

CONNECTION

Reston ♦ Oak Hill Herndon ♦ Chantilly ♦ CENTRE VIEW

'Movies Under the Stars' in Herndon

NEWS, PAGE 4

Woodland Park Crossing hosts 'Movies Under the Stars,' a series of Friday evening family-friendly films.



'We Hear Things We Never Want to Hear'

NEWS, PAGE 3

As Federal Benefits Drop Food Insecurity Escalates

NEWS, PAGE 5

CLASSIFIEDS, PAGE 6

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Braddock Road and Old Lee Road Safety and Operational Improvements Study Fairfax County

Virtual Public Information Meeting

**Wednesday, September 30, 2020
7 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.**

www.virginiadot.org/braddockandoldlee

Find out about a study assessing potential safety and operational improvements at the intersection of Braddock Road (Route 620) and Old Lee Road, and the S-curve on Braddock Road between Pleasant Valley Road and Old Lee Road. The concepts being studied include realignment of the S-curve and intersection enhancements at Braddock Road and Old Lee Road such as turn lanes and innovative intersection improvements.

The meeting will be held as a *virtual/online* meeting. It is the second public information meeting on the study, the first was held February 13, 2020. Information for accessing and participating in the virtual meeting will be posted on the project website (www.virginiadot.org/braddockandoldlee).

The VDOT project team will make a presentation beginning at 7 p.m. and be available to answer questions after the presentation until 8:30 p.m.

Review project information and meeting details on the VDOT project website or during business hours at VDOT's Northern Virginia District Office, 4975 Alliance Drive, Fairfax, VA 22030. Please call ahead at 703-259-2239 or TTY/TDD 711 to make an appointment with appropriate personnel.

Give your comments after the presentation, submit your written comments by **October 12, 2020** via the project website, by mail to Mr. Andrew Beacher, P.E., Virginia Department of Transportation, 4975 Alliance Drive, Fairfax, VA 22030 or email meetingcomments@VDOT.virginia.gov. Please reference "Braddock Road and Old Lee Road Safety and Operational Improvements Study" in the subject line.

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COMMENTARY

No More Excuses

BY KENNETH R. "KEN" PLUM
STATE DELEGATE (D-36)



The most important election of my lifetime is coming up on November 3, and I am not even on the ballot! It is likely the most important election in your lifetime as well. Yet, if past practices hold true, we will in the United States have one of the lowest voter participation rates in the world. We simply cannot have people deciding to stay home when the future of our basic form of government may be at stake. (No, I am not overstating the seriousness of what we are facing this election day!)

There are no good excuses for not voting. As an editorial last week in the Washington Post stated, "Virginia has gone from laggard to leader in making it easy to vote." You can vote on Election Day November 3 at your usual polling place following the rules of the pandemic of wearing a face mask and keeping social distance. Alternatively, you can vote early at designated locations and times, or you can cast an absentee ballot with no excuse needed by postage-paid mail or dropped in designated ballot drop boxes. All this begins on September 18. Details are available at <https://www.elections.virginia.gov/casting-a-ballot/>.

Historically Virginia has been a laggard in making it easy and convenient to vote. In fact, most voting laws in the past had the intention of making it difficult for most and impossible for some to vote. After the Civil War and Reconstruction, white supremacists who took

control of the government passed laws with the publicly announced purpose of keeping Black people from voting. Some poor whites met the same fate. Virginia had the lowest rate of voter registration and participation in the country and the world with these laws that were part of the Jim Crow movement.

The first challenges in voting in Virginia in the past was getting yourself registered, if you could find the voter registrar who was part of the governing machine and

not readily accessible. Registration was by a blank sheet process whereby you were required to supply on a blank sheet seven specific pieces of information exactly in the order they were required in the state constitution. Stories abound about college-educated Black or progressive persons who could not pass the literacy test to vote because of the ways the requirements were manipulated.

Once registered to vote in the Virginia of the past you were required to pay a poll tax to cast your ballot. The \$1.50 was a problem for some, but the greater problem was remembering and meeting the requirement of paying the tax at least three years in a row six months before the election. Only the party faithful received a reminder.

See why I say there is no excuse for not voting this year?! It could not be easier. Make sure that you, your friends and neighbors are registered, in person or online, by the deadline of October 13. Make a plan to vote that you will keep: vote early in-person or by absentee ballot or on election day. No excuses!



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'We Hear Things We Never Want to Hear'

What it's like being a Fairfax County dispatcher.

BY BONNIE HOBBS
THE CONNECTION

In times of crisis, dispatchers are a lifeline between callers needing help and the first responders who can provide it. And two Fairfax County dispatchers – Public Safety Communicators Marie Keith and Jennifer Heflin – recently explained their jobs to the Sully District Police Station's Citizens Advisory Committee.

"Everyone starts out as a call-taker," said Keith. "And as they get better, they can ask to be trained as a fire or police dispatcher. Our motto is, 'Call if you can; but if you can't talk and need to stay quiet, then text us.' But know your location."

This summer, the call center transitioned to AT&T's Next Generation 911, an easily adaptable, advanced 911 platform resulting in more-accurate call routing and reduced response times. And eventually, it'll be able to receive callers' streaming media and photos, too.

"We answer 95 percent of our calls within 10 seconds," said Keith. "The only time there's a delay is when there's a really big event – such as when a tractor-trailer and five cars were on fire after a crash on I-66 – and everyone is calling us at once. Several of our people are bilingual, and we can get interpreters. But these calls also take longer."

Keith said landlines provide the best information, although cell phones are improving. But, she said, "We still rely on callers to give us their address. Just because we're asking questions doesn't mean



BONNIE HOBBS/THE CONNECTION

(From left) are Fairfax County Public Safety Communicators Marie Keith and Jennifer Heflin with 911 peer-support dog, Sully.

we're not sending you help. We need your information, especially in a medical situation."

Besides, said Heflin, "If you call from a cell phone – not from your home – and just say, 'Help,' and hang up, we have no idea where you are. And you can't send pictures or video to 911, but we're working on that technology." The county's new system will enable it to receive information from Smart-

watches, fire and burglar alarms and car sensors, as well.

Meanwhile, she said, "If you're in a high-rise building, we can't tell what floor you're on, unless you tell us. But we're trained to hear things in the background and understand your tone of voice [to know if you're in danger]."

"As long as you can communicate and let us know you have an emergency, we can try to help you," added Keith. "You can even call and say you're ordering a pizza. And when we tell you you've reached 911, you can repeat what you said – and we'll understand you're in trouble and can't talk."

THE COUNTY has 157 dispatcher positions on four squads – two day and two night – working two days and off three days, in 12-1/2-hour shifts. "We're always there, including weekends, holidays and snow days," said Keith. About 40 people are working at a time, including 11 call takers, plus other staffers. They each receive 12 weeks' classroom training and six to 12 weeks' on-the-job training. They must also be able to multitask, prioritize and make quick decisions about who needs to respond and where.

Dispatchers answer calls via their headsets and then direct them via keypad to the best entity to help the caller. "Our shifts are split between being on the phone and on the police radio or fire dispatch," said Keith. "Supervisors make sure we're doing our job right. And with more training, dispatchers can become call-taker trainers and hostage and crisis negotiators."

She and Heflin handle calls involving both the Fair Oaks and Sully police districts, plus county police headquarters and the police helicopter. So it's critical that they're able to

prioritize things, especially during life-and-death emergencies.

They're also trained and certified in Emergency Medical Dispatch. For example, said Keith, "I can instruct you in stopping bleeding, giving CPR or doing the Heimlich maneuver before the ambulance gets there. And we're doing screening for coronavirus to keep our first responders safe, as well."

Heflin said they even have a script to read for specific situations, such as childbirth. And keeping the caller calm helps everyone.

"Dispatchers deal with a lot of calls and can't mentally prepare for them in advance," added Keith. "We hear things we never want to hear – and we sometimes hear the last words someone speaks."

As a result, Heflin helped establish a new, peer-support team for the dispatchers. "In August 2018, I took a call from a 15-year-old girl shot twice in the chest by her mother – and her 5-year-old sister was dead in the other room," said Heflin. "So I had some serious issues to work with after that, and I wanted others dealing with these things to be able to get help."

She then rebuilt the peer-support team, including K9 Sully, who stays with her. "I work with all four squads for interaction and training with Sully," explained Heflin. "So we have several initiatives to make sure we're all OK. I'm getting closure with this program, and Marie and I created a team that everyone can go to when they need help."

"The peer-support team has been really great," said Keith. So besides coming to the aid of callers in need, she said, "We can help other dispatchers after particularly tough calls."

THE 911 call center is in the McConnell Public Safety and Transportation Operations Center on West Ox Road in Fairfax. For more information – including how to become a dispatcher – go to <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/911/>.

AREA ROUNDUPS

Upcoming Stuff the Bus Events

COVID-19 has increased the need for food in the local area, so Stuff the Bus is responding to the demand. On Saturday, Sept. 12 and Sept. 26, Fastran buses will be parked at the following locations from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. to collect food donations:

*Sully District Governmental Center, 4900 Stonecroft Blvd. in Chantilly; and *Centreville Regional Library, 14200 St. Germain Drive in Centreville.

Free COVID-19 Testing on Tuesdays

In partnership with the Centreville Labor Resource Center, Healthworks for Northern Virginia is offering free COVID-19 testing every Tuesday, from 8-10 a.m. for walk-ins, and 10 a.m.-4 p.m. by appointment only. Loca-

tion: 5944 Centreville Crest Lane in Centreville. Testing is available to everyone, and people don't need to have symptoms to request a test. To make an appointment, call 703-443-2000 and select option 1.3

Public Hearing on Truck Ban

The Fairfax County Board of Supervisors will hold a public hearing on reinstating the through-truck ban on Bull Run Post Office Road in Centreville. Trucks would be prohibited from traveling on this road between Route 29 in Fairfax County and Braddock Road in Loudoun County.

Centreville Route 28 Drivers, Beware

As part of VDOT's I-66 Outside the Beltway project, drivers on Route 28 north and south in Centreville – be-

tween the E.C. Lawrence Park athletic fields and Route 29 – need to be extra alert. Through this Friday, Sept. 11, from 9 p.m.-5 a.m., Routes 28 north and south will be reduced to a single, travel lane in each direction for bridge-beam placement at Braddock and Walney roads. Two-way traffic will run on the southbound side of Route 28.

Nighttime Hike and Campfire

Area residents can learn about Walney history through legends, lore and stories of the supernatural on a night hike in Ellanor C. Lawrence Park, 5040 Walney Road in Chantilly. Afterward, they'll gather 'round a campfire to enjoy s'mores. This event is slated for Friday, Sept. 25, from 7-8:30 p.m.; it's for ages 5-adult and costs \$8/person. For more information, call 703-631-0013. Go to <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/eclawrence/legends-lore/092520> for registration information.

'Movies Under the Stars' by Woodland Park Crossing Herndon

Catch a free, family-friendly flick.

BY MERCIA HOBSON
THE CONNECTION

With the summer of 2020 coming to a close and the pandemic a fixture of life, local families search for ways to pass the time outdoors. Enter the locally-grown series, "Movies Under the Stars," presented by Woodland Park Crossing, 12960 Highland Crossing Drive in Herndon. Family-friendly free movies are being shown on a big screen set up on the breezy upper parking deck behind Moby Dick House of Kabob at Woodland Park Crossing.

"People are tired of being in their homes. They are looking for something to do but they still want to be safe. So, if we can provide them an environment where they hang out with their family, and do so differently outside of their normal, that makes me feel good," said Marion C. Myers, Myers Public Relations, LLC.

According to Myers, safety was number one. She and others spent the summer researching safe practices and following state and local rules. "Everybody that comes in has to wear masks. We have extra masks, sanitizer and enforce distancing," Myers said. Portable LED ground lights



Bruno and Libby Bianchi of Reston with their daughters, Lucia and Annabelle at "Movies Under the Stars," Woodland Park Crossing Herndon.

PHOTOS BY MERCIA HOBSON/THE CONNECTION



Tim and Robyn Ristau of Herndon with daughter, Summer, 7, at "Movies Under the Stars," Woodland Park Crossing Herndon.

brought their daughters, Lucia and Annabelle. "We needed to get out of the house and do something different in the community. This is a great and safe opportunity," said Libby. Off to the side in the family's area rested two pizzas from a local establishment. "We encourage people to eat here," said Myers. "We've got the telephone numbers for all the restaurants on the website."

As each group entered the venue, they received a goodie bag with special offers from Woodland Park Crossing retailers. For a little extra fun, organizers held a mask contest for the most creative, goofy mask. Tim and Robyn Ristau of Herndon brought their daughter Summer, 7, who proudly sported a puppy face mask. Holding her hands up like paws, Summer said she hoped to win the competition.

Myers gave a callout to Pinot's Palette for helping to organize the event, and sponsor Kiran Gunnam, owner of PJ Mulligans-Bourbon Boulevard. Organizers scheduled the next free movie, "Princess Bride," for Friday, Sept. 11. Attendance is limited, and registration is required. Visit woodlandparkcrossing.com.

marked each four-person viewing space, physically distanced following County guidelines. "When the family gets in their

spot, they're away from everybody else," said Myers.

Bruno and Libby Bianchi of Reston

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NEWS

(From back left) Beth Meyer, co-owner of Green Lizard Cycling, presents a donation check to benefit LINK, Inc. to Peggy O'Reilly of Rotary Satellite Club of Herndon during Rotary's Food Drive held Saturday, Sept. 5. (From front left) Rotarians Signe Friedrichs and Kristen Spotz look on.



PHOTO BY MERCIA HOBSON/THE CONNECTION

As Federal Benefits Drop Food Insecurity Escalates

Rotarians, People of Action, hold food drive.

BY MERCIA HOBSON
THE CONNECTION

For more than a month, like other unemployed workers across the United States, those in the Herndon area struggle to afford food and housing on state benefits alone when work remains scarce. In August, Congress left Washington without extending its supplemental unemployment benefits, previously \$600 a week approved under the CARES act that came on top of aid states paid. Entering the second

week of September, those unemployed have gone more than a month without receiving the enhancement. According to The Century Foundation, the plunge in weekly payment for the average Virginia worker receiving unemployment was 68.8 percent.

Local food banks saw an increased number of calls for assistance. Seeing the need, the Rotary Satellite Club of Herndon held a food donation for LINK, Inc. at Green Lizard Cycling in Herndon. The t-shirts Rotarians

SEE ROTARY, PAGE 7

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Announcements

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CALENDAR

			1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9 10
11	12	13	14	15	16 17
18	19	20	21	22	23 24
25	26	27	28	29	30 31

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OBITUARY

SLHS Alumni Adwoa A. Kessie, '99 Dies

Served on the frontlines of COVID-19 pandemic.

BY MERCIA HOBSON
THE CONNECTION

Longtime Reston resident and South Lakes High School alumni, Adwoa A. Kessie, Class of '99, passed away on Wednesday, Aug. 19, after a long battle with COVID-19. A dedicated medical technician and health educator who was passionate about helping people, Adwoa selflessly continued to demonstrate her care and concern for others by serving on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic. Friends and family gathered virtually in a Celebration of Adwoa's Life on Saturday, Sept. 5, 2020, in Lawrenceville, Georgia.



Adwoa Kessie, South Lakes High School Class of 1999.

andria, Va, to Agnes and Andrew Kessie, Adwoa attended Gwinnett Tech and Everest College to pursue a degree in Respiratory Science and American Sign Language. Her next goal in life was to pass her certification exam and begin practicing in respiratory science.

Adwoa moved to Georgia after graduating from South Lakes High School in Reston. She was a dedicated mother to her three children. Adwoa's love for them was evident in how she tirelessly worked to support her children's endeavors through the Lawrenceville Youth Association and Central Gwinnett High School family. Her kindness knew no bounds. Her in-

SEE OBITUARY, PAGE 7

Legals

ABC LICENSE
Pickleballerz NCR, LC trading as Pickleballerz, 14424 Albemarle Point Pl Ste 115, Chantilly, VA 20151-1790. The above establishment is applying to the VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGE CONTROL (ABC) for a Wine and Beer on Premises license to sell or manufacture alcoholic beverages. Greg Raelson, Vice President. NOTE: Objections to the issuance of this license must be submitted to ABC no later than 30 days from the publishing date of the first of two required newspaper legal notices. Objections should be registered at www.abc.virginia.gov or 800-552-3200.

Legals

ABC LICENSE
First Watch Restaurants, Inc. trading as First Watch the Daytime Cafe, 13027 Lee Jackson Memorial Highway, Chantilly, VA 22033. The above establishment is applying to the VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGE CONTROL (ABC) for a Wine & Beer On Premises; Mixed Beverage On Premises license to sell or manufacture alcoholic beverages. Jay Wolszczak, Secretary, Chief Legal Officer. NOTE: Objections to the issuance of this license must be submitted to ABC no later than 30 days from the publishing date of the first of two required newspaper legal notices. Objections should be registered at www.abc.virginia.gov or 800-552-3200.

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THE CONNECTION

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NEWS

Rotary Holds Food Drive

FROM PAGE 5

wore on Saturday, Sept. 5, read "People of Action." Rotarians collected grocery items and cash donations to benefit community residents struggling to put meals on the table. "The need for food does not stop," said Peggy O'Reilly, Rotarian. "It's important we take care of one another."

LINK, Inc. is an all-volunteer, nonprofit organization that provides emergency food and financial assistance to qualified people in need. According to LINK's website, those requesting emergency food call its phone line, and a coordinator calls back. For those who qualify, a delivery is scheduled. Each family receives about a five-day supply of non-perishable food and a certificate to purchase perishable food per each request.

The Green Lizard Foundation, represented by Dan Fisher, President and Scott Schelling, Vice President, lent a hand with curbside drop-offs. "We are very happy to help support this very worthwhile cause," said Fischer. Schelling added, "The Green Lizard Foundation...looks forward to supporting other events like this in the future."

Chair Signe Friedrichs, Rotary Herndon Satellite Club, said, "In addition to donations of food and household products LINK can pass along to its clients, charitable cash contributions totaled \$ 472."

BULLETIN BOARD

Submit civic/community announcements at ConnectionNewspapers.com/Calendar. Photos and artwork welcome. Deadline is Thursday at noon, at least two weeks before the event.

RCC PREFERENCE POLL CANDIDATES FORUM

The Reston Community Center Preference Poll Candidates Forum will take place Wednesday, Sept. 9 at 6:30 p.m. at RCC Hunters Woods. Five candidates are vying for three, three-year terms in this year's poll. Board members work together to establish the overall policy for the Center and to guide its programs and budget. Board members represent RCC at social, recreational, cultural and educational activities throughout the district as well as function as liaisons to RCC's community partners. Due to COVID-19 capacity controls, all attendees are requested to RSVP for the forum to RCCContact@fairfaxcounty.gov. The forum will also live streamed on RCC's Facebook page.

ERIN PETERSON FUND GOLF TOURNEY

Register to play in the 13th Annual Erin Peterson Fund Golf Tournament, Thursday, Sept. 24 at the Westfields Golf Club, 13940 Balmoral Greens Avenue, Clifton, VA 20124. Register by going to www.erinpetersonfund.org click on Golf Registration. You can pay by credit card or mail your check to: Erin Peterson



MERCIA HOBSON/THE CONNECTION

(From back left) Beth Meyer, co-owner of Green Lizard Cycling, presents a donation check to benefit LINK, Inc. to Peggy O'Reilly of Rotary Satellite Club of Herndon during Rotary's Food Drive held Saturday, Sept. 5. (From front left) Rotarians Signe Friedrichs and Kristen Spotz look on.

As of Sept. 2, the Federal Emergency Management Agency guarantees three weeks of funding to states it approved for enhanced federal unemployment insurance benefit authorized by President Trump on Aug. 8. Virginia received approval on Aug. 26. It is one of the authorized states to begin paying \$300 from the Disaster Relief Fund for the lost wages program, in addition to state unemployment benefits. The benefits start date is yet to be determined for Virginia.

Food and cash donations to local organizations remain critical. Access sites including those that deliver food such as Emergency Food by LINK, Inc. through Capital Area Food Bank at

Food Delivery - Herndon, VA | The Food Bank Network .

Fund, P.O. Box 232170, Centreville, VA 20120. Email erinpetersonfund@yahoo.com.

TUESDAY/SEPT. 22

Foster Care Fairfax. 6:30-7:30 p.m. At Reston Regional Library via Zoom. Did you know that nearly 200 children in Fairfax County are in foster care? If you are considering becoming a temporary foster home for a child, take the first step, and attend a virtual information meeting hosted by Reston Library. Register to join this free meeting: <https://librarycalendar.fairfaxcounty.gov/event/6535405>

CAREGIVERS SUPPORT GROUP

Tuesday, Sept. 15. (Virtual via Zoom). Free. Shepherd's Center serving Oakton-Vienna-Reston-Herndon hosts a support group for caregivers of adult family members with dementia the first and third Tuesdays of each month. Their virtual, facilitated meetings are from 10 to 11:30 a.m. Contact a facilitator, Jack Tarr, at jtarr5@verizon.net for details on joining the meeting via zoom or see the SC web site: <https://www.scov.org/announcements>.

and Francesca, several nieces, nephews, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents and her beloved mom, Agnes Arthur.

A Gofundme account has been set up to support her children at the following link: <https://www.gofundme.com/f/weloveadwoa>. Funds raised through the campaign will help support the children's practical, essential and educational needs.

OBITUARY

FROM PAGE 6

fectious smile could light up a room.

Adwoa was preceded in death by her father, Andrew Kessie and uncle, Yaw Twumasi. She is survived by her daughter, Qui' Andra, 19, sons, Eli, 18, and Jarion, 9, brothers, Benson, Edward and Andrew Jr., sisters, Tina Anaman, Angel, Jacqueline

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Cancer For Dummies: Me



By KENNETH B. LOURIE

As I was telling my long-time friend, Rita, over the phone on Saturday afternoon, as a cancer patient - and I know this is going to sound ridiculous, short-sighted and stupid, I am not always forthcoming and honest when it comes to sharing new symptoms with my doctors, particularly my oncologist. Aside from the obvious discomfort neglecting a new problem would cause, not telling my doctors everything, all the time prevents me from learning - for a brief moment anyway, exactly what either of my two types of cancer are doing to me. Out of sight, though not totally out of mind provides a certain salve for what ails me. A mixed up version of what I don't know can't hurt me - which of course, it most definitely can.

Still, after 11 and 1/2 years of walking this walk, I can't always get the message through my thick head. I'd rather rationalize and/or self-diagnose or attribute the miscellaneous maladies (aches and pains) to older age than I've ever been or due to the fact that I'm overweight and out of shape. And though my friend Frank might think that I'm in pretty good shape for the shape I'm in, the problem is that cancer has its own agenda and doesn't listen to anybody. Moreover, in my experience anyway, it seems to be able to affect one's judgment.

But how else, other than in a roundabout way, does one deal with such weighty issues such as life and death? Granted, I can see how I'm working against my own best/self-interest here when I neglect to mention something now which could harm my future defense (a sort of British Miranda-type warning). Unfortunately, that's another facet of cancer's insidious toll: common sense. Your perceptions and all are altered as you look at your life/choices through this prism of cancer. If you're honest and upfront about your symptoms, it could hasten your death by confirming your progression. If you're not it could definitely hasten your demise. (Cancer symptoms generally don't just disappear.) Either way, you're in cancer's grip. Extricating oneself is difficult. Fending off the demons is a full-time job. I'm not exactly Linda Blair from "The Exorcist," but occasionally, I do feel as if I'm possessed and unable to right my own wrongs.

You would think that eventually, one would be able to think outside their own box and realize that self-medicating/self-diagnosing and/or presuming one's age is the explanation for all the ifs, and or buts, concerning one's symptoms/health is akin to taking a long walk off a very short pier. It may suffice for the present, but the future is hardly there for the taking, if it's there at all. Realizing that fact has been difficult for me to assimilate. Part of my survival strategy, if one were even to call it that, has been to try and avoid any rabbit holes of emotional despair. My thought has been that I'd rather deal with it later than deal with it now, and since it will be bad enough later, I'm not going to subject myself to it now. Ill-advised? Probably. Recipe for success? I doubt it. But that's how I've mostly rolled since my "terminal" diagnosis in late February, 2009.

Well, better late than never. As I finally wake up and smell the coffee - which I never drink (smell the bacon would be a better example), closing my eyes to an impending disaster is hardly the stuff of dreams (more like nightmares). I imagine the stuff of dreams is more about admitting and facing adversity with your head on straight instead of facing it with your head on crooked. Pretending/hoping a problem/symptom doesn't matter/likely to go away on its own is not how proper health and hygiene works, especially not cancer. It has a well-earned reputation and one's prognosis would be better served by being proactive rather than reactive. Cancer waits for no man - or woman. It's on its own schedule. Come hell or high water.

Kenny Lourie is an Advertising Representative for The Potomac Almanac & The Connection Newspapers.

OPINION



PHOTO BY LUKE KONSON

Daniel Balsarak of Oakton holds the first state fish of the trip, a striped bass in Maryland.



PHOTO BY DANIEL BALSERAK

Luke Konson holds a weakfish out of the Delaware Bay.



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

(From left) Daniel Balsarak and Luke Konson in Times Square with their rods. They stopped on their way to Rhode Island.

Casting Off Distance Learning for Fishing Lines

Oakton teen defers college and sets off across America.

BY MERCIA HOBSON
THE CONNECTION

First in a series showcasing the stories of Fairfax County families in the time of distance learning as they develop strategies and alternative learning plans best suited to their needs.

Luke Konson, 18, of Oakton is on a journey of a lifetime. He traded computer screens and online learning for the great outdoors and fishing rod lines. Konson's goal is to visit each of the 50 states in America and catch and release their state fish. Konson said that he believes he will be the first person to do so and plans to complete his goal during the 2020-21 academic year. Konson's father, Mickey Konson, taught him to fish at age two and sportfishing remains his lifelong love.

This spring, as a senior in high school, Konson felt frustrated and challenged with online instruction. "It was hard to focus, hard to stay in rhythm (and) hard to absorb all the material," he said. Konson's mother, Michelle, said that her son finished his senior year at the dining room table on his computer. "Luke is social

and thrives on being with people. Isolation was very difficult for him mentally and emotionally," she said.

AFTER GRADUATING from Dominion Christian School based in Oakton, at the Upper School Reston Campus, Konson put those three months behind him. He set his sights to in-person learning and the college experience as a rising freshman at Clemson University in South Carolina. However, on July 22, the university president announced the fall semester would begin online on Aug. 19, in-person classes delayed to Sept. 21.

Disappointed and aware the COVID situation could force the university to extend online learning, Konson, with his family's help, considered alternatives. "We had some really frank discussions," said Michelle Konson. "Luke loves sports, he loves people. Sitting at computers is not his most chosen activity...He was ready to go and couldn't stay home any longer...It became clear, even if he got a job, he would still be at home. That's not what he wanted or needed at this point."

Konson said, "It's hard being all geared up to go and leave home in two weeks, and then all of a sudden you're told that you can't." Konson deferred his Clemson enrollment for a year and, with it, lost his scholarship. Next, Konson considered how he could make the most of his time and not waste it. He focused on travel. "That was definitely at the top of my list... There's just so much to see, and there's so little

time to see it all," he said. Needing a purpose to travel, Konson turned to the same sport his father taught him and the one he turned to during COVID-19, fishing.

Needing to self-fund the trip, Konson stood up a GoFundMe campaign of \$3,000, Fundraiser by Luke Konson : Catching the State Fish in Each State. It, along with his savings, would finance his journey through the spring of 2021. On his GoFundMe page, Konson wrote: "I will need to keep my gas tank full, purchase fishing licenses for each state, eat a couple of meals a day... Licenses will cost me approximately one thousand dollars, and the other expenses approximately \$3,000."

FOUR WEEKS AFTER learning Clemson would begin virtually, on Aug. 22, Konson left Virginia with finances controlled and a route prepared according to his mother. With his friend, Daniel Balsarak of Oakton, who also deferred enrollment to Clemson, by his side for the first leg of the nearly nine-month journey, Konson set off to the upper northeast, Maryland- striped bass, New Jersey- brook trout and New Hampshire- striped bass. Then onto Sebago Lake, Maine for the landlocked salmon, a subspecies of the Atlantic salmon. "There have definitely been challenges, but we're doing ok," said Konson.

After Konson's son left, she said it had never been on her list to send her 18-year-old son around the country fishing. "He's learning to figure out life....the value of a dollar, how to be flexible and change plans."



PHOTO BY DANIEL BALSERAK

Luke Konson holds a brook trout in New Jersey. It is the only trout species native to the state.



PHOTO BY DANIEL BALSERAK

Luke Konson holds a striped bass in New Hampshire.



PHOTO BY LUKE KONSON

Daniel Balsarak holds a dogfish, a little shark caught while targeting weakfish in Delaware.

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