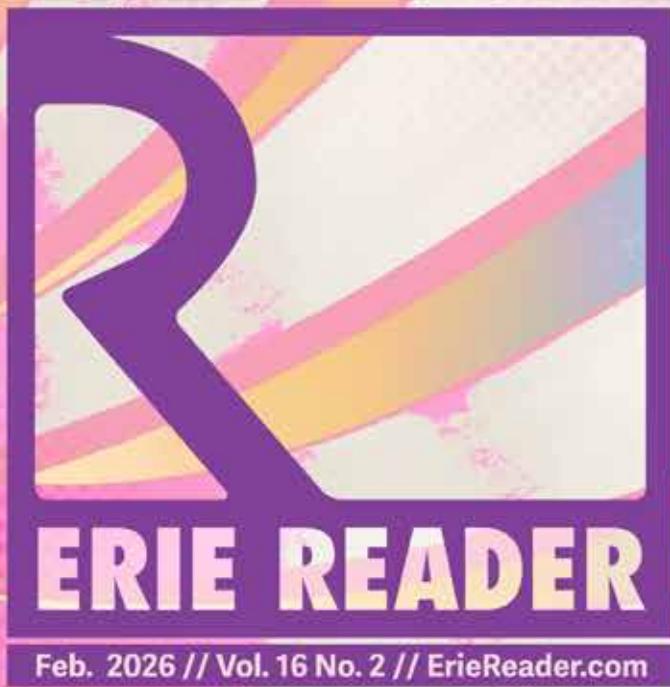


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In This Issue: Working Pennsylvanians Tax Credit (WPTC)
Erie VA Black History Month Celebration | Harry T. Burleigh
Harmony and Blessings Music Series | Oscars Predictions
Trail of Shared Heritage | Roger Harvey | Women of Word

A Local Black History Lesson in Portraiture

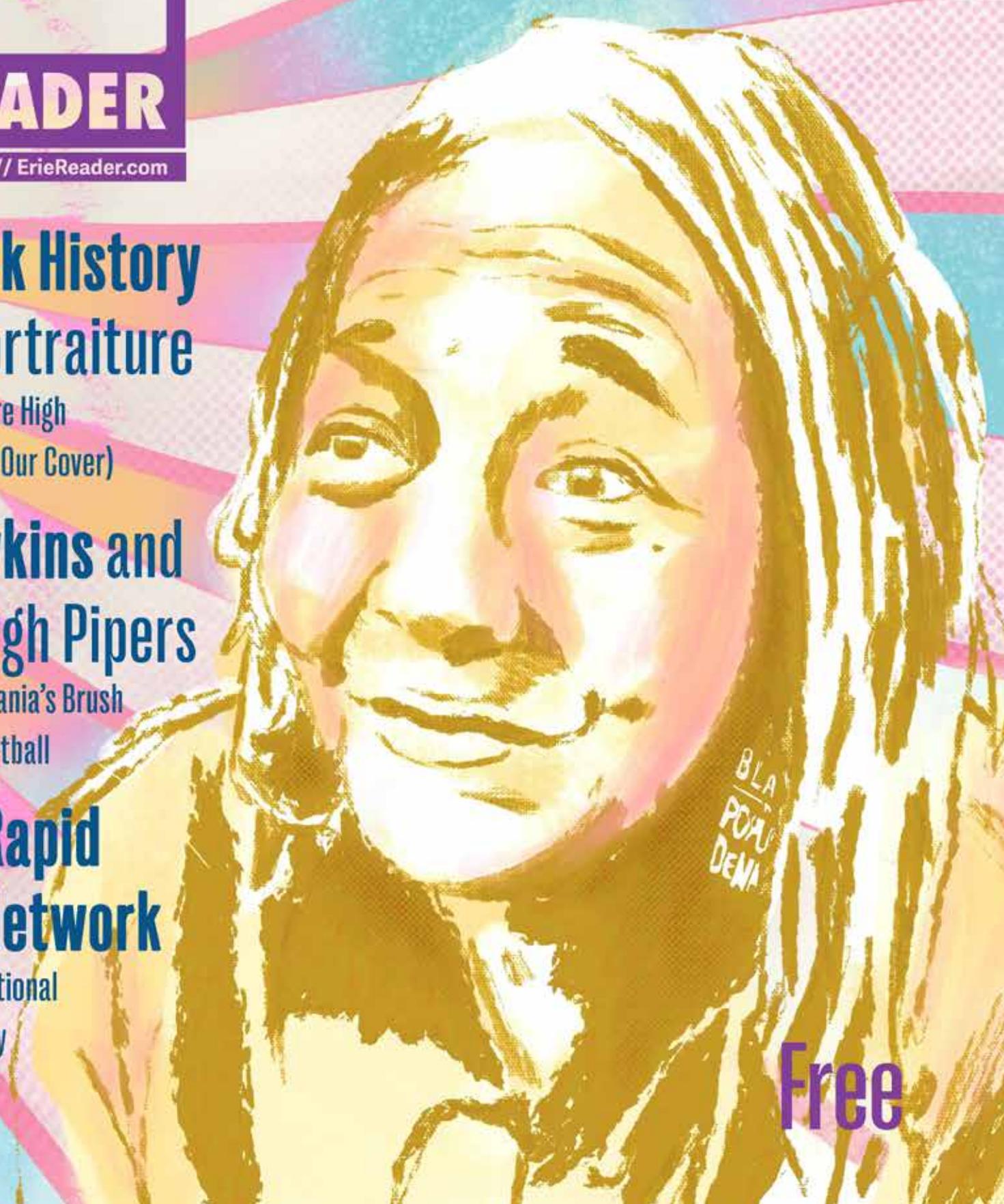
Three Erie Women Inspire High School Art Classes (and Our Cover)

Connie Hawkins and the Pittsburgh Pipers

Northwestern Pennsylvania's Brush with Professional Basketball

ICE in Erie: Rapid Response Network

Protecting the Constitutional Rights of Our Community



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From the Editors: February 2026

The power in being you

At this time last year, I was writing my first From the Editors column after the second inauguration of Donald Trump. What I wrote concerned the stripping of DEI initiatives and the assault on government agencies and programs at the hands of Elon Musk. And, now, just a year later, I'm writing this one amidst chaos: American citizens being executed in the streets by a masked gestapo, while thousands of hardworking refugees and immigrants are being ripped from their families, churches, and schools and disappearing, alongside the thousands of now publicly published allegations confirming what dozens of women have been telling us for years – that a disturbing number of rich, powerful men have been routinely and glibly participating in the trafficking, raping, assaulting, and murdering of children.

That really escalated quickly. It is psychologically exhausting – the rage at injustice and hypocrisy, the frustration that no consequences ever seem to fall upon those who

are flagrantly breaking the law and ignoring the constitution, and the unabashed racism that permeates it all. These feelings, however, are nothing new to the Black community.

Right here in Erie we have, pretty recently, witnessed the murder of a Black man at the hands of law enforcement and saw just how slowly the cogs of justice move (if they, in fact, move at all) when the victim of state violence is a person of color.

But as our cover model this month, local educator and advocate Gwendolyn Cooley reminds us, "There is power in being you." And it is that power we try to amplify in our annual Black History Month issue – sharing the voices and vision of those currently making Black history in our community, as well as remembering the stories of those from the past who have held the door open for them.

Last year's issue featured cover art from local artist Nicholas Cardell Gore, one which showed the difficult push and pull of emotions – of trying to find

balance between the rage of injustice and the joy of living. It was Gore again who came up with the idea for sourcing this month's cover – but this time, he arranged for three inspiring Black female elders in our community to be put in a room with our community's future – high school art students from Erie's Public Schools – to draw their portraits. The result was generational and genuine connection – the aforementioned Gwendolyn Cooley, along with Dorothy Smith-Frazier and Candace Battles (all featured within) spent their time telling their life stories, sharing their experiences, their hardships (and the boldness they all displayed at overcoming them) along with their joy, to three classrooms of high school students.

The results of this project were unforgettable for a number of intangible reasons, but also because the resulting art the students created will be captured in time, here in this issue. The cover, created by Collegiate Academy senior Rory Gardner, at-



Feeling comforted and inspired by the past, the students of the Erie School District, who represent our future, created unique portraits of prominent elder Black community members for the Erie Reader's Black History Month cover.

tempted to capture the radiant joy of the subject, Ms. Cooley, as Gwendolyn emphasized during her portrait session: "Life brings me joy. I'm thankful to be alive – loving life, loving who I am, respecting who I am, and realizing that I can make a difference."

May we all be so bold in overcoming, and so grateful for the one life we get to live.

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Vegas F. Kastberg is a new associate with Knox McLaughlin Gornall & Sennett, P.C.

Vegas focuses his practice on environmental law and real estate. His prior experience includes working as an attorney in the Office of Chief Counsel for the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), serving as a law clerk for the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), Environment and Natural Resource Division, as a legal intern for DEP, and as a research analyst for a private firm in Washington, D.C. He also worked for Northwestern Legal Services, representing clients in various court proceedings. He is a board member for the Tom Ridge Environmental Center Foundation (TREC).

Vegas earned his J.D. from Case Western Reserve University School of Law, where he was a Legal Writing Honors Fellow and received a CALI award for Advanced Legal Writing - Transactions. He received a B.A. in History from New York University and is proficient in Spanish.

Vegas joins a team of 40 attorneys that has been providing quality legal services to businesses, families, public entities, and nonprofits for over 65 years.



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From Erie to Carnegie Hall

Why Harry T. Burleigh's musical legacy plays on

By: Liz Allen

Erie has a rich gift just waiting for you to unwrap, one that honors the past, celebrates the present, and promises to endure for the future.

That is how Cheryl Rush Dix explains the lessons we can absorb and the inspiration we can draw from Harry T. Burleigh – composer, arranger, singer, oral historian, music editor, world traveler.

Burleigh is an Erie “treasure,” one who makes our community “richer than we know,” said Cheryl. “The Burleigh story is one in which we are the exemplars of what it means to be better together.”

If someone isn't familiar with Burleigh's story, you can explain his legacy this way, Cheryl suggested: “There's a great present in that wrapped box that you are going to love. Let me share it with you ... The gifts that came from here were developed here.”

Burleigh rose from humble roots in Erie to international acclaim thanks to those who financially contributed to his enrollment in the founding class of the New York Conservatory of Music. “Some folks put in a little and some of the great and glorious names put in a lot,” Cheryl said. It was a community-wide effort of pulling together in typical Erie fashion.

But Burleigh's story isn't just a local one. His life and his music are integral to America's narrative – both the uplifting and the harrowing parts of our history.

As a youngster, he had learned the spirituals when

he and his brother Reginald accompanied their maternal grandfather, Hamilton Waters, while he worked as a lamplighter in Erie and sang plantation songs. Formerly enslaved, Waters had purchased freedom for himself and his mother.

In a forward Burleigh wrote in 1917 for his arrangement of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” he said that Black spirituals are “the only music in America which meets the scientific definition of folk song. Success in singing these songs is primarily dependent upon deep spiritual feeling. The voice is not nearly so important as the spirit.”

He also pointed that it would be “a serious misconception of their meaning and value to treat them as ‘minstrel songs,’” in which singers, including a performer named Jim Crow, mocked Black people by “swaying the body, clapping the hands, or striving to make peculiar inflections of voice” to entertain white audiences.

Burleigh described the true beauty and power of the spirituals: “Through all these songs, there breathes a hope, a faith in the ultimate justice and brotherhood of man. The cadences of sorrow inevitably turn to joy, and the message is ever manifest that eventually deliverance from all that hinders and oppresses the soul will come, and man – every man – will be free.”

Those insights help to explain why his music has a starring role in *United in Sound: America at 250*, a Carnegie Hall series celebrating our country's birth. On Jan. 30, Cheryl attended the American Symphony Orchestra's opening concert, *Forging an American Musical Identity*. The concert featured Burleigh arrangements of “Go Down Moses,” “Behold That Star” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” On May 14, the Orchestra of St. Luke's and baritone Joseph Parrish will celebrate the friendship between Burleigh and noted Czech composer Antonin Dvorak at Carnegie's Flushing Town Hall, also part of *United in Sound: America at 250*.

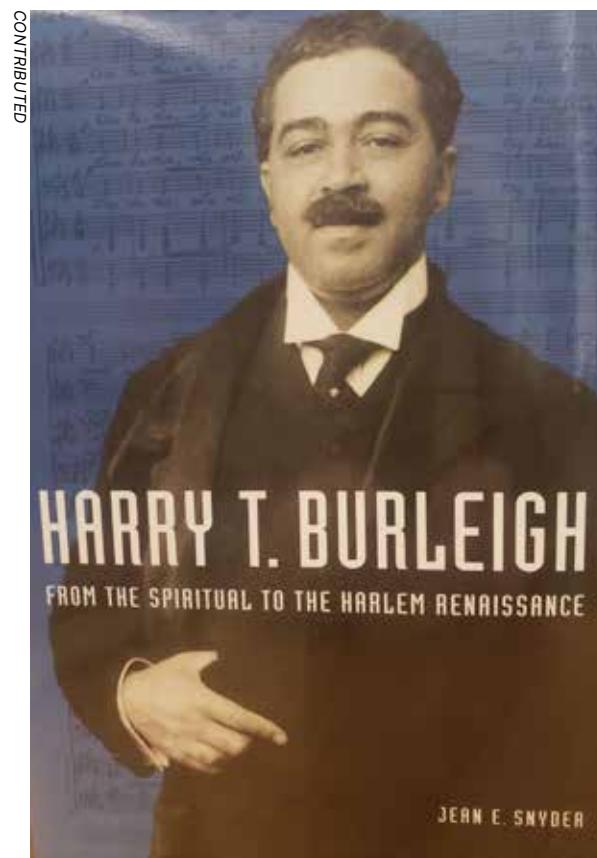
The promotion for this concert at carnegiehall.org states: “Their collaboration, rooted in spirituals and folk music, helped shape a distinctly American sound that continues to inspire us today.”

Yet you don't have to travel to New York City to experience the Burleigh phenomenon.

This year, the Harry T. Burleigh Spirituals Festival, held every year in Nashville, Tennessee since it began in 2016, will take place in Erie.

Patrick Dailey, countertenor and a voice professor at Tennessee State University (part of the network of Historically Black Colleges and Universities), organizes the Burleigh Spirituals Festival, along with Erie's Burleigh Legacy Alliance and other partners.

At a Dec. 3 concert at the Episcopal Cathedral of St. Paul, “Celebrating Harry T. Burleigh's Legacy Across American Music with the Sankofa Project: A Journey Through Black Music and Artistry,” the



Jean E. Snyder's book, *Harry T. Burleigh, From the Spiritual to the Harlem Renaissance*, is considered the defining biography of his life in Erie and his storied career. It is in the Heritage Room at Blasco Library and can also be purchased online.

Erie audience heard Dailey, Analia Corpas, Frederick Taylor, and Gary Mitchell Jr. deliver a multiple-ovation performance of Burleigh's pieces as well as music by singers he influenced, including Sam Cooke.

That concert, part of the annual Burleigh Week in Erie, was a sumptuous taste of what's in store for Erie at the Spirituals Festival March 25-28. There will be concerts, workshops for students of all ages, and lessons on how Burleigh's music has resonated for decades. For example, the 2019 festival featured the world premiere of “The Tupac Shakur Art Song Project.”

“This will be the 10th anniversary of a full academic and music festival, with a plenary opening concert and a capstone concert,” said Cheryl, a founding member of the Burleigh Legacy Alliance and my longtime friend and mentor. Cheryl compared the establishment of the Burleigh Legacy Alliance to “getting the band back together” with those associated with its predecessor, the Burleigh Society. That includes Legacy President Johnny Johnson, retired Erie School District teacher and researcher/writer about Erie's Black history; Jean E. Snyder, Ph.D., whose book *Harry T. Burleigh, From the Spiritual to the Harlem Renaissance* is the definitive biography of Burleigh; and Cheryl, among others.

CONTRIBUTED



Debbi Lyon, library assistant at Blasco Library's Heritage Room, created this poster to show Harry T. Burleigh's worldwide travels and international fame.

CONTRIBUTED



Cheryl Rush Dix of Erie enjoyed the American Symphony Orchestra's concert at Carnegie Hall featuring the music of Harry T. Burleigh with her son-in-law, Eric Cleary. She is a founding member of the Burleigh Legacy Alliance.

The Burleigh Society and now the Legacy Alliance carry on the work of the late Charles Kennedy Jr., who died suddenly in 2009 at age 59. Kennedy was known for his living-history portrayals of Burleigh and for educating Erie about Burleigh's story. He was the son of Mother Mary Beth and the Rev. Charles Kennedy Sr., who ministered to the poor and championed social and racial justice in Erie and abroad.

Shortly after Snyder published her Burleigh biography in 2016, she invited Cheryl to attend a sold-out Burleigh concert in New York City. At a reception that followed, one of the "luminaries" who had performed asked what Erie was doing for Burleigh.

"After this wonderful, emotive concert, I came away with a fire lit," Cheryl recalled. She vowed that "the next time somebody asks me that question, especially if my feet are in Carnegie Hall, I will have a better answer," she said. She and the others reconstituted the Burleigh Society with its new name, the Burleigh Legacy Alliance, committed to making "Erie a home for Burleigh performance and scholarship," she said.

Cheryl and other Burleigh fans are captivated by the fact that in addition to preserving the Spirituals, he also composed art songs and set to music poetry by Walt Whitman, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Langston Hughes.

"He wrote the music for 'Lovely, Dark, and Lonely' by Hughes for Marian Anderson, his voice protégé," Cheryl said. Anderson, famed contralto and civil rights pioneer, didn't sing Burleigh's interpretation of "Lovely, Dark, and Lonely" but in her career, she sang many songs that Burleigh arranged.

With Burleigh's connection to poetry, it's only natural that Erie poet Mabel Howard has joined the Legacy Alliance as a board member and that she

celebrated Burleigh's life in a poetry event she created for the Hagen History Center for Black History Month in February 2021. You can watch her program, *Beauty of a Colorful Mind. Honoring the Past While Inspiring a Brilliant Future* on the Hagen History Center's YouTube channel.

In addition, drop into Mabel's Café 7-10, 7 W. 10th St., and chat with her about poetry, Burleigh, and the current state of the arts, especially for artists of color.

"It's tough for African Americans in general to make it in the arts sector. To break into someplace we haven't been before is always something to be celebrated," Mabel said. "He took an elite path that many from his time, and even from now, haven't. He was willing to break barriers for himself and push through the vision that he had for greatness."

Mabel looks back with appreciation to the poets who participated in the "Colorful Mind" event. "They brought Harry T. Burleigh to life, through their lens," she said.

To learn more about Burleigh, another good source is the Erie County Library, where two Burleigh biographies are in circulation, *Hard Trials: The Life and Music of Harry T. Burleigh* by Anne Key Simpson and *Nobody Knows: The Harry T. Burleigh Story* by Craig von Buseck.

Both books are also available for reference in Blasco's Heritage Room, along with the biography by Jean Snyder.

Debbi Lyon, library assistant in the Heritage Room, highly recommends Snyder's book because it also gives insight into Erie's Black history. In the preface, Snyder writes: "Burleigh's most profound influence in his formative years was this strong family, for whom education was a primary value, and through his public and business education in Erie, he developed the confidence that facilitated his entrée into New York City's broader public arena."

From Snyder, I also learned that Burleigh's father joined with three other men to start the Equal Rights League, which advocated for full voting rights for African-American men and "to remove race and gender barriers from all state elections."

In addition to the Burleigh books, the Heritage Room also has copies of Burleigh's arrangements of various Spirituals (the originals are safeguarded in the rare books collection).

Debbi also noted that at the library's Heritage Room, "We don't just celebrate Black History Month in February. We celebrate it all year."

Specific details about the Burleigh Spirituals Festival in Erie will be available soon at Burleigh Legacy Alliance website.

Cheryl also suggested marking Sept. 20 on your calendar. That's when a Catholic Mass featuring Burleigh's music will premiere at Mercyhurst University. "So, be present at the creation. That's my advice!"

Amen.

Liz Allen hopes to attend the Flushing Town Hall concert with Burleigh's music on her next visit to New York City in May. You can reach her at lizallenerie@gmail.com.

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ICE in Erie: PA United's Rapid Response Network Established to Increase Protections, Inform Neighbors

Protecting the constitutional rights of our community

By: Carlos Mora, County Organizer for PA United

I'm writing this because many people in our immigrant and refugee communities are scared and unsure where to turn. I've heard it in conversations with neighbors, families, and faith leaders. People don't know what information is reliable, what their rights are, or what to do if immigration agents show up at their door, their workplace, or on the side of the road.

Some of that fear comes from misinformation. Some of it comes from real experiences.

Across the country, civil rights groups like the **American Civil Liberties Union** and the **National Immigration Law Center** have documented cases where federal immigration agents have detained people without valid judicial warrants, relied on racial profiling, or entered homes without legal authority. When that happens, it shakes trust and puts families at risk.

Here in Erie County, many social, community, and faith leaders have come together because we believe we can respond in a better way – calmly, lawfully, and with respect for human dignity. That's why we created the **ICE Rapid Response Network**. The Rapid Response Network operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. When immigration enforcement activity is reported, trained community members respond to observe and document what is happening. We do not interfere with law enforcement. Our role is to make sure agents identify themselves, follow the law, and use valid judicial warrants when the law requires them. Documentation matters. It protects people in real time and helps ensure accountability.

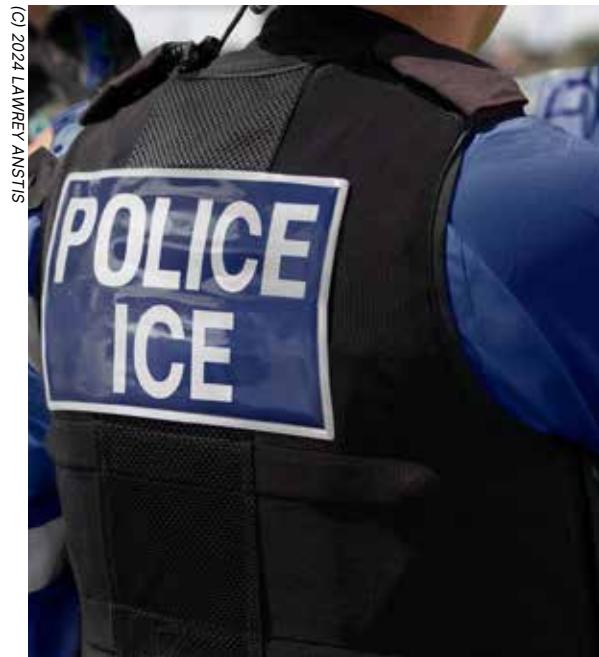
If you see immigration enforcement activity, or if a loved one has been detained, you can call our 24/7

hotline at **814-580-7090**. Trained volunteers will answer and help coordinate support. If you want to get involved or learn more, you can reach us at eriedeiced@protonmail.com.

It is also important for people to know their basic rights. No matter one's immigration status, you have the right to remain silent. You do not have to answer questions about where you were born or your immigration status. You can say, "I choose to remain silent." You do not have to open your door unless agents have a judicial warrant signed by a judge or you clearly give consent. ICE administrative warrants are not signed by judges and do not allow agents the right to enter a private residence. You have the right to ask to see a warrant through the door and to refuse entry if it is not judicial. You also have the right to a lawyer and should not sign anything you do not understand. Detention does not automatically mean deportation. Many people qualify for bond or other legal protections, especially when support and documentation happen early.

To be clear: we are not protesting or organizing around policy debates or political differences. We are organizing around human dignity and human morality. We believe our community can do better than separating families, placing children in detention, or criminally prosecuting parents who work tirelessly to make Erie County a better place. That is not who we are.

If you feel overwhelmed, afraid, or unsure how to take action, please know this: you are not alone. There are people in this community who think like you, care like you, and are committed to preserving our civil society. You do not need to be an ex-



As Immigration and Customs Enforcement activity ramps up in Erie, local community organizers have established a rapid response network for concerned citizens to report potentially unlawful or unconstitutional ICE activity.

pert. You do not need to be fearless. You just need to believe that dignity is worth defending. There is power in paying attention. There is power in showing up. And there is power in refusing to look away. Protecting constitutional rights protects everyone.

Carlos Mora is an immigrant, concerned citizen, and community member. He is currently the Erie County Organizer for PA United and can be reached at carlos@paunited.org



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Unlocking Economic Opportunity with WPTC

New tax credits look to help working poor, bridge gaps in inequalities

By: Chloe Forbes

Tax season is underway and for the first time, nearly a million Pennsylvanians will receive a new state tax credit when they file their returns this month. The Working Pennsylvanians Tax Credit (WPTC) signed into law last year is expected to deliver \$193 million in tax savings to about 940,000 Pennsylvanians – up to \$805 per household.

The credit, modeled after the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), is something that many other states have previously adopted.

This isn't just about tax policy, though. It's about who has historically been locked out of economic opportunity – and whether a tax credit can correct decades of structural inequality.

"There are about 34,000 working households in Erie County that are income-constrained, so it's a large group," explained Kim McCaslin, chief communications officer for the Greater Erie Community Action Committee (GECAC). GECAC is Erie County's frontline defense against poverty, offering programs and services designed to meet the needs of those struggling financially.

About 15 percent of county residents are considered impoverished by the federal poverty guidelines, but many more struggle with earning a livable wage. GECAC serves 22,000 clients each year, tackling prominent issues like food insecurity and housing and utility affordability. For those residents, how much of a difference could the new tax credit actually make?

"It's huge. It's the difference between keeping your job, feeding your family, and having a roof over your head," McCaslin said.

She said that many of the programs GECAC offers involve teaching people how to properly manage their money and to connect them with resources like rental and utility assistance. For many families, even if they can get by, they can be easily broken by a medical emergency or even a flat tire.

"It gives people access to the things that they need," she said. "If they have an illness, if they have a leak in their roof, just having that little bit of money that they can specifically allocate to their specific need – because every family is different, every emergency is different – so it is a huge bonus in Pennsylvania for our families to be able to have access to that bit of money."

But the credit's impact isn't evenly distributed across Erie County's workforce. Although the policy itself is neutral, Institute of Taxation and Economic Policy research shows that tax credits like these disproportionately benefit Black and Hispanic workers who are overrepresented in low-wage jobs due to historical inequities in the labor market.

An analysis of the EITC credit – which mirrors the WPTC – by the Urban Institute showed that the EITC reduced overall income inequality by 5 to 10 percent over 40 years.

Although it's effective in reducing gaps for middle-

to lower-income households, the program is less effective at closing racial income gaps for the lowest percentile, and in some cases, may even widen them.

The reason: because the tax credit is conditioned on household employment and work hours, "benefits to Black workers and families may be tempered by persistent structural barriers to employment and labor market discrimination."

The Shapiro administration acknowledged those limitations and said the tax credit is part of a broader effort.

"Gov. Shapiro recognizes that tax credits alone cannot eliminate every structural barrier workers face," said Jeffrey Johnson, director of communications for the Pennsylvania Department of Revenue. "That's why the WPTC is not a standalone solution, but part of a broader strategy to lower costs, raise

"Gov. Shapiro recognizes that tax credits alone cannot eliminate every structural barrier workers face. That's why the WPTC is not a standalone solution, but part of a broader strategy to lower costs, raise wages, and expand opportunity." – Jeffrey Johnson, director of communications for the Pennsylvania Department of Revenue.

wages, and expand opportunity."

He said that the administration is pairing the WPTC with historic investments in education, workforce development, child care, and job training – while also working alongside federally-funded programs like SNAP, Medicaid, and LIHEAP, "which remain critical to supporting families and helping workers stay connected to the labor force."

Alongside the WPTC, the administration expanded the Child and Dependent Care Enhancement Tax Credit to triple the amount or relief available through the credit.

Eligible families can receive \$600 to \$2,100 depending on income level and number of dependents.

Johnson pointed out other programs like efforts to support Black-owned and Latino-owned businesses in the procurement space and through the Historically Disadvantaged Business Assistance Program (HDBA).

Additionally, in his 2026-27 budget proposal on Wednesday, Shapiro asked the General Assembly to raise the state's minimum wage to \$15 an hour in an effort to strengthen earnings for low-wage workers.

Beyond structural employment barriers, there's another obstacle: awareness. Many eligible workers simply don't know the credit exists or don't know how to claim it.



Governor Shapiro signed the Working Pennsylvanians Tax Credit (WPTC) into law last year and it is expected to deliver \$193 million in tax savings to about 940,000 Pennsylvanians – up to \$805 per household. Chloe Forbes looks into the tangible impact of the tax credit within.

In Erie County, GECAC includes financial resources for its clients and is looking ahead to host a Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program next year where volunteers certified in tax code assist people in filing their taxes and getting the proper refunds, all for free. Since United Way stopped its in-person VITA program a couple of years ago, there have been other agencies trying to fill the gaps.

Erie Federal Credit Union is one of those agencies who opened its doors for people to access the VITA program. Cheryl Kindle, vice president of member solutions, said that without the VITA service, people may resort to going to a financial service that charges upwards of \$400 even if it's just a simple return.

At Erie FCU, they mostly see single moms, working parents and couples, and older adults. Many of them don't even know what credits are available to them as the tax law is constantly changing.

"That's one of the reasons we offer this service, even though some people could do their taxes online, they might not know all these different things they're eligible for," Kindle said.

For those who are not members of the Erie FCU, United Way does offer its VITA program virtually at MyFreeTaxes.com for those who make \$69,000 or less and would like a certified volunteer to file their taxes.

This tax credit may not be a life-changing amount of money, but it's a step toward equality and economic stability for many Erie County residents. Along with the other nonprofits and support in place, the tax credit is a reminder of how powerful resources can be when people properly know about and utilize them. Likewise, it's a reminder of the work that still needs done.

"This is just one piece of the puzzle," McCaslin said, "that is going to really help families keep their heads above water."

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

A Local Black History Lesson in Portraiture

Three Erie women inspire high school art classes and Erie Reader cover

By: Erin Phillips

“You are the most important resource that America has.”

Dorothy Smith-Frazier, a 76-year-old advocate, teacher, public servant, radio host, and current masters degree student, repeated these words twice to a classroom full of art students at Erie High and was met with a round of applause from everyone present.

Smith-Frazier’s face and life, along with Candace Battles and Gwendolyn Cooley, were subjects of a student art project conceived by a local artist and brought to life by the art teachers, students, and administration of Erie’s Public High Schools. The ostensible result of this contest is the current cover art of this issue of the Erie Reader, but the intangible benefits to the students were great: inspiration, validation, creativity, and the true and moving power of art.

The Idea

I was introduced to the art of Nicholas Cardell Gore last year, after a show featuring his work at Glass Growers Gallery, and asked if he would consider submitting his work, *Saturn Devouring His Sun*, for our Black History Month (February 2025) cover. He enthusiastically accepted and that cover remains one of our most emotionally evocative and striking to date. His piece, which was completed during the COVID-19 lockdown, expressed the dichotomy of emotions he was experiencing at the time.

Gore, now a teaching artist through Erie Arts and Culture, and in reflection upon how he could help facilitate our Black History Month cover this year, had a brainstorming session with his partner – local educator, artist, dancer, and advocate Jennifer Dennehy (Erie’s 40 Under 40 Class of 2018) – and together they came up with a community-oriented idea.

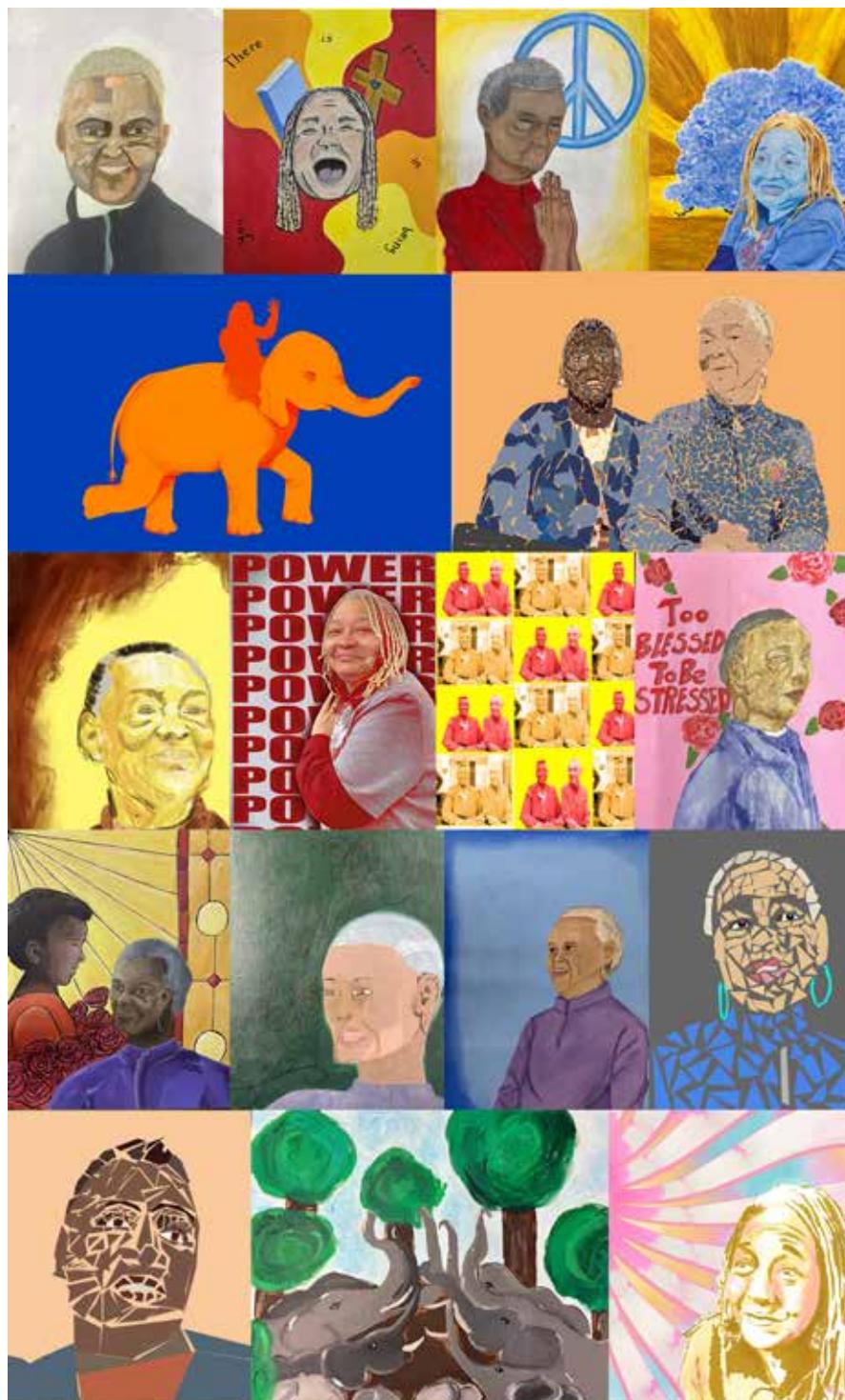
“How great an opportunity would it be to combine art students with people making change in the community who aren’t larger-than-life saints like Martin and Malcolm and Harriet and Rosa and Toni? My idea became to get kids to know who they’re growing up around, because these folks are

rich with knowledge and experience and could share something that could help them navigate today’s society.”

In seeking out these local change-makers, Gore communicated with three women – Dorothy Smith-Frazier, Candace Battles, and Gwendolyn Cooley – who have been influential to his life, as well as the Erie community at large. “I eventually settled on wanting to share Black women’s stories because historically in this city, in my view, they have not been as forward-facing. Men have been the faces of GECAC, St. Martin Center, and the MLK Center since their inception, but I know many women supporting our community in less visible or celebrated positions but who are just as qualified, intelligent, and deserving.”

Gore’s thought was to engage these three women in portraiture sessions within art classes at the two City of Erie high schools, and then select one of those resulting portraits to use as the cover for the Black History Month Erie Reader. When he presented me with his idea, it felt immediately like a perfect fit for our publication and a great way to share a story that is three-fold in effect. First, it helps students learn about Erie’s current Black history and to take in the experiences of these women as they are actively shaping the trajectory of our communities. Second, it helps students think about portraiture in a different way – not simply recording the way someone looks, but being able to tell the subject’s stories through the images they present. And third, to learn about commercial applications for art, as their design needs to fit within the Erie Reader’s cover template, and be bold and eye-catching, and appealing to a large public audience.

So Gore and I met with some folks at Erie’s Public Schools including Superintendent Dr. Natalyn Gibbs and Supervisor of Curriculum Megan Hollern. Gore pitched his idea to them and they immediately got to work on making the idea a reality. Looping in eager art teachers Tara Shannon at Collegiate Academy and Stephanie Welsler at Erie High, they were able to schedule multiple classes featur-



This collage is made up of all of the artwork created by Erie High and Collegiate Academy art students. The artists are as follows (top to bottom, left to right): A'naja Barney, Cassandra Geiger-Herman, Daniel Romanov, Lyrique Debary, Eh Mwe Pah, Zaakirah Gray, Marc Mancinelli, Mirela Saracevic, Bukuru Rashidi, Nant Mercy Sann Htay, Penelope King, Treasure Chan, Viola Eaton, Aesha Al Abdallah, Kimora Sanford, and Rory Gardner.

ing three prominent women making Erie’s current Black History.

Dr. Gibbs commented, “This project is the best kind of immersive learning experience, the kind that sticks with you for a long time. Students were able to hear firsthand the sto-

ries and lived experiences of people that they might not have learned about or met otherwise and then turned that knowledge into powerful portraits that help immortalize those stories. That benefits the students and it benefits history.”

Gore emphasizes, “I’ve learned that the older generations are eager to share their experiences and impart wisdom and knowledge to us because that is how they got through some of the darkest times in America. Their words are gifts.”

The Portrait Models

Gwendolyn Cooley, Candace Battles, and Dorothy Smith-Frazier all sat for portraiture sessions with Erie School District high school students as the three women told their stories to classrooms full of attentive teens who asked meaningful questions to help inform their portraits of the prominent, change-making citizens.

Gwendolyn Cooley (this month’s winning cover portrait) was the first to sit for a classroom of students at Collegiate Academy. Art teacher Tara Shannon had prepared handouts for the students with prompted questions to get to know their subject and to help inform and inspire their eventual portraits. During this session, we got to hear many of Cooley’s life stories. Cooley grew up in Erie and cites her parents and the community they helped create as her greatest influences and sources of support, “When I grew up in the Black community, the

church was the hub of things – the community raised us. My confidence comes from that community – boldness gets noticed and that can go a long way in life.”

At 67, Ms. Cooley, now retired but still deeply involved and active in advocacy in the community, had a career that brought her into decision-making positions, including being elected as director of the Erie School Board. Before that, she attended Academy High School and went on to attend Wilberforce University, a Historically Black College/University (HBCU) in Ohio, to study sociology. She’s traveled globally, helping to dig wells in Africa, and is an avid reader who never stops learning and expanding her worldview. When asked what changes she’s witnessed since she grew up in Erie, she pauses before responding. “There have been some changes, just a few, but changes come as we break down those old doors that have traditionally been closed to us. We have a woman mayor. We just elected our first Black female district judge. We have a woman in the county executive seat. We have a Black female superintendent.”

Overall, Cooley’s message was one of togetherness, standing up in the



The first session of the portraiture project happened in the art space at Collegiate Academy. Pictured are (left to right): artist and project creator Nicholas Cardell Gore, art teacher Tara Shannon, portrait model Gwendolyn Cooley, and Supervisor of Curriculum Megan Hollern.

face of adversity, and leaning in to who you are. “There is power in being you; never forget that.”

Candace Battles, 78, sat for her portraits at both Collegiate Academy and at Erie High. Her story of community involvement and advocacy also started with her family. Battles reflects, “I’ve always been involved in the community because I had strong Black women who raised me.”

Coincidentally, but unsurprisingly, both Battles and Cooley were given similar discriminatory advice when they were in high school by guidance counselors who were supposed to be supporting their students towards success. In no uncertain terms, they were both told that they were not college material. While Cooley boldly ignored that advice and went on to graduate with honors from an HBCU, Battles stated that her experience “had a tremendous impact on my immediate future and I ended up dropping out of school.” After earning her GED while pregnant with her first child, she eventually went on to earn two degrees: a bachelor’s from Gannon University in social work and her master’s from Case Western Reserve in the school of ap-

plied sciences. She went on to have a long career in professional social work in Erie at the Office of Children and Youth.

She emphasizes to the students, “Never let anyone take your joy from you. I allowed that woman to take my joy away from me, but I did recover. I still had some of the strength that my forebears had imparted to me.”

And that strength manifested itself again when she had a self-described “hissy fit” at Jack Sims in the office for advancement at Gannon University. Sims invited Battles, who serves on Gannon’s alumni board, into his office for a chat one day. Battles reflects, “Out of nowhere, I let him have it! How can Gannon be in this neighborhood, with the highest rate of poverty in the state, and not use its resources to improve the community? I had no idea where that came from. After I left his office, the administration somehow got a hold of the seed I planted that day, and from that seed, we were able to pull together the community to build this organization called Our West Bayfront.”

Our West Bayfront is a nonprofit organization serving the neighborhood within the boundaries of the Bayfront



Sitting for their portraits in Ms. Stephanie Welser’s art class at Erie High, (left to right) Ms. Dorothy Smith-Frazier and Ms. Candace Battles inspired the students’ artwork by sharing their incredible life stories.

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Parkway and West 12th Street and east to Sassafras Street. Its mission is to “enhance the quality of life in Erie’s West Bayfront neighborhoods through civic engagement, thoughtful development, historical preservation, and neighborhood pride. Our West Bayfront is an inclusive and thriving community where neighbors look out for neighbors, partners work together to preserve and enhance the West Bayfront’s unique assets, and mobilized residents are shaping the future of our neighborhoods and our city.” Battles is a co-founder of the organization, is on the board, and is actively involved with all of their community outreach initiatives and events.

“And it started because I had a hissy fit one day,” laughs Battles.

Dorothy Smith-Frazier began speaking at Erie High with the opening quote of this feature, and continued to inspire the classroom with her story. She notes her ancestry comes from Ireland and Sudan. “I am proud of my heritage,” she states. “I was born in Laurel, Mississippi at a time when this would not have ever been possible, for us to sit in a classroom of multi-cultural lineage – so I am proud to be in your presence today.”

Smith-Frazier has been an activist, advocate, and community leader for the bulk of her 76 years and feels strongly that it is never too late to expand your worldview. She is a product of the Erie School District, coming to Erie from Mississippi with her 13 brothers and sisters when she was 6 years old. She graduated from Academy High School, and from there became a licensed cosmetologist and cosmetology teacher, and started her own business. “I didn’t return to higher education until I was much older. I attended Gannon University majoring in mental health counseling, Penn State Behrend, majoring in workforce management and women’s studies, and now at the age of 76 I am again attending college, working towards my master’s in biblical studies.”

In addition to her pursuit of education, throughout her life, Ms. Smith-Frazier has been involved with the community. She states, “The common thread in all of my accomplishments is to make Erie a better place than it was when I got here and I can say I spent most of my life doing just that.” “I’m a servant to the people and

the community,” she adds. Along with volunteering as a radio host for over 40 years, starting close to when WQLN did, and famously hosting WERG’s Super Soul Saturday Gospel programming, she’s served on countless boards and councils including Harborcreek Youth Services, and the Governor’s Council on African American Affairs. She served as president of Erie’s NAACP for 20 years, serving longer than any other president of the branch. She now serves on the Perseus House board and Charter School board of trustees, having worked for the charter school for 17 years as a program specialist in the middle school. She is the pastor of her church, Bread of Heaven Tabernacle of Praise. She serves on the Erie Regional Airport authority and is a certified notary public.

“Learning about current Black changemakers, including these three women in our community, is incredibly empowering. These are real people making a real difference in our community every day, and to see that lets students know what’s possible.” – Dr. Natalyn Gibbs, superintendent of Erie’s Public Schools

“I feel strongly that if you touch someone’s life with goodness then that goodness will come back to you,” she reflects.

The Winner and The Message

As you can see by the cover of the Reader you’re holding, the winner of the cover design contest was a portrait of Ms. Gwendolyn Cooley, as drawn, painted, and designed by Rory Gardner, a senior at Collegiate Academy. Gardner noted that she worked to “capture the essence

Gwen has.” She did so through her use of color, which includes an intentional softening of the colors that Cooley mentioned were her favorites, reds and blues for the background while “keeping her a golden color since yellow is often associated with the sun and happiness. The rays around her play into the idea of the sun and its light. I wanted to give the painting a sort of pop art or Frutiger Metro (an aesthetic emphasizing vibrant colors, and abstract, flowing shapes that grew out of mid-2000s digital art) look to help her stand out.” Gardner likens this choice to the inspiring stories that Cooley shared in the classroom session – that “despite going through many hardships and dealing with discrimination, she smiles and brings joy to everyone around her.”

This project has been multidisciplinary in approach. While these students are learning about portraiture, they’re simultaneously learning about local Black history and the commercial applications for their artwork. Dr. Natalyn Gibbs, supportive of the project from its beginning, comments: “Interdisciplinary projects like this one are beneficial in that they engage many different types of learners with varied interests and strengths. A student initially interested in history may find a newfound love of art, or experience and interact with a particular discipline in a new way, or with a new lens. We strive to graduate students who are not only curious lifelong learners but well-rounded individuals with a breadth of knowledge across multiple disciplines, and these types of projects help us meet that mission.”

She continues, “Learning about current Black changemakers, including these three women in our community, is incredibly empowering. These are real people making a real difference in our community every day, and to see that lets students know what’s possible.”

Plans for a display and art show of the submitted student work are underway. Check on the Erie Reader’s social media channels for updates.

The work of Nicholas Cardell Gore can be found at nicholascardellgore.com

Erin Phillips can be reached at erin@eriereader.com



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Squad of Misfits: The Story of Connie Hawkins and the Pittsburgh Pipers

Northwestern Pennsylvania's brush with professional basketball

By: Jonathan Burdick

Growing up in a family loyal to Pittsburgh sports teams, I always had my favorite professional baseball, football, and hockey teams. The trinity of Steelers, Pirates, and Penguins even all share the black and gold, which due to its uniqueness seemed extra cool. As much as I enjoyed those sports though, basketball was always the sport that I gravitated towards, the trading card tables at the flea market where I made my beeline.

Maybe it was the era – you couldn't be a kid in the '90s and not be enthralled by Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls (and, let's be real, *Space Jam*) – but when fellow basketball enthusiasts inquired about my favorite team, I never really knew what to say. As much as I loved Jordan (or the Shaq and Penny Hardaway era Orlando Magic), no team really felt like *my* team.

Had I been a kid growing up in 1967, I would have been thrilled when it was announced that Pittsburgh was getting a professional basketball team. It actually wasn't the city's first. In the 1930s, the Pittsburgh Pirates *basketball* team played in the National Basketball League (NBL). In the 1940s, it was the Pittsburgh Ironmen with the Basketball Association of America (BAA). Then in the early 1960s, the Pittsburgh Rens played a single season as part of the short-lived American Basketball League (ABL).

In 1967, there was significant hype over the American Basketball Association (ABA), which would compete directly with the monopolistic National Basketball Association (NBA), itself formed from a 1949 merger between the BAA and the NBL. Many basketball purists didn't love the idea, as the ABA would differentiate itself with the three-point shot (which the NBA then lacked), a longer shot clock, and a faster-paced style of play.

In the Western Division for the first season were the Anaheim Amigos, Dallas Chaparrals, Denver Rockets, Houston Mavericks, New Orleans Buccaneers, and Oakland Oaks, while the Eastern Division included the Indiana Pacers, Kentucky Colonels, Minnesota Muskies, New Jersey Americans, and Pittsburgh's new team: the Pipers.

On Aug. 17, 1967, Vincent Cazzetta, a mild-mannered but experienced college coach, was announced as head coach. Charles "Brute" Kramer, previously of Erie working in the Middle-Atlantic League baseball, was hired as their publicity director. The Civic Arena would host the games.

Now, it was time to build a 12-man roster. In Erie, there were murmurs about Gannon College's "chief sparkplug," the 6-foot-3-inch guard Calvin Graham. He had a breakout senior year, scoring 425 points, hitting the boards for rebounds, and being the team's playmaker. The Pipers eyed him as a swingman. "We like him a lot," a Pipers official confirmed, complimenting his aggressiveness on the court.

After weeks of cuts, Graham made the team. In their first three exhibition games against the Indiana Pacers in early October, the Pipers won two. Graham played well as did a few others, but after a 120-109 exhibition win against the New Jersey Americans, the team's breakout player was clear: Connie Hawkins. The 6-foot-8-inch power forward drained 31 points, but he also demonstrated that he could do, well... just about *everything* on the court. This was unusual for a player of his size.

Hawkins had already been on quite a journey – or as *Ebony Magazine* described it, a "Kafkaesque nightmare." Some believed the 25-year-old baller was as good as the best players in the NBA, where they felt he should already have been playing. Willis Reed, New York Knicks future Hall of Famer, argued that Hawkins would be one of the superstars in his league. "All the guys know it," he said.

Hawkins never had the chance though. His basketball career was derailed while a freshman at the University of Iowa. Still a naive and inexperienced 18-year-old from Brooklyn, his name was caught up in a point-shaving scandal with dozens of players who'd associated with a fixer named Jack Molinas. Despite no wrongdoing on his part (the full story is told in-depth in the exceptional 1972 biography *Foul! The Connie Hawkins Story* by David Wolf), Hawkins was kicked out of school, banned from the NBA, and even shunned on his home courts in New York.

Hawkins was traumatized. He cried every day. Who even was he without basketball? Had it not been for loyal support from basketball superstars like Reed, Wilt Chamberlain, and Sam Jones, which helped restore his reputation, that might have been the last the basketball world heard from Connie Hawkins.

Some cosmic timing didn't hurt either. That same year, Harlem Globetrotters owner Abe Saperstein founded the ABL and Hawkins signed a \$6,500 contract with the Pittsburgh Rens. It was money he couldn't even fathom. After the league folded, Hawkins then joined Saperstein's Harlem Globetrotters.

He played this "barnstorm" style of basketball over the next four years, significantly broadening his playing style and nurturing a deep discipline with ball control. He also reinvented what it meant to dunk, which he said when "stripped to the core" was "the great form of asphalt revenge." During these years he also married, started a family in Pittsburgh, and, with the pro bono assistance of lawyers Roslyn and David Litman (family of the former Rens owner), filed a lawsuit against the NBA. When the Litmans were asked why they were spending tens of thousands of dollars of their own money on the case, their answer was simple: they believed Connie was innocent.

By 1966, Hawkins hung up his Globetrotter shoes and returned to Pittsburgh. He was tired and depressed and ashamed and, during pickup games



In the 1960s, Pittsburgh was home to an ABA basketball team, the Pittsburgh Pipers rostering Erie's own Calvin Graham from Gannon and an unequalled standout player – Connie Hawkins.

of playground ball, thought often about missing his prime years in the NBA. "It was the worst time of my life," he'd later say.

A year later though, Hawkins was again lacing up his shoes, this time with the Pittsburgh Pipers. For those who didn't know of him, they would soon. "The first time I saw Connie Hawkins," NBA legend Rick Barry said, "I couldn't believe what he could do with the basketball."

For those who saw him play in Pittsburgh, it was immediately clear that he was different from other big men on the court. Yes, as expected for his size, he could dunk and rebound and block shots, but he also could handle the ball, make playmaking passes, and even had a decent outside shot. Many compared him to Wilt Chamberlain and Oscar Robertson. As sportswriter Dan Barreiro later wrote, he "broadened the possibility" of what could be done on the court. "Hawkins used finesse," Barreiro explained, adding that with "big hands, quick feet, and a huge

imagination,” he had a “remarkable blend of broken-court moves to the basketball” along with bringing “creativity to the dunk.”

Ebony Magazine called him “Mr. Everything,” describing his style as “razzle-dazzle” and “sneaky fast” with “will-o’-the-wispiness and flair.” He also had exceptional instincts. As another journalist explained, Hawkins could “take complete command of a ball game” because he could see and analyze the entire court and every player on it all at once. “[Connie is] playing a very fast game of chess,” he added. “He knows what’s happening everywhere.”

“I remember actually being able to freeze frames in my mind and look ahead and see myself doing the move, making the move,” Hawkins once explained. In addition to his skills on the court, he was also a natural leader: warm, humble, composed, and unselfish.

Besides Hawkins, the core of this “squad of misfits” was developing. At point guard was Charlie Williams (another blacklisted from the NBA), with Chico Vaughn at shooting guard, Tom “Trooper” Washington as power forward, and Ira Harge, Craig Dill, Jim Jarvis, Rich Parks, Barry Leibowitz, and Calvin Graham in rotation. The regular season opener was against the New Jersey Americans on their court, followed by a home game against the Minnesota Huskies. Pittsburgh defeated New Jersey in a 110-107 nail-biter, but they lost to Minnesota 104-86 in their home opener in front of a crowd of 5,000.

For their third game, they faced the Denver Rockets at home. They stonewalled Hawkins in the first half allowing him a mere two points – before he dominated after halftime with 27 points in the team’s 91-77 victory. “As goes Connie Hawkins, so go too the Pittsburgh Pipers,” stated an article in the *Erie Daily Times*.

The following weeks were rocky. With their record at 11-12, home attendance decreased by over 50 percent. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* called the Pipers the “Losers’ Club,” while *Pittsburgh Weekly*

Sports took a swipe at Connie for “conning the fans ... believing he’s the greatest and that the world owes him a living.”

The team had a “roster reshuffling,” which included letting go of Graham, and signing shooting guard Art Heyman, a scrappy former NBA player and Duke University tough guy. Fellow players described him as “crazy” with a “very explosive” temper. “The trick was to direct the fire the right way,” his former college coach explained.

Pittsburgh won their next 15 games. “It took the Pittsburgh Pipers a while to get going but now their [ABA] rivals wonder if and when they’ll stop,” an article read following a win where they went “wild” with 146 points as they chased Minnesota’s first-place ranking.

While they still weren’t attracting crowds over 3,000 (“It’s almost a feeling like who cares,” Coach Cazzetta vented to the *Pittsburgh Press*), the Pipers ended the regular season with a league-best 54-24 record – a remarkable comeback from their weak start.

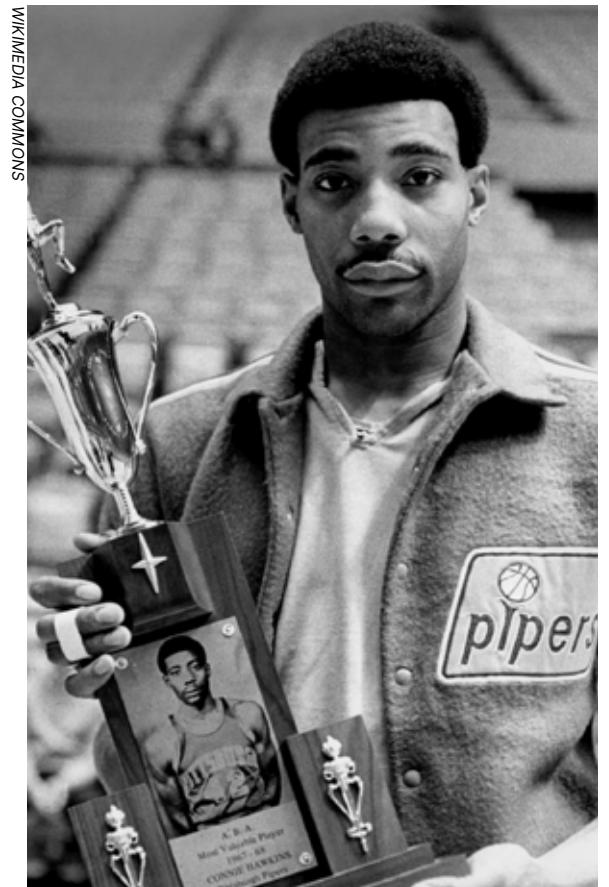
Hawkins, the “slender center who does everything well,” was named league MVP, with his 26.8 points, 13.5 rebounds, and 4.6 assists per game. Coach Cazzetta called him the “most complete player” in the league. “Defensively and offensively, outside and inside, he is perfect,” he said, then added, “I think he is the finest pro basketball player in the country.”

Pittsburgh first faced Indiana in the playoffs. Hawkins drained 38 points in their 146-127 Game 1 win before sweeping the series. For the Eastern Division title, they dominated the Minnesota Muskies 4-1. For the championship, the Pipers faced the New Orleans Buccaneers in a seven-game series.

They won the first matchup at home 120-112. Hawkins scored 39 points while Heyman and Williams contributed 26 each. New Orleans responded by winning the next two, the latter in front of a Louisiana crowd of over 6,300. Game 4, also in New Orleans and in front of a record crowd of 7,000, was “heartstopping.” In the final seconds of the fourth quarter, Pittsburgh turned over the ball and Larry Brown (future legendary college and NBA coach) sank a three-point shot to tie the game and send it into overtime. Then in overtime, with the game tied and one second left on the clock, Pittsburgh’s Charlie Williams was fouled. He drained the shot. The series was tied. Hawkins, with his 47 points and playing almost every minute of the game, had been called “simply unstoppable” by the *Pittsburgh Press*.

Unfortunately, heading back to Pittsburgh, the team was *beat up*. Washington had a broken jaw. Heyman had tonsillitis and was nursing a sprained ankle. Chico Vaughn was dealing with a hurt hamstring, as well as the death of his father. And Hawkins, it was revealed, had hurt his knee pretty badly. The team decided to rest him for the game. The Pipers played well without him, but lost by three. A determined Hawkins was back in the lineup as they headed back to New Orleans for Game 6.

“If we win down there, we’ll win the championship,” predicted Cazzetta. Game 7, after all, would be in



Connie Hawkins, the 6-foot-8-inch power forward for the Pittsburgh Pipers, was described by *Ebony Magazine* as “Mr. Everything,” describing his style as “razzle-dazzle” and “sneaky fast” with “will-o’-the-wispiness and flair.”

Pittsburgh. At the half, Pittsburgh was down 72-59. It was looking grim, but they came out hot in the second half, battling back to win 118-112.

For the championship, Pittsburghers finally showed up. A record-shattering crowd of 11,375 were in attendance for the final game. The Pipers put on a show for them, defeating New Orleans 122-113 and becoming the first ever ABA champions. New Orleans coach Babe McCarthy complimented Hawkins as “one of the greatest basketball players in the country.” Despite early criticism and doubts, the Pittsburgh Pipers were a championship team.

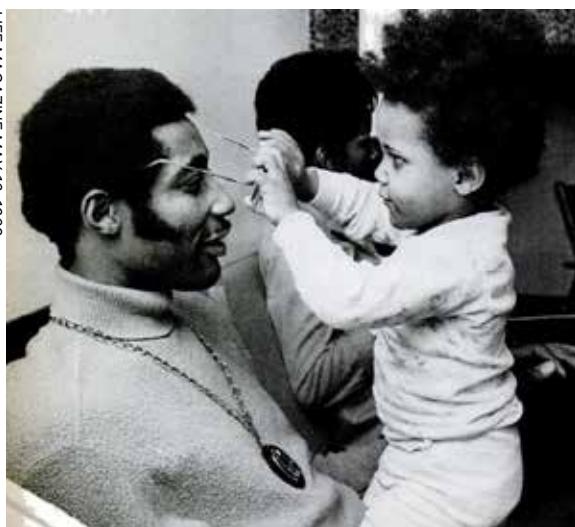
As far as I’m concerned, that first season of the ABA is one of the most compelling sports stories ever and the Pittsburgh Pipers, Connie Hawkins, and the rest of the squad of misfits are the reason why. Sadly, the legacy of that season was tainted by what came next: a shocking and bizarre move to Minnesota for the second season, Cazzetta’s angry resignation over that decision, and an upset team who overwhelmingly supported and trusted Cazzetta.

The hiring of Jim Harding, a former Gannon College coach with an astonishing record of 57-14, may have seemed promising for the *Minnesota Pipers*. His intense and “tough as nails” coaching style, far from Cazzetta’s calm and stoic approach, clashed with the players who viewed his screaming and kicking over of chairs as disrespectful. Harding was the first to admit to his controversial coaching style, but insisted he was merely a perfectionist who only asked the same of his players. Bud Elwell, his assistant



The Piper’s 1968 team rostered a “squad of misfits,” including Vaughn, Heyman, Hawkins, and Williams for their run on the first-ever ABA championship, playing Game 7 to a record-shattering crowd of 11,375 in Pittsburgh.

LIFE MAGAZINE MAY 16, 1969



After a circuitous entry into the NBA, having played for the Pittsburgh (then the Minnesota) Pipers, Connie Hawkins played seven seasons before retiring to Pittsburgh, establishing the Connie Hawkins League in the city, and eventually being inducted into the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame.

coach at Gannon, called Harding “a perfect gentleman off the court,” but on it, he stressed, “he was tough to work for.”

The season started off with a promising 18-7 record, but injuries, including a knee surgery for Hawkins who missed 25 games, and growing tensions behind-the-scenes took their toll. It boiled over with a literal fistfight between Harding and one of the owners. Harding was fired on the spot. “I

guess that incident does not add luster to my reputation,” he quipped.

They finished with a losing season. It was then announced they were relocating *back* to Pittsburgh, but the goodwill earned from the ‘68 championship was all but extinguished. The team was never the same, especially since Connie Hawkins was leaving. His lawsuit with the NBA was settled, they lifted their ban, and he signed with the Phoenix Suns.

“I don’t have to be ashamed anymore,” an emotional Hawkins said. He’d spend the next seven seasons in the NBA.

Meanwhile, the Pittsburgh Pipers rotated through players and coaches. Their new star player was swingman John Brisker, who was undeniably talented but also viciously mean and unpredictable. “Say something wrong to the guy and you had this feeling that John would reach into his bag, take out a gun, and shoot you,” Charlie Williams later recalled.

For the 1970-71 season, they were then sold and rebranded as the Pittsburgh Condors. In their final game of the 1971-72 season, with an abysmal 25-59 record, the organist played “Taps.” The ABA bought out the team, folded them, and the players were redistributed elsewhere. That was the end of professional basketball in Pittsburgh. In 1976, the ABA and NBA merged.

As for Hawkins, he inspired an entire generation of players, including fellow ABA player Julius “Dr. J” Irving, who became the league’s best-known play-

er before his NBA years. The ever-humble Hawkins, when asked about Irving being nicknamed “Little Hawk” after him, said *nobody* moved like Irving, who he considered the greatest dunker of all-time.

The years changed Connie Hawkins. The adversity had shaped him. It wasn’t the path he ever imagined for himself, but he’d *got* there. He achieved his lifelong dream to play in the NBA. Were there regrets? Maybe. But as Hawkins reflected, “All the trouble I had to go through made a man out of me.”

After retirement, he remained in the Pittsburgh area. The renowned and competitive Connie Hawkins League was established in the city and lasted for decades. In 1992, he was inducted into the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame, a call that brought him to tears. He died in 2017 at age 75. That same year, sportswriter Tim Bontemps noted that despite the ABA being long gone, it remains the soul of the current NBA.

While Pittsburgh remains a professional basketball desert (hopes for an expansion team in the hotter-than-ever WNBA fizzled last year), for basketball fans living in Erie, lifelong dreams came true in 2008 when the professional NBA G League team, the Erie BayHawks, were established and played in our downtown arena. They ceased operations in 2021. But that, readers, is another story for another time.

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

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Bird of the Month: American Tree Sparrow

A rusty cap and a big heart

By: Mary Birdsong

Like many of the birds covered in Bird of the Month, the American Tree Sparrow (banding code ATSP) breeds in the northernmost reaches of North America and overwinters from lower Canada to northern North Carolina, Texas, and Arizona. That area, delightfully, includes our region.

Named by early European settlers because it resembled the Eurasian Tree Sparrow they were familiar with, the American Tree Sparrow is a 6-inch bird with a rusty cap, a multi-colored mantle with prominent white wing bars and a two-toned bill (dark upper and yellow lower). Their faces are gray with rufous lines that cut across the eyes.

sexually monomorphic, meaning both the male and female adults have the same-colored plumage and features.

I saw my first American Tree Sparrow on a winter hike with my husband somewhere in southern Erie County or maybe Crawford. We used that central breast spot to help us newbie birders lock in the ID.

If you want to try finding some, you should be looking in fields, marshes, hedgerows, and open forests, which means just about everywhere from Presque Isle to State Game Lands to other undeveloped areas. They are often in small, loose flocks. You may also be lucky enough to find them in residential neighborhoods, gar-

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Check out that charming little dusky spot on the breast of this American Tree Sparrow, often referred to as a stick pin or heart. This field mark helps distinguish this particular bird from similar sparrows.

[To aid avian conservation efforts] homeowners and land managers can find alternatives to pesticide use, make your space more attractive with native plants and other resources like food and water that support bird life, and keep feline companions indoors.

One important field mark that helps distinguish it from similar sparrows is a dusky spot in the center of a buffy, un-streaked breast. This spot is sometimes referred to as a “stick pin” or heart.

Unlike the sexually dimorphic Red-breasted Mergansers that I wrote about last month, these birds are

dens, and at feeders. We’ve only had one American Tree Sparrow in our bird-friendly midtown back yard that we know of. We wish for more.

This species is classified as of Least Concern by conservation groups since it is abundant, but it does face decline. Despite nesting in undisturbed areas and adapting well to hu-

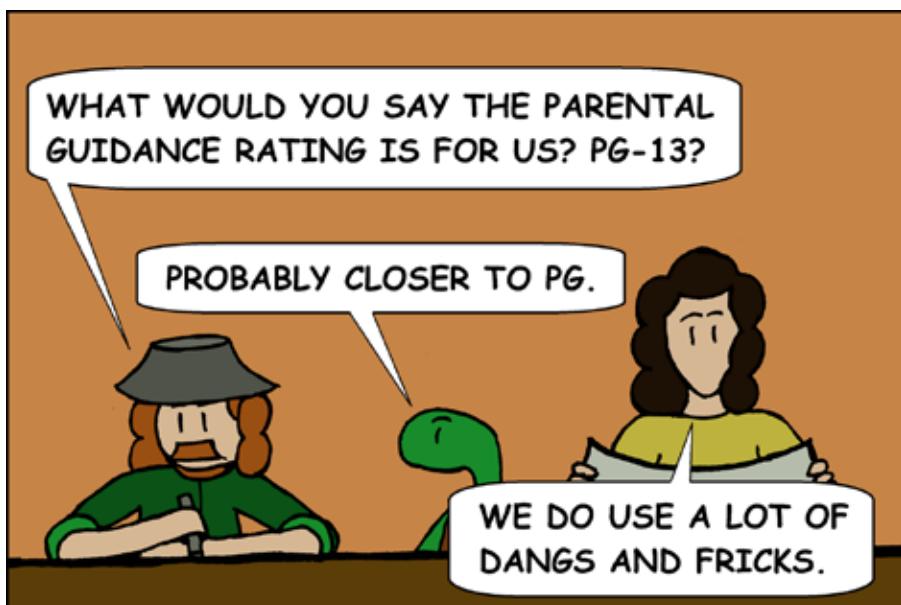
man activity while wintering, a 2016 study shows that the population was estimated to have declined by 50 percent between 1970 and 2014. The reasons for this decline are not quite known, but experts speculate that an increase in agriculture, and more forests maturing may have led to loss of open fields and other habitats used by overwintering birds.

So, like many other bird species that are still abundant but decreasing in numbers, American Tree Sparrows face risks that harm their population. This decrease has set off alarm bells for conservationists and other scientists, who are working on ways to

stem the loss. Our own efforts can help. Homeowners and land managers can find alternatives to pesticide use, make your space more attractive with native plants and other resources like food and water that support bird life, and keep feline companions indoors.

Look for that rusty cap and “heart” on the breast of any small sparrow you see and you might just get lucky and find this cutie.

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



Edwina Tries... An Erie Black History Driving Tour

A Trail of Shared Heritage is the perfect way to celebrate Black History Month

By: Edwina Capozziello

I know we're all feeling that Spring Fever coming on – a little extra sunshine has me itching to leave my coat at home and go explore. But I know it's only February, so what's a girl to do when she wants to get out of the house and celebrate Black History Month? Luckily, Erie legend Johnny Johnson's Shared Heritage Project (co-authored by historians Melinda Meyer and Chris Magoc) created a driving tour of 29 locations and an educational pamphlet outlining the history of each. So, I got into my 2009 Camry and hit the road.

The weather, on par for Erie in February, has been unpredictable, so I broke my tour up into three parts. Eventually, I'd like to make a full day of this drive that includes Lawrence Park and Harborcreek to the East, McKean and Edinboro to the South, and Girard to the West, as well as 21 locations in the city proper.

My personal favorite from this list is the Erie Cemetery, which is beautiful any time of year and the final resting place of Erie native and composer Harry T. Burleigh. But I have always been intrigued by the old stone house at East Lake Road and Water Street (the Crowley House) in Lawrence Park, and was so interested to learn

CONTRIBUTED



Ride along with Edwina as she explores the Trail of Shared Heritage, a locally published driving tour highlighting landmarks of importance to local Black History. Here, reflected in the rear window of her car, you'll see the Smith Family Farm House at 3050 Rice Road in Edinboro, former home of Beatrice and LeRoy Smith – a civically active family who came to Erie in 1948.

which used steam power to mass-produce ice cream. The Hicks family also lived in the building.

The Shared Heritage Driving Tour is chock-full of interesting stories about Black men and women who shaped Erie's rich history. A collaborative effort by many local historians and historical societies over several years resulted in a beautiful, detailed, easy-to-use driving tour guide that will help you feel a little more connected to Erie's diverse ancestors.

more about its history as a probable Underground Railroad station, with a tunnel leading from the house to the bank of Four Mile Creek.

We in Erie love our ice cream so I was excited to find out more about James Franklin's Gem City Ice Cream which stood at 10th and French for nearly 40 years and John S. Hicks' Ice Cream Factory at 12th and State,

The biggest revelation and most interesting part of the tour for me is a place that is sadly no longer standing: Hotel Pope at 1318 French St., which was touted as a music hot-spot for 50 years.

Interchangeably called the Pope Hotel, the business was primarily a nightclub and featured live entertainment by many famous sing-

ers and musicians, including Louis Armstrong, Pearl Bailey, Ray Charles, Duke Ellington, Lionel Hampton, Jackie Wilson, Lena Horne, and Dina Washington, as well as regular nightly shows with a house band, emcee, and chorus line. The building was demolished in 1978.

The Shared Heritage Driving Tour is chock-full of interesting stories about Black men and women who shaped Erie's rich history. A collaborative effort by many local historians and historical societies over several years resulted in a beautiful, detailed, easy-to-use driving tour guide that will help you feel a little more connected to Erie's diverse ancestors. Take a little drive and celebrate Black History Month on the Trail of Shared Heritage.

More information at www.sharedheritage.org and www.eriehistory.org

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

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Jeffery Hover, DO
Dr. Hover received his medical degree from the Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine and completed his internal medicine residency at the Cleveland Clinic Foundation in Ohio. He earned a Master of Science in Physician Assistant Studies from the University of Mount Union in Ohio and a Master of Science in Biology from the University of Akron. Dr. Hover is certified by the American Board of Internal Medicine and the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants.

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Gem City Style: February 2026

An interview with Corey Cook, chief operating officer of the Erie Downtown Development Corporation

By: Jessica Hunter

Corey Cook is a man in constant motion. He finds himself advising the governor, revitalizing Downtown Erie, and authoring a roadmap for the next generation. If you ask him what powers this relentless drive – what keeps him moving between family life, the Erie Downtown Development Corporation (EDDC), and the state capitol – the answer is grounding.

“It starts at home,” Cook says. “Everything else comes secondary.”

You’ll find him playing Nintendo Switch with his kids, always ensuring family time is protected – Cook’s public life is anchored deeply in his private one. That devotion is the engine behind his latest venture, his book *A Father and Mentor’s Guide to Life After High School*. The project was born not from a desire for commercial success, but from a father’s protective instinct. Watching his children approach adulthood, Cook remembered his own entry into the “real world.”

“I never wanted my kids to have a story where nobody told them how life works,” Cook explains. He drew on a lesson learned during his 16-year career at UPS: “In the corporate world, if it’s not written, it’s not real.”

So, he wrote it down. He created a “DREAM BIG” framework to serve as their guide, covering essential pillars like the importance of relationships, monetary success, building a career, and giving back. It is the manual he never had, written to ensure the youth of Erie don’t have to guess their way to success.

His passion for lifting others up is evident in every role he takes on. To go from a young man in Erie (bringing hope and purpose to inner-city youth via his nonprofit, Life Through Music, at the Downtown Y) to a leader advising the Shapiro-Davis administration is a testament to the resilience he preaches.

“You never know who you can be,” Cook says. “I never dreamed that I would be doing some of the work that I’m doing now. It’s a testament to belief in myself, support, and relationships.”

Today, he applies that same fatherly care to the city. As a leader within the EDDC, seeing the completion of the Flagship City Commons isn’t just

JESSICA HUNTER



Jessica Hunter invited Corey Cook to her downtown Erie studio to learn more about his current position as the COO of the EDDC, his advisory role in the governor’s office, his recent book publication, and prioritizing fatherhood.

about construction; it’s about community identity. He is well aware of the noise – the social media comments and the narrative that opportunity doesn’t exist here, often voiced by those who left long ago. For Cook, staying in Erie was a choice – a challenge accepted.

“Part of the reason why I chose to stay is to show that you can make it from Erie,” he emphasizes. He points to the transformation of downtown – the 104 new apartments, the dozens of new businesses, and the millions in investment – as proof that the naysayers are looking at the past, not the future. “The idea of the food hall has always been that it’s the commu-

nity’s dining room. It ties everything together.”

His influence now extends beyond the city limits to Harrisburg, where he serves on a commission for inclusive procurement (i.e., a government purchasing approach that embraces equitability in the communities and the social and natural environments surrounding them), ensuring that Northwestern Pennsylvania isn’t forgotten. But despite the high-level appointments and the transformation of city blocks, Cook’s definition of success remains refreshingly personal.

“I’ve always been in the business of trying to impact lives in a positive way,” he says. “If I can do that at

scale, that’s success.”

For Corey Cook, the goal isn’t just to build a better city, but to ensure that the people living in it – especially the young people wondering what is possible for them – know that their zip code doesn’t define their ceiling.

“The sky is the limit,” Cook says. It is a message he has written for his children, but one he is proving true for our entire city.

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



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FEBRUARY 20

7 PM

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Making a Small City Smaller: A Transplant's Love Letter to Erie

Gem City's assets sometimes easy for lifelong Erieites to overlook

By: Dave Tamulonis

I moved from Youngstown, Ohio to Erie, a town I knew little about, in 2019 to begin a job I knew even less about: events and marketing manager at the Erie Downtown Partnership (EDP). My background in community development, concert production, and event promotion seemed a great fit for the role, but I did not know if I would enjoy living and working in Erie. As I have recently transitioned to a new job, I have been thinking a lot about 2019, moving to this city for my previous role, and what attracted me to Erie in the first place.

At the time, I didn't care too much. I wanted a change of scenery, and I was deciding between a job offer in Pittsburgh and this job offer in Erie. After completing my second interview at EDP and having a good feeling about the job, I spent the rest of the day wandering the Bayfront, Presque Isle, and the surrounding neighborhoods to get a feel for the city I may soon call home. It was on this day that I realized Erie had everything I was looking for.

A few things immediately struck me about the Gem City: its manageable size, its accessibility, and its concentration of amazing resources and institutions. Growing up in Ohio, I was used to much more urban sprawl. Cities that experienced most of their population boom in a post-industrial America dominated by cars tend to be shackled to some less than convenient (and often sinister, racist, redline-influenced) planning practices: highways cutting neighborhoods off from urban centers, little to no thought given to public transportation infrastructure, and 30-minute vehicular commutes to traverse across town for groceries and shopping.

Erie seemed dense by comparison, with relatively flat and bike-friendly roads leading from most neighborhoods directly into the heart of the city. The amount of time I've saved by having a 7-minute commute (by bike) to work is invaluable. I was also impressed by the amount of green space. I've lived in the West Bayfront neighborhoods in various spots throughout my time in Erie and have always been a short walk away from two of the city's most incredible parks

DAVE TAMULONIS



Oh Erie, how do we love thee? Dave Tamulonis counts the ways. As a somewhat recent transplant to Erie, Dave examines all that our small city has to offer that cities of similar (or even larger) sizes tend to lack, like short commutes, a robust music scene, and well-established cultural institutions.

(Bayview and Gridley) along with the beautiful Bayfront itself.

While most of my columns bemoan our lack of pedestrian infrastructure, we are lucky to have what we do in a city with a population of only 100,000 or so, including our many opportunities. Because of our geography and current built environment, we are in a position where improving what we have is not as heavy a lift as it could be. Working in community development in Ohio, we had several major challenges with accessibility such as long walk routes to schools and institutions that the sprawl made more difficult to tackle. One reason that post-industrial cities with a larger footprint are less able to handle issues like a shrinking tax base is because the city still must manage and render services to such a large area with those dwindling resources.

Economies of scale and efficiencies become harder to achieve over time as the population declines. Similarly, Erie has the institutions of a large city built for many more people, but those institutions have worked very hard to remain in place and serve the current population and surrounding area. Institutions like the Warner Theatre, Erie Playhouse, expERIENCE Children's Museum, Erie Art Museum, the Jefferson Education Society, and our amazing SeaWolves and Otters have pivoted and positioned themselves to continue to deliver amazing entertainment and education for our community. Erie's population is also fully invested in our collective success. The popularity of the Erie Community Foundation's Erie Gives Day is proof that ordinary citizens and philanthropists alike see the value in supporting these institutions and their

continued service to our community.

Now that the more technical benefits are out of the way, it's time to discuss something that only became apparent to me after several months of living and working here; something that I think is Erie's greatest asset as a destination or potential home to young professionals: the amazing people that live and work here. This may be the nature of the line of work I found myself in, but I believe Erie has a very low ceiling for community involvement. I found it very easy to engage with all of the amazing things happening in Erie and quickly build a social circle of like-minded people and close friends. If you are interested in making something happen, getting involved in something, or just learning, chances are you can find someone doing that particular thing at a pretty high level, easily reach out to them,

and get involved. This goes for the music scene (which I'll touch on later), our robust theater scene, professional opportunities, civics, hobbies, faith communities, special interests, sports, and tons of other areas.

Erie has many professional social opportunities that prioritize networking and casual connections. It's very simple to join the Emerging Erie Fund, Young Erie Professionals, or Radius CoWork and immediately be plugged into the top 75 or so important things that are happening in the city, socially or professionally. It may be taken for granted, but I believe this to be a resource (and attitude) that is very hard to come by in other similarly sized cities. While we often lament gatekeeping in our professional circles, I've seen much worse entrenchment and stagnation elsewhere. Erie also has a strong social club scene, something that was an entirely new concept to me, and any club I've visited has been very welcoming. I don't have children, but I see numerous opportunities for after school education programs, community centers, summer recreation programs, and public spaces for children to play and connect in. An abundance of social engagement opportunities for all ages is a sign of a healthy city. People here are also very friendly and welcoming, eager to bring you into their world and explain it.

One great example is the Erie music scene. A healthy music scene should have 1. Easy-to-access, entry-level opportunities for aspiring artists 2. An abundance of venues and opportunities to perform and hone your skills 3. A great network of bands in communication with each other, open to expanding their networks and sharing

opportunities 4. Equal opportunities for cover artists and original musicians to make money performing, and 5. Clear paths to advance to playing at larger venues for wider audiences. Erie has an incredibly dense and talented music scene for the size city we live in. Part of that is due to the robust system of support we have in place for each new artist that comes into the pipeline. Several open mic events are held around town on a weekly basis, there are many music education institutions and residencies, songwriting workshops take place regularly, and an overall attitude of openness and encouragement gives new artists the confidence to step into these spaces and try new things. There are

and Presque Isle Partnership all create paid opportunities for local musicians to perform. Artists are paid (relatively) well for gigs at this level and can justify investing their free time and energy into improving as musicians and songwriters. There are also opportunities to perform at higher levels with professional production in higher capacity venues. Artists can graduate to perform at Centennial Hall, Liberty Park's 8 Great Tuesdays, Blues and Jazz Fest, Big Bar, Oliver's Beer Garden, and Celebrate Erie. The scene is far from perfect, but our music ecosystem is built to foster new talent and support existing talent with regular opportunities which is far more than can be said about even

right now contains monthly critical reviews of local releases, a dense calendar of local music and theater performances, and a yearly awards edition celebrating the best of Erie's performers and artists among many other categories. The critical recognition and celebration of local artists is important for legitimizing the creative work done in the region and helps set a bar others entering the scene can aspire to. All subjective awards are polarizing, but it's just as important to have healthy, good-natured competition in a scene as well as an atmosphere of mutual respect that encourages collaboration.

One of the most consistent points I hope to drive home with this column is the advantages and opportunities for livability that small cities like Erie can provide. A small city is neither a suburb nor a major city; it offers proximity to resources, accessibility, and big city institutions and entertainment without the drawbacks like traffic, high cost of living, and overcrowding. I think lifelong Erieites tend to suffer from the same malaise anyone will in their hometown if they stick around long enough. I had the same feelings about Youngstown, Ohio before moving here. My message to the lifers is that I hope this article reframes your hometown for you through the eyes of someone in a unique position to appreciate its strengths. Erie is a wonderful place to call home and I'm happy to be here.

Dave Tamulonis is an educator and musician living in Erie. He is the director of grants at the City of Erie and lives in the West Bayfront with his wife Marissa, dog Esthera Minerva, and cat Cherry Blossom.

One of the most consistent points I hope to drive home with this column is the advantages and opportunities for livability that small cities like Erie can provide. A small city is neither a suburb nor a major city; it offers proximity to resources, accessibility, and big city institutions and entertainment without the drawbacks like traffic, high cost of living, and overcrowding.

entry level gig opportunities for artists and bands that perfect their songs at open mics at venues like Philly on the Rocks, Room 33, City Gallery, and Lavery's Bunker. A summer built around outdoor events has created a culture in Erie that respects and accepts live music as a key component of the social fabric of our community. Cultural institutions and nonprofits like the Erie Art Museum, LEAF, Erie Downtown Partnership, Erie Downtown Development Corporation,

some cities that are larger than us. I remember talking to friends and music colleagues from the hyper-competitive and over-saturated Nashville scene who were incredibly jealous at the frequency us Erie musicians can play and get paid, not to mention how much farther that gig money goes with the much lower cost of living in Erie.

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The Reader Beat Monthly Recap: January 2026

A summary of January meetings

By: Alana Sabol

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

County Council Jan. 13: Constituents addressed the importance of public engagement. “In order to have effective governance, I understand that members of the public need to regularly engage with members of council and other offices to ensure our voices are heard and our concerns are shared,” Constituent Jacob Jones said. Constituent Anna McCartney also discussed public engagement in the case of the settlement between Gannon University and the Blasco Memorial Library. “The settlement really underscores the importance of community involvement and transparency in decisions affecting public assets,” McCartney said. “Our achievements were celebrated not as a conclusion of our efforts, but as a testament that we can accomplish a lot when we get united.” Some results of the settlement include the first lease term being shortened from 25 years to 10 and the leased space being open and free to the public. Resolutions appointing CPA firm Maher Duessel to perform audits of the County of Erie, the Erie County HealthChoices program, Pleasant Ridge Manor, the Pleasant Ridge Manor Pension Plan, and Expert Community Care Management for calendar year ending Dec. 31, 2025 passed unanimously.

City Council Jan. 21: During this meeting, attendees voiced concerns about future ICE activity in Erie considering the violence and volume of ICE raids in Minneapolis this month. “What is the City of Erie’s current approach to interactions with federal law enforcement agencies, especially ICE?” constituent Jennifer Kennedy asked. “How is our city protecting us?” In her report, Mayor Devlin announced that her administration is working on a plan for how to address ICE involvement. “This is something we will work together with our community, our police, and the administration to make

sure we can all agree on the language as we put it forward,” Devlin said. “We are working on it and we have to be in order to continue our Welcoming City status.”

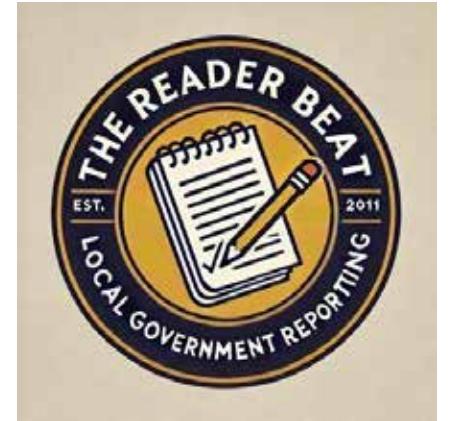
ICE Pop-Up Protest: On Jan. 25 Erie citizens gathered in the snowstorm to protest the ICE raids in Minneapolis, MN as well as the homicides of Renee Good and Alex Pretti by ICE officers. As the snow came down in Perry Square, protestors held signs and led chants calling for the impeachment of Border Patrol Commander Gregory Bovino, DHS Secretary Kristi Noem, and President Donald Trump.

A protester named AJ said that his grandmother was Polish-Jewish and was able to escape the Nazis and

“[A response to Immigration and Customs Enforcement presence] is something we will work together with our community, our police, and the administration to make sure we can all agree on the language as we put it forward. We are working on it and we have to be in order to continue our Welcoming City status.” – Erie Mayor Daria Devlin

rebuild her life in England. “I always asked myself when I was a kid: would I have been with the people that were being persecuted? And this is where it starts, so I gotta be out here.”

County Councilmen Rock Copeland and Chris Drexel also attended the protest. Drexel accused the federal government of “letting agents out on the street to kill people,” pointing to widely circulated video footage showing federal officers fatally shooting civilians during immigration enforcement operations. “This isn’t the country that I want it to be so it’s time to stand up and get together and make



a change. It shouldn’t be about political sides anymore.”

County Council Jan. 27: The meeting was sparsely attended. Constituent Mimi O’Conner discussed addressing racism in Erie, “In small ways, in large ways, in every way the bottom line question is: what will we sign into law? Peace or pain?” Council members Copeland, Bayle, and Schauerman were appointed to the Ad Hoc Committee on the Administrative Code. Wertz, Winarski, and Drexel were appointed to the Ad Hoc Committee to Review Council Budgets, the Davis Administration Vetoes, and the Decisions of the Court of Common Pleas of Erie County and the Commonwealth Court of Pennsylvania.

City Council Feb. 4: The timing of a March 4 public hearing relating to design firm Weber Murphy Fox’s proposal (on behalf of Scott Enterprises) for the construction of a new 8-story hotel containing 139 guestrooms and three restaurants/bars located at East Front St. in a Waterfront Commercial zoning district was subject to a friendly amendment that sets the Public Hearing to an available evening to allow for more community engagement. Flores voiced concerns about potential loss of waterfront views for the community and Horton proposed the amendment, moving the meeting to an evening time as opposed to the scheduled morning time (9:30 a.m.), as many constituents have work or school.

Coming up this month:

County Council: Feb. 10 at 6 p.m.
 City Council: Feb. 18 at 6:30 p.m.
 County Council: Feb. 26 at 6 p.m.

Are we there yet?



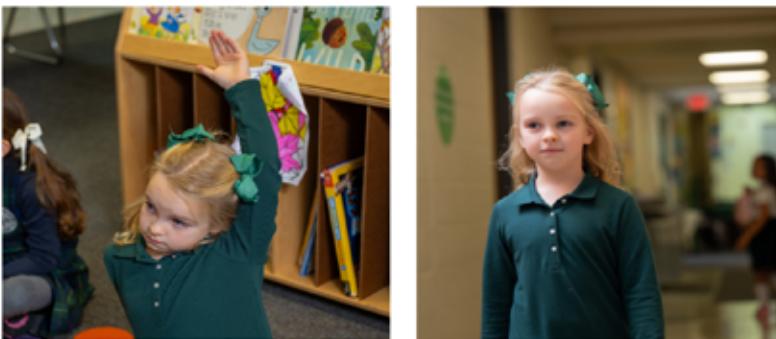
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Take Your Beer For A Walk

Learn some local history, civics in an anniversary jaunt

By: Jeff McCullor

Well friends, raise a local beer container of your choosing, we have made it a full journey around the sun together, as this is the 12th time for both of us to take our beer for a walk. We did it! What started as a mildly snarky column about embracing Erie's open container policy (or lack of policy, technically) has organically blossomed into a fun monthly traversal of Erie's streetscapes with a local beverage in-hand. So let's lace up our sneakies and get some steps in as we drink a drink and see some stuff along the way.

So where are we headed on this casual anniversary of some exercise-influenced drinking with a side of sightseeing? I think a fitting place to start is right along State Street across from City Hall at 626 State St. There's a new mayor in the cap-

tain's chair, along with a whole new administration, and I think we're all hopeful – dare I say excited – to see what this group of humans has in store for us. Cleaner streets? A re-imagined Celebrate Erie? Mayoral happy hours? Whatever they may be, I'm here for it, as I'm sure you are too. Cheers to you, City Hall!

Let's take a stroll north along State, crossing the street to the west side of Perry Square, taking the wide sidewalk along the park to the intersection of Peach and West Sixth streets. We'll cross Peach along the south side of the intersection, with Gannon University's Old Main looming. The Strong Mansion, a 46-room structure, was completed in 1893 for William L. Scott, who died before he could live there and willed the home to his daughter, who had a bunch of names: Annie Wainwright

Scott Strong, and her husband, Charles Hamot Strong. They held giant parties and entertained big-name guests like Presidents Grover Cleveland and William Howard Taft. In your spare time Google "William Howard Taft Erie PA" for an unfortunate alleged story about a bathtub. Anywho, cheers to you, Old Main!

Next let's head about 100 paces farther west so the Erie County Courthouse is directly across the street. Like at City Hall, there's a new leadership team in charge and again, like around the corner, I'm excited and hopeful for the new group leading the whole county into the future. The collective human brainpower inside both of these buildings should add up to quite a lot of positivity in our community, don't you think? Cheers to you, county leadership folks!

One more stop, then we'll call it a day. Continue trekking west across Sassafras to the second door on your left. Does this giant, stately home appear as though it wasn't originally built there? Maybe because it was MOVED from somewhere else? You're looking at the

What started as a mildly snarky column about embracing Erie's open container policy (or lack of policy, technically) has organically blossomed into a fun monthly traversal of Erie's streetscapes with a local beverage in-hand. So let's lace up our sneakies and get some steps in as we drink a drink and see some stuff along the way.

Olds-Norman house, a particularly unique restoration project because yes, indeed, this structure was moved from West Seventh, straight through its original backyard, rotated, and repositioned on West Sixth. For those of you who find it difficult to parallel park your car, these house-moving folks live their lives at an elite level. Cheers to you, moving people and your impressive house-maneuvering feats!

Thank you for taking a milestone walk with me and drinking a local beverage along the way. Keep up the good work!

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



JEFF MCCULLOR

Take a walk with Jeff McCullor (and a beer) as he celebrates his columnar anniversary and explores Erie's gubernatorial institutions that have undergone welcome electoral changes this year.

Bridge the Gap: Erie VA Presents Black History Month Celebration

Public events honoring Black veterans

By: Gretchen Gallagher Durney

There is no mistaking the Erie Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC) with its prominent location on the hill or mistaking that the region is fortunate to have it. But lesser known may be its breadth and depth of services, such as those offered by Maurice Clarke (40 Under 40 Class of 2025), Minority Veterans Program coordinator and licensed professional mental health counselor.

On the day of my interview with Clarke, temperatures outside were in the negatives but it's as though his positivity, passion, and warmth could be felt through the phone. This is no doubt the welcome attendees of the upcoming Black History Month Celebration will feel on Feb. 27.

Proudly brought to the area by the Minority Veterans Program, this event and others each month center on appreciation, recognition, and community connection. At the heart of it, "is ensuring that minority veterans feel seen, feel valued, and feel connected in the Erie community," said Clarke.

"We want to be sure we have a culturally conscious facility," Clarke explained. He highlighted the ways he and the facility's director and committee are supportive and intentional. He and the team have community engagement as a focus and this year's event will center on the extraordinary contributions of Black service members who shaped the nation's history, opened doors for future generations, and continue to inspire progress.

Designed to create dialogue and celebrate history, wellness and community impact, from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. the second floor conference room of the Erie Veterans Affairs Medical Center will feature powerful storytelling, historical displays, and meaningful reflections that celebrate the past while embracing a future of unity, service, and empowerment.

Free and open to the public, the event will be both informational and inspirational, he said, highlighting resilience while honoring successes.

"We'll recognize where we come from but celebrate where we're going," he added, and emphasized that folks coming to it have a wonderful opportunity to connect. "We want to be sure that culturally responsive care doesn't stop at our clinic doors."

CONTRIBUTED



Maurice Clarke, Minority Veterans program coordinator, licensed professional mental health counselor, has been busy coordinating a slate of public events for Black History Month at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center celebrating and honoring the contributions of Black service members.

This year's Black History Month observation will focus on community leadership, resilience, and tailored mental health engagement, with featured speakers and partnerships that reflect voices from across the Erie community. Clarke said he knew

Designed to create dialogue and celebrate history, wellness and community impact, from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. the second floor conference room of the Erie Veterans Affairs Medical Center will feature powerful storytelling, historical displays, and meaningful reflections that celebrate the past while embracing a future of unity, service, and empowerment.

when he started a few years ago that he wanted to "take these observation events to the next level" and indeed he has with featured speakers such as Marcus Atkinson (media producer, consultant, and social progress

advocate), Magisterial District Judge Christine Rush, and Johnny Johnson (local historian, retired Erie School District teacher and coach), and vendors such as Erie's Black Wall Street, the Hagen Historical Society, the Blue Coats, and more. "They are events for education, connection, healing."

Mentioning other past events – such as National Native American Heritage Month or National Hispanic Heritage Month – it's clear the carefully crafted details for these are almost as impressive as Clarke's passion. On deck for Women's History Month Celebration on March 31, are more than a dozen speakers and vendors who will pay tribute to the vision, courage, and trailblazing leadership of women.

This inviting space for service men and women acts like a network of recollection and hope is something Erie is grateful to have. In times like these, especially, access to care, and care for the community matters. "At the heart of it is that honoring identity strengthens healing, so when a group feels respected the outcomes improve, not just clinically, but emotionally and socially."

For more information on these events, visit: va.gov/erie-health-care/

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The Breeze Band and Reminiscent Serenade for Valentine's Day

Dance the night away in historic venue for a good cause

SATURDAY, FEB. 14

The perfect Valentine's Day concert is right around the corner. Not just in terms of the date, but the venue, food, and music are lending that Flagship City charm. The Breeze Band and Reminiscent are setting the romantic mood with a Valentine's Night Out at the Siebenbuerger Club, featuring DJs from XTC Sound Crew Entertainment providing additional tunes during the dinner.

"We really want people to know that it's open to everybody. Not just couples," band member Maurice Troop explained. "Single people, groups of friends, family, businesses. It's not just a night for couples; it's a fun night for all."

Among the Motown ballads that will be performed are "Ooh, Baby Baby" by Smoky Robinson and the Miracles, "My Girl," and "Just My Imagination," both by the Temptations. Alongside uptempo numbers from Earth, Wind, and Fire, Michael Jackson, and Bruno

Mars, Troop describes those three songs as music that brings people close and gets them dancing. "We built up a reputation over the years of being a good dance band. You can see people already dancing as they come into the doorway. The songs that people have been hearing their whole lives – they're catchy, so it's just feel-good music."

Playing at the Siebenbuerger Club has been an honor for Troop as an Erie native, with The Breeze Band and Reminiscent becoming a part of that musical tradition. "Some of the older musicians who were mentors to me would tell me stories of the Siebenbuerger Club. It's one of the places they really look forward to. You realize that some of the greatest musicians that ever come through the town have played here, and some of the greatest events in the city have taken place here. It's so much history that you realize you're now becoming a part of the story."

One of the most important aspects



CONTRIBUTED

Join the members of the Breeze Band and Reminiscent for a Valentine's event bringing Motown hits, dancing, and good vibes to the Siebenbuerger Club while benefiting the Shriners Children's Hospital.

of this event is its impact on families across Erie. Partial proceeds are being donated to Shriners Children's Hospital. As a teacher and principal for nearly 30 years, Troop emphasized the importance of giving back and helping the community. "In my personal life, my family and mother have volunteered in the community through Odessa's Place. They've al-

ways been the type to help the community, and that's important to me. We feel like it's our job to give back and help out in the community." –Thomas Taylor

6 to 11 p.m. // Siebenbuerger Club, 2114 French St. // \$40 (includes dinner buffet) // For more info: facebook.com/SoulBandErie



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Harmony and Blessings Music Series Continues in 2026

The art of jazz with Jair-Rohm Parker Wells and Ethnic Heritage Ensemble

BEGINNING MONDAY, FEB. 16

City Gallery is known as a hub for local art and music, where on any given night while viewing artist-created works you may also happen to catch an impromptu practice from local musicians getting ready for an upcoming performance. The gallery is owned and operated by musician Stephen Trohoske and artist Lena Logvina, who have always kept their business flowing with creative energy and beautiful sounds. Along with hosting some of the region's most talented musicians, nationally touring jazz musicians often grace their space as part of the Harmony and Blessings Music Series.

Kicking off the 2026 season is New York City bassist Jair-Rohm Parker Wells on Monday, Feb. 16. He will be performing a solo bass performance entitled *Resonance*, which explores the legacy of German double bassist and composer Eberhard Weber, known for his distinctive tone and phrasing, blending chamber music with jazz, classical, minimalism, and ambient music.

The improvisational playing of Parker Wells combined with his use of modern looping and processing technologies pairs well with Eberhard Weber's bass driven soundscapes, giving listeners a unique blend of jazz, experimental, and electro-acoustic music. Trohoske, also a bass player, spoke on his excitement for having Parker Wells perform at the gallery: "With the work of Weber in the '70s, when he was experimenting with triggers and symphonic compositions all being set from one instrument, it was really groundbreaking and I suspect that Jair-Rohm will be truly amazing with what he will bring to this performance."

Additionally and in continuing celebration of Black History Month, the Ethnic Heritage Ensemble, which was founded by percussionist Kahil El'Zabar at Lake Forest College in Illinois in 1973 will be performing on Sunday, Feb. 22. For the past 11 years, Ethnic Heritage Ensemble have been making a stop in Erie, with the help of Logvina and Trohoske. This event expects to draw a larger crowd and is therefore being held at the Cathedral of St. Paul. The music and performance of Ethnic Heritage Ensemble combines Black American music styles including jazz,

CONTRIBUTED



The Harmony and Blessings Music Series, created by the owners of City Gallery, is presenting two world-class concerts this month: Jair-Rohm Parker Wells and the Ethnic Heritage Ensemble.

blues, R&B, funk, and gospel, woven with African folk and dance traditions.

Following these two performances, the Harmony and Blessings series will continue throughout the year. Upcoming guests will include Lucian Ban and Alex Harding Duo, The Messthetics with James Brandon Lewis (which features the rhythm section from DC punk band Fugazi), and American flautist Jamie Baum with her decet.

Trohoske weighed in on why he feels that it's so important, at this moment, to give your time to live music: "So many artists are up against the internet, AI, fewer venues, greater expenses, and lower payouts. I think it's important to physically be there, not only to keep the events happening, but for the much needed energy exchange and spiritual lift that these events bring." – Larry Wheaton

Jair-Rohm Parker Wells on Monday, Feb. 16 at 7 p.m. // City Gallery, 1503 State St. // Donations accepted // For more info: facebook.com/citygalleryerie

Ethnic Heritage Ensemble on Sunday, Feb. 22 at 4 p.m. // Cathedral of St. Paul, 134 W. 7th St. // Donations accepted // For more info: facebook.com/citygalleryerie

For more Harmony and Blessings events throughout the year, visit tickets.eriereader.com



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Let *Tango After Dark* Arrastre You to Mercyhurst University

Then come back for an original musical production of *As You Like It*

WEDNESDAY, FEB. 18

What does the word “tango” evoke for you? Bold, passionate moves? A highly trained, choreographed couple, both donning seductive apparel? There’s a reason tango – and Argentine tango in particular – has captured the imagination for de-

cedes. It’s exquisitely precise, singularly emotive, and divinely unattainable (no random person off the street could move like that). It’s also coming to the Mercyhurst University Mary D’Angelo Performing Arts Center stage in mid-February, in the form of the Mercyhurst Institute for Arts and Culture Live (MIAC) spring kick-off

event, *Tango After Dark*.

“Tango After Dark is a high-energy experience that blends breathtaking dance with live music and vocals,” enthused Dr. Brett D. Johnson, the artistic director of MIAC. “Ten dancers perform alongside seven musicians and two singers, performing Astor Piazzolla’s *Nuevo Tango*, creating a powerful, real-time dialogue between movement and sound.”

At the helm of this company of artists is World Champion Germán Cornejo, whose choreography maintains the classic traditions of tango, while also infusing modern influences. A true virtuoso, Cornejo has performed his dance around the globe, captivating audiences with his breathtaking mobility.

“It’s a production that lifts the spirit while also inviting audiences into a shared cultural experience – bold, inclusive, and accessible,” said Dr. Johnson. Let it lift your spirits while we trudge through some of the coldest and snowiest days of winter in Erie.

And once you’ve taken in some tango, consider returning to MU for another excellent performance, this time

“[*Tango After Dark* is] a production that lifts the spirit while also inviting audiences into a shared cultural experience – bold, inclusive, and accessible.” - Dr. Brett Johnson, artistic director of MIAC

to the Taylor Little Theater. The musical version of the Shakespearean comedy *As You Like It* will be directed by none other than Dr. Johnson himself and runs from Feb. 26 through Mar. 1. – Cara Suppa

7:30 p.m. // Mary D’Angelo Performing Arts Center, 501 E. 38th Street // \$20-\$30 // Tickets and info: miac.mercyhurst.edu

CONTRIBUTED



Enjoy the high-energy, passionate, and entrancing performance of *Tango After Dark*, choreographed by World Champion Germán Cornejo, and coming to the Mary D’Angelo Performing Arts Center.

A Punchy, Impactful Play on Privilege

Straight White Men to be performed on PACA’s stage

BEGINNING THURSDAY, FEB. 19

The Performing Artists Collective Alliance (PACA) is proud to present *Straight White Men*, a 90-minute “dramedy” that explores themes of identity and privilege. It’s Christmastime in the Midwest, and brothers Drew and Jake have come home to spend the holidays with their older brother Matt and their widowed father Ed. However, tensions rise as the men begin to question Matt’s life choices and what constitutes contentment and success.

Contrary to its title, *Straight White Men* was originally written by Young Jean Lee in 2014, and workshoped in a room consisting of women, people of color, and people identifying within the LGBTQIA+ community. By 2018, Lee had become the first Asian American woman to have a play produced on Broadway, her ultimate goal being to explore the expectations placed on “straight, white men” and acknowledge the controversy of what that title entails today.

Director Rie Witherow (40 Under 40

Class of 2025), self-proclaimed “loudly queer and biracial,” expressed their gratitude upon getting to work on this show, describing it as, “Kismet. Fated and meant to be.”

When choosing the small cast, Witherow, Assistant Director Clara Hill,

“[*Straight White Men*] exists to explore and deconstruct tropes often associated with toxic white male existence. That work is difficult to do, but my cast has taken it in stride.” - Director Rie Witherow

and Stage Manager Alyssa Wowk wanted people who could accurately convey the more important themes of the production, while also being mindful of its sensitivity. Michael Rutter (Ed), Padraic McGuire (Matt), Chris Rosato Jr. (Jake),

JAMES WALLACE



Catch *Straight White Men* at PACA, a dramedy originally created by Young Jean Lee in 2014. The script, “honest and rooted in humanity,” explores themes of identity and privilege.

and Sam Comfort (Drew) became the ideal candidates.

“This show exists to explore and deconstruct tropes often associated with toxic white male existence,” Witherow explained. “That work is difficult to do, but my cast has taken it in stride. We do not always see eye-to-eye, but our team has also made sure that we all feel comfortable enough to have tough con-

versations when they come up.”

“Honest and rooted in humanity,” *Straight White Men* is intended for mature, adult audiences. – Cassandra Gripp

Fridays and Saturdays, Feb. 20 through 28 at 7:30 p.m. // Thursdays, Feb. 19 and 26 at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday, Feb. 22 at 2 p.m. // PACA, 1505 State St. // \$25 // For tickets and info: tickets.eriereader.com



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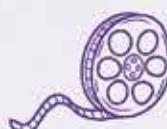
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Erie Reader Book Club: February 2026

Harlem Shuffle by Colson Whitehead

SUNDAY, FEB. 22

The Erie Reader Book Club will be reading and discussing the novel *Harlem Shuffle* by Colson Whitehead in conjunction with the Black History Month Erie Reader issue.

Selecting a Colson Whitehead novel to read for this book club was inevitable – the author's writing style and storytelling prowess check every box when it comes to our club's taste in books, making this choice perfect for discussion.

Set in 1960s Harlem, the story centers on Ray, a semi-reformed crook who is trying to make an honest liv-

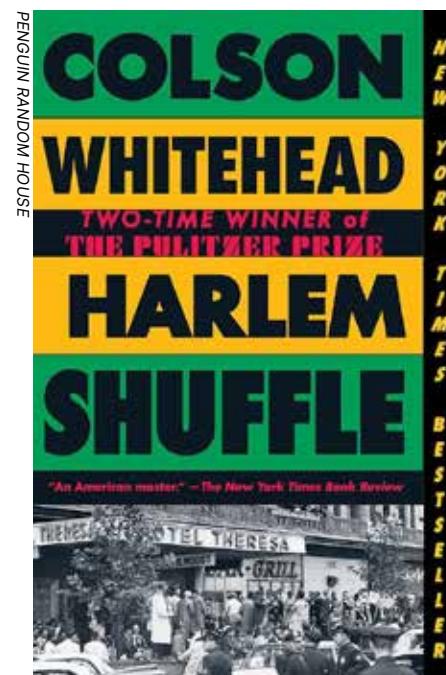
ing as an upstanding salesman of reasonably priced furniture. With his wife expecting their second child, Ray is just trying to make ends meet and to keep his less-than-honorable past from surfacing in their 125th Street neighborhood. So what if his cousin Freddie occasionally drops off jewelry of unknown origin? Ray knows exactly who to take it to where they won't ask questions.

But when Freddie falls in with a bad crew and volunteers Ray's services as a fence for their planned heist, things begin to go more awry than normal. With the heist not going to plan, Ray finds himself with a slew of

new clientele from shady cops to local gangsters and all the other assorted characters in between.

Now, Ray must choose between the two lives pulling him in opposite directions – will he continue to strive for the life he's been building as an honest man, or fall back into his former ways of deceit and crookedness? Can he avoid being killed, save his cousin, and still make it big? Or will it all come crashing down on him in the end? – Ally Kutz

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



Poetry, Music, Humor Combine for Annual WoW Event

Women of Word (with a few Man Made Words) at Schuster Theatre

TUESDAY, FEB. 24

Thasia Anne Lunger, director and producer of the project *Women of Word (with a few Man Made Words)* presents to her audience a soft landing for some very serious and heavy topics. Inspired by an open mic night at the Erie Store in 2011, Lunger created this collective that now showcases a diverse cast of local performers and gives voice to many who have had first-hand experiences with domestic violence, homelessness, trauma, and loss. This fine arts production is crafted from the lived experiences of local spoken-word artists, poets, dancers,



The annual *Women of Word (with a few Man Made Words)* poetry event will be taking place at Gannon's Schuster Theatre and featuring a reading from Dionne D. Hunter along with a number of local poets, writers, and slam poetry performances.

Inspired by an open mic night at the Erie Store in 2011, Thasia Anne Lunger created *Women of Word* to showcase a diverse cast of local performers and give voice to many who have had first-hand experiences with domestic violence, homelessness, trauma, and loss.

and musicians. Here, the spoken word reaches true depth and crafts a safe space for the performance while simultaneously encouraging survivors.

Lunger is aware that these perfor-

mances bring light to many tougher areas of life. As a social worker, she "knows that these discussions can bring on many emotions. And [we] now invite agencies to attend, and be at our reception immediately following." Lunger hopes to enlighten and stand as a reminder of the resilience in establishing connection after hardship. Even as these works are presented here with great depth and meaning, there are still challenges in keeping a lightness. "We added music, dance, and humor to the poetry so that the performance wasn't depressing, but instead enlightening," says Lunger.

Attendees in the audience this year are in for a very special treat as nationally known author, spoken-word artist, and motivational speaker Dionne D. Hunter will be traveling from North Carolina to join the cast. Hunter, author of *I Am a Dahomey Warrior!* has also created, produced, and starred in shows delving into similar themes. And for all of the wonderful returning cast members, including Luchetta Manus, Darryl Brown, Cathi GG Mitchell, Elyse Palmer, Matt Borczon, Courtney Forbes, and Narrator Kathy Schaaf, there will also be a few new additions. Jordan Bubin adds a dynamic slam poetry reading and Shani

Bills, Paul Groh, and Leon Sam Briggs arrive on stage for a very special ending.

After the performance, audience members will have the opportunity to attend a reception catered by A Waffle Miracle, with agencies on site to offer comfort and compassion as needed. Built for times such as these, the cast and crew of *Women of Word (with a few Man Made Words)* takes a good hard look at who we are and gently shares the collective stories of where we've been. – Erica Stewart

6 to 8 p.m. // Gannon University's Schuster Theatre, 620 Sassafras St. // Free

Roger Harvey Comes Home

Lavery Bunker show to encompass range of regional talents

SATURDAY, FEB. 28

For many folks tapped into Erie's music scene, Roger Harvey is a highly recognizable name: getting his start at local punk shows, the artist's inspirations soon grew to encompass folk and country sounds. Traversing musical boundaries, Harvey's folk career began as he started to explore other musical communities. Spending some time in Philadelphia, the artist eventually landed in Nashville, Tennessee.

"Coming home to Erie is always special to me. As a traveling artist over the past many years, I've always desired to play annually in Erie – to connect with the community and have the chance to see old friends," said Harvey. Taking place in the midst of a Pennsylvania

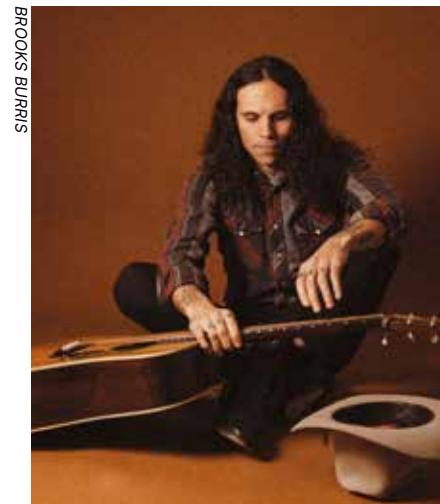
tour, Roger Harvey has assembled a wealth of talent to join him at a homecoming show in Lavery's Bunker, located behind Lavery Brewing Company. This grouping of musicians is co-headlined by William Matheny and the Constellation Singers: "When we got these shows in Western Pennsylvania, my first thought was to call William Matheny and see if he and his band would get involved."

Harvey has also used this opportunity to platform some fellow Erie musicians. In particular, singer-songwriters Fred Oakman (40 Under 40 Class of 2020) and Josh Travis are set as openers. "I try to stay plugged into what is happening musically in Erie because I care about Erie," Harvey remarked. Harvey also hinted at a new album,

deeply entwined with his experiences growing up in Girard, coming just around the corner.

"I wanted to put together a good show that brought me back, welcomed my friends from West Virginia into town, and also showcased important hard working local artists from the area. I can't wait to share my songs in an area that I feel so deeply connected to. I love Erie and I hope to continue to build something special in a place that will always be my home." – Nathaniel Clark

Doors at 6 p.m., music at 7 p.m. // The Bunker at Lavery Brewing Company, 128 W. 12th St. // \$15 in advance, \$20 at the door // For tickets and info: rogerharvey-music.com/shows



Roger Harvey makes a stop in his hometown for a show at Lavery's Bunker, as he invites friends William Matheny and the Constellation Singers along with locals Fred Oakman and Josh Travis to the stage.

Erie Philharmonic Throws The Idol with *Raiders of the Lost Ark* in Concert

Whip into adventure with live performance of John Williams' iconic score

BEGINNING SATURDAY, FEB. 28

Emerging out of the shadows with the crack of a whip, the Erie Philharmonic's Pops series returns in 2026 with the music of legendary composer John Williams, as the orchestra performs the complete score of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* in sync with a screening of the 1981 film.

"Enjoy *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* on the big screen over the Warner Theatre stage as the Erie Philharmonic provides the musical

at a screening of Spielberg's feature debut *Duel* hosted by mutual friend Francis Ford Coppola, but had been aware of each other's work for years, as Spielberg was inspired by George's UCLA short film *Electronic Labyrinth: THX 1138 4EB*. From that moment, their creative partnership was formed, as Spielberg would encourage Lucas during the development of *Star Wars*, even recommending John Williams after the chilling scores of *The Sugarland Express* and *Jaws*. History was made in that moment, and movie

Emerging out of the shadows with the crack of a whip, the Erie Philharmonic's Pops series returns in 2026 with the music of legendary composer John Williams, as the orchestra performs the complete score of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* in sync with a screening of the 1981 film.

score live," the Erie Philharmonic describes. "*Raiders* redefined the possibilities of adventure cinema and launched actor Harrison Ford to legendary status."

Stephen Spielberg and George Lucas working together on a movie was a powerful combination to be reckoned with. The two formally met

music would never be the same.

Williams composed the score in a matter of weeks, wanting a theatrical sound that would wear its inspiration for serialized adventure reels on the sleeves of a well-worn leather jacket. He wrote two themes; Spielberg loved both and asked if he could combine them. This became "Raiders' March,"



Join the stellar musicians of the Erie Philharmonic as they play the John Williams score to *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* live, alongside a screening of the classic adventure.

the iconic theme for Indy, containing recognizable leitmotifs and a dance between the brass and string sections of the orchestra. For the romantic relationship between Indy and Marion, Williams drew from the music of Max Steiner, including the 1942 film *Love, Voyager* to create a stirring, vintage atmosphere. Having that understanding of storytelling and musical theory allowed Williams to use both atonal music from the contemporary classical of the day and the bombastic sev-

ents from older cinema to represent the antagonists.

The film won five Oscars, winning over the hearts of audiences and critics alike, and solidifying the impact of the duo that would change filmmaking and Hollywood as we know it. –Thomas Taylor

Saturday, Feb. 28 at 7:30 p.m., Sunday, Mar. 1 at 3 p.m. // Warner Theatre, 811 State St. // \$17-\$68 // For tickets and info: eriephil.org

Erie Art Museum

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 27TH | 5-10 PM

GALLERY NIGHT

HOME, SARAH JACOBS, 2016



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Kids as Curators: There's No Community Without U and I

ARTIST ON SITE
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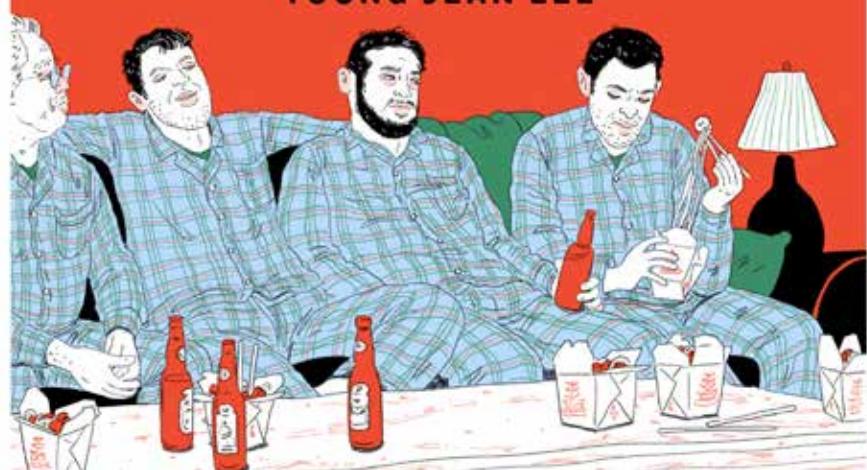
LIVE MUSIC | 6:30 - 8:30 PM
 MIKEL PRESTER JAZZ JAUNT ft. Joe Frisina on guitar

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YOUNG JEAN LEE



directed by **RIE WITHEROW** assistant directed by **CLARA HILL**
 stage managed by **ALYSSA WOWK**

MICHAEL RUTTER PADRAIC MCGUIRE CHRIS ROSATO JR. SAM COMFORT

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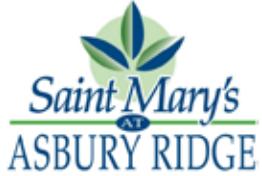
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Roc Marciano

656

Marci Enterprises



Roc Marciano has no interest in coasting. The East Coast rapper isn't just content spinning gritty and absurd yarns over dusty sample loops and fuzzy synthesizers – he's confident enough to do it almost entirely on his own. On *656*, his 10th studio album and first fully self-produced project in over a decade, Marciano handles nearly every aspect of the record himself. The lone exception is Errol Holden, an equally hungry collaborator who appears twice and doesn't mince words, delivering two of the album's most electric and confrontational moments. *656* would be a startling debut from a younger rapper, but it's even more impressive coming from a veteran who helped define underground rap in the 2010s. The album feels like a flex and a victory lap wrapped into one, allowing the rapper/producer to thumb through vinyl crates for the kind of warped, menacing samples found on opener "Trick Bag" and the deceptively soulful "Hate Is Love," while "Childish Things" hinges on an unsettling synthetic bass tone. None of this should be surprising for an artist of Marciano's caliber, but *656* still feels vital rather than nostalgic. By eschewing trends and past highs in favor of continuing to refine his vision, *656* immediately positions itself as an early contender for one of the strongest hip-hop records of the year. – Aaron Mook



Lucinda Williams

World's Gone Wrong

Highway 20 Records



Since her first *Folkways* release in 1979, Lucinda Williams remains prolific. She has experienced occasional success with constant notoriety. Lucinda's voice soothes like whiskey as she simultaneously holds the broken bottle to our throats. She sings lullabies over our burning beds. She tells modern folktales of barefoot maidens dancing inches from the gnashing teeth of wolves. She is a Southern Gothic godmother who conjures O'Conner, Faulkner, and Crews. Lu refuses to play the polite, good girl. No shrinking violet, she is a tall strong oak. We can trust her. She will always tell it like it is. When we can't find the words, Lu will. Her past activism forges this latest release. When pressure cookers are about to blow, musicians and artists are our high-pitched whistles. She gives us vignettes, ballads, and anthems – all moody with optimism. Always on the verge of down-and-out yet without hopelessness. Impudent guitars cruise like a big sedan creeping through back alleyways, revving the engine and flashing the high beams. The album is solid and rich. The commanding tracks repeatedly hit with bruised knuckles as we anxiously await each punch: "Freedom Speaks," "Low Life," "We've Come Too Far to Turn Around," "Everyone Knows the World's Gone Wrong," "How Much Did You Get for Your Soul?" and "Something's Gotta Give." – Melissa Sullivan Shimek



A\$AP Rocky

Don't Be Dumb

AWGE / RCA Records



While a solid project overall, *Don't Be Dumb* leaves listeners wondering if its ends justify its means. Calling the lead-up to A\$AP Rocky's fourth studio album tumultuous would be an understatement: teasers for this project dating back to 2019 have kept fans in excruciating anticipation for new music. All of this nonsense came to a head in August 2024 when Rocky's label AWGE notified music retailers to start taking pre-orders for the album; however, as the anticipated date came and went, the release never materialized, leading to refunds and canceled orders. With sour tastes in their mouths, music listeners felt little when Rocky announced that *Don't Be Dumb* would be released in January 2026. On this occasion, though, the rapper who cried wolf was right. Marketed as a medley of Rocky's different personas, *Don't Be Dumb* is an eclectic mix of hip-hop experimentation. While it has its fair share of in-line bangers like "Helicopter," the project is at its best when it pushes boundaries. Take "STFU" for example: a pulse-pounding melding of electronic production and abrasive punk-laden vocal delivery. "Robbery" is another standout as Rocky and collaborator DoeChii detail a bank heist led by cafe jazz-backed instrumentation. That being said, the album's delays have blunted some of its lyrical impact. In particular, "Stole Ya Flow," a hard-hitting diss against fellow rapper Drake – was first performed live in 2022. However, in a post-Kendrick Lamar world, this song feels tame in comparison to what came before. Despite its highs, *Don't Be Dumb* did not require seven years of development. – Nathaniel Clark



Ratboys

Singin' to an Empty Chair

New West



Ratboys have finally done it. While *The Window* and *Happy Birthday Ratboy* were spectacular albums in their own right (released in 2023 and 2021, respectively), *Singin' to an Empty Chair* truly reaches another level. From the first notes of "Open Up" you know you're in for a deeper, fuller listening experience. Flirting and dancing with tonal experimentalism while still framed in a catchy indie-pop lens, they've arrived at a nearly perfect synergy between accessibility and creativity. It's everything I want. Bitterly self-examining, confessional lyrics that are fun to sing along to, mixed with twistedly sculpted tones and short formalist excursions. The first four tracks are almost unrelenting, a pulse-raising grouping of front-loaded, infectious energy. I had the vinyl release pre-ordered before they were even finished. While more traditional alt-country tunes like "Penny In the Lake" and "Strange Love" take them back to their roots a la Waxahatchee or Hop Along, it lets the listener re-attune to why they fell in love with the band in the first place. The brilliant working relationship between singer and guitarist Julia Steiner and lead guitarist Dave Sagan has never felt so mutual or adventurous. The album title is taken from Gestalt therapy, an exercise where participants direct their focus to an empty chair, representing a person or concept, and is intended to directly confront and uncover unfinished business – a perfect metaphor for Steiner's lyrical tendencies. From the frothing waves of its introduction to the rippling undulations of its midpoint, to the rushing tides of its conclusion, the album washes over the listener thoroughly. – Nick Warren

Orchestrated Beauty

By: Mabel Howard, Mabeline "The Artist"

The curves and curls
 That have been carefully curated
 For the dynamic vessel
 Which happens to appear
 Before your eyes
 Is an exemplification
 Of a perfection
 That can solely
 Come from above
 Created to bring
 Harmony to the world
 And document notes
 Projecting a resonance that is
 Less familiar than the melody
 Allow me to introduce
 Myself as QUEEN
 Originally Coronated
 In the womb of a nurturing spirit
 Whom was entrusted
 With my presence.
 (Inspired by the C.R.O.W.N. Act)

Mabeline hosts and promotes a variety of community building programs that focus on the Art of Healing through poetry and writing, including Live Poetry at Cafe 7-10 and The Poetry X-Change at Werner Books and Coffee. She can be reached at gamewithmabel@gmail.com

Time and Temperature

at Your Fingertips



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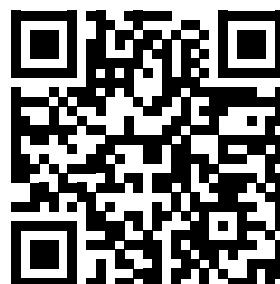
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NEGATIVE WORLDS

"SNOOZE ALARMING CONFESSIONS" BY NICK WARREN



Fish that Talk by JOHN BAVARO in: The Quality of Mercy



SABBATICAL DAY 1 BY BRAD PATTULLO



FRIDGE COMICS BY Anthony @ants art house



Oscars Predictions: Once More... With Feeling!

The 2026 Academy Awards Are an Eclectic Mix

By: Forest Taylor

In times like these, television awards shows may feel like a self-indulgent distraction – and they are, but sometimes we need some light-hearted entertainment. This year's Oscars have offered some genuine surprises. We have a new category and *Sinners* has broken a record held for 75 years! Once again, the Academy's choices left me disappointed (excellent films like *Sorry, Baby* and *The Testament of Ann Lee* were totally ignored) and pleasantly surprised (the truly awful *Wicked: For Good* was completely shut out). But now let's check out the nominees.

Best Picture

The nominees this year are mostly solid contenders. There were some that didn't grab my interest, but at least there is no trash on the level of *Emilia Perez* this year. The obvious frontrunner for the big prize is *One Battle After Another* (OBAA). Paul Thomas Anderson's epic has been a big hit with critics and audiences alike since its release and it makes perfect sense for the Academy to honor it with its top prize. However, there is a very strong challenger: Ryan Coogler's *Sinners* is now the most Oscar-nominated film with 16 nominations (the previous record, 14, was held by *All About Eve* back in 1951). The horror/drama is one of the highest-grossing films of the year and has near-unanimous critical praise. Those are the makings of a true Oscar powerhouse, but the Academy is notoriously hard on horror films. *Marty Supreme*, *Sentimental Value*, and *Hamnet* are the next biggest challengers, but it really comes down to OBAA and *Sinners*. In the end, I think it will go to *One Battle After Another*.

Best Director

Best Picture and Best Director usually go hand-in-hand, so that makes Paul Thomas Anderson the clear frontrunner. However, Ryan Coogler's direction for *Sinners* is the best in his career so far. He could easily take the prize. That said, the Academy loves giving veteran directors their long-awaited dues



Last year, film reviewer extraordinaire Forest Taylor correctly predicted 10 out of 13 categories. This year he predicts wins for (left to right, top to bottom) *Hamnet*, *Sentimental Value*, *One Battle After Another*, *Marty Supreme*, *Sinners*, *KPop Demon Hunters*, *Train Dreams*, and *Avatar: Fire and Ash*. See how he fares this year as you tune into watch Sunday, March 15 at 7 p.m. on ABC.

and Anderson hasn't won one yet. That easily puts him ahead of the other nominees. I don't see anyone but Paul Thomas Anderson winning this award.

Best Actor

For months, I was certain that this would be an easy win for Leonardo DiCaprio in OBAA, but in the last month, he has been completely overshadowed by Timothee

Chalamet in *Marty Supreme*, and at this time, maybe even by Wagner Moura in *The Secret Agent*. Leo went from a sure thing to an underdog. Didn't see that coming. Anyway, I think Chalamet has this one.

Best Actress

This is the easiest of the major categories to predict because Jessie Buckley has had it in the bag for

months. I would like more competition because some of the best performances of the year are here (except Kate Hudson. She was fine, but I'd have rather seen Amanda Seyfried for *The Testament of Ann Lee*). My personal favorite is Rose Byrne's brutal performance in *If I Had Legs I'd Kick You*, but Buckley's heart-rending role in *Hamnet* is great as well. This award is basically Buckley's already.



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Ohso Fabone.

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cathedralofstpaul.org



MOVIES

Best Supporting Actor

Once again, I thought Sean Penn had this one easy for his terrifying/ridiculous performance as Col. Steven J. Lockjaw (great name), but lately he's been getting overshadowed by his OBAA co-star Benicio del Toro. That leaves an opening that will be filled by Stellan Skarsgård. The Academy loves using the Supporting awards for overdue acting veterans and Skarsgård gave one of his best performances in *Sentimental Value*. I think those factors will lead to his win.

Best Supporting Actress

My heart tells me that this will go to Teyana Taylor's performance as Perfidia Beverly Hills (another great name), but there's something bugging me in the form of Amy Madigan's villainous performance in *Weapons*. She has already won some accolades and at this point, she may be the frontrunner. Still, I

that's wishful thinking. Adapted Screenplay has some solid nominees too (except for *Frankenstein*. "You are the monster, Victor"? Wow, deep), but the clear standout is *One Battle After Another*. *Hamnet* has a slight chance, but not enough to compete.

Best Casting

For the first time since 2002, we have a brand new Oscar category! It's pretty exciting, but they might as well call it "The Sinners Award" at this point because nothing else stands a chance. Well, maybe *One Battle After Another*. In fact, this could be a barometer for what wins Best Picture. If *Sinners* doesn't win Best Casting, it may just get the big one.

Best International Feature

I was certain that *Sentimental Value* had an easy win with this one, but Brazil's *The Secret Agent* has been

In times like these, television awards shows may feel like a self-indulgent distraction – and they are, but sometimes we need some light-hearted entertainment. This year's Oscars have offered some genuine surprises. We have a new category and *Sinners* has broken a record held for 75 years with 16 nominations (1951's *All About Eve* had 14).

don't see OBAA winning the big one and not getting any acting awards. At this point, Taylor has the best shot at winning, but I'm not sure. This is the hardest one to predict and it may go either way.

Best Screenplay

The Best Original Screenplay category has some strong contenders (although I wish Eva Victor's incredible *Sorry, Baby* could have got in), but Ryan Coogler's screenplay for *Sinners* stands above them all. I originally thought it would go to *Sentimental Value*, but I think Coogler has the momentum that won't be stopped. Of course, I would like to see Jafar Panahi get it for *It Was Just an Accident*, but I know

picking up momentum lately. It's turned things competitive, but I still think it will go to *Sentimental Value*. Of course, I would love to see it go to *It Was Just an Accident*. Panahi may be going back to prison if he returns to Iran, and I think giving him the award would make a powerful statement. I guess we'll see what happens.

Best Animated Feature

I don't see any scenario where *KPop Demon Hunters* doesn't win. The surprise Netflix hit has everything going for it. Of course, *Zootopia 2* was the highest-grossing American film of 2025, but I don't think it matters. *KPop* will take it and everyone under the age of 12 will rejoice.

Best Cinematography

All strong contenders (except *Frankenstein*, which suffers from the glossy "daytime soap opera" sheen so common in Netflix films), but to me, the breathtaking cinematography of *Train Dreams* stands above the rest. My brain tells me this will go to *Sinners*, but my heart tells me *Train Dreams* takes it.

Best Visual Effects

Avatar: Fire and Ash. Sorry, other nominees. You made the mistake of being released the same year as an *Avatar* movie.

Forest's Predictions

Best Picture:

One Battle After Another

Best Director:

Paul Thomas Anderson for *One Battle After Another*

Best Actor:

Timothee Chalamet for *Marty Supreme*

Best Actress:

Jessie Buckley for *Hamnet*

Best Supporting Actor:

Stellan Skarsgård for *Sentimental Value*

Best Supporting Actress:

Teyana Taylor for *One Battle After Another*

Best Original Screenplay:

Ryan Coogler for *Sinners*

Best Adapted Screenplay:

Paul Thomas Anderson for *One Battle After Another*

Best Casting:

Sinners

Best International Feature:

Sentimental Value (Norway)

Best Animated Feature:

KPop Demon Hunters

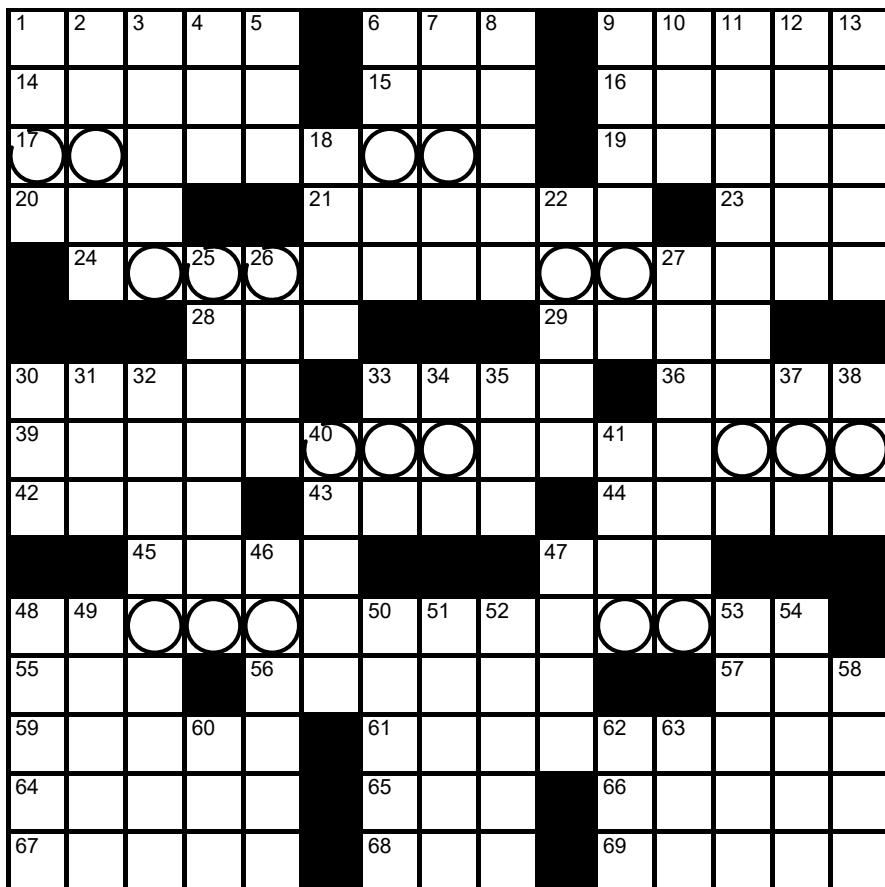
Best Cinematography:

Train Dreams

Best Visual Effects:

Avatar: Fire and Ash

CROSSWORD



Across

- 1. Race with batons
- 6. Fitting
- 9. More sagacious
- 14. GIF, e.g.
- 15. Old-timey cheering word
- 16. Really amazed
- 17. Degraded
- 19. Escorted from the outside
- 20. The "S" in RSVP
- 21. Scoundrel
- 23. 180 deg. from WSW
- 24. Study unfamiliar material, say
- 28. Place to go in England?
- 29. Stoop
- 30. Scarecrow's desire
- 33. Inkling
- 36. Measure with a stopwatch
- 39. They may be laminated to protect against spills
- 42. Eight, to Einstein
- 43. Right behind in line
- 44. State of dread
- 45. "The Time Machine" leisure class
- 47. Pacers' st.
- 48. Disco, early punk, funk, etc.
- 55. Foe of Frazier and Foreman
- 56. Place to pamper poodles, perhaps

- 57. ___ el hanout (North African spice mix)
- 59. "The Hobbit" hobbit
- 61. Like the circled letters in the long entries (or the clustered groups)
- 64. Actor's parts
- 65. Barrett who cofounded Pink Floyd
- 66. Smart group
- 67. Bothered
- 68. Sweet suffix
- 69. Pamphlet

Down

- 1. Wheel edges
- 2. Message from a server
- 3. Soup server
- 4. Questionnaire topic
- 5. Archery bow wood
- 6. Scottish island with a namesake whisky brand
- 7. Outdated
- 8. Network with LeVar Burton hosting "Trivial Pursuit"
- 9. First half of a suspenseful decision-making phrase, maybe
- 10. Plastic follower?
- 11. A weepy movie often has one
- 12. "Dallas" surname
- 13. Descartes and Lacoste

- 18. "Deal ___ Deal"
- 22. Awaiting the pitch
- 25. Not much
- 26. Slangy term for COVID-19
- 27. Means (to)
- 30. Car grille protector
- 31. Suggestion, casually
- 32. North Carolina city home to the Biltmore Estate
- 33. Soreness
- 34. Actor Shepard of "Idiocracy"
- 35. Otitis doc
- 37. Greek consonants
- 38. Superlative suffix
- 40. Bring together
- 41. English Premier League club, to fans
- 46. Acting as sentry
- 47. Apple model since 1998
- 48. Hummus brand
- 49. "The Waste Land" poet
- 50. "___ great to see you!"
- 51. Annual awards for athletes
- 52. Black playing card
- 53. Twist in a tale
- 54. Activist's focus
- 58. Vietnamese flag feature
- 60. Dorothy portrayor on '80s TV
- 62. Band with the 1991 album "Schubert Dip"
- 63. ___ Taco (fast food chain)



Answers to last puzzle



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Sun 2/09

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

Sun 2/16

Winter Fun Run 4 Miler
@ 1pm / \$35
5774 Sterrettania Road, Brown's Farm Barn, Fairview

Thu 2/12

Featured

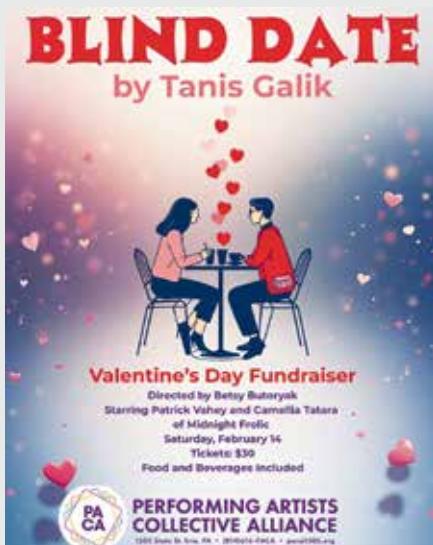


Mystic Mingle A Valentine's Speed Dating Experience
@ 8pm / \$7-\$7
King's Rook Club, 1921 Peach Street



Sat 2/14

Featured



Blind Date: Valentine's Day Fundraiser
@ 6:30pm / \$50
PACA, 1505 State Street



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

Sun 2/15

Brit Floyd
@ 7:30pm
Warner Theatre - PA

Wed 2/18

Featured



Marty Supreme | The Underground Railroad: Ep 3 & 4 [FILM 10|20]
@ 5pm / \$10-\$30
The 1020 Collective, 1020 Holland Street



Thu 2/19

Straight White Men
@ 7:30pm / \$25
PACA, 1505 State Street

Fri 2/20

Erie Otters vs. Oshawa Generals
@ 7pm
Erie Insurance Arena

Mercyhurst Lakers Hockey vs. Niagara Purple Eagles Hockey
@ 7pm
Mercyhurst Ice Center

Straight White Men
@ 7:30pm / \$25
PACA, 1505 State Street

Sat 2/21

L'Arche Erie's Outdoor Adventure Raffle
@ 1pm / \$45
L'Arche Erie will host an Outdoor Adventure Raffle on Saturday, February 21st, 2026 at the Zem Shrine Club. Doors will open at 12:30pm and the event will run from 1pm to 4pm. 2525 W 38th St, 2525 West 38th Street. jmarkham@larcherie.org, 814-452-2065

Experience Curling!
@ 6:30pm / \$30
LECOM Sports Park, 8159 Oliver Road

Straight White Men
@ 7:30pm / \$25
PACA, 1505 State Street

Wed 2/25

Double V Campaign (WWII) - Fighting on All Fronts with Robert and Chelle Lewis: Black Service Members
@ 4:30pm / Free-\$10
Watson-Curtze Mansion, 356 West 6th Street

Sentimental Value | The Underground Railroad: Ep 5 & 6 [FILM 10|20]
@ 5pm / \$10-\$30
The 1020 Collective, 1020 Holland Street

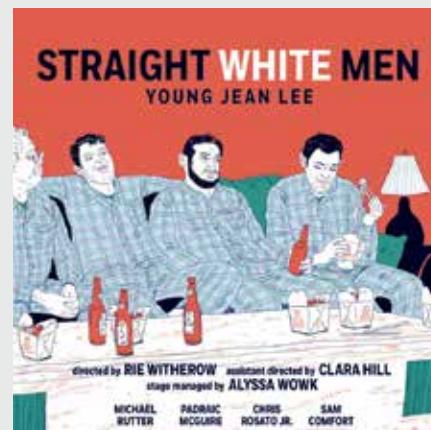
Thu 2/26

Straight White Men
@ 7:30pm / \$25
PACA, 1505 State Street

Trivia Drag Night!! Hosted By Rebecca Mae
@ 8pm / \$2
King's Rook Club, 1921 Peach Street

Fri 2/27

Featured



Straight White Men
@ 7:30pm / \$25
PACA, 1505 State Street



Sat 2/28

Experience Curling!
@ 6:30pm / \$30
LECOM Sports Park, 8159 Oliver Road

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

Mercyhurst Lakers Hockey vs. Robert Morris Colonials Hockey
@ 7pm
Mercyhurst Ice Center

Straight White Men
@ 7:30pm / \$25
PACA, 1505 State Street

Sun 3/01

Erie Otters vs. Owen Sound Attack
@ 4pm
Erie Insurance Arena

Wed 3/04

Sarah's Oil | Dear Neighbor | Screenwriting Meetup [FILM 10|20]
@ 5pm / \$10-\$30
The 1020 Collective, 1020 Holland Street

Sat 3/07

Featured



Family Feud Live! Comedy Show and Dinner at Madeline's
@ 5pm / \$45-\$55
Madeline's Dining and Events, 8844 Pennsylvania 18, Cranesville



Featured



We Rise to Fall (Ashboro NC)
@ 6pm / \$10
Centennial Hall, 145 West 11th Street



Experience Curling!
@ 6:30pm / \$30
LECOM Sports Park, 8159 Oliver Road

Erie Otters vs. London Knights
@ 7pm
Erie Insurance Arena

Sun 3/08

Erie Otters vs. Saginaw Spirit
@ 4pm
Erie Insurance Arena

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