couldn’t do it at the end of the driveway. I’m far out here. So, I started doing weekly subscriptions.”

She garnered the interest of members of the Powhatan Chamber of Commerce, which led to an in-town >



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE CENTER: CLAIRE FORTIER; EMILY RICHARDSON

love the colors and textures. They are just beautiful. They speak to me.”

“Mom and dad decided not to grow flowers anymore,” says Paul Maloney. “They weren’t making enough money and needed the ground for other things. Jenny didn’t want to do just vegetables. She was kind of a mess, so I said we could till the front yard.”

“Little by little, we filled up every

little sunshiny spot,” says Jenny. “Then we cleared trees and got even more sunshiny spots. Paul’s brother said there were a couple of acres that they weren’t using at their house. We filled up their whole backyard and then their whole side yard, every inch of their property. Then we decided that was probably a little too much.”

For Barbee, the planning was more





dam. From Montgomery's living room to a shop in Scott's Addition, the business has evolved into a grower-owned cooperative and Central Virginia's first all-local flower market.

"In agriculture, you eventually end up bumping shoulders with other farmers. To succeed, collaboration and cooperation are much better than competition. Our goal is to lift up our local flower farming industry," says McFarland, an original member and vice president of the Exchange.

"On any given weekend, you can't move in here," says Claire Smith, manager of River City Flower Exchange, as she unloads buckets of flowers from one of the 11 flower farms that are part of the exchange. It's her job to take in flowers on Mondays and Tuesdays, sort them by orders, and have them ready to be picked up by florists, event planners and floral designers on Wednesday and Thursday mornings. The exchange is open to the public from noon to 2 p.m. on Wednesdays and Thursdays and from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturdays. The exchange also offers workshops in floral and herb topics.

"The exchange has gone from being a pet project to now in its second year at Scotts Addition," says Hobson Carr, president of the exchange. "We got a grant from the USDA, a specialty crop grant that historically hasn't been connected with flowers. That allowed us to build out our marketing material and fill out our workshops. We have doubled our sales, and we are 25% larger than last year."

The grant also allowed the exchange to open a drop-off spot in Williamsburg, with aspirations to open more. The hope is to get more floral designers and retail outlets to give local flowers a chance.

"Flowers just give people joy," says Jenny Maloney. "You celebrate all these major life events with flowers – weddings but also funerals. You celebrate someone's life with flowers." **13**



From top: Rachel Watman of Swann's End Flowers in Powhatan; golden yarrow

flowers and the diversity of locally grown flowers. "When COVID happened, wholesale houses had to shut down, flowers weren't getting shipped and florists had a hard time sourcing flowers," says Jenny Maloney. "My clients started sourcing more from us."

"With the shipping and transit getting bad, the quality of the flowers that designers were getting was worse," says Paul Maloney. "Now more customers are actually looking for local, and that's driving our growth."

The River City Flower Exchange is a testament to the burgeoning business of locally grown flowers. It was started in 2019 by Jenn Henry, a floral designer who runs Field Day Creative, and Amanda Montgomery, who started growing flowers in the front yard of her Bon Air home before expanding her Hummingbird Flower Co. to Beaver-

pickup spot, introduction to local businesses who would carry her bouquets and connections with local farmers markets. While she still works her day job as the vice president of programs of The Rita and Alex Hillman Foundation, Watman finds creativity and community in the flower world.

In addition to launching flower farms, large and small, the pandemic also pointed out the flaws with overseas

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: CLAIRE FORTIER

BY CLAIRE FORTIER

Speaking to the Moment

*Poet
Nikki Giovanni
embraces
her
contradictions*

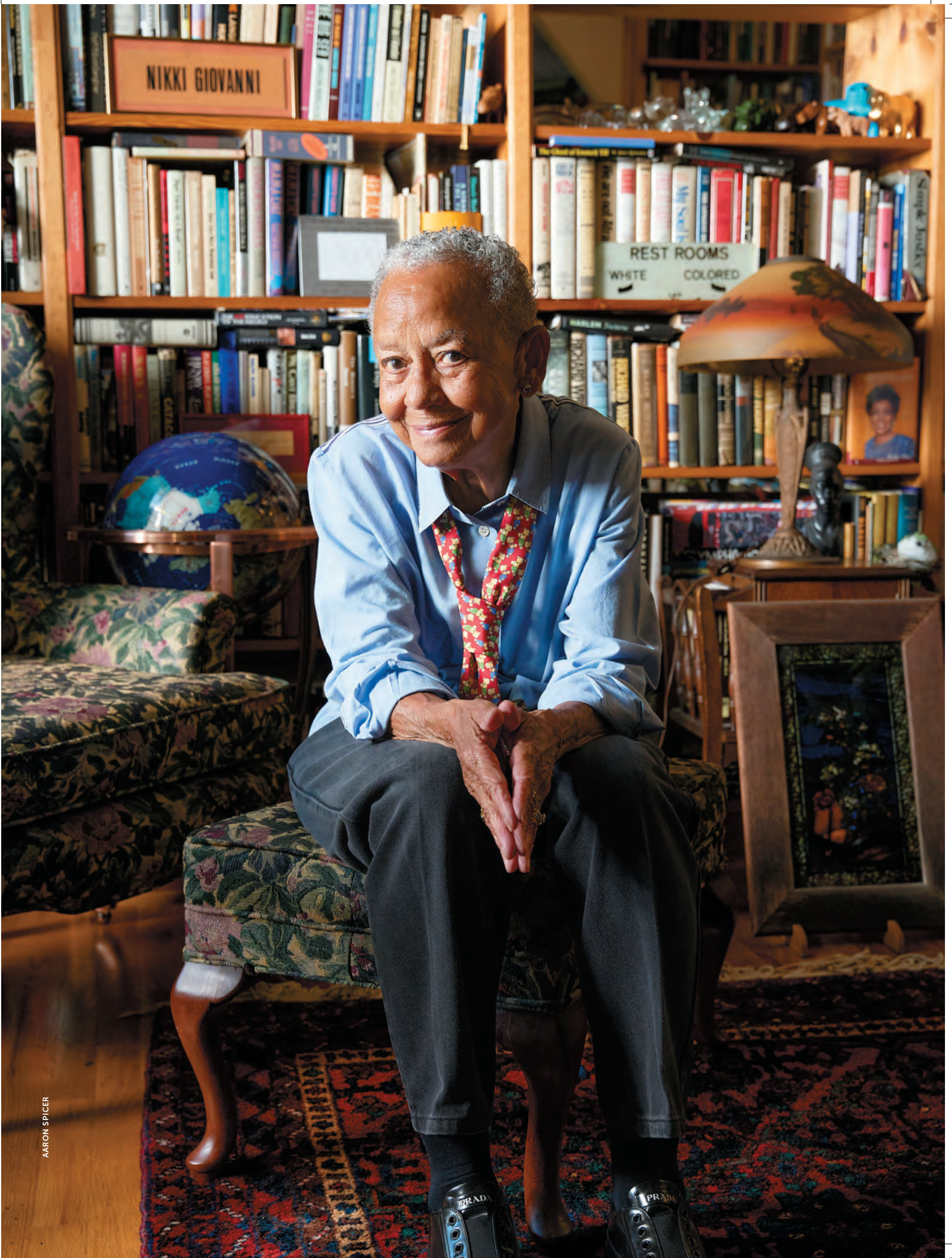
“I am a revolutionary poet in a prerevolutionary world,” Nikki Giovanni wrote in her 1971 book, “Gemini: An Extended Autobiographical Statement on My First Twenty-Five Years of Being a Black Poet,” a 1973 finalist for the National Book Award.

Now, just months after celebrating her 80th birthday, how does Dr. Giovanni feel about that statement?

“Call me Nikki, and I don’t reread my work,” she says. “I wrote ‘Gemini’ when I was young. I’ve learned a lot since.”

Writing in the moment and letting the work speak for itself, especially when she reads it to an audience, is a hallmark of the celebrated poet and author. Her book “The Nikki Giovanni Poetry Collection” was a 2004 Grammy finalist for Best Spoken Word Album.

Retiring last year after teaching at Virginia Tech for 35 years, Giovanni, an outspoken activist for civil and women’s rights, has written more than two dozen volumes of poetry, essays and anthologies and 11 illustrated children’s books. >



AARON SPICER



SOUL!

One of the most renowned artists to emerge from the Black Arts Movement, which was established in 1965 in the wake of the Black Power Movement, Giovanni viewed the creation of Black art as a means of awakening Black consciousness. She, along with writers James Baldwin and Maya Angelou, gained national prominence from a movement often reviled by mainstream culture. But it was a movement that launched both hip-hop and poetry slams.

From the beginning, Giovanni had the ear of young Black activists through her frequent guest hosting of the WNET Group television show “SOUL!”, a performance and variety show that reached more than 65% of Black households during the 1960s and '70s.

It was on “SOUL!”, in 1971 that she had a now-famous dialogue with Baldwin. Giovanni, who was 28 at the time, jostled with Baldwin, who was 47, over the roles of Black men, white racism and the writer.

Looking back on that iconic interview, Giovanni says, “I recently watched it. I hadn’t seen it in 20 years or so. You know, you learn things. I’ve been curious that we have not — not me because I’m just a poet — that nobody has really dealt with racism as a two-way street. Segregation was a two-way street. I had to be segregated against, but white people had to be taught to segregate against. You know, they didn’t just wake up in the morning and it made sense to them. What’s

that song from ‘South Pacific?’” she says, referring to “You’ve Got to be Carefully Taught” from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s 1949 musical. She picks up the tune: “You got to be carefully taught to hate before you are 6 or 7 or 8.”

Speaking Truth

For Giovanni, her one job as a poet is to tell the truth. It’s a job she has been doing through the Civil Rights era, the Rodney King riots, the Million Man March, the election of Barack Obama and the Black Lives Matter movement.

It was on full display on April 17, 2007, at a convocation following the Virginia Tech massacre, which took the lives of 32 students and faculty members. Standing before an overflowing crowd that included President George W. Bush, Giovanni delivered her now-famous poem, “We are Virginia Tech.” Her words that day, “We are strong enough to stand tall tearlessly, we are brave enough to bend and cry, and we are sad enough to know that we must laugh again,” drew spontaneous cheering, with the crowd chanting, “We are Virginia Tech.”

“My job that day was to address the student body,” she said at the time. “If we do love, we have to do hate. If we do good, we have to recognize evil.”

Giovanni had recognized evil almost immediately. She knew the gunman, Seung-Hui Cho, and had had him removed from her class. She told the dean about the man she called

AARON SPICER

*“Stories are being written by
people who have the power,
white people.*

It’s time we write our stories.”

“pure evil” and knew almost immediately who the shooter was as he was wreaking devastation.

As her friend Barbara Crosby once described her, “Nikki’s personal growth has required that all around her grow. ... To love her is to love contradictions and conflict.”

Patron of Letters

Eight decades of growth have earned Giovanni seven NAACP Image Awards; more than 30 honorary degrees from colleges and universities nationwide; the keys to more than a dozen cities, including New York and Los Angeles; a commendation from the U.S. Senate; and the first Rosa Parks Woman of Courage award given by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Oprah named her a living legend.

And now, she is being honored by the Library of Virginia with a Patron of Letters degree, along with bestselling author David Baldacci, literacy advocate Michelle Baldacci and award-winning children’s author Meg Medina. The degrees will be presented during the 26th annual Virginia Literary Awards Celebration in Richmond on Oct. 14; the ticketed event is open to the public.

The award means a lot to her, so much so that she insisted on returning early from the London premiere of “Going to Mars: The Nikki Giovanni Project” to attend the ceremony. The documentary film won the 2023 Grand Jury Prize at Sundance Film Festival and was just picked up by HBO.

When asked why she was hurrying back, she says, “Virginia is my home, and it has been for almost 40 years. I have always really appreciated the Library of Virginia. I love London, but it will still be there.”

A Universal View

This is the second time the Library of Virginia has honored Giovanni — she received a Literary Lifetime Achievement Award in 2016. And it’s not the first time she has left London in a hurry. Ten years ago, she was in the city giving poetry readings when her mentor,

Dr. Louise Shoemaker of the University of Pennsylvania, died. “The only way to get back to the funeral in time was to take the old Supersonic Transport [similar to the Concorde]. I’m a poet and don’t have any money, so I went to a London bank to get a loan, you know, because they’re rich. I told them, ‘This is important to me, and I’m an honest person.’ I told them, ‘You people were involved in the slave trade, and a lot of the money you have came from my ancestors.’ I did get the money, and I paid them back, little by little. You can’t get it unless you ask.”

That flight was a seminal experience for Giovanni, and one that has shaped her view of the world. “I actually saw the curve of the earth, up more than 70,000 feet. I thought that was fabulous. I am a big fan of heaven,” she says. “I always liked the idea of the galaxy. If we are the only life form, if that’s the case, then there has been a big mistake, because human beings, we’re just not good people. We are just not very nice. And I think that is showing up more and more. Once a week somebody is being shot or something. It’s insane.”

Part of that insanity includes Civil War monuments, she says. Touching on the removal of the statue of Confederate

Still from 1971 “SOUL:
James Baldwin &
Nikki Giovanni Part I”



Virginia Tech held a Convocation on April 17, 2007 to honor the shooting massacre victims, where Nikki Giovanni read "We are Virginia Tech."



Gen. Robert E. Lee from Monument Avenue, Giovanni says, "I think a traitor to this country probably shouldn't have a statue. I can think of a lot of people whose statues I would like to see, if we are just doing statues. I don't see why we keep having these statues to the same Confederates who really tried to destroy the nation and thought of people like me as property. Why wouldn't you take it down? Richmond is important to Black Americans. Virginia is important to us. We have a lot of people whose statues need to go up, so why wouldn't we do that?"

But, she admonishes, "We have to look forward, we just have to." Looking forward isn't just looking at this nation or even this planet. It's about looking beyond, to the galaxy.

"I'm excited about what life forms there are out there," she says with almost childlike glee. "Well, what happens when another life form knocks on your door? How do you welcome another life form? The way you welcome another life form here on earth."

She suggests we practice welcoming people who look differently to us here on earth.

"That's why transgender kids are so important to us, because they're the ones saying, 'No, I am not going to be defined by what you think is my gender. I'm going to define that.' My ancestry is slavery, and we lost our names. What happens when somebody says, 'I want my own name, and I

want my own gender, and I want my own race,' which will lead to, 'I want my own religion, I want my own body?'"

A believer that other life forms from beyond our world will be revealed soon, Giovanni believes that humans must go beyond gender, race, religion and all the other elements that separate us from each other. Humans, she says, "have to look at everything differently."

Memories of Mulvaney Street

Back down on terra firma, Giovanni is focused on a specific street in Knoxville, Tennessee. Although she grew up in Ohio, she was born in Knoxville and spent her summers there with her grandparents — particularly her beloved grandmother, Louvenia Watson, the inspiration for many of her poems.

"My grandparents lived at 400 Mulvaney St.," she says. She has described the street as "a camel's back with both humps bulging — up and down — we lived on the down part." As she wrote in "Gemini," the little frame house "was duplicated twice more which overlooked the soft-voiced people passing by with 'Evening, 'Fessor Watson, Miz Watson,' and the grass wouldn't grow between our house and Edith and Clarence White's house."

Her grandparents' house, as well as much of the neighborhood, has been torn down and rebuilt. Now the University of Tennessee may take more of the area. "It upsets me," Giovanni says. "That kind of s— happens all the time. They took the whole thing. There is still a park there and the creek, but all the rest of it is gone."

The name of the street was changed from Mulvaney to Pat Summitt Drive, after the women's basketball coach, taking Giovanni's last vestige of cherished memories. The poet is striking back the only way she knows how. "I am working on my best job of writing the story of Mulvaney Street, because I knew the people who lived there, the people next door," she says. "Somebody needs to write about Mulvaney Street. I want to write about what I remember, and somebody else will write what they remember. I am sure there are stories all over, little stories here and there, like Tulsa, St. Louis and Knoxville. Right now, those stories are being written by people who have the power, white people. It's time we write our stories." **IS**

*"If we do love,
we have to do hate.
If we do good,
we have to recognize
evil."*

COURTESY VIRGINIA TECH

Honoring Authors

The Library of Virginia's annual gala shines with literary luminaries

WHAT DO YOU HAVE when you invite a bestselling author, an award-winning children's author, an activist poet, a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, three fearless journalists and several award-winning poets? In addition to very lively dinner conversation, you have the Library of Virginia's celebration of literature, the Virginia Literary Awards.

The gala, which is being held at the Library of Virginia on Saturday, Oct. 14, will present awards to several exceptional Virginia authors in the areas of fiction, nonfiction and poetry.

"The Library of Virginia's Virginia Literary Awards celebration, featuring a stunning array of amazing writers and literary works, has become a not-to-be-missed annual tradition," says Librarian of Virginia Dr. Sandra Treadway. "At this year's event, the library will pay special tribute to four outstanding Virginians — David Baldacci, Michelle Baldacci, Nikki Giovanni and Meg Medina — who have made important contributions to libraries and to the literary landscape of Virginia through their writing, philanthropy and advocacy."

The Baldaccis, Giovanni and Medina are being presented with the library's honorary Patrons of Letters degree. Bestselling author David Baldacci and his wife, Michelle, are being recognized for literacy advocacy through their Wish You Well Foundation, which promotes and fosters literacy and education programs. Giovanni, a poet and educator, is being celebrated for a lifetime of Black activism. And Medina, the 2023-24 National Ambassador of Young People's Literature and the 2019 winner of the John Newberry Medal, will be honored for her children's books, which celebrate Latino culture.

But that's just the appetizer for a full feast of literary

excellence. The key reason for the gathering is the Virginia Literary Awards, which, according to Treadway, "highlight and celebrate the amazing work of authors who live in or write about Virginia, as well as individuals who have made a remarkable impact on literature and literacy."

This year's finalists are six writers and three poets, including Bill Glose, a combat veteran; Barbara Kingsolver, a Pulitzer Prize winner; Beth Macy, a writer and producer of a Peabody-winning TV series; Bruce Holsinger, a Guggenheim fellow; and Jonathan M. Katz, an Overseas Press Club award recipient. The finalists were chosen by an independent panel of judges from more than 104 submissions. In addition to distinguished recognition, the winner in each category will receive a \$2,500 prize.

While the main award recipients are selected by an independent panel, the library includes the public in its People's Choice Awards, also being presented at the gala. For the more artistic of heart, the Mary Lynn Kotz Award, also to be presented, recognizes an outstanding book that is written in response to a work of art.

In its 200th year, the library is the most comprehensive resource in the world for the study of Virginia history, culture and government. Founded by the General Assembly in 1823 to organize and care for the commonwealth's growing collection of books and official records, the library's collection has grown to 2 million books, maps, newspapers, prints and photographs, as well as 130 million manuscript items.

The gala, which will feature cocktails, dinner, the award ceremony and a silent auction, is the Library of Virginia's biggest fundraiser. It supports the library's preservation, education and research initiatives. For more information and to purchase tickets, visit lva.virginia.gov. ■

Library of Virginia Patron of Letters Degree Honorees



**DAVID AND MICHELLE
BALDACCİ**



NIKKI GIOVANNI



MEG MEDINA

FROM LEFT: COURTESY LIBRARY OF VIRGINIA; COURTESY NIKKI GIOVANNI; COURTESY MEG MEDINA