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From the Editors: July 2026

Identity Crisis

Last April, for the Erie Reader Book Club, we all read and discussed the novel *North Woods* by Daniel Mason. I essentially forced everyone to read this book because I think it is one of the greatest books ever written, and I'm not being hyperbolic. It is grand in its scope, but intimate, moving, personal, and deeply creative in its details. It marks the passage of time through one piece of land in the forests of Massachusetts and tells that land's story (and thus, the country's story) from the beginning of America as we know it to the near-ish future. And it tells the stories of all the different identities of America. From its wild, untamed, beginnings – of dense forests of chestnut trees and their slow descent into blight, of throngs of bird-song once so deafening that are eventually silenced by wildfires, of wild cats once stalking the land, hunted to the brink of extinction. And it tells the stories of people – of indigenous bravery and sadness, of agrarian magic, of lovers and sisters and ghosts – of doctors, teachers, builders, and artists. Mason shares that really, the only way to see the story of America as anything other than a tale of loss is to instead see it as a tale of change.

As we are all currently bearing witness to the bombastic red, white, and blue display of performative patriotism that is America 250 this month – and while the current administration continues to make it harder and

harder to feel anything close to admiration for the current version of our country – we have only to look to the different identities of America to feel a true sense of patriotic pride. American pride is, at its historic core, based in revolution. It is based on celebrating the people who said “no, not this way,” and then fought, died, thought, wrote, acted, spoke, and worked to change America's identity – over and over again throughout history. While American soldiers did it in 1776, countless others have done it in other ways since and the identity of America shifts, even slightly, with each new version, each act of bravery and change.

And what of Erie's identity? Part of our identity comes from our history – from battles, flagships, maritime traditions, choices, buildings, houses, and roads and those who built them. Part of our identity comes from our educational institutions – those which enlighten the minds of our engineers, doctors, historians, lawyers, and teachers. Part of our identity comes from our landscape – from our wild, untamed beginnings and from those who are working to conserve those once towering forests and uninhibited birdsongs. Part of our identity comes from our artists – painters, sculptors, ceramicists, writers, dancers, photographers, muralists – those imprinting Erie's identity into our visual memory. Part of our identity comes from our

PUBLIC DOMAIN



Prior to the turn of the 20th century, America was forested with dense copses of American Chestnut trees until a fungal blight wiped out approximately 3 to 4 billion trees. The American story (a microcosm of our local story), is one of constant change, revolution, and redefining our identity

hospitals and those people who dedicate their lives to saving the lives of others, to bringing care to all corners of our county, and to helping our children rise out of trauma so they can contribute to building Erie's future versions.

All of the facets of Erie's defining characteristics are represented within these pages of what makes up the 14th annual 40 Under 40 issue. Get

to know what these folks are doing – the many doctors, teachers, builders, leaders, and artists who are helping to shape the version of Erie we're working on becoming right now. Their work builds onto what has identified Erie for generations and contributes to the changes to which we can all look forward and in which we can feel a sense of true, rational, and genuinely celebratory patriotic pride.



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The New American Crisis: Common Sense

America 250 through the eyes of Thomas Paine

By: Emerson Bannon Cutri, 40 Under 40 Class of 2026

“These are the times that try men’s souls.” That famed line was penned by Thomas Paine in *The American Crisis* No. 1, written in December of 1776, a few months after the Declaration of Independence and during a very uncertain war with the British Empire. Then, like today, we as Americans faced a tyrant ruling our country, and no assurance on how things will end. Unlike then, however, our tyrant and fate is of our own hand. We have crises in governance, in climate, and in equality which hang over us like a thick fog. We are a nation 250 years old this year, and are looking back at our past for guidance. Paine represents some of the best of that history. He was a major intellectual influence on the revolution, and his pamphlet *Common Sense* (written in Philadelphia when he had only come over from England two years prior) helped galvanize the colonies in favor of full independence. He advocated not just for an independent republic, but for true democracy and economic justice as well. His later works advocated for an early form of universal basic income and defended the principles of equal rights amidst the French Revolution. He was both an intellectual leader among the founding fathers, and had one of the most forward-facing visions among them.

Through Paine and other early revolutionaries we can interpret and perhaps even reclaim some of that history. He was a major influence not just on the country as a whole, but on Pennsylvania specifically. Active in Philadelphia, his works were a major influence on the revolutionary Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776. That constitution sought to prevent aristocracy from dominating an upper chamber with a unicameral state legislature, and prevented a single leader from gaining too much power by having a power shared by collective executive council. Both seem like fairly prescient reforms today. It was under this constitution that Pennsylvania fought the Revolutionary War, and in 1780 Pennsylvania became the first of the 13 colonies to pass a law on the prohibition of slavery with the flawed but groundbreaking Gradual Abolition Act.

The American Revolution, and America itself, has more than its share of moral

failings and hypocrisies, but figures like Paine also show the long arc of progress that we fight for. He was certainly not the only person in that long arc, and the project is not about big man history or putting him on a pedestal. We look at the whole of our history for guidance and context, in America, in Pennsylvania, in Erie. Ever more towards equality, democracy, liberty, and justice for all.

Ambiguity is the difference between reading about history and living through it. History flattens the human experience into a digestible, understandable narrative. It provides clarity which allows us to make sense of our past. Those of us in the present have no such luxury. We know not how this story ends, whether ours has a happy ending, or perhaps a tragedy. Life doesn’t stop happening – there is a profound sense of disconnection when you still have to go to work, get groceries, see your friends – while a crisis surrounds you. But there is also possibility. Characters like Paine have already had their stories written, and furthermore, they helped write them themselves. In our story, in our country, we are both character and author, and we can shape what will seem so predetermined in some future history. We are, fundamentally, the same humanity that accomplished all of those feats which seem so impossible in our present state.

It is now us, in the present, who are bearers of the long arc. We cannot continue things as we have done and which have failed. Local sovereignty, direct action, a new democracy, and an aggressive reform of our economic system is needed. These crises are ultimately, human problems with human solutions. These are not small or trivial tasks, but neither was American independence.

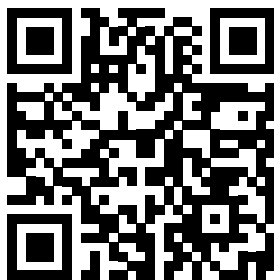
“Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.” – Thomas Paine, *The American Crisis*

This essay was written as part of the Thomas Paine Project, an interpretive history initiative by the Erie Research Team looking at the progressive history of the American Revolution at 250 years, and how its lessons can be applied to civic life today.

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The Reader Beat Recap: July 2026

A summary of June 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 June.

County Council June 2: Nearly all of the comments by constituents touched on the disbanding of Erie County Re-entry Services and Support Alliance (ECRSSA) that council passed without a second reading on Feb. 26. Constituent Cyndi Treiber stated her concerns about the lack of ironclad reasoning for disbanding the program and reinstating it under the Adult Probation Department. For example, Treiber said, there have been claims that ECRSSA did not have any intensive care resources. “Four hundred and fifty of 600 clients in 2025 were in intensive care management receiving human services assistance like drug and alcohol therapies, mental health treatment, and obtaining birth certificates,” she said. Constituent Jen Paulson encouraged council to take action to build back public trust. “Halt the transfer pending a public review, release all meeting records and financial documents, open a proper procurement process, and commission an independent audit of the program’s finances,” Paulson said. Paul Gambill, a reentry specialist for over 20 years, was involved in the early stages of ECRSSA and expressed his confidence in the team of people who came to run the program later. “You listened to other folks about why the programs weren’t working. No one at this table called me. You didn’t ask other folks like me who actually know,” Gambill said.

An ordinance for a 2026 Appointed Official Salary for a Full-Time Assistant Public Defender was motioned to a second reading by Councilwoman Schauerman. Councilman Wertz discussed the importance of the public defender’s office. “They’re currently sitting on thousands of cases that they’re trying to work through,” Wertz said. However Drexel and Copeland hesitated moving the ordinance to a second reading. They encouraged giving

the public time to comment and review the ordinance, reflecting on the vote to reinstate ECRSSA under the probation department. “Sometimes you make mistakes; make a judgment. You think people are bringing you information that is 100 percent true,” Drexel said. “I have a definite problem with it being under probation; that makes zero sense whatsoever to me.” The motion passed 5-2 with Drexel and Copeland voting no. The ordinance also passed, with Drexel voting no.

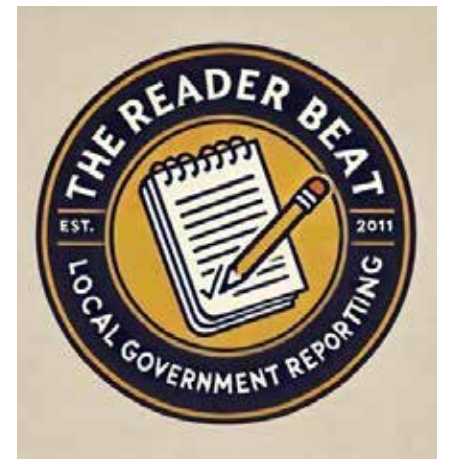
Some constituents also discussed cellphone usage at meetings, as the courthouse does not allow people to access their phones. However, constituents claimed that preventing people from accessing their phones during a public meeting violates the Sunshine Act. A resolution to direct the county executive to hold a meeting to discuss this issue to allow accommodations was on the agenda.

Council discussed the resolution directing the county executive to convene relevant parties to develop reasonable accommodations for the use of mobile devices at public meetings held within the courthouse. Bayle and Schauerman argued that the council should not be directing the county executive. Copeland disagreed, saying that the resolution is a good step forward to ensure a meeting is held. “This really is a conversation that requires convening to make sure all of the elected officials are on the same page,” Copeland said. Ultimately, the resolution failed 4-3 with Bayle, Schauerman, Winarski, and Scutella voting no.

City Council June 3: The City Council meeting held on June 3 at 9 a.m. included a presentation by ECRSSA Program Managers Sheila Silman and Bob Hess on the new Erie County Re-entry Services and Support Alliance (ECRSSA) that was reinstated under the Erie County Probation Department on May 8. Among other reasons for the shift in management, the presenters claimed that data had not been recorded since 2023 under the YMCA’s management. Hess stated that the program is now fully up

and running under the county, with three case workers and a client advocate. Hess also mentioned that the program will maintain the privacy of their clients and will not share information with probation officers unless the client requests it. “The ECRSSA is not being run by Adult Probation. We are completely separate entities and have different purposes and completely separate staff,” he said. One case worker described her reason for joining the program, saying that her father and uncle were incarcerated for most of her life. “They were good people who were very institutionalized and didn’t know how to reenter society and live.”

Constituent Michelle Dovishaw said the information presented about the ECRSSA program under the YMCA was inaccurate, as the data was from when the program began in 2016. “In a decade a program changes,” she said. Michael Keys expressed concerns about the county program’s ability to support BIPOC clients. “It’s not just about the program, it’s whether the people you have hired are culturally competent to manage the people that they’re supposed to manage,” he said. “We know representation matters.” Executive Director of Erie Together Mary Bula stated that ECRSSA under the YMCA focused primarily on job placement and it was difficult to quantify the impact of the program due to lack of data. “We knew where there were job placements but what about the rest of it? It is a holistic approach that we needed to be following and we weren’t seeing that,” Bula said. Consistent Erin Mizner highlighted issues she has with the new ECRSSA and the claim that focusing on job placement is not enough. “If you have a job, all of the other stuff falls into place. Everything else is better if you can afford to live,” Mizner expressed. Director at PA Department of Corrections Ebony Frith disagreed about job placement being enough to keep recidivism rate low. “What we were looking for is maybe services that can help with the transition, not just getting a job that a lot of people can’t necessarily keep. There’s drug and alcohol and mental health issues



and if those things aren’t addressed, you don’t maintain a job,” Frith said. Previous Senior Case Manager Allen Brown remarked that no one on council reached out to him about the status of reentry. “This wasn’t some useless agency,” he said. “We didn’t send people to BPS Staffing where they get an \$8 or \$9 hourly wage. We got them sustainable wages at every place we sent them and it was always Erie’s biggest industries that accepted them.”

City Council June 17: During the City Council meeting on June 17 at 6:30, many community members filled the council chambers to speak out against a transphobic comment made by Councilman Ed Brzezinski to Council President Tyler Titus during a special meeting on June 9. After a brief disagreement and an exchange between Brzezinski and Councilman Horton, Titus asked for decorum and respect between council members. Brzezinski responded by misgendering Titus, saying: “Yes, ma’am.”

During Wednesday’s meeting, constituents demanded professionalism and respect between council members. “Whether an individual personally agrees with a person’s identity, that’s not the issue here today. The issue is whether elected officials can demonstrate basic professional courtesy and respect while conducting the public’s business,” Michelle Dovishaw said. Speaking as a non-binary person, Rie Witherow stated that Brzezinski’s comment did not appear to be an innocuous mistake. “It is easy for those outside of any marginalized community to not understand the dangers of micro-aggression,” they said. “But the oc-

currence of a microaggression is what paves the path for macroaggression and violence. Every day, our nation's trans and queer lives are assaulted, targeted, and ended." According to the ACLU, 530 anti-LGBTQ bills have been presented in 2026 alone. Witherow and a handful of other speakers called for Brzezinski's resignation, censure, or removal from committee assignments. Speakers also requested a fully realized decorum policy in council to ensure there are guidelines for how to handle any future incidents.

Constituent Mimi O'Conner spoke in tribute to a young queer person in her life that she lost to suicide in 2013. "The very bottom line is, we all have the right to feel respected. We have a right to feel safe – because words have power." According to a meta-analysis of nearly 1 million people, transgender individuals were consistently more at risk of suicide and suicidal ideation than their cisgender peers. Constituent Josh Jagger spoke of the Erie community's potential for kindness in the face of adversity. "We're a city of people who dig each other out of the snow and check on each other when the power goes out. We do not agree on everything; Lord knows we never have. But we do not get to throw away basic human dignity the second a fight turns ugly," Jagger said.

During reports, Brzezinski did not address his comment or the constit-

uents. President Titus spoke about their thoughts and their actions going forward. "There is something deeply degrading about having your identity, your body, and your existence treated as a subject for public debate," they began. However, after days of reflection and support from the community, Titus said they remain positive about the work that city council can do. "I remain committed to working alongside my colleagues to strengthen this body. That includes reviewing our council rules,

"We're a city of people who dig each other out of the snow and check on each other when the power goes out. We do not agree on everything; Lord knows we never have. But we do not get to throw away basic human dignity the second a fight turns ugly." – Constituent Josh Jagger

procedures, and ordinances, and making necessary changes to ensure that they reflect the values of our city. Healing does not happen by pretending harm did not occur, healing happens when we tell the truth about what happened."

According to Titus, Brzezinski has since been removed from his committee and liaison assignments, including Information Technologies, the Airport Authority, and the Convention Center.

Landlords and members of the Apartment Association also came to share their concerns about two rental-related ordinances on the agenda. These ordinances had their first reading and were not yet voted on by council. Constituent Natalie Miller disagreed with the city taking over all rental inspections. "In light of the \$12 million deficit and cutting six positions, is now the right time to hire five new positions?" Miller asked. Randy Harris, a board member of the Apartment Association of NWPA, en-

couraged council to find a solution with BIU Pennsylvania instead of creating a city department to inspect rental properties. "If the city needs better access to data, let's negotiate better reporting requirements for BIU," Harris said. "I would encourage council to slow down and ask a few important questions before moving forward."

County Council June 22:
Constituents continued to discuss the

ECRSSA transfer to the county under the Adult Probation Department. Constituent Cyndi Treiber said that she attended a Department of Human Services meeting to discuss how the transfer has gone thus far: "Everybody in that room admitted readily that there have been gaps in services, that it was probably not done right, that they are struggling to make it run right." Constituent David Uhlig spoke about the council needing to commit to transparency. "I'm waiting for this council to revisit the ECRSSA decision as three of you have expressed regret about your apparently ill-informed decision. At the very least, you owe it to your constituents to fully examine the decision."

County Executive Vogel announced that Erie County Community College has received Title IV funding to administer Pell grants to eligible students. "That's all dollars that are going to go to help people train for better jobs. And any money that they get in excess of what would pay for tuition goes back to the students," Vogel said.

An ordinance appropriating \$614,508 for additional revenue received from the PA Department of Drug and Alcohol passed unanimously.

Coming up this month:

City Council: July 1 at 9 a.m.

City Council: July 15 at 6:30 p.m.

County Council: July 21 at 6 p.m.

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Edwina Tries... Joining an A Cappella Group

Singing along with the Flagship City Chorus

By: Edwina Capozziello

I have always loved to sing. I first remember singing in church and shortly thereafter, to Kool and the Gang, the *Dream Girls* soundtrack, and Earth, Wind and Fire. I had a brief foray back into a church rock band in



Sing along with Edwina this month as she steps out of her comfort zone and into the rehearsal space of Erie's Flagship City Chorus, the local chapter of SingUnited International (formerly the Sweet Adelines), a global a cappella organization.

my early 20s, but for the most part, it's been just singing in the shower for me. When I saw the local Sweet Adelines Chorus posted something on social media comparing themselves to The Jazzagals from *Schitt's Creek* and were open to membership...I knew I needed to try it out.

Sweet Adelines International has made a recent name change to SingUnited International. The local chapter is still called Flagship City Chorus and is made up of women who are grouped by voice into barbershop and a cappella harmonies. SingUnited prides itself on being inclusive and non-audition in style. According to their website (singunited.org), they believe in singing for well-being and raising money for local charities.

When I visited, I was greeted warmly by the existing members, introduced

to the group leader, Kim Ackerman, and placed into the bass section. In all-female choruses, the basses sing an octave higher than standard bass parts. We sang some traditional Americana songs, some hymns, and a rousing rendition of "All About That Bass," the Meghan Trainor bop that takes on new meaning in this setting. I was provided sheet music with lyrics and jumped right in. It was a little intimidating because these women are having fun but also take music very seriously, many with the ability to read sheet music and with strong and lovely voices.

By the last couple of songs, I was singing less and listening more. The ladies applauded my efforts, each told me a little about themselves, and invited me back. They discussed their upcoming performances at local

events and marked their calendar for a holiday show in December. I thoroughly enjoyed my time with them.

There is a yearly membership fee to join, with discounted rates for those under 25. If you are looking for a creative outlet that involves singing, camaraderie, and entertaining the public, you should definitely go and visit the local Adelines. Tell them Edwina sent you!

SingUnited Flagship City Chapter (formerly Sweet Adelines) // Immanuel Lutheran Church Lower Level, 1002 Powell Ave. // Mondays, 7 to 9 p.m. // singunited.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

Bird of the Month: Gray Catbird

Birds that meow (and are sometimes legends)

By: Mary Birdsong

You hear a series of whistles, chatters, and squeaks all delivered in rapid sequence emanating from a shrub. You may also hear another bird that sounds somewhat like a Northern Cardinal or American Robin. If you don't know what you're hearing, just wait. A Gray Catbird will always give itself away with its signature squeaky meow call, from which it received its name.

Indeed, the Gray Catbird has quite a versatile vocal vocabulary. According to *Cornell's Birds of the World*, "Part of this ability stems from the structure of its syrinx. Both sides of this vocal organ are able to operate independently." Meaning the Gray Catbird can sing with two voices at the same time.

Although many may call Gray Catbirds drab in appearance, I prefer to call them understated in their plumage. They are overall gray in color and sport a narrow black cap. To spice things up a bit, they have a splash of rusty red hiding in what are called the undertail coverts, which is the set of feathers under the tail.

They spend their summers nest-

ing across much of the United States and southern Canada, excluding the American Southwest. They are regular nesters in our area. In fact, one has nested in or near our backyard for a few years now, meaning they

A Gray Catbird will always give itself away with its signature squeaky meow call, from which it received its name.

are a relatively easy bird to find since they occupy a variety of habitats from forest to urban spaces. They winter along the Gulf Coast of the U.S. as well as in the Caribbean, Central South America, and a small portion of Colombia.

They choose living shrubs, trees and vines for their nest, which the female mostly builds. Typically, the nest is about 4 feet off the ground but some

have been found as high as 60 feet up. Their clutch can be anywhere from one to six eggs but three to five is found most often. They feed their nestlings insects and fruit, the same foods the adults eat.

Although common and mostly anonymous, some local Gray Catbirds are more famous than others. At the EBO banding station, Momma Catbird is a legend. Per Laura-Marie Koitsch, EBO's banding manager, she was banded in May of 2018 as a "second-year bird," meaning she hatched in 2017. Banders have welcomed her back every year. "She returns every spring around the same date she was banded and, in the fall, we usually catch her in the first week of September." They know she's a local breeder since she most often has a brood patch, a featherless area of skin on the abdomen of the bird that helps warm the eggs and nestlings.

"At a known age of 9, Momma Catbird was the oldest (known) bird at the banding station this year," says Koitsch. And since the longevity record for catbirds is close to 18 years,



If you ever hear what sounds like a sad, stray kitten crying out in your backyard, it is more than likely a Gray Catbird. This charming bird, gray (like their namesake) with a narrow black cap, is a common sight in Erie during the summertime – particularly the female pictured, who has returned to Erie annually since initially banded in 2018.

she adds "we are hoping she's with us for many years to come."

Famous or not, Gray Catbirds are, um, the cat's meow.

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

Take Your Beer for a Walk: Saturday Sip Circuit

Tour four local watering holes, on foot with cup in hand

By: Jeff McCullor

This column has been a regular feature in the Erie Reader for a while now and I think the act of taking your beer for a walk is really catching on. What if I told you there's a guided summer walk where you and your friends could take a jaunt with a semi-large group of other downtown drink enthusiasts? And what if I also told you this organized walk featured multiple stops that served you some of the best drinks downtown, then encouraged you to walk on to another next stop?

Well friend, you're reading the right words! The all-new Saturday Sip Circuit is custom-built for you! We're going to zip through a walking tour that was designed to do exactly what this column does – hit some local stops, with local people, and drink local stuff along the way. Organized by the fine folks at Erie Food Tours with some light planning from four downtown libation factories, this Circuit contains four distinct stops and offers trivia and quick games along the way as participants hoot and/or holler along. Oh, but what if you wanted to make bottle or 4-pack purchases at any point during the foray? A customized wagon accompanies the group, freeing you up to high-five your tour-mates as much as you want.

So let's go? Oh yes, let's go. Our first stop will be the Brewerie at Union Station. We'll gather at the bar inside the front door of Erie's original train station at 123 W. 14th St. Here, new-ish owner Jessica Warren and brother-in-law Tate Warren will give you a guided tasting tour through samples of your choice plus a beer batter fried pickle and a braised beef taco. It's fitting to start the tour here inside this building as it served as the



If you've taken Jeff McCullor's regular walks, you know that the beer is generally optional. This month, the beer is the point! Join the latest tour on the docket from Erie Food Tours called the Saturday Sip Circuit and visit four different libation stations within a casual mile-long stroll.

origin of Erie's craft beer scene, starting with Erie Brewing Company, originally known as Hoppers Brewpub, in 1993. Since 2006, the impressive space has been known as The Brewerie at Union Station, cranking out beer, events, and even soda pops to the masses. Cheers to you, Brewerie!

With a half pint (it's a short walk) of Hopness Monster in your hand, we'll exit the Brewerie, heading east two blocks to State Street. Cross the street and turn left, heading north and ending up at 1213 State, home to Luminary Distilling's Cocktails & Bottle Shop. Here you'll chat with owner Joel Normand, where he'll share stories of their origin in Summit Township and how cool it is to make booze for a living, all while sharing at least one

cocktail and an expertly-heated pepperoni ball. Luminary moved into this new space at the end of 2025 and it's quite the looker. The iron spiral staircase is arguably the star of the show, leading imbibers to an upper deck that overlooks the whole space. Or you can choose to sit bar-side with the garage door open in warmer months; it's all flexible. Cheers to you, Luminary Distilling!

Next stop, Lavery Brewing Company. With (ahem) a beverage in-hand, the tour will follow State Street north, crossing 12th Street, to head west two blocks, landing at 128 W. 12th St. The tour will occur in the back production space, where owner Jason Lavery will guide you through two different beers of your choice alongside chips and guacamole. As the founding brewer, he'll walk you through the brewery layout, how their system is unique to their space, give a quick tutorial on the venerable Wild Goose canning rig, and how their business expanded multiple times, taking over the entire ground floor of the building. Cheers to you, Lavery Brewing!

Erie Ale Works is the next and final stop on the Circuit. Your tour guide will lead the group, beer-in-hand, slightly north to West 11th Street, heading west three long blocks until

hitting the intersection of West 11th and Chestnut streets. From here, make your way one short block north to the front door. The garage door is usually open this time of year with the tour group reception area set up in the back near the brewhouse. Opened in 2014, EAW underwent one large expansion in early 2020 and has been cranking out the hits ever since. Your tour will include three 5-ounce samples and a bag of Utz chips. Usually a food truck is onsite for extra food. Jeff McCullor (hi, that's me) will be the guide through the brewery history, the process, and the beers. Afterward, the Saturday Sip Circuit is officially over and you're free to roam; I'd recommend taking at least a half pint along!

If you're interested in walking along the Saturday Sip Circuit, simply visit eriefoodtours.com and reserve your spot online. Tickets cost \$52 per person, with discounts available for groups of eight or larger. The next two are scheduled for Saturday, July 11 with an August date still being ironed out at press time. It's fun; trust me, I do this for a living!

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



Gem City Style: Dr. Ferki Ferati, The Long Way Home

A 40 Under 40 catch-up

By: Jessica Hunter

Dr. Ferki Ferati has brought a former President of the United States to Erie. Then he brought another one. He has brought Nobel laureates and some of the most consequential minds of our moment to a mid-sized city on the edge of a Great Lake, and then stood back and watched Erie pull its chair in close and listen.

Twenty-seven years ago, it was Erie that took him in.

That is the thing I keep turning over about Ferki. The man who now brings the whole world to our doorstep was once carried to that same doorstep with almost nothing, a refugee whose family had circled four American cities on a form and ended up in none of them. To understand the Jefferson Educational Society, the Global Summit, the leaders he has quietly helped grow, you have to start on a farm in Kosovo, with a boy who did not yet know the world could be any better than it was.

He was on the cover of this paper's very first 40 Under 40 issue, at age 29 back in 2013. When I asked what that meant, he did not reach for the easy answer.

"I don't believe I deserved it back then," he told me. "And I still kind of don't believe I deserved it." But it told him, he said, that he was at least pointed in the right direction, and that he should keep going. Keep swimming, was how he put it. And then, almost to himself: "We've swam pretty far."

Take me back to the farm, I said. What was that life like?

"I was a boy," he said. "And quite frankly, Jessica, I didn't like my life." They were poor in a way that is hard to render on a page in a country as comfortable as the United States. He remembers the winter of 1991, just before the family left for Sweden, when the food simply ran out. His father brought a guest home and asked his mother to make dinner, and his mother had to say there was nothing to make dinner with. The only cow they had died giving birth.

"Right? Died giving birth," he said. "And we had nothing."

He was 9 years old.

His father is the hero of his story, and he says so without hesitation, in a way that makes everything he has built since sound small to his own ear. His dad had been a foreman at a zinc refinery. When the regime forced the Albanian leadership out and installed its own, his father was one of the first nine men to walk off the job. The next day, he says, 50,000 people walked out behind them. "That's how the revolution started," Ferki says. "Everything I've done pales next to the sacrifices he made."

They had a single television back on the farm. Through it, this boy in Kosovo built a picture of America, and the picture was utopia. "It was *Miami Vice*," he says, laughing. "And *Dynasty*. That was our idea of reality in America." Don Johnson and shoulder pads. He understood the U.S. from programs,

JESSICA HUNTER



Jessica Hunter catches up with Ferki Ferati this month – Kosovar refugee, doctor of education, original 40 Under 40 class alum, and president of the Jefferson Educational Society.

not as a place a person could actually go.

Then the family left for the first time. They spent two years in Sweden, and Sweden opened a door in his head. This was the early '90s, years before the war most people picture when they hear Kosovo. They had gone for the oldest reason there is, because there was no food and no work, the way many Kosovar families were quietly leaving in those years, heading west toward something better. He watched the 1992 American election unfold on the news there, and found himself, a boy with no stake in any of it, quietly rooting for Bill Clinton, the challenger, simply because he didn't want to cheer for whoever was already in charge of the world. "I wanted change," he says. What Sweden actually taught him was bigger than any candidate. "Oh," he remembers thinking. "You mean people have a say in what happens around them?"

And then they went back. That is the part that surprises people, because we tend to picture a refugee's path as a single straight line out. His ran the other way first. The family returned to Kosovo

around 1994, the money they'd made was gone, and a teenage Ferki went to work to make more, selling cigarettes bar to bar and table to table for about three years. He was building a life in the country he'd been born in.

Then, at the end of the decade, the war came. And this time, leaving was not a choice.

When I asked how his family ended up in Erie, of all the places on earth, he stopped me before I could even finish the romance of the question.

"This is why you shouldn't make it about where you want to go," he said. "It's a study in letting the world come to you, and seeing where you can go." And then, plainly: he had never heard of a place called Erie in his life.

What happened was this. After the war, the family landed at Fort Dix, the New Jersey military base where the United States was processing thousands of Albanian refugees that President Clinton had cleared to come. And here Ferki insists on saying the part that many people in his position would let slide.

"We were lucky that we were white refugees," he says. His friend Felix spent 19 years in a refugee camp. Ferki spent six weeks there. "You know why? The color of my skin." He brings it up, he says, every chance he gets, because he had something working in his favor that doesn't work for so very many of the world's refugees, of whom there are tens of millions. "We should always pay attention to why I got here so fast," he says, "compared to somebody from Sudan who waits 20 years for clearances." It is the rare immigrant success story told by a man insisting you notice the unfairness that helped speed it along.

At Fort Dix, they were asked where in America they wanted to live. The family circled the only names they knew from the movies: New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Washington. Then a man named Mike Murnock, who ran the International Institute of Erie, told them something that changed everything by accident. New York, he said, is only 30 minutes away.

He meant New York State. He meant Erie's corner of it. Ferki, who didn't know "New York" could mean anything other than the city he had seen in films, heard only that Erie was 30 minutes from Gotham. Thirty minutes away sounded perfect. So they came.

"And my first thought," he says, "was, oh, they played a trick on us." Just a quiet, lakeside city that was about to become the rest of his life.

People showed up for him here – reporters from the Erie Times-News interviewed the family, the folks at the International Institute, an interpreter, an Albanian ambassador. He had taught himself English already, in Sweden and from the movies, and he is quick to point out, with a grin, that he is "of course, still learning English, by the way." Twenty-seven years later.

He loves Erie. He says it simply and often: "It's given me everything I have." But when I asked whether there was a single moment when Erie stopped being the place he accidentally landed and started being home, he gave me the most unguarded answer of the afternoon, and it was not a clean one.

"Every foreigner has to realize one thing," he said. "At one point you're going to be too foreign to go back, and still foreign here."

That is the line I keep coming back to. He has lived in Erie for 27 years and he is not sure the transition has finished happening inside his head. He goes back to Kosovo and speaks, he says, like an eighth grader. He comes home to Erie and he still has an accent. "So where do I fit in?"

I told him, gently, that from where I sit he seems to fit in everywhere.

"Yeah," he said, turning it over. "It's quite poetic. I'm a chameleon. I make my place wherever I go." Back in Kosovo, he can swim with the people who left school at 14 and with the professionals both. Here, the same. A man who can move through any water.

And there it is. The boy who was told to keep swimming has become a man who can swim anywhere, in any company, in any country, precisely because he has never fully belonged to one shore. The thing that aches in him is the same thing that

makes him extraordinary.

Which brings us, finally, to the work, and to the second thing Ferki cannot stop talking about. If the first half of his life is a man learning to swim across, the second half is a man building ladders, so other people don't have to.

He came to the Jefferson Educational Society (JES) almost by accident, the way he came to everything. It was 2007, he was fresh out of college and couldn't find a job, and the recession was about to make that much worse. A group of Erie's civic dreamers, people like Joyce Savocchio and Tom Hagen, had been talking for years about building a real think tank in Erie, and they hired this young intern to research how the best ones worked.

He fell in love with what he found. Brookings. Chautauqua. The 92nd Street Y. The whole idea of civic learning, of a town taking its own intellectual life seriously. "Oh," he remembers thinking. "This is where it's all happening."

The conviction underneath it is pure Ferki, and it traces straight back to that boy on the farm. "The bed you sleep in, you should make very nicely," he told me earlier, "because this is where you're going to sleep, day in and day out. That's how I saw this community. What can I do to make it better?" He learned it, he says, from his parents and his grandparents: wherever you are, you try to leave it better than you found it. He chose to make his bed in Erie, so he has spent his life making it nicely.

The JES's whole premise, he says, is importing big ideas to our little corner of the world, on the conviction that Erie deserves to learn from the best minds alive. The vehicle is the Global Summit, the JES's marquee speaker series every fall, the reason a lake city this size keeps landing on the travel schedules of people who could speak anywhere. So he built a deliberately complicated machine for choosing them. There is an educated steering committee. There is the doctorate he went and earned specifically to learn how to do this well. And there is one rule he treats as sacred: money and the selection of speakers never touch.

"I don't go to sponsors and ask them what the product should look like," he says. The JES decides who the community needs to hear, and only then brings that slate to the people who fund it. The secret, he says, is to host conversations that even the most powerful people in the room might find a little uncomfortable, and to trust that an audience can handle it. "My biggest teacher," he says, "is the Jefferson audience." They have told him, again and again, that they want to hear points of view that are not their own. In an age of echo chambers, that may be the most radical thing about the place.

He has hosted something like 1,500 speakers, so asking him to name one that changed him is a little unfair. He named a few anyway.

James Fallows, he said, came and spoke about civic duty, and about a hard, beautiful idea: that your own success is not the same as your community's success, and that sometimes you have to spend the first on behalf of the second. One of the scientists, a man in a Mr. Rogers cardigan, told a room with chil-

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dren in it that math is like a muscle, that most people are afraid of it, but that anyone who works at a thing will get good at it.

And then there was the urbanist Bruce Katz, who came to Erie and said the sentence Ferki repeats like a man holding up a match. Nobody is coming to save Erie. So you had better do it yourselves.

"That lit a fire in this community," Ferki says, and you can hear that he believes the development reshaping Erie right now traces back, in part, to that one talk. It is also, not coincidentally, the entire philosophy of the man telling me the story. Nobody came to save him, either. He made his place. Now he is in the business of helping a whole city make its own.

Which is where the ladders come in. I came up through the Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy myself, so I asked him about it a little selfishly. He built it, he says, because of an uncomfortable truth about his own rise: the connections that let him into Erie's civic life, he got by accident.

"If I hadn't made those connections," he says, "it would never have happened." So his whole question became: how do you make it not an accident? How do you build the ladder on purpose, and hand it to everyone with the appetite to climb? He reaches, of course, for Thomas Jefferson, who wrote long ago about a "natural aristocracy," the idea that talent and drive are scattered everywhere, even when opportunity is not. Ferki's life work is closing that gap. A World Bank report he read put it bluntly: a commu-

nity that refuses to build that ladder will never become what it could be.

And when I asked what someone walks away from the Academy with that they couldn't get anywhere else, he laughed and offered me the secret sauce. "There is no secret sauce," he said, "except getting people together." He means it as a philosophy. He distinguishes, in his scholarly way, between human capital, the skills you can teach a person – welding, banking, insurance – and what he calls social capital, the trust and connection that form when you simply put people in a room together. Our society seems to have learned to respect the first, he says, and to neglect the second. "We are social animals. We've convinced ourselves we've graduated into something that isn't social. I don't believe that's true."

The most revealing thing he said about why he does any of it came near the end, when I asked what the young man on that 2013 cover would find most surprising about the man he became.

"That I am so righteous about improving the lives of people in a disadvantaged situation," he said. And then, more quietly than anything else he told me: "Secretly, I'm there myself." He doesn't worry much about himself. What he wants is the ladder. He has found that on the east side of his own adopted city, there are far too many people for whom the ladder to prosperity isn't even visible. He has spent his life trying to make it visible.

I asked him, last, about the Erie he is working to-

ward. The one he wants his sons to inherit. He answered with a question of his own.

"Why did the Middle East, once the cradle of civilization, fall behind the West?" Because, he said, it spent centuries running its societies at half capacity, excluding its women. "And as long as we keep excluding New Americans, and Black people, and other minorities, and the people who live in Albion and Union City and in other very small communities," he said, "we're never going to be our best selves."

So his hope for Erie is not really about himself at all. It is about the next person, with more power than he has now, still working on that same unfinished thing. He even framed it as a wish for his own life: that the man he is 15 years from now is closer to the man he is today than to the boy he was 15 years ago. Still pointed the right way.

You have seen him on that stage, bringing the world to Erie. What I hope you see now is the longer story underneath it. A boy who didn't fit on either shore, who decided the answer was not to find his place, but to make one. And then to make room.

You will find him again this fall, where you always find him: at the Global Summit, off to one side of the stage, making room for someone else to be heard.

Gem City Style is a monthly column featuring an intimate profile of 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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Edwin Garnet Riley: The Humble Preacher, Poet, and Painter of Northwestern Pennsylvania

An Oil Region legacy that lives on

By: Jonathan Burdick

Edwin Garnet Riley was a preacher, poet, painter, essayist, historian, husband, and father in Titusville, Pennsylvania. In 1948, the Oil City Blizzard called him the “Titusville poet and narrator of facts and tales of legendary lore.” The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette called him a “poet-historian.” In 1958, the Titusville Herald noted newcomers to the city were always asking “Why, is this Mr. Riley?” In response, they gave Riley, now 78 years old and containing “a vast wealth of lore” about the Oil Region, a chance to introduce himself in an autobiographical sketch.

“I have lived a long and somewhat eventful life and my experiences have been many and varied and sometimes critical,” wrote Riley. “I have seen men come and go. I have seen men rise to affluence and office and then be reduced to abject poverty over night,” he continued. “I have always been interested in community life and its activities and have always seemed to gravitate toward the public.”

Indeed, the Titusville community was central to Riley’s life. He was born there on Sept. 5, 1880 to Ephraim and Anna (Burch) Riley. Ephraim was born in Macon, Georgia in 1856 while Anna was born in New Haven, Connecticut in 1858. Accounts vary, but most include that Ephraim escaped antebellum-era enslavement as he made his way to Cleveland, Ohio and then to Oil City where he worked as a bricklayer. Some of Anna’s family arrived in the region during the Oil Boom. Before she moved to Pennsylvania, she had a daughter, Emma Gertrude. After her arrival, she then met Ephraim and they were soon married. Together, they had three children: William, Frances, and Edwin. The children attended Titusville High School. Upon graduation, Edwin then attended Howard University in Washington, D.C. before returning to Titusville.

On Aug. 2, 1906, Riley married Sarah Newsome, daughter of Darius and Mary (Lamb) Newsome, of Pittsburgh. Their oldest, Gerrit, was born the following year. They had six more children: Felicia (b. 1909), Constantia (b. 1911), Portia (b. 1913), Phyllis (b. 1916), Edmonda (b. 1918), and Merlyn (b. 1923).

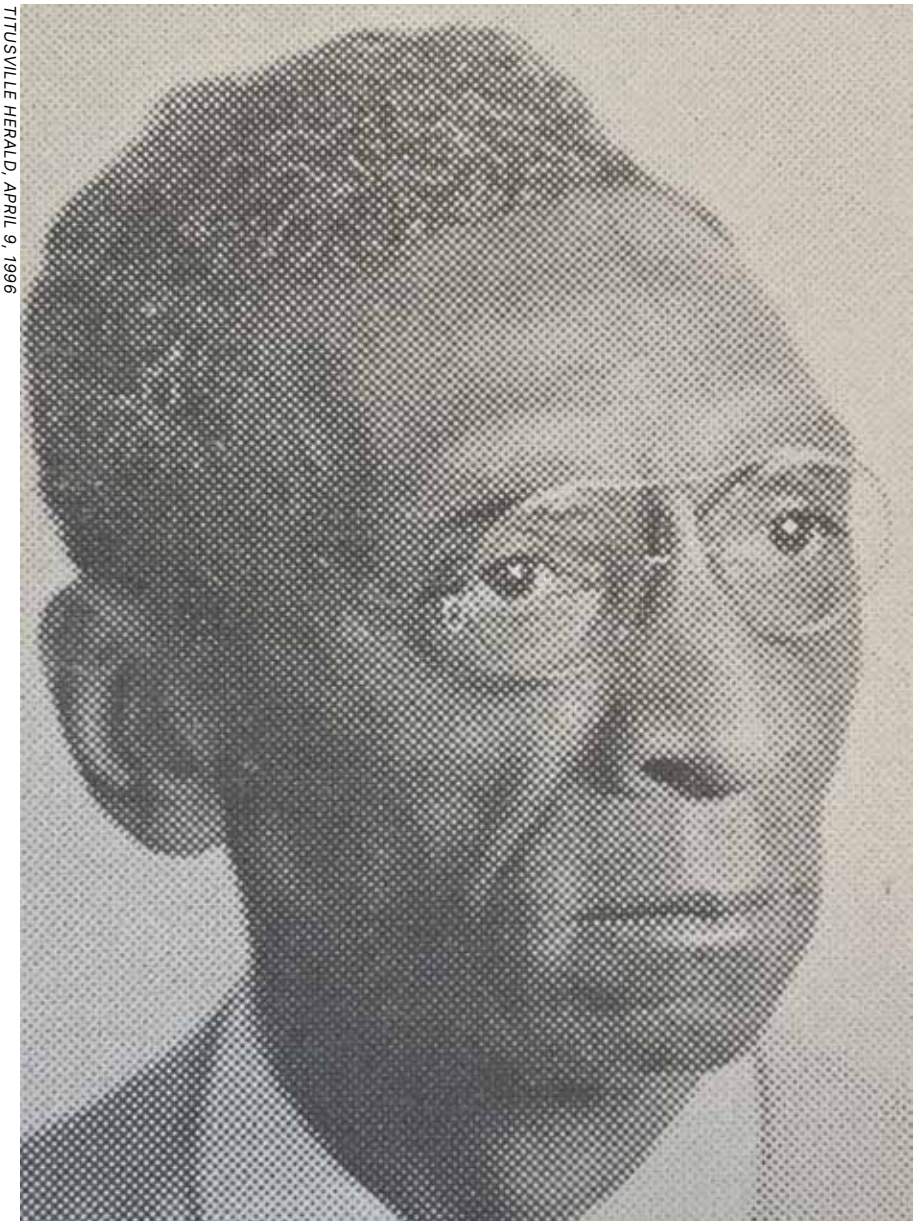
The family resided at 126 S. Brown St., on the corner of Spring and Brown, in a homestead they called Sunnynook. Edwin served as an assistant pastor at the Titusville Trinity African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. He also traveled on behalf of John Jefferson Smallwood’s Temperance Industrial and Collegiate Institute to raise funds for the schooling of Black youth. During these travels, he met and spent time with Susan B. Anthony and other popular civil rights and suffrage activists.

He’d also been writing from a young age. It wasn’t long into adulthood before he was well-known for his poetry. In fact, the Titusville Herald made it in an unofficial policy that his would be the only poems published in their newspaper as “they were always of such high quality.” His poetry often focused on Titusville history, places around the city, and the people who inhabited it. He often memorialized lives of recently deceased with a poem published in the Herald as well as a yearly Christmas poem.

In 1936, after having some of his work published in two different anthologies, he was complimented for the “excellence of his work” as a poet. Some of his poems were even recited over New York City radio by the Rockefeller Foundation. As historian Jessica Hilburn, author of *Hidden History of Northwestern Pennsylvania*, described it in her story on Riley: “Edwin Garnet Riley quickly earned a reputation for his detailed memory, excellent writing, straightforward style, and earnest craft.”

The following year, he released “Sparks from the Anvil,” a 32-page pamphlet of 44 different poems. “There is food for thought in each,” the Titusville Herald stated. Copies made their way around the country, including to a critic at the Indianapolis Recorder who described Riley as “religious, anti-war, and an interpreter of homely philosophy” and “a bard who gives his reactions to life in rhymed cadences” who would “appeal to those souls who find inspiration in the verses of [Detroit poet] Edgar Guest.”

Along with his poetry, he also wrote more straightforward narrative histories and biographies. He wrote of-



Edwin Garnet Riley, a preacher, poet, painter, essayist, historian, husband, and father was dubbed the “unofficial poet-laureate” of Titusville. So remarkable was his work that the Titusville Herald made it an unofficial policy that his would be the only poems published in their newspaper.

ten about the Oil Boom era including nearby boomtowns like Pithole and historical figures like Edwin L. Drake. In the Titusville Herald, he published some of these histories. As he knew many of the historical figures personally in his younger years, for instance, he contributed a multi-page story about many of the old houses across Titusville, which included Ida Tarbell’s childhood home and the Burgess House, mansion of the region’s first oil millionaire Jonathan Watson (then owned and renovated by Charles Burgess).

In his poem “The Conquest of Oil” honoring Drake, he praised his innovations and called for “a mighty chorus” to “magnify the fame of Drake.” In a poem about Pithole, titled “Harlots on Parade,” he highlighted the debauchery through the eyes of “men of vice” rushing from the saloons to watch a parade of scantily clad women coming down the street, adding that “many a man of wealth ... came to the brothels at night by stealth.”

In his narrative *A Tribute to John Brown*, dedicated to the famed abolitionist who lived in Crawford County

for a decade, Riley called Brown the “greatest benefactor” of Black Americans. “Men have called him a fanatic and perhaps he was,” Riley said. “Any individual who scorns the hypocrisy of his age and follows in the path of truth – who rears his temple in the unclouded clime of the ideal, is usually thought to be a fanatic. Yet, the fruits of any civilization and the progress of mankind, are but the result of fanatical intent.”

In 1940, his sister Frances, now residing in Pittsburgh, died. Like her brother, she had gained significant renown and her death received plenty of attention. After attending the University of Chicago and marrying Dr. George H. Bolling, she founded multiple schools as well as Pittsburgh’s Young Women’s Friendly Institute. She’d also been popular lecturer and toured the country on behalf of the National Federation of Negro Women. The Herald described her as “a woman of strong and forceful character, broad of mind and deeply possessed with humanitarian instincts” with friends “numbered among the hundreds in every part of the country.” Funeral services were held in Titusville.

Meanwhile, that same year, Riley released another book of poetry. This included 85 poems and the Herald said it had “a dedicated charm” and would “be read with interest” by all. Two years later, he released another collection, *Mid-Summer Reveries*, which had poems “dealing with wit, sentiment and philosophy” in a way

that was “pleasing in style, clear in thought and interesting.” After another two years, he released a volume titled *Titusville, Past and Present, Poems, Sketches, and Legends*. In it, he wrote sketches and poems about many people from Titusville’s past. The book was described as “attracting extraordinary attention” upon its publication with “unforgettable characters, past and present” and “enhancing the historic aspect of life and character in this community.”

The Titusville Herald continued to be impressed with his work, writing, “Mr. Riley has lived in this community all of his life and is conversant with the growth, progress and development of much that has lent charm and color to this business and cultural life of the city.” In another review, they noted that his poems “all indicate Mr. Riley’s love of beauty, his metrical exactitude and expression of his philosophy.”

As for Riley, he said he did not “claim any considerable knowledge concerning the production, refining and transportation of oil,” but he *did* “have a positive and first-hand knowledge of men and things and events associated.”

As his renown grew, he traveled and gave speeches. In Titusville, he was a usual figure present at events and ceremonies where he’d recite a relevant poem. In the newspaper, he continued publishing poetry, often as a creative “letter to the editor” commenting on contemporary events. For example, he wrote “Spare of Trees” when it came to his attention that his-

toric trees in front of one of the Oil Boom era mansions were going to be needlessly cut down. “From boyhood we have fondly gazed on that enchanted spot,” he penned. “How sad if when those trees are razed we look to find them not.”

He also was painting more and more. He did portraits of his children and local historical figures and, by the 1950s, added landscapes to his repertoire. His finished works were often displayed at his church and the Benson Library and were described as “attract[ing] attention for originality, charm and as an example of creative energy.” When his painting of Edwin L. Drake, titled “Father of the Oil Industry,” was displayed, the Erie Daily Times noted their surprise at his newly revealed skill. “This is unusually interesting since the artist made no pretension of being an artist,” they wrote.

Sometimes his writings were surprising. For instance, in 1953, following Joseph Stalin’s death, Riley wrote a column about the lessons learned from his dictatorial rule and defended the United States political system. In context, this would have been written after important Supreme Court rulings desegregating public universities and in the midst of arguments on *Brown v. Board of Education*, in which the ruling the following year banned racial segregation in public schools.

“Democracy may sometimes fall short in its practices, but never in its ideals,” Riley observed. “It has now and then been derelict in the per-

formance of its duty, but it has soon awakened to consciousness. It has often stumbled in its path, but to its great credit, it has never stumbled backward, but forward.” As for Stalin, he called him “vain” for what he saw as “personal ambitions and lust for power.” He ruled to serve *himself*, not others.

“How much greater is it to serve than to be served?” asked Riley. “He that would be the master must indeed be the servant. And it is far better to rule by love than fear.”

In a 1954 interview, he was complimented on the readability of his writing and the way in which he brought the subjects to life. “The Gourmet” was given as an example, following a poverty-stricken man searching through garbage for food after “muster[ing] up enough courage to put shame in his pocket and pride under his feet.”

Entering his mid-70s, Riley spent much of his time at Sunnynook at his desk surrounded by his library. The Herald reported on his “comfortable living room and study” that was “lined with books, statuary and antiques.” These antiques included his prized statue of Hebe, Greek goddess of youth and vitality, as well as 15 striking clocks, each ringing in unison each hour. He never gained wealth with his literary acclaim, but he and Sarah were content.

“I have always been a freelance writer and have never labored under any organization or auspices what(-so)ever,” he reflected in 1958. “I have

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ERIE ALE WORKS

never sought fame, knowing it to be elusive. I have never tried to win undue popularity, knowing it to be a cheap commodity."

To Riley, along with his strong faith and duties as a minister, living a life in the arts was his life's reward. He again reiterated that he never strove "for that which was beyond my reach" and didn't desire fame or power, which he saw as vain – although he *did* stress that he didn't care "any too much about being ruled" either.

"I am a firm believer in individualism and in individual initiative," he wrote. "No man should be restricted in the proper exercise of his thought and talent. He should be given full opportunity to follow his own path and scale the mountain peak of his endeavor provided he does not encroach upon the right or prerogative of his fellow man."

In 1960, Riley, now 80, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette printed a story on the "unofficial poet laureate" of Titusville. He'd been invited to the city to be honored at a banquet held by the Western Pennsylvania Research and Historical Society.

"I've been a preacher most of my life," Riley said. "But most people think of me as a poet and writer. I've been writing poetry since I was a child. My first subjects were nature and all its mysteries, but lately – since I've grown older – I've become more philosophic." Or as his friends would say, Riley quipped, excessively talkative about tedious subjects.

In "Perpetual Youth," one of his best-known poems, he reflected on aging: "I'll grow not old in spite of years, in spite of toil or grief or tears; Something of youth shall still remain to garner up life's golden grain."

This same year, he and Sarah were facing pressure to sell Sunnynook, their home of 50 years. According to reports from the time, the school board had already purchased six adjacent properties that were west of Carter Field and they had their eye on the Riley homestead so they could use the property as part of their planned campus renovations and expansion.

"The reader is made immediately aware that Mr. and Mrs. Riley do not want to leave their home," explained the Titusville Herald. "The Titusville School District owns all the property around it and ... would like to acquire the Riley property to square up

their holdings."

"I'm feeling quite trim," responded Riley, "but I'm too old to move."

He even wrote a poem about how he hoped to live the remainder of his life at Sunnynook. He and Sarah eventually agreed though, accepting \$8,000 for the property, and they moved to 226 E. Spring St. a couple of miles away. The house was removed and the cellar filled it shortly after.

In January of 1966, Edwin, now 85, came down with an illness. After a few weeks, on the evening of Jan. 26, he died. There was an outpouring of tributes and remembrances. "Titusville lost a man who loved this community," the Herald published. They eulogized him as an "extremely perceptive man, witty and wise" who "contribute[d] much to Titusville lore" who also "brought up a fine family whose friendship is valued by all with whom they came in contact."

Sarah died the following year. They were both buried at Woodlawn Cemetery. Surviving them at the time were their children, 16 grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren. Of their children, Portia died in 1976, Merlyn in 1986, and Felicia and Constantia in the 1990s. Phyllis, Gerrit, and Edmonda all lived to see the turn of the century.

As described in a 2001 story with Gerrit Riley, then 94 and selling his West Elm Street home, he described how his father had "instilled a love of learning and culture in his large family," as did his Aunt Frances, who encouraged people to "be well read and be intellectually curious."

In 2005, the Drake Well Museum showcased Riley's life and writings on their website in their first all-electronic exhibit, titled *Titusville's African-American Poet Laureate*. The Oil City Derrick said his poetry was "whimsical and gentle in nature" with the ability to "capture the time and tempo of intervals in the oil region's history."

"His understanding of people, coupled with his wit, produced whimsical poems recognizing the merits of people from all walks of life," the exhibit stated. Museum director Barbara Zolli admired the Rileys as "a high-powered, well-educated family."

"My aim," Riley once wrote, "has been simply to serve in my humble capacity."

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

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Erie's 40 Under 40 Class of 2026

Honoring Erie's best and brightest movers and shakers



The Erie Reader is now on our 14th cycle of honoring 40 young individuals – folks who are doing their thing and in so doing, helping to make Erie a better place, giving us a stronger sense of self, making our area more beautiful, equitable, helpful, healthier, safer, more interesting, and more generous. All of the people you'll find within these pages have *chosen* Erie – to either remain here or to relocate here. They see our city, lift up what's already great about it, and actively work to improve those areas that need it. These 40 folks, selected from amongst the hundreds of nominations submitted by our readers, are truly helping to shape the future of Erie and will hopefully inspire you to do the same, in your own way. We're so proud of these 40 folks and the 520 who have come before them and truly look forward to this issue each year – a breath of fresh air and, with that, the confidence of knowing that our city's bright future is in their hands. So without further ado, here they are! The 40 Under 40 Class of 2026!

Written by: Jonathan Burdick (JB), Chloe Forbes (CF), Ally Kutz (AK), Erin Phillips (EP), Alana Sabol (AS), Cara Suppa (CS), Amy VanScoter (AVS), and Nick Warren (NW). All photography by Jessica Hunter.

Do you know someone you would like to see in an upcoming class? Our online nominations for 2027's class are now open! Just visit eriereader.com/40under40nomination

Wuji Ahmad, 33
Coordinator of New American Affairs, Mayor's Office of Community Affairs



As a refugee from Eritrea, Wuji Ahmad has dedicated her time to supporting New Americans in Erie. Ahmad came to the U.S. at just 8 years old and worked hard at East High School, graduating in the top five of her class. She went on to graduate with a B.A. in Criminology and Criminal Justice from Slippery Rock University and is currently pursuing an MBA in Marketing. Her passion for helping refugees like herself shines in her work as the coordinator of New American Affairs – she ensures refugees and immigrants

have a voice in Erie. She oversees the Mayor's New American Council, where more than 20 designated organizational and community members representing Erie's various immigrant communities address needs and concerns, provide advocacy, and ensure civic engagement. Not only that, Ahmad is a key player in keeping Erie's Welcoming City certification, implementing changes needed to aim for a higher welcoming designation and standards. "As a refugee, joining Mayor Devlin's administration and working daily with other immigrants and refugees is truly a full-circle moment; I am humbled and honored," she says. "Especially in an uncertain climate and rapid changes in federal immigration laws, at least we're doing our part in making sure all Erie residents are treated with dignity and belonging." Though she plans on staying in Erie for the foreseeable future, Ahmad also sees herself living abroad, as she is an avid traveler and speaks three languages: English, Arabic, and a tribal Eritrean language called Tigre. She has visited and worked in Poland, Malta, Egypt, and Thailand. A dream of hers is to one day open a restaurant with international dishes from different cultures. Whether she is working with New American com-

munities in Erie or traveling internationally, Ahmad uses her position to lift up others and raise awareness. "As a refugee whose family was displaced due to political instability, war, and dictatorship, it is of high importance for me to use my voice and platform to speak against any form of injustice or oppression – whether it's local or international. If it's an issue against humanity, it is our duty to be humane and speak up," she says. – AS

Nadia Asif, 30
Pediatric Hospitalist, AHN Saint Vincent Hospital



The children of today will grow up and become the adults of tomorrow, and pediatric hospitalist Nadia Asif realized that truth when she herself wasn't much older than a kid. "I was sure of the path I wanted to take to help others early on... so I started shadowing physicians through a regional internship program at the age of 15, graduated high school at 16, and started medical school at age 18," she shared, adding that she started practicing at AHN Saint Vincent directly after finishing her pediatric residency, when she was just 26. The Kent State and Northeast Ohio Medical University grad, who attended high school in New Fairfield, Connecticut, and who is also currently an adjunct clinical assistant professor in pediatrics at LECOM, is on a mission to "improve the lives of all children and their families in Erie by continuously improving how we take care of children in the hospital," Asif said. In so doing, according to her nominator, she is keeping Erie kids in Erie, instead of sending them out to a Pittsburgh hospital, and all the disruption associated with that. In addition to her passion for helping hospitalized children, Asif enjoys spending time with family, trying new foods, exploring new parks and cities, and playing video games. She is a lifelong learner, who believes one should continuously seek out information. Obviously, she practices what she preaches, having traveled to Austin, Texas to attend a pediatric point-of-care ultrasound workshop, in the hopes of bringing that technology and those techniques back to Erie. "Children are our future," she insisted. "In order for Erie to be a better place, the children must be able to thrive." And she is certainly doing her part to ensure that is so. – CS

Emily Bahm, 28
Operations Specialist at Knox McLaughlin Gornall & Sennett, P.C.



As operations specialist at Knox Law, Emily Bahm jokingly describes herself as “basically our office’s Elle Woods for operations.” While she leaves the legal work to the attorneys, her role, as she puts it, is “organizing chaos,” encompassing nearly everything from project management and streamlining policies to improving workplace culture.

“My favorite part of my job is being able to make meaningful changes for my colleagues,” Bahm explained. “I do my best every day to make our office not only a great place to work, but somewhere you genuinely want to spend your days.”

A North East native and Mercyhurst Prep graduate, Bahm went on to attend the prestigious Berklee College of Music, graduating with concentrations in music business management, arts administration, and stage management. In Boston, she worked as a stage manager with the SpeakEasy Stage Company, the Huntington Theatre, and the Boston Conservatory at Berklee, alongside artists including Billy Porter, Kathy Bates, Rachel Dratch, David Harbour, and Jesse Eisenberg.

Today, Bahm channels those experiences into the local arts community, volunteering with the Erie Playhouse as a stage manager and mentor. She is passionate about showing young people that there are many ways to participate in the performing arts beyond performing on stage. She is also a vocalist for area churches and LGBTQIA+-centered religious events, in addition to volunteering with the Erie Humane Society.

Outside of work and volunteering, Bahm can be found enjoying Erie’s live music scene, exploring local breweries, crafting, belting out karaoke tunes, or spoiling her Jellicle cat, Asparagus. Currently house hunting, Bahm plans to continue building both her life and community in Erie for years to come.

“My goal for Erie is for young adults to believe that our city is thriving and that there is so much opportunity to build a life for yourself here.” –NW

Emerson Bannon Cutri, 27
Urban Planner, County of Erie, Parks, Trails, Recreation, and Active Transportation Planning
 When it comes to activism, Emerson Bannon Cutri is all about taking initiative. Someone strong in their values, Cutri, 27, is active in local politics and deploys policy and research to turn those values into action. They are an urban planner for Erie County’s

Parks and Recreation department and part of the active transportation planning effort to improve conditions for people walking and biking, while also conducting a bikeshare feasibility study, understanding that connectivity and transportation lead to economic mobility.

They are also the leader and founder of Erie Research Team (find that work on the Portside Erie Substack), are on the board of the Erie to Pittsburgh Trail Alliance, are the founder of the Erie Game Design Collaborative, and are a member of Erie County United.

Their work is described as quiet but consistent, mining fields of facts and information that promote the need for equality then mobilizing young leaders to bring that work to fruition, whether that’s a public developer model for housing affordability or co-operatives for economic development.

“Both my work in urban planning and activism are



about making Erie a more livable and vibrant place for everyone,” Cutri said. “We are facing major challenges as a country and as a city right now, but these are human problems with human solutions.”

In their spare time, they explore regional culture through baseball games, punk shows, festivals, and being outdoors. They enjoy playing and designing tabletop games and are a big fan of cryptids and folklore.

Currently, Cutri is reading the *Wizard of Oz* novels, of which there are over 40, and enjoys the art of storytelling even further, through comics and animation like *Adventure Time* and *Popeye*. – CF

Kyle Blackmer, 37
Property Manager, Sisters of Saint Joseph Neighborhood Network

As property manager for the Sisters of Saint Joseph Neighborhood Network (SSJNN), Kyle Blackmer is improving life for Erieites in multiple ways. On any given day, he may be managing homes and commercial properties, mentoring prospective homeowners, organizing neighborhood cleanups, installing security systems, or helping bring public art and community gardens to life.

“I’ve always been someone who likes to fix things,” Blackmer explained. “Not just properties or neighborhoods, but problems that hold people and communities back.”

A graduate of Northwestern Senior High School, Blackmer found himself repeatedly drawn to Little Italy and Erie’s east side throughout his 20s and ear-

ly 30s. Today, much of his work centers on strengthening those neighborhoods through revitalization efforts, neighborhood watch groups, beautification projects, and home ownership counseling.

Blackmer is known to be someone who is con-



stantly trying to find ways to improve Erie. Through his involvement with farmers markets, property development, and securing grants for murals and public spaces, he’s making a tangible difference in specific communities.

“Whether it’s sharing knowledge from my own life experiences, mentoring aspiring homeowners, helping improve a neighborhood, or simply taking the time to talk with someone who needs guidance, I believe real change starts by meeting people where they are,” Blackmer stated.

Through the SSJNN’s Genesis Program, Blackmer assists families with home ownership. The program provides 12 to 36 months of mentoring services, helping to establish financial literacy, budgeting, and credit-building for new Erie homeowners.

A father of five, he’s an avid outdoorsman who spends what free time he has hunting, fishing, and catching live local music. Blackmer is active with the Albion Sportsman’s Club Trout Raceway and Nursery, helping to raise trout for local streams.

“At the end of the day, I want to be someone people can depend on to show up, lend a hand, or lead the charge,” he said. “Whatever is needed to help create opportunities for people and neighborhoods to grow and thrive.” – NW

Shannon Brown Stewart, 39
Licensed Mental Health Therapist, Clinical Director, OpenedEyes



Shannon Brown Stewart has dedicated her career to improving mental health access, suicide prevention, and community wellness throughout Erie. As a licensed professional counselor and clinical direc-

tor of OpenedEyes Counseling and Mental Wellness, she has become a respected voice in behavioral health, serving the community through both clinical work and systems-level advocacy.

Originally from Amherst, New York, Stewart is an avid Buffalo Bills fan, graduating from Amherst High School and earning her Master of Science in Clinical Mental Health Counseling from Gannon University and a Bachelor of Science in Public Justice from SUNY Oswego. Her ability to lead while remaining grounded, empathetic, and community-focused has awarded her a Mercy Center for Women's 2025 Women Making History designation as well as a Federal Executive Board Excellence in Government Gold Award for efforts in Diversity, Equity, Equality, Inclusion and Access in 2022. Stewart is also actively involved with the nonprofits Big Brothers Big Sisters and Erie City Moms, co-leading a monthly "moms night out" group focusing on motherhood, mental health, and well-being.

Stewart says she is enjoying "the work from home mom life," and has recently reached 6,000 supporters across her social media accounts (@downtownshannonbrown on TikTok and Instagram) where she posts relatable, educational, entertaining content related to parenthood, adulthood, and mental health. She likes to stay active mentally and physically, and in her free time enjoys spending time with family and friends, working on puzzles, reading, walking, rollerblading, doing yoga, and lifting weights. – AVS

Spencer Cadden, 36

Township Manager, Lawrence Park



Spencer Cadden is a man of many interests. The Iroquois High School grad studied history at both Slippery Rock University and the University of Pittsburgh, and is currently completing his final year of law school at the University of Dayton, clerking at McDonald Illig right here in Erie. While continuing law school, he is also serving as township manager for Lawrence Park. In this role, he's responsible for carrying out and fulfilling the priorities and goals of the township's elected officials along with coordinating public works including sewer, roads, parks, playgrounds, and community activities. In addition, he creates and presents the township budget, handles public communications, pursues grants and initiatives to improve Lawrence Park, and works directly with staff, neighboring communities, and regional partners to solve local problems. As Cadden puts it, he does everything in his power to improve his community, from infrastructure planning to town-

ship transparency.

"I am proud of stepping into local government leadership at a time when small municipalities face serious challenges: aging infrastructure, tight budgets, and the need to modernize without losing their identity and their history," he explains. "I want to do whatever I can to help my home reach its potential. If I can help one small part of our region have a government that is more transparent, more practical, more honest, and more useful to its people, I will count that as a success." But, he adds, there's always more to do.

In his spare time, he's part of numerous boards and committees. He is a certified PIAA football official. He has acted in several shows at the Erie Playhouse (he even taught high school theater for a few years). He enjoys baking, cars, motorcycles, and collecting rare coins and books. He's also passionate about creative writing, whether it's short fiction or for his long-running *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign.

His most important role though is as husband to Jennifer, a physical education teacher at Iroquois Elementary, and father to their 7-year-old son Allen. "They are my whole world," Cadden says. "I hold my family above everything else and, honestly, I would rather watch my son do endless handstands or go for a swim in the lake with him than anything else." His perfect moment? Sitting together as a family around a campfire and making s'mores. – JB

Gabrielle Catrabone, 34

Director of Constituent Engagement and Special Events, Cathedral Prep

Building connections can be a driving force behind an engaged and active community. For Gabrielle Catrabone, that's something she can put into practice daily. As director of constituent engagement and special events at Cathedral Prep, she's become a vital link between the organization and its alumni and supporters. By coordinating initiatives such as alumni weekends and large-scale fundraising events, she's creating an active dialogue and helping the school system thrive.

Working collaboratively with leadership teams at Cathedral Prep and Mother Teresa Academy, she has overseen a range of events, including the Legacy Gala, the Rambler Golf Classic, the Athletics Hall of Fame celebrations, and donor stewardship experiences.

An Erie native and McDowell graduate, Catrabone earned her degree in finance from Mercyhurst University. Her early professional experiences in banking led to roles at Erie Insurance, the Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership, and Gannon University before joining Cathedral Prep.

"I've learned that strong communities are built the same way, one person, one relationship, and one act of commitment at a time," Catrabone explained.

Beyond her work with Cathedral Prep, Catrabone has been active in local athletics and youth development. A former Mercyhurst Laker midfielder, she has coached at virtually every level, including youth soccer, Villa Maria Academy, Penn State Behrend, and Mercyhurst University. She also previously served

on the board of the Erie Youth Soccer Association.

Her commitment to service extends to volunteering with the Erie Humane Society, being a member of St. Patrick Church, and helping with local events such as the Flagship City Comedy Festival. She was part of the Chamber's Erie Ambassador program and a graduate of the Jefferson Educational Society's Civic Leadership Academy.



Outside of work, Catrabone can often be found exploring Presque Isle, hiking at Asbury Woods or Wintergreen Gorge, biking Erie County trails, or spending time with her son and beloved dog, Freddy. Baseball games at Scott Park are also a regular part of family life.

Catrabone said that she has come "to realize that meaning in both career and community isn't found in a single grand achievement, but in the daily choice to contribute, connect, and serve others." – NW

Dana Dickerson, 38

Realtor, Agresti Real Estate



In a world where costs are ever-increasing, Dana Dickerson is working to make home ownership possible. The 38-year-old realtor for Agresti Real Estate is an Erie native who bought her first home in 2013, opening a door of possibilities. Since then, she has purchased 18 properties and is the landlord of 11 currently.

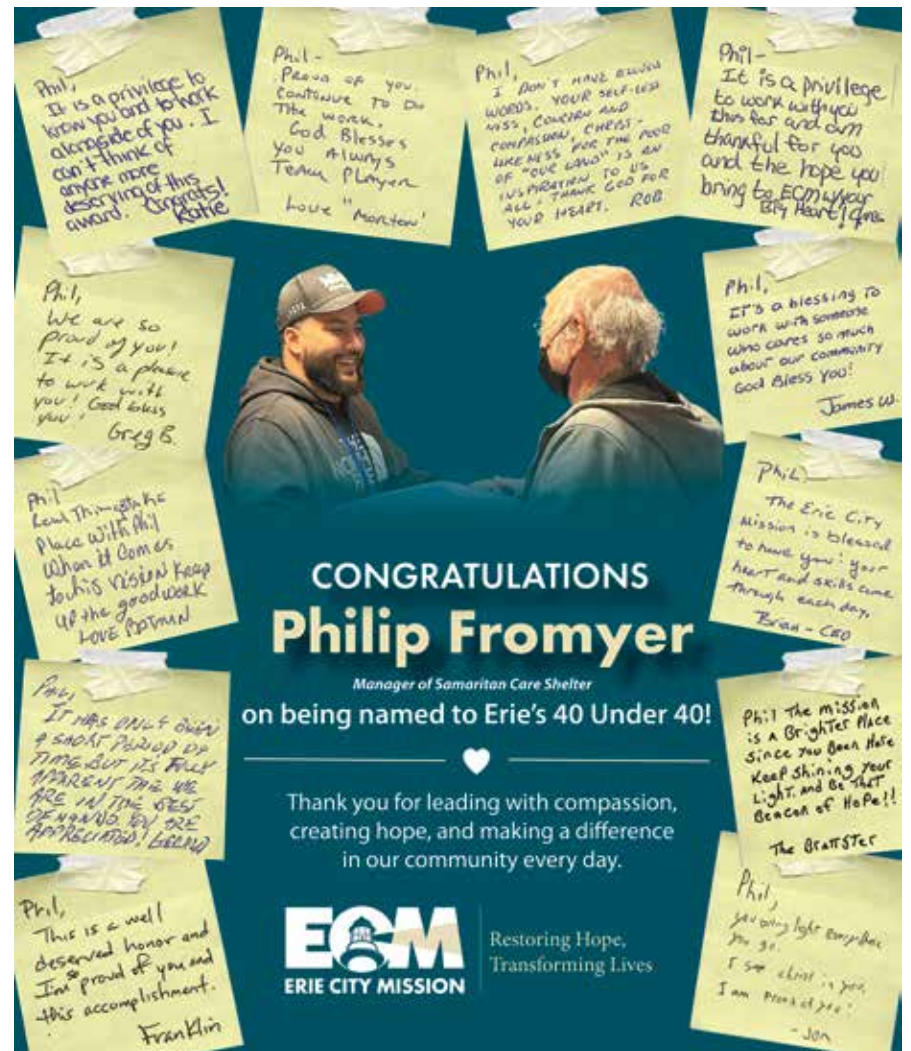
She has done over \$17 million in sales since becoming a realtor in 2021 and was named Best Black Realtor by Erie's Black Wall Street and Business Woman of the Year in 2024 by Her Power Inc. She is secretary of the Erie Land Bank board and works to get first-time homebuyers grants to offset upfront costs. Dickerson also hosts fix-and-flip classes to educate people on how to make their dream homes possible.

She initially went to cosmetology school thinking she would be a hairdresser for the rest of her life,



CONGRATULATIONS, DEANGELO DIXON!

Acting Operations Manager, Community Access Media
(CAM Erie) & Co-Owner, Dreams Don't Die Entertainment





CONGRATULATES

ERIE'S 40 UNDER 40 HONOREES

We proudly recognize three outstanding members of the Erie County team for earning a place among this year's **Erie 40 Under 40**.

Emerson Bannon
Department of Planning and Community Development

Hillary Hoffman
Assistant District Attorney, Erie County District Attorney's Office

Alyssa Johnson
Communication and Outreach Coordinator, Erie County Public Library

 Your leadership, dedication, and commitment to serving the people of Erie County make our community stronger every day.

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on this well-deserved honor!

Congratulations Kyle!

40 under 40

The grace and love you bring to our community exemplifies the mission of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Northwestern Pennsylvania through your commitment to the SSI Neighborhood Network



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DR. CHRISTOPHER MANSOUR
40 UNDER 40 HONOREE

Congratulations to Dr. Christopher Mansour, Mercyhurst University's Associate Professor and Chair of the Computing and Information Science Department, on being recognized in Erie's 40 Under 40, Class of 2026!



MERCYHURST
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but now she's on the path to getting her broker's license with the goal of opening her own brokerage one day, living by the motto "Be a Doer."

"Never be afraid to take that leap of faith because it can be the best decision you'll ever make," she said. "I strongly believe the people of Erie need to learn financial freedom and have the chance to own some real estate."

Outside of work, she spends time with her four children and they love to travel, fish, boat, swim, ride bikes, and play board games. She also loves to hang out with family and friends, brunching and laughing. – CF

Kathryn "Kat" DiVittorio, 37

*Assistant Director, Corry Higher Education Council
// Executive Director, DiVittorio Center for Autism*



Kat DiVittorio refuses to take "no" for an answer – when she sees an idea, she is determined to make it happen. At 37, the assistant director of the Corry Higher Education Council and executive director of the DiVittorio Center for Autism, Kat is a Corry native with a passion for infusing her hometown with resources and leadership opportunities.

Her family is at the heart of her work as her two biological children, Emily, 15, and Nicholas, 7, are on the autism spectrum, requiring drastically varied levels of support. When she struggled to find resources in rural Pennsylvania, she created the DiVittorio Center for Autism – an educational center for individuals on the spectrum and their families – and is now working to spread resource hubs to other rural counties.

Her "how can I make this better" mindset recently earned her recognition as the Nonprofit Partnership's Young Professional of the Year and one of Mercy Center's Women Making History. She is the vice president of the Autism Society of NWPA, treasurer for the Corry Chamber of Commerce, a Jefferson Educational Society Civic Leadership Academy and Raimy Fellowship graduate, an Impact Corry Connectivity Champion, a member of the Rotary Club of Erie, a Corry Area School Board Director, Uplift Corry Chair, Corry Emerging Leaders Fund co-chair, and an Athena cohort graduate.

"I believe wholeheartedly that my purpose of existence is to leave the world better and help and support as many creatures as possible, and with this in mind, I try to do it as often as possible," she said.

DiVittorio is also currently running for state representative in Pennsylvania's District 4. In her (limited) spare time, she is a beekeeper and enjoys going to the beach and spending time with her children, including her stepson James. – CF

DeAngelo Dixon, 29

Acting Operations Manager, Community Access Media (CAM Erie) // Co-Owner, Dreams Don't Die Entertainment



Helping to make Erie a place where creativity and opportunity thrive takes passion and perseverance, and DeAngelo Dixon is certainly up to the task. As the acting operations manager for Community Access Media (CAM Erie), Dixon manages the day-to-day operations while also making waves in the independent film industry as the co-owner of Dreams Don't Die Entertainment, a media company that specializes in photography, film, content creation, and visual storytelling.

Dixon attended Central Tech High School in Erie and went on to earn his Bachelor of Science in Cinematography from Full Sail University. Leaving his impact on the community isn't just delegated to his work behind the camera. Dixon is creating his legacy – serving on the board of Career and Dreams, Inc., a nonprofit organization working to create and implement impactful, relevant, education and career readiness programs in the community. He is also an ambassador for Erie's Black Wall Street.

"My goal is to help build a stronger creative community that inspires people to believe bigger about what's possible in Erie and remind others that your dreams never die," Dixon said.

Dixon recently spent time focusing on another Pennsylvania city as he co-produced a documentary about the hit television show *The Office* and the influence it had on the city of Scranton. When he's not working on films and photography, you'll find him spending time with his five children (four of them girls) and his fiancé. – AVS

Sharnae "Shar" Dunston, 33

Community School Director at Grover Cleveland, United Way of Erie County

For Shar Dunston, community isn't just an idea – it's what drives her in every aspect of her work. As the community school director for Grover Cleveland, she is motivated every day to serve the children she works with and to help the community as a whole. "As cliché as it might sound, the children really are our future," Shar said. "I want to continue to pour into and uplift the next generation."

A graduate of East High School, Dunston went on to earn a bachelor's degree in social work from Edinboro, as well as her master's in education with a focus in educational psychology. Working as the community school director for Grover Cleveland,

she's been instrumental in bringing in community partners to help host meaningful programs that help students and families learn life skills such as cooking, sewing, and emotional learning. She also helped the school become the first to partner with Infinite Love Yoga to host a morning yoga club for select grades, turning the club into an evening event during Mental Health Awareness month.

Through her work, Dunston also helps to organize after school programming and family engagement events, as well as helping families access needed resources and provide support to those in need. "This programming is so important, and I hope to be able to spread my passion for it throughout the community, so all students have access," she said.

Dunston's work has extended beyond the school



walls to her role in the community. She served as the keynote speaker for the Women's United Campaign event, speaking on the United Way community school model and how it is being used at Grover Cleveland, giving insight into the programming and events as well as how they help families with non-academic barriers. She also sat on Nurturing Heart's Big Sister panel, talking with girls in the program about topics like self-confidence, purpose, and navigating girlhood.

"I love my city and I believe that it can be so much more, but someone needs to stay around and do the work," Dunston said. "I am ready to work!"

Outside of school, she can be found keeping up with her busy 10-year-old son, spending time in the water, going to the gym, or just enjoying the great outdoors. – AK

Tiffany Frits, 37

Vice President, Customer Experience at Erie Insurance



No matter where she's lived, Tiffany Frits has committed herself to bettering her community. At 37, she is an Erie native who always found herself drawn

back to her roots and family, eventually returning after a 15-year hiatus in which she worked in all aspects of the athletics industry.

She spent time in sports business, sports media, and streaming – namely with The Walt Disney Company's ESPN and ESPN+ departments, where she led ESPN's Enabled Disabilities Affinity Group and hosted the first-ever Mothers of ESPN panel for employees with demanding careers experiencing postpartum anxiety and depression. She has also raised millions for cancer research, mentored veteran-owned small businesses, and facilitated business partnerships in premier events like the Kentucky Derby, UFC fights in Las Vegas, and Formula 1 racing.

She returned home to Erie to be with her mother and her grandfather, who is a disabled veteran, and is already embedded in the community.

She is the vice president of customer experience at Erie Insurance, an adjunct professor at Mercyhurst University in the Sports Business Management program, a fundraiser for Shriners Children's Hospital, a soccer coach, and an active volunteer.

"My hope is to slowly bring some of the perspectives and experiences I gained outside of Erie back to the community, especially by helping create opportunities and connections that may not exist here yet," Frits said.

She enjoys soaking up what Erie has to offer in the meantime, especially with her husband, Erik, and two daughters, Josie and Lina, plus their 6-year-old rescue pit bull Roxy. As someone with a background in dance, she also enjoys other art forms like music, painting, reading, and writing, and being outdoors. – CF

Philip Fromyer, 34

Manager of Samaritan Care, Erie City Mission



Philip Fromyer, graduate of Strong Vincent High School where he was second team all-state in soccer, is the manager of Samaritan Care for the Erie City Mission, helping those around Erie who are experiencing homelessness get back on their feet. "When the guys arrive, we immediately start working on a better future," he explains. "While we provide a warm, safe place for them to sleep and have meals, we also want to see them move on from the mission into a place they can call home." Along with helping secure housing, he works to provide employment opportunities, transportation, and case-working.

He was part of the outreach team with Expert County Care Management, an experience he de-

scribed as amazing, where they pushed into encampments around the area. "Watching the guys move on from the mission into their own place, there is no better feeling," he says. He works hard to make Erie a better place by serving people with "compassion, leadership, and purpose."

He's also a husband and father, married to the love of his life for nine years and raising two children, Stella and Miles. He coaches his son's sports teams and loves being a cheer dad for his daughter. As a family, they often travel together to her cheer-leading competitions – which includes Walt Disney World this year, an extra special trip as it happens to fall during his son's birthday week. Family time is important to Fromyer, so in the summer you might find he and his family fishing on Lake Erie, going to Waldameer, or simply having a backyard fire.

In addition, he's the director of local nonprofit Energize Erie alongside Ejay Fyke, where they assist underserved youth through mentorship, community involvement, and programming that inspires confidence and growth. "I strive to be a positive role model and help young people realize their value and potential," he says, adding that he encourages children to believe in themselves.

"I try to make a difference each day by leading with service, compassion, and a commitment to improving the lives of others in Erie," says Fromyer. "I believe everyone deserves dignity, encouragement, and the opportunity to move forward in life." – JB

Kimberleigh Haslett, 28

Development and Marketing Director, Erie Arts and Culture



If you've ever needed a reminder to stop and smell the roses – or better yet, look at that painting or listen to that music – let Kimberleigh Haslett be the catalyst, as she is in so many other ways for the Erie community. The Warren, Pennsylvania native, who attended Lycoming College and emerged with bachelor's degrees in psychology, art history, and painting, and then ended up back near her hometown, currently serves as the development and marketing director for Erie Arts and Culture (EAC), a role about which she is most proud. "I am surrounded by talented, passionate people who care deeply about our community, and I feel incredibly fortunate to be part of a team that makes such a meaningful impact," she said.

In addition to her professional work, where she spearheads the marketing efforts for EAC, combining artistic talent, analytics, and ad campaign

know-how, Haslett also serves on the board of CAFE (Cultures Arts Festivals and Events of Erie), as well as the Northwestern Pennsylvania chapter of AFP (Association of Fundraising Professionals). An active visual artist, she has painted murals in the Erie Zoo and participated in the Chalk Walk downtown.

But the most important things in her life are her family, including her husband and two kids, as well as encouraging others to take pleasure in the small, simple things, which for Haslett includes art. "Art reminds us that we are all human," she said. "Erie already has a vibrant and talented arts community, and I want to help ensure it continues to grow and thrive. A strong arts community doesn't just make Erie more beautiful – it makes it more connected, welcoming, resilient, and full of possibility." – CS

Jillian Heschke, 39

Director of Operations, AHN Saint Vincent Hospital



While the 40 Under 40 Class of 2026 surely consists of Erieites who were born here, raised here, and now living out their adult lives here, we simply cannot overlook the transplants, like Jillian Heschke, who has lived here since 2011 and whose contributions to our little tight-knit community have provided untold benefits for the people of this city. Heschke, who attended Ambridge Area High School, Pitt Johnstown, and LECOM's Bradenton, Florida campus for graduate school, and now lives in Waterford, is making a huge difference in one of the most crucial industries today: healthcare.

She is currently the director of operations at AHN Saint Vincent Hospital, a highly involved leadership position with a significant duty to "strengthen systems that protect patients and improve access to reliable, high-quality care," according to her nominator.

"Working in healthcare in Erie for the past 15 years has shown me both the strength of our community and the gaps we still need to fix," Heschke said. "Erie healthcare is filled with good people doing their best every day, and I hope as a healthcare leader to honor what is good, while [I] fight for what can be better."

In addition to her role at AHN, she also just completed her doctorate in healthcare, not only while working full-time, but also while raising three kids with her husband, and overseeing the care of her 15-acre hobby farm (with over 20 chickens). Ultimately, Heschke is here to stay in Erie, saying it shaped her passion for healthcare leadership and challenged her to grow, and she, in turn, has given so much back to its citizens. – CS

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Hillary Hoffman, 33
Assistant District Attorney, Erie County District Attorney's Office



Since she was 6 years old, Hoffman knew she wanted to be a lawyer. “I loved watching *Law and Order Special Victim’s Unit* with my Mom. I’d recite the intro during every episode. I thought they were absolute superheroes,” she says. Years later in her 20s, she achieved her dream and joined the district attorney’s office in 2018 after clerking for Judge John J. Trucilla and Judge William R. Cunningham. She specializes in prosecuting crimes of sexual violence against adults.

A large part of Hoffman’s life and career is helping others feel heard. “Countless survivors fear no one will believe them. I am indescribably proud to represent these survivors in their fight for justice. I pride myself in having personal contact with each and every survivor in a case, so they always feel seen, understood, and safe,” she says.

Family is very important to Hoffman. She spends the majority of her time outside of work with family and friends and their children. “I [devote] myself to making it to holidays, first days of school, soccer games, and watching them grow.” Her family owns two bars, Bruce’s Pub & Grub and Darcy’s Pub & Grub. They host an annual fundraiser on July 4 at Darcy’s to raise money for veterans.

Hoffman supports her family in other ways too, including volunteering for the Alzheimer’s Association and participating in the Walk to End Alzheimer’s, as her family has been greatly impacted by the disease. Her uncle was diagnosed in 2016 with early-onset Alzheimer’s at just 53 years old and is taken care of by his oldest daughter Rylee. Rylee and Jack are currently embarking on the challenge to ride 100 miles during the month of June to raise money to support the full-time care.

When she’s not working in the law office, she’s working out – fitness is a huge part of her life as she enjoys going to the gym and doing anything outdoors, including embracing Erie’s winters on her snowboard. – AS

Lauren Holler Sala, 33
UniServ Representative, Pennsylvania State Education Association

Lauren Holler Sala, an Ohio native, met her husband Brendan in law school at Cleveland State University. She never planned to leave Cleveland (“Cleveland or nowhere was my anthem,” she jokes), but then Brendan said he wanted to move back to his home-

town of Erie to practice law with his father. That was, she felt, a noble justification. “I took another bar exam, moved for love, and the rest is history,” she says. Now they have a daughter, Annie (“my biggest joy”), a cat, Clinton, and their recently purchased forever home in the Glenwood neighborhood.

Holler Sala now serves as a UniServ Representative for PSEA, a “dream job” where she is a frontline advocate and consultant for local education associations and their bargaining unit members, primarily teachers and school support personnel. Her region consists of Erie, Crawford, Venango, Forest, and Warren counties. She’s described as a “passionate advocate for her clients.”

“Every day I get to support our public education professionals ... with respect to day-to-day employment matters, which translates to better learning environments for our students,” she says. “We are living in a critical time in history right now when it comes to public education, collective bargaining rights, civil rights, and fair elections.” She’s honored to play a “small role” with her PSEA work to “ensure these shared values and rights remain for generations to come.”



To say she’s embraced Erie as her adoptive home is also an understatement. She is involved in numerous organizations around the county such as the Emerging Erie Fund and Erie Community Foundation. She co-chairs the Erie County Bar Association Attorneys and Kids Together program, helping students facing homelessness or housing insecurity. She is a board member of Erie Arts & Culture and, having studied dance theater during her undergraduate years, she works with Seiche Dance Collective as a dance artist and choreographer. She was also a cast member with the recent *Tethered* immersive theatrical experience.

“We are here to stay!” she says. As for her move to Erie? “Best decision of my life!” – JB

Alyssa Johnson, 38
Communication and Outreach Coordinator, Erie County Public Library

There is no place more magical than the public library – and making folks aware of all the magic the library holds is Alyssa Johnson’s *raison d’être* as the communication and outreach coordinator for the Erie County Public Library.

Her duties range from simple to large-scale and all involve creation: from advertisements to full-on orchestration of major literacy events like the Summer



Reading program, HistErie Week, the Winter Reading Challenge, and the Battle of the Books. Additionally, her work partners her with area schools to ensure that all students (especially those without access to a school library) get to know a little bit of that magic: by hosting tours and making school visits with the BookMobile. She spearheaded a pilot program which provides delivery services from the library to area public schools. She shares, “Pilot is my second favorite word used in my work, the first being ‘free,’ and I am perpetually dreaming up new ways to build literacy connections in our community.”

Johnson is an Erie native who attended high school at Collegiate Academy before earning her B.S. in Financial Services from Edinboro University.

In addition to her literacy and programming work with the library, Johnson serves as a committee chair for the Lake Erie Lit Festival and is a graduate of the Jefferson Educational Society’s Civic Leadership Academy.

Outside of her work, Johnson is a country girl at heart and enjoys spending time with her husband, children, and their many chickens, while working in her garden, making maple syrup, and attempting to do all the crafts with her kids.

Johnson has deep roots in the Erie area and plans on sticking around for the long haul, keeping literacy advocacy at the forefront. “I have a selfish interest in youth literacy and making pathways for our kids to develop a love of reading that can change their lives and improve their future. When we raise readers, we lift the whole community.” – EP

Erin Kerner, 38
Founder and CEO, Eventio



If you can dream it, you can achieve it – and Erin Kerner is living proof of this. She’s the founder and CEO of Eventio, an AI-native tech startup that’s completely redesigning and paving the way for the

future of event planning. “You can build anything from anywhere,” Kerner said. “I want to give the young people in Erie a real example of what they can become.”

An Erie native and Mercyhurst Prep grad, winner of back-to-back state championships in girls basketball, Kerner attended Quinnipiac University to earn her Bachelor’s of Science in International Business and her MBA. She also excelled on that school’s basketball team, proving she’s been a winner all along. She broke into the luxury fashion business via an unpaid internship with Versace and went on to work with well-known names such as Valentino, MCM, and Louis Vuitton. In the decade-plus she spent in the fashion industry, Kerner saw incredible successes with multiple campaigns, collaborations, and events to her credit. But her hometown was calling, and along with it an idea.

“We’re building something completely new and something that will change the way events are planned,” said Kerner. Her company, Eventio, is helping individuals access the resources they need to bring any event to life. The business is made for anyone and everyone – from nonprofits to DIYers to professional event planners, Eventio connects people with the vendors, tools, and inspiration to make it all possible. “We’re leveling the playing field for small vendors and making premium event experiences accessible to everyone,” said Kerner.

Her choice to start her company back home in Erie was intentional. “There’s no reason a world-class tech company cannot be built right here in Erie, and I plan to prove that,” she said. “Doing this from Erie is so important – AI can be an equalizer for small communities to build products that have national and global appeal.”

When she’s not revolutionizing the event-planning industry, you can find Kerner cooking, enjoying basketball (more watching than playing these days), and renovating her 100-year-old house with her family. – AK

Jessica Mando, 39

*Archivist and Special Collections Librarian,
Gannon University*



Some may look at the history of a place as something to leave behind if a community wants to move into the future – Jessica Mando believes that we should take interest in the past and its preservation, and that learning from it will help us grow both as individuals and as a community.

Growing up in Erie, Mando was interested in histo-

ry from a young age and had dreams of becoming a librarian but never saw a direct path to the career. She earned her B.A. in English at Edinboro before deciding to obtain her master’s in library science at Clarion, both of which prepared her for the archival work she now does at Gannon.

As the university’s archivist and special collections librarian, Mando helps to organize and maintain histories of both Gannon and Erie, sharing them with students and the community as a whole. She has gone beyond the call of her work to enrich this collection by gathering oral histories from Erie residents who donate items from their personal archives – histories that would likely be lost to time without her important work.

Mando’s work includes presenting to students at the university as well as outside groups, giving them new perspectives on something they may overlook. “I’m able to connect them with Erie’s history and hopefully show them that they are part of a continuous, living story,” she said. “I hope to inspire students to stay here after graduation and help our community thrive.”

“Being an archivist isn’t just about saving old files – we ensure that different voices, cultures, and historical context aren’t lost to time and then provide access to those voices,” Mando said. “Archives can be a springboard to engaging with the world around us.”

When she’s not doing deep-dives into the archives, you can find Mando spending time with her various groups and clubs (book, bocce, and tabletop RPG, to name a few), making people laugh, and fulfilling her domestic travel dream of eating ice cream out of tiny baseball caps at every MLB stadium (only 26 to go!). – AK

Christopher Mansour, 35

*Associate Professor of Cybersecurity, Chair of
Computing and Information Science Department,
Mercyhurst University*



In today’s technologically evolving world, cybersecurity is a hot topic of conversation, and no one understands this better than Christopher Mansour. Born and raised in Lebanon, he came to the U.S. to do graduate work in computer engineering and engineering at Villanova University (where he received both his master’s and doctorate). He then found himself in Erie at Mercyhurst University, where he became a founding member of the Cybersecurity program (which has received national recognition since its inception) and now serves as an associ-

ate professor and the chair of the Computing and Information Science department.

“Seeing students succeed, enter the workforce, and make an impact in cybersecurity has been incredibly rewarding,” he said. “I am also proud of my work in advancing cybersecurity education and awareness through research and public engagement.” One of the proudest moments of his career so far was receiving a special letter of appreciation from the White House in 2024, which commended him for all his efforts.

Cybersecurity is more than just a career for Mansour; his nominator shared that “he gives selflessly of his time to educate the next generation of cybersecurity analysts,” citing the cybersecurity workshop he started offering to youngsters in the area. He is also an avid Apple user (who has done the Lord’s work in converting many friends and colleagues), serves on the board of CAM Erie, and enjoys reading and road trips.

Still, it all comes back to outreach for Mansour, who loves living in Erie. “My goal is to help Erie grow as a hub for innovation, education, and responsible technology,” he stated. “I want to ensure people from all backgrounds have access to opportunities in technology and cybersecurity.” – CS

Bill Moon, 39

Production Manager, WQLN



When someone is in charge of media and content, taste matters. Bill Moon, production manager of WQLN PBS/NPR, has good taste. As a lifelong music lover, Moon has no problem diving into his interests and passing that understanding on to others, all while creating something wholly new.

Overseeing television and radio production at WQLN, Moon is contributing to the media landscape in Erie. He supervises live streaming, graphics, and web management for WQLN. This includes organizing the Sounds Around Town music series and other special events and broadcasts, such as the Erie Philharmonic’s Come Home for the Holidays concert program, for which he received a Central Great Lakes Emmy Award nomination. Whether by spearheading original local programming or organizing community events, he’s helping leverage public media’s impact at a time when it matters most.

Hailing from Oil City, Moon graduated from PennWest Edinboro, where he earned his BFA in Media Arts with a concentration in film and video. After working for the family business – Moonlight Packaging – through college, he moved to Erie and



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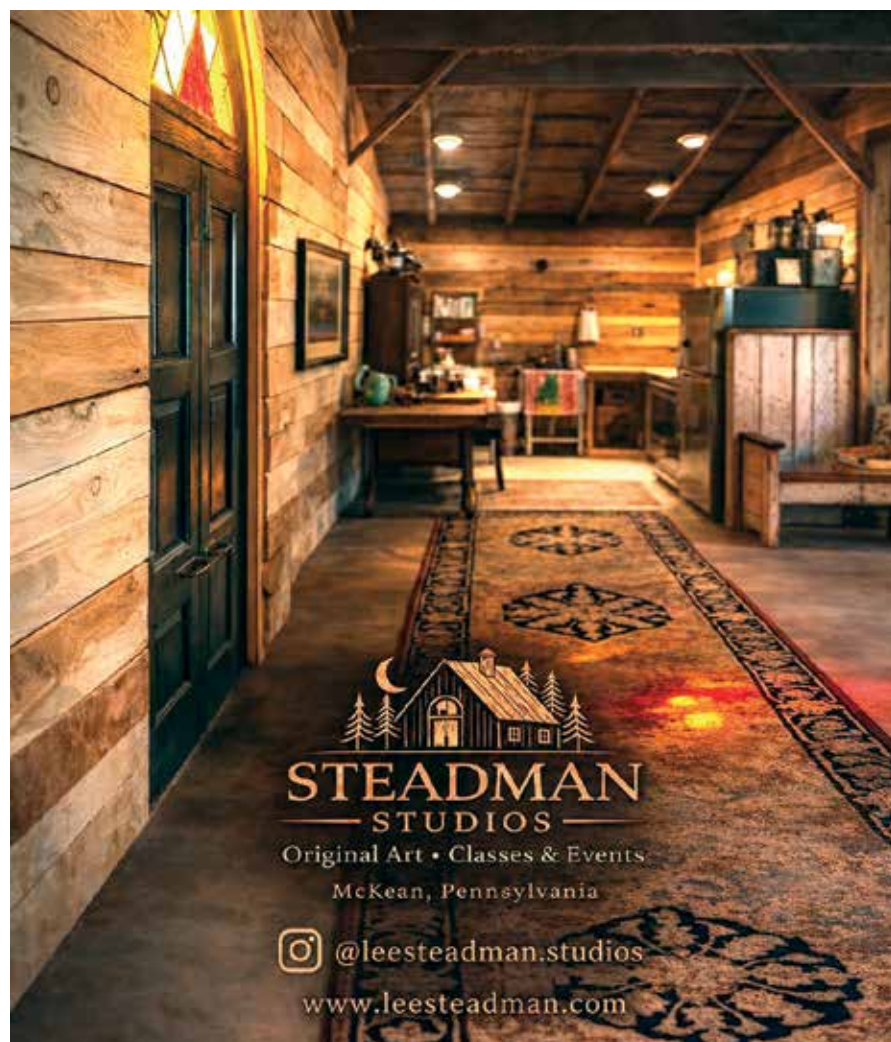
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soon began volunteering for WQLN. That led to a role as a production assistant and later his current post as production manager. Having been at WQLN for well over a decade, Moon has established himself as a distinctive voice in local media.

As co-host of *Sonic Sounds* with Erie Reader contributor Larry Wheaton, Moon is able to curate playlists and programming every Friday night over the airwaves. “The program showcases an eclectic mix of music spanning jam bands, blues, folk, jazz, psychedelia, Americana, and other genres, while highlighting both legendary and lesser-known artists,” Moon explained.

He’s a self-proclaimed Deadhead, *Star Wars* superfan, avid concert-goer, record collector, reader, and an ordained minister who has officiated weddings. He’s helping keep Erie fresh and just a little bit weird.

“I believe public media is the connective tissue of a healthy community,” Moon noted. “Being part of WQLN means I get to help keep Erie informed, engaged, and entertained every single day.” – NW

Carlos Mora, 29
*Erie County Community Organizer,
 Pennsylvania United*



Carlos Mora is an active member of the community, with a passion to support local leaders and protect civil liberties. Leading the Northwestern Rapid Response Network, an organization that trains citizens to be legal observers of ICE activity, is his primary occupation. He does this work through the Erie branch of Pennsylvania United, a grassroots organization designed to support working families in Western Pennsylvania with an ultimate goal to “build a strong foundation for progressive organizing, form lasting connections, and unite a multiracial working-class movement to drive change across the state.”

Mora’s values reflect his work and he believes that “we currently live in [chaotic] times, where politics, economics, and social issues are spiraling out of control. I believe that the solution for those problems relies on everyday people coming together and having difficult conversations. We need leadership, as well as solidarity and empathy. I live to serve this purpose. History is made of small acts of courage from normal people.”

After moving to the U.S from Colombia, Mora got his B.A. in Political Science from Penn State Behrend. He is the first member of his family to attend and graduate college.

A point of pride for the tireless advocate is his involvement and success in the local 2025 election in which he campaigned for both County Executive Christina Vogel and Mayor Daria Devlin. “Democracy is an active exercise. We might not agree on everything, but we should work towards a system that allows us to disagree and come up with the best answers,” he says.

When he’s not assisting a campaign or training community members, Mora enjoys running and biking around the city when the weather is favorable and will vehemently defend the correctness of pineapple on pizza. – AS

Kylie Morris, 38
Municipal Administrator, Millcreek Township



Dr. Morris is an active member of the Erie community. While serving as a newly elected Millcreek Supervisor, she also contributes to the Erie County Drug and Alcohol Advisory Board, Human Relations Commission, Grace Church, Erie County Medical Society, Millcreek Dems, Erie Dems Executive Committee, Erie County United, and works part-time as a professor at LECOM. “I want to help shape the community I live in to become healthier and safer by making it an easy decision. Community infrastructure plays a major role in how we go about our daily lives – I want to make sure everyone has access to safe streets, sidewalks, healthy foods, and emergency services,” she says.

Morris earned her MBA from the University of Pittsburgh and her D.O. from Des Moines University. “I love to learn. If being a professional student were a paid position I would do that! Almost every topic interests me.”

Morris is a perfect example of living a life she felt called to live. The Pennsylvania native didn’t have a career background in politics before she launched her campaign to help improve and be a voice in her local community. She recently changed careers from being a family medicine physician with special interest in addiction medicine. However she is “most proud of the work I put into becoming an elected official. I did not have a political background or a large support team but I was motivated to try and make improvements in the community and worked hard to get into my current position,” Morris says. She plans to return to medicine in 2028 when Millcreek transitions to a council-manager form of government.

When she’s not working in municipal government, she enjoys spending time with a menagerie of pets: eight dogs and three cats to be exact. She enjoys

reading, biking, playing board games, and traveling (although her schedule doesn’t allow for much of that these days). – AS

Lori Radder Spicer, 34
Chief of Staff, The City of Erie



As chief of staff for the city under Mayor Daria Devlin, Spicer wears many hats. On any given day, she might be working with city departments, elected officials, or community members to navigate challenges, improve how we serve the public, and turn ideas into action. “At its core, my job is about helping create the conditions for Erie to thrive by fostering collaboration, supporting innovation, and building strong relationships,” Spicer says.

After graduating from Collegiate Academy, she moved to Illinois to earn her bachelor’s in mathematics and sociology. She then became a licensed massage therapist and lived in Chicago before moving back to Erie in 2023.

Since then, Spicer has immersed herself in many organizations and groups throughout the city, including the Erie Bike Co-op, Groundwork Erie, Friday Morning Beach Club, and local urban agriculture initiatives. “Community building has been a consistent thread throughout my life,” she says.

Spirituality and ecology are a large, less visible part of Spicer’s life. “As a graduate of the Living School at the Center for Action and Contemplation, I’ve spent years exploring questions of meaning, belonging, and the ‘understory’ of things: the relationships, culture, values, and connections that shape how people, organizations, and communities grow and thrive,” she says. Spicer is also involved with the Erie Spiritual Coalition and helps organize Wild Church gatherings that invite people to connect with one another, the natural world, and the sacred.

She calls grief one of her most important teachers after her husband passed away last year. “Grief has become a trusted companion, reminding me that love and loss are inseparable. In many ways, it has made me more alive to the fullness of being human and more committed to creating spaces where we don’t have to hide our sorrow from one another.” – AS

Maftuna Rakhimova, 30
Founder and CEO, Bakery on 5th

Career changes can be intimidating. Going from aerospace engineering to running a Turkish bakery in Downtown Erie? That’s a giant leap few people would even consider.



For Maftuna Rakhimova, it was simply a small step. Before opening the Bakery on 5th in Downtown Erie, Rakhimova built a career in aerospace engineering, developing the precision, problem-solving skills, and attention to detail required in one of the world's most demanding industries. But even while working in engineering, she found herself drawn to a different kind of creativity.

During her days as an engineer, she spent her free time visiting coffee shops and small bakeries in New York City and Connecticut. Eventually, she realized that she could combine her analytical mindset with her entrepreneurial ambitions by opening a small business.

That decision brought her to Erie, where the Bakery on 5th has quickly established itself as both a culinary destination and a community gathering place, introducing many Erieites to authentic Turkish pastries and coffee. Rakhimova remains committed to preserving that authenticity, sourcing baklava directly from Turkey and working with Turkish suppliers to obtain traditional ingredients used throughout the bakery's menu.

The bakery has become a downtown staple, attracting everyone from curious first-time visitors to devoted regulars. One particularly memorable guest was former President Bill Clinton, who stopped in and praised both the bakery and its coffee.

Outside of work, Rakhimova enjoys spending time with her husband and two daughters, traveling, reading, skiing, and playing tennis.

In a twist that surprises many customers, Rakhimova readily admits that she isn't the bakery's chief baker.

"I don't actually know how to bake," she laughed. "I have a wonderful team that makes these beautiful and delicious pastries."

"As a bakery owner in Erie," Rakhimova explained, "I aspire to make the city better by creating a warm, inviting community hub where people can connect over delicious, locally sourced treats and by actively supporting local charities and events." – NW

Nicole Rupp, 38

Special Education Teacher/Self-contained Autistic Support Teacher, Millcreek Township School District

Nicole Rupp's focus is on making life in Erie better for everyone, especially for those with disabilities. Rupp, 38, is a special education teacher in Millcreek Township School District, Unified Track and Field Coach through the Special Olympics of Pennsylvania, and co-director of the Erie Adaptive

Sailing experience, which offers disabled individuals of all types the opportunity to enjoy Lake Erie on the water.

Her inclusive approach to community enables all people to enjoy the area, saying, "There is a place for everyone in Erie!"

She is an Erie native and volunteers with the Bayfront Maritime Center, contributes to major fundraisers like the Cardboard Boat Regatta and Ales for Sails, and recently joined the Woman's Club of Erie as an active volunteer. She's also an integral volunteer of the Sarah's Great Giveaway event for the Sarah Reed Children's Center.

She also helps moderate the "Things To Do in Erie" Facebook group to spread awareness about what all Erie has to offer.



In 2014, Rupp earned the Annie Sullivan award from the Northwest Tri-County Intermediate Unit (IU5), which is presented to a professional who showcases exceptional work with disabled students, as the award is named after Helen Keller's teacher.

She enjoys exploring things to do in the area, even when others are complaining about the weather. She can be found watching documentaries with her two cats — Benson and Elliot — named after SVU detectives, and loves reading, exercise, and going on adventures. – CF

Nick Samsel, 30

Owner, 814 Digital and 814 Aerial Productions



Nick Samsel is living proof that young entrepreneurs don't have to leave Erie to succeed. He has been growing his businesses 814 Digital and 814 Aerial Productions over the past six years to include a small team of employees. Samsel and his team actively serve over 15 major business clients in Erie and the surrounding areas, providing marketing, web design, social media, and advertising management services. His business has been rec-

ognized and supported through the Emerging Erie Fund of the Erie Community Foundation, a program designed to "empower emerging leaders to create a lasting impact in their community through collective giving."

A graduate of Fairview High School with a bachelor's degree from Gannon University in marketing and supply chain management, Samsel chooses to keep his talent local and has created a company that serves and promotes others in the region so they can do the same. You may have seen his production work for Erie Apparel and Erie Fitness Academy.

"It is my personal mission to help Erie's small businesses grow through marketing that showcases who they are and turns that attention into real revenue," said Samsel.

When he's not working you'll find him enjoying a round of golf, exercising, traveling to new places, and spending time with his wife Emily, and dog Rosie. Rosie may also be considered a part of his entrepreneurial journey as he rescued her on the side of the road as he was on his way to a shoot in 2024. – AVS

Michelle Schrimper, 38

Client and Community Relations Specialist, PNC Bank



Not many can say they've turned their passion into their purpose, but Michelle Schrimper has done just that – when an opening arose for a client and community relations specialist with PNC, Michelle was able to take her passion for the community she lives in and turn it into a career and the purpose that drives her every day.

A graduate of Collegiate Academy, Schrimper earned her B.A. in Hospitality & Event Management from Mercyhurst University. After starting at PNC in 2021, she grew into various roles until being promoted to her current position in 2024 thanks to her performance and dedication. "When I stepped into this role, I prioritized re-establishing PNC's presence in the community," she said. "I want to use my passion for Erie to help foster a positive environment where people are proud to call this community home."

In 2025, those efforts paid off with a 179 percent increase in employee volunteerism across the market, which included collaboration with 14 organizations, participation in 37 local events, and engagement of more than 130 employees. Through PNC's main philanthropic initiative, PNC Grow Up Great – which focuses on children from birth to age 5 – Schrimper has been able to foster relationships

between PNC and local organizations, including the Erie School District and the Childhood Development Centers of Erie County.

She also helped initiate the partnership with the Erie Cancer Wellness Center to sponsor the holiday photo session with families of those using the facility, a cause that is near to Schrimper's heart after losing her father to cancer. "You realize you never have enough pictures with the ones who matter to you," she said.

Schrimper's community involvement isn't just to fill a quota for her employer – outside of the office, she's active within the community through her volunteerism, donation drives, and at special events, while also sitting on the board of the Mercy Center for Women. As one of her nominators said, she "always leads with heart and purpose," something very apparent in all that she does.

When she's not working or volunteering, Schrimper enjoys supporting local sports teams, cooking, working on home projects, and spending time with her husband, Carson, as well as their family and friends. – AK

Jamie R. Schumacher, 37
Attorney and Partner, MacDonald Illig Attorneys



Taking specialized skills from a work environment and applying them in the public space is no small feat, but Jamie Schumacher does so in ways that widely benefit our community. As an attorney and partner with MacDonald Illig, her work consists mainly of litigation that includes commercial, employment, estates and trusts, and medical malpractice. Outside of the court room, she translates this legal expertise into a valuable resource for the community.

Growing up in Erie, Schumacher attended Gannon University for her B.A. in Political Science before earning her J.D. from the University of Pittsburgh School of Law. She serves on multiple boards across the county, including the Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network (PLAN), Erie Art Museum, Early Connections, and most notably as the President of the Erie County Bar Association (ECBA). In many of these positions, she has helped the organizations in creating or updating bylaws, reviewing internal policy, and offering a legal perspective and input on matters within the organizations. With ECBA, she helps focus on filling gaps where legal needs are not being met within the community.

"I am a strong believer in Erie," Schumacher said. "I

hope that my work within the legal community can not only assist Erie's residents in improving what is already a great place to call home, but also encourage professionals to return home or consider Erie as their preferred place to grow a career and raise their families."

Encouraging those professionals is also a part of what Schumacher does at MacDonald Illig. As chair of the firm's Recruitment Committee, she oversees all attorney, law student, and undergraduate internship applications as well as mentoring many interns and new full-time attorneys. She's also informally mentored a number of young professionals new to Erie through her work with ECBA. "I aim to help strengthen our community fabric, and to create a community that everyone can be proud of," she said.

Outside of work, she enjoys teaching dance at Long's School of Dance and spending time with her wife and daughter, traveling together outside of Erie, or enjoying local favorites like Sara's, Presque Isle, and Waldameer. – AK

Averie Shaughnessy-Comfort, 34
Executive Director, Presque Isle Light Station/ Lake Erie Lights of PA

If you've ever visited the Presque Isle Lighthouse, you've, quite literally, walked in the footsteps of Averie Shaughnessy-Comfort. The Monroeville native and Gateway Senior High School graduate studied English at Saint Vincent College in Latrobe before earning her master's in museum studies from the Cooperstown Graduate Program at SUNY Oneonta. The knowledge she gained there has been essential in her executive director role where she oversees operations and programming involving the Presque Isle Lighthouse, Erie Land Lighthouse, and North Pier Light.

Along with her executive director duties, she is also Friends of the Chorus Chair for the Erie Philharmonic



Chorus. She sings soprano for the main chorus and chamber group. In addition, she is a general operating grant and project grant reviewer for the New Jersey Historical Commission and serves on the board of the Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums as the Pennsylvania Representative. She and her husband have four fur-babies and spend time together cooking, gardening, hiking, visiting museums, and trying out new places to eat. She loves reading science fiction, playing video games like *Mass Effect* and *Fallout*, and crocheting anything "from hats to goofy creatures."

"I love when I see people get interested in history – and their local history, especially," she says. One of her proudest moments was when she inspired an attendee of a recent presentation, who said "that her intern would want to be someone like me when she grew up," she says. "That's my greatest accomplishment."

Shaughnessy-Comfort always leads with kindness. "I aspire to be as kind as possible and take a moment to understand and consider the experiences of others," she says. "I truly believe that the more we continue to learn more about each other, the better Erie will be."

Arriving in Erie from the southwestern part of the state, she says that she talks up the city every chance she gets. "It has so much character and so much unique history to offer," she says. "I may be from Pittsburgh, but I see Erie as my home." – JB

Holley Short, 37
Executive Director, Erie Bird Observatory



The avian residents and visitors to Erie are fortunate that we now have Holley Short in our midst. Short is a somewhat recent transplant to Erie from Florida, where she grew up and attended school, earning her B.S. in Wildlife Ecology and Conservation alongside a minor in zoology from the University of Florida. While in Florida, she helped to reinvigorate the St. Petersburg Audubon Society, serving as president. The position of executive director for our own Erie Bird Observatory (EBO) brought Short (along with her husband and their two black labs, Jack and Harry) to our area. "Working with birds as a career has been one of the best things that has ever happened to me. I want to continue sharing that passion with others, and I am so excited to do so with the Erie community," Short shares. "Birds are such an easy way for us to really start noticing the beauty of the natural world, whether it's in our own neighborhood in the middle of the city or in a beautiful state park like Presque Isle."

In addition to her role at the EBO, she also serves as the board secretary of the Regional Science Consortium, truly linking the ecological conservation of birds to that of our overall environmental health.

When she's not birding or playing a rousing game of *Wingspan*, she can be found hanging with her two new rescue kitties, at her Horror Book Club at Werner Books, watching horror films, thrifting, or gardening.

Overall, Short wants to help bring people togeth-

er through birding and nature, “Birding connects us with each other and the world around us.” She continues, “We have many ways for the community to get involved – seeing science in action at our bird banding station at Presque Isle and through free bird walks around Erie. We’re really starting to activate our volunteer programs, so people can become directly involved in conservation efforts locally.” – EP

Jess Simmons, 35

Arts Program Supervisor, Erie Center for Arts and Technology // Instructor, Erie ClaySpace



Art is a side effect of life as it is lived by Jess Simmons, who dedicates most of her time to “figuring out how to get teenagers excited about making weird, ambitious stuff” in her role as arts program supervisor at the Erie Center for Arts and Technology (ECAT). Overseeing the art instruction programs for both adults and teenagers at the east Erie creativity hub, Simmons makes sure that everyone who wants to learn about an art medium has that opportunity. The free teen arts program is one particularly fantastic resource, as it employs a slate of working artists in Erie to share their skills, inspirations, and techniques with kids in their teen years, as they’re just starting to figure out and create their place in the world.

Additionally, Simmons is a talented ceramicist and is an instructor at Erie ClaySpace in the PACA building, where she also has a private ceramics studio. “I’ve built a career that balances making, teaching, and running programs without any of the three completely falling apart, which feels like its own kind of achievement. I’ve gotten to learn from and work alongside some really remarkable artists over the years both locally and nationally. I don’t take that for granted.”

When she is not balancing those three worlds, Simmons enjoys walking with her dogs, thrifting, and being outdoors (skiing, kayaking, and traveling). She is a self-proclaimed pyromaniac – in the most legal and art-centered way possible – she once traveled across the country and stayed awake for 36 hours to tend a giant, wood-fired kiln... and called it a vacation.

Overall, the quintessence of Simmons’s life is making things. She shares, “In both my studio work and my work with students, I’m trying to create spaces where people feel connected, capable, and excited to make things in a world that spends a lot of time telling us to just consume them instead.” – EP

Neel Singh, 22

Erie Civic Engagement Coordinator, PennFuture and the Conservation Voters of Pennsylvania

Growing up exploring the shores, wetlands, forests, and wildlife of Presque Isle eventually led Neel Singh back to Erie – and to help lead the fight to make sure our natural environment is a legislative and conservatory priority. Singh was born in Erie, eventually moving to the San Diego area of California and then attending college at the University of Montana – where he graduated three semesters early at the age of 20 with degrees in political science and statistics. Now, in his role with PennFuture, an organization whose mission is to “lead the fight for an equitable, job-creating state economy by advancing clean air, pure water, and climate change solutions through legal advocacy, policy engagement, and empowering all Pennsylvanians,” Singh’s days are spent “meeting with local advocates and Erieites who are passionate about the environment and finding methods to connect their concerns to elected officials across the state.”

Unsurprisingly, when Singh is not working hard for environmental justice, he enjoys being outdoors – birding (his favorite birds are vultures – you should ask him about them sometime) and hiking, but also watching baseball, hanging out with his pet tarantula, Scooter, and competing with his crack trivia team, Ctrl+Alt+Defeat.

Singh feels proud to be back in Erie and fighting to



protect what makes our area so special. He shares, “I want to thank the community that helped raise me by making sure that our forests and our teal lakeshores are protected, as well as making sure every Erieite has access to clean water and healthy clean air.”

He adds that when it comes to standing up to climate change, it takes a village of organizations to make it happen: “The environmental community in Erie isn’t just any one individual. And none of the successes we’ve had would have been possible without the foundation laid by groups like the Benedictine Sisters, Pennsylvania Lake Erie Watershed Association, Presque Isle Audubon, Erie Bird Observatory, LEAF, Groundwork Erie, S.O.N.S. of Lake Erie, and so many more.” – EP

Brenton Song, 38

Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, LECOM Health

Originally from Honolulu, Dr. Song has embraced Erie with open, welcoming, and supportive arms.

Coming to our area to attend LECOM as a medical student, Song found a home in that same medi-



cal community as a child and adolescent psychiatrist, while also serving as program director for the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Fellowship Assistant Program, the director for the General Psychiatry Residency, and as medical director at Corry Counseling of LECOM Health. Through his work in Corry, Song is fulfilling a personal goal to extend outreach to rural and underserved communities. Being a psychiatrist, especially to children and youth, is extremely important and impactful for our community’s future. He shares, “Helping people understand that they are not alone and that they can get help for their mental health is something that I work towards every day. It is important to me to meet each person where they are at and provide an environment of respect, understanding, and to help them feel heard.”

Through his role as director of LECOM’s psychiatry residency program, he is also helping to train the next generation of mental health professionals, imparting that prioritization of care for underserved communities. His nominators, the psychiatry residents at LECOM, feel strongly about his leadership, sharing that “his tireless pursuit of education and compassion is inspiring.”

When he is not teaching, treating, or leading his area of medicine, Dr. Song expresses his creativity through cooking. He also enjoys watching baseball, staying active outdoors or at the gym, spending time with his family and girlfriend, and “trying to convince my dogs that they do not run the house.”

Song shares, “I do my best to serve the Erie community that has been so welcoming since I came here. Being from Hawaii, I try to bring some of the ‘aloha’ spirit to Erie and maintain a sense of compassion, kindness, and understanding.” – EP

Bobby J. Sulecki, 36

Freelance Writer, Public Historian, and Curator

Bobby J. Sulecki is a Harborcreek High School graduate who has been researching the city’s Polish history since he was a teenager. In the ninth grade, he was featured in the Erie Times-News for an exhibit he curated for the Watson-Curtze Mansion. Since then, he’s earned numerous accolades and awards including the Public History Award from the Hagen History Center.

For over a decade, he’s curated the Erie Polonia History Project. He’s the historian of the former St. Hedwig Parish. Just this past year, he had a popular exhibit on local Polish history on display at the Hagen History Center. “There is so much history lost and so much history hidden in plain sight, that this inspires me to continue my work,” he says, adding



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that he loves Erie.

He's a member of St. Stanislaus Church, Hagen History Center, Polish-American Historical Association, Polish Falcons of America Nest 610, and the Society of Holy Trinity. He's also a member of the International Polka Association. A dream is to get into broadcasting with a Polish/polka radio program. As a self-described news junkie who loves the history of radio and television broadcasting, he also hopes to work in the media someday.

Born with cerebral palsy, accessibility in public and historical buildings is also important to Sulecki. "Since I could not do many things my peers did in school or activities, I spent my time learning and researching history and reading," he says. While he acknowledges health-related and physical limitations, he wants people to see and accept him for more than his disability. He enjoys collecting records, going to museums, reflecting and praying, coffee talks, and simply listening to people's stories. His chihuahua and best friend, Atticus, passed away in March, but he hopes to adopt another soon. He deeply cherishes friendships and appreciates a good sense of humor. Although he may come off as serious, he says, he has a great sense of humor and a big heart. Those who know him highlight his intelligence, humor, resiliency, and charm.

"I want to live in a world where intelligence, empathy and compassion are valued, where people are accepted regardless of their religion or nationality, where we can all learn from each other instead of being divided," Sulecki says. – JB

Jaslyne Walter, 33

IT Supervisor, Erie Insurance // Board President, Meals on Wheels Erie



Jaslyne Walter has been described by her peers as a leader who blazes trails without starting fires – finding ways to move people, ideas, and organizations forward. As the IT Talent Pipeline Program owner at Erie Insurance, she oversees "new to IT" and early career development programming, but also the enterprise

IT talent pipeline strategy, which aligns early-career programs and partnerships to long-term technology workforce needs.

"I try to make Erie better by showing up where I can actually make an impact. Professionally, I focus on building strong teams, supporting growth in others, and helping people operate more effectively. I believe small, consistent efforts matter because they add up over time – emphasis on consistency," said Walter. But more than an IT specialist, Walter finds meaning in the connections she makes with people, "I think being a safe space for the chaos of life is the other side I pride myself in – my team, peers, and friends know that they can come to me with anything. This world is crazy, work is stressful, and life is overwhelming. I'm not a therapist but I will always listen."

Originally from North Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, Walter attended Norwin High School and earned her Bachelor of Arts in Intelligence Studies at Mercyhurst University along with her Master of Science in Information Technology and Data Analytics. She serves as the board president of Meals on Wheels Erie, vice chair of Junior Achievement of Western PA (Erie), and the co-chair of Erie Insurance's Asian Pacific Affinity Network.

Walter enjoys spending time outside collecting beach glass, gardening, and playing in the water on LEAF Market Saturdays with her husband (Richard) and their 5-year-old son (Rhys). They also frequent SeaWolves games and local restaurants. In the winter you can catch her with a glass of red, reading or doing word searches. – AVS

Kristen Weibel, 36

Dance Director, NWPA Collegiate Academy



Dance often doesn't get quite the recognition of the other arts, but Kristen Weibel has been working to change that for over a decade. The Fairview native, who attended Villa Maria Academy before earning her B.A. in Dance Studies with a business cognate and theatre minor from the University of Akron, then a Master of Education in Dance Education from Point Park University, found her way to Erie in 2014, and has been leaving her indelible mark on the dance community – and the arts community at large – ever since.

She hit the ground running with the Erie Dance Consortium, which went quiet after 2021, but is currently in the process of a rebrand as DANCE Erie, and she has dedicated much time and effort over the last seven years into the Seiche Dance Collective, a non-profit dance company which she co-founded with four other women. Additionally, Weibel is a board mem-

ber for the Erie Contemporary Ballet Theater, whose mission is to encourage the "general public to experience the art of dance and recognize that it is rich in tradition and inspires creativity, growth, self-expression, and discipline," she said.

The avid traveler, who once did a grand tour of Italy, then stopped in Germany to visit a friend from high school, and enjoyed what she called "probably one of the best adventures" she ever has been a part of, is also the dance director at Collegiate Academy and is incredibly proud of her achievements in that role. "Building a thriving dance program takes more than great choreography – it takes vision, community, and exposure to the world beyond the studio," she explained. And so, Weibel has connected her students to countless opportunities to witness and take part in the wider world of dance, because, as her nominator put it, it is one of her core beliefs that "arts education is a right, not a privilege." – CS

Olivia Wickline, 28

Director of Marketing and Community Relations, expERIENCE Children's Museum // Publications Layout Designer, Jefferson Educational Society



With genuine care for families, Olivia Wickline has helped to position the expERIENCE Children's Museum as more than a place to visit, but as a trusted and inclusive community resource. Starting her career as an intern in 2019, she now leads the museum's presence at community events, festivals, and collaborative initiatives, helping the organization meet families where they are while strengthening connections across Erie.

Wickline graduated from Riverside High School in Ellwood City, Pennsylvania and earned her Bachelor of Arts in Communications from Penn State Behrend and had a "porch graduation" in Pittsburgh during the pandemic in 2020. "Moving here gave me a unique perspective on the heart and character that Erie has. As someone who wasn't born and raised here, I think I notice the little things people who've lived here forever might overlook like the strong sense of community and the true amount of creativity that exists in so many spaces and people," she said.

Beyond the museum, Wickline actively works with the Community Health Council and the Jefferson Educational Society. As an alumna of the Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy Class of 2024, Wickline has gone on to serve as the think tank's publications layout designer. Outside of work you can find Wickline sewing, working on pennant banners and quilts, hanging out with her cat and dog, Judy and Keno, and restoring her 1930s Tudor-style home. – AVS

Celebrate the Symphony of the Summer with Erie Philharmonic Outdoor Concerts

Free pops, family-friendly, and brass selections performed throughout Erie County

BEGINNING SATURDAY, JUL. 4

In communities across the United States and Western Pennsylvania, music and fireworks are being planned for America’s 250th birthday and the Erie Philharmonic is kicking off the summer with a celebration of patriotic spirit and classical music with 10 free concerts across Erie and Crawford County.

“Summer means it’s time for the Erie Phil to hit the road,” Erie Philharmonic Executive Director Bobby Pape explained. “From Bayview Park to Conneaut Lake, these concerts showcase not just incredible music – they highlight the unique character of the

towns, parks, and gathering places that make northwest Pennsylvania a great place to live, work, visit and play.”

Family activities, local vendors, and community partners will be present at many of the concerts. Rain locations will be announced as needed. With three unique musical experiences across 10 locations, the 2026 Summer Concert Series is a perfect classical summertime exploration into the music of Americana and beyond. –Thomas Taylor

Daniel Meyer’s Patriotic Pops

Beginning at the Bayview Park on July 4, and extending into Gibson Park, Downtown Corry Park, Pennwest

Edinboro, and Meadville’s Diamond Park, Daniel Meyer leads the Philharmonic in a patriotic selection of pieces to celebrate America’s 250th. The music of legendary American composers Aaron Copland, John Williams, and John Philip Sousa is featured alongside Broadway standards.

In celebration of Erie’s history of musical excellence, The Patriotic Pops concert at Bayview Park will also feature an opening performance by singer-songwriter Josh Travis, whose debut album, *Few of Days and Full of Trouble*, premiered in 2023. Three Way Street will also be a featured opening act at Corry’s Downtown Park and PennWest Edinboro. The band’s repertoire includes a variety of jazz, funk, soul, and pop, and features jazz standards from Miles Davis and Duke Ellington to the music of The Jackson 5 and The Beatles.

Erie Philharmonic Family Concerts

Led by concertmaster Emeritus Ken Johnston, the Erie Philharmonic Octet brings an animal-themed musical adventure to Gibson Park and McLane Church starting on July 22, featuring Sergei Prokofiev’s *Peter and the Wolf* among other wildlife-focused compositions. Interactive and craft activities are a centerpiece of these two concerts, with The Erie Zoo, experIENCE Children’s Museum, and McLane Church providing unique educational experiences for children and families. McLane will also have a community

cookout at 5 p.m. preceding the concert.

Prokofiev’s classical masterwork has often been taught in children’s music programs as an introduction to classical music. Commissioned by Natalya Sats, director of the Moscow Musical Theater for Children, *Peter and the Wolf* served as a children’s story told through orchestral music, with each instrument becoming the voice of a character. As an advocate for music education, Prokofiev had a strong interest in writing the piece both as a composer and a father, and completed the piano manuscript in under a week. Premiering May 2, 1936 at the Moscow Conservatory, the piece would become standard repertoire with orchestras around the United States two years later with the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Prokofiev’s direction.

Erie Philharmonic Brass Ensemble

Principal tubist Ken Heinlein returns with the Erie Philharmonic Brass Ensemble starting on July 27 at Fairview’s Pleasant Ridge Park, followed by Gibson Park and Conneaut Lake’s Ice House Park. Audiences can expect Pops selections, symphonic classics, and patriotic favorites arranged for the rich symphonic sounds of the brass section.

Various times, dates, and locations throughout Erie, beginning at Bayview Park on Saturday, July 4 at 1 p.m. // Free // For more info: eriephil.org



If you thought the Erie Philharmonic season was over, think again! Free summer concerts are coming to a public park near you. Beginning with an America 250 celebratory concert at Bayview Park, expect performances of Patriotic Pops, family-friendly concerts, and brass ensembles throughout the region.





2026 SUMMER CONCERT SERIES



One Night Only: An Evening with Sutton Foster & Kelli O'Hara

Thursday, July 2 • 8 p.m.



Preservation Hall Jazz Band
Friday, July 3 • 8 p.m.



Trombone Shorty & Orleans Avenue – Let's Go Get 'Em Tour

Friday, July 10 • 8 p.m.



Harry Connick Jr.

Friday, July 17 • 8 p.m.



Alison Krauss & Union Station featuring Jerry Douglas with special guest Theo Lawrence

Friday, July 24 • 7:30 p.m.



An Evening with Amy Grant

Friday, July 31 • 8 p.m.



Dolly Parton's Threads: My Songs in Symphony with the CSO

Saturday, Aug. 1 • 8 p.m.



Josh Groban: Stage, Screen & Symphony

Thursday, Aug. 13 • 8 p.m.



The Revivalists with Olivia Barnes

Friday, Aug. 14 • 8 p.m.



The Music of Billy Joel with Tony DeSare and the CSO

Saturday, Aug. 15 • 8 p.m.



Kate Kortum

Monday, Aug. 17 • 8 p.m.



Preacher Lawson

Wednesday, Aug. 19 • 8 p.m.



Renée Fleming with Béla Fleck. The Fiddle and the Drum

Friday, Aug. 21 • 8 p.m.



Silkroad Ensemble featuring Rhiannon Giddens

Saturday, Aug. 22 • 8 p.m.



Get Happy with Lara Downes and Kurt Elling

Tuesday, Aug. 25 • 8 p.m.



Samara Joy

Wednesday, Aug. 26 • 8 p.m.



An Evening with Kenny G

Thursday, Aug. 27 • 8 p.m.



The Australian Pink Floyd Show

Friday, Aug. 28 • 8 p.m.



Tower of Power

Saturday, Aug. 29 • 8 p.m.



Indigo Girls

Thursday, Sept. 10 • 7 p.m.

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The image displays three posters for Broadway musicals, each featuring the 'Broadway' logo at the top.

- Left Poster:** For the musical *Hairspray*. It features a blue wig with a red bow. The text reads "hairspray" in a stylized font, with "THE BROADWAY MUSICAL" in smaller text below it. The dates "JULY 24 - AUGUST 9" are at the bottom.
- Middle Poster:** For the musical *Come From Away*. It has a dark blue background with a wood grain texture. The title "COME FROM AWAY" is in large, bold, yellow letters, with a globe icon replacing the letter 'O' in "FROM". The dates "SEPTEMBER 11 - 27" are at the bottom.
- Right Poster:** For the musical *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. It has a dark background with a bright light source at the top. The title "CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY" is in large, stylized, yellow and purple letters, with "THE NEW MUSICAL" in smaller text below it. The dates "OCTOBER 16 - 25" are at the bottom.



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Director Rodland brings whimsy, good time to PACA stage

BEGINNING FRIDAY, JUL. 10

How do you tell someone to do a bad job well? This month that's exactly the conundrum the crew, cast, and director face at PACA. Jeff Rodland, director for *Bad Auditions by Bad Actors* explains that this performance offers a silly, fun time, "a chance to laugh and forget about the troubles of the world." July's production is a sketch-type show, in which the play follows a director quickly auditioning and casting for a performance of *Romeo and Juliet*. The story centers on a new director with a full to-do list – they must fill every member of the cast's roles in just one day. Accordingly, the auditions commence, and the cast grows, as does the hilarity of each character's audition.

This show features PACA debuts by several actors, including the leads,

Dawn Sears and Devin Chaney. Each cast member has ample opportunity to play with the role as written while simultaneously bringing life to the comedic whimsy and ridiculousness of an audition gone poorly – a deliciously resonating experience to anyone who has ever auditioned for a play themselves.

Attendees may notice these shenanigans and silliness favor an earlier work also written by playwright Ian McWethy, *14 More Ways to Screw Up Your College Interview*. This earlier work, which was performed and staged at PACA in 2021, taps a similar vein of humor. "Although we like to stage classics, musicals, and contemporary shows that are on the cutting edge, it is also nice to just have a good time. That is what this show is: a break from the intense reality that we are living in today," shares

MEGS HARRISON



The folks at PACA are lightening the mood this July with their production of *Bad Auditions by Bad Actors*. Director Jeff Rodland hopes audiences take the opportunity to "to laugh and forget about the troubles of the world" as the cast brings the Ian McWethy play to life.

Rodland. And for the summer season, a bit of fun and whimsy with family and friends lands well. – Erica Stewart

Fridays and Saturdays through July 18 // 7:30 p.m. // PACA, 1505 State St. // \$25 // For tickets and info: tickets.eriereader.com

Brooke Surgener and the Bandits go *All In*

Local indie favorite celebrates new EP release at King's Rook Club

FRIDAY, JUL. 17

Brooke Surgener has some plans this month and she'd like you to join her in celebrating her new EP and birthday in a big way at the Kings Rook Club. Surgener (Erie's 40 Under 40 Class of 2014) says she was inspired to call the EP *All In* based on a line in one of her favorite tracks, "Houston." "These songs are a testament to betting on myself, going all in on my career and personal relationships, and refusing to give up regardless of the outcome."

She began writing and releasing the

July 17 will be Surgener's full band, The Bandits. "I want the night to be a big party! Yes, it's my birthday, so I want to have fun but I also want to take the opportunity to feel like a mini concert," explains Surgener. The Bandits feature Noah Minarik on guitar, Mikey O'Toole on bass, Andy Stambaugh on guitar and vocals, and Jon Robbins on drums. The night will open with Rachel Sanders and Andre Costello.

"My hope for the night is that people experience something meaningful," adds Surgener. She says she plans to

"These songs are a testament to betting on myself, going all in on my career and personal relationships, and refusing to give up regardless of the outcome." – Singer-songwriter Brooke Surgener on her latest release, *All In*

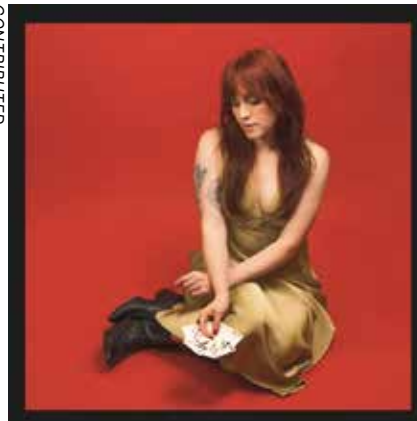
songs for this EP as singles after her 2022 full-length album *Moon Waves* was released. There will be vinyl and cassette copies of *All In* available for purchase at the release party, featuring previously released and unreleased tracks plus some surprise bonus audio.

Also on hand for the festivities on

decorate the stage and add the kind of ambiance that often inspires her.

It's been a momentous year for Brooke and The Bandits so far. The band started 2026 by opening for The Wallflowers in Pittsburgh and will be playing 8 Great Tuesdays on Aug. 18 with some other local faves, First to Eleven.

CONTRIBUTED



Erie's Brooke Surgener (40 Under 40 Class of 2014) is celebrating her birthday while simultaneously celebrating the release of her latest EP entitled *All In* at the King's Rook Club this month.

"If I could dream big on this birthday, my wish is that this record reaches new fans and that the good vibes of the night carry on to the rest of the year so I can continue sharing music and meeting new people," explains the birthday gal. "But, I also wouldn't mind a (Nintendo) Switch 2 so I can play *Ocarina of Time* when the new (*Legend of*) *Zelda* releases." – Edwina Capozziello

8 p.m. to 3 a.m. // King's Rook Club, 1921 Peach St. // 21+ // \$10 members, \$15 non-members // Tickets and more info at: tickets.eriereader.com



Mount St. Benedict Monastery 170th Anniversary Open House

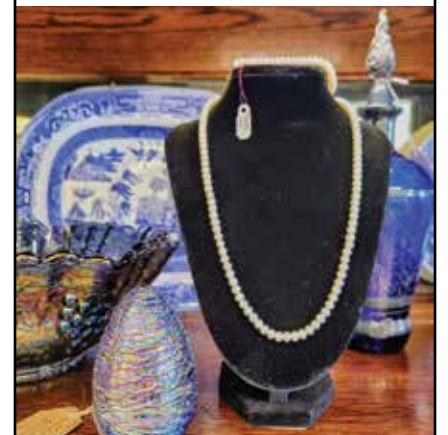
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Shore Thing: The 2026 Piping Plover Fest

Celebrate the return of a once-gone bird

BEGINNING SATURDAY, JUL. 18

In a charming prelude to Discover Presque Isle, which opens on July 20, the first-ever Piping Plover Fest will be celebrated at Presque Isle State Park on Saturday, July 18, and Sunday, July 19. The festival marks the 10th anniversary since the Piping Plover returned to Presque Isle to nest.

Festival-goers will learn why habitat restoration requires a lot of collaboration. Attendees will get to view *Our Threatened and Endangered Species: Piping Plovers*, a new documentary by Pennsylvania Game Commission filmmaker Tracy Graziano, an Erie native, alongside having a lot of fun discovering why the Pennsylvania Piping Plover and Common Tern Recovery Partnership bills Presque Isle’s Piping Plovers as Pennsylvania’s “comeback kids.”

“It is a globally rare species,” explained Cathy Haffner, Piping Plover recovery coordinator for the state Game Commission’s Bureau of Wildlife Management. “There are about 4,000 pairs in the world and they occur only in North America, in three different populations. All are protected at the federal level by the Endangered Species Act,” she said.

“To put that in context, only 88 breeding pairs were confirmed last year in the entirety of the Great Lakes,” she said. That includes the two pairs that nested at Presque Isle in 2025. “We have a small amount of these but our fledglings will go on to colonize other sites. We are helping to grow the population,” she said.

The Piping Plover is a native spe-

cies of Pennsylvania and more than a century ago, up to 15 pairs nested at Presque Isle. “The first nest (at Presque Isle) was documented in 1900,” Haffner said. Piping plovers lay eggs in the sand, “well-camouflaged to protect from predators,” but as beach use increased, people didn’t recognize the eggs, and the last nesting pair (before the relatively recent return) was recorded in 1955, Haffner said.

The effort to attract Piping Plovers to nest again at Presque Isle began after several male plovers showed up in 2005. The Game Commission decided “maybe there’s a chance to get them to stay,” Haffner said. “So I conducted a recovery assessment, from the Presque Isle Lighthouse to Beach 10.”

To restore the habitat, the Game Commission partnered with the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Pennsylvania Field Office, the Western Conservancy, the Erie Bird Observatory, and the Tom Ridge Environmental Center Foundation. Habitat restoration included getting rid of invasive plants, which also allowed for the preservation and documentation of rare plant species.

“It took some time before the Piping Plovers decided to stay. These efforts require a lot of patience, persistence and, of course, partnerships,” Haffner said. “Finally, in 2017, we had two pairs stay.”

The park is now the only available



As an opening act to Discover Presque Isle, the Erie Bird Observatory, along with community partners, is throwing a big party for a little bird: the Piping Plover. Catch film screenings, exhibits, interactive educational events, and field trips all celebrating the comeback of this beloved shorebird.

nesting habitat for this species in Pennsylvania, according to Haffner.

“Celebrating 10 years since Piping Plovers returned to Pennsylvania, especially coming back to Presque Isle, is something our community should be really proud of,” said Holley Short, executive director of the Erie Bird Observatory (and 2026 40 Under 40 honoree). “We get to be the home of such a charismatic little shorebird!”

The festival opens on July 18 with a free panel discussion and the documentary premiere from 1 to 3 p.m. at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center. A lecture and social hour featuring Francie Cuthbert, Ph.D., professor emeritus from the University of Minnesota, follows from 5:30 to 8:30

p.m.; there is a \$15 charge. The documentary will also be shown all day on July 19 at TREC.

Piping Plover Fest was timed purposely as a prelude to Discover Presque Isle, said Haffner. “The piping plovers are like the park’s little celebrities,” she said. Then there’s this bonus: the festival also celebrates the Tern.

Registration is required by July 17 for Cuthbert’s lecture and encouraged for the other events. – Liz Allen

Saturday from 1 to 8:30 p.m., Sunday from 8 a.m. // Free (\$15 for Dr. Cuthbert lecture and social hour) // Tom Ridge Environmental Center, 301 Peninsula Dr. // For registration and more info: eriebirdobservatory.org/piping-plover-fest

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2026 MAIN STAGE LINEUP

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- 12 PM DUKE SHERMAN BAND
- 2 PM THE MAX SCHANG BAND
- 4 PM WAYNE BAKER BROOKS
- 6 PM DYLAN TRIPLETT
- 8 PM BYWATER CALL

SUN AUG 2ND

- 12 PM ERIE PHIL JAZZ ENSEMBLE
- 1:30 PM TONY GREY TRIO
- 3 PM ERIN & ROSS W/
THEIR BETTER ANGELS
- 5 PM NATHAN PAUL
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- 7 PM THE LAO TIZER BAND

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Tracy Turnblad's Moves Aren't Bad!

Award-winning musical *Hairspray* returns to Erie Playhouse

PREMIERING FRIDAY, JUL. 24

Welcome to the '60s: the days of sock hops and big hairdos. It's 1962 and after a spot opens up on her favorite local teenage dance show, *The Corny Collins Show*, Tracy Turnblad is determined to make it her own, even as new challenges try to stop her. Dance your way to your seats for the Erie Playhouse's production of the Tony Award-winning musical, *Hairspray*.

Last seen at the Playhouse in 2010, *Hairspray* is a celebration of body positivity, racial integration, and the power of youthful rebellion. Based on the 1988 (non-musical) film with the same title, *Hairspray* has had a steady run through Broadway, the West End, and more. In 2007, its popularity spiked again with a film adaptation of the musical, starring John Travolta and Michelle Pfeiffer.

Director Ryan Ingram noted that his favorite aspect of working on the show has been the overall excitement surrounding it: "The energy around it has been unmatched. People know the show and love it."

With a nod to its source material, the

audience can expect to see a bright and cheery color palette throughout the show. "The costumes are also bright, fun, and have a retro flair. The characters are transitioning from the dull world of the 1950s to the brighter, more colorful (and hopeful) time period of the 1960s," says Ingram.

And speaking of characters, the cast is full of many new faces making their Mainstage debuts: Matthew Sommers

Last seen at the Playhouse in 2010, *Hairspray* is a celebration of body positivity, racial integration, and the power of youthful rebellion.

(Corny Collins), Meghan Bucheral (Penny Pingleton), Rhonda Berlin (Prudy Pingleton), Tamiyah Goodwin (Little Inez), Maeve Wakefield (Brenda), Jack McBride (Joey), and Messiah Mooney (Duane).

According to Ingram, through the collaborative effort of choreographer Jenna Baker and music coordinator

NICOLE LOSSIE



The cult classic *Hairspray* comes to the Erie Playhouse stage in musical form, standing as a zany, colorful celebration of body positivity, racial integration, and the power of youthful rebellion.

Devon Yates, the cast is excited to bring every move and moment to life.

Given the buzz surrounding the show, additional dates may be provided as needed. – Cassandra Gripp

Fridays and Saturdays through Aug. 9 at 7:30 p.m. // Thursday, Aug. 6 at 7:30 p.m. and Sundays, Aug. 2 and Aug. 9 at 2 p.m. // Erie Playhouse, 13 W. 10th St. // \$20-30 // For tickets and info: erieplayhouse.org

Erie Reader Book Club: July 2026

Never Let Me Go by Kazuo Ishiguro

SUNDAY, JUL. 26

The Erie Reader Book Club will be reading and discussing *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro in conjunction with the Erie Reader 40 Under 40 issue.

Every July, we decide on a coming-of-age novel to coincide with our 40 Under 40 issue – since all the individ-

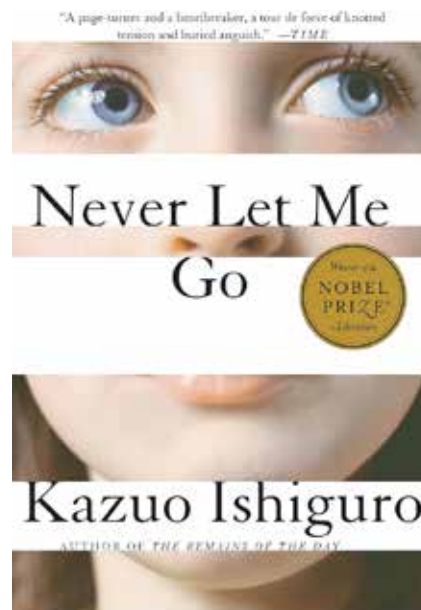
Considered one of Kazuo Ishiguro's best, *Never Let Me Go* is all at once beautiful, heartbreaking, and lyrically written.

uals honored in the issue come from different careers, backgrounds, and walks of life, the one commonality among them is that they themselves are experiencing a coming-of-age moment, in their own ways.

In *Never Let Me Go*, 31-year-old Kathy reflects on her idyllic childhood when two of her schoolmates come back into her life and friendships are rekindled. Having lived at Hailsham, a private school in the English countryside, Kathy reminisces on her time with her classmates, a group of students sheltered from the outside world. Brought up to believe that they were special individuals, their well-being was crucial to not just themselves but for society as a whole.

As Kathy continues to reflect on the past, now through the lens of hindsight, a darker understanding of the childhood she so loved begins to take shape, forcing her and her friends to face the truth about their childhood, and about the lives they lead now.

Considered one of Ishiguro's best, *Never Let Me Go* is all at once beautiful, heartbreaking, and lyrically written, offering perspective on



the sadness of the human condition and asking the insurmountable question: what does it mean to be human? – Ally Kutz

1 p.m. // Werner Books and Coffee, 3608 Liberty St. // Free to join, cost of book not included // For more info: wernerbooks.com



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Highland at the Hall

Ally the Piper brings bagpipes to Centennial Hall

FRIDAY, JUL. 31

Traditional bagpipe music has long been a part of Scottish tradition and the Great Highland bagpipe is the most popular of the pipes, and has been used for centuries throughout Europe, the Persian Gulf, and South Asia. In America, this type of bagpipe is traditionally used at cultural events, Highland games, or at funerals. Forget your preconceived notions on the limits of bagpipes when it comes to a performance from Ally the Piper. She is a well-versed piper who has acquired a large fanbase online – blending tradition with hard rock music. She has amassed millions of followers and thousands of views on her social media accounts. Ally (Allyson Crowley-Duncan) tells us that she began playing classic rock songs almost immediately after learning the instrument. “As a gigging bagpiper I played a lot of pubs and parties, and after playing my traditional reels and jigs, I would love to end a performance with something a little more unexpected, like ‘Crazy Train.’” Within a couple years Ally had put together a rock band with some of her friends from high school.

After high school, Ally moved from New York state to Pennsylvania to at-

tend Edinboro University where she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Music. “I learned a lot of independence as an artist. I was distanced from my competitive background for the first time in my life and finally had a chance to take a deeper look at my relationship with the pipes and figure out what role I wanted them to play in my future. I didn’t know then that I would be a full-time performer, I thought I would pursue the education field, but I did graduate knowing that I wanted to bring the bagpipes into new spaces and be a voice in breaking apart some of the stigma that tends to follow the pipes,” she shares.

After graduation, she continued to play, but it wasn’t until the pandemic that her career as a piper shifted from in-person to online. “I hadn’t played my pipes in a few months, and was feeling pretty isolated and depressed. So, I made the choice to hold myself accountable to something. I posted my first video on TikTok, primarily because I didn’t know anyone on the app and thought I could maintain some semblance of anonymity. That failed the first day when my video got 150K views. But, the accountability worked – I haven’t put the pipes down since I posted that first video five and half

CONTRIBUTED



If you haven’t yet heard someone absolutely shred on the bagpipe – Centennial Hall is bringing you that opportunity as they host the internet sensation Ally the Piper, with an opening act from Erie favorites the Mulligans.

years ago.”

She is best known for her renditions of “Crazy Train,” “Free Bird,” “I’m Shipping Up To Boston,” and “She’s a Pirate” (from the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie). Attendees to her upcoming show at Centennial Hall (with local guests the Mulligans) can expect to hear those classics alongside some traditional pipe tunes, as well as original material. Ally says that her favorite thing about live shows is the generational aspect – sometimes

with a family spanning three generations sitting in the front row, excited to celebrate their heritage, and directly next to them is a heavy metal enthusiast head-banging along. Ally also stated that she is looking forward to being so close to her alma mater and hopes to see some familiar faces in the audience. – Larry Wheaton

Doors open at 6 p.m. // Centennial Hall, 145 W. 11th St. // \$33.65+ // For tickets and info: tickets.eriereader.com

Reel Rituals Revs Up for Driller Killer

Up-and-coming film series unpacks genre oddities

FRIDAY, JUL. 31

Do you like films on the fringes? Forgotten gems? Oddballs that were

CONTRIBUTED



Reel Rituals is a film screening series like no other – sharing vintage films, often from the public domain, that have often been long-forgotten or are generally under appreciated and giving them a fresh take. This month’s film and discussion will tackle the 1979 psychodrama *The Driller Killer*.

ahead of their time? Do you want to find a place to watch them with like-minded weirdos and talk about the modern social ramifications of the movie you just watched?

If so, you might already be a Reel Rituals fan. The series is the brainchild of Madman Mook and the Pentacle Pin Up, also known as the Erie Reader’s own Aaron Mook, and 40 Under 40 alum Rie Witherow.

For their fourth installment of the Reel Rituals film series, the duo will be presenting the 1979 psychodrama *The Driller Killer*. In a recent statement, the organizers described Reel Rituals as “a series of semi-regular, affordable film screenings dedicated to overlooked, forgotten, and underseen cinema. Rooted in Erie’s DIY spirit, we bring films to life in rotating

venues across the city, turning each screening into a unique communal experience.”

“Part of what’s exciting about Reel Rituals is not only exploring different genres, but even subgenres of film,” Mook explained. “Most of what is in the public domain is pre-1960 and relatively tame as far as today’s standards go, so it’s exciting to use this month’s screening to introduce folks to the weird and wonderful world of ‘video nasties.’”

It’s a loose atmosphere that offers academic takes and insights into films that are often misunderstood – and so far, all in the public domain. The previous screenings featured *The Brain That Wouldn’t Die*, followed by *A Bucket of Blood* and *The Old Dark House*.

With opening slide presentations

to provide context and backstory, the duo offers an experience that’s part vintage horror hosting and part TED Talk. Expect them to tackle the film’s misleading cover image and its impact on censorship in the Thatcher-era United Kingdom.

With dates and films lined up for August and September, stay tuned to their social media to find out what’s next. Witherow hinted, “We have some super secret special announcements we’ll be making that go beyond Reel Rituals, and any fans of Erie’s spookier side are not going to want to miss them.” – Nick Warren

Doors at 5:30, film at 7 p.m. // 10/20 Collective, 1020 Holland St. // \$10 // For Mature Audiences // For tickets and more information, visit 1020collective.com

Celebrate 31 Years of Rhythm at the 2026 Erie Blues and Jazz Festival

Two days of world-class music, local flavor, and community await in one of Erie’s favorite summer traditions

BEGINNING SATURDAY, AUG. 1

For 31 years, the Erie Blues and Jazz Festival (a perennial winner of Best Music Festival in our Best of Erie awards) has transformed Frontier Park into a hub for music, the arts, and community. Returning Saturday, Aug. 1, and Sunday, Aug. 2, the Festival once again invites audiences to enjoy an eclectic mix of blues, jazz, soul, funk, and fusion performances against one of the city’s most scenic backdrops.

“This year’s festival brings an incredible mix of elite national, regional and local intense energy to our three stages,” Festival Producer Maria Gangemi (Erie’s 40 Under 40 Class of 2020) shares. Saturday will feature (among others) performances from The Duke Sherman Band, whose guitar-driven blues channels classic American music, acclaimed guitarist Wayne Baker Brooks and his signature Chicago sound, and rising vocalist Dylan Triplett, whose powerful voice evokes the golden age of soul and R&B.

Sunday is set to continue the momentum with groups like the Erie Phil Jazz Ensemble showcasing their regional talent, as well as headliner The Lao Tizer Band, a well-recognized fusion group known for combining contemporary jazz elements with funk, world music, and altogether infectious grooves.

“For over 33 years, the Erie Blues



The People’s Festival, Erie’s Blues and Jazz, winner of Best of Erie’s Best Music Festival in 2025, returns to Frontier Park for the first weekend in August bringing headliners like The Duke Sherman Band and The Lao Tizer Band to perform alongside scads of other local, regional, and out-of-town favorites.

and Jazz Festival has anchored our region’s summer arts season as a true community equalizer. Thanks to our dedicated sponsors and part-

ners, free admission ensures there are zero financial barriers to cultural enrichment,” says Gangemi. “We love seeing generations of families grow up attending the festival together, creating a shared local lineage. This deep-rooted togetherness, paired with a sustained draw of world-class musical talent to Frontier Park, is exactly what has defined a large part of Erie’s vibrant cultural identity.”

Beyond the stage, attendees can look forward to a “diverse mix of local food vendors, artisans, and community organizations” while enjoying the relaxed atmosphere that has earned the event a reputation as one of Erie’s signature summer gatherings.

If you’ve never been to the festival before, expect “an immersive community celebration that feels like a massive neighborhood party, despite hosting a multi-thousand-person audience,” Gangemi says. “It is a completely family-oriented experience that encompasses dedicated spaces offering interactive arts and activities

for children, all set within a welcoming and relaxed crowd.”

Admission for the Erie Blues and Jazz Festival remains free, with organizers suggesting a \$25 donation for adults to help sustain the festival’s mission and future programming. As a thank-you, donors receive a limited-edition festival button commemorating the event.

Whether you’re a lifelong blues enthusiast, a jazz devotee, or someone simply looking for a memorable experience in Frontier Park, the Erie Blues and Jazz Festival promises another remarkable weekend of live music, dancing, and camaraderie. More information about this year’s lineup, parking, and festival guidelines can be found at eriebluesandjazz.com. –Aaron Mook

Saturday and Sunday, 11 a.m. to 9:30 p.m.
// Frontier Park, 1501 W. 6th St. // Free Admission with \$25 Suggested Donation
// Additional information available at eriebluesandjazz.com



Family-friendly, interactive, and culturally diverse activities accompany the music at Erie’s Blues and Jazz fest, as it takes over all aspects of Frontier Park for the first weekend in August.

Celebrating America at 250

July calendar filled with patriotic events

By: Chloe Forbes

As the summer heats up, so does the event schedule. Fast approaching the Fourth of July – which this year marks 250 years of America's Declaration of Independence – there's pomp and circumstance by the boatload, beginning with the return of the U.S. Brig *Niagara*.

July 2 at noon, Erie's flagship will return to its home port after more than a year away for repairs. The Parade of Sail will begin at the channel of Presque Isle near the North Pier Light then travel toward Liberty Park, concluding at the Erie Maritime Museum. Once docked, the flagship will remain open for deck tours all weekend.

The festivities continue on the bayfront on **Friday, July 3**, with Erie 250: Light and Liberty on the Lake, the City of Erie's signature Independence Day event, hosted on the water and featuring a fireworks display from Dobbins Landing at 10 p.m. after a concert by the Marshall Tucker Band and Buckcherry at the Rebich Investments Amphitheater. While the fireworks are free to watch, the concert is a ticketed event.

Also on July 3, the Erie Commodores, Erie's semi-pro soccer team, will close out its season with a special America 250-themed match at Mercyhurst University's Saxon Stadium.

On **Saturday, July 4**, at 2:30 p.m., the Erie Philharmonic will perform a free Patriotic Pops concert in Bayview Park. It will include Sousa marches, an Armed Forces Salute, cinematic John Williams hits, and Broadway favorites.

Now through **Sunday, July 5**, the Flying Legends of Victory Warbird Tour will take place at the Erie International Airport. See B-17 and B-25 bombers, two of the rarest historical military planes and get a tour.

Beginning **Monday, July 6**, at 6 p.m. the Jefferson Educational Society will kick off its USA 250 summer programming with a weeklong residency by Dr. Robert Garland titled "Democracy: From Beginning to Now." Later in the month, on **Thursday, July 16**, at 4 p.m., renowned food and drink writer Brian Freedman will present "Spirits that Moved America: Lessons through Liquor," a tasting of spirits that tracks the nation's own spirited journey.

Beginning on Monday, July 27 through Thursday, July 30, the Jefferson Educational Society will host Moments That Shaped America: A Nation and Independence at 250. Events include "9/11 25 Years Later: WH Chief of Staff Andy Card's Eyewitness to History" with Andy Card, White House Chief of Staff from 2001 to 2006; "From FDR to Trump: Life in the Modern White House" with bestselling author Gary Walters and Stuart McLauren, author and President of the White House Historical Association; "We the Women: The Hidden Heroes

HEIDI BRESN



As the nation gears up to celebrate the semiquincentennial anniversary of the founding of our country – Chloe Forbes lines up those events happening throughout Erie including a free philharmonic concert, fireworks, the return of the flagship *Niagara*, educational events, art shows, and more.

Who Shaped America" with Kate Andersen Brower, New York Times bestselling author; and "Against All Odds: Front Line Stories from World War II" with Alex Kershaw, New York Times bestselling author, and David Yoho, WWII veteran.

Running throughout the entire month, the Tom Ridge Environmental Center will host its Presque Isle 250 exhibit, which displays the role of Presque Isle State Park throughout America's past 250 years. The free exhibit on the second floor includes journals, newspaper articles, and photos that tell the story of Presque Isle.

Events throughout Erie County include the

America 250 Celebration at the Mellon Heritage Veteran's Outreach and Wellness Center in North East on July 2 and 3; **18th Century Life and Traditions, a re-enactment of life in 1776** at the Gifford-Blanchfield House in Harborcreek on Saturday, July 11, at 10 a.m.; and re-enactments from America's history in the 18th and 19th centuries at the **Fort LeBoeuf Historical Society in Waterford** on Saturday, July 18, as part of Waterford's Heritage Day festival.

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

Never Say Never

Down This Road

Barcode Records/PMA Syndicate



★★★★★

There are some records that stay with you. If you were a local punk or hardcore kid in the late '90s or early 2000s, you no doubt remember Never Say Never. Hailing from North East, the quartet was one of the top acts around, even playing the Buffalo leg of the Vans Warped Tour. They were also one of the relatively few bands to record and release a full-fledged album. This was just before the days of ubiquitous home recording and burned CDs, and long before online streaming. Recorded at Watchmen Studios in Lockport, New York (the main option for Erie bands at the time), the band released the album in 2001 with the help of Barcode Records. The band was composed of Dana Castaldo on guitar and vocals, J. Morey on guitar, Phil Iavarone on bass, and the late John Miller on drums. Now, 25 years later, Never Say Never's *Down This Road* has been pressed on vinyl. This special re-release is the work of PMA Syndicate. Formed by Dan Riefstahl and P.J. Wroczynski, this new local initiative is built on a positive mental attitude and a conviction to bring projects to life. This release in particular was born from a genuine love and appreciation for an album that helped shape their formative years and musical tastes, while also serving as a tribute to Miller. With a limited pressing, each record features a random color from recycled vinyl. In addition to the nine cuts that originally appeared on the CD, it includes two tracks from the band's demo recordings, "Your Own Way" and "What You Believe." Hardcore punk fit for the skatepark alongside bands like Millencolin, No Motiv, and Boysetsfire, Never Say Never is a band that absolutely deserves both revisiting and discovery by new fans (to order and for more information, visit PMASyndicate.com). – Nick Warren

elias, if only

RARE EMBERS, LATE SPRING

Self-released



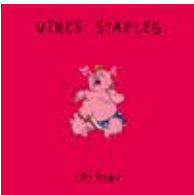
★★★★★

The evolution of Erie independent artist/songwriter/you-name-it Eli Kerr (under the moniker elias, if only) has been fascinating to watch. Not unlike another local songwriter, Brian the Fly, longtime observers have seen Kerr's production evolve from hip-hop to indie-flavored songwriting and even country music, once again landing somewhere new on the immediately fascinating *RARE EMBERS, LATE SPRING*. With hardly any vocals featured throughout the record's efficient 30-minute runtime, listeners will instantly be hooked by the chillwave-influenced guitars on album opener "APRIL 15 (TAXES II)," which feels like a midpoint between 2000s indie and Mk.gee's current run. But the album gets weirder from there, and that's not a bad thing; amongst snippets of dialogue and conversation are warbly, soft keys and pleasant guitar noodling ("FAT BIRD"). In fact, if one were forced to come up with a comparison, *RARE EMBERS, LATE SPRING* sounds a bit like A24's latest signee ear (an ambient electropop duo from New York) – but in the most thrilling way. The latest from elias, if only sounds like the distillation of a dozen influences boiled down into something completely fresh. – Aaron Mook

Vince Staples

Cry Baby

Section Eight Arthouse/Loma Vista Recordings



★★★★★

For America's 250th anniversary, Long Beach rapper Vince Staples serves up a piece of absurdist pie on *Cry Baby*. On the album's seventh track, Staples begins his first verse by proclaiming, "America the beautiful, I'd like to take a look at you." In his search, the musician, on his first independent venture, moves away from the individual storytelling approach of his past efforts in favor of an assessment of our morally illiterate, media-undated, and socially apathetic nation. In keeping with this approximation, Staples employs his signature lackadaisical vocal delivery – sounding battle-worn as tragedies take place on his front lawn. However, the musician does expand beyond his traditional wheelhouse. Abandoning the wooziness of West Coast sounds and Kenny Beats production, Staples harnesses the edge of rock-adjacent hi-hats, kick drums, and basslines. The result is a project that feels as anthemic as it is telling. Topics range from questioning America's trust in police forces on "Go! Go! Gorilla" and "The Big Bad Wolf," comparing our relationship with media to that of lust on "TV Guide," and reckoning with the perpetuation of slavery on "Only In America." Staples concludes that America is damned. When people can watch fellow civilians gunned down in the street with glazed-over eyes, what is there to save? – Nathaniel Clark

Lee "Scratch" Perry and Mouse on Mars

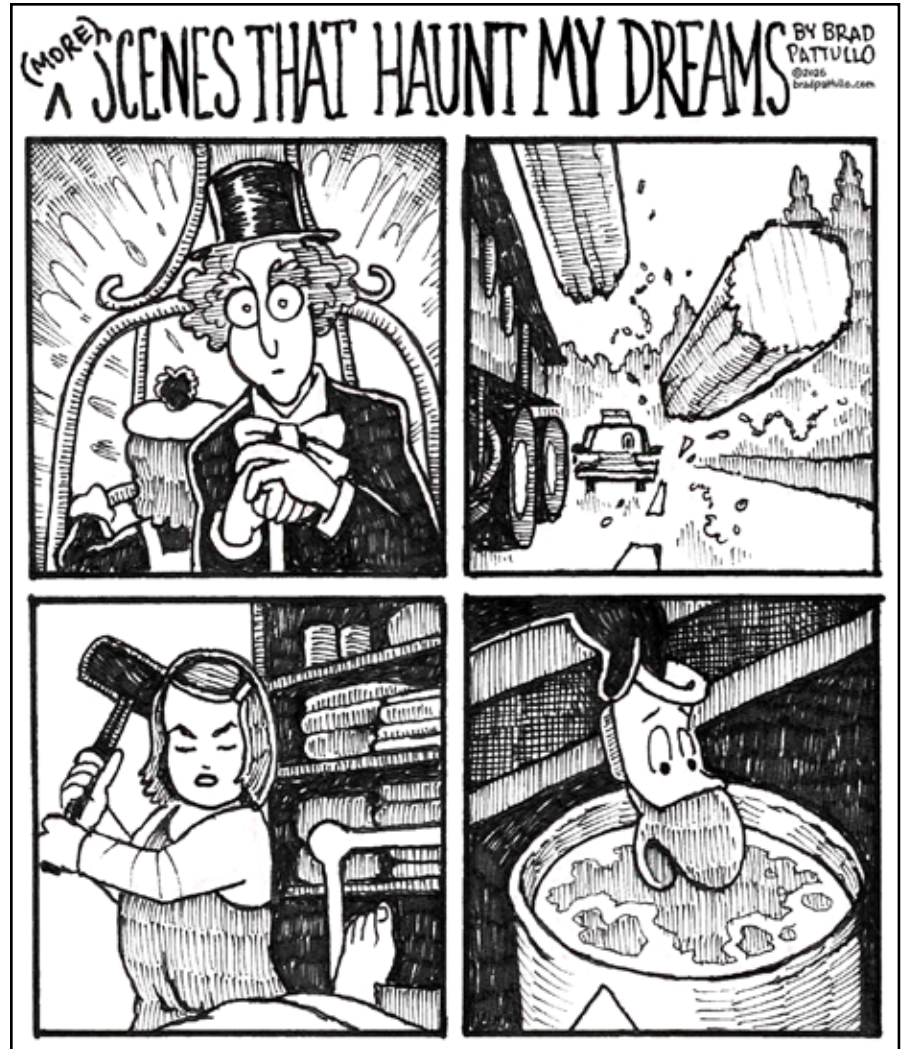
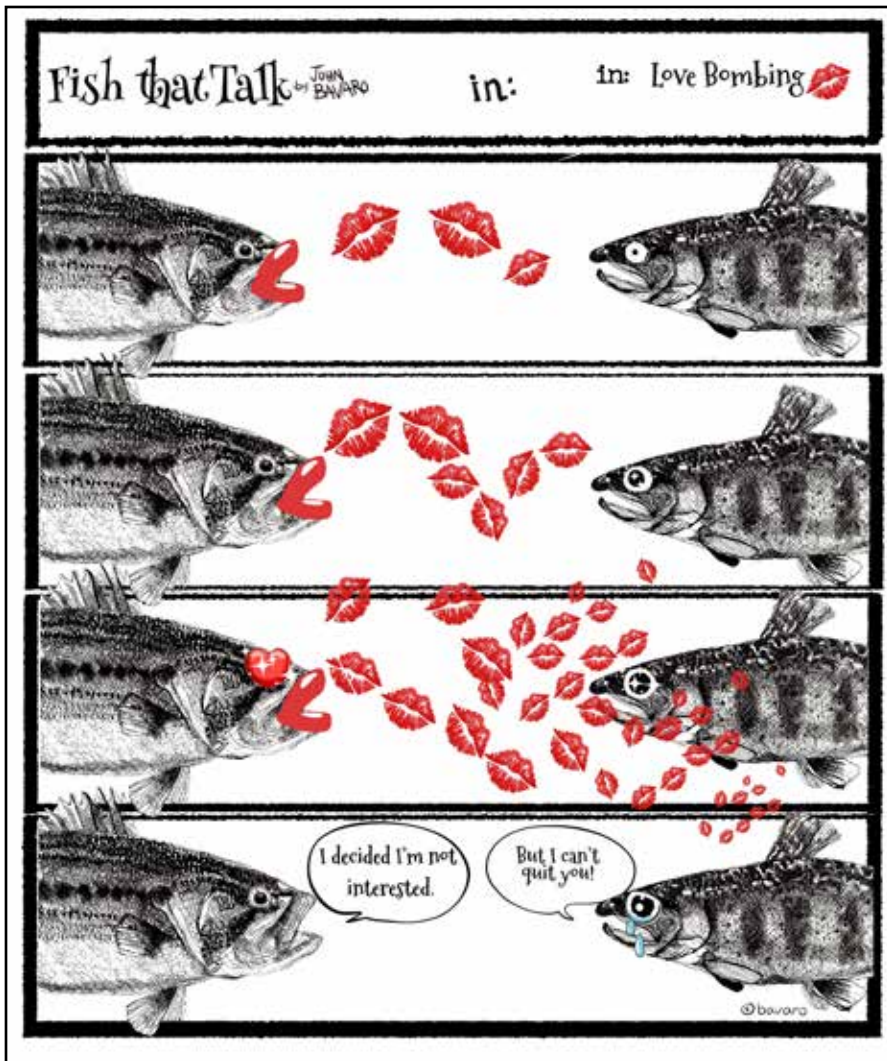
Spatial, No Problem

Domino Recording Company



★★★★★

Lee "Scratch" Perry left us in 2021 only to be resurrected with the previously unreleased *Spatial, No Problem*, recorded in 2019 under a very hush-hush mysticism. His experimentation reached beyond reggae to dub with releases like "Blackboard Jungle Dub" and "Super Ape," which influenced everything from punk to hip-hop to electronica. His hypnotic multi-channel productions utilized the mixing board as an instrument. The Black Arc studio vibe followed Perry onto every collaboration like a shadow. German duo Mouse on Mars creates electronic trance-like sound collages utilizing samples, usually without the typical crate-digging, with each rising up and falling back like musicians on an Albert Ayler recording. "Rock Curry" immediately drenches us in an intoxicating Krautrock rhythm nodding to the band Neu! with "Hallo Shiva" keeping similar beats stretching into a meditative koan. "Economic Train" layers simple samples into a complex lattice with soulful horns. "Spatalee" hits like a piece to be played back in an empty gallery room with a single bench in its center. "To the Rescue" is the epitome of what one loves about Perry's unique vocal freestyle structure. "State of Emergency" is a call for peace with a New Orleans horn procession, climaxing in mournful wailing. This album is a lot to absorb, but eventually it will sink in. – Melissa Sullivan



Mabeline’s Poetry Corner

Haiku at Poetry Park

“Born”
Born to move mountains
Given the strength required to
Create needed change

“Master Gardener”
Master Gardener
I give you all the credit
For this atmosphere

“Seeds”
I love to plant seeds
Seeds of hope, love, joy, and trust
Prepare for harvests

“Freeing”
It’s freeing to be
In a space like this. No walls
Serene music, You.

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



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MOVIES

A Useful Ghost is a Brilliant Romantic Fantasy

Til death do us part

★★★★★

Over the last decade, Thailand has become (with the possible exception of Romania) the most interesting film country in the world. This fact has naturally led me to seek out Ratchapoom Boonbunchachoke’s film *A Useful Ghost*, whose concept alone was enough to pull me in. But it was so much more than I expected. The film manages to be a funny and heart-breaking story of love (both straight and queer) while also being a terrific political satire, capitalist critique, and fantastical ghost story simultaneously.

The story centers on Nat (Davika Hoorne), the recently deceased wife of the heir to an electronics company, whose spirit possesses a vacuum cleaner to help her husband, March (Witsarut Himmarat), with his dust allergy. While Nat and March are blissfully reunited, the company feels they can use Nat to get rid of the troublesome ghosts of slain factory workers to help productivity. With the promise



that they will not separate her from her husband, Nat begins exorcising other ghosts from the company, but in the process, starts to disconnect from March.

The absurd premise is really just a Trojan horse to get to the real meat of the story. Much like Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s *Cemetery of Splendour*, the film uses fantastical elements to talk about the control that authoritarians exert over their people, even after death, and how governments erase their uncomfortable histories by disappearing the “ghosts” of the past. We follow various characters and how Thailand’s most power-

ful elements have tried to erase their memories, and watch as Nat goes from oppressed to oppressor in the name of self-preservation.

You’ll never guess a film about a haunted vacuum could make you cry by the end.

A Useful Ghost is currently available on Hoopla, Kanopy, Amazon Prime, Apple TV+, and YouTube. Written and directed by Ratchapoom Boonbunchachoke // Starring Davika Hoorne, Witsarut Himmarat, Apasiri Nitibhon, Wanlop Rungkumjad, Gandhi Wasuvitchayagit, Ornanong Thaisriwong, and Witsarut Homhuan // 130 minutes // GDH 559 // Unrated (R equivalent)

Disclosure Day Is Well-Made but Silly

I want to believe

★★★

Aliens have long held significant meaning in the films of Steven Spielberg. Whether they represented an incomprehensible force of spiritual majesty (*Close Encounters*), the joy and wonder of childhood innocence (*E.T.*), or the fears and anxieties felt by a post-9/11 America (*War of the Worlds*), the aliens in his films are never just aliens. This theme continues with *Disclosure Day*, in which extraterrestrials represent the key to human connection and understanding in an increasingly hostile and divided world. However, despite some admirable filmmaking, that theme isn’t enough to hold a shoddy story together that gets bogged down by its own ambitions.

Daniel Kellner (Josh O’Connor) is a whistleblower who is on the run after stealing a strange otherworldly device. He and his team are desperately trying to reveal a nearly 80-year cover-up about the existence of extraterrestrials while being pursued by

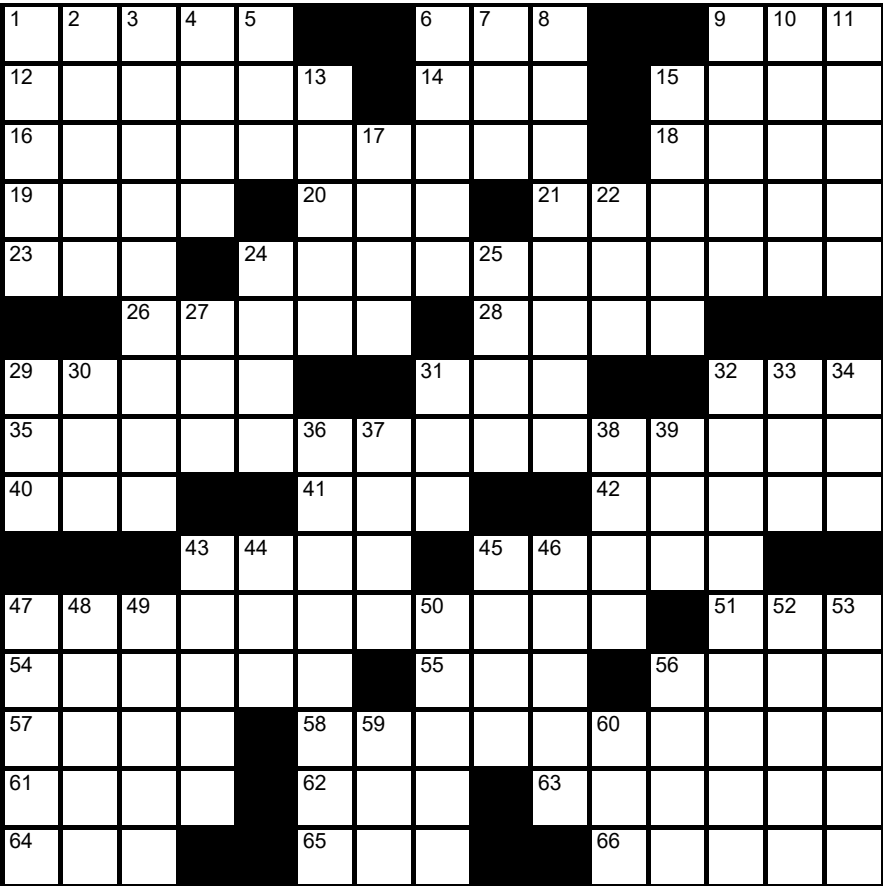


a ruthless government agent (Colin Firth). Their quest leads them to a television meteorologist (Emily Blunt) who seems to have a mysterious connection to Kellner and knowledge about the alien visitors that even she does not yet understand.

The film is mostly an extended chase sequence that often feels like a blockbuster from the 1990s. Sadly, the story feels stuck in that era as well, as it comes off like a mid-tier episode of *The X-Files*. There are some brilliant shots and expertly directed action sequences (Spielberg is still a great filmmaker), but the story suf-

fers from the worst sentimental excesses of its director. The message of cosmic forces bringing the world together is a hopeful one, but in this age, it comes off as woefully naive. – Forest Taylor

Directed by Steven Spielberg // Written by David Koepp // Starring Emily Blunt, Josh O’Connor, Colin Firth, Eve Hewson, Wyatt Russell, Elizabeth Marvel, Henry Lloyd-Hughes, Courtney Grace, Jeremy Shamos, Michael Gaston, Gabby Beans, Elliot Vilar, Tommy Martinez, Noah Robbins, and Colman Domingo // 145 minutes // Universal Pictures // Rated PG-13



- Across**

1. Like some mixed drinks

6. Tree goo

9. Airline based in Sweden

12. Orange, e.g.

14. A.L. Central team, on a scoreboard

15. Sicilian volcano

16. Xenomorph leader of sci-fi filmdom, for instance

18. Depilatory brand with "short shorts" ads

19. Offer temporarily

20. Coffeehouse dispenser

21. ___ Online (long-running MMORPG)

23. "Black-ish" dad

24. She's portrayed both Queens Elizabeth (I on TV and II on film)

26. Rakish cads

28. Listen to

29. Work in a haunted house, say

31. Lot purchase

32. Do some sums

35. Type of incandescent headlamp bulb

40. Up to now

41. Stimpy's costar

42. "Norma," for instance

43. ___ dire (court examination)

45. Fortnite dance or action

47. Greeting in Gelsenkirchen

51. Director Jean-___
- Down**

1. Burn

2. Bathroom floor worker

3. Wandering

4. Vanmate of Daphne and Velma

5. Good times

6. Play segment

7. Pub purchase

8. Shadow effect from a partial eclipse

9. Flight unit?

10. Crunchyroll offering

11. Clear plastic wrap

13. "So excited!" noise

15. Bookkeeping record

17. Addresses in a browser

22. Bend the truth

24. Color subtleties
- Godard

54. "The Death of Slim Shady (Coup de Gr,ce)" rapper

55. Title for a judge, for short

56. AZ city

57. 1949 mil. alliance

58. All tied up

61. Certain prayer leader

62. Rodent in a maze

63. Twelve-book Trojan tale

64. "Ich bin ___ Berliner" (JFK quote that's a misquote on his part)

65. Pull up a chair

66. Family nickname
25. Trevor who video-interviewed Kamala Harris in October 2020

27. Part of OPEC, for short

29. Barnyard pen

30. Kind of stick or ball

31. Network getting a U.S. remake of U.K. panel show "Have I Got News For You"

32. When most children begin sixth grade

33. James Van ___ Beek

34. Coded strands

36. Nose hair tools

37. Architect Saarinen

38. Minnesota state bird

39. Choose

43. Snake's secretion

44. Number of one-syllable U.S. state names

45. "Ghostbusters" character Dr. ___ Spengler

46. High-IQ group, supposedly

47. Bottled-up type?

48. Taste found in mushrooms

49. Mythical giant like Atlas

50. Half of "Good Mythical Morning"

52. Start of a gym motto

53. Drug store aisle

56. Dish list

59. Grammy-winning guitarist Steve

60. Mid-afternoon drink



Answers to last puzzle



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