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ERIE READER

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**BEST OF ERIE WINNERS AND FINALISTS 2025
THE ANNA SHELTER'S RUTH THOMPSON
ERIE ARTISTS IN THE SHADOW OF AI
WHAT'S AT THE BOTTOM OF LAKE ERIE?**

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From the Editors: January 2026

Give me shelter

For a majority of my young adult life I worked in an animal shelter. I often say that I did so in a *previous* life, really meaning before I had children, before I joined on with the Reader, etc. But it also truly feels like a totally different lifetime from the one I'm living now.

I'm sure anyone can sympathize with the fact that working in an animal shelter is hard – emotionally, psychologically, physically. But sympathizing with it and living it are two very different things. No one outside of shelter work can truly understand that sinking anxiety that comes with watching a car pull into the parking lot and not knowing what is going to happen next.

It could be a lovely family looking for a pet or a girl scout troop with a truckload of donations, but it could also be a dog with fur so matted it can hardly walk, a feral cat closed precariously into a suitcase, a red-faced, potentially violent man to whom the animal cruelty officers just paid a visit, the fifth litter of kittens to come through the door *that day*, a wild mink in a live trap someone thinks is a ferret, any number of terrified animals being brought into an unfamiliar place – and the deeply understood knowledge that there will never, ever be enough homes for all of them. All of these are possibilities when a car simply pulls into the parking lot, and all of them happen, very

literally, every single day. Being a shelter worker is existing in a state of constant stress and anxiety, while also having to provide love, cleanliness, and care to thousands of animals every year. The lows are very low; the highs, when they happen, are sustaining.

It is, in a way, akin to living in the United States of America right now.

It is existing in a very similar state of vigilance, of constantly living on the anxious brink of what might happen next, of feeling empathetically ex-

With the constant stream of terror coming through our newsfeeds, it can feel easiest to disconnect, to draw inward, to block it out for the protection of our own mental health. But what will truly get us through it all is community.

hausted from all of the cruelty and sadness and injustice. It is balancing that barrage of negativity with the human need for joy, for achieving a win, for celebration, that is so hard to strike, both in the animal shelter industry and in America.

Enter our annual Best of Erie contest.

This issue always feels like a breath of fresh

air, much like our annual 40 Under 40 issue (if you've noticed, we parodied that yearly cover with adoptable dogs this month), a chance to celebrate some wins, to throw a spotlight on the people, places, and things that *you* love so much about Erie. It's so refreshing to send out our congratulations to all the winners every year and it is exactly this kind of news that gives us the stamina to get through the harder stuff.

In an interview within this issue with Ruth Thompson, the director of the ANNA shelter, she mentions that animal shelter work is just as much about forming and maintaining relationships with people as it is working with animals – that you can't have one without the other and that we're truly all in this together.

In terms of a microcosm, that feels deeply accurate.

With the constant stream of terror coming through our newsfeeds, it can feel easiest to disconnect, to draw inward, to block it out for the protection of our own mental health. But what will truly get us through it all is community.

And that community starts here – with the people, places, and things in Erie that make us who we are – by allowing their successes to become our community's successes and to let those wins sustain us.

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Hitting the Big 100

Lawrence Park, Mercyhurst centennials more than sentimental journeys

By: Liz Allen

This is a big year for Marjorie Dean McLean. She celebrates her 100th birthday.

Lawrence Park Township, where she has lived most of her adult life, marks its centennial.

And Mercyhurst University, Marjorie's alma mater, also hits the century mark.

Marjorie piqued my interest in these 2026 milestones the first time we met at the Lawrence Park Historical Society, where she volunteers as office manager. We were introduced thanks to Dick Obermanns, who enlisted me to help him research the history of Edison Elementary School, at 1921 East Lake Road, which Dick attended in the 1950s. The school will be razed after a new Edison, under construction south of the existing school, opens in the spring.

Dick and I are interested in learning about any possible early connections between Edison School, in the City of Erie, and General Electric Co., in Lawrence Park. Volunteers at the Lawrence Park Historical Society, including Marjorie, have graciously allowed us to pick their brains for our history project. Thomas Edison, the school's namesake, played a key role in what became the GE Works in Erie.

Time is valuable for Lawrence Park Historical Society volunteers. Located in the township building at 4230 Iroquois Ave., the historical society is usually only open on Thursdays from 2 to 4 p.m. and Saturdays from noon to 2 p.m. During those busy hours, volunteers field calls, sort and organize collections, do research, and welcome visitors like Dick and me. For five years, they have also been planning for the centennial, according to Anna Mae Van Dyne, society president.

She and her colleagues are confident that Lawrence Park's story will appeal to "Parkers," the nickname for current and former township residents, to people in greater Erie, and to tourists.

As a young adult, Van Dyne moved from Erie to Lawrence Park and was delighted by the township's "small town community charm," the green spaces, the tree-lined streets and the distinctive neighborhoods, including the brick rowhouses modeled on English garden homes.

During her career as an underwriter at Erie Insurance, she stayed in Lawrence Park and remained there when she married Jim Van Dyne, who serves as the Historical Society's vice president.

The neighborhoods tell the story of the township's development, she said, starting with housing built during World War I, followed by World War II and then the '50s and '60s. "Each has its own character," she said.

Township Manager Spencer Cadden admits to "waxing poetic" about Lawrence Park.

"Lawrence Park is part of a much bigger con-

MERCYHURST UNIVERSITY



Along with Lawrence Park Township, Mercyhurst University celebrates its centennial this year. The Sisters of Mercy sold bonds door to door in 1924 to raise funding for construction.

versation surrounding industrial towns, corporate communities, planned architecture, and Erie's industrial history," he shared.

"Lawrence Park was built deliberately, planned to reflect a specific moment in Erie's broader industrial history. (It's) a reflection of how companies, workers, and families imagined a better life in a working community in the early 20th century, not just inside a state-of-the-art factory but in a town built by General Electric Co. Lawrence Park is a mirror showing how industrial power can shape daily life and how workers and residents ultimately shape their experience in return," Cadden shared.

In 2011, Marjorie wrote the book *Lawrence Park*, part of the Images of America series. From her book, I learned that the township is named after Captain James Lawrence, whose final words before he died in the War of 1812 became Oliver Hazard Perry's battle cry: "Don't give up the ship." I also discovered that Lawrence Park once boasted an amusement park, similar to Waldameer, on the shores of Lake Erie, that the quaint Dairy Queen on Iroquois Avenue dates to 1952, that actor Ronald Reagan visited Lawrence Park in 1954 (as the spokesman for General Electric), and that the Iroquois branch of the Erie County Library is

designed to resemble an old-fashioned train station (Marjorie's book is in the library's collection).

Anna Mae, the historical society president, wants the centennial celebration to help people discover and understand the community's history, join walking tours, learn about why the streets are named after scientists, inventors, and explorers, and give everyone a sense of pride.

Indeed, the Lawrence Park Historic District is on the National Register of Historic Places, thanks to famed city planner John Nolen's role in designing it.

The centennial celebration kicks off the first weekend in February, with extended hours at the Historical Society Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, a lecture at 1 p.m. on Feb. 7 about the origins of Lawrence Park, and the official Centennial Day observance on Feb. 8 to mark the date that Lawrence Park became a first-class township 100 years ago. To learn more, to volunteer or to donate, visit lp100year.com, email lp100years@gmail.com or visit the Facebook page, Lawrence Park Centennial Celebration.

Cadden, the township manager, elaborated on why he and so many others are excited to celebrate Lawrence Park throughout 2026. "The centennial, in my mind, isn't just nostalgia or a

feel-good moment. It is about recognizing our past and acknowledging that Lawrence Park was an attempt to make life better. It was a corporation, a community and its people coming together to form something unique.” He continues, “Our centennial is an opportunity for stewardship and to share our story and to talk about how we are going to move forward. Lawrence Park matters because it is a reminder that communities aren’t accidents, they are built and tested, curated, and sustained by the people who live there and I think that is something that can be appreciated far outside the boundaries of Lawrence Park.”

I certainly appreciated learning from Marjorie that Mercyhurst University will also celebrate its centennial this year. On the university’s dedicated website (mercyhurst.edu/centennial) you can scroll through an easy-to-navigate timeline and learn how the Sisters of Mercy went door to door in 1924 to sell bonds to construct the school, and that 50 nuns pitched in to finish building their new college after workers went on strike in August 1926 so the school could open that September. The website also documents the growth of women’s sports, the decision for the school to admit male students, and the work on cancer research led by Sister M. Eymard Poydock, among many other achievements.

This September also marks the 30th anniversary of the premier of *That Thing You Do!* The

Mercyhurst Centennial would be a great opportunity to pay tribute to this film, which Tom Hanks wrote, directed and starred in. After all, the Oneders, the fictional band at the film’s center, rose to fleeting fame by winning a battle of the bands at Mercyhurst. The film also faithfully recreates what Erie, especially State Street, looked like in the 1960s, thanks to extensive research provided to the production company by the Hagen History Center.

And speaking of faithful reconstruction of the past, there is still time to see *The Story of Us, Erie Polonia*, the exhibit at Hagen curated by Bobby Sulecki. Jonathan Burdick wrote about the exhibit in the October issue of the *Erie Reader*.

Bobby, a longtime friend, said the final day of the exhibit is Jan. 30. “I think people are happy to learn what neighborhood their ancestors came from, which church they attended, that history,” Bobby told me. “They tell me they are part Polish somewhere and they can feel that connection. We must preserve that heritage because much of it is lost, because most of us are now in the fourth and fifth generation.” Visitors can do a self-guided tour, attend when Bobby is present on Jan. 14, 21, and 28 or set up an appointment by emailing him at suleckibobby@gmail.com.

As Bobby has explained to me many times, one of the best sources to learn local history is to seek out the storytellers. Dick Obermanns, Edison

CONTRIBUTED



Members of the Lawrence Park Historical Society display an iconic photo of the township, which celebrates its 100th anniversary this year. Left to right are Jaye Beebe, Anna Mae Van Dyne, Jim Van Dyne and Marjorie McLean. The Historical Society will have an open house on Feb. 6 from 1 to 5 p.m., Feb. 7 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Feb. 8 from 1 to 5 p.m.

School grad, is one of them. So is Marjorie Dean McLean, devoted wife to one-time GE apprentice, Lynn McLean, mother of five, retired guidance counselor from Iroquois High School, office manager at the Lawrence Park Historical Society – and one of the oldest living alums of Edison Elementary School.

Liz Allen can be reached at lizallenerie@gmail.com. If you have Edison School memories, pass them along.

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What's at the Bottom of Lake Erie?

Mapping our industrial, Indigenous, and geological past

By: Dan Schank

When I arrived at the office of James Hall, site administrator for the Erie Maritime Museum, on a cold January morning, he was excited to show me a map in his hallway. At its bottom, in blue capital letters, it read: GHOSTSHIPS OF THE SOUTH SHORE QUADRANGLE. Above the text, I saw our portion of Lake Erie, with Ohio on the left, New York on the right, and Presque Isle's hook, dead center. Along the lake were dozens of little ship icons indicating sunken vessels – schooners, ferries, brigs, barges, steamboats, and more – peppered across the water with surprising regularity.

Upon seeing the sheer number of identified wrecks, I assumed (incorrectly) that travel by boat was extremely dangerous in the 19th century. Hall gently corrected me, "If you go back to the turn of the century or a little before that, you should imagine I-90 within five miles of the coast. Before trains, there was no way to get from point A to point B without being on the water." Back then, Lake Erie was closer to the bayfront connector than the tranquil vacation spot we enjoy today.

At the top right of the museum's map is a curious blank spot, one of the only places where this "graveyard of the Great Lakes" lacks any nautical remains. Was this area unusually safe? A road less traveled? Neither – it's simply the part we've neglected to explore.

This fall, a public/private partnership between the Ocean Exploration Cooperative Institute (part of our federal government's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration or NOAA), the Center for Coastal and Ocean Mapping at the University of New Hampshire, and two private companies (Louisiana's Chance Maritime Technologies and R2Sonic from Austin, Texas) began to address that problem by examining the northeast corner of Pennsylvania's portion of Lake Erie in greater detail than ever before. It's not some tiny periphery they're looking at, either. The project has mapped about 98 square miles of lakebed along the Pennsylvania, New York, and Canadian borders – a survey area about five times larger than the City of Erie itself. According to Honey Stempka, NOAA's Lake Erie designation manager, the work is long overdue in our region: "Some of Erie's bathymetry maps were created in the 1940s and haven't been updated since then."

In October, a 30-foot-long, remotely operated, uncrewed vehicle called the LR-30 (designed by Chance Maritime Technologies) was sent out to explore the lakebed. Operating like some futuristic hybrid of a submarine, a Roomba, and a Zamboni, the "vessel was sent as far as 27 nautical miles off shore, and operated from a remote station set up at the Erie Maritime Museum," ac-

CONTRIBUTED



Pictured is the LR30-UV, designed by Chance Maritime Technologies, which aided in mapping about 98 square miles of lakebed along the Pennsylvania, New York, and Canadian borders this fall.

ording to Val Schmidt of the Center for Coastal and Ocean Mapping at the University of New Hampshire. "This kind of technology is brand new and is quickly changing the way ocean mapping and exploration is done at great savings," according to the researcher. Working alongside the vessel is the Voxometer, a state-of-the-art sonar survey system designed by R2Sonic, to provide high-resolution data. It's a very symbiotic public/private partnership – two tech companies get to test their new products while Erieites get a unique look at our submerged history.

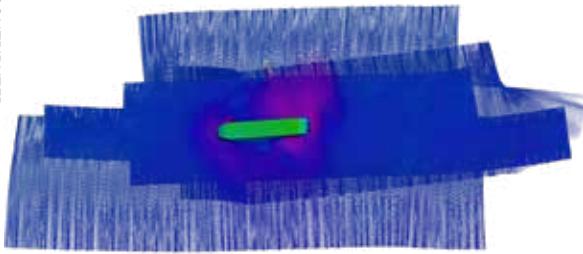
This brings us to the fun part: what are they going to find down there? The obvious answer is shipwrecks, and they've already given us a high-res map of a noteworthy one. The *Howard S. Gerkin*, which was built in 1910 and sank in 1926, served as an early guinea pig for their mapping technology. We now have a much clearer view of the remains of the 241-foot-long steamer. "I think people have a natural interest in shipwrecks," says Ben Ford, historic and maritime archaeologist at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania. "They represent moments of extreme drama and remind us of the larger forces around us. The ships are also part of many people's heritage, representing how their families came to the re-

gion or past occupations."

Val Schmidt is especially excited about what we might learn about the history of our industries: "Lake Erie, as a major commercial waterway, was critical to early industry and exploration. Folks from the local fisheries office told us that, due to its shallow lakebed, Lake Erie was an extremely prolific fishery far exceeding that of the other Great Lakes and that Erie was the center of much of that fishery for many years. Much of that history still lies on the lakebed, in the form of shipwrecks and debris."

The mapping project may also inform our understanding of our prehistoric and Indigenous past. Due to changes in topography over 5,000 years ago, researchers have reason to believe that parts of the lake may have once been dry and inhabited. "The lakebed off of Erie contains a ridge that extends from Canada to within a few miles of the Pennsylvania shore," according to Ford. "This ridge separated a lake in the eastern basin from a lake in the central basin. There would have been a stream connecting the two lakes running near the PA shore. This would have been an attractive area to live, with varying topography and a mix of lake and river environments. It is the kind of setting that I would expect to find sites if it was dry

CONTRIBUTED



This graphic shows an example of what is recorded with the current underwater mapping technology – this is a high-res scan of the *Howard S. Gerkin* shipwreck.

land. It's a pretty unique setting in Lake Erie and the Great Lakes in general."

Ford is careful to note that more work must be done in this regard, and that any inquiry into our Indigenous past must be done in cooperation with Indigenous leaders. "Native American scholars and elders have the best understanding of how their ancestors likely used these spaces," explains Ford. "Archaeologists can help reconstruct the landscape – find places that have intact surfaces – and ask questions based on our understanding of the past, but Indigenous knowledge and understanding of how these spaces were likely used is really key. If we can find early settlements, they will significantly increase the database about how ancestors made a living – what plants, animals, and resources they used.

If they were living near the lakes, were reeds, fish, and different medicines more prevalent than we currently understand from what would have been upland settlements? Was life organized differently in the settlements near the paleolakes? Can these now-submerged settlements shed new light on Indigenous histories by linking them to places and events?" Only time will tell, but we may soon have some answers.

"Lake Erie, as a major commercial waterway, was critical to early industry and exploration ... Much of that history still lies on the lakebed, in the form of shipwrecks and debris." – Val Schmidt, Center for Coastal and Ocean Mapping at the University of New Hampshire

For the non-history buffs among us, the mapping project may have a more practical impact, according to James Hall of the Maritime Museum: "I'll tell you what the public in Erie is most interested in – fishing spots. I can't tell you how many Facebook comments, emails, and telephone comments we get asking when all this stuff will be released. They want to know where the fish are!"

Since a lot of the lake is composed of silt and devoid of life, shipwrecks "provide a place for small animals to hide – and the big animals come to eat the smaller ones," according to Hall. When the project's data is eventually released, you might end up re-routing your weekend fishing trip in response to it.

In the meantime, we have to wait. "Our data collection effort was hugely successful and with that comes a mountain of data processing and documentation to ensure the data is immediately useful to others," explains Schmidt. However, after working with NOAA and the State of Pennsylvania, the data will eventually become publicly available. "The people who read the Erie Reader are living here because of the lake," says James Hall. "If you work at Hamot, you know that there wouldn't be a hospital here if there weren't a city, and there wouldn't be a city without the lake." Whether you're a student of history in search of new artifacts or an angler in search of yellow perch, this data will be sure to make our local environment more fascinating and intimate.

The Lake Erie mapping project is part of a larger project, sponsored by NOAA, titled Lakebed 2030. The project aims to fully map all five of our Great Lakes over the next four years. Visit glos.org/lakebed-2030/ for more info.

Dan Schank can be contacted at danschank@gmail.com

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Erie Artists in the Shadow of AI

Machines can mimic, but can they create? Erie artists weigh in on what's at stake

By: Julia Carden

As big tech pours investment into AI, pushing for ever-greater efficiency, many people working in creative fields feel left in its data-center-shaped shadow. The rapid spread of generative AI content raises thorny questions about authorship, signaling a profound shift in how art is made and valued.

In some industries, AI is being used productively, including medical research, insurance processing, and tax services, where it can improve efficiency. In other areas, the benefits are less clear. For many artists, it's difficult to visualize an ethical and useful future for generative AI.

That uncertainty feels especially close to home in Erie, a small, working-class Great Lakes city with a growing creative community. For local artists, the risks are no longer theoretical.

Adam Calfee is a partner and co-founder of MoreFrames Animation, based in Erie. He earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Animation from Edinboro University in 2008, when the work was still hand-drawn on paper and individually scanned onto VHS tape. More than 15 years ago, Calfee and his classmates, Gus Trauth and Jordan Held, launched MoreFrames. Since then, the studio has worked with major clients including A24, Adult Swim, National Geographic, Vice, and most recently, Marvel Snap.

After years of working in animation, Calfee warns that "the creative industries are in real danger." What worries Calfee isn't just the technology itself, but how quietly it's becoming the baseline. "It's an extremely powerful and fascinating technology, with horrifying implications," Calfee said. "Companies are embracing AI while pretending they're not – putting on a public face that claims to support artists, while quietly shoehorning AI into every possible crevice."

Since accessible generative AI models entered the mainstream, artists at MoreFrames have noticed a shift in client expectations, specifically in assignments that, as Calfee put it, aren't humanly possible.

"Companies say 'don't use AI,' but their expectations assume that you will. The window of what's considered possible is shifting and artists who don't use AI risk being pushed out." In one instance, a company requested that MoreFrames animate a video, using images generated by AI. Calfee said the images were "totally useless." The studio declined the project. "It was surprising and disappointing to see this from such a big company with the resources to pay for real art," he said.

In addition to questions of quality, AI raises ethical issues because its content is drawn from creative work published online. This work is then scraped into massive datasets used to train generative AI models.

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This artwork was created by local animation company MoreFrames for Toonami, a part of Cartoon Network's Adult Swim via the agency The Foreign Correspondents Club. Adam Calfee, a partner and co-founder of MoreFrames, speaks with Julia Carden about the effects of AI in the animation industry.

"Exposure is good – what am I making this work for if not to be seen? I want to put my work out as widely as possible, but that also makes it vulnerable," Calfee said on pushing his animations out online. What tech companies often frame as innovation feels, to many local artists, like exploitation, work absorbed without consent.

As artists recognize their work inside these systems, some turn to the courts. Artists and writers have filed multiple lawsuits against companies accused of scraping their work to train generative AI. Most recently, Anthropic agreed to a \$1.5 billion settlement with authors whose works were used without authorization, marking one of the largest copyright-related settlements in U.S. history.

At the same time, the economic promise of generative AI is showing signs of strain. The MIT Media Lab surveyed more than 300 businesses using generative AI tools and found that only 5 percent saw return on investment. The remaining 95 percent failed to see a profit. Even though most users see minimal profit, major tech companies keep encouraging businesses to adopt generative AI.

Beyond legality and ethics, many artists argue that AI-generated art lacks the depth and nuance that characterize human-created artwork, shifting the way art is perceived.

Andi Graham, an Erie-based illustrator, is concerned about the quality of AI-generated imagery, the risks of people being misled by fake visuals, and the broader appreciation for human

creativity.

"New technology will always replace something. Jobs will be lost, and maybe new ones will appear," Graham said. "But the real victims are the people who are skilled at doing it the long way – the ones who understand the craft, the effort, and the nuance behind it."

When it comes to AI-generated art, Calfee and Graham agree: it's often recognizable, flat, and futuristic in a way that feels mechanical. Some have dubbed it "AI Slop," a phrase Merriam-Webster named the 2025 Word of the Year.

"I hope people understand the time and effort that goes into creating – it's not something that should be churned out of a database," Graham explained. "AI imagery is soulless – it's nothing without the artists who made the original work first."

Calfee warns that AI endangers the very currency of creativity, making it harder for artists to find paid work, keeping the starving artist trope alive.

"Artists will still know how to make art. What's at risk is the infrastructure that makes it possible for artists to earn a living," Calfee said. "I'm trying to make a career out of this. I have a family to support. I rely on the infrastructure to be there to do work that has value, and it won't have value anymore."

Research shows that these platforms don't just stumble – they trip spectacularly, and often. Popular AI tools like ChatGPT and MidJourney exhibit harmful flaws, including racial and gender biases, factual inaccuracies, and cybersecu-

rity risks.

Erie-based digital artist Savannah Wilson (KellyKillz) is particularly concerned about the implications of generative AI being built without the input of artists and marginalized communities who have historically been excluded from tech developments.

"We can't ignore that these systems are built on racism and misogyny," Wilson said. "Artists are being left out of these conversations, and it's intentional. We need to reclaim these spaces and make sure our voices are heard."

Wearing a black T-shirt featuring "Self-Love," a design she created after noticing a lack of representation of Black women in online art, Wilson explained that her career in digital art began unexpectedly, with a silver Nintendo DS and a stylus.

Today, Wilson works across digital platforms including, PicsArt Pro and CapCut, and selectively uses Artlist AI Animation to bring her illustrations to life, "infusing perspective and soul." But Wilson maintains firm boundaries around how her data is used. She has disabled ChatGPT's "improve the model for everyone" setting, which, according to OpenAI, means her interactions "won't be used to improve ChatGPT."

She also harnesses generative AI to satirize its gatekeepers, weaving figures like Elon Musk and Sam Altman into her works. In "Decoding The

Future Of AI," a striking digital collage, she "critiques the fusion of tech and power... Beneath the surface of innovation lies a complex web of government policy, wealth, and unchecked ambition."

"I stand in both perspectives and look at all sides of the issue. AI is here, and we need to think about how we engage with it," Wilson explained. "As AI takes center stage, we must remember that behind every machine is a decision

"New technology will always replace something. Jobs will be lost, and maybe new ones will appear. But the real victims are the people who are skilled at doing it the long way – the ones who understand the craft, the effort, and the nuance behind it." – Andi Graham, Erie-based illustrator

made by humans, at the expense of the environment and human creativity."

Another area of concern is the environmental impact. These large-scale data centers rely on fresh water to cool labyrinthine halls of humming servers, consuming millions of gallons daily to prevent their equipment from overheating. The Lincoln Institute of Land Policy found that large

data centers require up to 5 million gallons of water every day. That's enough water to meet the needs of 50,000 people, comparable to Millcreek Township.

According to the Food and Water Watch, generated AI images consume thousands of times more energy than a standard text search. The expansion of AI data centers across the country has raised concerns in Great Lakes communities, where fresh water is both a shared resource and a point of pride.

Popular AI platforms like Claude (Anthropic), MidJourney, OpenAI, and Perplexity AI extract value from artists and natural resources, and often sideline the very people whose labor and creativity make it possible.

"The law simply hasn't caught up yet. I think the solution, if there is one, is going to be heavy regulation," Calfee said.

As artists grapple with these changes, policy protections remain limited in the United States. While Europe has enacted guardrails for AI oversight, recent federal actions have signaled resistance to state-level AI regulation.

As generative systems reshape creative labor, the question isn't what AI might become – but who it serves, who it harms, and at what cost to communities like Erie.

Julia Carden can be reached at juliacarden91@gmail.com



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Do People Even Read Anymore?

How our reading habits have – and haven't – changed over the years

By: Jonathan Burdick

John Adams was an enthusiastic reader. There was little that he enjoyed as much as getting lost in his books, studying, and absorbing the thoughts and ideas and stories of others. His personal library, comprising around 3,000 books, was one of the largest private collections of its time. In 1772, while away from his home, he wrote to his wife Abigail of what he missed the most. “[A]bove all, except the wife and children, I want to see my books,” he told her.

As explained in David McCullough’s biography, unlike many of the founders of the United States, Adams was an awkward man who dressed plainly and couldn’t dance or play cards. He had no inherited fortune or family prestige. Books, he learned early on, were his key to knowledge and, as McCullough wrote, helped shape Adams into becoming a “great-hearted, persevering man of uncommon ability and force.”

He was well-read in the Roman and Greek classics and in ethics and philosophy and science, but it was the tales of authors such as William Shakespeare and Jonathan Swift that helped him “fathom the ‘labyrinth’ of human nature” and his passion for reading only grew as years passed.

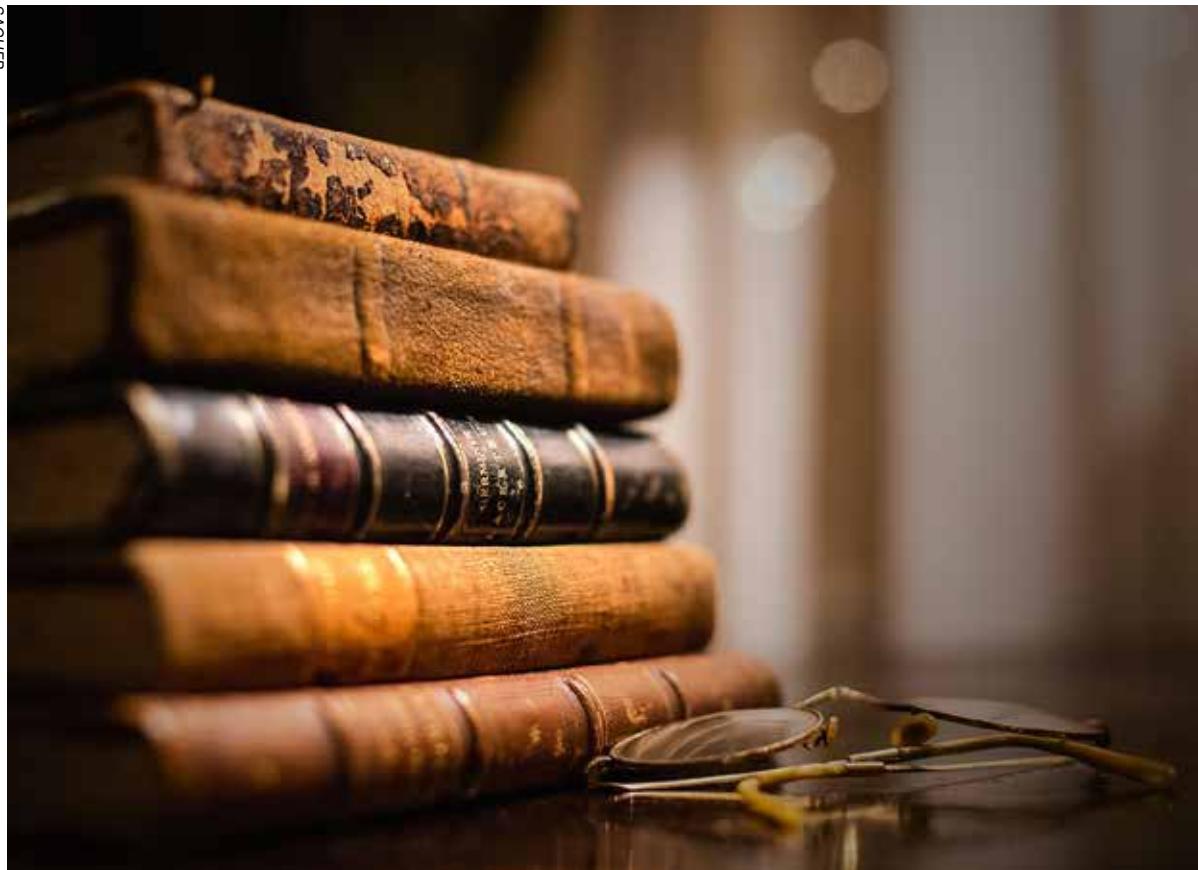
Despite his love of reading though, even Adams at times felt distracted from it. As a young man, he wondered why time simply seemed to get away from him. “All my time seems to roll away unnoticed. I long to study sometimes, but have no opportunity,” he wrote in his diary. “I have no books, no time, no friends. I must therefore be contented to live and die an ignorant, obscure fellow.”

Fast-forward two centuries and it often remains a challenge to find the time to pick up a book and read. There’s endless laundry. Dishes in the sink. A dog to walk. All those daily obligations and responsibilities. It’s easy to feel guilty about what you’re *not* getting done when you sit down with a book. As a result, many of us, like Adams, wish that we had more opportunities to read.

The idea that people *don’t* read anymore is nothing new either. In 1980, Walter Tevis published the dystopian novel *Mockingbird*, a spiritual cousin to the better-known classics *Brave New World* and *Fahrenheit 451*. In it, an illiterate and apathetic humanity is on the verge of extinction. It is set in New York City a few hundreds years in the future and humanity exists only to consume mind-numbing sedatives and meaningless entertainment under the watchful eye of highly advanced androids.

Humans are lazy, an administrative android tells the recently literate protagonist, Paul Bentley. People desire distractions and reading is *not* a distraction, but exercise for our mind’s eye. Bentley pushes back, arguing that humans desire

SACHER



In a world of constant distraction, it comes as no surprise that the amount of time spent reading for pleasure these days is dwindling. Jonathan Burdick takes a look at how the statistics have changed over the years and what we can do to bolster our numbers and make reading a priority.

not distractions, but connection. Since learning to read, he sensed the awe of traversing other minds, even of those long dead. “All of those books – even the dull and nearly incomprehensible ones – have made me understand more clearly what it means to be a human being,” Bentley continues. “And I have learned ... that I am not alone on this earth.”

It’s a story emphasizing ideas over plot, letting us explore the mind and philosophies of Tevis, who also authored *The Hustler* and *The Queen’s Gambit*. His personal struggles with numbing his mind with alcohol served as inspiration for his story after sobering up following an eight-month bender. Of course, *Mockingbird* is also about literacy, inspired by his 25 years as an English teacher.

“[M]y private experience as an English teacher has been that Americans don’t read books,” explained Tevis. “They didn’t read books in 1949 when I started teaching. They don’t read books now.” Some blamed television, but he said that wasn’t *really* the problem. As Tevis portrayed in *Mockingbird*, he stated that people are inclined to “find substitutes for living their lives.”

Of course, even in 1981 when Tevis claimed

Americans don’t read books, he was being hyperbolic. People do read books. As the New York Times recently reported, over 700 million print books were sold last year. Book reading *is* declining though and has been for some time. A widely discussed Gallup poll from 2022 found that Americans are reading an average of about a dozen books per year, down from 18.5 in 1999. A 2025 YouGov poll found something perhaps more enlightening though: about 40 percent of Americans reported reading zero books over the previous year. An average person polled read eight books while the median was two. Less than 20 percent read 10 or more.

It’s easy to blame social media and, sure, there is obviously truth in that. Sometimes doomscrolling Facebook provides us the instant gratification that we crave. Why read John Steinbeck talking about some trip he took with his dog when we can watch a celebrity eat increasingly spicy chicken wings on YouTube? To be fair, Sean Evans is a *great* interviewer. All I know is that sometimes I plan for an evening of reading, but somehow end up clicking through Netflix for half an hour adding more movies and shows that I probably won’t watch to my watchlist. Ah, the tyranny of choice.

Even if folks are reading fewer books, they're likely reading elsewhere: online articles, local news, maybe that uncle posting his long-form ramblings on social media. And it may be hard to believe, but millions of people still have print magazine subscriptions.

I would still argue that reading a *book*, a story with multiple threads told across hundreds of pages, is a different workout for our brains. It's also different from reading something because you *have* to, such as for school or work, rather than pleasure. Americans have self-reported a drastic decrease in pleasure reading. In a sweeping study of 236,000 American readers published in 2025, researchers found a 40 percent decrease in reading for pleasure over the past 20 years. Similarly in another study, 13-year-olds who read for pleasure "almost every day" has fallen by 13 percentage points over the last decade. In 1984, less than 10 percent of children reported to Pew Research Center that they "never or hardly ever" read for fun, while in 2020, that number nearly tripled for middle and high school-age students.

So, what can we do in our increasingly distracting world? For my part, I'm going to continue be-

People do read books. As the New York Times recently reported, over 700 million print books were sold last year. Book reading *is* declining, though, and has been for some time. A widely discussed Gallup poll from 2022 found that Americans are reading an average of about a dozen books per year, down from 18.5 in 1999.

ing deliberate in setting time aside to read for pleasure. For others who hope to do the same, carve out a reasonable amount of time or set yourself a daily goal, even if it's only 10 minutes or pages each night. Join one of the numerous book clubs hosted each month at Werner Books & Coffee (like the Erie Reader Book Club) or create your own with friends. Go to the library and peruse (only *half* of Americans have a library card!) or visit the Erie County Public Library virtually with apps like Hoopla or Libby where you can digitally check out e-books, graphic novels, and audiobooks for free. Like my Netflix watchlist, my *to-read* pile has continued to grow over the years.

"I read my eyes out and can't read half enough," John Adams wrote to Abigail in 1794. "The more one reads the more one sees we have to read."

That's not a bad problem to have.

Jonathan Burdick runs the public history project Rust & Dirt. He can be reached at jburdick@eriereader.com

Meet the Cover Models

ANNA Shelter dogs available for adoption

This month's cover models all hail from the Association for Needy and Neglected Animals (or ANNA) shelter located at 1415 E. 10th St. and represent a small portion of the wide array of adoptable pets looking for homes. The ANNA Shelter has won the Best of Erie category Best Place to Adopt a Pet this year and for the past 12 years in a row. The organization's mission is to "provide unwanted, stray, abused, or neglected animals with a safe, nurturing, loving environment where they can be either reunited with their owners or placed into new, lifelong, loving homes."

If you've got a space available in your heart and home, consider stopping in the shelter and meeting some of the dogs, puppies, cats, and kittens whose personalities, affection, and devotion are sure to round out your household nicely. Learn more at theannashelter.com

Please note, these photos were all taken the week of Jan. 12, 2026 and some of the dogs may have already been adopted. Never fear, there is no shortage of animals in need of a home!

All photos by Jessica Hunter



(Left to right, top row) Sheila is a sweetheart mutt with an adorable side-sit, a cozy tummy, and a sharp mind. // Pat is a super unique, *Young American* kind of guy with eyes like David Bowie. // Try to resist Sophie's super soft, pure white squish and the little cracks of blue in her eye – she's just as beautiful on the inside.

(Left to right, bottom row) Kobe is a 7-year-young Boxer mix who is grey-faced, dignified, and looking for an owner to match his vibe. // What a distinguished, intelligent, loyal dog. Tyson will sit and stay, faithfully by your side. // Photogenic much? Saint the Norwegian Elkhound will be your portable heater in the winter and your hiking pal in the summer.

Edwina Tries... A Boxing Class

Level Red Boxing has fun, accessible classes in the bag

By: Edwina Capozziello

I have to admit that I am one of those people who gets really excited to try something new, plans to do it, and then gets a little bit anx-



Channel your inner badass with Edwina this month as she faces her anxiety head on and gives it a one-two punch in a welcoming beginners class at Level Red Boxing.

ious when it's time to actually do the new thing. When I made plans with Kim Anderson to take a Monday night lightweight (beginner) boxing class, it seemed like a great idea. When Monday night-after-work rolled around, I had some regrets. Spoiler alert: I am so glad I went!

Anderson is fitness director for Erie Fitness NOW and Level Red Boxing Erie (LRB). She was so kind and enthusiastic about my visit that it was hard to be anything but excited, even if I was a little apprehensive. I am not what one would call "coordinated" or even particularly "sporty" these days and I was a little concerned that I would embarrass myself. I have zero boxing experience.

I walked in a few minutes before the 6:15 p.m. class and was greeted by a smiling employee who was

wrapping a newcomer's hands and directed me to a QR code to fill out a waiver form. The music was pumped up and inviting as an earlier class finished up their cool down exercises. Class instructor Reggie came out and showed me how to wrap my hands and led our class to the punching bags, we slipped on gloves, and he started leading us through warm-up exercises.

Then we got to the real boxing moves. I was impressed at how easy Reggie made the movements look as he demonstrated. I wasn't quite as graceful when I repeated the movements on my own bag but I did feel like I was doing it. I felt strong; I felt mighty; I felt like a badass! Jab, cross, hook, uppercut. It was a short but intense workout followed by some core work with a medicine ball and a cool down on

the mats. Reggie's instruction was effective and efficient.

If you've ever wanted to try boxing but have been intimidated for any reason or unsure where to start, try LRB. No one made me feel like I didn't belong there, the place has a great vibe, is super clean and organized, is very welcoming and in a convenient location, especially for west-siders. Bonus: your first class is free.

Level Red Boxing is located at 2147 W. 12th St. For more info, visit: levelredboxing.com or email LRBerieGM@levelredboxing.com

Edwina is Erie's (self-proclaimed) biggest fan who loves being a tourist in our own town. If you have an idea of something new she should try you can email her at edwina.capozziello@gmail.com

Take Your Beer For a Walk: January 2025

A sweet eastside midtown stroll

By: Jeff McCullor

January, what a month. We're full of robust resolutions, confident we can accomplish serious fitness goals if we just hunker down and actually *do* it this time. Well you may have noticed this column is ALL about fitness as we log some serious steps each month scampering all over town with a local beverage in our hand, celebrating Erie's lack of open container prohibition.

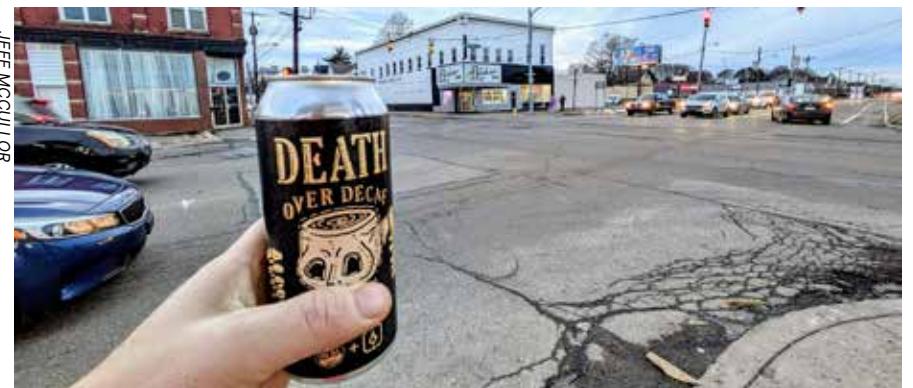
Speaking of beverages, let's get to it shall we? Choose your favorite locally-made malt beverage, alcoholic or otherwise. Yes I see you, dry January subscribers! Lace up those sneakies, grab a pair of gloves unless you're adventurous, and let's hit the bricks!

We'll begin this month at the storied corner of East 28th and Parade streets. You can take it all in from the parking lot of the now-closed Rite Aid on the northeast corner. This part of town once served as the main traffic artery between Erie, Wattsburg, and Waterford. Longtime farmer Elihu Marvin owned all the property adjacent to this intersection back in

the 1800s. He eventually sold off his land, which was then parceled out into individual properties that originally accommodated Erie's first large population of German immigrants. The area was subsequently dubbed Marvintown – in fact, you may know a local elder who played baseball at Marvintown fields. Cheers to you, Mr. Marvin!

Next, let's take our beverage north on Parade Street. Walking a block and a half, halting our travels across the street from Mighty Fine Donuts at 2612 Parade. Have you ever paired a beer with a donut? Well, this might be your chance. Swing in and snag a six pack of donuts that have been made the same way since 1967 (uh, deliciously?). New ownership took over in 2023, continuing the tradition. If you've never had these donuts before, they are indeed *mighty* fine. Cheers to you, Mighty Fine Donuts!

From here, we'll continue moving our cherished liquid north along Parade to the intersection of East 26th Street. Walk across the inter-



A sudsy stroll down one of Erie's oldest streets in the historic Marvintown neighborhood brings multiple opportunities for sweet treats and maybe even a sweet new ride from the Erie Bike Co-op.

section, looking to the west where you'll see Pulakos Candies, in continuous operation since 1903, with this location becoming home base in 1971. Make yourself a brain bookmark to stop by for chocolate-covered strawberries on or before Valentine's Day, or really any random weekday you need some extra fruit in your diet. Cheers to you, Pulakos Candies!

Next, we'll move our beverage east along East 26th Street, we have one more stop to make at address 436, the Erie Bike Co-op. Sure it isn't peak cycling season, but this elevated garage space is busy as can be all winter, fixing and rehabilitating bikes of

all sizes for those in need when the time comes. If you find spare time in your schedule, inquire about volunteering as any and all skill levels are welcome. You might even learn some mad bike repair skills from Garrett Raszmann (Erie's 40 Under 40 Class of 2025), the leader of the group himself. Cheers to you, Erie Bike Co-op!

Hey, thanks for taking a walk with me and bringing your beverage along for the trip. We'll do it again next month!

Jeff McCullor is the co-owner of Erie Ale Works. He can be reached at jeff@eriealeworks.com



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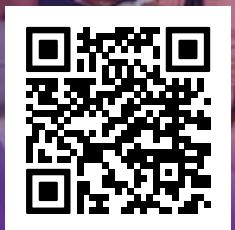
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Making a Small City Smaller: Saving Lives through Better Infrastructure

A cyclist death in the city and a Vision Zero Strategy for Erie

By: Dave Tamulonis

In December, a 66-year-old cyclist was struck by a car on Eighth and Liberty streets and later died as a result of his injuries. The driver fled the scene and police are still looking to identify them through security footage. My wife and I drove by the scene shortly after it happened and were rerouted around the flood of emergency lights on our way to our home five blocks away that evening. Cyclist and pedestrian deaths and injuries are far more common in our community than most people realize. In September, a 46-year-old cyclist was killed in an accident on Peach Street. In November, three pedestrians were struck by a vehicle on State Street and sent to the hospital. A man was hit by a vehicle at 38th and Bayfront back in July. It may be even more surprising for readers to learn that there are similarly sized cities that routinely record zero pedestrian and cyclist deaths each year like Hoboken, New Jersey and Berkley, California.

The main difference between Erie and the cities with the lowest rates of pedestrian deaths should surprise no one: planning and proper infrastructure. Through aggressive Vision Zero strategies like street redesigns, lower speed limits, and increased visibility at intersections, cities have been able to nearly eliminate the threat of accidental pedestrian and cyclist deaths by vehicle. Vision Zero is a global road safety strategy that aims to eliminate traffic fatalities by acknowledging human error and designing safer transportation systems for ev-

eryone. Originating in Sweden, it's a multi-disciplinary approach involving engineering, education, enforcement, and policy – prioritizing vulnerable users and treating traffic safety as a public health issue.

The idea behind Vision Zero is simple: design our cities around those who are most vulnerable because they are at the highest risk of suffering traffic-related injury and death. The benefits made to our city will then benefit everyone. Drivers also benefit from high visibility crosswalks and protected bike lanes because being able to see cyclists and pedestrians makes it easier to avoid accidents. Having designated and protected spaces for this traffic reduces bicycle and foot traffic on the road, making it safer for vehicles. Increased lighting reduces the risk of crime, vehicular accidents, and pedestrian deaths. Lower speed limits on residential and commercial corridors reduce the amount of damage when crashing a car into another (accidents do still happen) and make it safer for children to play on the sidewalks in our neighborhoods.

Luckily and conveniently, the City of Erie was just recently awarded a \$20 million federal grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation's Safe Streets and Roads for All initiative in late December, specifically to fund a Vision Zero Plan to reduce fatal crashes through multiple infrastructure improvements. I look forward to seeing these developments take place over the next year, but it still doesn't address the social issue

DAVE TAMULONIS



Reflecting on the recent death of a cyclist, Dave Tamulonis advocates for safer infrastructure for all road users and hopes that a recent influx of funding from the U.S. Department of Transportation's Safe Streets and Roads for All initiative will translate into a Vision Zero plan for Erie.

in Erie: why do people often oppose developments like this?

The number one reason I see in comment sections is taxes. "I don't bike. My taxes should pay for the roads. I drive a car!" This argument of course is grounded in selfishness and a lack of knowledge, but that's the great thing about federal grants: an infinitesimally small amount of your taxes are involved. Grants like this actually save your tax dollars. They're specifically granted for a single purpose so that a proportionally larger share of your city tax burden doesn't have to be used for that funding purpose. It frees up the city to make improvements *without* raising your taxes or taking away from other necessary city services like

education, fire, and police. These types of grants from both the commonwealth and the federal government are (sadly) usually the only way very specific quality of life improvements like this can happen for smaller municipalities. I will gladly volunteer to personally pay you back the \$0.0001 of your federal tax burden (that you already paid) that made this possible for our community.

Other public comments often center around the thought that "this money should be used for X instead." Again, this is why grants are important. This money exists and has already been collected, appropriated, and awarded for one specific purpose: to fix our streets. If

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we didn't get this money, some other city or municipality would. This money cannot be used for housing support, education, food pantries, community centers or otherwise (even though we also desperately need funding for those things). This is money that will either help us or not be sent to Erie at all. Isn't it better that we are the ones who have been awarded this money?

Finally, and this is the most cynical and selfish: "I don't want any of this on my street." This NIMBY ("Not In My Backyard") complaint was seen often during the city's battle to install bike lanes on Greengarden Boulevard. In the Facebook comments of the JET 24 article about the city's bike lanes on Greengarden one gentleman wrote, "Why do you need to bike on Greengarden? Go to Presque Isle to bike."

I'm going to be generous and suggest that it may not have even occurred to this man that some people are riding bicycles not just for leisure, but because they must. Maybe they can't afford a car and a bicycle offers them a much more efficient way to get from Point A to

Point B than simply walking. And maybe, just maybe, that person needs a way to safely traverse Greengarden Boulevard to get to their destination. A more likely assessment of this comment and the overall sentiment from the residents on Greengarden that unsuccessfully fought the bike lanes is that they are knowingly trying to prevent lower income people from using their street.

Fighting the installation of bike lanes is akin to waging class warfare against the people that would benefit the most from using them. Greengarden Boulevard is in the city and city living requires compromise. These residents benefit from all the things a city offers you: reliable utilities, reliable police and fire response, free education for your children, clean water, proximity to amenities and resources, relatively well-kept roads that lead to said amenities and resources, and in return you occasionally have to acknowledge that your non-vehicle-owning neighbors deserve a safe way to get to those amenities and resources as well.

Healthy and safe cities have abundant pedestrian and cycling infrastructure. Lanes legitimize and concentrate bike traffic in one spot to achieve both safety in numbers and increased vehicular awareness. Bike lanes are not just for cyclists,

Originating in Sweden, [Vision Zero] is a multi-disciplinary approach [to road safety] involving engineering, education, enforcement, and policy – prioritizing vulnerable users and treating traffic safety as a public health issue.

they are also helpful for vehicle users' awareness of cyclists. I would guess the new bike lanes on 10th Street have increased the amount of folks biking on that street already. If there is a safe way to use a bicycle on a street, people will use it. Additionally, bike lanes democratize a street. A bike lane is a compro-

mise; take a little bit of the vehicular lane to make space for those who don't have a car to safely use that street to go somewhere. And look! We don't even have to raise your taxes to do it.

And the kicker is that all of this is so that people *don't* die. Not just that people are comfortable, safe, or otherwise placated, but that people literally won't be killed by cars. People living in your community, your neighbors, are dying completely avoidable deaths that can be designed away at a negligible expense to you. This is a public health and safety issue.

Congratulations to the outgoing administration of the City of Erie for securing this money and best wishes to the incoming administration as they look to implement these changes. The road to progress may be bumpy, but at least it will have some high visibility crosswalks.

David Tamulonis is a musician and educator who works at Erie Downtown Partnership managing community events and activities in Downtown Erie. He can be reached at davidtamulonis@gmail.com.



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The total cost to renovate and transform the historic Sacred Heart School into 19 units of permanent supportive housing is estimated at **over \$7 million**. Every dollar represents an investment in stability, dignity, and second chances for individuals who have nowhere else to turn.

For further information contact:
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Executive Director
Mercy Center for Women
1039 E. 27th Street
Erie, PA 16504
(814) 455-4577
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The Reader Beat Monthly Recap

Summary of December 2025 Meetings

By: Alana Sabol

The Reader Beat aims to cover city and county council meetings as well as other important government and community-related meetings. The following is a summary of each meeting for the month of December.

City Council Dec. 3: Public comments addressed the resolution brought forward by council to acknowledge the death of Marchello Woodard and to ask for updates regarding the status of the investigation and to release information to the public to the fullest extent permitted by law. Constituent Shateria Franklin (40 Under 40 Class of 2023), mother of Woodard's youngest son, urged council to pass the resolution, saying: "We hold positions of power to make change – not to make a name for ourselves, not to build our pockets up, but to actually make change." A resolution of the Erie City Council requesting transparency and timely public updates regarding the death of Marchello D. Woodard and the ongoing investigation by the Erie County District Attorney and the Pennsylvania Board of Probation & Parole passed unanimously with amendments put forward by Councilmember Chuck Nelson. The amendments included a request by city council for the coroner to sign and release the death certificate.

County Council Dec. 9: This meeting followed the special meeting that was held on Dec. 8, addressing County Executive Brenton Davis' 2026 budget vetoes. Fourteen of the 21 vetoes issued by Davis were overridden. However, portions of the budget funding the Diversity Equity and Inclusion Commission (Diverse Erie) and Black Wall Street failed to be approved. Constituents spoke out against this vote during the council meetings. "The willingness to claw back that money from an organization that has boosted homeownership amongst Americans in Erie, PA, it's tough, it spells out the quiet hate that spoils this society," Constituent Kennedy Horton, son of Council member

Andre Horton, said. "That money was clawed back for no other reason than the color of those business (owners) and homeowners." Constituents and council members alike also spent time recognizing Andre Horton for his 12 years of service in county council, as this was his last meeting before he begins serving on city council in January. Council member Rock Copeland presented Horton with an award and written acknowledgment of his service, highlighting the creation of Erie County Community College, founding youth programs such as the Summer Jobs Program, and his instrumental work in council adopting Resolution 43, 2020 that declares racism a public health crisis. Horton graciously accepted the award while wiping away tears. "The first years, after every meeting no matter the tough votes, like the votes last night, we all used to go out and we'd leave it right here," Horton said. "That's my prayer for y'all. After the tough votes, find some place because something happens when you break bread with people."

City Council Dec. 17: Councilwoman Schaaf began the meeting by congratulating Mayor Joe Schember for his service during his two terms. Chuck Nelson, Mel Witherspoon, and City Controller Teresa Stankiewicz were also acknowledged for their service during the meeting. A resolution for the proposed repository sale of a property on Buffalo Road failed 0-7.

County Council Jan. 5: Erie County Council held a reorganization meeting on Jan. 5 to nominate the chair and vice chair. The meeting began with public comments. Constituent Freda Tepfer encouraged council to begin electing a chairperson for one year instead of two or more. Democrat Terry Scutella has served for two terms. "It's good to start over with a new chair," Tepfer said. Scutella was nominated for a third term as council chair 4-3, with Rock Copeland, Chris Drexel, and Jim Wertz voting no. Copeland nomi-

nated Drexel for vice chair and the nomination passed unanimously.

Following the nominations, new Council member Wertz thanked his colleagues for welcoming him. "I'm looking forward to the good work we can do with transparency, equity, and with openness and communication with the folks on the fifth floor," Wertz said.

Copeland spoke about rotating leadership within the council. "I want to make my colleagues aware that I would not accept any appointment to the finance chair. I don't believe it's appropriate for any level of leadership to serve three terms and I want to make that well known."

Scutella defended his position as a third-term chairman. "We are playing by the rules. It's not in the Home Rule Charter that we can't elect the same leadership team for more than one, two, or three years ... If somebody can point out that it's against federal law, or state law, or county law, then we'll do something different," Scutella said.

City Council Jan. 7: The council began with electing the new president and vice president for 2026. Tyler Titus was nominated and unanimously elected president. Titus is the first transgender person to hold the position in the commonwealth. "I am hopeful and honored that you all have entrusted me," they said. Kathy Schaaf was nominated and unanimously elected vice president. During public comments, constituent and former City Councilman Michael Keys discussed renovating local parks and potentially installing a recreational center on the south side of Erie. "I know we have a grants department now so it's my request that we put this back on the forward agenda," Keys said. An ordinance appropriating \$742,429 from the City of Erie ARP Fund Interest to be used to fund the Capital Improvement Fund passed unanimously.

Coming up this month:
County Council: Jan. 13 at 6 p.m.
City Council: Jan. 21 at 6:30 p.m.

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Bird of the Month: Red-breasted Merganser

Punk rockers of the bird world

By: Mary Birdsong

If ever there was a bird that could be said to have permanent bad hair days, it would be the Red-breasted Merganser. Its spiky crest is made up of feathers of varying lengths and almost always looks disheveled – sometimes quite comically so. They are also called saw-bill ducks because they have what look like teeth but are actually serrations on both the upper and lower bills. Together, the “mohawks” and sharp “choppers” make them look pretty tough – the punk rockers of the bird world.

After nesting in primarily the upper portion of North America and Asia, Red-breasted Mergansers (RBME for short) migrate south for the winter and are frequent winter visitors to the waters of the Erie area if they remain ice-free.

The Red-breasted Merganser is a medium-sized waterbird about 22 inches long with a wingspan of just under 30 inches. The species is sexually dimorphic, with males and females having different plumage. The male features a dark head with an iridescent greenish cast, a body of alternating black and white feathers, and a reddish-brown breast mottled with black. The female is the plainer of the two with a rufous head and crest, and a pale grayish breast. Similarities they share are

bright red eyes and slender red-orange bills, although male bills tend to be redder. These serrated bills, mentioned above, are what set mergansers apart from other waterfowl. Unlike ducks that have wide, rounded bills, mergansers have very narrow, pointed and hooked bills, which are effective at grasping slippery prey.

That prey is mostly small fish, though scientists have found they sometimes eat seeds and insects. In Lake Erie, the fish they take are mostly emerald shiners, gizzard shad, and the occasional round goby.

This species is one of the most abundant waterbirds here in the winter, according to Jerry McWilliams, who has been doing daily waterbird surveys from late August to late December every year since 1987. On Dec. 6, 2013, he recorded 46,600 Red-breasted Mergansers migrating through on that single day. And in seven other years, he has recorded more than 10,000 birds in a single day. Season totals can reach into six digits. In 2012, the Christmas Bird Count (an international event that occurs every December since 1900) total for the species was 24,973.

And because of its profusion here, the Red-breasted Merganser has

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Oi oi oi! The Red-breasted Merganser, Mary Birdsong’s Bird of the Month for January, is real punk (in appearance only). The distinctive mohawk of this abundant waterbird makes them stand out in Erie’s winter landscape.

earned a place (along with a Piping Plover and a Least Bittern) in the Erie Bird Observatory logo as one of the “signature” birds in this area.

To get decent close-up views of these birds, visit the channel from the South Pier (on the mainland at the foot of Port Access Road) or North Pier (on Presque Isle State Park) when there is open water. March would be the best time to

see them perform their courtship behaviors, which can be amusing to watch.

Once you find them, you may even hear The Clash playing in the distance.

Mary Birdsong is the lead shorebird monitor for Erie Bird Observatory. Learn more at eriebirdobservatory.org. Mary can be reached at mbirdsong@eriereader.com

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Gem City Style: January 2026

An interview with Ruth Thompson, director and founder of the ANNA shelter

By: Jessica Hunter

Walking into The Association for Needy and Neglected Animals (ANNA) Shelter on a Tuesday morning is a lesson in controlled chaos. Before the doors even unlock, the entire facility is filled with the sound of dogs barking and cats meowing, all waiting for a turn at a second chance. At the center of this whirlwind is Ruth Thompson, a woman who navigates the noise with the calm of someone who has been spinning these particular plates for 22 years.

Despite being the architect of one of Erie's most successful nonprofits, Thompson recoils slightly at the mention of formal titles. "People say 'executive director' and I'm like, I'm just the girl that works there," she says humbly. "I don't ever want to feel bigger or better than anybody. I'm just like everybody else."

That grounded, "just like everyone else" mentality is the bedrock of what she calls the "ANNA Family." It's a philosophy that clearly resonates with the people of Erie – the shelter recently achieved a sweep in the Erie Reader's **Best of Erie** awards, taking home **Best Nonprofit** and **Best Place to Adopt a Pet** (for 12 years running), while also being named a runner-up for **Best Place to Work**. For Thompson, these accolades are a reflection of a shared local victory.

"We are a team, and that team includes the entire community," she says. "When people see that we are voted runner-up for Best Place to Work, it's because we've built a culture of mutual support. I try to be a safe space for my staff of 39, just as much as this is a safe space for the animals."

The shelter's mission is rooted in a deep, unwavering commitment to those with no other options. "We are here for the ones that truly need us," Ruth explains. Whether it's an emergency intake or a rescue off the freeway in the freezing cold, Thompson is a fierce advocate for the animals in their most vulnerable moments. "I have to prioritize based on need. Those who have nobody else in the world take precedence. They are the needy and neglected

JESSICA HUNTER



Executive Director Ruth Thompson of the ANNA Shelter, 12 time winner of Best of Erie's Best Place to Adopt a Pet category and this year's winner for Best Nonprofit, sits down with Jessica Hunter to discuss her role, the ins and outs of running an animal shelter, and being a safe place for our area's needy and neglected animals.

we are here to serve."

To manage an operation of this scale, Thompson relies on a visionary approach to leadership, viewing the rescue as a "people business" as much as an animal one. "I'm a huge people person," she says firmly. "We average 64 visitors a day. You're dealing with humans all day long – you've got to love people to do this work well."

That empathy extends to her team, where "Pizza Fridays" and "Taco Tuesdays" serve as the universal language of appreciation. It is a culture where no task is too small – Thompson herself can be found helping with the most difficult tasks or responding to midnight calls to ensure every animal feels safe the moment they arrive. "Animals don't operate on human emotions; they have a hierarchy of needs," she notes. "Safety is number one. I want them to feel safe here."

Her dedication was crystallized years ago during a quiet moment of reflection. While riding her horse

through the woods, she found herself at a crossroads, questioning the weight of the mission. The very next morning, she encountered a terrified dog trapped in a roadside ditch. After a calm approach, the dog hopped into her front seat, looked at her, and let out a massive sigh of relief.

"I bawled," she remembers. "It was like a sign saying, 'This is why you're here. You're here to save him.' That moment re-energized everything."

Today, that energy is felt across five buildings and through the hands of 50+ loyal volunteers. From donations arriving from as far as Australia to the neighbor dropping off a jug of laundry soap, the ANNA Shelter stands as a testament to Erie's heart. As I was leaving the shelter, the philosophy was on full display: a woman was pulling up to drop off a generous load of supplies for the animal residents. It was a quiet, unprompted moment of service that happens at

the ANNA Shelter every single day.

When asked what she would say if she could speak animal for a day, Thompson's focus remains outward. "I'd ask them: 'What can I do to better serve you? What more do you need from me?'"

It's a question that defines her legacy – and one that Erie answers back every time a donation is dropped off or a pet finds a home. In the end, Ruth Thompson isn't just running a shelter, she's tending to the soul of the Gem City one rescue at a time. And as long as Erie keeps showing up, no animal will ever have to face their hardest day alone.

For more information on the animals available for adoption or to make a donation, visit theannashelter.com

Gem City Style is a monthly column featuring an intimate Q&A with someone making a creative impact in Erie. If you or someone you know would make a good fit for a future Gem City Style, email jessica@eriereader.com

Best of Erie Winners and Finalists 2025

All your favorite people, places, things, and events in Erie

By: Erie Reader Staff

If you were one of the thousands of voters who logged on to vote in this year's Best of Erie contest, you may have noticed that we made some changes. We completely revamped our voting platform, added a write-in nomination period, and streamlined the final voting to the top five nominees only – to truly focus on finding the best and to make it easier for everyone. We've also added a slew of new categories to get a better picture of what makes Erie Erie.

These winners truly represent the BEST of Erie as they are bestowed their status by you, their biggest fans, going out of your way and taking time out of your day to send them a little love in the form of a vote. With over half a million page visits, it is astounding to see people show up for the businesses, artists, makers, entrepreneurs, restaurants, service providers, and musicians that make Erie so special. Thank you, on behalf of the winners, and from us here at the Reader for helping us shine our spotlight on the following winners. Cheers to you!

Dining Out

Best Restaurant

Winner: **Bar Ronin**

Runners-up: Federal Hill Smokehouse, Colao's

Best New Restaurant (Last Two Years)

Winner: **Serafini's Trattoria**

Runners-up: Bay and Berry, Born & Braised

Best Breakfast

Winner: **Gem City Diner**

Runners-up: Flip Cafe, The Breakfast Place (E 38th)

Best Place for Vegan or Vegetarian Food

Winner: **Erie Food Co-Op**

Runners-up: Lavery Brewing Company, Like My Thai

Best Sushi

Winner: **Samurai Kitchen**

Runners-up: Ichiban, Oba Sushi

Best Brunch

Winner: **Flip Cafe**

Runners-up: The Cork 1794, Skunk and Goat

Best Romantic Restaurant

Winner: **Oliver's Rooftop**

Runners-up: Colao's, Room 33

Best Fine Dining

Winner: **Oliver's Rooftop**

Runners-up: Colao's, Bar Ronin

Best Deli

Winner: **Urbaniak Brothers**

Runners-up: Teresa's Italian Deli, Gordon's

Best Food Truck

Winner: **Waffle Miracle**

Runners-up: The Que Abides, The Atacolypse

Best Chinese/Japanese/Thai/Vietnamese Food

Winner: **Samurai Kitchen + Sushi**

Runners-up: Like My Thai, Bar Ronin

Best Wait Staff

Winner: **Calamari's Squid Row**

Runners-up: Lavery Brewing Company, Odis 12

Best Steaks

Winner: **Firestone's**

Runners-up: Ricardo's, The Cork 1794

Best Barbecue

Winner: **Federal Hill Smokehouse**

Runners-up: The Que Abides Pit Stop, Underdog BBQ

Best Chef

Winner: **Stephen Stanbro (Bro Man's)**

Runners-up: Dan Kern (Bar Ronin), Martin Firestone (Firestone's)

Best Waterfront Dining

Winner: **Pier 6**

Runners-up: Oliver's, Smugglers' Wharf

Best Indian/Nepali Food

Winner: **Tandoori Hut Indian Cuisine**

Runners-up: Erie Curry House, Fine Restaurant

Best Bar Food

Winner: **Odis 12**

Runners-up: Lavery Brewing Company, Plymouth Tavern

Best Diner

Winner: **Gem City Diner**

Runners-up: Lawrence Park Diner, Flip Cafe

Best Wings

Winner: **Odis 12**

Runners-up: Park Tavern, One Way Inn

Best Mexican Food

Winner: **El Amigo**

Runners-up: El Canelo, Torero's

ERIN PHILLIPS / JESSICA HUNTER



(Clockwise from top left) Winner of Best Brunch is Flip Cafe in Edinboro, winner of Best Sushi is Samurai Kitchen, winner of Best Mexican Food and Best Taco is El Amigo, and winner of Best Indian/Nepali Food is Tandoori Hut.



(Clockwise from top left): Winner of Best Ice Cream is Whippy Dip, winner of Best Donuts is Mighty Fine, and winner of Best Bakery, Best Dessert, and Best Bread is Herb and Honey Bakery.

Best Mediterranean or Middle Eastern Food

Winner: **Habibi**

Runners-up: Casablanca Grill, Shawarma King

Best Seafood Restaurant

Winner: **Pineapple Eddie**

Runners-up: Bay House Oyster Bar & Restaurant, Smugglers' Wharf

Best Italian Food

Winner: **Colao's**

Runners-up: Valerio's, Serafini's Trattoria

Best Kid-Friendly Restaurant

Winner: **Odis 12**

Runners-up: Cheeserie, All Aboard Dinor

Best Caterer

Winner: **Cali's West**

Runners-up: Teresa's Deli, Valerio's

Best Sandwich Shop

Winner: **Bro Man's Burgers and Birria**

Runners-up: Picasso's, Teresa's Italian Deli

Best Burger

Winner: **Bro Man's Burgers and Birria**

Runners-up: Firestone's, Bar Ronin

Best Taco

Winner: **El Amigo**

Runners-up: Bro Man's Burgers and Birria, Atacolyse Food Truck

Best Pizzeria

Winner: **John's Wildwood Pizza**

Runners-up: Ippa Pizza Napoletana, Valerio's

Sweet Treats and Baked Goods

Best Chocolates/Candies

Winner: **Romolo Chocolates**

Runners-up: Pulakos Chocolates, Stefanelli's Candies

Best Bakery

Winner: **Herb and Honey Bakery**

Runners-up: Mighty Fine Donuts, Art's Bakery

Best Dessert (Dish and Business)

Winner: **Herb and Honey Bakery (Pastries)**

Runners-up: Art's Bakery (Cookies), Ye Ole Sweet Shoppe (Specialty Desserts)

Best Donut Shop

Winner: **Mighty Fine**

Runners-up: H&K Donuts, Peace Love and Little Donuts

Best Bread (by the loaf)

Winner: **Herb and Honey Bakery**

Runners-up: Majestic Baking Company, International Bakery

Best Bagels

Winner: **Jo's Brooklyn Bagels**

Runners-up: Herb and Honey Bakery, Lakeside Bagel & Deli

Best Ice Cream

Winner: **Whippy Dip**

Runners-up: Straw Hat Sundae Shop, Creamland

Best Coffee Shop

Winner: **Brew Ha Ha**

Runners-up: Ember + Forge, Werner Books and Coffee

Best Coffee Roaster

Winner: **Brew Ha Ha**

Runners-up: Happy Mug, Millcreek Coffee Company

Drinks

Best Bar (Overall)

Winner: **The Plymouth Tavern**

Runners-up: Lavery Brewing Company, Room 33

Best Brewery

Winner: **Lavery Brewing Company**

Runners-up: Voodoo Brewing, Erie Brewing Company

Best Winery

Winner: **Arundel**

Runners-up: Mazza Vineyards, 6 Mile Cellars

Best Distillery

Winner: **Altered State Distillery**

Runners-up: Luminary Distilling, Erie Distillery

Best Locally Made Beer

Winner: **Dulachan (Lavery Brewing)**

Runners-up: Love Child (Voodoo Brewing), Tattooed Lady (Erie Ale Works)

Best Locally Made Wine

Winner: **Wild Child (Arundel)**

Runners-up: Derby Red (6 Mile Cellars), Niagara (Heritage Wine Cellars)

Best Locally Made Spirit

Winner: **Luminary Apple Pie Moonshine**

Runners-up: Altered State B-Side Bourbon, Erie Distillery Limoncello

Best Craft Cocktails

Winner: **Room 33**

Runners-up: Altered State Distillery, Bar Ronin

Best Sports Bar

Winner: **Odis 12**

Runners-up: Cornerstone Bar & Grill, Coach's

Best Irish Pub

Winner: **McGarrey's Oakwood Cafe**

Runners-up: Lavery Brewing Company, Sullivan's

Best Bar Staff

Winner: **Lavery Brewing Company**

Runners-up: Plymouth Tavern, Erie Ale Works

Best Pet-Friendly Bar

Winner: **Voodoo Brewing**

JESSICA HUNTER



(Clockwise from top left) Winner of Best Bar (Overall) is Plymouth Tavern, winner of Best Hotel Bar is Oliver's Rooftop, Winner of Best Brewery, Best Bar Staff, and Best Locally Made Beer is Lavery Brewing Company (and their beer Dulachan).

Runners-up: Oliver's Beer Garden, Lavery Brewing Company

Runners-up: Oliver's Beer Garden, Centennial Hall

Best Hotel Bar

Winner: **Oliver's**

Runners-up: Shoreline Bar and Grille, Two45 Waterfront Grille

Best Trivia Night

Winner: **Plymouth Tavern**

Runners-up: Altered State Distillery, Voodoo Brewing

Best Live Music Series

Winner: **8 Great Tuesdays**

Runners-up: Voodoo's Patio Concert Series, Erie Philharmonic In Your Hometown

Best Karaoke

Winner: **Rack & Roll**

Runners-up: Sloppy Duck, Flagship City Foodhall

Best Night Club

Winner: **BIGBAR**

Runners-up: Kings Rook Club, The Zone

Health and Beauty

Best Salon

Winner: **Moxi Hair Salon**

Runners-up: The Loft, Hidden Gem Hair Studio

Best Spa

Winner: **Coventina Day and Medical Spa**

Runners-up: Monacella Massage & Kinesiology, A Compassionate Hart

Best Barbershop

Winner: **Ruiz Barbershop**

Runners-up: V's Barbershop, Colony Barbershop

Best Nail Salon

Winner: **M Nails**

Runners-up: Sky Nails, Glow Luxe Aesthetics

Best Med Spa

Winner: **Coventina Day and Medical Spa**

Runners-up: ReJuv, A Compassionate Hart

Nightlife

Best Music Festival

Winner: **Erie Blues and Jazz Festival**

Runners-up: CelebrateErie, 8 Great Tuesdays

Best Happy Hour

Winner: **Plymouth Tavern**

Runners-up: Lavery Brewing Company, U Pick 6 Public House

Best Comedy Venue

Winner: **Kellar's, A Modern Magic & Comedy Club**

Runners-up: 1020 Collective, Werner Books

Best Dance Club

Winner: **The Zone Dance Club**

Runners-up: BIGBAR King's Rook Club

Best Patio

Winner: **Oliver's Beer Garden**

Runners-up: Pier 6 Rooftop Bar & Restaurant, Calamari's Squid Row

Best Place to See Live Music

Winner: **Warner Theatre**

JESSICA HUNTER / CONTRIBUTED



(Clockwise from top left) Winner of Best Music Festival is Erie Blues and Jazz Festival, winner of Best Trivia Night and Best Happy Hour is Plymouth Tavern, winner of Best Live Music Series is 8 Great Tuesdays, and winner of Best Comedy Venue is Kellar's: A Modern Magic & Comedy Club.

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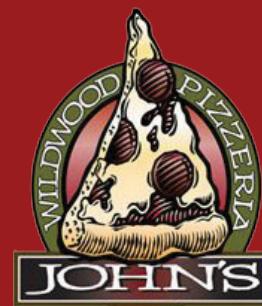
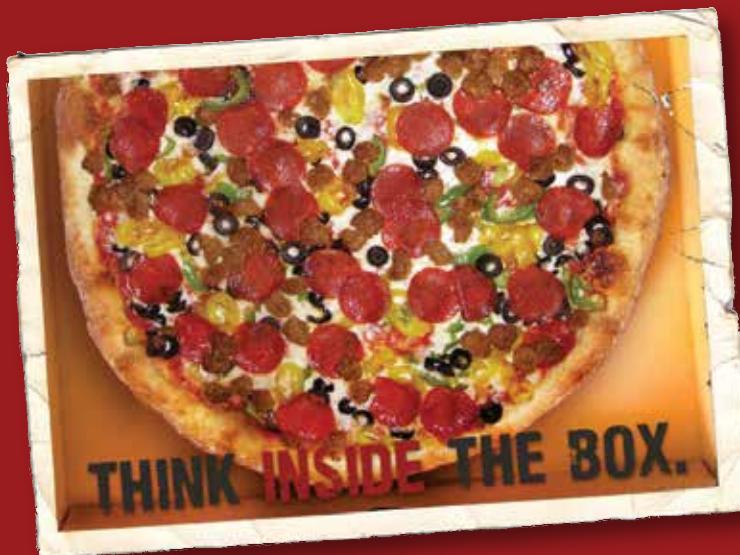


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JESSICA HUNTER / ERIN PHILLIPS / CONTRIBUTED



(Clockwise from top left) Winner of Best Spa, Best Med Spa, and Best Massage Therapist is Coventina Day Spa, winner of Best Dispensary is RISE, winner of Best Hospital is UPMC Hamot, and winner of Best Salon is Moxi Hair Salon.

Best Assisted Living/Retirement Community

Winner: **St Mary's at Asbury Ridge**
 Runners-up: Brevillier Village, Springhill

Best Tattoo Studio

Winner: **Wayward**
 Runners-up: Lake Effect Tattoo, Inkxpressions

Best Dispensary

Winner: **RISE**
 Runners-up: Sunny Side Dispensary, Curaleaf

Best Body Piercing

Winner: **Sacred Piercing**
 Runners-up: Ink Assassins, Wayward

Best Tanning

Winner: **Zoom Tan**
 Runners-up: Liquid Glam Spray Tans, Planet Fitness

Shopping

Best Local Business

Winner: **Werner Books and Coffee**
 Runners-up: Purrista Cat Cafe, Herb & Honey Bakery

Best New Business (Last Two Years)

Winner: **Bay and Berry**
 Runners-up: Serafini's Trattoria, Bespoke Tailoring

Best Locally Made Product

Winner: **Romolo Sponge Candy**
 Runners-up: Smith's Provisions, Herb and Honey Bakery Pastries

Best Furniture Store

Winner: **John V. Schultz**

Best Massage Therapist

Winner: **Coventina Day and Medical Spa**
 Runners-up: A Compassionate Hart, Monacella Massage & Kinesiology

Best Doctor/PCP

Winner: **Dr. Christine Agnello**
 Runners-up: Dr. Kelli DeSanctis, Dr. Brad Fox

Best Hospital

Winner: **UPMC Hamot**
 Runners-up: AHN St. Vincent, LECOM Medical Center and Behavioral Health Pavilion

Best Physical Therapist

Winner: **Shriners Children's Erie**
 Runners-up: Ashley and Kuzma Therapeutics, Rise Up PT

Best OB/GYN

Winner: **Dr. Andrea Jeffress**
 Runners-up: Dr. Sarah Achenbach, Dr. Elizabeth Wise

Best Dentist

Winner: **Dr. David James DeMarco**
 Runners-up: Dr. Carla Orlando, Dr. Aaron Merski

Best Eye Doctor

Winner: **Dr. Nicholas Sala**
 Runners-up: Dr. Alyssa Conjack, Dr. Emily Hosack

Best Pediatrician

Winner: **Dr. Cynthia Weibel**
 Runners-up: Dr. Michael Webster, Dr. Robert Burns

Best Mental Health Counseling

Winner: **LECOM Institute for Behavioral Health**
 Runners-up: Life Balance Counseling and Wellness, ABC's of Building Better Lives LLC

Best Chiropractor

Winner: **Trevor Nash (Nash Chiropractic)**
 Runners-up: Amber Kridler (HealthSource Chiro of Erie), Jeff Manucci (Manucci Chiropractic Center)

ERIN PHILLIPS / JESSICA HUNTER



(Clockwise from top left): Winner of Best Local Business and Best Bookstore is Werner Books and Coffee, winner of Best Farmers Market is LEAF Open Markets, winner of Best Deli and Best Local Grocer is Urbaniak Brothers, and winner of Best Tailor/Alterations Shop is Primo Tailoring.

Runners-up: Cobb's Thrift Shop, Arthur F. Schultz

Best Farmers Market

Winner: **LEAF Open Market**

Runners-up: Mason Farms, Pay What You Can Markets

Best Bike Shop

Winner: **John Adams Cycling and Fitness**

Runners-up: Bert's Bikes and Fitness, The Erie Bike Co-Op

Best Thrift/Consignment Store

Winner: **Amvets**

Runners-up: Sassy Peacock, Cobb's

Best Florist

Winner: **Allburn Florist**

Runners-up: Potratz, Gerlach's

Best Car Dealership

Winner: **Bianchi Honda**

Runners-up: Auto Express, New Motors

Best Boutique

Winner: **Glass Growers Gallery & Gifts**

Runners-up: The Dollhouse Vintage Boutique, Ala Carte

Best Greenhouse

Winner: **Stan's Garden Center**

Runners-up: Potratz, Johnston's Evergreen Nursery

Best Tailor/Alterations Shop

Winner: **Primo Tailoring**

Runners-up: Bespoke Tailoring, Erie Alterations

Best Local Book Store

Winner: **Werner Books & Coffee**

Runners-up: Pressed, Books Galore

Best Neighborhood Grocer

Winner: **Urbaniak Brothers**

Runners-up: Erie Food Co-op, Bello's

Best Antique Shop

Winner: **Copper Carriage**

Runners-up: Oregon Antiques, 814 Vintage Marketplace

Best Jewelry Store

Winner: **Dahlkemper's Jewelry Connection**

Runners-up: Dempsey and Baxter, Glass Growers Gallery

Best Gift Shop

Winner: **Glass Growers Gallery**

Runners-up: Ala Carte, Presque Isle Gallery & Gifts

Music and Entertainment

Best Band (Original)

Winner: **Eric Brewer and Friends**



ERIN PHILLIPS / JESSICA HUNTER

(Clockwise from top left) Winner of Best Family-Friendly Attraction is Presque Isle State Park, winner of Best New Band is Broke Boland's String Show, winner of Best Kid's Birthday Party Venue is expERIENCE Children's Museum, and winner of Best Music Venue is the Warner Theatre.

Runners-up: Smilo and the Ghost, Storms Within

Best Band (Cover)

Winner: **The Groove**

Runners-up: First To Eleven, The Goats

Best New Band (Last Two Years)

Winner: **Broke Boland's String Show**

Runners-up: Hot Mess, Battle Chapel

Best Singer/Songwriter

Winner: **Jess Royer**

Runners-up: Tyler Smilo, Erica Lynn

Best Hip-Hop Artist/Group

Winner: **MTV Canyon (posthumous)**

Runners-up: CEE Brown, Jonny Evans

Best Instrumentalist

Winner: **Eric Brewer**

Runners-up: Stephen Trohoske, Joe Porter

Best Vocalist

Winner: **Heather Nemenz (The Goats)**

Runners-up: Erica Lynn (Storms Within), Johnny Snyder (Fastfall)

Best Local Comedian

Winner: **Lisa Ann the Glam Ham**

Runners-up: Anthony Morelli, Aaron Forsyth

Best Club/Vinyl DJ

Winner: **Stephen Maynard**

Runners-up: Mark Eisert - Millennium Sound, DJ Sleepy Matt Sinnott

Best Special Event/Wedding DJ

Winner: **Millennium Sound Productions**

Runners-up: Stephen Maynard, DJ Sleepy Matt Sinnott

Best Indoor Playground/Trampoline Park

Winner: **Vertical Jump Park**

Runners-up: ASCEND Erie, We Rock The Spectrum

Best Kid's Birthday Party Venue

Winner: **expERIENCE Children's Museum**

Runners-up: Erie Zoo, Play Port

Best Radio Personality

Winner: **Lou Baxter**

Runners-up: Nat the Hat, DJ Bill Page

Best Radio Station

Winner: **90.5 WERG**

Runners-up: Happi 92.7, 94.7 BOB FM

Best Family-Friendly Attraction

Winner: **Presque Isle State Park**

Runners-up: Waldameer Park and Water World, Erie Zoo

People and Places

Best Local Entrepreneur(s)

Winner: **Jason and Nicole Lavery (Lavery Brewing Company)**

Runners-up: Jessica Schultz (Herb and Honey Bakery), Rebecca Styn (Blind Tiger Spirit Free Cocktails)



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Best Nonprofit

Winner: **The ANNA Shelter**

Runners-up: Shriners Children's Erie, WQLN/NPR/PBS

Best University

Winner: **Penn State Behrend**

Runners-up: Gannon University, Mercyhurst University

Best Public School

Winner: **Collegiate Academy**

Runners-up: McDowell High School, Fairview Elementary

Best Private School

Winner: **Mercyhurst Preparatory School**

Runners-up: Cathedral Prep, Erie Day School

Best Preschool

Winner: **Montessori in the Woods**

Runners-up: Erie Day School, Child Development Centers

Best Daycare

Winner: **St. Paul's Child Development Center**

Runners-up: YMCA, Child Development Centers

Best Local Elected Official

Winner: **Ryan Bizzarro**

Runners-up: Daria Devlin, Tyler Titus

Best Place for a First Date

Winner: **Presque Isle**

Runners-up: Werner Books & Coffee, Bar Ronin

Best Dog Park

Winner: **Scott Park**

Runners-up: Larry R. Fabrizi Dog Park, Harborcreek Community Park

Best Place to Take Out-of-Town Visitors

Winner: **Presque Isle State Park**

Runners-up: Erie Zoo, Lavery Brewing Company

Best Place to Work

Winner: **Erie Insurance**

Runners-up: Erie Federal Credit Union, The ANNA Shelter

Best TV Anchorperson

Winner: **Sean Lafferty**

Runners-up: Eva Mastromatteo, Brianna Malone

Best Local Weatherperson

Winner: **John Stehlin**

Runners-up: Tom Divecchio, Tom Atkins

Best Local Sportcaster

Winner: **Mike Fenner**

Runners-up: John Lydic, Tom Reisenweber

Best Local TV Station

Winner: **Erie News Now**

Runners-up: JET 24, WQLN/NPR/PBS

Best Lawyer

Winner: **Seth Trott**

Runners-up: John Knox, Nikki Page

Best Place to Camp

Winner: **Sara's**

Runners-up: Sparrow Pond, Camp Sherwin

Best Wedding Venue

Winner: **Warner Theatre**

Runners-up: Goodell Gardens, Erie Art Museum

Best Staffing Agency

Winner: **Career Concepts**

Runners-up: All Seasons Staffing, Just In Time Staffing

Best Bed and Breakfast

Winner: **Spencer House Bed & Breakfast**

Runners-up: The Victoria on Main, Elsie Greer House

Home and Services

Best General Contractor

Winner: **Great Lakes Construction**

Runners-up: Leon Construction, Matt Krol Construction

Best HVAC

Winner: **Wm. T. Spaeder**

Runners-up: Nerthlings, Agnello

Best Electrician

Winner: **Wm. T. Spaeder**

Runners-up: Knorr Electric, Stonehouse

Best Residential Roofer

Winner: **Angelos Roofing Inc.**

Runners-up: Leon Construction, Mark Bean & Son

Best Plumber

Winner: **Wm. T. Spaeder**

Runners-up: Motsch Plumbing, TJ's Plumbing & Heating

Best Real Estate Agent

Winner: **Max Rankin**

Runners-up: Adell Lane, Eric Hammill

Best Pet Daycare/Pet Boarding

Winner: **Peninsula Pups**

Runners-up: Lucky Dog Stay & Play, Paws 'n Claws

Best Place of Worship

Winner: **St. Peter's Cathedral**

Runners-up: Grace Church, Elevate

Best Insurance Agency

Winner: **Erie Insurance**

Runners-up: State Farm, Allstate

Best Dry Cleaner

Winner: **Thrifty**

Runners-up: Chido's Dry Cleaning, Frank's



JESSICA HUNTER / CONTRIBUTED

(Clockwise from top left): Winner of Best Elected Official is Ryan Bizzarro, winner of Best Lawyer is Seth Trott, winner of Best Local Entrepreneurs are Nicole and Jason Lavery of Lavery Brewing Company, and winner of Best Place to Camp is Sara's Campground.

JESSICA HUNTER / ERIN PHILLIPS



(Clockwise from top left) Winner of Best Place to Adopt a Pet is the ANNA Shelter, winner of Best Local Hardware Store is Kraus Department Store, and winner of Best Insurance Company is Erie Insurance.

Runners-up: NLM Media, Werkbot Studios

Best Advertising Agency
Winner: Epic Web Studios

Runners-up: LAMAR Advertising, 814 Digital

Best Local Hardware Store
Winner: Kraus Department Store

Runners-up: Ferrier's True Value, Hobbs Lumber & Hardware Inc.

Arts and Culture

Best Museum
Winner: Erie Art Museum

Runners-up: expERIENCE Children's Museum, Watson-Curtze Mansion/Hagen History Center

Best Art Studio Space
Winner: Performing Artists Collective Alliance (PACA)

Runners-up: 1020 Collective, ClaySpace

Best Dance School
Winner: Long's School of Dance

Runners-up: Little Dance Studio, Dafmark Dance

Best Podcast
Winner: Spotlight 814

Runners-up: 2 Man Happy Hour, The Metal Family Experience

Best Local Author
Winner: Justin Dombrowski

Runners-up: Brenna Thummler, Tommy Link

Best Filmmaker/Videographer (Individual)
Winner: John Lyons

Runners-up: Jessica Yochim Taylor, Jesse James

Best Local Instagram
Winner: VisitErie

Runners-up: Erie Reader, Lake Erie Life

Best Production Company
Winner: Project Algerine

Runners-up: MenajErie Studio, Tethered Immersive

Best Painter (Art)
Winner: Jamie Keim-Pomorski

Runners-up: Kaitlyn Page, Lara Schaff

Best Photographer
Winner: Jessica Hunter Photography

Runners-up: Katie Mihalak, R. Frank Media

Best Community Theater
Winner: Erie Playhouse

Runners-up: Performing Artist Collective Alliance (PACA), Footlights Theatre Performing Arts Center

Best Sculptor
Winner: Evan Everhart

Best Veterinarian

Winner: Dr. Dan Pierce (Glenwood Pet Hospital)
 Runners-up: Dr. Kevin Ramey (Animal Ark/Kingdom), Dr. Jenny Grimshawe (Millcreek Animal Hospital)

Best Place to Adopt a Pet
Winner: The ANNA Shelter

Runners-up: Erie Humane Society, Because You Care

Best Dog Groomer
Winner: Joy Riley

Runners-up: Paws 'n Claws, Peninsula Pups

Best Dog Trainer
Winner: Scholars in Collars

Runners-up: Peninsula Pups, Lake Erie K9

Best Interior Designer
Winner: Andrea's Interior Design

Runners-up: Vintage & Soul Home, Blue Lily Interior Design and Remodeling

Best Pest Control
Winner: Big Foot

Runners-up: Ehrlich, General Exterminating

Best Auto Repair Shop
Winner: Bianchi Honda

Runners-up: Nolan's Pine Ave, Smith's Collision

Best Estate Sale or Auctioneering Company
Winner: Mel and Tee's

Runners-up: C & C Auctions, Wheeler Auctions

Best Bank/Credit Union

Winner: Erie Federal Credit Union
 Runners-up: PNC Bank, Widget

Best Law Firm
Winner: MacDonald, Illig, Jones, and Britton

Runners-up: Knox, McLaughlin, Gornall & Sennett, MP2 Placidi and Parini

Best Landscaper
Winner: Dahlkemper Landscape Architects & Contractors

Runners-up: Weiss Earley, Chaffee Landscaping Inc.

Best Cleaning Service
Winner: Keep It Clean

Runners-up: Poppins Cleaning Service, Presidential Cleaning

Best Moving Company
Winner: Tri State

Runners-up: Frank's Movers, Zoom Movers

Best Realty Company
Winner: Agresti Real Estate

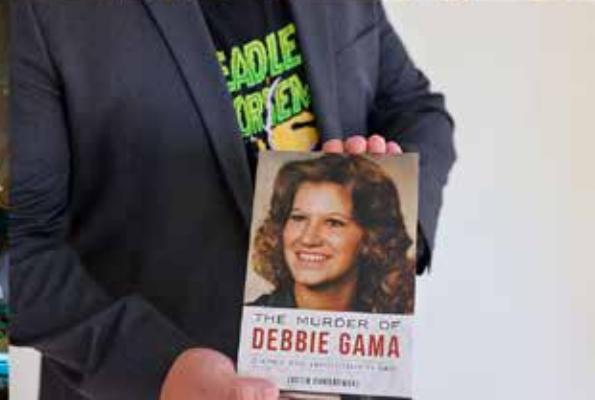
Runners-up: RE/MAX Real Estate Group, Marsha Marsh

Best Home Decor Shop
Winner: Trellis

Runners-up: a la Carte, Traditions Unlimited

Best Web Developer
Winner: Epic Web Studios

JESSICA HUNTER



(Clockwise from top left) Winner of Best Museum is the Erie Art Museum, winner of Best Photographer is the Erie Reader's own Jessica Hunter Photography, winner of Best Local Author is Justin Dombrowski, and winner of Best Art Gallery (along with Best Boutique and Best Gift Shop) is Glass Growers Gallery.

Runners-up: Erie Otters, Erie Roller Girls

Best Public Park

Winner: **Presque Isle State Park**

Runners-up: Frontier Park, Asbury Woods

Best Hiking Trails

Winner: **Asbury Woods**

Runners-up: Wintergreen Gorge, Presque Isle State Park

Best Yoga Space

Winner: **YogaErie**

Runners-up: Dreaming Tree Yoga, Infinite Love Yoga

Best Fitness Club

Winner: **YMCA**

Runners-up: Motivate Studios, FitnessU

Best Outdoor Adventure Activity

Winner: **Presque Isle**

Runners-up: Waldameer Park and Water World, Erie SeaWolves

Best Bowling Alley

Winner: **Greengarden Lanes**

Runners-up: Eastway Lanes, Rolling Meadows

Best Athletic Competition

Winner: **Turkey Trot**

Runners-up: Presque Isle Triathlon, Erie Roller Derby

Best Golf Course

Winner: **Whispering Woods Golf Club**

Runners-up: Lawrence Park Golf Course, Beechwood Golf Club

Runners-up: Adam Stempka, Madison Rose

Best Art Gallery

Winner: **Glass Growers Gallery**

Runners-up: 1020 Collective, City Gallery

Best Theatrical Performer

Winner: **Adele Crotty**

Runners-up: Kate Neubert-Lechner, Ryan Dawley

Best Heritage Festival

Winner: **Zabawa Polish Festival**

Runners-up: Greek Festival, Irish Festival

Sports and Recreation

Best Team to Root For

Winner: **Erie SeaWolves**

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January 15 & 23 January 16 & 24
January 17 & 25 January 18 & 22

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CURTIS JONES III BRENNA THUMMLER RYAN DAWLEY KARALYN HEADLEY

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THURS / FRI / SAT Doors 7 PM Show 7:30 PM
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PERFORMING ARTISTS COLLECTIVE ALLIANCE 1505 STATE STREET, ERIE, PA 814-616-PACA

EVENTS

Jazz Up Your January

Erie Art Museum hosts drop-in dance class taught by Sara Little

BEGINNING THURSDAY, JAN. 15

It's January; it's a new year; we have a collective holiday hangover; it's cold outside. We all want to find something to do that is new, exciting, fun... something that doesn't involve cheese or cost too much money, right? Well, Erie dance legend Sara Little and the Erie Art Museum (EAM) have got something planned to shake up your January – All That... Jazz! is an adult musical theater dance class that “is truly open-level – great for absolute beginners, seasoned movers, or anyone else in between,” promises the class description.

The drop-in workshop requires no registration and is only 10 bucks per class. Each class includes a warm-up that is touted as “a mini workout with a Broadway twist.” Little will teach a choreographed combo set to a contemporary Broadway (or Off-Broadway) tune. You can drop in for one class or take them all. All materials are included and there will be

modifications and support for people at all levels – attendees will be encouraged to move at their own pace.

Little has 40 years of dance experience in Erie, beginning at the Little Dance Studio. She has a strong background in tap, jazz, ballet, lyrical, modern, hip-hop, swing, contemporary, and Irish step. She has been teaching for over 28 years, instructs people of all ages and experience levels, and strives to have classes that are inclusive and full of energy.

If you're looking for a way to overcome the post-holiday, winter doldrums then these classes may be just the ticket. Little and the EAM invite you to “shake off the winter blues, get moving and rediscover joy through dance.” No experience? No problem. – Edwina Capozziello

Thursdays from Jan. 15 through Jan. 29, 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. // Erie Art Museum, 20 E. 5th St. // \$10 // Ages 16+ // More info: erieart-museum.org/dance-class

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Local dance legend Sara Little teams up with the Erie Art Museum to bring low-stress, low-commitment, affordable dance classes to folks of any experience level.

Unconventional Four-actor Cast Sings Its Way Through *The Last Five Years* at PACA

Two decades later, break-up musical still strikes a chord

BEGINNING THURSDAY, JAN. 15

Every now and then a musical takes to the stage and speaks to audiences with so much truth and honesty about the human condition that, de-

spite its release at a fixed moment in time, its popularity endures for decades to come. One such show is *The Last Five Years*, written by Jason Robert Brown, the story of a break-up told from two perspec-

tives – one linear and one in reverse – which premiered in Chicago in 2001.

Since then it has been the subject of numerous productions, including a movie adaptation, and now the Performing Artists Collective Alliance (PACA) is bringing this live theater production to Erie for the latter half of January.

Of course, in true PACA-like fashion, the organization has put its own spin on the production, casting two Jamies and two Cathys, whereas the roles are typically only played by one person each.

Each actor at PACA will play against both counterpoints, which means there will be four different versions of the show.

“This is such a unique experience, because all four of us bring something completely different to our characters,” said Ryan Dawley (40 Under 40 Class of 2024), who plays one of the Jamies, and is also the artistic director at PACA. “We make

different choices, which changes the dynamic of the relationship you see on stage.” Joining him are Brenna Thummler (40 Under 40 Class of 2023) and Karalyn Headley, while the other Jamie will be portrayed by Curtis Jones III.

“I highly recommend seeing it at least twice to experience the different performances,” Dawley advised. The 90-minute show, which is almost entirely sung through, is under the direction of Emma Richardson, while Zachary Hoffman serves as assistant director. According to Dawley, the band under musical director Rhonda Berlin is absolute “fire!” – just like the conflagration of hope and love he and his castmates will be presenting to audiences from the stage.
– Cara Suppa

Thursday through Saturday performances at 7:30 p.m., Sunday performances at 2 p.m. // PACA, 1505 State St // \$25 // For tickets and info: tickets.eriereader.com



The cast of PACA's latest production *The Last Five Years* is untraditional: with two people for each lead, whereas the roles are typically only played by one person each. This allows for four unique versions of the show, one you won't want to miss.

NEW EXHIBITS OPEN IN JANUARY

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King's Rook Club: More than Music

January's schedule full of concerts, trivia nights, speed dating, gaming and more

CONTINUING THURSDAY, JAN. 15

The King's Rook Club is known as a hot spot for local and national touring music acts, but in January and February they are switching it up a bit and giving Erie residents more reasons to beat the cabin fever and head to the Rook for some fun times.

– Larry Wheaton

Thursday, Jan. 15 at 8 p.m. is Trivia Night hosted by Adam Holquist. This game night is hosted by Erie's own three-time *Jeopardy* winner and resident trivia guru. Test your knowledge with a chance to win a \$25 cash prize and two drink tickets.

Friday, Jan. 16 at 7 p.m. Tropicadelic brings their island-themed vibes, along with Jarva and Damn Skippy. This six-piece from Cleveland has become a staple on the touring jam circuit and always makes a stop in the 814.

Thursday, Jan. 22 is Karaoke and Game Night. If you are in the mood to belt out your favorite tune, fancy yourself a chess player, or are feeling nostalgic for some Magic the Gathering – this night of fun promises to keep you going until last call.

Friday, Jan. 23 at 9 p.m. Skeleton Drive, a folk emo outfit from Ohio comes to the Rook with local acts Common Spence, Joe Porter, and Answer (featuring Cy Eihwaz). This night of acoustic vibes is a perfect laid back night.

Thursday, Jan. 29 at 9 p.m. is a night for all you Hobbits to leave the Shire and come down to the Rook

for a *Lord of the Rings* lecture and film screening. Fans are encouraged to wear cozy pajamas during a short lecture given by Jonny Purvis before watching the first film of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. There will be hot cocoa available, as well as a themed menu catered specifically for the movie.

Saturday, Jan. 31 at 9 p.m. is an open jam led by local guitarist and leader of indie jam band Kactai Ethan Foulk, who will play along with anyone who wants to hone their skills.

Thursday, Feb. 5 at 9 p.m. is a night for games and fun, with a chess tournament and music by DJ Topaz. Test your skills for a chance to win some cash and drink tickets – players will be matched up and compete for prizes. Also, this evening will be a special Valentine's Day holiday Paint and Sip, hosted by Kristina Dabrowski (Particular Ideas).

Friday Feb. 6 at 9 p.m. throws it back with Disintegration: a Tribute to the Cure. This Rochester-based cover band will play all your favorite songs from the godfathers of goth, The Cure. Opening the show will be local act Sanis, with Rochester-based DJ Ben Frasier spinning records between the bands.

Thursday Feb. 12 (Upstairs) is Mystic Mingle: A Valentine's Speed Dating Experience. With only two days remaining before Valentine's Day, attendees have a chance to find a special someone before the big day. This is being brought to The Rook by From The Ashes Promotions



The King's Rook Club isn't just for concerts this month (although they offer plenty of those as well). Try out a game night of chess, put together a trivia team, or give speed dating a go, as the well-loved Erie club expands its offerings.

who will pair you with the most compatible match based on your sign-in sheets. If you already have a loved one, you will be able to personalize your own valentine for them. This is a LGBTQIA+ friendly event.

Thursday Feb. 12 (Downstairs) at 9 p.m. After finding a date from upstairs, head downstairs to view the

second installment of *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. Hosting the event with a mini-lecture before the showing will be Jonny Purvis once again, with a post-viewing Q & A hosted by Dee Elle.

For more info or tickets to these events, visit tickets.eriereader.com





SACRED PATHWAYS

art exhibit

Explore our January Theme, *Seeing Through the Darkness*, with the work of local artist, Gary Cardot.

Art Open Weekdays
10:00 A.M. until 3:00 P.M.

An Art Gallery Reception will be held on *Sunday, January 18 at 7:00 P.M.*

With our featured artist available, and artwork available for purchase.

Followed by a candlelight service, *Evening Echoes*, at 8:00 P.M.

At the Cathedral of St. Paul
134 W 7th St. Erie, Pa 16501
cathedralofstpaul.org



EVENTS

Stay Muddy in 2026 with Erie ClaySpace

Ceramic arts studio in PACA building posts winter schedule

CONTINUING MONDAY, JAN. 16

For many of us, the new year brings with it the desire to learn something new, to venture out and try something a little different, or to get back to something that we loved long ago. If you're looking for an outlet for your New Year's urge, look no further than Erie ClaySpace. The community ceramics studio in Downtown Erie has posted a new schedule of classes and there is plenty in store for January and February.

Executive Director Caelin McDaniel says, "We're really leaning into accessibility and welcoming new folks into the studio." To that end, there are a whole host of beginner ceramics classes this month. Offerings for newbies include a single session called "Try It! Beginner Wheel Throwing," and "4 Week Intro to Handbuilt Ceramics." These are in addition to their more advanced classes and recurring "Pottery Date Night" and "Sip & Spin BYOB" events.

In February, Clayspace is offer-

ing a Galentine's Day event, inviting you to gather your best gals (or treat yourself!) for a one-of-a-kind Mug-Making Class. Whether you're crafting a mug for your waffle syrup or your fourth cup of coffee, it's the perfect way to celebrate your inner beautiful tropical fish (*Parks and Rec* fans know). Channel Leslie Knope and make a custom mug (friendship forever, clay edition).

Or think two people, one wheel, a little creative chaos, and lots of muddy fun. Bring your significant other, your mother-in-law (bold choice), your situationship, or that mysterious and attractive stranger you met last week. Expect muddy hands, questionable coordination, and lots of laughing. Admit it, you're thinking of the movie *Ghost* now. Erie ClaySpace is ready to accommodate and says, "For this event only, we encourage all the Ghost/Patrick Swayze/Demi Moore references you've got – we'll even snap a pic for Instagram if you so desire." In case you need any extra incentive, the studio is also offering a limited time promotion:

CAELIN MCDANIEL



Check out the upcoming slate of classes offered by Erie ClaySpace, located within the PACA building. Whether you're a beginner, a seasoned pro looking for some practice, or on a first date: Clayspace has a spot for you.

10 percent off any multi-week classes in January or February.
– Edwina Capozziello

Classes from Jan. 16 through Feb. 15 // Various times and prices // For tickets and info visit: erieclayspace.com // General questions can be answered at info@erieclayspace.com

Who's Hungry?

Erie Restaurant Week is back and better than ever

BEGINNING THURSDAY, JAN. 22

After weeks of holiday preparations, big meals, and full houses, the new year is upon us with new appetites to satisfy. Turn your resolutions into reservations at some of Erie County's most delicious dining establishments with the return of Erie Restaurant Week from Jan. 22 through 31.

Celebrating its sixth year, Erie Restaurant Week is put on by VisitErie to "support local flavor and the people behind it." January is typically the month when our diverse catalogue of area restaurants experiences the least traction with diners. This event encourages our community to get out there and try something new – further incentivizing its importance with a giveaway.

The event has shown a steady increase in participating restaurants since its inception in 2020. In 2025, VisitErie had a total of 64 restau-

rants participating, offering specialized menus and "limited-time creations designed to surprise and delight." This year, 72 restaurants will be contributing towards Restaurant Week's biggest year yet.

VisitErie's Director of Communications Christine Temple shared her excitement regarding the upcoming event: "Watching local restaurants feel supported and celebrated is incredibly fulfilling. When we hear that diners have tried a new spot for the first time, or rediscovered an old favorite because of Erie Restaurant Week, it's such a great feeling."

Whether it's breakfast, lunch, or dinner, each time you dine at one of the participating restaurants means a chance to win one of five \$100 Visa gift cards. Every receipt documented is an entry to win. To enter, text ERW26 to 202-988-0446 and

JESSICA HUNTER / ERIN PHILLIPS



This year's Restaurant Week, presented by VisitErie, is bigger and better than ever. Featuring over 70 spots, it's never been easier to support local eateries during this historically slow time in the restaurant industry.

follow the prompt. Receipts must be shown in their entirety, including the date of your purchase. Winners will be chosen at the end of the week.
– Cassandra Gripp

Thursday, Jan. 22 through Saturday, Jan. 31 // For more information on participating restaurants or giveaway details, visit: visiterie.com/restaurant-week/

Erie Reader Book Club: January 2026

The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida by Shehan Karunatilaka

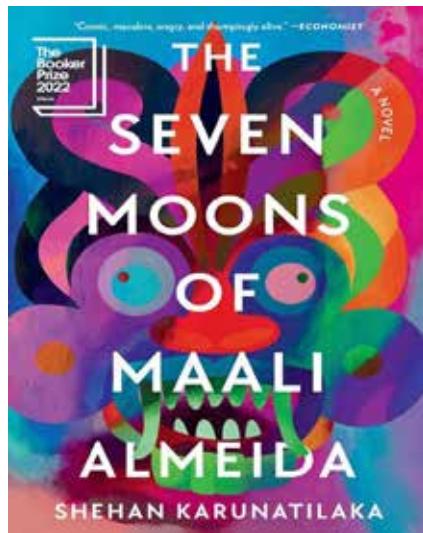
SUNDAY, JAN. 25

The Erie Reader Book Club will be reading and discussing the novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* by Shehan Karunatilaka in conjunction with the Best of Erie issue.

In selecting a novel that matches our 'Best Of' theme, we often look to those that have won a prestigious award or prize. Last year's selection was Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, which won the National Book Award for Fiction in 2011. This year's choice follows suit with Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, which won the 2022 Booker Prize.

The story follows Maali Almeida, a Sri Lankan war photographer who has been murdered and wakes up dead in what appears to be a celestial visa office. With no idea who killed him – the list of suspects is long – he finds that even in the afterlife his time is running out.

Over the course of just one week (which the book defines as seven moons), Maali will be able to travel



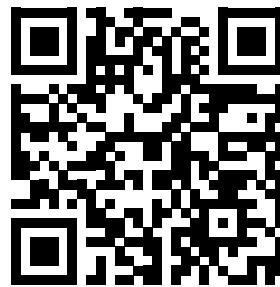
between the afterlife and our world to accomplish the seemingly impossible: solve the mystery of his own death while also leading his loved ones to a set of photographs that, if released, will expose the truths behind the Sri Lankan Civil War. –Ally Kutz

1 p.m. // Werner Books and Coffee, 2608 Liberty St. // Free to join, cost of book not included // For more info: wernerbooks.com

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NEGATIVE WORLDS

"LOW RESOLUTIONS" BY NICK WARREN



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Get in Loser, We're Going to the Theater

Mean Girls hits the mainstage at the Erie Playhouse

BEGINNING FRIDAY, JAN. 30

Cady Heron thought she'd seen it all, growing up in the African savanna, but nothing could have prepared her for the cliques and chaos of an

American high school. Join Heron as she navigates the social status quo and infiltrates "The Plastics" and their leader, Regina George, in the Erie Playhouse's mainstage production of *Mean Girls*.



CONTRIBUTED

Don't put the Erie Playhouse in your burn book; they're just getting started in 2026 with their version of the hit musical based on Tina Fey's cult classic, *Mean Girls*. Join the Plastics (Tobeigh Ingram, Maddie Penpek, and Gina Ghamo), pictured here in rehearsals along with the rest of the cast in February.

An instant classic and true representation of teenage life in the 2000s, Tina Fey's *Mean Girls* was a major box office success starring Lindsay Lohan, grossing \$130 million worldwide. In 2017, a musical adaptation of the highly-quotable story hit the stage with music by Jeff Richmond and lyrics by Nell Benjamin, later entering the Broadway scene in 2018.

Scenic Shop Manager and Director Brendan Daugherty (40 Under 40 Class of 2024) has been involved with the Erie Playhouse for 12 years, designing sets for countless productions. *Mean Girls* will mark his third directing credit, following *Freaky Friday* in 2019 and *The Shawshank Redemption* in 2024.

He expressed excitement at the opportunity to bring this widely-loved show to the Erie community: "I grew up with the movie and also thought the musical seemed like a lot of fun. It's got great music and dance numbers, funny lines, and a lot of different moving pic-

es."

This show has several cast members making their debut, including Rebekah East (Ms. Heron/Mrs. George), Giovanni Natalie (Aaron Samuels), Bryson Berkowitz, Silas Fromyer, Josh Herrera, Alison Jones, Aaron Maracci, Karla Merritt, and Madison Wager – all ensemble.

"They are a very talented group of people and it's been a pleasure to work with them." Daugherty remarked.

Featuring iconic songs like "Meet the Plastics," "World Burn," and "Someone Gets Hurt," this show is certain to keep the crowd entertained. Due to some adult content and language, *Mean Girls* may not be suitable for younger audiences. – Cassandra Gripp

Fridays and Saturdays, Jan. 30 through Feb. 15 at 7:30 p.m. // Thursday, Feb. 12 at 7:30 p.m. and Sundays, Feb. 8 and Feb. 15 at 2 p.m. // Erie Playhouse, 13 West 10 St. // \$20-30 // For tickets and info: tickets.erieplayhouse.com

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Erie Philharmonic Gallops into the New Year with Copland's *Rodeo*

Program celebrates American contemporary classical works

SATURDAY, JAN. 31

The Erie Philharmonic is curating 2026 with a January concerto of American contemporary classical works, featuring Aaron Copland's *Rodeo*. In performance, the concert showcases George Walker's *Lyric for Strings*, Randell Thompson's *Symphony No. 2*, and Samuel Barber's *Violin Concerto* featuring Alexi Kenney as featured soloist.

"He's one of the most interesting composers ever, but he was very much influenced by the modernists like Stravinsky and Schoenberg," Erie Philharmonic Music Director Daniel Meyer recalls about Copland's musical influences for *Rodeo*. His other ballets, including *Billy the Kid* and *Appalachian Spring* had mass appeal for popular audiences with the ingenuity and energy of a modernist masterwork. "With *Rodeo*, you've got these old cowboy tunes mixed with brilliant orchestration, rhythmic vitality, and the simplicity of American folk music. This specific cocktail somehow resonated with many audience members over the years."

Copland and Stravinsky both incorporated other art forms into their compositions, specifically dance. Stravinsky's collaboration with Vaslav Nijinsky on the choreography for *The Rite of Spring* famously shocked the classical music and dance circles during its 1913 premiere in Paris. For *Rodeo*, Aaron Copland worked with Agnes de Mille early in her career as a dancer at the American Ballet Theater, staging it specifically for the Ballet Russe de Monte-Carlo. De Mille would go on to choreograph the Broadway smash hits *Oklahoma*, *Carousel*, and *Brigadoon*.

The influence of fellow composers also extends to George Walker, who became the first Black composer to win the Pulitzer Prize for Music for *Lilacs*. Fifty years before Columbia University's recognition, Walker was a student at the Curtis Institute of Music, where he studied piano under Rudolf Serkin. *Lyric for Strings* was dedicated to his grandmother, Melvina King, and premiered in 1946 under the direction of Seymour Lipkin.

For Meyer, programming Copland, Thompson, Walker, and Barber in the same concert was intentional, as their musical connection as contemporary American composers extends beyond their eras. Walker and Barber were classmates in Rosario Scalerò's composition class at the Curtis Institute and would remain friends throughout their professional careers. Randall Thompson would also serve as one of Barber's teachers at Curtis, and Walker would continue his studies in composition under Copland's mentor Nadia Boulanger.

"Barber composed *Adagio for Strings*, and *Lyric for Strings* is a kindred spirit," Meyer explains. The sheer beauty and lyricism, the ability to create music with this gorgeous, unfolding melody with beautiful harmonies – it's quite special and serves as a nice foil to some of the more rhythmically driven and energetic pieces."

Every composition in this program is a kindred spirit, as these composers all deliver a distinctly American voice in the world of classical music. – Thomas Taylor

7:30 p.m. // Warner Theatre, 811 State St. // \$17-\$63 // For tickets and info: eriephil.org



The Erie Philharmonic kicks off 2026 with a concerto of American contemporary classical works, featuring Aaron Copland's *Rodeo*, among others, and violin soloist Alexi Kenney.

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Show a Swell of Support for the Bayfront Maritime Center

13th annual Ales for Sails event

FRIDAY, FEB. 6

The weather may not be shipshape but savor the winter winds – while cozy, indoors, and peering onto the bay – raise a glass in support of the Bayfront Maritime Center (BMC) at their annual Ales for Sails fundraiser.

With a mission since 1998 to design and implement engaging, hands-on, maritime-themed educational, vocational, and recreational opportunities for the community in a universally accessible waterfront facility, the BMC's unique programs create access to the water for everyone. "Ales for Sails is our largest fundraiser each year and it helps provide the funding needed to continue our programs each sailing season. The majority of the funding will go towards two main initiatives in 2026 – our award-winning EASE program (Erie's Adaptive Sailing Experience) which is the only adaptive sailing program in the state, and our Community Boating Program which includes sailing, kayaking, and

canoeing lessons," said Andrea Baker, Ales for Sails event coordinator.

The center is also unique in that it is currently run entirely by volunteers such as their dedicated board, and Baker, whose enthusiasm and passion is to the brim. Baker is also quick to credit this year's event sponsors who are helping keep things afloat – Lincoln Recycling, Sirco Industrial Supply, Lake Erie Trucking, St. Francis Ushers Club, MacDonald, Illig, Jones & Britton Attorneys, Presque Isle Yacht Club, and Millennium Sound Productions.

She said the brewers this year will have a fun time competing as guests receive a voting chip to be placed at the station for their favorite brewery. "This event would not be possible without the amazing support of the local breweries who continue partnering with us year after year. While the lineup of competing brewers has changed some since the beginning, I'd like to thank the 10 breweries

CONTRIBUTED



Support the Bayfront Maritime Center's mission while enjoying the best local brews during the annual fundraiser Ales for Sales.

participating in 2026 – Erie Ale Works, Nostrovia Brewing, Lavery Brewing, Black Monk Brewery, Erie Brewing, Poverty Knob Farmhouse Ales, Twisted Elk Brewery, Five & 20 Spirits and Brewing, and John Russell Brewing."

Attendees needn't know starboard from stern as Baker emphasizes it is a casual and relaxed atmosphere with live music, pho-

to booth, hors d'oeuvres by Cali's West, and basket raffle. Guests also receive a commemorative tasting glass and samples from each brewery but the event is known to sell out so snag tickets soon. – Gretchen Gallagher Durney

6 to 9 p.m. // Bayfront Maritime Center, 40 Holland St. // 21+ // \$60 // For tickets and info: bayfrontcenter.org

Winter Discovery Day Presents a Different Way of Loving Presque Isle

Ice fishing, dog sledding, snowshoeing, and more

SATURDAY, FEB. 7

As we settle into winter along the bright, snowy lake, we're often gifted a picturesque cold-weather landscape. And next month, many local and seasonal activities will too reveal their hidden beauty. Hosted by Presque Isle Partnership, the annual Winter Discovery Day celebrates many family-friendly seasonal activities. Beginners can try their hand at fishing atop frozen waters with equipment provided by S.O.N.S. of Lake Erie. For Presque Isle Partnership, many of these traditional winter experiences are offered as a bridge to their warmer weather counterparts.

Additional family-friendly events for curious outdoorsfolk include a meet and greet with the Red Sky Working Siberian Sled Dogs. This Fairview-based recreational mushing team offers a demonstration of the speed and power of their athletes. A few of the offerings are

weather-dependent, including ice fishing and the beginner snow shoe experience. This planned activity allows attendees to experience snowshoeing along nearby trails with DCNR Environmental Educational Specialists.

Hot chocolate will be available for purchase at the Rotary Pavilion, along with bites to eat. And the Presque Isle Lighthouse, which is also offering warm beverages, will be showcasing their own brand of winter charm with an open house. Guests may browse the house museum and gift shop to learn a bit of local history, enjoy a cozy concoction, and get creative with a craft for Valentine's Day.

Additionally, the Tom Ridge Environmental Center is offering discounted admission to the Big Green Screen Theater Special. Showtimes for *Wings Over Water*, *Superpower Dogs*, and *The Last Reef: Cities Beneath the Sea* will be an alternative way for attendees to

PRESQUE ISLE PARTNERSHIP



A visit to Presque Isle shouldn't be just for the sunny days on Erie's calendar – the wintertime offers plenty of opportunities to explore, try a new activity, and get to know our state park in a different season.

support and explore Presque Isle.

For those of us in the north, winter can be a blessing or a bane. And often that leaves us wondering if we'd best enjoy our day cuddling in blankets or layering up the sweaters to enjoy a crisp moment outdoors. However, Presque Isle is a year-round experience. And Winter

Discovery Day 2026 is a great reminder of the beauty of this season. – Erica Stewart

11 a.m. to 2 p.m. // Presque Isle State Park, Waterworks Area (Rotary Pavilion & Shelter #1), 301 Peninsula Dr. // Suggested Donation of \$3 // More info: discoverpi.com

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Gumshoe Delivers on Wild West Adventures

Brenna Thummler's latest graphic novel gets the stamp of approval

By: Nick Warren

There's someone wreaking havoc on the institution dearest to you ... and you've just been mistaken for them.

That's hard enough to imagine dealing with as an adult. But for Willa, an 11-year-old girl with dreams of being a mail carrier, it's something she needs to get to the bottom of – lickety-split.

Gumshoe is the latest graphic novel from the Erie-based cartoonist Brenna Thummler. Released on Jan. 13, 2026, the book follows the character Willa as she tracks down the infamous Two Gum Tilly through modern-day Arizona.

A smart, shy girl with a true affinity for the postal service, Willa loves sending letters. The stamps, the paper, the anticipation – she appreciates them on a higher level. Much to her dismay however, the outlaw known as Two Gum Tilly has been on the run, stealing mail for years.

When Willa herself is mistaken for Tilly, she joins forces with the Gumshoe Gang. This group of lively, like-minded peers is bent on pursuing the bandit as well. While overcoming her shyness, Willa comes out of her shell, with the help of the girls, in a fun-filled adventure packed with absurd and colorful moments.

"I think this book to me was such a testament to self-growth," Thummler asserted. "Watching how far I myself have come." Thummler noted that she "really wanted to give the characters in this book the chance to experience joy."

With its technicolor landscapes, Wild West cosplay, and empowering friendships, *Gumshoe* delivers on fun. Bright in both palette and tone, it's Thummler's most lively and amusing graphic novel to date. Balanced and easily accessible, this middle-grade Wild West escape story doesn't sacrifice the author's trademark thoughtfulness and sincerity.

"I feel like a lot of the kids' books nowadays that we're reading are pretty true to life," Thummler stated. "People are really starting to write about a lot of big problems that kids face, which is incredibly

important and is the reason that I wrote the *Sheets* series in the first place." Thummler reasoned that "while that is so important, it's also so important to allow kids to know what happiness and adventure are and not grow up too quickly, and I think this book is at its core an escape and an absurd adventure."

As the follow-up to the successful *Sheets* graphic novel trilogy, *Gumshoe* does have some big cowboy boots to fill. The much-loved coming-of-age tale about ghosts and laundry served as a defining point in Thummler's career, with the deluxe edition topping out at over 1,000 pages. While ultimately hopeful, *Sheets*, *Delicates*, and *Lights* all have an air of melancholy at their core.

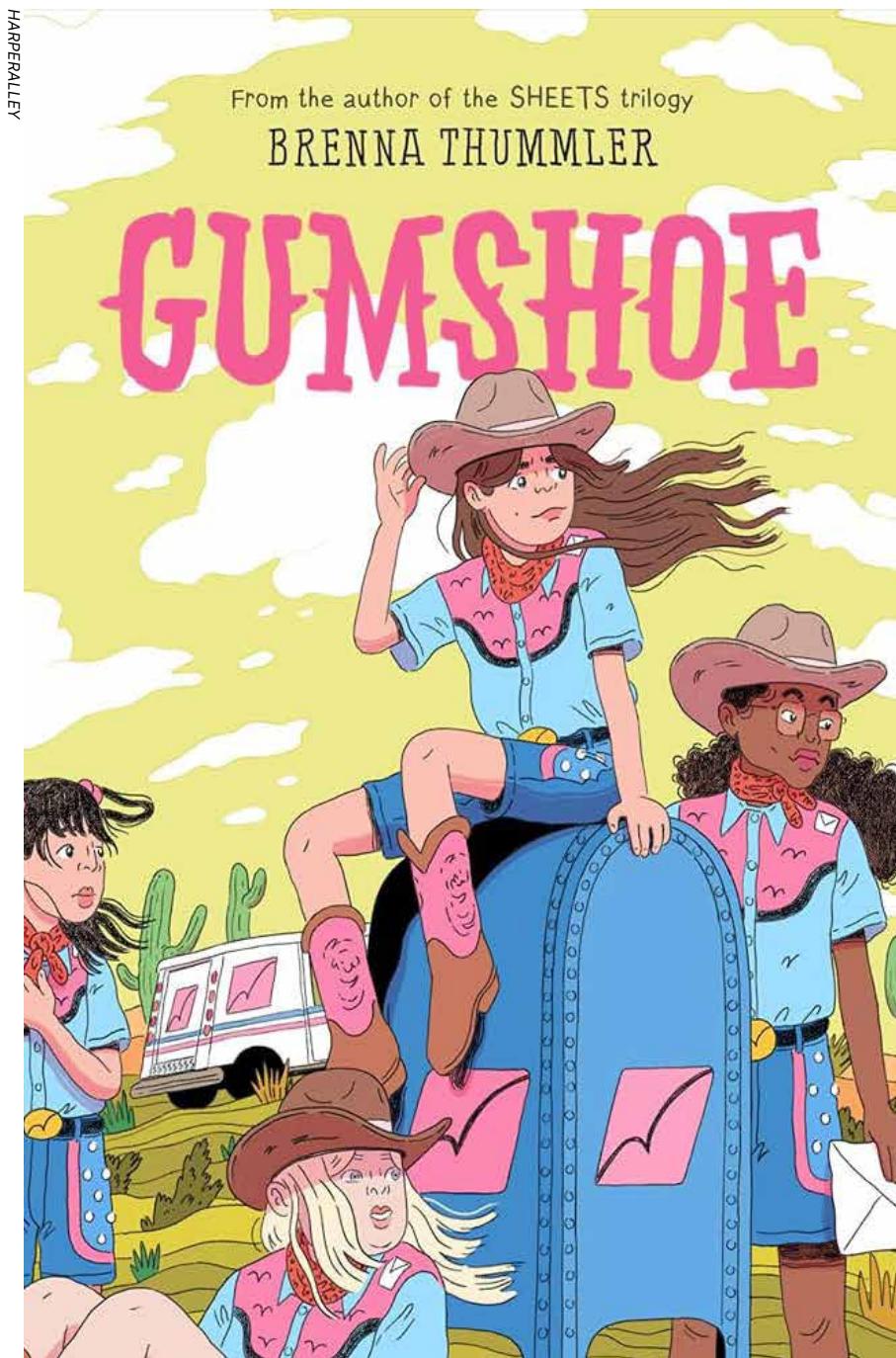
"I spent so much time of my life working on these books that were very sad," Thummler noted. "I feel like they reflected a lot about where I was in my life and the transition from college into the real world and facing a lot of problems at that age."

"I think there will be a lot of cross-over," she wagered. Because I think at the core of my writing, regardless of the tone, there are these young girls who are really struggling internally and afraid to face and externalize their fears."

"At their heart, they are still girls trying to figure themselves out and that hasn't gone away."

Gumshoe, though, is certainly not without its sincerity or struggles. Its passionate protagonist has to overcome her own social anxieties to be true to herself and win the day. With a foundation that's honest, it's balanced out by a storyline that's at times both madcap and animated.

The titular Gumshoe Gang helps drive the story as well, inspiring the main character and drawing her out of her comfort zone. This rang true to Thummler's own experiences even into adulthood. "I pull a lot from people I know like my friends who are so different from me and how much they've sparked my life and changed who I am as a person," she said. "So it was so important for Willa to meet this wacky gang of



The latest graphic novel from Erie-based writer and artist Brenna Thummler hit bookstores on Jan. 13. *Gumshoe* tells the story of a postal-service obsessed tween who has a friend-filled caper in the present-day American Wild West.

girls who are so different from her – so loud, so energetic, and who are going for what they want, and not necessarily letting their problems stand in the way."

The book also looks markedly different from its predecessors. Specifically, the color palette is brighter and more intense, illustrating the almost-foreign sense of wonder palpable in the western

United States. "It's been so great to not have to use the same color palette. You don't even know," Thummler laughed.

Far from the autumnal town of *Sheets*, similar to Thummler's nearby hometown of Meadville, *Gumshoe* is set in the fictional Arizona town of Stony Lonesome. "If you're stuck in this one town it does feel very monotonous and

JESSICA HUNTER



Brenna Thummer, an alum of Erie's 40 Under 40 in 2023, recently added *Gumshoe* to her canon of published work which also includes the graphic novel trilogy *Sheets*, as well as the art for an adaptation of *Anne of Green Gables*.

so to be able to capture an entirely new place was great," admitted Thummler. To prepare for the new scenery, the author took a road trip to the southwest with her mother, taking reference photographs and experiencing the environment first-

evening plans to be an immersive event keeping with the theme of cowgirls and the post office.

Werner's Jennifer Allen is helping to organize activity stations like stamp coloring and letter crafting, complete with a mock post office

With its technicolor landscapes, Wild West cosplay, and empowering friendships, *Gumshoe* delivers on fun. Bright in both palette and tone, it's [Brenna] Thummler's most lively and amusing graphic novel to date.

hand. "It truly felt like I was stepping into a different country because Arizona is so different from what I'm used to," Thummler explained. "I felt like I was experiencing a different place for myself, and I was able to put that into the book and make it more fun and bright."

A Real Release Hootenanny
Wednesday, Jan. 28

In celebration of the book's release, there will be a themed launch party at Werner Books.

"It was really important for me to make this so much more than just a book signing. Like I don't want to pull people out into the cold in January just for me to put my name in their book," Thummler jokes.

In addition to book signings, the

box and a photo booth.

In addition to custom drink flights from the cafe, there will be live music by the Buttermilk Falls Gang. Perfectly echoing the tone of the book, the local quartet was hand-picked by Thummler after she worked with guitarist and vocalist Lacey Keck at the Academy Theatre in Meadville.

Guests are encouraged to dress up in their most appropriate Wild West and/or postal attire.

"It's about giving people a fun time and celebrating the story and making it mean something more to them."

5 to 7:30 p.m. // Werner Books, 3608 Liberty St. // Free // All Ages // For more information, visit wernerbooks.com/events



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- John's Wildwood Pizzeria II
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- Main Street Cakery

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- Oasis Pub & Tiki Bar
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- Triple D's Tasty Grill
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- Two45 Water Grille
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Logan B & Dirty Leaf*The Middle Road*

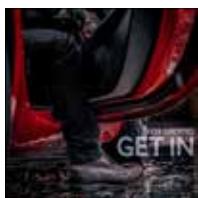
Self-released



Consider the curse of the jam band – studio albums often fall short of live performances. Although Grateful Dead were often criticized for lackluster full-length releases, missing the spontaneous groove found on tour, one can easily absorb the excellent songwriting and musicianship found on those platters. No doubt Logan B & Dirty Leaf manifest their best selves while feeding off the energy of live audiences. However, these tracks highlight threads within their sound with a clarity and depth akin to Sly & the Family Stone tracks. Logan Battin's vocals stagger between Levon Helm at their most focused and Frank Zappa at their most playful. Soulfulness from his keys hint at Leon Russell or Brent Mydland. The locked-in groove of the rhythm section boldly manifests Bernard Purdie, Sheila E., and Tito Puente. Prominent horns create their own Tower of Power with ska undertones, giving listeners the luxury of brass solos. Guitars attentively wind and wander, brightening with versatility while providing extra drive to already strong rhythms. Basslines ribbon throughout with solid but understated fluidity. Backing vocals push through like Meatloaf's Ellen Foley with harmonica punctuating with Paul Butterfield Blues enthusiasm. "Stumble," "One More Day," "Hard to Say," and "No Time to Wait" hit with great grooves to hold you over until catching their next live show. – Melissa Sullivan Shimek

Fox Grotto*Get In*

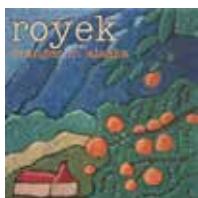
Self-released



With *Get In*, Erie rockers Fox Grotto make a solid album debut with their inspirations worn on their sleeves. Hailing from Erie, the members of Fox Grotto had been playing music together for nearly two decades as Falling Hollywood before reforming in 2021. Consisting of Matt Flowers (guitar, vocals), Nick Taylor (guitar, vocals), Bill Frackowiak (bass), and Brad Triana (drums), the band rekindled their momentum in Erie's local music scene, releasing singles "Day at a Time" and "Sputnik" in 2021 and 2022, respectively. After years of live show tinkering, the band entered GCR Audio in Buffalo, New York, to craft their first contained body of work. The result is *Get In*, released in Dec. 2025. At a lean 40 minutes, Fox Grotto delivers an effort that encapsulates their weatherworn approach. While listening to the 11 tracks, the project evokes much of the early 2000s garage/indie rock soundscape: despondent lyrics meld with earwormy riffs in a manner that calls back to *Hot Fuss*-era Killers. With songs like "Corduroys," "Bricks and Bones," and "Dark Anatomy," the quartet crafts a perfect middle ground between thrashing hard rock and singalong melancholy. Although this group has been a local presence for years, *Get In* presents a revitalized band that sounds ready for greater recognition. Whether listening on a streaming service of choice or attending a nearby show, Fox Grotto is ready for you. – Nathaniel Clark

Royek*Oranges in Alaska*

Self-released



Beautifully filled with infectious energy and introspection, the debut full-length from Royek is an album worth repeating. The local indie-rock quintet has been active for a few years now, having released a three-song demo in the summer of 2024. This record clocks in at 29 minutes over seven tracks, a quick listen with a *King of the Hill* reference to boot. The band's namesake, bassist and vocalist Matt Royek, is joined by guitarists Kevin Coatoam and Eric Larson, keyboardist Jessica Larson, and drummer Jon Teater. The opening track "Mind/Body/Soul" starts things off lightly, and continually ramps up until the passionate chorus of "In Your Back Pocket." The picked bass intro of "Home Movies We'll Never Make" is gorgeous, underscoring more uptempo complaint rock you can dance to. Things shift gears with Coatoam's "Into the Storm," a bluesy 6/8 scorcher. "32nd Annual Apology Tour" is probably my personal favorite, embodying the lyrical alt-rock central to the band, and containing maybe the greatest local guitar solo I've heard recorded. Larson and Coatoam's guitar work over the record serves as an overall highlight, with some real moments of vocal brilliance from Royek (ferverently shown on tracks like "Moon") abounding. The closer "All In" plays like a Ted Leo banger, with some smoking guitar solo tradeoffs. – Nick Warren

Optimistic Apocalypse*Life Comes When Death Does*

Self-Released



It's been three years since McKenzie Sprague's (40 Under 40 Class of 2025) last album as Optimistic Apocalypse, and based on some of the songs that comprise *Life Comes When Death Does*, one could reasonably assume that things haven't been easy for the homegrown artist. But unlike some songwriters who opt to wallow in their sadness, *LCWDD* feels shockingly hopeful, cementing Sprague's indie-folk (backed here by Brent Knight, Jennifer Meyer, and others) as some of the best coming out of Erie right now. *LCWDD*'s portrayal and acceptance of death as a natural part of our life cycle is a very fitting theme for Sprague's vivid, nature-centric lyricism, but it's not the only thing that makes this collection of psychedelic-folk songs stand out. Where 2022's *Above the Land* felt fluid and at times even ambient in sound, *LCWDD* forgoes the boygenius comparisons in favor of the work of numerous indie veterans, such as David Bazan and Modest Mouse on opening tracks "Oak Tree" and "Have You Noticed," respectively. It's hard to believe Sprague is only 28 considering her unique aesthetic, subject matter, and long-term presence in our art scene, but with any luck, *LCWDD* is another step towards a prolific career for one of Erie's most promising musicians. – Aaron Mook

814 Matters Turns Up the Volume on Local Voices

A podcast to spread positivity

By: Chloe Forbes

The 814 area code has become synonymous with the Erie area, weaving together people, places, and experiences into one numerical symbol. Although not everyone is cut from the same cloth – a new podcast is using that shared identifier to bring a positive message to people.

The *814 Matters* podcast was recently launched by co-hosts Anthony Peyronel and Mike Ruzzi, with two episodes now available online.

“Mike and I go way back,” Peyronel said of his relationship with Ruzzi. “We’re both from the Pittsburgh area, but we met pretty much our freshman year when we went to Edinboro.”

The two 412 natives quickly found their place in the 814 – and their voices, thanks to WFSE, the campus radio station.

After decades in the communications and marketing industry, though, Peyronel found that the media ecosystem had shifted, and while it gives people more options of what they want to listen to or stream, it isn’t entirely favorable.

“We have a very fractured media ecosystem and a big loss of localization, and I think that’s particularly true in radio,” he explained. “Most local radio stations have been bought by larger chains

The 814 area code has become synonymous with the Erie area, weaving together people, places, and experiences into one numerical symbol. Although not everyone is cut from the same cloth – a new podcast is using that shared identifier to bring a positive message to people.

and I think technology was the driving force of that negative.”

He was quick to note that technology is also the enabling factor that allows him and Ruzzi to use a couple microphones and put their own podcast together, with the help of Christopher Lantinen and Ron Raymond at PennWest Edinboro who produce and provide voice tracks, respectively.

Likewise, the podcast is all about turning a negative outlook into a positive one.

“Mike has a thing about positivity,” Peyronel said. “Negative people bother Mike. He tries to be positive in his approach to his job, his life, that kind of thing, so I said, ‘Well let’s make that the focus of the podcast. Let’s talk to some of the most influential people who really have a posi-

CONTRIBUTED



Erie’s newest podcast *814 Matters* is hosted by Anthony Peyronel and Mike Ruzzi, recorded at the Edinboro Hotel Bar, and focuses on positive, locally-focused stories.

“...tive impact on the region.”

Given that Ruzzi has been a broadcast journalist in the area for 40 years and Peyronel has made connections through the communications field as well, the two decided to take advantage of the relationships they’ve made over the years.

In a sense, Peyronel said it’s almost a promotional endeavor, giving the microphone to the people and organizations that have brought pride to the area.

In the first episode, the two talked with Chris Clark, president of Saint Vincent Hospital. They discussed the Allegheny Health Network’s contributions to regional economic development, competition among health care providers, the status of the COVID-19 vaccine, and a deeper look into the personal life of Clark and whom he considers his mentors in Erie.

The second episode is with Carter Mook, police chief for Millcreek Township. In it, Mook discusses his time at Edinboro University, along with Millcreek joining the regional Police Athletic League program, and the police department’s upcoming agenda.

The episodes are typically taped live at the Edinboro Hotel Bar, taking Ruzzi and Peyronel back to their college roots. The Hotel Bar is the sponsor for the first season, which will have at least six episodes total.

Peyronel said a lot of things are still up in the air, like if they’ll be able to continue after the first season; but above all, he is, of course, positive.

“Of course we hope this is going to continue, that this will be successful,” he said, “We hope it will continue in the future.”

Episodes of 814 Matters can be found on Spotify and Apple Podcasts now.

Chloe Forbes is a local journalist. Reach her at chloe-forbes14@gmail.com.

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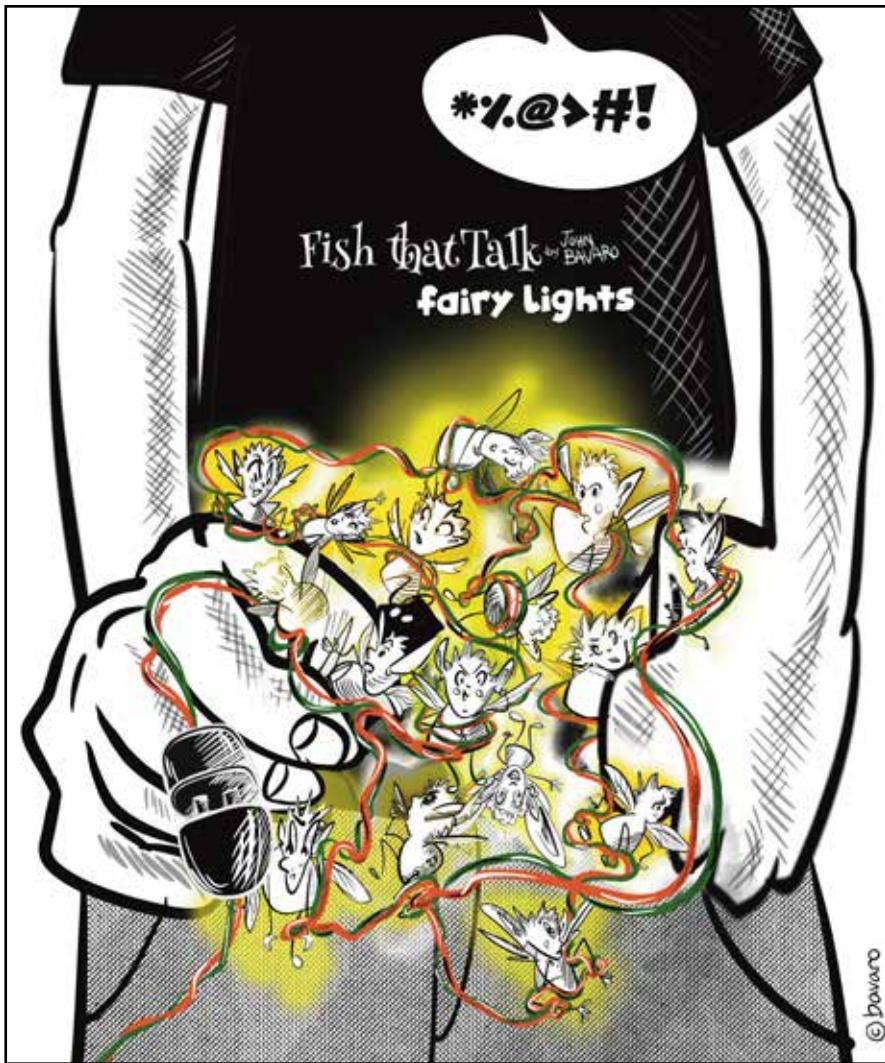
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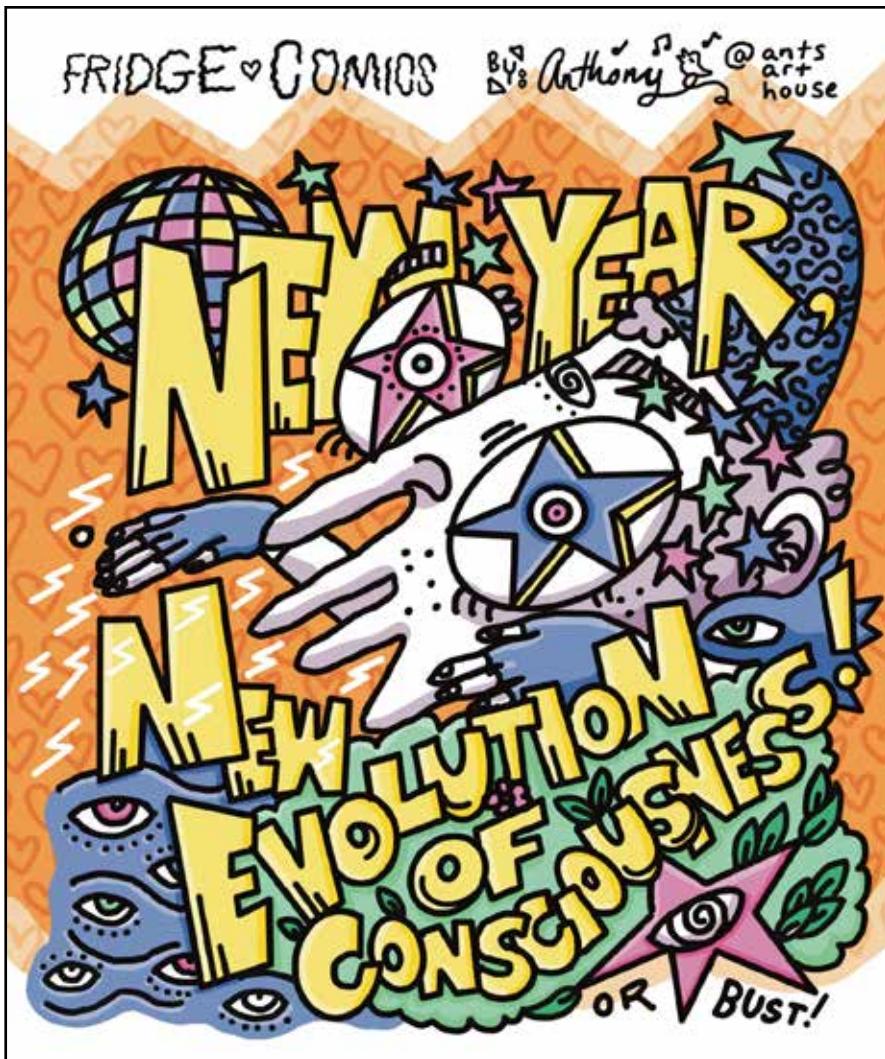
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JUST TOYIN' WITCHA — BY B. TOY



Marty Supreme is an Exhausting Experience



Keep your eye on the ball

Audiences watching the trailer for *Marty Supreme* might think that it's a typical sports movie or a rags-to-riches story about a young table tennis star. Those familiar with the works of Josh Safdie expected something very different. Like his previous films (*Good Time*, *Uncut Gems*), this is a tale about an unstoppable male ego on a collision course with the cruel winds of fate and the many people hurt in the crossfire. The result is two and a half hours of dizzying (sometimes too dizzying) filmmaking held together by an actor at the top of his game.

In 1952, Marty Mauser (Timothée Chalamet) is one of the best table tennis players in America. He is utterly focused on making it to the Tokyo championships and neither

his lack of money nor his girlfriend's (Odessa A'zion) unexpected pregnancy will deter him from that goal. In the months leading to the championship, Mauser finds himself in an increasingly chaotic series of predicaments related to his plans to invent a new type of ping pong ball, his affair with a former silent film star (Gwyneth Paltrow), and an incident involving a missing dog.

Much like the antiheroes of Safdie's previous films, Mauser finds himself in well over his head, mostly through his own impulsive choices, and the fun is watching him try to dig himself out of his own grave. Safdie's trademark frenetic editing and anxiety-inducing camerawork are in full force here, and Chalamet gives possibly his best performance as an unrepentant narcissist. The



unpleasant, often absurd situations in which he finds himself occasionally threaten to fall into full-blown farce. For Safdie fans, there is much to love here; others may find it too much to handle. – Forest Taylor

Directed by Josh Safdie // Written by Safdie and Ronald Bronstein // Starring Timothée Chalamet, Odessa A'zion, Gwyneth Paltrow, Kevin O'Leary, Fran Drescher, Tyler the Creator, Emory Cohen, Sandra Bernhard, David Mamet, Koto Kawaguchi, Geza Rohrig, Pico Iyer, Luke Manley, John Catsimatidis, Abel Ferrara, and Penn Jillette // A24 // 150 minutes // Rated R

The Mastermind Is a Unique Look at America

Smooth criminal



I always dread the deadline for my year-end top five because I know I'll never get to see every film I plan to watch before it arrives. This was doubly true in 2025 when I missed the newest film by my favorite working filmmaker. Although the deadline has passed, I was finally able to see Kelly Reichardt's *The Mastermind*, and while it didn't hit me as hard as her previous two films (*Showing Up* and *First Cow*), it still kept me hooked thanks to her unique view of the American outsider.

Set in Massachusetts in 1970, the film follows James Mooney (Josh O'Connor), an unemployed carpenter who is secretly hatching a daring heist: he and his accomplices plan to steal four paintings from a local art museum. His seemingly "master" plan falls apart quickly, and now Mooney must keep the stolen paintings hidden from his wife (Alana Haim) and sons and find a way to escape the police, all while social unrest seems to follow him everywhere he goes.



As a heist film, the plot has more narrative propulsion than Reichardt's usual fare while still maintaining her minimalist, shaggy dog storytelling. Its quirky side characters, dry humor, and pitch-perfect attention to period accuracy sometimes make it feel like her take on a Coen Brothers film. The heist may seem silly (stealing paintings for no reason other than to do it), but set against the turmoil of Vietnam-era America, Reichardt makes a grand statement. Having the privilege to tune out the unrest of the world does less to protect oneself than to turn one into an

aimless loner. Reichardt's protagonist embraces solipsism to a fault until the world crashes into him in the film's devilishly ironic climax. – Forest Taylor

The Mastermind is currently available on Mubi.

Written and directed by Kelly Reichardt // Starring Josh O'Connor, Alana Haim, Hope Davis, John Magaro, Gaby Hoffmann, Jasper Thompson, Sterling Thompson, Eli Gelb, Cole Doman, Javion Allen, Matthew Maher, Rhenzy Feliz, Bill Camp, and Amanda Plummer // Mubi // 110 minutes // Rated R

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MONTH OF JANUARY



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JANUARY 17

YOUTH SPORT NIGHT

7PM

PRESENTED BY FRWRD BRIGHTER FUTURES FOUNDATION SPORTS DIVISION



JANUARY 24

KIDS TAKEOVER

7PM

PRESENTED BY EXPERIENCE CHILDREN'S MUSEUM



JANUARY 30

3-2-1FRIDAY

7PM



JANUARY 31

STAR WARS NIGHT

7PM

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SCHOOL DAY GAME

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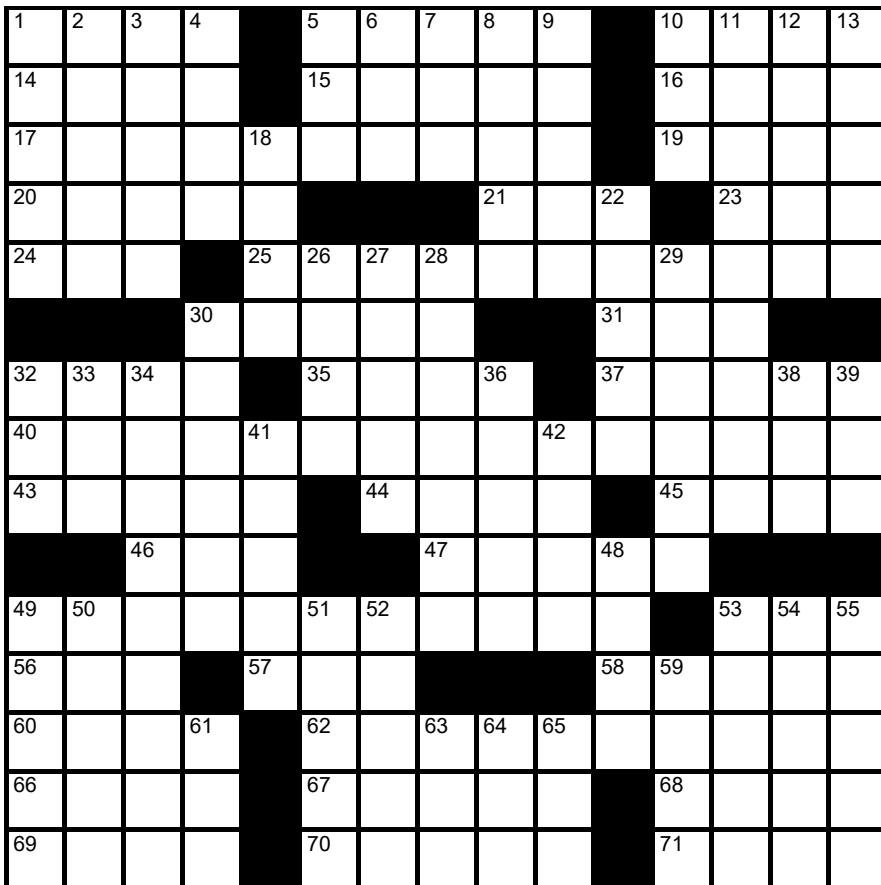
ZIPPER PULLS

1.31

LED RALLY TOWEL

FOR TICKETS AND MORE INFORMATION    [OTTERSHOCKEY.COM](http://ottershockey.com)

CROSSWORD



Across

- 1. First, second, or reverse
- 5. Castle barriers
- 10. Muesli bits
- 14. European capital city formerly known as Christiania
- 15. "Star Wars" android ___ Detoo
- 16. Burr/Hamilton showdown
- 17. Singer who complements the lead
- 19. Dame ___ Everage (Barry Humphries alter ego)
- 20. "The Road Not ___" (Robert Frost poem)
- 21. "Walk-___ welcome"
- 23. Charged particle
- 24. "Affirmative"
- 25. Pre-employment screening
- 30. ___ Taco (discontinued Good Humor-Breyers ice cream snack)
- 31. Blue Jays' prov.
- 32. Apollo 13 gp.
- 35. ___ bait (Oxford's Word of the Year 2025, referring to dubious online engagement tactics)
- 37. "Schitt's Creek" star Catherine
- 40. Available again, like a hot item
- 43. All confused
- 44. Coffee-brewing choice
- 45. Wine bottle sediment
- 46. Chewed stimulant familiar to Scrabble players

- 47. Right now
 - 49. 1980s movie starring Michael J. Fox
 - 53. Fedora, e.g.
 - 56. Ovine opinion
 - 57. Snub-nosed dog
 - 58. Mesoamerican staple crop
 - 60. Actress Miranda
 - 62. "I Want It That Way" group
 - 66. Santos of "Superstore"
 - 67. British racetrack locale
 - 68. Projection room spool
 - 69. Buccaneer's refrain
 - 70. Absolut competitor, informally
 - 71. "Free Willy" creature
- ## Down
- 1. "I ___ run!"
 - 2. Written test format
 - 3. Comparable
 - 4. Dramatic part
 - 5. Hawaiian ___ salad (noodle-based side dish)
 - 6. Gold, in Guatemala
 - 7. 4-wheel drive transport
 - 8. Debate subject
 - 9. Noise
 - 10. Keats poem
 - 11. Cassette
 - 12. High guy?
 - 13. Urban Dictionary content
 - 18. Ancient symbol of life, in 52-Down
 - 22. "Gin & Juice" rapper, familiarly

- 26. Insulated electrical cable
- 27. Holiday greeting that doesn't include an envelope
- 28. "A Rake's Progress" painter William
- 29. Wicked
- 30. Lunged toward
- 32. "Don't share any information" contract, for short
- 33. Farm animal?
- 34. Pacific Northwest cryptozoology subject
- 36. "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats" poet
- 38. Corned beef bread
- 39. "Six-pack" muscles
- 41. Eagerly devour
- 42. Hairstyle that uses hairpins
- 48. "Look ___ now!"
- 49. Wood traditionally used in pianos
- 50. 3-to-1, for one
- 51. They're sometimes blown
- 52. Country straddling two continents
- 53. Employment manager
- 54. Worshipper of Quetzalcoatl
- 55. Inventor Nikola
- 59. Prefix for nautical
- 61. Tic-tac-toe win
- 63. Bear, also in Guatemala
- 64. NBA center Manute who was 7'7"
- 65. "Didn't need to hear that!"



Answers to last puzzle



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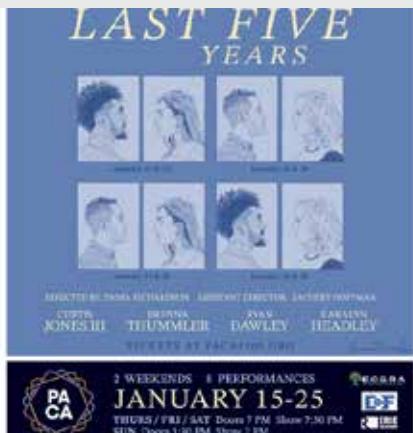
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Sun 2/09

ERC Valentine Prediction Run
@ 10am / \$20
8271 Barker Rd, Girard

Thu 1/15

Featured



The Last 5 Years
@ 7:30pm / \$25
PACA, 1505 State Street



Sat 1/17

Erie Otters vs. Saginaw Spirit
@ 7pm
Erie Insurance Arena

The Last 5 Years
@ 7:30pm / \$25
PACA, 1505 State Street

Wed 1/21

Featured



One Battle After Another | Program Preview [FILM 10|20]
@ 6pm / \$10-\$30
The 1020 Collective, 1020 Holland Street



Wed 1/28

Featured



If I Had Legs I'd Kick You | Screen-writing Meetup [FILM 10|20]
@ 7pm / \$10-\$30
The 1020 Collective, 1020 Holland Street



Sat 2/07

Race to Remember
@ 9:30am / Free-\$25
1135 Lake St, Girard

Tue 2/10

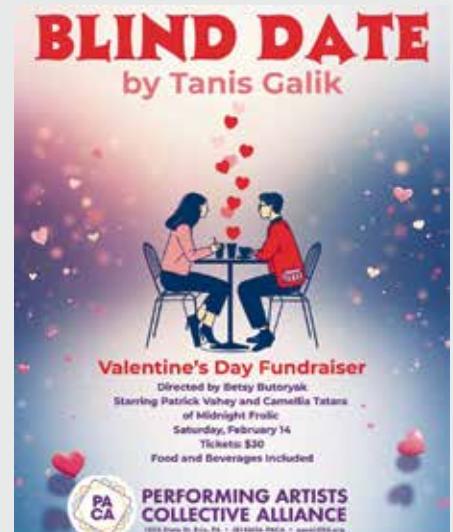
Food, friendship, and flavors from Down Under
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Watson-Curtze Mansion, 356 West 6th Street

Wed 2/11

Erie Otters vs. Owen Sound Attack
@ 7pm
Erie Insurance Arena

Sat 2/14

Featured

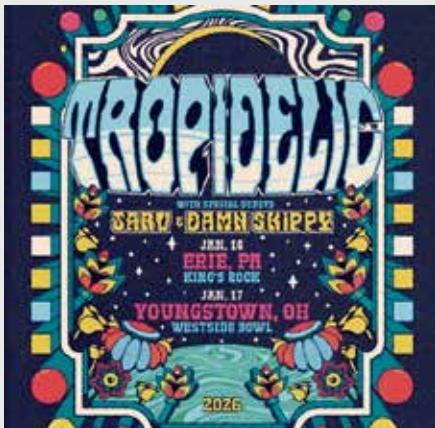


Blind Date: Valentine's Day Fundraiser
@ 6:30pm / \$30
PACA, 1505 State Street



Fri 1/16

Featured



Tropidelic w/ Jarv and Damn Skippy live at King's Rook Club
@ 6:30pm / \$28
King's Rook Club, 1921 Peach Street



Thu 1/22

The Last 5 Years
@ 7:30pm / \$25
PACA, 1505 State Street

Fri 1/23

Mercyhurst Lakers Hockey vs. Canisius Golden Griffins Hockey
@ 7pm
Mercyhurst Ice Center

The Last 5 Years
@ 7:30pm / \$25
PACA, 1505 State Street

Sat 1/24

Erie Otters vs. Kitchener Rangers
@ 7pm
Erie Insurance Arena

Mercyhurst Lakers Hockey vs. Canisius Golden Griffins Hockey
@ 7pm
Mercyhurst Ice Center

The Last 5 Years
@ 7:30pm / \$25
PACA, 1505 State Street

Sun 1/25

The Last 5 Years
@ 2pm / \$25
PACA, 1505 State Street

Fri 1/30

Erie Otters vs. Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds
@ 7pm
Erie Insurance Arena

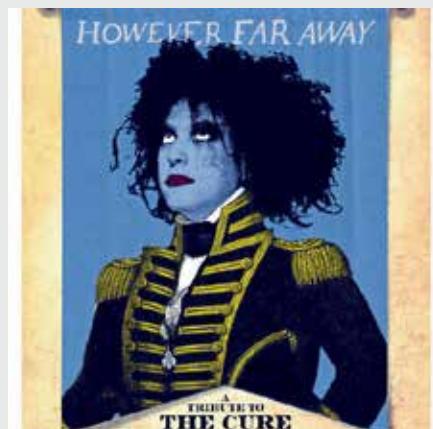
Sat 1/31

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Mercyhurst Lakers Hockey vs. RIT Tigers Men's Hockey
@ 5pm
Mercyhurst Ice Center

Fri 2/06

Featured



Disintegration a Tribute to The Cure + SANIS
@ 9pm / \$15
King's Rook Club, 1921 Peach Street



Do Not Call List MASQUERADE with Turtle Park, Velvet Waves and Deja Blue
@ 9pm / \$7
King's Rook Club, 1921 Peach Street

Calendar information is provided by event organizers. All events are subject to change or cancellation. This publication is not responsible for the accuracy of the information contained in this calendar.