

TUBE CITY TALES

*a publication of the Tube
City Writers and the Mon
Valley Photography Collective*

For the people of Mon Valley whose
fortitude
never ceases to inspire us.

The presses and newsroom of the former Daily News building had been quiet for four years until one spring evening last year, when Dr. Nicole Peeler and I hosted the first Tube City Writers session in the newly opened McKeesport Community Newsroom.

I had no idea who would show up at that first meeting. I had spent the previous week traversing McKeesport's steep hillsides informing neighbors that a writer's group was coming together in the old newsroom. The flyer I distributed inquired: "Do you have a story to tell?" Yes, they do have stories to tell. And, yes, there are people who want to hear their stories. Our first meeting attracted a wide range of backgrounds. From teenagers to senior citizens, they bonded over sharing the same community. A year and half later, the group remains diverse in life experiences.

Later that autumn, we organized the Mon Valley Photography Collective comprised of photography enthusiasts from around the region with different levels of experience. What they share is the strong belief in the power of images to inform and inspire change. You probably saw us documenting events such as McKeesport's annual fireworks

display and annual Salute to Santa Parade.

Writing and photography at its best can unite communities by telling stories that inspire a greater good. The pandemic has created more uncertainties and challenges for our group due to uneven resources and technology, but we have persevered. We know we are more powerful when we support each other. History has left its indelible marks on us, but in order to create a more equitable future, we know we need to drive the conversation.

Tube City Tales is a celebration of people, their experiences and reflections, and sometimes their achievements. I am very proud of all the incredible work our wonderful participants have created. They have taught me so much about what it means to live and work in the Mon Valley. Their honesty and willingness to share their lives with me has made me a better person.

We invite you to sit back and take in their stories. Then, please consider joining us to tell your own story.

Martha Rial

Project Manager, McKeesport Community Newsroom

It was such a pleasure to work with these Tube City Writers on their live storytelling event held in November of 2019, and I was happy to sign on for another six months and a new project. Our goal this time was a print anthology that, like the storytelling event, would make sure Mon Valley voices were heard despite the loss of their local paper, The Daily News, in 2015.

As we made plans for the anthology, none of us could have expected that our bi-weekly meetings would be interrupted by a global pandemic. Suddenly, in-person meetings were an impossibility, and we scrambled to adjust. Technology allowed us to continue our mission, which only became more obvious in its importance as our writers wrote and photographed a world drastically changed — first by COVID-19 and then by the protests challenging systemic racism in reaction to George Floyd's murder by police.

Where previously many of our writers told stories about the past (a father's beloved car; the birth of a child, now a teenager; or the rescue of an abused animal), now they told stories very much set in the present. This is important, considering

the loss of the Mon Valley's newspaper. In that vacuum, Tube City Writers, through their blog at the McKeesport Community Newsroom site, have supplied an ever-evolving view of history in the making, from the perspective of the Mon Valley's inhabitants. These stories range from the personally tragic to the publicly triumphant. But every story is similar in that these writers are providing history with an account of life in the Mon Valley during these strange times, when otherwise such coverage would be lost.

And here, with this print anthology, we celebrate these intrepid writers who've shared their lives and the lives of their beloved Valley with the world. Thank you for inspiring me, personally, with your candor, your vulnerability, and your hard work. Keep telling your stories. The world needs them. I know readers will enjoy learning about you and your home as much as I have.

Nicole Peeler

Tube City Writers facilitator

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Cover photograph by Vickie Babyak

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When I first gave you up it was incredibly hard. I pined away for you. I daydreamed about you ... a lot more than I cared to admit. Truthfully there were even a few days where I cried over the loss of you. I didn't think it would be so hard. I didn't realize how overly dependent, and incredibly necessary you were to my life.

You compliment things; events. You make people happy, and lift their spirits. You can be a source of joy at virtually any time of the day ... or even in the middle of the night if need be.

How could I go on without you? You would definitely need to be replaced. something to fill the deep, and seemingly endless void. As time goes on it gets surprisingly a little easier ... However it's always inconvenient to not be able to have you, but I just need to plan ahead most days. anticipate my needs.

You will still always surround me though dear friend. Haunting me and taunting me always, and forever. I love you, and I have grown to hate you.

Gluten, you are no longer a part of my life. We need to part ways.

by Jennifer McCalla

LETTING

GGO

GRAPPLING WITH AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY AND HOW IT RELATES TO MY IDENTITY

When I was a kid, I depended on my teachers to teach me everything that happened in the past. Then, I grew up a little and discovered there is too much history to fit in the few short years of my life I'm in school, so I accepted that we would only learn the important stuff.

That is when I noticed the problem. People who look like me are not a top priority in the "important stuff."

Most of the history I remember was American History. I memorized the main events: the European discovery of America, the taking of the land, the freedom from Britain, and the many wars, battles, injustices, and victories in between. Now that I am out of American history, there are

many things I know now reveal the origins of many ongoing problems in the black community, one of which is finding a community.

As children we are taught about how the slave trade started, what racism is, and how that has affected America and Americans to this day, but we are not taught much about the many countries of Africa or the countries that were mainly affected by the transatlantic slave trade like Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, and many more. These countries, where most African Americans are from, have great and rich cultures, languages, and histories to which we often don't even get to be introduced.

There are many common misconceptions about the

ancient people of Africa. Many different groups around the continent were advanced in medical research, metal work and many other areas of study, whereas other places in the world were still trying to figure things out. For example, there was the West African city of Gene where cataract removal surgery was a pretty common practice. In what is now Uganda and Rwanda, scholars were reported to have performed accurate and reliable c-sections in the 1800s, which suggest the practice was much older.

The Akan people of West Africa figured out how to immunize themselves to Smallpox, a sickness brought by the Europeans in the age of colonization and slave trade. A slave, Onesimus, in the U.S. told his

master, Cotton Mather, about this immunization process when a smallpox outbreak had happened. Mather used this information to gain fame and powerful positions. The slave had been recorded in the history books but when he tried to buy his freedom, he was erased from those records in 1717.

Last but certainly not least, historians were able to track down a member of the Haya people, who somehow were able to preserve the oral tradition of passing on lessons by generation. Through them we learned that they could build furnaces and smelting iron. They were able to reach temperatures of 3272°F, which was 200° hotter than any contemporary European device. The Haya

ORY DENTITY

by Nya O'Neal

people were making carbon steel for 2000 years, meaning they had this technology when the only other place that had this was Sri Lanka, which powered its smelting irons with monsoon winds.

At this point you might be thinking: what does all this information have to do with finding community? Well, for me personally, it has everything to do with it. All history has been about surviving, fighting and proving that African-Americans deserve acknowledgement for our contribution to the human race, but no one really took my view beyond that. At one point in time, we thrived without the oppression of the European rulers. For some this was easier to see because they knew exactly what country they

were descended from and were able to embrace that, but I was without that information. My family tree is a bit chaotic, so there are many options of what I could be but no exact people to which I belong.

Then, another issue that faced me was not knowing where I belonged in my own community of African-American people because I was always labeled as a “white black person” because of my use of large words and lack of slang or street knowledge. Something else I had to confront was my position in America. I had been taught that this country was built to put me at a disadvantage where history would repeat itself, and I would just be another Black woman in America barely surviving and

having to put my dreams aside in order to make ends meet - a story that many of us know too well. I felt alone, as I struggled to find my roots while also missing that community of support that I needed when facing this country head-on.

But now I know more. I know more about some of my possible origins, and I know more about the many unjust systems built into America and have found a community of people to support me and who I can support. We share information and build each other up and cheer each other on so we can not only survive but thrive.

There was always an eerie sense of comfort that came over me as soon as we drove up the rocky road leading to Grandma and Grandpa's. Great Grandma lived there as well, and would love to sit outside and let us comb her long silver and black hair. The smell of fresh baked bread and apple pie smothered the cool breeze. And then, there was nightfall. As I sat on Grandpa's lap on the front porch, we rocked in his favorite chair and stared into the quiet space beyond the driveway. I imagined the different beings that awaited out there.

Grandpa smoked a pipe with sweet smelling tobacco. As the white swirls swam across the sky and disappeared, I thought of how they would search out the wicked forest ahead and seize all those entities wishing to lurk upon us. Sensing my wandering mind, Grandpa pulled a huge knife out of his pocket, opened my hand, and showed me how to open it without saying a word. When I turned and looked up at him, he smiled and winked at me. We sat on the porch until Grandma called us for dessert. Grandpa took a deep breath and said, "Come on Babe." As we turned to walk inside, I took one last look at the forest. A figure was steadily approaching, but instead of being scared, I squeezed the knife in my hand and felt reassured.

THE DARKNESS

by Labeedah Hall



Fire in the Sky

Photograph by Maria Palmer

THE NEW NORMAL

By Kie McCrae

Picture this - you're an Ironman triathlete about to start a race filled with consecutive long-distance swimming, biking, and running. Stand on the shore of the ocean with the 1st wave of swimmers. Close your eyes and smell the ocean, the pleasant stench of your wetsuit and slick waterproof sunscreen. Squint your eyes over the horizon and visually map the miles you will swim. Let the cool breeze that is gently blowing in your direction raise your goosebumps and try to get loose enough to compete. Will there be seaweed brushing against your skin when you run into the water? Is there sea life that will graze your hands on the pull motion to freak you out? You feel anxious and your muscles begin to get tight, so you shake your sillies out, but gently so that you don't hit any of the hundreds of other athletic, lean bodies standing near you. There is at least a 10-yard sprint to the water and it's almost time for the horn. Bend your knees to prepare for the sprint. Take a deep breath and ...

Four months ago, I had a plan to pursue the coveted Ironman medal. Let me be clear about a few things first: 1) I hate to run with no ball, especially for "fun." 2) I also can't swim very well, as far as I'm concerned. 3) I am ridiculous enough to try just about anything for a cool medal.

To obtain this medal, and to do so honestly, would mean that I have conquered sports in a totally new way. I am confident that I can beat a person with a ball, of course, or with a helmet and pads, but I've never beaten a person with just my physically conditioned body. Hell, I don't think I've ever believed I needed to be in shape to beat anyone. So, I put together a plan that involved several races, increasing in distance for the year, with the goal of pursuing the beautiful Ironman medals the following year.

I went to sleep one day having hit all my February goals. Up at 6 a.m., I started training and eating better. I felt cleaner inside and it showed in my

output. Then the world broke. By March, my goals were shot. Gyms closed. We were told to stay inside. Society created an unnatural shortage of toilet paper and water. Bike shops closed. Sports shut down. No March Madness. Guess what else? Races got cancelled or postponed. Over time, my motivation waned even more. There are commercials on now that speak of us all adjusting to the "new normal" while we wait for a cure, savior, mutation, our last stand or whatever you believe. These commercials are supposed to be sensitive to our situation, I guess. Instead of coming off as sensitive, they fill me with rage. It is not normal to avoid contact with people you love. It is not normal to avoid your friends, to remain segregated, or to be forced to watch actual tv because ESPN has little to nothing to highlight. I reject this "normal" you speak of! When this is over, because it will at some point be over, races will resume. It's May now and 43 days ago I developed a routine to get back on track.

My "eat whatever and do nothing" lifestyle has probably set me back a month in training, but I can get back to it. My bike is on the trainer and I need to start running again. I'm still looking for that healthy eating motivation from February. That part isn't new, but it is absolutely normal. Let's try more normal things. Get up on time and do something productive. Make plans for your future. Find that fight inside you and get back to normal. Don't be new. New is not normal.

HELLO SIXTY

by Vickie Babyak

It was 61 degrees when I woke up on my 60th birthday last Friday. I wasn't expecting much considering we are in the middle of a global pandemic. I felt like I already had a birthday gift. Southwestern Pennsylvania began its yellow phase on my special day. It will take time to achieve normalcy, as people continue social distancing and wear face masks. Some businesses are opening from the shutdown but are required to have safety guidelines in place during COVID-19.

On this beautiful morning, I decided to treat myself by brewing a package of breakfast coffee blend from the Mother's Day gift my oldest daughter Trina sent me as well as eat one of the lemon muffins my middle daughter Holly baked for me.

I looked forward to wearing my heather grey birthday t-shirt emblazoned on the front: 2020, with toilet paper rolls instead of zeros, Hello

Sixty, with a face mask in place of the O, and quarantined. I considered my shirt perfect for the occasion.

I found dozens of photographs on the dining room table. Elyse, my youngest daughter, arranged them in the middle of the night. Images of my parents, grandparents, siblings, husband, three daughters and granddaughters tugged at my emotions. Tears welled up in my eyes and warmhearted memories flowed through my mind.

My husband ordered takeout food from Tillie's Restaurant when he arrived home from work. Our daughters planned a virtual surprise 60th birthday party which included a drive by parade and online video call later in the evening. I appreciated all the kind words and birthday wishes from friends and family. It was an amazing day. Best of all, I received framed photographs of my three granddaughters.

Sadly, Trina and my granddaughter Addy were not here. It's not the same when they are unable to participate in person. My husband and I wanted to visit them in Maryland during Easter, but the trip was canceled due to the virus.

It has been almost a year since we saw them, and it has been very difficult. Next opportunity we have, we want to go on a big family vacation. My granddaughters were old enough to appreciate each other's company on our last vacation. They found out they adore each other.

The girls and I miss our time together. As a grandmother, it's depressing not being with my grandchildren, but we are lucky to have modern day technology to help us stay connected.

Two of my granddaughters live nearby and came to visit since it was my birthday. It was like sunshine after the rain and a breath of fresh air to see them

play in the yard. We had not seen each other for weeks. We remained cautious by not hugging, kissing and keeping space between us. The oldest granddaughter is at the age of feeling too grown up for kisses, but still likes a hug. The younger one still enjoys a hug and kiss from Grandma. I remind her that I love her even though we can't hug. She understands because she is very wise for a six-year-old.

I hope we all stay healthy while scientists discover information and a vaccine for the novel coronavirus. When this is over, my granddaughters can expect a bear hug and a kiss on the forehead or cheek. Well, no kisses for the oldest. I respect her desire for maturity.

Always remember, you are braver than you believe, Stronger than you seem, and Smarter than you think.

-Unknown



Imogen and Bailey
Photograph by Vickie Babyak

GROWING OLD WITH **THE MCKEESPORT DAILY NEWS**

by Ed Boyko

Those growing up in McKeesport on Evans Street had easy access to the world and the events around us through The Daily News. My Dad would pick up the paper at Johnny Klucka's store on the way up the hill after his shift at National Tube.

Dad would focus on the Sports and the Obituaries pages to see if any friends had passed. Mom would check all the store ads: Kudlik's, for steaks; Balsamos: for groceries or Immel's, Jaison's, Cox's, or

Penney's for clothing, or to see what movie was playing at the Memorial Theatre or Capitol Theatre for something to do for the weekend or after church on Sunday afternoon. I always read the sports section and the funnies.

The Daily News was the source of information for the Mon Valley, covering topics such as church activities, respective men's and ladies' clubs and organizations as well as schedules for social and religious groups throughout

the valley. Church Mass and religious services schedules were always published in every Saturday edition.

In the spring and summer, the newspaper printed the schedule for the Daily News Baseball league. Eight teams, such as The McKeesport Tubers and Duquesne Zemps, (They discovered that their grandparents originated from Zemplinska, Slovakia thus the name..) played at fields in Renzie Park and other ballparks.

Several Major League teams often sent scouts to look for prospective players.

The Daily News is no longer a sponsor because the paper closed in December 2015, but the league continues to this day. The Daily News reported on all of the bowling groups, golf outings and all the local high school sports teams. My dad and I followed the news and comments from sport editor Mr. Luke Quay. Mr. Quay, the official scorer

for the Major League baseball games, played in Pittsburgh. He was the official who called the play when Roberto Clemente got his 3,000th career hit, a double into right center field.

Norm Wargo succeeded Quay and went on to cover all six Steelers Super Bowl wins. The most amazing story originating in McKeesport Swintayla “Swin” Marie Cash. She and her mother Cynthia lived in Harrison Village. When she was a little girl, her mom bought her a basketball. Her basketball skills blossomed and the rest is history. She helped The McKeesport Area High School Tigers win a WPIAL championship. She was recruited by University of Connecticut and went on to help them win two National Championships. She was drafted by the WNBA and played 15 seasons for the league. After that she helped the WNBA team from Chicago win a National title. A back injury cut short her active playing time, and she opted for retirement after a competitive 15 years. She currently serves as vice president of basketball operations and team development for the New Orleans Pelicans, the only female athlete to serve in such a capacity in the NBA. Her progress and career was followed by the Daily News.

Downtown Pittsburgh stores such as Kaufmann’s adver-

tised in the Daily News. My mother and I took the train on Sunday to Braddock to visit my baba (grandmother). Sometimes on Saturdays, my mother and I took the train to downtown Pittsburgh to shop at Kaufmann’s or Donahue’s Food store for their pastries and rye bread.

Around that time I got a Daily News paper route, so I technically

became an employee of the newspaper. I was in fifth grade and it kept me occupied every day after school. My area was Evans and Soles streets to the McKeesport Hospital driveway. I only made a nickel on each delivery, but I had fun and learned responsibility. And every so often on collection day, I got a dollar or two in tips.

I started high school at St. Peters Catholic School and I had to

give up my paper route. My after school time was taken up with algebra, Latin and other core subjects.

In the fall of 1962, I was admitted to Duquesne University, I tried commuting. But, it proved to be too burdensome and time consuming, I could not study or even read the Daily News on the rickety and drafty 56C streetcar.

I decided to go to a school where I could reside, so I enrolled in what is now known as Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio. I, as well as a few students with Mon-Valley roots received the Daily News, although it was day or two later.

Every historic event was covered in the Daily News. The Daily News no longer manages the baseball league although it is

still in existence and has retained the name. The train to Pittsburgh is gone.

The old Daily News building has been vacant until recent interest by Point Park University and other non profits to sponsor classes for youth and adults in computer skills and journalism. When one walks around the empty offices and shell of a hallowed building, it will be a major undertaking to revitalize the former activity. A few valiant and dedicated teachers are attempting to do just that.

The last straw that changed McKeesport forever was the closing of the Daily News.

“Those growing up in McKeesport on Evans Street had easy access to the world and the events around us through The Daily News.”

WHAT

are they teaching us about

AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY

in school?

by Calise Johnson

I'm starting to hear more people say, "-Oh, they don't teach that in school." We learn enough math, science, and reading, so is the only subject we're missing out on history? I feel as though the history provided to us in school isn't as accurate as they say it is and doesn't tell the whole truth (for example, Christopher Columbus being the first to discover America). I also feel that the history taught can be accurate sometimes but doesn't go in-depth as much as it should.

This is our history and we shouldn't pick and choose what people hear and know and see about certain topics like slavery. Our teachers should be providing us raw history that covers everything. I shouldn't have to take a separate course class specifically geared toward African-American history or to even learn an ounce.

Some may ask, "Why does history matter?" And to that I say it is important for everyone to know the real outcome of history - the whole truth and nothing but the truth along with the whole story. If we don't educate, then history will only repeat itself with different

scenarios but with the same background and issues. Everyone should feel welcomed and not feel like only half of their story is being told or that someone else is writing or controlling their history.

I interviewed my mom and asked her why she felt history is important. "History is important because we shouldn't pick and choose what we want people to know or learn," she said. "Everyone should know everything even if it's dark and wrong. That's what helps us from having history repeat. By educating the next generation hopefully they can do better than generations before them."

I also interviewed my friend Hannah, who feels that history isn't taken seriously and that we could all be doing better. "We shouldn't have to, but taking the time to learn history on our own can help," Hannah said. She feels that the African-American course available at our school shouldn't be a separate course. "It should be included in our normal everyday history class," she said. "Making sure everyone is aware and educated on all important dates in history can really open people's eyes more."

TRASH

TALK

by Jill Beiger Frederick

I take each piece of trash I see along the road personally. Every Coke can, cigarette pack, crumpled napkin, and Styrofoam container makes me grit my teeth and squint my eyes in disbelief. I carry a plastic bag on our dog walks each day - not for dog poo, mind you, but to pick up all the trash I see.

Is everyone going to a place that does not have a garbage

can? Is there some building or business they are visiting that is somehow not producing any trash and requires no garbage cans? Can they not throw it away at their house?

And what makes people feel entitled to toss their trash out the window? Who gave them the pass to make the roadside their personal litter collection area?

As I walk along with my dogs and pick up trash along our street, people honk and yell "Thanks!"

When people shout their thanks, I can't help but think: "There's so much trash out here. You must have thrown something too."

The Autistic Artist

By Maria Palmer

My life has been and always is a creative one. I guess you could say it's been a part of me even before I was born. I love being creative whether it is through music, dance, photography or art. Creativity is my way to express myself. What made me come into the light was happiness, hope and positivity. What I learned about my family history made me rethink my life in a new light. My family made me understand why I love being creative so much because of my great uncle whose music-loving footsteps we followed. I became the fourth or fifth generation to do music growing up. In this picture are all the artistic things that I have brought in myself.



Autistic Artist
photograph by Maria Palmer

The only thing that is not in this picture is my sister's flute, which I've returned to her. I played the flute from 4th grade at Mt. Vernon Elementary School in Elizabeth Township until 7th grade at Elizabeth Forward Middle School. I moved from Elizabeth to McKeesport where I continued playing flute at Founders Hall Middle School until high school graduation. It was hers before it was mine. I still play flute once a year when the High School Marching Band holds their annual Alumni event, where past graduates get to join the band for the national and school anthems, as well as pep tunes at one of the home football games.

I was the fourth or fifth generation in my family to follow in my family's musical footsteps. My great uncle was the first one to play multiple instruments. My mom sang in a church choir and played trumpet. My elder sister played the flute in college and my older brother played trumpet. As for me, I stuck with my mom's and my sister's musical talent choir and flute. I continue to enjoy music by singing and listening. Music wasn't the only thing that brought me into the light. As you can see in my photograph, I love art. I love to draw, paint and photograph. In fact, my

photography group turned photography into art for me. I drew Pokémon from watching drawing tutorials on YouTube and paintings from Painting with a Twist.

I have high functioning autism. When I get inspired to do creative stuff, it helps me to express myself. I've also been writing stories and poetry about things that I hear, see or feel. My poetry has opened up what was hiding inside me for a long time. I still continue to write, especially stories. I've been inspired to write stories since my first serious book that I read and continued reading the Harry Potter series. J.K. Rowling inspired me to become a writer someday.

I find myself relating in so many ways with other people who had or have autism. In music, I find myself relating to Mozart, in poetry, to Emily Dickinson, in writing to Hans Christian Andersen who wrote stories like The Little Mermaid and Lewis Carroll who wrote Alice in Wonderland. Through art I relate to Michelangelo and Pittsburgh native Andy Warhol.

When I studied about people with autism, I found out that one of our president Thomas Jefferson and movie director

Tim Burton were autistic. It is because of these people that I'm no longer ashamed of being autistic. I even got to see Trolls 2: World Tour, where they talked about differences.

These differences explain how to accept more than one genre of music and how more than one kind of music can come together to create harmony. I was happy that it was included in their sequel. Trolls 2 gave an example to different genes to how there are four different sensors for autistic people who are sensory sensitive. The four sensory sensitivities are light (who needs sunglasses), vision (who needs magnifying glass), hearing (who needs soundproof headphones), and touch (who wears winter gloves all the time).

I also like being a crafty person. I do crafts to keep me busy during my spare time. I included my yarn projects in this picture because one of my talents is a combination of crocheting and knitting. I realized in this picture is all my artwork, my crafts and all my differences who make me who I am. My life is filled with so much creativity that my mind grew to love doing puzzles and that is what I also put in this picture. I've got my two out

of my four kinds of puzzles that I put together to show that puzzles can be creative as well my mind likes to be challenged. I did challenge it so many times but didn't think my mind would stay focused when it did when it came to be creative. I am proud of all of it and all it has brought into my world. I hope others will enjoy seeing my love of art, music, writing and crafts for hope, love, acceptance, peace and culture. All of my differences come together as one.

A Journey Towards Inner and Outer Compassion

By Aviva Gersovitch

The sticky heat of late summer in Southern Virginia was beginning to fade in the cool evening breeze by the water, to be replaced with the crackling dry heat of a raging bonfire. I sat in a circle around its dancing light with 50 other young environmental activists. We had met less than a week ago but you would never know it by the depth of connection, warm hugs and heartfelt conversations we shared like old friends, kindred spirits united in care for the Earth. Our bare feet kissed the ground, and a sense of magic permeated the air in the intimate community on the old Girl Scout campgrounds where Sprog (The Sierra Club's summer grassroots activist training) was being held.

The quiet hush of evening fell over us as the flames reflected in our shining eyes. The group invited us to share our "Green Fire", the passion and purpose that fuels our inner flame and commitment to the environmental movement. I shared about one of the winters of my life, a time of transformative inner reflection

and healing where I would emerge like a bear from her den, transformed with a new life and vitality inside me. This restorative time would lead to me going vegan, lighting a fire of passion and activism that sometimes burned so bright that it drained me. My journey has been to learn to nourish this fire but also to know when to temper it, a crackling of compassion for both self and other.

Just under two years prior, during the winter of 2014, my sophomore year of undergrad at Case Western Reserve University, I made a decision that would forever alter the course of my life. I had entered college as a bright-eyed freshman eager to get involved and discover new passions. One of the first things I did was join the student sustainability council, which springboarded my journey into environmental activism. I felt galvanized and inspired to live my life more in alignment with the Earth. I delved into research on the harms of bottled water, joined the fossil fuel divestment movement, became known as the "trash

girl" for constantly volunteering to stand by trash cans at events around campus to sort out recyclables from compostables from what went to the landfill. I also combed the beaches of Lake Erie for plastic and got stopped by security for dumpster diving. My parents were certainly dumbfounded when I came home from college a nouveau-hippie.

You can't get very far in the environmental movement without hearing about the impact of factory farming. This was in the back of my mind as I learned more about sustainability and about how I could do my part in combating climate change. However, as a college student who had grown up in a strictly no-junk food household, I was busy enjoying all you can eat buffets of double cheeseburgers, pizza, and chicken nuggets.

When I first read the definition of veganism, it seemed both restrictive and extreme, which was something that I actively wanted to avoid having grown up in that type of environment. The tipping point for me came

as a total mindset shift, when I realized that I was participating in a system that was unwell, and that I was unwell. I put my foot down and decided to shake everything up.

I had struggled with mental illness and some health issues through the end of high school and early in college, and I used the blogging platform Tumblr as a coping outlet. However, I was realizing that it had become more of a de-motivational tool than a motivational one. The negativity became a feedback loop where I would use it to confirm and reinforce what I was feeling, keeping me stuck in sadness. As I was becoming more invested in the environmental movement, I was slowly starting to follow more blogs that were focused on these topics instead, and many of them also discussed spirituality, Buddhist philosophy, and compassion for self and others. Two things happened in quick succession that would forever alter the course of my life.

First, I stumbled upon a quote: "All beings tremble before violence. All love life. All fear

death. See yourself in others. Then whom can you hurt?" I was shaken as I realized that by eating chicken nuggets, hamburgers, and salmon, I was harming an actual living being who felt, cared, and hurt just like me. I decided I would no longer eat meat that day, in November of 2014. Second, less than a month later, I saw a video of sheep in a wool farm being brutally beaten with the shears that I had been led to believe were used to painlessly and gently take off excess wool. I sobbed my heart out, and from that day forward I realized that it wasn't veganism that was extreme. It was the industries we've created that are so callous, cruel, inhumane, and exploitative. After that moment, I have never once looked at a piece of cheese, a lobster, or a jar of honey again as food, nor a wool blanket or a silk pillowcase without seeing the violence and the hurt that humans are capable of.

Something shifted within me. Whereas before I never made the connection, now I am floored looking into the eyes of animals – cows, horses, cats, chickens. I feel a depth of connection and an inner sense of presence – a deep sureness that something, no, someone, is there with me, who maybe doesn't have the same level of understanding as me, but who is looking at me just as

I am looking at them. After a time, I even found this same connection with insects who had once largely frightened me and who I would usually squish if one found its way into my room. Now, I gaze into their strange little eyes and see the same sense of aliveness as is easy to find in a hamster or dolphin.

Armed with my newfound knowledge and perspective, I dove into animal rights and environmental activism. I woke up at the crack of dawn to bear witness to pigs and cows being brought to slaughter in trucks, begging for one last drop of water. I stood shoulder to shoulder with activists from around the country blocking traffic by a meat market to make people stop and think about what has become commonplace.

I was filled with a sense of outrage and injustice and also disillusionment that so many people I deeply loved and respected were perpetuating systems of cruelty and were unwilling to look more deeply at these issues. As a fiery and intense person, I threw myself wholeheartedly into causes and found that I tended to burn myself out due to being so desirous of helping and making a difference, of standing up against injustice.

Now, reflecting back on my



Magnolia Blossoms

Photograph by Jennifer McCalla

path, it has been a slow and arduous journey to learn how to implement self-compassion, whereas it's so easy for me to extend compassion to others. I had to forgive myself for the lack of compassion I have shown myself in the past, and I have slowly started to realize that sometimes the best way to be an activist, to keep one's own green fire burning and to create a more compassionate world, starts from within.

If I truly want to commit to a lifestyle of ethics, non-violence,

wellness, and justice, I have realized that I must see myself as worthy of those same principles. I have become rewilded in a way, more connected to the Earth, to my roots, and to myself in relation to others. I move through the cycles of restful winter, of budding spring, of passionate summer, of contemplative autumn. Each day is another step on this slow unfolding, this ongoing and winding journey of self-realization and compassion for all.

**Pondering race
during the par**

ism ndemic

by Dahnyl Champine

Why does it matter what shade of color you are? When I choose my friends, it's not because they are black or white. What should matter is if you are smart or kind. People come in all different shades of colors. They should be judged by their intelligence and not because they're different.

I never understood what discrimination was until we had to quarantine. I remember my mom talking about George Floyd getting killed. I felt scared, mad, and afraid. The first thing I did was go to the internet. I wanted to see for myself why my mom was so sad. I saw them kill him because he was black, and I'm black too. I imagined this happening to me. I wondered,

if I was walking down the street, would the police kill me for being black?

In conclusion, I don't know why people discriminate, but I can say it is ugly to have those feelings about people you don't know. I don't care if a person is yellow, all that matters is, are they a good friend to me and the people around them. If I am ever discriminated against I don't know how I would handle it. It's a scary situation. If I speak up, will something happen to me?



Mask Required

Photograph by Aviva Gersovitch

Par

When I first heard about the pandemic, I went to my trusty dictionary to learn what this word meant. The word pandemic means something affecting an exceedingly high proportion of the population (of a country or an area) like a disease.

At the time, when we first heard of it, it was called Coronavirus. We knew to be wary of sneezers and coughers and that people were to use social distancing which was needed to stop the spread of disease.

After looking at the news, I realized it not only affected cities but also states and even countries. People were frightened and a little skeptical about touching everything: door handles, shopping carts, and soap dispensers. Hand sanitizer was suddenly a necessity and so were masks. We wore them over our mouths and noses to prevent the spread of the virus. I saw blue ones and black ones,

ndemic

by Colette Funches

homemade ones and store-bought ones. Some looked like World War II gas masks.

People wore blue plastic gloves in the stores and even while driving. We were all determined not to let this hidden thing get the best of us. We listened to the mounting death tolls in cities. I saw six newly-dug grave sites near one city's hospital, with trucks waiting to carry as many dead bodies as could fit inside. We saw our first line of defense - the doctors and nurses worn out and bone tired but still fighting to save the lives of the sick. All hospital staff wore masks and some even line danced in the hospitals to stay awake after long hours and shifts. Racing one step ahead of death themselves. The virus was contagious and we cheered them on.

Hospitals worried about lack of supplies like masks, testing kits, ventilators, beds - all the

things we just assume would always be there.

If you must go to a store for necessary items, stores limited the number of people admitted into a store, and you had to stand six feet behind the person in front of you. Floors were marked with yellow and black stripes. This was social distancing needed to stop the spread of the disease.

I went to stores with no bread, no toilet paper (Good heavens!) no paper towels, no bags of potatoes and store shelves empty of some foods. Stores had to tell people to buy only one or two packages of toilet paper. Leave some for others - for Pete's sake!

The schools closed for classes in March, April and May because of the virus, but they still gave out instructional packets for diligent students and determined parents. They still wanted their children to learn and so did

the teachers and volunteers such as myself. At the height of the pandemic I volunteered at a school, so students could receive their instructional packets. We were not thinking of ourselves, just the students.

But in the neighborhoods I did not see any children; everyone was at home. Graduates donned caps with tassels and gowns but were not hearing the "make you cry" graduation march song. Parents took pictures and then promptly closed their doors and celebrated inside their homes with congratulations posters on doors, front lawns and windows. Adults were also quarantined at home.

Stay at home orders hit many cities, jobs were lost, and many businesses were closed, both big and small. And the government came to the rescue with stimulus checks. It was a nice tidy sum of money \$1200 to tide over those persons who worried

about the loss of income. This kind of caring on the part of the government allowed many people to pay bills and the rent. Restaurants were allowed to do curbside pickup or take-out orders, but no one could eat inside.

Churches were closed. I thought, don't we really need God now with so many being sick and dying? People with their masks on nodded hello, instead of speaking. In foreign countries like Spain and Italy, their streets were completely empty of cars and people. Here I learned that this great country of ours turned its attention to what matters most — the people.

America, you are still strong. Please stay that way. Stay healthy and stay safe.

The House that Happy Built

by Jim Busch

More people have died in my bedroom than met their demise at the Bates Motel. Unlike Norman Bates' guests, the people who passed from life in my home passed away peacefully. In the very spot where I lay my head each night, my wife's parents and grandparents exited this world the way they lived it: surrounded by their loving family.

Our home is a family home in every sense of the word. It is situated on land that has been in the family for more than 200 years. Over the years the original farm was broken up and distributed to members of the family. Jesse and Edna Myers, my wife, Glenda's, grandparents, received our property as a wedding gift shortly before World War One. Originally from Western Maryland, Jesse joined the mass migration of country people to gritty, grimy, bustling Pittsburgh in search of work. In time, he took up the machinist trade, married Edna Stewart and started a family. A personable and ever pleasant man, Jesse's childhood friends began calling him "Happy," a name that stuck with him throughout his life.

Despite his delightful nickname, Jesse Myers' life was not always a happy or an easy one. Jesse worked hard for his family until he was involved in a deadly industrial accident. One of his shop-mates accidentally took hold of a high voltage line. Jesse tried to pull the man free, but the voltage surged straight through his buddy's body into his. A third man grabbed Jesse and he too became part of the painful circuit. When the power was finally cut off, Jesse's two buddies had died, and the incident left Jesse severely burned. His physical wounds healed, but the damage to his nervous system took much longer to recover. The doctors weren't sure if it was the electrical surge, his friends' deaths or a combination of the two, but Jesse suffered a "nervous breakdown." In addition to his psychological problems, Jesse faced financial ruin. In those days before worker's compensation, Jesse was given a fruit basket and summarily fired from his job. Jesse and Edna had three children by this time. The young family only survived through the kindness of Edna's family and the fruits of Jesse's large garden.

In the spring of 1927, Jesse had no money, a serious nervous condition and a growing family. The only thing Jesse and Edna owned was the slice of worthless overgrown sheep pasture they had received on their wedding day. Most people would have thrown in the towel, but Happy Myers decided to build a house. With more optimism than carpentry skill, he borrowed a handful of tools and began to clear the land. Every day he would walk down the hill with his wheelbarrow to scrounge building materials. Like a robin in the spring, he gathered all sorts of materials to build his "nest." He collected stones from creek banks, bricks from decrepit buildings and packing crates from outside the railroad freight station. He dug a foundation pit and built walls with whatever he had gathered the day before.

Our basement walls still contain sections made of stone, brick and block in random patterns. He followed the same practice in erecting the walls. Before I painted the basement ceiling, many of the boards featured the stenciled addresses used

to deliver the Railway Express crates from which they came. He installed second-hand windows and doors and covered it with a tar paper roof paid for by doing odd jobs. In building the little house, Jesse also rebuilt his shattered nerves and his hopes for the future. The family moved into the semi-finished home in the fall of 1927.

Originally the house had just two rooms, a large bedroom and a combination kitchen/living area. The plumbing was an outhouse in the backyard.

Water came from a pitcher pump and a brick lined cistern outside the backdoor. As time and finances allowed, he improved the little house. Happy added another small bedroom and a kitchen. He finally scraped together the cash to hook on to the gas line and the original wood burning stove was replaced by a gas range and a "Warm Morning" gas heater. The house was electrified in the 1930's and finally got indoor plumbing after World War Two. For some reason, Jesse never thought to include closets in his architectural design for the house.

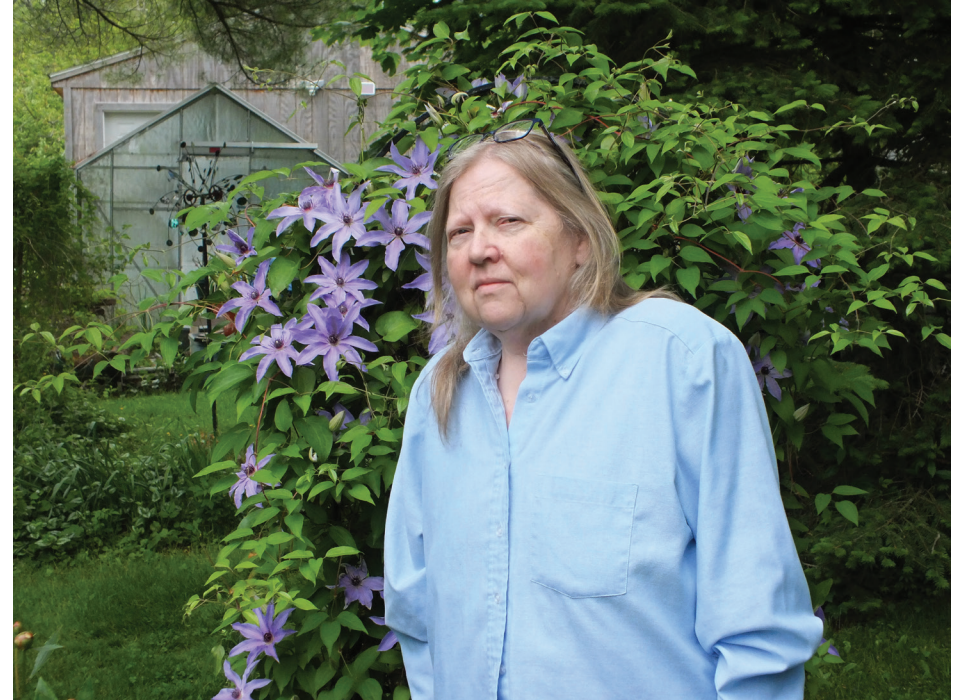
Though the little 750-square foot home would easily fit inside the great room of today's McMansions, Happy and Edna raised three children there. They were good people and never turned anyone away from their door or their table. At times during the great depression, the house sheltered as many as seventeen family members. Edna served up simple but filling meals straight from Happy's large garden.

My wife's mother and father, John and Eleanor, moved in after the war. John had seen a great deal of action during the war and had trouble adjusting to peacetime. The young couple moved in "just till we get on our feet," and remained in the little house for the rest of their lives. Jesse helped his son-in-law get his life together and Edna helped her daughter, Eleanor, to care for her twin daughters born in 1947 and for my wife when she came along. The little house now housed seven people in cramped but loving quarters. Jesse who loved singing sentimental ballads and old hymns had to endure Elvis Presley and Janis Joplin records on the stereo. He also had to endure the loss of his wife and his own declining health.

My wife and I were expecting our first child when Jesse was diagnosed with terminal cancer. We promised him that if we had a boy we would name him Jesse. Jesse joked that we were just telling him that because we knew he wouldn't be around to check up on us. I think he willed himself to live long enough to hold us to our promise. The last picture we have of Happy Myers is him in a wheelchair holding his great grandson Jesse with a big smile on his face.

A few years later, during the recession of the 1970's, I was out of work so my wife and I with two kids in tow moved in with my in-laws. When we told them the arrangement was just until "we could get our feet on the ground," John and Eleanor just smiled. Our children grew up and her parents grew old and passed away in the little house and we are still here.

I think the spirit of "Happy Myers" radiates from every brick, board and nail in the house he built. Six people from three generations living in a tiny house with no closets and one bathroom seems like a recipe for disaster, but somehow we made it work. We all helped and loved one another. Though my children complained about



Glenda

Photograph by Jim Busch

the cramped quarters and lack of privacy, I think they've come to appreciate what they had growing up.

Today just my wife and I live in the little house, but we are never really alone. We are surrounded by the ghosts of all the people who lived and loved here. My wife still bakes her grandmother's cinnamon rolls in Edna's kitchen. Our yard is shaded by the trees Jesse planted. Every room is filled with tangible memories

of my in-laws. We don't talk about it much, but I know that when we sit down for a quiet dinner we both still hear the old commotion, the squabbling, and the laughter. Fortunately all of our ghosts are of the Casper variety, very friendly. I've never been convinced that our spirits linger here on earth when we pass, but I do know that the joy my wife's grandfather brought to everyone he touched lives on in the house that Happy built.

BIOS

Aviva Gersovitch (she/her) is passionate about social change, dismantling oppression, and building regenerative alternatives to exploitative systems. She graduated Magna Cum Laude from Case Western Reserve University with degrees in cognitive science and psychology in 2017, followed by receiving a Master's of Social Science Administration and a Master's of Nonprofit Organizations in 2019. While in school, she dove into environmental and vegan activism and is involved professionally as the Administration Manager with IN VEGANS WE TRUST, a new global directory connecting vegan businesses with vegan individuals. She also is a business development and grant writing intern with Behavior Technologies, a health-tech startup in Pittsburgh. She lives in McKeesport.

Calise Johnson is a junior at McKeesport Area High School. She has been playing soccer for her school team, as well as other teams, since she was six years old. Calise is also a violinist who loves to perform and connect with her friends through music. When she has free time, which is rare due to her busy schedule, she likes to watch Netflix. Calise plans to study physical therapy at Edinboro University.

Colette Funches lives in McKeesport and is a founding member of Tube City Writers. She is a substitute teacher with the Pittsburgh Public Schools and a dedicated volunteer for Oasis Tutoring program. Colette is also a member of Mon Yough Chorale of White Oak and has performed with McKeesport Little Theater.

Dahnayl Champine lives in Braddock and is an eighth grader at Propel East. His friends call him "D" for short. He plays basketball and has a Yorkshire Terrier named Ricardo. Math, band and gym are his favorite subjects. Dahnayl plays saxophone and loves to DJ. He wants to learn about the music industry in college and become a professional DJ so he can create beats for rappers and singers. He is inspired by his sixth grade mentor Mr. Eastwood who helped him get through some tough situations.

Ed Boyko grew up in McKeesport. He attended St. Peters High School, served in the U.S. Navy and later earned his degree at College of Steubenville. Ed has worked numerous jobs including teaching elementary school students at St Joseph's, working as "weigher" at U.S. Steel's National Tube Works and selling World Books where he became their top salesman in Western Pennsylvania. For 25 years, he was a probation officer for Allegheny County. Ed has three adult sons and five grandchildren. He lives with his beautiful wife, Phyllis, in Glassport.

Jennifer McCalla is a native of Duquesne. She lives in West Mifflin with her husband, Jim, her teenage daughter, Ashley, and her spunky Chihuahua, Tequila. Jennifer has an associate degree in Commercial Art from CCAC. She has been an avid photographer ever since she started taking photographs at 10 years old. Her favorite subjects to photograph include nature, animals and her family. She also loves art, kayaking and cooking, and you can always find her listening to music.

Jill Beiger Frederick is a marketer, animal lover, yoga enthusiast, and outdoor adventurer. She attended Harvard on the Mon, also known as California University of Pennsylvania. She built her professional career at Kennywood Entertainment, The Meadows Racetrack and Casino, Nicholson Construction Company, and most recently, RoadBotics. She and her husband, Russ, enjoy traveling and hiking with their two dogs, Franklin and Hazel. As a Mon Valley native growing up, and now making her home in Elizabeth, Jill appreciate this opportunity to write and share right in her backyard.

Jim Busch is a freelance writer, journalist and public speaker. He writes a monthly magazine column and contributes to several local newspapers. Jim has published a number of memoir and short stories in the Loyalhanna Review and has won the Ligonier Valley Writers' flash fiction contest four times. He is retired from the newspaper industry and lives in White Oak with his wife and proofreader, Glenda.

Kie McCrae was an AmeriCorps KEYS (Knowledge to Empower Youth to Success) Member working with the McKeesport Library during her time with the Tube City. She considers herself the International Director of Fun and an extroverted introvert. End game - more play, less work.

Labeehah Hall is an athlete, poet, an OIF/OEF Army veteran, and foodie who writes about her experiences in the military, and occasional reviews on Yelp. Aside from traveling, and taking photographs, Labeehah enjoys watching Hallmark and Lifetime channels, as well as kitten videos on YouTube. Her first novel; Bittersweet: A closer look at the war within, debuts in 2020. After years of living/traveling in Europe and other countries, she now makes her home in Western Pennsylvania. To find out more about Labeehah, follow her on Instagram @mshall405.

Maria Palmer grew up in Elizabeth and is a graduate of McKeesport Area High School. She loves volunteering at Carnegie Science Center. Her love of cartoons and movies have led to roles as an extra in movies and television. Maria is a creative person who writes poetry and stories, crochets, and plays music. She is also a proud autistic geek who loves Pokémon, which was created by Satoshi Tajiri, who also lives with ASD.

Nya O'Neal is a junior McKeesport Area High School. She has been working with YouthCAST since 2018. She member of McKeesport High School Marching Band color guard. She enjoys hanging out with friends and family, drawing, writing, and taking photographs. She is also a foodie. Nya wants to study English in college and pursue a career in writing.

Vickie Babyak was born and raised in McKeesport. She is a graduate of the McKeesport Area High School and earned an associate degree in Visual Communication from the Art Institute of Pittsburgh. Vickie has worked as a paraprofessional for McKeesport Area School District for 10 years. She is active in the arts community and a contributing photographer to Tube City Almanac. A devoted wife, mother, and grandmother, she lives in Dravosburg with her husband Bob.

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