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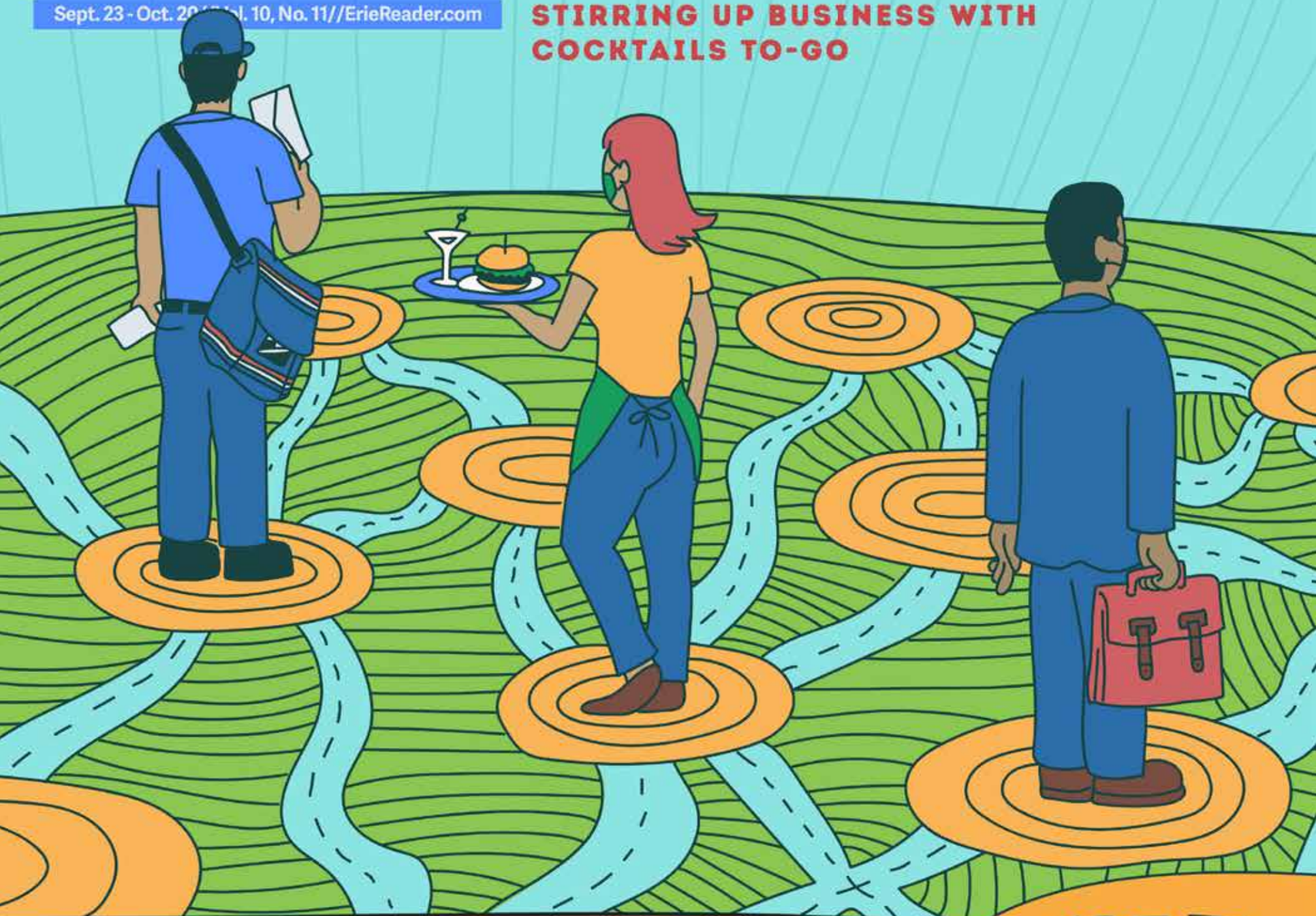
WHERE TO GO INDUSTRY, ENTERPRISE, AND ADAPTATION

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DURING COVID-19**

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Editors-in-Chief

Brian Graham & Adam Welsh

Managing Editor

Nick Warren

Copy Editor

Matt Swanseger

Contributing Editors

Ben Speggen

Jim Wertz

Contributors

Liz Allen

Mary Birdsong

Charles Brown

Jonathan Burdick

Katie Christ

Symoné Crockett

Chloe Forbes

Tommy Link

Hannah McDonald

Aaron Mook

Brad Pattullo

Dan Schank

Tommy Shannon

Melissa Sullivan Shimek

Ryan Smith

Jen Sorenson

Rebecca Styn

Cara Suppa

Forest Taylor

Bryan Toy

Photographer

Jessica Hunter

Intern

Simonique Dietz

Cover Design

Nick Warren

1001 State St. Suite 1315

Erie, Pa., 16501

contact@eriereader.com

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From the Editors

Local businesses aim to level up

Is life a game of chance or a game of skill? It would depend on who you ask, but most would agree it’s neither purely roulette nor purely chess. Instead, they might just say “it’s a grind.”

If you’ve ever played a role-playing game (RPG), you might be familiar with the term “grinding” — returning to an area you’ve already mastered to build up enough resources to tackle an area you haven’t. You collect them in the form of materials — items, weapons, armor, currency — and experience, which is applied toward better competencies and skills. With enough grinding, you just might be able to hold your own against the more daunting enemies and challenges to come. Of course, since the advent of the massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) such as *World of Warcraft*, it has become possible to buy fully upgraded characters and equipment outright with *real* money on sites like eBay. Others put in the (palm) sweat equity so you don’t have to — it’s almost like being born rich.

But as is often the case in fantasy, so it is too in reality. In our professional lives, few of us start as a Level 100 Wizard, just conjuring resources from the ether at will. We either grind for a while and advance, or just “keep grinding.” For those of us who *do* choose to proceed toward greater obstacles and the pursuant reward, we undertake the element of chance and place faith in our skills — like a game of the original RPG *Dungeons & Dragons*, it’s a series of dice rolls combined with real-time problem-solving and creative thinking. Business owners and entrepreneurs accept this and embrace this.

But what happens when the rules change? How have they reacted during a year when it seems every roll of the dice is coming up snake eyes? In some cases, quite well. In this latest adventure of the Erie Reader, we explore how local businesses of all classes and specializations have fought back against the insidious new coronavirus, using every resource and bit of ingenuity at their disposal. You’ll see how a local plastics manufacturer is actually *growing*, how a long-term care facility has come together as a family, and how local bars and restaurants have concocted compelling potions and elixirs to go. You’ll hear firsthand from those in personal services, dining and hospitality, and music and entertainment about the actions they’ve taken in the face of tremendous adversity.

We here at the Reader have been forced to make adjustments of our own, although our character class (Erie’s only independent alternative newspaper) and alignment (champions of all things local) remain the same. So while we narrowly missed the originally scheduled publication date of our annual “Industry, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship” (I2E) issue due to the onset of the pandemic, we’ve summoned up its spiritual successor in this edition. This time, though, we’re adding one important word to the mix — *adaptation*.

If we are all to survive and be our fittest, we must match our capabilities to our realities. Some have already fallen and others will fall — the campaign drags on and the rules change, and they haven’t always seemed fair. It’s been a grind. But with any luck, perhaps we can level up as a community before this is all over.

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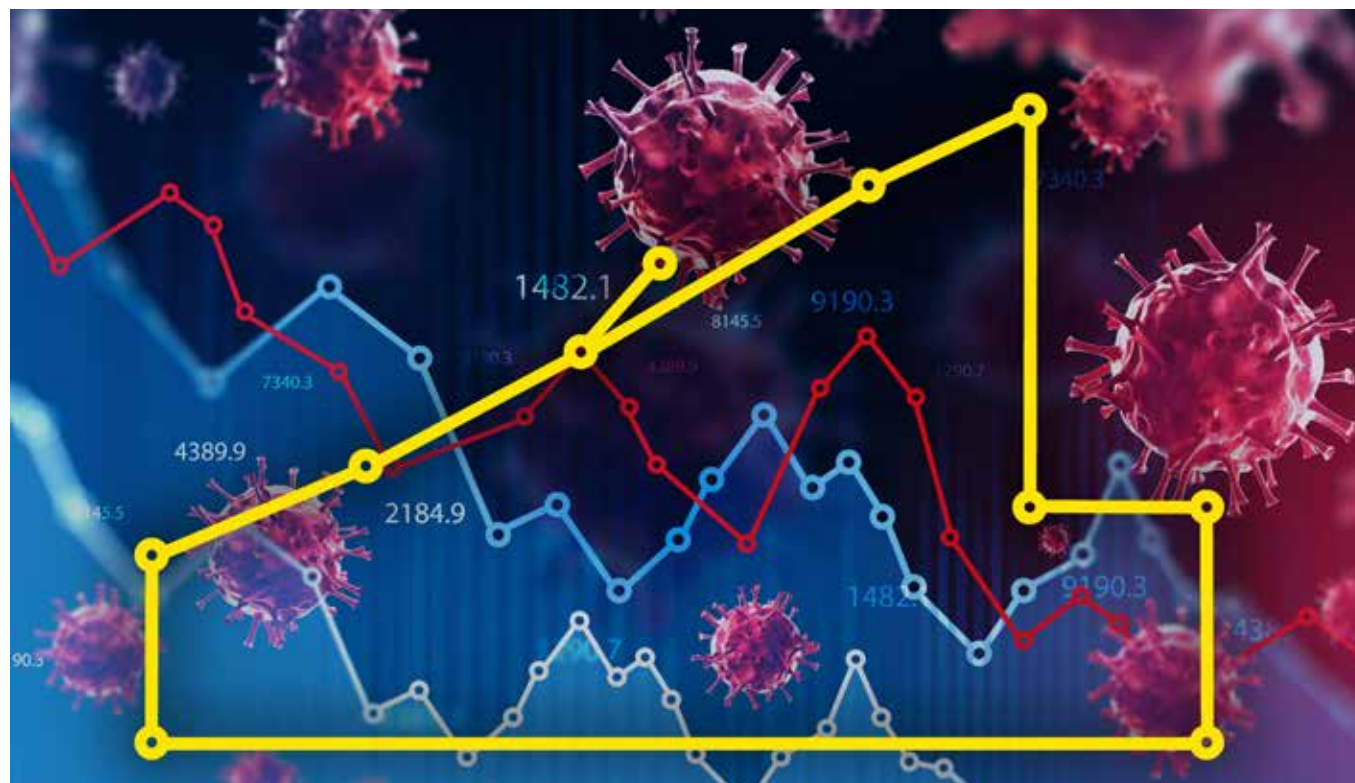
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Living and Making a Living Through the Pandemic

How COVID-19 is impacting our lives, the way we live, and our livelihoods



Since the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Erie County on March 18, case counts have had their ups and downs, although they've remained notably lower than other parts of Pennsylvania. Meanwhile, the local economy faces a long road to recovery, but it has begun to recoup some of the 22,000 jobs lost, especially in the decimated leisure and hospitality sector.

stitute of Erie and associate professor of economics at Penn State Behrend. "According to the government statistics, our total output nationally, what we call the real gross domestic product, fell by almost 32 percent in the second quarter."

That drop followed a 5 percent drop in the first quarter of the year, Louie adds.

"But things are improving slightly," Louie says, pointing to the decline of national unemployment, which has fallen to 8.4 percent with the addition of 1.4 million jobs in August. But GDP is just one way to measure the economy.

Adding jobs is one thing. Having consumers able — and confident enough — to make purchases is another.

Erie, like much of the rest of the country, has not been immune to the economic trauma of COVID-19.

"In the first four months, we lost almost 18 percent of our jobs, over 22,000 jobs," Louie reports. "But the good news is since April jobs have increased, and we've gradually added back."

Between April and July (local data is only available up to July), the Erie economy has added more than 8 percent of its jobs back.

He points to other good signs for Erie's economy and its recovery. Industrial production, he notes, is showing signs of improvement, meaning that the economy is "gearing up in terms of its output."

Additionally, the manufacturing sector, which, as Louie notes, in previous recessions "has faced lots of challenges," hasn't suffered as much as retail or leisure and hospitality, the "hardest-hit sector."

"During the first four months of the year, the worst part of the pandemic, they lost almost 10,000 jobs — that was about 70 percent of their employment," he adds.

Since April, however, the sector has added back about 5,000 jobs, offsetting about 50 percent of the losses in Erie.

By: Ben Speggen

By the time this story makes its way to my editor's desk, the numbers will be higher. Even more so by the time it is published.

Not just in the years to come but in the coming days, readers, upon seeing these numbers here, will likely pause to then reference their date of publication. "Oh, that's where we were then."

As of 12:30 p.m. on Wednesday, Sept. 16, six months to the day since Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf first put social distancing restrictive measures in place in the name of public safety and health to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention reported 194,092 COVID-19-related deaths in America. Total confirmed cases, to date, stand at 6.5 million.

To put it into global perspective: there are 330 million Americans living from sea to shining sea, making up just 4 percent of the world's total population. And yet the U.S. to date accounts for more than one-fifth of the worldwide total deaths from the novel coronavirus, which claimed its first reported American life on Feb. 29, 2020. The first case in Erie County surfaced on March 18, 2020, and the first death was recorded on April 23, 2020.

The confirmed total case count numbers follow a similar pattern, with the U.S. accounting for 6.5 million out of the world's 29.6 million, or 22 percent.

Reported deaths per day peaked on May 6, with 2,701 — 276 shy of the number of people who died during the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. The daily death rate then began to decline through the end of June. But as summer wore on, the numbers again rose, with the highest reported deaths in the U.S. since May occurring on Aug. 12 at 1,486.

But in April, before May's spike, the total confirmed death count in the United States surpassed what the nation experienced during the Vietnam War, a grim milestone that gave context to the mounting toll the virus was taking in months, not years.

Since then, the U.S. has lost more than two additional Vietnam Wars-worth of American lives and averages 9/11-sized death counts in single-digit spans of days.

Pennsylvania, with its 151,081 confirmed positive cases, ranks 12th highest amongst the states and territories. Nearly 8,000 have proven fatal, where the state ranks ninth overall.

Erie County, with 1,439 positive cases and 37 deaths confirmed, ranks 22nd out of 67 Pennsylvania counties in pos-

itive case count. It is the 15th most populous county.

These are the numbers of our nation, our commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and county, where we are now more than six months into the pandemic. We don't know when and how it will stop, but we do know they will increase. We also know that the toll of the COVID-19 pandemic isn't solely measured in lives, but also how we live as well as our livelihoods.

The Cost of Action

Initially, businesses deemed life-sustaining and/or essential remained operational in their spaces. Of the rest of the lot, those whose jobs afforded them the opportunity to do so began working from home. Those who couldn't, couldn't work and could only wait for further updates.

The Congressional Budget Office reported that from February to April, unemployment rates rose from 3.5 percent to 14.7, with 25 million more people filing for unemployment. Sectors supported by in-person interactions felt the impact more deeply. The hospitality and leisure sector lost a reported 8 million of its 17 million jobs.

"Nationally, we went into recession as of February," says Dr. Kenneth Louie, director of the Economic Research In-

DENISIMAGLOV / ERIE READER

Jobs being added back into the economy are aligning mostly with where the economy experienced losses, according to Louie, but the hospitality and leisure sector is adding jobs more quickly.

When envisioning a road to recovery while still on the pandemic's pathway without an end in sight, it may be tempting to look to recent history for guidance. That recent history would be the Great Recession.

Not entirely recession-proof — the Erie economy lost 8,900 jobs, or 6.6 percent — Erie weathered that storm better because of one of its advantages, Louie cites: its stable housing market. With relatively low housing prices without a boom experienced during growth, there simply wasn't as much to bust.

"The difference now with the pandemic is that, from a medical standpoint, the virus doesn't discriminate, really, irrespective of metro area, size, or economic structure or populations," Louie explains. "It has hit just about everywhere there is possibility of transmission."

Yet, lessons are still there to learn.

"We don't pay enough attention to debt levels and what economists might call over-leveraging," he says.

According to Louie, "We have to look at debt levels specifically to avoid over-leveraging — that is, over-extending ourselves at the individual level in terms of households who borrow more than they can sustain, and at the national level, the government level."

But short-term measures shouldn't remain long-term solutions, Louie cautions, and once the economy is stabilized, debt should be reined in.

Call it echoing or repeating; either way, history is now present: Like the Great Recession, the COVID-19 economic recession is schooling us in our inequities, Louie points out.

"Whether you look at it along ethnic lines or socio-economic lines, income bracket lines, the more vulnerable people sometimes unfortunately bear the brunt," Louie says. "We need to pay more attention to the disproportionate consequences by certain groups for inequity."

The last key lesson Louie believes we can learn from the Great Recession is

"the importance of swift government action."

"Whether it's providing fact-based, objective information so that people can make better decisions, or whether it's directing policies that will coordinate our responses, or whether it's providing assistance in the form of stimulus or unemployment benefits, whatever the policies are, swift government action, when it's a crisis of the national level, is crucial to help us get through the crisis collectively."

Because without an us, there is no economy.

Insurance in the Time of COVID

In a Feb. 17, 2019 feature for the Erie Times-News, Jim Martin reported that while no single restaurant ranked in Erie County's top 50 employers by volume, the group, as a whole, represented the No. 1 employment sector when accounting for both part- and full-time employees.

"In other words, more of us work in the restaurant industry than in any other part of the economy," Martin wrote.

In the same feature, it was reported that again Erie County's largest employer was Erie Insurance.

In March, Martin also reported that those more than 3,100 locally-based Erie Insurance employees would begin working from home throughout the pandemic. A date when they — and the nearly 6,000 Erie Insurance employees working across 12 states and the District of Columbia — would return to their physical offices was not then and has still yet to be determined.

"Our priority is to keep our employees safe and to keep our company fiscally healthy," says Tim NeCastro, Erie Insurance's president and CEO, who guided the adaptation to the work-from-home setting over the course of four days. "When we first decided we were going to send our workforce to a remote situation, I should note that followed many years of planning and tabletop exercises and even live-attempts to do it."

An early observation found that the pandemic affected certain areas of the company more than others. Rather than furlough employees, the company created a program to shift employees



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JESSICA HUNTER

with less or little to do to areas of the company where the volume of work had increased.

“We’re trying to do our best to make sure that employees are productive but not overwhelmed.”

The company has maintained its existing employee base, but internal moves and promotions created vacancies that led to 100 new hires. Erie Insurance had projected to hire closer to 600 new employees throughout 2020.

Due to COVID, the ribbon-cutting for the new building on its campus, a \$135-million investment, has been postponed and the schedule delayed two months. Originally, Erie Insurance expected to open the doors in August; NeCastro says the building will be ready for occupancy by the end of the year.

In addition to the campus growth, Erie Insurance had been projecting bottom-line growth, this year at 5 percent, but expects to finish less than 1 percent overall given the pandemic’s impact, according to NeCastro.

“Our industry is projected to shrink somewhere around 3 percent,” NeCastro explains. A solid year during bad times compared to the industry. He credits the company’s 95-year history in creating a strong surplus to “endure tough situations.”

Industry challenges vary. On the commercial side, businesses are shuttering their doors, meaning they’re canceling policies. Too, individual policyholders may be using their policies less and purchasing fewer policies.

To continue building relationships with their consumers, Erie Insurance announced a 5 percent rate reduction to policyholders. Other insurance companies issued checks to their policyholders, and after fielding phone calls from policyholders wondering where

Prior to COVID-19, Erie Insurance President and CEO Tom NeCastro had anticipated this \$135 million office building, located just east of Perry Square, to be buzzing with employees by now. Instead, 3,100 locally-based Erie Insurance employees continue to work from home, as they have since March.

their checks were — in addition to the rate reduction not offered by all other companies — Erie Insurance decided to double-down on their customers and cut checks, too.

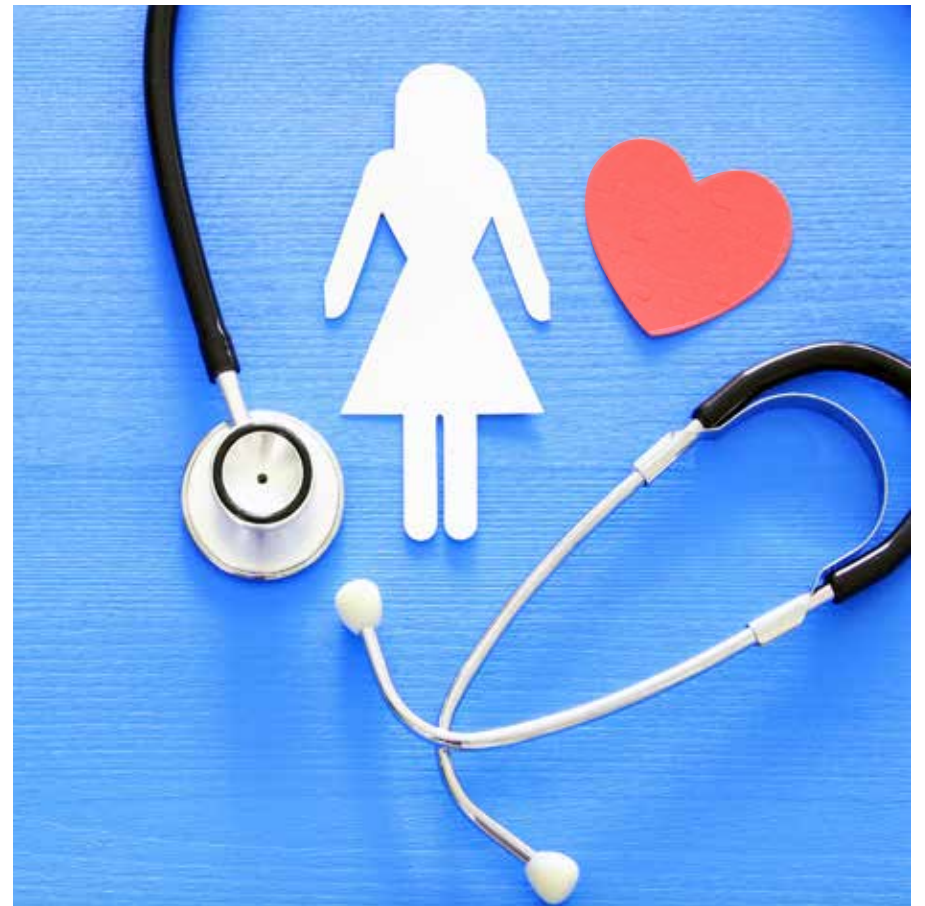
“We essentially returned \$400 million in premium to policyholders — \$200 million in cash, and \$200 million in reductions that we’re taking over the next 12 months,” NeCastro explains.

NeCastro remains optimistic about both Erie Insurance and Erie’s future — both that the end of the pandemic will come, and that Erie’s progress will continue.

“The hope I get is coming from other people, whether it’s my family members, my friends, and certainly our employees, our board of directors — the people that I’m around mostly do fully believe we’re going to come out of it stronger than ever — and think that coming out of it is eminent, like it’s not something that it’s a decade away, that it’s around the corner.”

He points to redevelopment efforts downtown that have endured, from the continued acquisition of property in the Erie Downtown Development Corporation footprint, to the recently awarded \$21-million grant for Bayfront development.

“If we could get some leaders together and shine a light back on the redevelopments, it would help give the community renewed hope that, yeah, this isn’t over,” he says. “The flame is still burning here, the pilot lights are on in, the gas is ready to go.”



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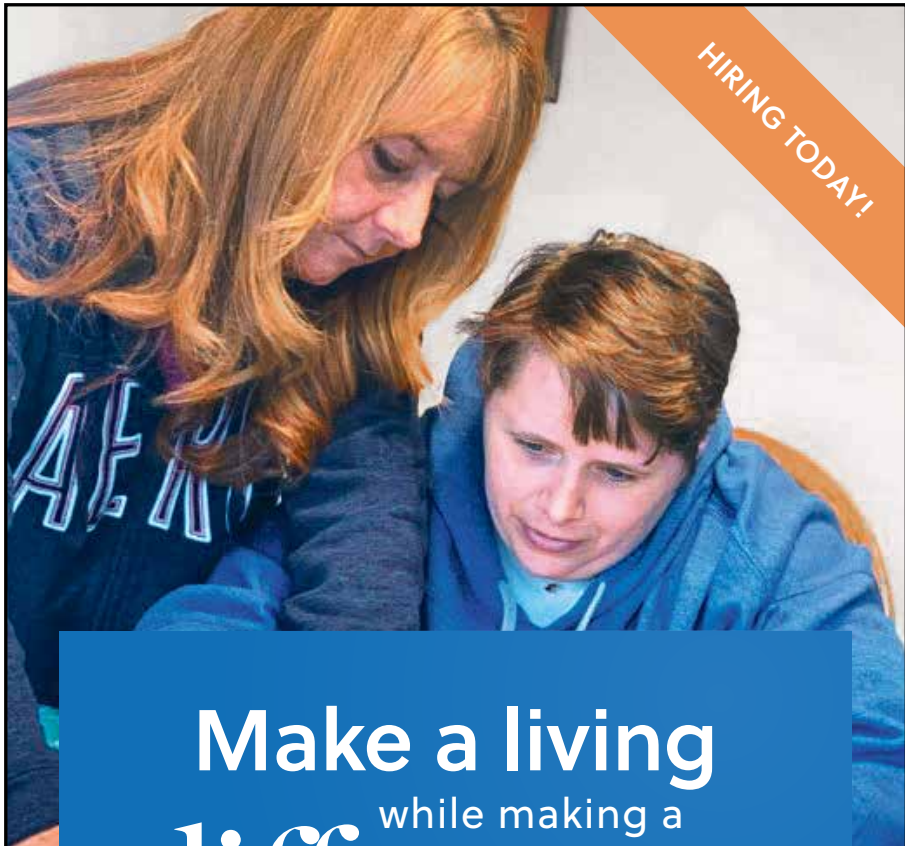
Medical Associates of Erie introduces
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Comfort Food in Crisis

"March 16 was the day that was probably the scariest day for Red Letter," says Annē Lewis, director of marketing of Red Letter Hospitality, which owns and operates The Cork 1794, The Skunk and Goat, and Molly Branigan's in Erie County, and three Core-Life Eatery establishments in Northeastern Ohio.

"We felt for the safety of our guests and our employees that we were going to shut down — so we were the first ones to do that," adds Billy Lewis, co-owner and president of RLH.

"So that's when we decided to become a takeout-only business," Annē says. Prior, the company had not processed online orders, but within 48 hours, RLH had adapted.

In addition to not knowing what other restaurants were about to do in wake of the pandemic, RLH also did not know that Gov. Wolf would later that afternoon announce restrictions his administration would be putting in place statewide, including the shuttering of restaurants.

The Lewises notified their 200-plus employees of their plan and then issued the media release. Next followed a conference call with employees to discuss details, from what was happening to the restaurants to employees — what benefits packages covered and would look like and how they'd support their entire team at the onset of the crisis.

"We made the decision that from now until we reopen, we'll have employee meals every Saturday, free meals for the families of employees," Annē notes. Managers began checking in with their employees on a routine basis to see how they were doing, how they were holding up during the crisis.

RLH, which has been able to keep

most of its management team intact throughout the crisis, then focused on the immediate: Keep the proverbial lights on.

"That's what we have been doing for the last six months — just looking for those opportunities," Billy says. "You know, run into the fire versus running away from it — that's what we did."

He admits he wasn't sure their first pivot would be a path they could continue. But the community responded positively, so RLH kept going.

In the spirit of why-run-three-kitchens-when-you-can-use-two, after the first week, RLH shut down Molly's entirely. Rather than lay any employees off, they divided Molly's team between The Cork and Skunk and Goat.

Through the duration of the quarantine phase, takeout orders remained steady, Annē says, but have since doubled at the Skunk and Goat.

In addition to providing free meals to employees, RLH has served more than 7,000 meals to various nonprofits throughout the area, including front-line workers at the local hospitals, with the help of area sponsors.

"That was the one thing that we could do," Annē explains. "Food brings everyone together, food brings happiness, and food brings comfort."

RLH offered the meals at a discounted rate, which sponsors covered, creating a win-win — those who needed food got it, and RLH kept their employees working and paid.

"Trying to get innovative and survive during those times," Billy adds.

In North East, RLH donated meals to area teachers in the school district when classes resumed, as a way to "show our appreciation and gratitude for them," as Annē puts it.

Prior to the pandemic in Downtown Erie, RLH had been working toward

managing the new food hall in the EDDC footprint. Interviews for vendors were halted at the onset, but the Lewises have the timeline back on track with the anticipated announcement of the vendors coming Oct. 1.

While Molly's has been offline in-person, Billy notes that since being able to seat patrons, both indoors and outdoors at the other restaurants, RLH is not significantly down in terms of overall revenue. However, outdoor dining — something that won't be available for much longer as summer gives way to fall with winter knocking on the door in Erie — has played a critical role.

"We're already starting to feel it over the last week as the temperatures are cooling down," he says. "We would have never made it at The Cork without the outdoor seating. So as that becomes less utilized, it's going to be very difficult for us to maintain that pace," adding he anticipates a 30 percent drop in revenue as he loses his outdoor dining.

"We can sit and complain, but at the end of the day, we just have to move forward and do the best we can with the parameters and guidelines that are set for us," Billy says.

The Road to Recovery is ... for Now, being Paved Slowly

Still, the questions of *when* and *how* the world will emerge from the COVID-19 looms. So does the question of how economies will recover.

"I think the best way to look at it is in this way: It's really going to be determined by developments in the medical arena, just quite bluntly, whether we have a safe and effective vaccine," Dr. Louie says. "But it is more nuanced than that. Even before that takes place, we are likely to see continued gradual improvement."

That gradual improvement comes thanks to something humans have been doing since, well, before we became humans: Adapting. Not in terms of evolution but rather the change of our behaviors given our circumstance of crisis.

"You will see jobs coming back at a slow pace, as we gradually adapt to living with the virus, and we're already doing that," Louie says. "We are already learning how to live with those constraints, whether it's social distancing, reducing capacity indoors. The critical turning point will come when that vaccine becomes widely available — then I am fairly confident that our economy will once again resume its stable and possibly even more robust trajectory."

As Louie puts it: "That's an optimistic note to end on."

"Because we have built up so much momentum, all the exciting developments that have been taking place in the central part of the city, on the Bayfront, all the research that's coming into our city, the Knowledge Park activities at Penn State Behrend — that's a considerable amount of momentum," which Louie says is "ultimately what is going to make Erie another success story" in the coming years.

"And what I hope is that people won't forget and won't be so discouraged because they went through such a traumatic pandemic interval."

To foresee a post-COVID economy, we must work to close the COVID-19 chapter of our story. The quicker we do that, the quicker we can get back to business.

Ben Speggen can be contacted at bSpeggen@ErieReader.com, and you can follow him on Twitter @BenSpeggen



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Going to the Polls vs. Mail-in Voting

Why both are equally valid methods of exercising your right



A look at the seemingly innocuous Downtown Post Office. The Postal Service has become a subject of much speculation and hysteria, especially from the political right, due to the large role mail-in voting is set to play in this November's elections.

Sowing doubt in the process seemed to be the intent. Any truth about mail-in ballots became distorted among unsupported claims that spread unstoppably across social media. Many were confused about the differences between a ballot application, which they might have received in the mail, and an actual ballot. Some (but notably not many) Republican leaders pushed back against Trump's claims along with Democratic leaders. This included former Republican Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge.

"I think it's very sad and very disappointing that ... the president seems to [want to] try and delegitimize the Nov. 3 election," Ridge said in June. "It just seems to me that this may be an indication he's more worried about the outcome than he's worried about fraud."

Ridge's assurances on the safety of mail-in voting didn't seem to have much of an impact for those who had already made up their mind though.

The lawsuits didn't help. In June, Trump's reelection campaign (along with members of Congress including U.S. Reps. Mike Kelly and Glenn Thompson) sued all 67 Pennsylvania counties over mail-in voting, calling it, without evidence, the "single greatest threat to free and fair elections."

The lawsuit would eventually be thrown out due to the campaign's inability to provide any evidence of mail-in voter fraud, but the doubt, the fears, that *seething rage and fury* had already ripped through every Pennsylvania county, fueled by social media, misleading memes, and the president's own tweets.

I probably shouldn't have been surprised then when, during my advocacy work, my wife and I were subjected to (mostly unprintable) obscenities that would have made Gunnery Sergeant Hartman blush. I began to document some of the responses.

"You're a scumbag liar," one man told me in one of the tamer hostile conver-

By: Jonathan Burdick

Last week, while taking my evening stroll, a discarded political mailer on the ground caught my attention. I stopped for a moment and knelt down to look closer. On it was a photo of Donald Trump, a fist triumphantly at chest level with his other hand high above his head gesturing *number one*. The mailer, which promised to put "America First" by "fighting for law and order" and "protecting us from the radical left" was addressed from the Republican Federal Committee of Pennsylvania out of Harrisburg. "Support our great American comeback!" the mailer read. "Make a plan today to fill out one of the attached General Election Ballot Request forms."

The irony of seeing this mailer promoting mail-in ballots was not lost on me. My wife and I spent countless hours over the summer participating in nonpartisan mail-in ballot advo-

cacy, sending out literally thousands of text messages and phone calls to Pennsylvania residents to inform them of their right to vote by-mail in the November election — made even more pertinent by the pandemic. We spoke with people of all political persuasions, working through any questions or concerns they had about the process and helping them apply for a ballot if they asked.

When we had agreed to the advocacy work, there were certainly some who were skeptical and had worries about mail-in voting, a natural reaction to any sort of change such as this. It was quite clear to me, though, when such skepticism transformed into seething rage and fury.

In May, President Trump began ramping up his rhetoric against mail-in ballots. He began by criticizing the process, often distorting the truth, and by June, his claims of mail-in ballots being a deliberate tool to pro-

mote fraud became nearly a daily talking point. Mail-in ballots were, he claimed, a way for Democrats to rig the election. He also began to claim without evidence that foreign countries would counterfeit ballots, never elaborating how they would be able to circumvent safeguards such as individualized barcodes.

"Most Trump supporters are like me — we trust Trump but no one else," Frank Miller, a 51-year old Pennsylvania business owner told Reuters in May. "When I see a Democrat pushing [mail-in voting], I know there must be a sinister reason for it."

"We are sending out hundreds of millions of universal mail-in ballots," Trump lied in July. In one tweet, he claimed mail-in voting would make for "the most INACCURATE & FRAUDULENT election in history" and even suggested that the United States delay in the election until it was safe to vote in person.

JESSICA HUNTER

NEWS & VIEWS

sations. He added that I was going to receive a \$500 fine for contacting him after he got in touch with the Department of Justice.

"What a bunch of s--t," one woman responded. "So easy to cheat and they will have no idea who fills them out and then who touches it in the mail. I hope people don't fall for this crap."

"We have seen time and time again, the Democrats cheat," another claimed, stating that the need to vote by mail was highly overrated and the pandemic was overhyped.

I heard a variation of "if you can go to Wal-Mart, you can vote in person" at least a dozen times.

"I do not support your attempt at voter fraud by fixing an election with Act 77, so shut up," another person said. "Lies, lies, lies!"

Act 77 was signed into Pennsylvania law by Governor Tom Wolf in October 2019, months before the pandemic. It codified no-excuse mail-in voting in the state and received bipartisan support in Harrisburg from local Republicans including State Sen. Dan Laughlin and Reps. Brad Roae and Curt Sonney.

"Compromise has given Pennsylvanians a modernized election code that preserves the integrity of the ballot box and makes it easier for voters to choose the people who represent them," Republican Senate Majority Leader Jake Corman said at the time.

Republican House Majority Leader Bryan Cutler echoed these sentiments, saying the bill was "not written to benefit one party or the other" and served to "preserve the integrity of every election."

How this had months later become so divisive and politicized baffled me, especially considering the Pennsylvania Republican Party's support earlier. In the midst of my advocacy, perhaps a bit worn down from all of the F-bombs being hurled at me daily, I messaged the Erie County Republican Party directly to ask their stance on mail-in voting.

"We are against it!" was their full response. I followed up, explaining that I had done it for the primary, that it appeared safe and secure and even provided online tracking of my ballot. I asked directly what their concerns were about mail-in voting. I didn't receive a response.

I reached out again this past week. I brought up the mailer that I had seen during my walk and asked if their

position had changed. A read receipt showed that they read my message, but again, I didn't receive a response.

Journalist Matthew Rink has expertly been covering our local mail-in voting saga for the Erie Times-News. As early as 2018, long before no-excuse mail-in voting was legalized in Pennsylvania, he wrote about his own experiences in a neighboring state.

"Having spent more than 13 years in Ohio, a state with early voting, I've found Pennsylvania's electoral process to be rather restrictive, even arcane, since returning home last summer," he wrote then.

Rink also recently reported on how in the latest primary, "mail-in voting accounted for half of all ballots cast in Erie County with 21,795 Democrats voting by mail compared with 7,764 Republicans."

On Aug. 4, President Trump suggested that voting by mail was safe if you were doing it in Florida. "Whether you call it Vote by Mail or Absentee Voting, in Florida the election system is Safe and Secure, Tried and True," he wrote. "[I]n Florida I encourage all to request a Ballot & Vote by Mail!"

He didn't elaborate on why it was safe in Florida, but when pressed by a White House reporter the following day, he stated: "So Florida has got a great Republican governor and it had a great Republican governor. Ron DeSantis, Rick Scott, two great governors. ... Florida is different from other states."

The reality is that mail-in voting is safe and secure and in states that have already been doing this for years, there is no evidence of widespread fraud. You can even track your ballot online throughout the entirety of the process. If you aren't able to vote in-person for whatever reason, you can request an absentee or mail-in ballot online at votespa.com or in-person at the Erie County Board of Elections office.

The deadline to request a ballot is Oct. 27, although it would be wise to request and send your ballot back (or drop them off at the election office or in the secured drop-box outside of the Erie County Courthouse) as early as possible.

Whatever method you choose, just be sure to vote.

Jonathan Burdick runs the historical blog Rust & Dirt. He can be reached at jburdick@eriereader.com.

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Berry Global Thrives in Erie

Essential plastic closure business is open and humming



Berry Global, located at 316 W. 16th St. in Erie's historic Little Italy, manufactures plastic closures for food and beverage containers. Production has not only continued, but increased, as the pandemic has worn on.

LIZ ALLEN

By: Liz Allen

In historic Little Italy, in a plant where workers once built hulking steam locomotives, Berry Global showcases the best of Erie's manufacturing culture — offering reliable family-sustaining jobs and encouraging forward-looking thinking.

Part of a company with 50,000 employees worldwide, Berry's local plant makes plastic closures, mostly for food and beverage customers, in a rainbow of colors and an array of sizes: blue lids for Hellman's Mayonnaise, orange for Gatorade, black for Powerade, green for DaSani water bottles, purple and other hues for Naked fruit juice, among many other items for clients.

Part of the manufacturing facility is still housed in the old building with massive brick walls — perhaps as thick as four feet — that once housed Heisler Locomotive Works, which made gear-driven steam engines, primarily used for logging. The Lake Shore Railway Historical Society and Museum has a Heisler in its collection.

After rolled-up structural blueprints for the Heisler factory from 1922 were discovered, Ralph Shipp, plant engineer, framed the prints, as detailed and precise as computer-generated documents would be today, to hang on the conference room wall. The prints are an acknowledgment of the factory's heritage and its importance to Little

Italy, and they serve as an eye-catcher when the Historic Little Italy Business Association holds bimonthly brown-bag lunch meetings in the conference room, courtesy of Berry. (Those meetings are now being held virtually because of COVID-19.)

Bob Guthrie became Berry's plant manager in 2001, about the same time that the Sisters of St. Joseph were canvassing the neighborhood to ask residents about their most pressing needs in preparation for the opening of the Sisters of St. Joseph Neighborhood Network.

At the time, fencing and barbed wire surrounded the plant, located at 316 W. 16th St. The sisters suggested that perhaps those barriers could come down. Today, the plant's grounds are open and nicely landscaped, a vibrant visual introduction to the manufacturing facility, which is bright, clean, and inviting.

That welcoming culture extends to employees, who are encouraged to ask friends and family to apply for jobs at Berry, said Guthrie. "We want a work environment that encourages people to bring your friends," he said.

In Erie, Berry Global employs about 150 people, and there will soon be job openings as longtime employees retire in the next couple of months.

"We're looking for employees who want to build a career," said Guthrie, who agreed to transfer from Illinois to Erie after his boss called while he and

his wife were vacationing in Seattle.

"I like coffee," said Guthrie, who had checked out the original Starbucks in Seattle at the time. "I looked online to see if there was a Starbucks in Erie and the first Starbucks had just opened on State Street. 'OK, they have a Starbucks. I have to go there,'" he recalled with a laugh.

Guthrie and Christen Brown, human resources manager, are both proud of the fact that the company provides jobs with wages that "people can live on," in Guthrie's words. The work is also steady. Berry has employees who grew up in Little Italy, began working there right after high school, and stayed to retirement age. Shipp, the plant engineer, has been with Berry for 25 years. Every quarter, the number of five-year service awards increases, said Brown.

The company also is committed to both initial training and retraining, when needed. "You can make a decent living. We're looking for folks who have mechanical ability. We're looking for the intellect, the initiative, the integrity," Brown said, borrowing a quote from Warren Buffett. "We do a lot of promoting from within into a skilled position," she added.

When Brown holds small group meetings with employees to discuss their career goals, she likes to ask them: "What's making you stick around?" It's the reliable nature of their jobs, they tell her.

Berry Global continues to seek out new markets, including drinkable yogurt, energy drinks, non-dairy refreshments and cold-brewed coffee. (It also makes caps for motor oil.)

Serving diversified customers helps Berry to avoid becoming "vulnerable" to a dip in any one market.

In fact, Berry Global, deemed an essential business, has remained open throughout the pandemic, Guthrie said.

"We make food packaging and we never stopped production," he said. "Some customers are up, some are down, but overall, our business is up." While there

was a drop in demand for food that comes in large containers, such as salad dressings for restaurants, there has been an increase in other lines. "There are definitely more individuals cooking at home, so with some sandwich spreads, those volumes went up," he said. "Early on, we saw a surge in water bottles, when people went out and bought cases of water."

The Erie plant has not had one confirmed case of COVID-19. "Whenever someone has symptoms, we tell them to stay home," Guthrie said. An outside handwashing station has been set up. Employees wear masks, and there is deep cleaning inside the plant every four hours.

Guthrie said his biggest worry during the pandemic has been about the well-being of the workers, "particularly workers with young families, with kids in school affected by daycare closings," he said. "My biggest concern is their ability to maintain their lives."

With retirements and with some additional work coming to the plant, Berry Global in Erie is looking to hire about a half-dozen new employees, Guthrie said.

In addition to a commitment to train new hires and to upgrade their skills periodically, Berry also has developed a strong working relationship with engineering students from Penn State Behrend's Innovation Commons, according to both Guthrie and Jake Marsh, industry relations coordinator for the Innovation Commons.

"It's a great company to work with," said Marsh.

In 2015, Penn State unveiled an initiative for each campus to find ways to support small businesses, inventors and startups. With funding from an Invent Penn State seed grant and from the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority's "Ignite Erie" program, Innovation Commons opened in January 2016. "We want an entrepreneur to have all they need to succeed," said Marsh.

Innovation Commons is part of the Innovation Beehive in Erie County, in which Behrend, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, Gannon University, Mercyhurst University, and the Erie County Library each specialize in aiding business innovation.

Behrend's niche is offering prototyp-



Bob Guthrie, Berry Global plant manager, stands beside framed blueprints of the Heisler Locomotive Works from 1922. Manufacture of Heislars at its factory in Erie's Little Italy neighborhood ceased in 1941.

LIZ ALLEN

ing services to innovators and free engineering consulting services to businesses.

At Berry Global, Behrend engineering students are consulting on 3D printing, which has resulted in “major cost savings” for the company, said Marsh. He explained that a part that might have cost up to \$1,000 to replace can now be made with a 3D printer for about \$3. In addition, Behrend students wrote a computer program that kicks in if one

of the fast-moving machines becomes jammed. The jam no longer breaks a tool that could cost as much as \$10,000 to replace. Instead, the computer program triggers action that breaks the part made with the 3D printer — a part that will be replaced economically.

The goal of Innovation Commons isn't simply to do a job for a client; it's also to teach the business how to do the job itself. Berry is now buying its own 3D printers, Marsh said.

The benefits of Innovation Commons don't just accrue to the business receiving consulting services. For engineering students, it's a way to learn about various business environments, to build up “killer references” for future employment, and to gain confidence to become an innovator.

John Nowakowski III, owner of the recycling start-up Bayfront Glass, LLC, earned his master's degree in manufacturing management at Behrend and served as a student manager of Innovation Commons. Bayfront Glass is one of at least 10 start-ups nurtured at Innovation Commons. Another is M2 Additive Manufacturing, which builds flexible 3D components. Michael Paul, a Behrend grad in electrical engineering who also served as a manager at Innovation Commons, and Behrend student Michael Gibilterra, who also worked at Innovation Commons, started M2 Additive.

Not every student with a background at Innovation Commons will start a business. But they will bring an innovation mindset to their employers, contributing ideas on how to improve processes, Marsh said.

And because of Berry Global's work with the Innovation Commons and Plant Manager Bob Guthrie's enthusiastic embrace of innovation, the solutions devised by Behrend students “may get implemented at a global level,” said Marsh.

Liz Allen has participated in numerous Zoom sessions during the pandemic but her Zoom interview with Jake Marsh was her first use of that technology for a reporting project. You can reach her at lizallenerie@gmail.com.

Berry Global, 316 W. 16th St., expects to hire at least six new workers in coming months. Interested applicants should visit www.berryglobal.com, click on careers and then on the Erie location. Bob Guthrie, plant manager, said the company is stepping up its use of social media to recruit workers.



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Pre-Fab, But Uniquely Erie

The Lawrence Park Dinor's history and future



ERIN PHILLIPS

By: Erin Phillips

Pepperoni balls, ox roast, sponge candy ... “dinors?” There are some things in this world that are unique to Erie alone. A diner certainly isn’t, but the strange way of spelling it is. Almost all of the old, mid-century diners in Erie are spelled that way. No one knows for sure, but some speculate that it is an old typo that caught on or some German derivative, but one thing is certain: it’s only spelled that way in Northwestern Pennsylvania. The spelling of the word isn’t the only thing that is unique about the “dinor” on Main Street in Lawrence Park. This 1948 prefabricated, train car style diner has been a part of the fabric of the township for so long, it has secured its place in local and national history. It was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2004 and is the only diner in Pennsylvania to hold such a distinction.

The current owners, Becky and Rick Standley, were drawn to the Lawrence Park Dinor because of its long history and old-timey feel. In 2010, the couple found themselves at a crossroads in their lives as Becky lost her job in manufacturing and, after much deliberation, they decided to take the risk and buy the Dinor. It was up for sale because former owner George Gurlais, who ran the Dinor for nearly 20 years, was ready to retire. Rick had to do a bit of convincing as neither he nor Becky

had any restaurant management or professional cooking experience. “I do come from a long history of this kind of work,” Becky reflects. “My grandparents owned a tavern in Lackawanna and my parents owned the Dairy Delite in McKean in the ‘80s as well as a tiny bar called the Blue Star Tavern, so I kind of had it in my blood.” After purchasing the Dinor, Becky worked side by side with Gurlais for a month to learn the ropes. Rick took photos of all the recipes and videos of the processes. They have mostly kept the menu the same, with some small tweaks, otherwise very little has changed over the years.

The same is true for the look of the Dinor. Its charm is in the original feel; if you picture a 1950s diner in your head it will likely look and feel an awful lot like the Lawrence Park Dinor. It was originally manufactured by Silk City Diners which was a division of the Paterson Vehicle Company in Paterson New Jersey. They produced 1,500 diners from 1926-1966 that were shipped all over the US. The exterior of the Dinor is porcelain enamel with a fluted stainless steel band and a monitor roof that runs its length and two stainless steel doors with porthole windows. The interior of the Dinor has a long counter with barstools and an open, stainless steel kitchen, with booths along the windows. The vaulted ceiling is made up of curved porcelain panels. Pretty much all of the original character of the Law-

[top left] The Lawrence Park Dinor, a fixture on Main Street since 1948, introduced outdoor seating for the first time ever this summer in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. [bottom right] Plexiglass barriers now separate individual dining booths, but otherwise the original aesthetic of the Lawrence Park Dinor remains unchanged.

rence Park Dinor remains as intended.

The Standleys spent a lot of time restoring the exterior of the Dinor, which was painted over many times through the course of the last 72 years. They stripped off two layers of white paint, a layer of red, and a layer of blue to uncover the original porcelain enamel. Rick also points out that the interior ceiling is still the unpainted porcelain, and all the tile on the floors, counter kick plate, and bathrooms is vintage. The restaurant also still uses the original stainless steel refrigerators, steam table, cooktop, backsplash, milk cooler, and drawers. All of the mechanisms and compressors inside the appliances have been modernized, but they still retain the old-time look that gives the Dinor its charm.

When the Standleys first purchased the Dinor, they received a letter from the son of the original owners, Larry Curtis, who now lives in Texas, giving them some early history. His mother and father originally paid \$20,000 for it in 1948, when it was delivered and set

on its foundation at 4019 Main St. The Curtis family lived in a little one bedroom house that sits behind the Dinor to this day. They chose Lawrence Park for the location in order to cater to the massive workforce at GE at the time. The Dinor ran 24 hours back then to accommodate all shifts at the plant. In their first year of business in 1948, they made over \$70,000. That amount would equate to approximately \$750,000 today which is very impressive, as the fare at the Dinor then and now is modestly priced.

“One of the things I like about the Dinor, is that it is basically recession proof,” Rick explains. “Even if something happens to the economy, people will still want to go out to eat, but they’ll do it on a tighter budget.” The Dinor will always accommodate that tight budget, with its affordable prices and food without pretension. And they have enjoyed great success during their ownership. They have been Trip Advisor’s top restaurant in Erie for 7 years running. As a result, they get a lot of traffic from out-of-towners. When they took ownership of the Dinor, they made the decision to be open on Sundays and, in doing so, nearly doubled their business.

Not only is the Dinor recession-proof, it seems it is pandemic-proof as well. After the initial shut down in March,



ERIN PHILLIPS



the Lawrence Park Dinor remained closed for 3 months, deciding on how best to move forward. The Standleys were in the fortunate position to not have a mortgage on the Dinor and since Rick was still employed elsewhere, they took their time and reopened in June with all the precautions in place. They temporarily removed the original side door (safely storing it for its eventual return) and installed a pick up window in its place. They built plexiglass dividers between the booths. The barstools are marked off to allow for social distancing and there are plexiglass barriers hanging between the counter and the cooking area. Once summer arrived, they converted the small grassy area between the Dinor and the parking lot into an outdoor seating area. All in all, they adjusted quickly and well to the changes, so much so that they had met their goal of reaching 50 percent of their monthly sales for July by mid-month.

The pandemic less adversely affected the business than it did a long-term personal goal that was within sight: retirement. Before COVID hit, the Standleys had placed the Dinor up for sale. Becky was ready to be done with the all-day-everyday work of the restaurant and was looking forward to spending more time with her grandchildren. At the beginning of March, it seemed like that goal was about to become a reality when an offer came in. And then, right before they were able to close on the deal, the stay-at-home order went into effect and it all got put on hold. After reopening, the bank was reluctant, set multiple parameters the business needed to meet (which they did) but then ultimately rescinded the deal

Becky and Rick Standley purchased the Lawrence Park Dinor in 2010, learning all the ins and outs of restaurant management from former owner George Gurlais. They had been looking to pass on the tradition to new ownership this year, but COVID-19 delayed those plans.

amidst the uncertainty of the restaurant business during an unpredictable pandemic. So for now, those plans of retirement are on hold and Becky and Rick will continue on until, hopefully, they can find a cash buyer or the pandemic ends. Either way, you can sense Becky's disappointment. She was ready to be done and pass the torch (as well as the recipes, techniques, and historic building) on to a new owner.

In the meantime, the Standleys plan to keep the Dinor open and running — and continue making food that people keep coming back for, whether it is for dining in, dining outside, or to go. The typical diner fare, such as club sandwiches and old fashioned milkshakes, is all accounted for on the Dinor's menu. But what people really love most are Becky's homemade soups and pie — and, of course, another famously Erie phenomenon in "Greek Sauce," available traditionally on burgers and dogs, but here also in omelette form. Becky and Rick plan to help the new owner just like Gurlais helped them, to teach them the recipes and processes so the Dinor can continue to provide consistently good, comforting, affordable food for the people of Lawrence Park and beyond well into the future.

Erin Phillips runs the Instagram @olderieonfoot, an in-depth look at local architecture "by foot, stroller, papoose, bike, and occasionally minivan."

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40 Under 40 Alumni Continue to Show Moxie

Despite challenging year, individuals show no quit



From left to right, Erie's 40 Under 40 alumni Kate Neubert-Lechner (2014), director of the Erie Playhouse; Sara McMillan Guerrein (2018), owner of Moxi Hair Salon; and Matt Texter (2018), musician and graphic designer.

By: Cara Suppa

The newest class of Erie's 40 Under 40 has just been inaugurated, but innovation, entrepreneurship and civic engagement in the city never stops. We're delighted to revisit three past recipients: Sara McMillan (2018), Kate Neubert-Lechner (2014), and Matt Texter (2018), all of whom have continued the work of making Erie a better place to live and do business, and all of whom have seen their personal and professional lives disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic in a variety of ways. But they persist; let's learn, and be inspired by, how.

Sara McMillan , 2018
Owner, Moxi Hair Salon

Cara J. Suppa (CJS): Catch us up -- what's new, what's different with you and the Moxi Hair salon since then?

Sara McMillan (SM): I purchased a new location for Moxi at 1722 W. Eighth St. in Nov. 2018. I spent six months renovating it into an updated eco-conscious building and opened it in March 2019! I've grown the team

into five diverse and talented stylists. Personally, I recently became engaged and we had our wedding planned for July 3, 2020. Due to COVID-19 we rescheduled it for next July.

CJS: There is no denying how disproportionately difficult the era of COVID has been for service-based businesses. Can you describe what the spring and summer were like for you and the staff at Moxi?

SM: Our last day of operations before the COVID shutdown was March 14. We anticipated being closed for a few weeks, we had no idea it would be 15! I kept in touch with them through daily and weekly check-ins and we attempted a few Zoom meetings to brainstorm ideas for reopening. I created a Facebook community group for local beauty business owners called "Erie Area Beauty Business Owners" — it grew into a wonderful, supportive community.

I spent a lot of time working on my business during those 15 weeks. I took the time to really dig deep into my business and the path of growth I want us to be on. I stayed optimistic by viewing this situation as a great

opportunity to grow as a business owner and leader.

CJS: Now that you are able to open up again, have you found any additional difficulties with the new COVID-based regulations in place, while also keeping with the salon's mission of sustainability?

SM: The standards the state board of cosmetology and CDC have set for us are very close to what we have always adhered to. We have altered the layout of the salon so all guests are 10 feet or more apart and we never have more than three clients and three stylists in the building. The clients stay in their chairs the entire length of their visit to help control cross-contamination ... but the capacity dictates limit the amount of clients we can accommodate each day.

Some of the new guidelines are very difficult to follow in an environmentally friendly way, unfortunately. Thankfully, our sustainability partner Green Circle Salons has updated their intake process so we can now send them any PPE. So even after all the new protocol, we are still able to divert 95 percent of our waste from

landfills and keep our sustainable beauty mission going strong even in a global health pandemic.

Kate Neubert-Lechner, 2014
Executive Director, Erie Playhouse

CJS: When you were part of the class of 2014, it was for your work with the Make-A-Wish Foundation; now, you are the executive director at the Erie Playhouse. Your original write-up cited your ability to inspire and bring joy to people, especially young people and their families, in our area. Do you feel that stepping into your new role at the Playhouse broadened your ability to do this?

Kate Neubert-Lechner (KNL): I absolutely feel like I have been able to expand my ability to reach our community in positive ways! Shortly after being part of the class of 2014, I was hired as the Youtheatre/education director at the Playhouse and was in that position before being hired to serve as the executive director. During my time as Youtheatre director, I was able to develop and administer the PLAYtime program in conjunction with United Way's Imagination Library. My past and current position at the Playhouse have put me in a position to connect with a larger portion of the Erie Community and to partner with many other organizations to work to allow the arts to be an agent of change and growth in our area.

CJS: Obviously we have to address the impact of COVID on a regional theater like the Playhouse. Digital and streaming arts and entertainment got us through quarantine, but live action performances took a huge hit. Simply put, how did you navigate the Playhouse through the spring and summer?

KNL: It has been a tremendously difficult time for all arts organizations across the country and, of course, in our area. We, unfortunately, had to furlough the majority of our staff at the beginning of the quarantine and at this time have only been able to

bring back two additional full-time staffers and three part-time, and that is all we'll be able to do for the foreseeable future.

As you mentioned, we focused on pivoting our programming to a strictly virtual platform, as we cannot safely bring patrons and performers into our space at this time. We tried to stay as active as possible on social media platforms to stay engaged with our patrons. One positive of all this is that we have been able to engage patrons and friends from all across the country who were former Erieites that have moved away, but have loved being able to watch performances at the Playhouse again and take classes from our staff!

CJS: The state is now in the green phase, and things are starting to open up again. Even more impressive is how creative organizations have become in delivering their art to the masses, both in-person and online. What can we look forward to from the Playhouse in the coming months?

KNL: At this time, we do not know when we'll be able to open our doors, even as restrictions are loosening. To maintain safety for our patrons, our maximum capacity would be around 20 percent, which is not, at this time, a financially viable option for us, as production costs are significant in our space, no matter how small the production. We are currently working on planning a production in an alternate space for the holidays, but that's all I can tell you at this point ... until I have a few more things tied up, we can't make a formal announcement, but I can tell you that we hope it will be a great opportunity for multiple Erie organizations and businesses to work together to provide a COVID-safe holiday event for the entire family.

**Matt Texter, 2018
Musician/Graphic Designer,
Lamar Advertising**

CJS: Catch us up! What's new with you in the two years since you were a recipient?

Matt Texter (MT): I am still working at Lamar Advertising, but not doing live music as much.

CJS: I'm glad you mentioned that, because I noticed you pulled back from music. Did the pandemic have any effect on your decision?

MT: I started pulling back a little bit

before the pandemic, but as the pandemic came into full effect, I realized that things weren't the same before and they definitely weren't going to be the same after.

I should say that I do plan on writing more and maybe recording an album, but I don't really plan on playing out too much moving forward, for the foreseeable future.

CJS: Your write-up mentioned your local activism as something you hold near and dear to your heart. It's a huge election year; how have you stayed active in politics while still being safe?

MT: In spite of the pandemic, I've been able to stay relatively active. I am still the Ninth District, Sixth Ward Precinct Democratic committeeman, so we have our monthly meetings via Zoom. I've also been volunteering with a great local organization called Erie United, helping with their text banks. Of course, I have my own political leanings, but it's been good to be working with a great organization to help mobilize people [of either party] to get them out to vote.

CJS: And finally, for all three of you, what is one thing that has gotten you through these tough months of 2020?

SM: My fiancé Phil has been my rock during all of this. He is an Erie Insurance employee, so he had a big transition to working from home and he still found the energy to be supportive during all of this.

There were some really rough days and a lot of really good days. I tried to see the shutdown as a once in a lifetime (hopefully!) opportunity to really spend quality time with my family.

KNL: It has been great to be able to spend more time at home with my daughters, as you can imagine, pre-COVID, we did a lot of running around! I also love horror/sci-fi movies and have been watching all of the older movies that I never saw ... it has been highly entertaining to watch all those early campy horror movies like *Evil Dead* and *Friday the 13th* and such.

MT: I would say that my handful of close friends, and of course my family. Complete isolation is good for no one, so understand the risks and listen to science; it's a good way to figure out how to still remain in contact with those you care about.

*Cara Suppa can be reached at
csuppa@eriereader.com*

CONGRATULATIONS to our own Jake Marsh of Penn State Behrend and Chris Lantinen of Edinboro University for their inclusion in this year's Erie Reader 40 Under 40.



Chris Lantinen

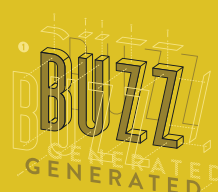


Jake Marsh

Photography by Jessica Hunter

To learn how we can help your business start-up, or hear how we helped the 2020 edition of Erie's Blues & Jazz Festival thrive despite COVID-19, please go to nwpabeehive.com.

For the latter, please continue to the Edinboro University page and click on "Buzz, Generated."



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2020 Viewing Guide



Oktoberfest

Thursday, October 8 @ 8pm
Sunday, October 11 @ 2pm

With works of charm, sophistication, beauty and rich drama, we explore some of the most adored music to have even been performed on the world's concert stages.



The British Isles

Thursday, October 29 @ 8pm
Sunday, November 1 @ 2pm

In this episode, we survey the expanse that makes music from this part of the world so lasting in our hearts, minds and spirits.



Americana

Thursday, November 19 @ 8pm
Sunday, November 22 @ 2pm

Next, we perform works from the nineteenth century to present day, showcasing how America's composers can take traditional dance, song and rhythm, and infuse it all with a distinctive new voice.



A Holiday Special

Thursday, December 17 @ 8pm
Sunday, December 20 @ 2pm

December is a time for families to relive treasured traditions, reconnect with loved ones and sing songs of old. Tune in for a memorable TV special celebrating the holiday spirit!

Stirring up Business with Cocktails To-Go

Bars and restaurants find new mix to their business model



CONTRIBUTED

By: Rebecca Styn

The rules and regulations tied to restaurants and bars during the COVID-19 pandemic have been tumultuous at best. Restrictions have gone from completely closed, to take-out only, to 50 percent capacity, to 25 percent capacity and no bar seating, and now finally back up to 50 percent (and this all only includes establishments that serve food). Needless to say, keeping up with this six-month nightmare is fundamentally worse than keeping up with the Kardashians.

One concession granted by the state in May, however, was that restaurants and bars could now offer cocktails to-go, in hopes of buoying the spirits of some owners.

There were limitations of course — restaurants or bars had to sell food, beverages could only be sold in containers with a secure lid and in quantities from 4 oz. to 64 oz., and all before 11 p.m. They also couldn't ride shotgun with you. They had to be placed in your trunk or backseat — away from passengers. For some though, the offering helped restaurants feel a little less muddled.

"Having the ability to offer cocktails to-go has been a game-changer for our restaurants," emphasizes Annē Lewis, director of marketing for Red Letter Hospitality. "The Skunk & Goat Tavern has continued to

have consistent cocktail to-go business, even after we were able to open." For them, it's now part of the norm. "I think the biggest takeaway is the convenience of it. Patrons can get a delicious cocktail by simply doing curbside pick-up [with the necessary precautions] and don't have to worry about making multiple trips to the store to retrieve ingredients. Also, with the current restrictions of not having the ability to enjoy a nice cocktail at a bar, this has given our guests the opportunity to still enjoy their favorite drink, but now just in the comfort of their home."

One of their tried and true takeout favorites? "Lakeshore Lemonade has been on our menu at The Skunk and Goat for the past two to three years. It is a favorite and has turned into a staple at the Tavern. It is house-infused blueberry mint vodka, fresh lemon juice, and house-made simple syrup. It also travels well." As an added convenience, guests can order their cocktails online. "We have pictures of each drink as well for reference." Lewis noted it would be a great bonus if businesses could continue the cocktails to-go once restrictions are lifted. "I think it has given many businesses that little extra boost."

Diana Merski, owner of Coach's Sports Bar and Grill, also agrees the change in regulations has been beneficial to their base.

"We started offering them the

same day it was approved. At the time, we could only do to-go food. This really started to save us — you could kind of breathe a little easier and a lot of our regulars started coming back."

Inside Coach's, patrons will find a "Feature Wall" that rotates every month and highlights a series of different drinks. "We've had a Sanitizer, Liquid Marijuana, and two slushie rotating flavors. But our namesake, the Coachella, is definitely one of the most popular. The drink is a bit lighter (Berry Rum and Lemonade) and ombré in design. It's a deep purple at the bottom and gets lighter as it gets to the rim of the glass." (Ombré is a French term which refers to use of a gradient, or gradual shift in tint and shade).

Even with the challenges, Merski remains hopeful. "We are excited to have sports back this fall and I know our customers are looking forward to watching the NFL again."

Gavin Maus, president and co-owner of Altered State Distillery, experienced things a little differently at the onset of the shutdown. "Right when COVID hit, as a manufacturer we were held to a different restriction. We were allowed to sell to-go drinks immediately."

Recognizing the hardships of others, he's counting his blessings. "We almost hate to say this because we know how difficult it's been for so many, but we have

Cocktails-to-go have been a life-saver for struggling bars and restaurants since the state approved their sale in May. Pictured from left to right are the Lakeshore Lemonade (Skunk & Goat Tavern), Pina Colada (Altered State), and Ward 8 (Room 33).

been really very lucky. We were pretty much inundated from the beginning. We had just opened in November, so this helped us immensely."

It wasn't an easy start, however. "We were going 100 miles an hour. We went through multiple slushie machines that didn't work. Many that didn't work as soon as we unpacked them. But we figured it out." They also took time and precision with their drinks. "We didn't use mixes, we did everything from scratch — from in-house simple syrups to house-made coconut cream."

They wanted to do it differently than the convenience stores. "We were doing them in a craft way. When you go to Country Fair and GetGo, those are mixes and are malt liquor or beer-based. We built ours from scratch."

To date, the most popular drinks have been the Creamsicle, Pina Colada, Key Lime, and Gin Punch. "They're our highest selling items. Erie's been incredibly open and we couldn't be more thankful and appreciative of the community."

Before restaurants were allowed to sell cocktails to-go, Room 33 started capitalizing early on in the shutdown by creating craft drinks — without the spirits — and bottling them for takeout. The project inspired the team to develop a concept known as Blind Tiger Spirit Free Cocktails. Lizzy Heffernan, events manager and bartender at 33, was the mastermind behind the initial recipes — with support from Shawn McCall, Room 33 general manager.

"We started with five classic cocktails — Ward 8, Bees Knees, Sidecar, Southside, and Bacardi.

Then we found out Bacardi was trademarked and dropped it from the process," explains Heffernan. The group worked with a beverage consultant in Pittsburgh to determine the ingredients that would translate into a shelf-stable product. "We have what we believe to be our final product, but now we are getting samples bottled for others to try," McCall notes. "We need unbiased opinions on it to back up what we believe to be a good product."

The intent behind the project is to market to non-drinkers that are looking for a sophisticated product they can enjoy at home — or at a bar. "As a secondary option, these all mix well with their intended spirits," McCall adds. The labels will highlight stories about the drinks as well as serving size and what it can be mixed with if the patron so chooses."

Heffernan hopes to have the product ready for distribution by the end of the year. "Many give up drinking for the New Year and we think it would be a fitting time to have this on the shelves — if we are able."

Facing a sea of unknowns as restaurants work to move towards continued reopening, and some, a hopeful recovery, this fix gave many a temporary lifeline. Although a push towards permanency of this regulation could provide an opportunity for a reset as many look to a hopeful future, for now we will live in the present and continue to navigate the continually evolving landscape to not only stay afloat, but to continue to keep our patrons and communities safe.

Rebecca Styn is the proprietor of Room 33 Speakeasy. She is also VP of Ventures at Erie Innovation District and recently completed her Ph.D. in Leadership and Organizational Learning from Gannon University. Follow Room 33 on Facebook @room-33speakeasy, and follow Rebecca on Twitter at @rstyn.

Slide in the DM

How local Dungeons & Dragons players are rolling for their own initiative



Dungeons & Dragons devotees are dragon-like in their tendency to hoard dice, a key component of its gameplay mechanics. Dice come in many colors and designs and can be four, six, eight, ten, twelve, or even 20-sided.

for developing an outrageous accent). They even have the option to create an elaborate backstory. "Now players have the chance to play a shape-changing cat person," Holoweinko laughingly explained when mentioning the different types of creatures a player can be.

As a dungeon master (DM), one can create an entire world for the players to explore, adventures for them to go on, encounters with strange characters, and monsters for them to defeat. These monsters can be chosen from the wide selection in the Monster Manual, created from the DM's imagination, or even based on characters in pop culture. "They may take lore that's already in the D&D universe and work it into their own world," noted Bell. The concept of creating one's own world for an RPG is known as homebrew. Something few people realize is that a Dungeons & Dragons campaign does not require a dungeon or even a dragon. RPGs can take place in a wide variety of universes — a magical kingdom, on board a spaceship, or in the midst of a zombie apocalypse to name a few. "You really can do anything, which is the cool part of it," says Holoweinko. "Someone putting together a homebrew game can be better than any module."

Be warned, this game does have potential to lead to an expensive habit ... dice hoarding. That's right, they don't just come in different colors; creative craftsmen make and sell sets of dice one could only dream of. "All RPG players are dragons, but instead of treasure and gold, we hoard dice," Bell joked. She noted that her preference was for dice on the sparkly side. Lea favors a set of her own that appear to have stars in them. Holoweinko loves the weight of his metal dice on the gaming table. Copp has a lucky set known as blood golem dice, and mentions that the kids she works with likely have over 200 sets of dice between them. Some are filled with glitter, flowers, and skulls, some are made from crystals, some are made like little snow globes. The possibilities are endless, and it is addicting and fun. However, fear not if money is scarce. Roll 20 has a free dice program, so until that perfect set comes along, players still have access to the

KATE COPP

By: Claudia Rose

The tabletop role-playing game (RPG) *Dungeons & Dragons* has been around for decades, originally invented in 1974 by American game designers Ernest Gary Gygax and David Arneson. At first, it gained an unfortunate reputation for having a very niche and therefore limited target audience. It even stirred up a panic amongst conservative parents that it would cause their children to lose touch with reality, resulting in some rather unfortunate films being made which will not be mentioned by name.

"It was very much a 'niche of a niche,'" Steve Holoweinko of the Griffons Lair Game Shop LLC remarked when discussing the initial controversy the game met when it first came out. "People didn't even admit to playing it." The truth is, the game is just fun, and anyone can play it — writers, actors, book-worms, tech whizzes, gamers, even amateur stand-up comedians. "There's a lot more female players now, and there's a lot more older people playing with younger people," Holoweinko added. As web series/podcasts like *Critical Role* gain increasing popularity, more attention is being brought to the game.

"Transitioning into fifth edition, it's a lot more welcoming to people who didn't come from an RPG background," Sarah Bell of Gateway Games pointed out. That being said, for those still looking for a safe but fun hobby, consider joining an existing group, or creating your own original campaign. With computer programs like Roll 20, Discord, and the Tabletop Role-playing Game (TTRPG) Safety Tool-

kit that allow players to participate online, social distancing is not an issue, nor is finding a t-shirt with just the right obscure reference to wear to game night.

Kate Copp, of GeekErie, has been getting younger people into the game through remote sessions that used to be held at the library.

"We continued using Discord during the pandemic," says Copp. "Having the ability to video chat, and home delivery services being able to deliver dice and maps, it's been really great to have that in times where we can't get together as a group." Britty Lea, who is one of the players in the delightful D&D podcast *No Dice*, has been playing with a group for three years, with no members living in the same state.

"We use Roll 20, it's a fantastic resource. You can look through supplemental books on the site. What's really nice about it specifically is you don't have to be as well-versed. That's how we started learning it more in depth because all the information is there when you play." Additionally, Lea discussed how the TTRPG Safety Toolkit contains guidelines for how players can all feel comfortable playing together. It outlines the importance of communication, trust, and boundaries amongst group members, so everyone is having a good time.

RPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons* present people with endless opportunities to express themselves as either a player or the creator of a campaign (dungeon master). As a player, a person can create their own character that can look, sound, and act however they wish (now is the time that all those *Monty Python* marathons might come in handy

tools they need.

Starting a game like this actually becomes a more fulfilling experience than one would expect. Players working together towards a goal in a fictional setting as different characters can be viewed as quite the team building exercise. "It's a collaborative storytelling experience; that's what really interested me about it," says Lea. Copp recalled that the kids who participated in the GeekErie sessions benefited greatly from working together through the game. "They have times where they don't agree with each other and they've worked it out through the story. It's helped them become leaders for each other in ways that are non-violent." Alternatively, it creates a form of escapism, giving a player the chance to just immerse oneself in a new world and act in a way they wouldn't in the real world. Lea charmingly observed, "It's that same energy of when you were seven and picked up a stick and it was suddenly a sword."

For the dungeon master, a person has the chance to see what is important to them when being in charge of the game — how much control they like to have and whether they can improvise. "I didn't know how well I'd do as a DM. The game itself has helped me; it gives me no choice but to lead. You have these adventurers that need you. It does push you," Copp says. "It's helped me not only in D&D, but in my personal life. It's taught me patience and objectivity. I've always been a black-and-white person, and I never explored the gray."

She makes a great point. The skills one needs in an RPG campaign are those that can be applied in the real world. Bell observed too that "you can use everything you do for D&D when writing your resume." Campaigns can get deeper than most would expect, depending on how much people like to role-play. Characters might establish relationships with each other that grow and develop as the game progresses, making the stakes of battle all the more stressful.

It's certainly an option that might make quarantine a little less monotonous.

Claudia Rose recently wrapped up her first campaign as a Dungeon Master (with Reader Managing Editor Nick Warren as one of the party members). *The final boss was killed by a goose, but that's another story. Claudia can be reached at Claudia@eriereader.com*

The Standby Release Demos to Celebrate Over, Under Anniversary

‘Modern emo kid’s take on ‘90s grunge’ gained national notice



The Standby — singer-guitarist Jordan Sigmund (left) and bassist Lyle Sallade (right) — celebrated the one-year anniversary of their debut album *Over, Under* with the release of a series of demo recordings.

The Standby are celebrating the anniversary of their debut album, *Over, Under*, with a special release of a compilation of demos, including a previously unreleased track. The band had been kicking on local stages for a few years, before their seven-song EP catapulted them out of the tri-state area and onto the national scene, touring multiple times

across the country, releasing three music videos, amassing over 80,000 plays on Spotify, and earning coverage in national music outlets such as *Alternative Press*, *Dreambound*, *Punk News*, and *Substream*. All in the span of one year. *Over, Under* has been described as “falling between Kurt Cobain and emo fame” by *Alt-Press*, and as “picking up where

Balance and Composure left off with *The Things We Think We’re Missing*” by *SweetStatic*. A modern emo kid’s take on ‘90s grunge, *Over, Under* is a masterful blend of multi-genre influences, knowing just the right moments to be powerful and energetic, and when to be somber and introspective, and delivering a sound that fans of any alt-rock subgenre will enjoy. “It was incredibly satisfying just to put out a cohesive release,” says singer and guitarist Jordan Sigmund. “We put a lot of work into those songs, and it was an achievement to us making the EP, and realizing how many people we could reach.”

Riding the successful year they had behind their debut effort, The Standby kicked off 2020 with a month-long full U.S. tour, which surely would have been followed by more touring, if it weren’t for the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. “We were planning on swinging through some parts of the South this summer that we had never been through before, and we were going to hit the West Coast again.” As a special anniversary celebration, the band has decided to treat their fans to *Over, Under - The Demos*, a compilation which features early demo versions of the songs “Wintersun” and “Broca”, as well as a previously unreleased, untitled track. As to why the final track was left off of the album, Sigmund states “We just didn’t feel that it fit the vibe of the rest of the record, and there were other songs we wanted to focus on more. At the time, we

didn’t even have lyrics, which is why we left it untitled on this release.” The untitled track is the highlight of this release, with an explosive chorus and vocal melody that is sure to get stuck in the listener’s head, and will hopefully become a staple of the band’s setlist, whenever live music performances come back. To return the ever-present comparisons to Nirvana, this track feels like the direction the band would have gone had Kurt Cobain lived to write an album around “You Know You’re Right.” *Over, Under - The Demos* is available on all major streaming services as of Friday, Sept. 18, and be sure to keep your eyes and ears peeled for what the band does next. If the past year has been any indication, big things can be expected for the future of The Standby. — Tommy Shannon

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MOVIE REVIEWS

Back to the Start: *Tenet* is a Clever Idea That Lacks Humanity

★★★★

Christopher Nolan is a filmmaker obsessed with time. Films as varied as *Memento*, *Inception*, *Interstellar*, and *Dunkirk* have shown the director’s particular fascination with the way people perceive and experience the passage of time. It was only natural that he would eventually make a film solely about time travel and his new film *Tenet* is his own take on the genre. The film manages to display both Nolan’s best (clever ideas and creative set pieces) and worst (a disinterest in characterization and human emotions) qualities, but the good things make it an entertaining ride.

John David Washington plays a CIA operative who gets recruited by a secret organization that is trying to stop a Russian oligarch (Kenneth Branagh) from starting World War III through a device that can somehow reverse chronology. Helping him on this mission are a fellow operative (Robert Pattinson) who seems to know more than he lets on and the oligarch’s estranged wife (Elizabeth Debicki), who sees this mission as her ticket to freedom.

The film spends very little of its 150 minutes developing its characters to the point that Washington’s character doesn’t even get a name. Debicki’s character is the only one we really get to know and she sadly gets less to do as the story moves on. Also, technical issues that Nolan has been criticized about before like sloppy editing and deafening sound mixing get ramped into overdrive here. With that said, the action sequences are expectedly breathtaking and its interesting twist on time travel is enough to somewhat forgive its flaws. *Tenet* is what Nolan’s career has always been heading towards, for better and for worse. — Forest Taylor

Written and directed by: Christopher Nolan // Starring: John David Washington, Robert Pattinson, Elizabeth Debicki, Kenneth Branagh, Dimple Kapadia, Himesh Patel, Aaron Taylor-Johnson, Clemence Posey, and Michael Caine // 150 minutes // Rated PG-13



WARNER BROS. PICTURES

STATION!!!: *Bill & Ted Face the Music* is Both Excellent and Bogus

★★★★

The writers and stars of the *Bill & Ted* movies have been teasing a possible third entry in the series for quite some time now. There were doubts that it would ever be made, but now the story of two dopey guys saving the world with the power of music feels like a breath of fresh air. Unfortunately, *Bill & Ted Face the Music* is a bit of a mess with an overabundance of subplots and neither the clever storytelling of *Excellent Adventure* nor the demented creativity of *Bogus Journey*. However, the film’s message of positivity makes it impossible to hate.

Thirty years after their first adventure, Bill S. Preston, Esquire (Alex Winter), and his most excellent friend Ted Theodore Logan (Keanu Reeves) still haven’t written the song that was foretold to bring about world peace. Upon hearing a warning that the world may soon end, they travel forward in time to get the song from their future selves. Meanwhile, their daughters Billie (Bridgette Lundy-Paine) and Thea (Samara Weaving) travel back in time to get together history’s greatest musicians to help them in their task.

Winter doesn’t miss a beat getting back into Bill’s fun-loving shoes. Reeves, on the other hand, has trouble replicating the energy of a character he has clearly outgrown. The youthful energy of the older films can be better found in Weaving and Lundy-Paine, who do a great job re-creating the silly scenes that made those films so much fun (shout-out to a musicians duel between Jimi Hendrix and Mozart!). In the end, *Bill & Ted Face the Music* is harmless fun, but don’t expect it to make history. — Forest Taylor

Currently playing in select theaters and on VOD // Directed by: Dean Parisot // Written by: Ed Solomon and Chris Matheson // Starring: Alex Winter, Keanu Reeves, Kristen Schaal, Samara Weaving, Bridgette Lundy-Paine, Anthony Carrigan, Erinn Hayes, Jayma Mays, Hal Landon Jr., Holland Taylor, and William Sadler // 92 minutes // Rated PG-13



UNITED ARTISTS RELEASING

Away Isn't a Waste of Space

How the easy-to-love Netflix drama goes beyond its elevator pitch



I didn't expect to love *Away* like I did. A series taking the Netflix number one spot for a week usually means a few things: It has fairly broad appeal, there's something buzz-worthy going on, and there's a fair amount of it to watch. All of these are true, of course, but there are a few things that make this populist space drama better TV than most. First, let's start with the obvious things. This is a show about Hilary Swank going to Mars. Having a two-time Academy Award Winner for Best Actress shoot a series that primarily takes place in

space is unequivocally interesting. While Frances McDormand may still go to the moon one day, that doesn't make *Away* any less captivating. Though Josh Charles (*The Good Wife*, *Sports Night*) is the only other well-known name in the series, this is entirely an ensemble cast. As Commander Emma Green, Swank wrestles with her driving ambition to go to Mars while still caring about her family — her husband and co-worker Matt (Charles) and her teenage daughter Lex (Talitha Bateman). On her mission aboard *The*

Atlas spacecraft, she's joined by an international team of fellow astronauts. There's Misha (Mark Ivanir), the gruff, experienced Russian cosmonaut; Wang Lu (Viviaun Wu) of China, whose initial cold demeanor may be deceiving; Kwesi (Ato Essandoh), the Ghanaian-born botanist and man of faith representing England; and Rom (Ray Panthaki), Green's suave Indian second-in-command. You'll know every character's name by heart three episodes in. By following each character's backstory, but not relying on too much of a *Lost* tribute (despite the title ... wait a minute), the viewer really grows to know each of the character's inner workings. While it doesn't have the quirks and punches that make a truly great drama (think *Mad Men*, *The West Wing*, etc), it excels at yanking your heartstrings against a breathtaking backdrop of zero gravity. — Nick Warren

Season One currently streaming on Netflix
// Created by: Andrew Hinderaker // Starring: Hilary Swank, Josh Charles, Vivian Wu, Mark Ivanir, Ato Essandoh, Ray Panthaki, Talitha Bateman // 10 episodes

PEN15's Absurd Nostalgic Glory

The early 2000s period piece returns in full force despite limited episodes



If you don't know about *PEN15*, get ready to join the club. The series stars Maya Erskine and Anna Konkle playing middle school versions of themselves. The gimmick: Everyone else plays their actual age. Acting alongside actors and actresses that are just barely teenagers, Erskine and Konkle are Maya Ishii-Peters and Anna Kone. The two are best friends in the most glorious

way, two people being themselves and basking in all the weirdness they can muster. Season Two, though ultimately less cartoonish than the first, barely skips a beat, taking place immediately after the events of Season One. Still in seventh grade, Maya and Anna deal with gossip from their classmates and navigate through the waters of middle school re-

lationships. There's a school play, a new friend, sleepovers, and more, while the relatively mundane events of this era of one's life are made monumental. It's the balancing act that Erskine and Konkle do of being truthful and believable 13-year-olds with the scene-breaking insanity that the premise thrives on. It's sincerity and satire simultaneously. The viewer is both aware of the stretches being made, but able to buy into it for the amazing payoff. It's a hilarious show, with an attention to detail that will have anyone who grew up in the early 2000s both shocked and delighted at what's being repurposed for schtick. What viewers have now is purportedly the first half of Season Two. With filming cut short due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the latter half of this season will likely come in 2021. — Nick Warren

First half of Season Two currently streaming on Hulu // Created by: Maya Erskine, Anna Konkle, Sam Zvibleman // Starring: Maya Erskine, Anna Konkle, Mutsuko Erskine, Richard Karn, Taylor Nichols, Melora Walters, Taj Cross, Dallas Liu // Awesomeness TV // Seven episodes

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TELEVISION REVIEWS

Queens of the North

Canada's Drag Race Slays the Screen and Crowns a New Queen



CRAVE/WOW PRESENTS PLUS

The Canadian iteration of *Rupaul's Drag Race* ended its first season on September 3. Before we get to the new Queen of the North, here's a fair warning that some slight spoilers are ahead.

Back in July, *Canada's Drag Race* started streaming on Wow Presents Plus, a

streaming service of all things *Rupaul's Drag Race*. Twelve contestants from all across Canada strutted into the workroom to join the pantheon of RuGirls that continues to grow internationally (*Drag Race Holland* and *Drag Race Australia* are next).

The *Queens of the North* proved to be worth the wait. From the first episode, it was clear that it was an eclectic group of queens. All different styles and reputations of drag are represented from pageant queens and YouTube Gurus to Canadian indigenous queens and circus queens. *Drag Race* continues to further visibility for different types of drag, and effectively showcases their talents. Fan favorites like Priyanka, current New York City native Jimbo, and Lemon stole the screen with their quick wit and star power personas. Jimbo in particular captured hearts with her bizarre style and quirky personality.

While the competition was tight, ironically the panel of judges faced the most critiques. *Canada's Drag Race* is hosted by judges Brook Lynn Hytes (A U.S. *Drag Race* runner-up) and models Jeffery Bowyer-Chapman and Stacy Mackenzie.

After some unfavorable critiques, Chapman came under fire on social media. Fans were angry at his critiques and have accused him of inconsistent

feedback, body shaming, and general rudeness. This then presented a problem within the *RPDR* fandom. Queens or judges that face criticism for how they are portrayed or the decisions they make are blasted and "canceled" on social media. Hate messages and death threats can pour in and run victims like Chapman off social media. Here, it is more important than ever to remember how to politely disagree and not take a reality show too seriously.

Canada's Drag Race put a new spin on staple challenges, casting an enchanting group, and delivering a nail-biting finale right until the queen was crowned. With a legendary season in the books, we can only sit back and wait to see what the next international season will deliver. — Michael Mongera

Season One airing on Logo TV and currently streaming on WOWPresents Plus, purchasable on Amazon Prime // Created by: RuPaul // Judges: Brooke Lynn Hytes, Jeffery Bowyer-Chapman, Stacey McKenzie // 10 episodes



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Ghost of a Podcast

Hosted by: Jessica Lanyadoo
Arrow / Astrology, Advice, Self-care

We’re all looking for answers these days. With the current uncertainty in our world, many are finding themselves looking towards the stars and delving into their spiritual nature. *Ghost of a Podcast* is your one stop shop for astrology, advice, and self-care with the occasional political discussion. Similar to having a conversation with your quirky aunt, Lanyadoo has a knack for explaining astrology, current events and difficult topics with humor, wit, and straightforward language. In the most recent Episode 141 she covers the current Mars Retrograde period, touching on conspiracy theories, COVID-19, and how the state of affairs in the United States relates to transit. Lanyadoo is internationally respected as an astrologer and psychic medium. In 2019, she co-hosted TLC’s digital show *Stargazing*. She was the weekly astrologer for the San Francisco Bay Guardian from 2003 until it closed in 2014. She has written astrology columns for varied publications, including *The Hoodwitch*, *Target*, *Girlboss*, *Chatelaine*, *Martha Stewart’s Body and Soul Magazine*, *On Our Backs Magazine*, *Glamour Magazine*, *Oyster*, and *Rookie*. Her website lovelanyadoo.com is full of fun free stuff, weekly horoscopes, and a link to purchase your full astrology chart. Mine was emailed within five minutes and



was an impressive, easy-to-read 50 pages. Check out new episodes of *Ghost of a Podcast* twice a week.
— Amy VanScoter

1619

Hosted by: Nikole Hannah-Jones
New York Times / History, Economy, Social Justice

Americans still seem to learn very little about the lives of those enslaved and how that portion of history built the economy which our country runs upon today.

The 1619 Project by The New York Times Magazine was created to provide the narratives of Black citizens and their experiences in the country. The 1619 podcast by Nikole Hannah-Jones is an extension of this story.

The podcast begins as Hannah-Jones illustrates a scene standing at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean. She recalls the tales of her ancestors, where a pirate ship by the name of *White Lion* sailed into the bay and trades 20 to 30 Africans for permission to continue their journey. Ironically named Point Comfort, this is where slavery in the British North American colonies begins.

The podcast covers the economy built up from the cotton industry, the beginning of American music through Black “freedom,” how federal health care continues to create bad blood, and Black land ownership struggles today.

The profound storytelling and recordings throughout the five-episode podcast shine through, stirring



up grueling emotions while bringing old issues into new light, telling the story that no history book will
— Chloe Forbes

Jensen and Holes: The Murder Squad

Hosted By: Billy Jensen and Paul Holes
Exactly Right Media / Mystery, True Crime

Have you ever wanted to solve a murder? On *Jensen and Holes: The Murder Squad*, true crime journalist Billy Jensen and retired cold-case detective Paul Holes give you the chance. Brought together through the death of their mutual collaborator and friend Michelle McNamara, Jensen and Holes started The Murder Squad with the intention of arming citizen detectives with the knowledge needed to crack unsolved cases. Each week, the duo discusses a different unsolved case that has lost traction with local law enforcement, hosting conversations with guests who have a connection to the victim or the crime. Each episode closes with a call to action for listeners in the form of a weekly assignment, aimed at providing new leads for law enforcement agencies to follow up on to help solve these cases. The episodes often revolve around a murder victim whose case is unsolved, but Jensen and Holes also cover cases in which a killer has been caught, but their victims remain unidentified. With impeccable investigation skills and witty banter, Jensen and Holes bring to light cases that have long since been forgotten, giving listeners the chance to do right by the victims.
— Ally Kutz



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Summer Reads You Might Have Missed

Three novels you won't want to put down no matter what season it is

By: Ally Kutz

The Shadows by Alex North

Thriller, Horror, Mystery / Celadon Books

What it's about: In a desolate English town, Charlie Crabtree committed a murder so horrendous that it continues to live on in infamy in the dark corners of the Internet, with copycat killers cropping up every few years. Now, 25 years later, Paul Adams — a friend of both Charlie and his victim — has returned home after his ailing mother's health takes a turn. Before long, strange things begin happening to Paul, bringing past memories with them. The most unsettling memory of all, though, is that after the murder, Charlie Crabtree disappeared — and was never found.

Why you'll love it: North writes with such intensity and passion that it is difficult not to be immediately pulled in, drawn to the characters' struggle with such a horrific murder and the circumstances leading up to it. Each chapter pulls you further into the tangled web of Paul's life, both now and 25 years ago, and the jumps between the past and present are seamlessly blended to keep you on track but hooked nonetheless. With multiple twists and jaw-dropping moments, *The Shadows* is sure to keep you on edge until the very last page.

Head Over Heels by Hannah Orenstein

Sports Romance, Contemporary / Atria Books

What it's about: Avery Abrams is a gymnast whose luck seems to have run out. After a terrible performance, Avery's dreams of joining the Olympic team are crushed, she and her football star boyfriend break up, and her best friend and teammate, Jasmine, becomes an Olympic champion, marrying their emotionally abusive coach. Returning to her hometown, Avery begins working alongside new coach Ryan to train a young gymnast with promise. Sparks start to fly, but when a scandal hits the gymnastics world, it has devastating effects on Avery and her old friend Jasmine.

Why you'll love it: Orenstein's characters jump off the page and come to life, giving this story an edge compared to typical romance genre novels. Shining a light on the pressures of elite competitions, the story focuses not only on Avery's love life, but also on her other relationships, both professional and personal. Orenstein does well in balancing heavy topics with lighter tones, creating a summer read that you won't want to put down.

The Death of Vivek Oji by Akwaeke Emezi

Fiction, Contemporary / Riverhead Books

What it's about: When a Nigerian mother finds her son's body wrapped in fabric on her doorstep, the struggle to understand ensues. Growing up, Vivek Oji suffered blackouts with disconnection between both himself and his surroundings, with an understanding but overprotective mother and distant father raising him. As he becomes an adult, he forms friendships that bring him comfort, his closest being with his cousin Osita. As their bond grows stronger, Osita tries to better understand Vivek's intensifying crisis that ends in an unanticipated act of violence.

Why you'll love it: Emezi's writing captivates from the beginning, with characters that are unforgettable and a vivid storyline that will leave readers wanting more. The novel focuses on much more than Vivek's death, drawing into the story both his life and the people that surround him. With an excellent balance between first-person and third-person narratives and the ability to build tension through subtle foreshadowing, Emezi creates a compelling and gorgeous novel that all should read.



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- Terminal illness; and
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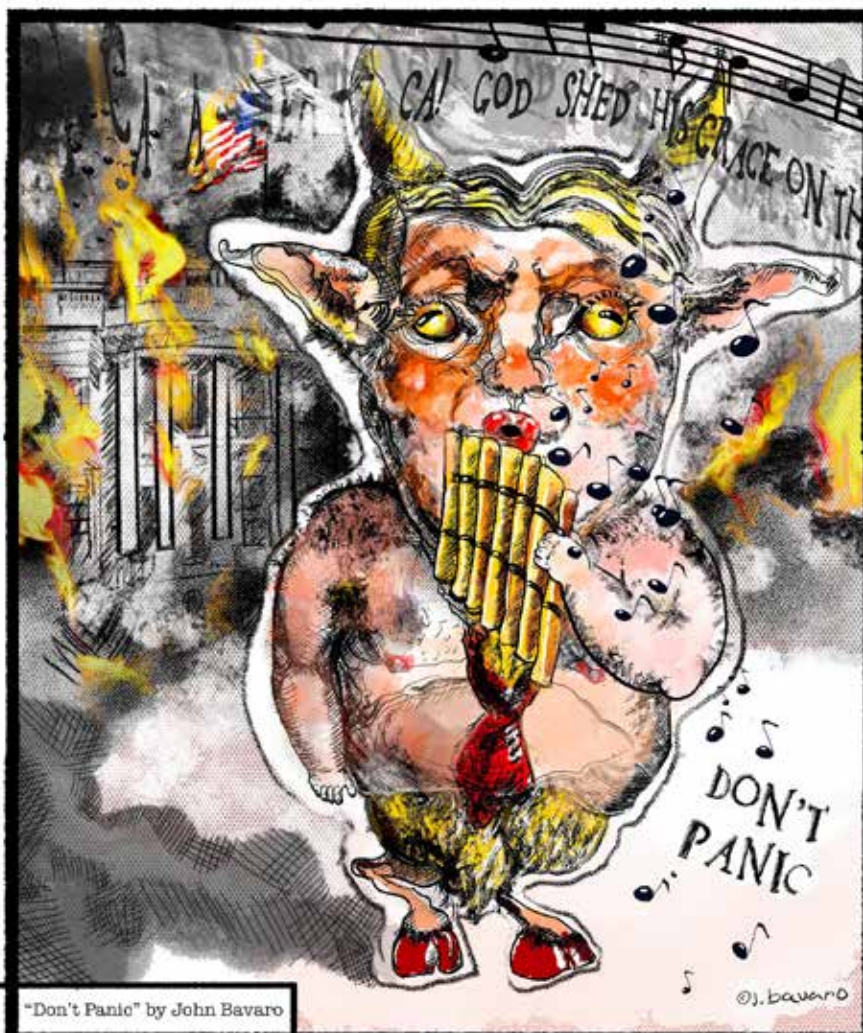


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ALBUM REVIEWS

Wasted Info

Tacos, Paint Fumes, and All the Other Essentials
Self-released

★★★★★

There's something warm and immediate about Wasted Info's debut album. That kind of distinctive touch probably isn't an accident from the Erie band. In fact it makes perfect sense — they recorded all ten tracks themselves. Spinning *Tacos*, *Paint Fumes*, and *All the Other Essentials* is pure lo-fi fun. From the start of the band's eponymous and extremely catchy opening track, you get an idea of what's in store, with a healthy share of curveballs thrown in. At the heart of the band is singer-guitarist Kennedy Krahe, joined by bassist Garret Mallory. There are times — particularly in the uptempo tracks three through six — where Krahe belts out her vocals with an exuberance that echoes Marissa Paternoster of Screaming Females, mixed with the humor and approachability of Colleen Green or Tacocat. Then there are others (like "I Sometime") that are pure Kimya Dawson, as the latter half of the record dips into a more somber tone. Any comparisons aside, Krahe, who founded Wasted Info in 2015, knows who she is. *Essentials* shows off that infectious personality, both as a loose bedroom album and a document bursting with potential that's certainly not wasted. — Nick Warren



waveform*

Last Room
Self-Released

★★★★★

For the uninitiated, waveform* is a Connecticut-based duo that makes noise. I say "noise," specifically, because the music they create seems impossible to classify in a singular genre. Take hooky songwriting, coat it in layers of reverb and DIY charm, add some alluring photography-based artwork, and you have a waveform* album. It's what made 2019's *Shooting Star* one of the best albums of the year, and fortunately, their new release, *Last Room*, follows suit. Decidedly less weird than its predecessor, *Last Room* highlights the band's strength as songwriters, with tracks like "Favorite Song" and "Shooting Star" incorporating more acoustic instrumentation with a distinct Western flair. Still, what makes *Last Room* nearly as masterful as its predecessor is the variety it presents; the aforementioned songs are strategically placed between grungy power-pop numbers like "Tell You" and "Blue Disaster," which is led by an eerie, unforgettable synth riff. With *Last Room*, waveform* continues to succeed at what they do best: creating genre-defying albums that play as truly unique experiences. And no other band is doing it quite like they do. — Aaron Mook



Anjimile

Giver Taker
Father/Daughter Records

★★★★★

Meditative and focused, the debut album from Boston's Anjimile is subtly astounding. Carrying the affecting tones and harmonies delicately harnessed by artists like Sufjan Stevens and Fleet Foxes, *Giver Taker* offers up its own unique voice. The project of multi-instrumentalist Anjimile Chithambo, the album portrays an instantly relatable feeling told from a deeply personal perspective. As Chithambo received treatment for their alcoholism prior to the release of this album, they also continued their journey as a trans, non-binary individual (going by both they/their and he/him pronouns). It's a work to behold, chamber-folk of the highest caliber that's ideal warmth for the coming autumn nights. Wafting melodiously, dealing with mortality and self-actualization, *Giver Taker* forgoes any seeming pretension and opts for honesty at every turn. Utilizing instrumentation that's often minimal, the harder-hitting pop sections of songs like "Baby No More" or the afrobeat crescendos of "Maker" strike fire just as well as reflective, finger-picked chimes of the album's bookend tracks, "Your Tree" and "To Meet You There." — Nick Warren



Various Artists

Damaged By Dez
Cadena Records and Cylinders

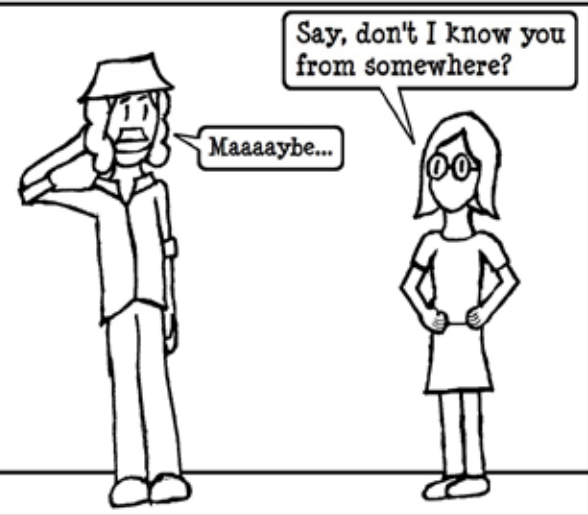
★★★★★

Damaged By Dez is a tribute record to singer Dez Cadena of Black Flag. Featured are six songs Cadena either sang, recorded, or wrote right before singer Henry Rollins ultimately joined the band. Local Erie thrashers Maniacal Device rip through a Hamm's-fueled rendition of "Six Pack," with beer-soaked vocals over razor-tight guitars and a charging rhythm section that makes you want to see how many cold ones you can pound before the song is over. The Jesse Blankenship Band cover of the break-up song "Jealous Again" shines as a country-punk tune while fellow Columbusites Mummula give us a horror-punk version of "Gimmie Gimmie Gimmie." Buffalo's Pure Heel pull off "Damaged I," a song that utilizes Black Flag's abrasive start/stop technique, complete with feedback and vocal taunting. Vieja Estirpe from Puerto Rico does a street punk version of "Rise Above," complete with gang vocals. Rounding out this tribute is Betty Machete and the Angry Cougars (also from Columbus) with "American Waste," a frantic thrash punk take on a Black Flag classic. Stocked with locals and regular Erie visitors, this is a must-have for any Black Flag collector. — Larry Wheaton




TOMMY IN TOON — BY TOMMY LINK


I don't know why I get uncomfortable when people recognize me outside of a show.



I should be jumping at the thought of "word of mouth" publicity, but instead I get sheepish. Am I afraid of coming across as full of myself? Am I ashamed of being a musician when I'm off stage?



Or have I just watched enough super hero movies to really want a secret identity....



CROSSWORD

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- Across
1. Honda rival

6. Enjoy Joyce, Carroll or Oates

10. Man of letters?

15. Japanese or Javanese

16. "Picnic" playwright

17. Upright, maybe

18. Flattering thing for artist Kahlo to hear when she walks in a room?

21. China's Chiang ____-shek

22. Cookie that's often pulled apart

23. Airline that doesn't schedule flights on Shabbat

24. Something in the sky in early February?

29. '70s radical grp.

30. Bill in a tip jar

31. Rocket interceptor, for short

32. Sad, in French or Spanish

34. "Bottled poetry," according to Robert Louis Stevenson

36. Go ____ great length

39. Smear

40. Excitement over an evening festivity involving poop?

45. "Curb Your Enthusiasm" lead, casually

46. Quito's land: Abbr.

47. LAX guesstimates

49. Home of the NHL's Senators

52. Vowelless deli order

54. It helped bring dinos to life in "Jurassic Park"

55. "Who ____ to judge?"

56. Pic posted by Charlton
- Heston that was taken on the set of a 1959 movie?

60. Knight's equivalent

62. Gateway Arch designer Saarinen

63. Michele of "Glee"

64. "Hurry it up!" ... or an apt description of 18-, 24-, 40- or 56-Across

70. Off the table, perhaps

71. " ____ only known ..."

72. Big name in cameras and lenses

73. Tech support callers

74. "Dragonwyck" novelist Seton

75. Many new parents could use it
- Down
1. Yoga pad

2. It comes straight from the hearth

3. New Mexico tribe

4. French : merci :: German : ____

5. Turkey's capital

6. Carnival city

7. Provide with funds

8. 2008 Katy Perry hit "I Kissed ____"

9. Can't abide

10. Lotion bottle abbr.

11. Suffix with billion

12. Hard time, so to speak

13. Speedy Gonzales cry

14. Eucalyptus eater

19. One of the lesser apes
20. Pucker-producing

24. Boar's mate

25. Teaspoon or ton

26. It's from Latin words meaning "almost last"

27. Luxury hotel chain

28. Evening, in ads

33. Put money in the bank

35. Part of QED

37. What candles may indicate

38. Active ingredient in marijuana

41. "Fiddlesticks!"

42. "Waltz Across Texas" country singer Ernest

43. Seasonal song words after "gay apparel"

44. Prego competitor

48. "Aaron Burr, ____" ("Hamilton" song)

49. Natives of Nebraska

50. "What time?"

51. Singer of "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" at Barack's inauguration

53. Immune system protectors

55. "Au revoir!"

57. Ballpark player?

58. Buzz Lightyear's buddy

59. Superman's Kryptonian name

61. At all

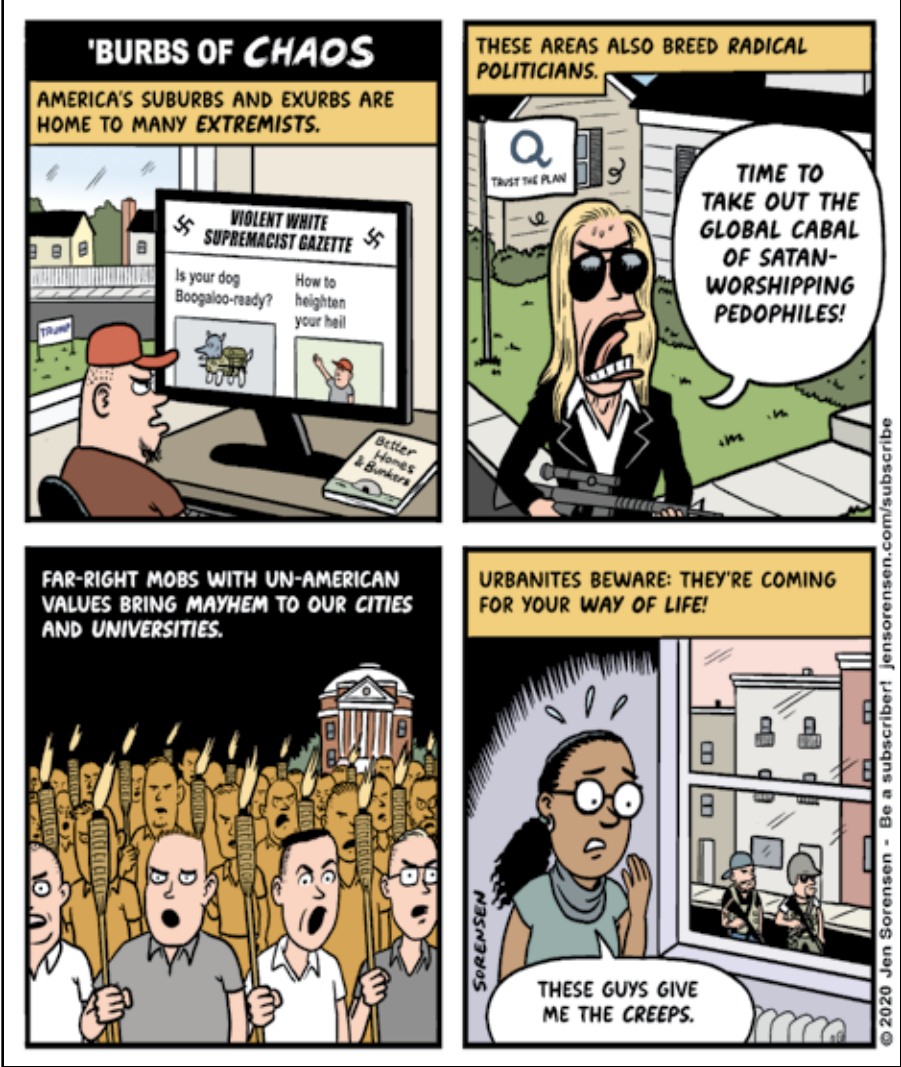
65. USCG rank

66. Aunt in la familia

67. Conk out

68. Team's best pitcher

69. Toy dog's bark



Answers to last puzzle

A	G	A	S	P		X	A	X	E	S		C	G	I
D	A	C	H	A		A	K	I	T	A		A	O	L
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D	E	A			I	M	I	N	G		O	O	H	E
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