INSIDE: Wish you could fly? A local school will help give you wings.

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editor’s welcome

The long March of winter

Punxsutawney Phil may have called for an early spring this year but, if you’ve been around South County for any length of time, you know to take predictions about when the winter will end with the tiniest grains of salt.

Luckily, contrary to popular belief, South County is not just a summer destination. When you know where to look, this area is a beautiful place to spend the harsh winter months and that’s what we’re celebrating in this, our first edition of 2024. In this month’s cover story, we take a special look at some of the area’s most beloved public buildings. That’s right. It’s time to talk about the library.

If you’ve paid attention to Narragansett over the last few years, you know this isn’t a topic without it’s controversy but, after years of struggle, the new and improved Maury Loontjens Memorial Library opened earlier this year to rave reviews and reminds us all of the special role these buildings play in a community.

That’s the focus of reporter Mara Hagen’s story “More Than Words,” and we hope her story will motivate you to head to your local branch and see what’s new because, if you haven’t been a library lately, there’s a whole world out there for you to discover.

Speaking of sights worth seeing, longtime readers of this magazine know that the first issue we put out every year also features one of our favorite traditions: the Annual Photo Challenge.

This year, our readers showed off some truly beautiful works we can’t wait to show you and it’s our hope that you see some of the beauty of South County and get inspired to take your own photos to capture it and preserve it forever.

If you need tips, be sure to check out our companion piece to this year’s Photo Challenge as Hagen’s second story in this magazine “A Matter of Perspective” sheds some light on two local photographers just like you who have learned what it takes to document the beauty of South County through their eyes and cameras. And they’ll tell you how you can do the same.

One of our favorite parts of the annual photo challenge is seeing the lovely photos readers send of South County’s beaches and that got us thinking. What do the beaches look like during winter?

Reporter Bill Seymour knows as his story “Winter Breaks” is all about the lengths one local family goes through each winter to maximize their time in the water. Of course, when your family business is surfing, it makes sense you’d want to catch as many waves as possible all year long.

As usual, our photo challenge also features amazing shots of sunsets and the South County sky but, let’s be honest, I think it’s safe to say the best views are those from above.

In “Reach for the Sky,” reporter Rachel Philpson talks to one local helicopter school about what it takes to learn to fly in 2024 and what she found may just inspire you to try it out for yourself.

Rounding out this month’s issue is another Philpson piece, this time on one of South County’s most beloved and timeless businesses: Sweenor’s Chocolates. This family-run institution, profiled in “Sweet Dreams,” has been around for generations and it’s easy to see why the more things change for the family at the center of this tasty treat maker, the more they stay the same.

Thanks for picking up this issue of South County Life Magazine. We can’t wait to show you what we have in store this year.

Now, if you’ll excuse us, it’s time for us to get back to dreams of warmer weather and the coming colors of spring. And that’s a vision worth waiting for ... regardless of what any celebrity groundhogs have to say.
A BANNER YEAR

Hera Gallery will honor its past, celebrate its present and embrace its future with a special 50th anniversary year full of celebration.

SOUTH KINGSTOWN — Wakefield’s Hera Gallery is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year with an array of exhibitions and events inspired by their past exhibitions that continue to have relevance today.

Hera Gallery was one of the first women-run galleries to open in the United States and is one of the few that remain. In 1974, female Rhode Island based artists created their own contemporary art gallery dedicated to exhibiting femme artists — a concept that was virtually unheard of at the time.

Although the gallery has changed throughout the past five decades, its core mission of creating a gallery setting dedicated to gender equity and feminist discourse to challenge perceptions and inspire social change has remained the same and will always remain the same, Sonja Czekalski, Hera Gallery director said.

“We are a gallery by artists, for artists,” Czekalski said. “For 50 years, it has been our mission to create a cooperative space for artists to show their work without restrictions or censorship. Since people apply for exhibitions and membership from all over the country, it is clear to see that our mission is still imperative.”

Czekalski said this anniversary commemorates the 50 years of passion and dedication of the founding members, especially Roberta Richman and Alexandra Broches who are still active artist members and board members, to a cause that is greater than being an art venue.

“Hera is not in a large city, or even a small city, yet we have survived, proving that our venue is critical to the community,” Czekalski said. “To put a timeline in context, Roe V. Wade was overturned just before its 50th anniversary, and now Women’s Healthcare has regressed. If we do not continue the conversation about gender equity, the conversation will be erased.”

To celebrate the anniversary, Hera Gallery will have 11 in-person exhibitions and one virtual exhibition. Each exhibition title is inspired by an exhibition from the past 50 years.

The first exhibition — which is currently live on the Hera Gallery website — is “Girl Art Now,” a virtual exhibition revisiting the 2024 exhibition of the same name. “Girl Art Now” features 44 international artists whose artwork encapsulates what it feels like to be a girl and how to make art like a girl.

In February, the gallery kicked off the celebration with its 31st Biennial Children’s Art Exhibition, a three-week long exhibition that showcased techniques and creative expressions of local young artists — the first of many opportunities Hera Gallery has for artists at any stage in their career to show their work.

For the Children’s Art Exhibition, Hera Gallery invited Rhode Island art teachers from public and private kindergarten through eighth grade schools to submit 10 works of art to showcase their school and emerging artists. The exhibition offers young artists a special opportunity to present their original artwork to the community in a professional gallery setting, Czekalski said.

“It is tradition to start off our exhibition season with our children’s exhibitions,” Czekalski said. “It brings our community together in the cold winter months, is a great
activity over February vacation and sets the tone for a new year of art at the gallery.”

Sixteen public and private Rhode Island schools participated in the Children’s Art Exhibition with over 150 drawings, paints, sculptures, ceramics and other mediums on display. The participating schools are Rocky Hill Country Day School, Quidnessett Elementary, Stony Lane Elementary, Forest Park Elementary, Fishing Cove Elementary, Wickford Middle School, Hamilton Elementary School, Davisville Academy, Davisville Middle School, Broad Rock Middle School, The Compass School, The Lincoln School, West Kingstown Elementary School, Matunuck Elementary School, Peace Dale Elementary School, Meadowbrook Waldorf School and Bain Middle School.

“Hera Gallery is open to all artists to apply for exhibitions and membership regardless of formal art education or exhibition experience,” Czekalski said. “We value artists at all stages of their careers and utilize our venue as a platform to exhibit ideas and challenge critical discourse over showcasing refined commercial pieces.”

In addition to current member exhibitions, Hera Gallery will be hosting two national exhibitions. Named after one of Hera’s first exhibitions in its inaugural year, “The American Woman: Feminist Futures” will be juried by Amy Smith Stewart, the chief curator of the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in the spring. The fall national exhibition is entitled “Democracy Under Siege” with a pending juror.

In June, Hera Gallery will have a special 50th Anniversary member exhibition entitled “Hera Gallery: Past and Present” with work by current and former members. It will include a past and present celebratory parade with cutouts of founding members by Martha Cooper. In August, they will present “Historical Parallels: featuring Women of Visions,” the longest-running collective of Black women visual artists in the United States.

Throughout the season, Hera Gallery will also have guest special speakers, panel discussions, movie nights and a collaboration with the Domestic Violence Resource Center.

“We are excited to dig into the archives to pull up photographs, newspaper clippings and more to celebrate and commemorate the history of Hera,” Czekalski said.

As an educational foundation and contemporary artist cooperative gallery, Czekalski said Hera Gallery and the Hera Educational Foundation takes pride in being an alternative exhibition space and will continue to be a safe space for female-centered art for years to come.

“There are not many places like us in Southern New England,” Czekalski said. “Many of our current artist members find Hera for this reason and some join us as artist members from across the country!”

As for the next 50 years of Hera Gallery, Czekalski said she hopes more artists and art lovers will continue to hear about the gallery and will be inspired to create more moving artwork.

“(I hope) that our mission continues to spread across the country and inspires more folks to apply for exhibitions, membership, or make some daring artwork,” Czekalski said. “I also hope that it inspires more artist collectives to rise! We are stronger when we collaborate together.”

- Rachel Philipson
Dave Levy, left, his son, Greg, and grandchildren, Oscar, 7, and Isla, 9, prepare to surf near the Pt. Judith Lighthouse in mid-February. For the Levys, surfing isn't just a hobby. It's a bonding experience that unites the family year-round—even during winter months when getting in the water is not for the faint of heart.
Every summer, hundreds of surfers hit South County’s beautiful beaches to catch some of the area’s best waves. But what about the rest of the year? Well, for locals in the know, that’s the time when the water is best ... and when the real memories are made.

Story by Bill Seymour,
Photography by Michael Derr
Surfing for the Levys is a family sport, even when gloved hands reach into bone-chilling 40-degree salt water to paddle off the coast of Narragansett and Matunuck.

“I get colder snowboarding than I get surfing,” said a smiling Greg Levy, 42, glancing over to his father, Dave, 72, who has been a local — and international — wave rider for over 60 years.

The winter and cold spring waters have never deterred these two, said the Levys, who have passed the passion for the sport to Greg’s children, Oscar, 7, and Isla, 9, though she prefers warmer weather.

“Surfing is my passion because of the sense of freedom it brings me. Whether it’s the winter or the summer, I love hitting the waves,” said Oscar.

Floating in the Atlantic’s frigid waters, while waiting for the right wave, may be chasing an “Endless Summer,” but those in the 1966 flick by the same name were in warm waters seeking the perfect wave.

For the Levys, it is a matter of love and passion for a sport that bonds this family across the generations on surfboards.

“Surfing at this time of year can be a turbulent love affair with ice-cream headaches, limited daylight hours and heavy hold downs,” according to surf and retreat planners Surf Sistas.

“However, it’s not all cold and misery. Winter also opens us to exploration, hunting for sheltered corners from storm swells, surfing different breaks from the locals. It’s also a chance to challenge yourself in some heavier conditions and improve your overall surf fitness,” the company pointed out.

The Levys agree.

Greg, who has taken the passion to include working in the surf equipment and clothing business, pointed out that evolving designs in wetsuits have now replaced the once-required drysuit to prevent an onset of hyperthermia.

In surfer language, he says winter and early spring surfing means “you need a 5/4 hooded wetsuit, with seven mil boots and five mil gloves.”

This all distills to a sturdy wetsuit having different material thicknesses across various areas. It is five millimeters thick in some areas and four millimeters in others. It also has a hood attached to keep your head warm.

The recommended boots are made of seven-millimeters-thick material to keep feet warm in cold water, and gloves have five-millimeters-thick material to protect fingers that could get cold first, then palms and the rest of the hand.

“This gear is designed for swimming or surfing in cold water,” he added. Yet, it remains more flexible than the old drysuit that might be compared to “running in heaving clothing,” which would drain energy and stamina.

Giving his usual plain-spoken and
common-sense thoughts, the elder Levy said bluntly: “You have to make sure it’s all working well.”

That means no pinholes, rips, tears, or loose-fitting and unzipped portions that could easily let a lot of icy water or further open while many yards offshore.

In addition, winter surfing includes the mechanics of paddling, catching a wave and standing up.

“It’s all pretty much the same as any other time of the year. The only thing is that you might be a bit cold as you get ready to go and put on the suit,” said Dave Levy, who noted he changes in his van.

“I’ve ruined too many car seats with the salt water dripping from my suit,” said Levy, owner of Levy Surf Designs, who hand-makes custom surfboards and paddleboards in Narragansett.

Greg said he and the kids get changed at home before heading to the winter seas when west, northwest and southwest winds blow offshore to make for clean surfing. That is the reward for the effort, he and his father said.

Both men said that conditions are often variable, so it’s hard to estimate how often they seek winter waves and harbinger of summer surf, which is still very cold in March and April.

The weather — regardless of snow or rain — may bequeath rollicking rollers from a storm every two weeks. They said their various phone and computer apps make them surfer meteorologists.

When conditions are favorable, they may make one, perhaps more trips, to favorite spots (that they won’t disclose) for a romp and glide and coast through the icebox surf.

However, no matter the temps, waves or lack of surf, this family sport, Dave said, is always worth doing.

“I love having the experience of seeing the kids catch waves or when Greg will grab one of their feet and paddle out with them,” he said, noting the nostalgia that comes as he remembers doing the same with Greg.

Greg remembers those days, too.

“It’s an inspiration. He’s the one who taught me to surf, and this led to my career, and he’s still here with me,” he said.

It is not lost on the kids, either.

“I love hitting the waves. Learning from my dad and grandpa only adds to the excitement, as they teach me all sorts of cool tricks and techniques,” Oscar said.

His sister, Isla, dodges the cold dip, but remains part of the pack of family surfers.

“While I absolutely love surfing in the summer, I am grateful for the opportunity to travel to warmer destinations in the winter to catch some waves with my dad, who is always looking for the best waves,” she said.

“Riding my grandpa’s boards is a unique experience as they are truly the best and it’s pretty cool to be able to say that my grandpa made them himself!” she added.

Write to Bill Seymour, a freelance writer covering news and feature stories, at independent.southcountylife@gmail.com.
Everywhere you look, there is beauty to be found in South County. From beautiful beaches to iconic structures, there’s no shortage of sights to be seen. Every spring, we ask readers to share their favorite photos with us. As usual, they came through with pictures worth more than a thousand words.
Clockwise from top left: “Solace on the Ocean Shore” by Ray Stachelek; “Ooh Aah” by Ginny Newton; “Last Light of Day” by Ginny Newton; “Jamestown View of the Pell in Red White and Blue” by Donna Lynch.
Above: “Bridge to the Future” by Steven Pinch; Below: “Snowy Owl” by David Hempe; At right: (Top) “Tranquil Sunset over an Estuary” by Ray Stachelek; (Bottom Left) “Full Moon over Jamestown” by Donna Lynch; (Bottom Right) “Rolling with the Waves” by Ginny Newton.
Photographing South County’s beauty is about much more than being in the right place at the right time. For two budding local photographers, it’s about looking beyond the perfect backdrop and seeing the art that lies within.

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Story by Mara Hagen, Photography by Michael Derr
THE SUN BEGINS TO SINK BELOW THE SEA, TURNING THE SKY A COLLAGE OF PINK AND ORANGE CLOUDS. A COLD WIND WHIPS ACROSS BEACH REEDS, A GUST OF SAND IS BLOWN AROUND SOLITARY ANKLES. A WOMAN SHIVERS, PULLS HER COAT TIGHT AROUND HER, AND TAKES OUT A CAMERA. AT THE SAME TIME ACROSS TOWN, IN A SMALL, CROWDED BAR, ANOTHER WOMAN TAKES OFF HER COAT, ORDERS A DRINK. SHE SLINGS A HUGE CAMERA BAG OVER HER THIN SHOULDER AND HEADS TO THE FRONT OF A SCUFFED STAGE FOR A PERFORMANCE.

AS THE SUN IS ABOUT TO DISAPPEAR FOR THE NIGHT, THE SKY KISSES FAREWELL WITH AN EXTRAORDINARY BURST OF COLORS, AND STACY CLARK CLICKS FURIOUSLY ON HER PHONE CAMERA TO IMMORTALIZE THE MOMENT. AS CLARK SNAPS AWAY, SONJA LEMOI SLOWLY BEGINS TO SET UP HER CAMERA, WAITING FOR THE PERFECT SHOT OF THE BAND FROM BEHIND THE CURTAIN.

BOTH WOMEN ARE ATTRACTED TO PHOTOGRAPHING DIFFERENT THINGS, YET THERE IS A COMMON THREAD BETWEEN THE TWO: A LOVE FOR OUR STATE, THE PEOPLE, AND ITS BEAUTY.

LEMOI FIRST GOT A CAMERA WHEN HER SON WAS BORN, BUT THE PASSION FOR PHOTOGRAPHY REALLY BEGAN ABOUT 10 YEARS AGO, WHEN SHE WAS HIRED TO TAKE PICTURES FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY FAIR; SINCE THEN, SHE HAS BEEN “BIT BY THE BUG.” THE WASHINGTON COUNTY FAIR IS AS INTRINSIC TO RHODE ISLAND AS IGGY’S AND COFFEE MILK. BEING HIRED TO IMMORTALIZE THIS ENVIRONMENT MADE HER CONSIDER, FOR THE FIRST TIME, HOW DO I CAPTURE THE SPIRIT OF RHODE ISLAND?

“I DEVELOPED MY STYLE AND MY PERSPECTIVE, WHICH SEEMS TO BE EXTREMELY LOW,” SHE SAYS. “I TRY TO MAKE MYSELF AS SMALL AS POSSIBLE, I WANT PEOPLE TO FEEL LIKE THEY’RE NOT BEING WATCHED, YET I WANT TO WATCH YOU.”

SHE HAS EVEN GONE SO FAR AS CRAWLING UNDER A COW’S UDDER TO GET THE PERFECT SHOT.

AS A GARDENER FOR WILD AND SCENIC, LEMOI BEGAN PHOTOGRAPHING WITH HER PHONE EVERYTHING BEAUTIFUL THAT SHE SAW. “I LOOK AT THE WORLD THROUGH A ROSE-COLORED LENS. I WISH MY EYES WERE A CAMERA, I WITNESS SOMETHING AND I WANT TO STOP IT IN TIME.”

This feeling she has towards photography is something she wants to share because “it helps them remember a moment if they were in that place. Or if they weren’t, they can experience it through my photograph. It is kind of like time traveling.”

CLARK, A NARRAGANSETT LIBRARIAN WHO POSTS PHOTOGRAPHS ON INSTAGRAM UNDER THE HASHTAG #MYSOUTHCOUNTYLIFE, TAKES PHOTOS BECAUSE SHE “WANTS TO CAPTURE AND REMEMBER BEAUTIFUL MOMENTS, TO SHARE THEM WITH OTHER PEOPLE. I SHARE THESE BEAUTIFUL MOMENTS THAT I AM LUCKY TO SEE.”

A NATIVE OF WESTERLY, RHODE ISLAND, CLARK WAS ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE WHO WAS INSPIRED BY THE ENVIRONMENT AROUND HER; WHO, BEFORE THE EXISTENCE OF CELLPHONES, CARRIED AROUND A DISPOSABLE CAMERA. WHEN SHE IS NOT AT WORK SHE IS AT THE BEACH, AND THE STATE’S VAST COASTLINE PROVIDES ENDLESS INSPIRATION FOR CLARK’S PHOTOGRAPHY. “ANYTHING BY THE OCEAN IS MY INSPIRATION. PHOTOGRAPHY IS MY THERAPY.”

While Lemoi is more interested in capturing the humanity of Rhode Island, Clark finds herself leaning towards the

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landscape portrait. And, when it comes to art, we need both. You cannot find the essence of a state without its geography, nor can you find it without its people.

Both Clark and Lemoi prefer photographing summer in Rhode Island. Lemoi enjoys summer because “everything is alive, the colors are bright, everyone is hot and sweaty.” It is easier to stand outside and take pictures in the summer, which is why Clark advocates for summer photography. But the winter has better sunsets. “Winter sunsets make you work harder for it, but it’s so worth it.”

Photography has budded into such an easily accessible art form, as the nicest camera’s now sit readily available in most of our back pockets, making photographers of us all. But before we go off thinking we are Man Ray or Ansel Adams, here are some tips and tricks from the pros.

Clark advocates for paying attention to angles. Her strategy is to take multiple photos of the same landscape on her iPhone, while trying out different angles. Then she will go back and cull, choosing the best one and editing from there. Lemoi stresses patience. It is all about “looking for the light, looking for the right light, and patience. It is a feel, I feel myself doing weird movements until I am plugged in, and then when the subject and me are plugged in, that’s when you have nailed it.”

You can find Stacy Clark and her prints on her website coastaltownphotos.shootproof.com or at her Instagram handle coastaltown_photos.

Sonja Lemoi can be found and scheduled for a portrait photoshoot or boudoir shot at sonjalemoiphotography.com.

Photography is all about learning how to be flexible and finding the right angles and, for Sonja Lemoi, that means putting her yoga training to go use to line up a photo along the Saugatucket River in Wakefield.
For generations of both children and adults, local libraries have felt like home. And with good reason. Far more than purveyors of books, local libraries are a one stop shop for all a community needs and in South County, that’s a service that will never go out of style.

Story by Mara Hagen, Photography by Michael Derr
It is a brisk, grey day in South Kingstown. The cold streets are mostly empty, wind rips through the playgrounds, the still trees. There is a sense of loneliness in the air, a quietness unrippled; with the exception of one car.

It is a Sunday, and the library closes soon. The woman had a sudden urge to go to the library, an urge she hasn’t had since before 2020. As she pulls in, she notices the windows are illuminated in a warm glow and silhouettes walk across the yellow glass curtain. She rushes across the biting parking lot, and the comfortable air of the library instantly settles her. There is a group of readers meeting for a book club in a cozy corner, whisper-laughing to each other. A mother sits reading to her young child on the floor of the youth room, across from them her, her grandfather reads the paper. She feels, less lonely, more at peace. She has lived alone since 2020 and did not know she could find this in the library, a place she forgot held more than just books.

Laurel Clark, director of the South Kingstown Public Library, sits at a big desk in a small, slanted room, nestled in a cobblestoned pillar of the historic building. She has been the director of the library for 7 years and says that Rhode Island is still her favorite place in the world to be. “Rhode Island is special, so unique, so small, but so full of heart, creativity and history.”

The libraries of Rhode Island foster the landscape of communities that Clark finds so intricate. There are 48 libraries in RI, each one offering something special for its citizens.

Continued on page 22
Pam Kaczynski, the central library services manager for the South Kingstown Public Library, returns books to the stacks at Peace Dale Library.
Patti Arkwright, director of the Maury Loontjens Memorial Library in Narragansett, pragmatically views libraries as being "defined differently than what people are used to."

"The purpose of a library is to bring people to information, and to help them find it," she said recently. "It is also a community center, a place where they can gather."

Clark finds the library building more of a shelter, a shelter from the physical and mental ailments that affect us all. A place to hide out from the cold, to cool down in the heat, or a place for people to see a friendly face, if they live alone.

"People can take from it what they need," she said.

Arkwright sits behind another desk, in a much brighter, and newer, office. The Maury Loontjens Memorial Library just completed the migration and renovation into the old, larger, Pier Marketplace, from its tiny companion building off Kingstown road. Some folks were worried about the change as another reflection of the present forgetting the past, but Arkwright knows that the new building will facilitate the increasing demands the library has from the community.

"People have come to realize how important libraries are and what they have to offer," she said. "In the past, they thought they were only books, but now they realize there is more to it."

From author talks, to egg hunts, it is evident that this library holds much more than books on its shelves.

Libraries not only offer an assortment of community-building resources but have the capacity to change lives. Both Clark and Arkwright believe that libraries foster the creation of an increasingly rare, coveted creature, the "life-long reader."
Clark believes that the books in the library offer adventure. Knowledge. Escape.
“Some people need a break, and these books offer them an escape from the world,” she said.

The thirst for knowledge that a library quenches is something that is sacred, something un-exchangeable.

The heavy age of technology is sitting fat upon our chest, and this weight threatens to suffocate what modern society holds as natural as breathing: reading. According to The National Literacy Trust, “fewer than 3 in 10 children and young people aged 8-18 said they read daily in 2023.” With the vapid consumption of cheap, easy phone screens, and daily produced streaming television shows, the urge to read a book becomes a bygone thought.

Libraries are important to give breath back to the art of reading, Clark professes. “Readers are leaders!” she said. “Reading advances you in life. Not just monetarily or career wise, but emotionally and mentally. Libraries continue to help people see different perspectives, help them expand their world. It opens a lot of choices and options they may encounter.”

AI has seeped into most aspects of reality, and libraries are not excluded from the threat of its misuse. Arkwright compares the threat level of AI, and digital books, to the enamor one feels when confronted with a new toy.

“You get really excited with it, but then you realize you miss the old stuff,” she said. “You really like to hold the book, you like to smell the book. You get a different experience.”

When confronted with the idea of total library obsoletism, Clark’s eyes narrow across the book-covered expanse of her desk “No,” she said. “I do not believe in that. And curse those who say they do.”

When Arkwright was in high school she took a personality test that matched her dream job as a librarian. She shook her head and said “no way.” Twenty years later, she found a part time job at a library as a children’s librarian, and the rest was history.

To be a librarian is to have a selfless commitment to the belief in the goodness of knowledge. After 20 years in library work, Clark has spent seven years of service at the South Kingstown library branch, and still feels amazed,

“The staff of a library is great, especially in this branch,” she said. “They are very dedicated to give back to community and do their job.”

Even after all this time she stills pulls up to work feeling lucky, for the beautiful building, for the beautiful space, the beautiful people.

As you prepare to exit the new Narragansett library, you can peek around at the glistening white bookshelves, the wave-themed table dividers, and the red plush chairs.

For those who grew up in the antiquated, smaller library, there may be a piece of nostalgia in the air, a lingering for the familiarity of the past. But when you see the people coming in and out the door, and the next generation of kids playing in spacious kids section, Arkwright’s closing remarks resonate.

“A lot of times people think about libraries as comfortable, cozy places, and moving from a small place to a bigger place would change things,” she said. “I think it is that people that visit that make it, all it is, is just a little bigger, a little brighter, and a little nicer.”
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Since the days of the Wright Brothers, man has dreamed of taking flight. But dreams will only get you so far. Enter HeliBlock, Southern Rhode Island’s premiere helicopter flight school: Where dreams become reality.

Story by Rachel Philipson, Photography by Michael Derr

Elijah Johnson, top, a flight instructor for HeliBlock, conducts a pre-flight check before taking his student, Adam Rhodes, of Attleboro, Mass., for a lesson at Westerly State Airport.
here is magic in the air when a helicopter first starts to hover above the ground with the anticipation of adventure. At the Rhode Island/Connecticut-based helicopter company, HeliBlock, their certified flight instructors will provide one-on-one flight training for those who want to become a successful, safe and efficient pilot.

Whether someone is looking for an exhilarating new hobby or a new career in the helicopter industry, HeliBlock certified flight instructor (instrument) Elijah Johnson said he believes any dedicated student of the helicopter flight school can become a pilot.

"If they are willing to put in the effort and actually try, I do believe anyone can learn how to fly," Johnson said.

**Floating to Cloud Nine: What is Helicopter Flight School?**

Since 2016, HeliBlock has been a helicopter operational company that caters to the greater New England area, They originally began with aerial sightseeing tours around Block Island, but quickly grew and expanded to offer charter services, aerial photography, flight instruction, wildlife survey and additional tour locations, according to their website. The flight instruction component was added later in their opening year.

With their helicopter flight school, instruction of all levels in Robinson R44 helicopters is offered year-round. (Robinson R44 is a model of aircraft with four seats and a slightly bigger engine and body as compared to other helicopter models.) Depending on if they want to pursue flight as a hobby or profession, HeliBlock pairs students with an instructor that best meets their flight training needs.

The experienced certified flight instructors help the students reach their minimum flight hours required by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and learn the required skill sets needed to safely fly. To prepare students for certification exams, the flight school combines flight training and ground school.

HeliBlock has a wide selection of courses, including private pilot, instrument, commercial, flight instructor and “add-on.” Students first start with a private pilot license and gain additional licenses as needed.

As for Johnson, he has always had a love for flying. He pursued his passion at Southern Utah University, where he earned an instructor’s license (with the specific instrumental distinction). Johnson joined the HeliBlock team a few months ago and says it has been incredible working with students, seeing them strengthening their skills with every lesson.

His role is to teach students all the rules and regulations that go into getting the licenses and teaching how to hands-on fly the aircraft safely, but Johnson said he wouldn’t call himself a teacher. Instead, he is more of a guide to knowledge, answering any and all questions along the way.

"It’s a lot of work on the individual themselves," Johnson said. "The instructor can only do so much. It’s a teacher slash guide [role] to help them learn what they need to learn."

**Giving Wings: One-on-One Instruction for New Hobby**

The process for learning how to fly starts the same way, no matter one’s flying intentions. The first license, known as a private pilot license, allows individuals to fly a helicopter for personal use and enjoyment—but without the ability for monetary compensation.

The first phase of pilot training is an introduction to helicopter aerodynamics and basic maneuvers, like hovering, approaches and departures. Once students complete
Elijah Johnson, a flight instructor for HeliBlock, says it takes a lot of time and dedication to train to fly but feels it is “one hundred percent worth it.”

preliminary authorization to fly, they can take the wheel and begin the learning process.

Inside the aircraft, Johnson said there are dual controls, similar to a driver’s education car, with a full set of controls. This gives the student hands-on training with some guidance.

“If I were to take a new student up there, I can basically immediately start giving them certain controls while monitoring it the whole time,” he said. “Technically, I am still in control of the whole aircraft, but it gives them control to learn how it all works.”

In the second phase, students build upon their basic skills, as well as learning how to best handle emergency procedures. In his lessons, Johnson monitors the student’s strengths and weaknesses and tries to best cater to their current level, as well as fitting as many needed skills required for pilots to know from the FAA’s Practical Test Standards (PTS) as possible.

“As far as lessons go, I try to hit as many things in each lesson as I can, obviously monitoring how the student is performing,” Johnson said. “I try not to overwhelm them. If they are able to complete everything, we are able to progress.”

Students need both in air flight time and ground instruction to acquire the needed PTS, Johnson said.

“Generally, the rule of thumb I was given when I first started training was for every hour you are flying, you are doing three hours of ground,” he said. “I try to get my students in these [ground] lessons where I am going through all the information as well as flying with them in the air.”

The final phase is preparation for the private pilot license exam, a final stage to perfect maneuvers and emergency procedures. Once the instructor thinks a student is ready for examination, they will endorse them. If the student passes the exam, they can become a licensed private pilot.

“There is a very strict list of things that you have to know and be able to perform in the aircraft in order to get the license,” he said.

Soaring High: Flying Helicopters As A Second Career

For students who wish to use their skills as a professional helicopter pilot, they will need to continue their flight studies to become commercially certified.

“If you are just doing it for a hobby and fly around for fun, you really only need to achieve the private pilot license but if you are trying to make it more of a career, you have to proceed with getting licensing,” Johnson said.

According to the HeliBlock website, the company suggests students work on their instrument rating at the same time as their commercial pilot license. An instrument rating allows a helicopter pilot to fly only referencing their instruments without the need to look outside — which is critical for inclement weather.

The commercial license training phrases are similar to the private license, but focuses on more advanced maneuvers typically found in commercial flight settings, like confined areas and slope landings. Once a pilot has received their commercial license, they can operate an aircraft for compensation.

HeliBlock also offers two flight instructor licenses, one called certificated flight instructor (CFI) and the other called certified flight instructor instrument (CFII). Johnson said the only difference is that CFIs can teach the specific instrument rating — whereas CFII can’t.

At the end of the day, it takes a lot of time and dedication to successfully complete all of the needed training. Johnson said it’s worth every second of training to be able to have the joy of flying.

“[It is] one hundred percent worth it but definitely was a lot, a lot of restless nights and stress but so worth it,” Johnson said.

Ready for Take-off: Helicopters are for Everyone

No matter the student’s motivation behind wanting to learn how to fly, Johnson said every student shares a strong desire for flying — and it shows through what the student is able to achieve and how hard they are working.

As a certified flight instructor, he said it’s the best feeling seeing students go from not being able to control the aircraft at all to safely performing complicated maneuvers.

“My favorite part is working with those individuals who are inspired by the work and watching them grow and be able to achieve these things they have been dreaming of,” Johnson said. “It is so fulfilling and watching things click in their minds and be able to perform. You are there for the whole process.”

By having a helicopter flight school in Southern Rhode Island, Johnson said it makes it significantly easier for locals who have a passion for flight to “fly” after their dreams.

“I moved across the country to learn how to fly but if there was a local flight school, that would have made things simpler,” Johnson said. “The ability to have a well-run flight school in the local area for people is a huge benefit.”

He expressed that anyone, at any age (above the legal requirement age of 16), can learn how to fly. Currently, he personally has students in their 20s from early 80s. Johnson added that he has people of all ages trying to pursue an aviation career, and it is inspiring to see so.

“It’s never too late or too early to learn,” Johnson said.

For more information on HeliBlock’s flight instruction and additional information, please visit their website https://heliblocktours.com/
For nearly seven decades, Sweenor’s Chocolates has been the go-to source for locally-made chocolate in South County. Why? Well, it all comes down to the secret ingredient: Family.

Bill Sweenor, front, and his children, Brian Sweenor and Lisa Sweenor Dunham, hold trays of buttercrunch at Sweenor’s Chocolates in Wakefield. At 84 years old, Bill still stays active in the business but has passed the day-to-day operations to the fourth generation of the family.
While the fictional chocolatier Willy Wonka is having a renaissance following the latest musical prequel movie, South County locals have a real-life candy shop with scrumptious delectables that is almost too good to be true.

The fourth generation owned and operated candy shop, Sweenor’s Chocolates, has been a beloved sweet spot for South County locals since 1955. Lisa Sweenor Dunham, co-owner and treasurer, said her family’s business is dedicated to using high quality ingredients, providing excellent customer service, and maintaining an affordable price point.

While the commitment to creating the best confections remains the same, the business has grown since its humble beginnings as a home business 69 years ago. Sweenor’s Chocolates has expanded to two physical locations (Garden City Center Cranston and Wakefield), an online store and has claimed the title of Rhode Island’s largest chocolate manufacturer.

Lisa Sweenor Dunham said her family never envisioned their small family business would have become a community favorite and Rhode Island’s largest chocolate manufacturer, but it is an honor they hold proudly.

“Small businesses don’t always survive in the current landscape, especially manufacturers,” Lisa Sweenor Dunham said. “We value the title of Rhode Island’s largest chocolate manufacturer because it means that we have had support from the state and community over many years, when people keep coming back it allows us to grow.”

Humble beginnings

School teacher Walter Sweenor learned how to make candy from his father who was a candy maker himself in Springfield, Massachusetts in the early 1900s. To make extra money during World War II, Walter Sweenor started to create sweets in his basement kitchen, ultimately opening a retail shop named “Sweenor’s Open Fire Candies” in Garden City Center Cranston, Rhode Island, in 1955.

The business was still going strong when Walter’s son, Bill Sweenor, joined the business in the late 1950s. In 1979, Bill and his wife Claire opened a storefront in Wakefield, later moving the main kitchen to Wakefield in 1983.

Presently, the next generation of Sweenor’s are co-owners, with Lisa Sweenor Dunham handling business operations and her brother, Brian Sweenor, co-owner and primary candy maker, working with their father to create a wide assortment of treats by hand.

Lisa said Brian has worked for the business ever since he was a child, even while he spent a few years rowing competitively. On the other hand, she worked part time for Sweenor’s Chocolates in high school and college, leaving to pursue a career in Information Technology. When Claire was ready to retire, Lisa was recovering after having her third child and knew it was perfect timing for her to go back to the business.

“No two days are alike… My role is more of the business side, but I also make all of the baskets and often do many other things,” she said. “When you own a business, you wear many hats.”

Lisa, Brian and Bill are the only family members on staff. However, Lisa said everyone on their 35-person team feels like a member of their family.

“Some of our employees have been with us for a long time,” Lisa said. “We consider them family.”

Nowadays, Sweenor’s Chocolates is still developing new products, Lisa said. Right now, they have a recently added 72% cocoa line that has become popular, in addition to their ongoing experimentations with vegan chocolate. The key is to listen to what customers want.

“We used to do a lot more hard candy, especially in the very early days, as that was the demand,” Lisa said. “The demand now is for more chocolate items.”

Yes, You Can-dy: How the Candy Gets Made

Sweenor’s Chocolates does sell a wide assortment of candy, ranging from sugar mints, fudge and jelly beans. Their best sellers are almond buttercrunch nut clusters, turtles and caramels - most notably their dark chocolate sea salts.

Lisa said the recipes have been handed down for generations and takes a lot of skill to pull them off correctly.

“Each center is made differently, some are easier than others,” she said. “Chocolate has to be tempered perfectly, there’s a bit of chemistry involved.”

Before any candies can be made, one needs ingredients. Lisa said Sweenor’s Chocolates only uses first-rate ingredients, such as fresh cream, butter, honey, roasted nuts and a special blend of pure milk chocolate and dark chocolate, superior flavors and no preservatives.

“Quality ingredients make everything better,” she said.

For chocolate production, Brian runs two enrobers (a chocolate manufacturing machine) four days a week. He leaves Fridays as a separate day to make other candies. (He does have an assistant who does the candy molding and helps in the kitchen, Lisa added.)

The two enrobers are used for dark chocolate and milk chocolate, respectively. Before it is time for the enrober, the candy centers are made in the kitchen where the
creams are mixed and extruded into round centers and/or the caramel is cooked over a fire cooker in a kettle pot.

Once everything is ready, the candy center is fed into one end of the enrober, getting a top and bottom coat of chocolate. Someone will put a decoration or mark on the top that identifies the chocolate, and it then goes through a cooling tunnel before it gets packed into a stock box at the other end.

“Brian is always prepping for the next day,” Lisa said. “We have molding in operation five days a week.”

Beyond physically making the chocolate, Lisa said there is a lot of planning to determine what exactly to make. Their busy seasons are the weeks before Christmas and Easter, as well as the three days before Valentine’s Day. She said months of planning go into all three holidays.

“We keep records of what we made/sold for each and plan accordingly,” she said. “Supplies need to be ordered well in advance.”

Carrying on the Sweenor’s Chocolates Legacy

Every day working at Sweenor’s Chocolates is a fun new adventure, Lisa Sweenor Dunham said. She said it’s vital for her family to uphold family traditions and keep the bonds of their family alive.

“When people tell me their own family history with Sweenor’s, and how it’s part of their own family traditions it is heartwarming,” she said. “Brian and I really love our jobs. We work a lot of hours over the holidays, but we enjoy every minute. Our dad is 84 and still comes to work every day and loves every minute. It says a lot when you really love your job.”

Year after year, Sweenor’s Chocolates has brought exciting, delicious delights to loyal sweet tooth aficionados. Lisa said she hopes Sweenor’s Chocolates can remain a fixture of the South County community, proving that family businesses are a much-needed necessity.

“Family businesses are few and far between,” she said. “It shows others that it can be done and done successfully. Communities need businesses that have stood the test of time. And everyone needs chocolate now and then!”

Sweenor’s Chocolates is located at 21 Charles St, Wakefield, RI and 43 Hillside Rd, Cranston, RI. Sweenor’s Chocolates are also available for purchase through their online shop at sweenorschocolates.com.
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