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contents

4 **Local Catch**
Check out some of the upcoming events that you won't want to miss.

8 **A New Perspective**
Clark Farms is a beloved South County institution. But that doesn't mean it can't evolve and embrace new ideas. Enter Max Buchholz.

10 **Rhode Rage**
If it's December, it's time for the best rivalry in all of Rhode Island sports: URI vs. PC mens basketball.

14 **Feeling Festive**
It's the most wonderful time of the year in North Kingstown. That's right. It's time for the Festival of Lights.

18 **The Sweet Spot**
Whether you're looking for a tasty treat or a gift for the hard-to-please person in your life, South County's chocolate scene is sure to deliver.

22 **Hearts of Glass**
Why settle for an ordinary Christmas gift when you can make one forged by fire? Clancy Designs Glass Studio will show you how this holiday season.

25 **The Giving Tree**
The Teens for Teens program started out with a simple idea and has grown into an annual showcase of care.

28 **Calendar**
Calendar of upcoming events this month in Southern Rhode Island.

THAT'S THE SPIRIT!

Ebenezer Scrooge returns as Contemporary Theater Company rings in the holidays with its latest take on 'A Christmas Carol'

Story by Stephanie Bernaba



The Contemporary Theater Company unwraps a brand-new "A Christmas Carol" in Wakefield this holiday season.

Each December, South County audiences return to a story they all know by heart. This year, The Contemporary Theater Company offers theatergoers a unique way to experience it. The CTC will open a new adaptation of "A Christmas Carol" on December 4, with a fresh script, new faces, and a few surprises along the way.

This time-honored holiday adventure requires no introduction. Over one very long night, the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his old business partner, then by three spirits. By Christmas morning, Scrooge is a changed man.

This year's production opens in the present day, with a troupe of actors gathering to tell everyone's favorite Christmas tale. From there, the crowd is transported back to Victorian London.

"Rolling doors, quick costume changes, and an impressive sound design will keep the show engaging," Artistic Director Paula Glen said.

CTC, which celebrated its 20th anniversary last year, first brought Dickens to its Main Street stage in 2018. The story returns every few years, alternating with other holiday favorites such as "Miss Bennet: Christmas at Pemberley" and "Mrs. Bob Cratchit's Wild Christmas Binge." Its most recent run, in 2024, was Glen's own adaptation, in which five actors shared every role.

"It's still one of my very favorite shows that I've been involved with," Glen said.

This year, the director is also the playwright. Theodore Clement, who coordinates the theater program at the Community College of Rhode Island, wrote the adaptation himself. A longtime director and actor, Clement received the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival's Region 1 Medallion in 2022 for his service to theater education. In recent years, he has also premiered his own original plays at CCRI. University of Rhode Island student Kayla Kennedy serves as stage manager.

Phil Iredale makes his CTC debut in the show's central role, Ebenezer Scrooge. Offstage, Iredale works as a neuroscience consultant.

Glen herself plays Jacob Marley, which she considers the best role in the production.

"I come in, moan and talk for two minutes and then take the rest of the night

off," she joked.

It's been a busy year for Glen, who was music director for "Into the Woods" and played Lady Bracknell in the CTC's production of "The Importance of Being Earnest."

Tiny Tim is played by Desmond Hanlon, who comes from a true CTC family. His mother, Cathleen Carr, is a favorite in the theater's "Whodunit?" improvised murder mysteries, and his older brother, Ronan, played Young Scrooge in the CTC's 2023 production of "Mrs. Bob Cratchit's Wild Christmas Binge."

Allison Krebs, who plays Mrs. Fezziwig, wrote, directed, and produced "Han-Tyumi and the Murder of the Universe," a sci-fi rock opera set to the music of King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard, for the CTC's 2026 Springboard season.

For three cast members, this production will feel very close to home. Mackenzie Brennan, Mrs. Cratchit, shares the stage with her partner, James Scott, as Bob Cratchit, and her father, John Brennan, as Mr. Fezziwig.

"It's a delightful family affair," Glen said.

All three come straight from the banks of the Saugatucket River, along with Sarah Elizabeth Taylor, the Ghost of Christmas Present. This summer, they all appeared in "Love's Labour's Lost," the 10th anniversary production of the CTC's Shakespeare on the Saugatucket series.

The cast also includes Will Riordan as Fred, Leila Rodrigues as the Ghost of Christmas Past, Evergreen Eads as Fan, Sondra Royce as Belle, Micaela Chille as Martha Cratchit, and Emma Platt as Belinda Cratchit.

Glen said the company is thrilled to include so many newcomers this season.

While the production welcomes audiences of all ages, Glen advises that younger children might find Jacob Marley's ghost scary, particularly with the new sound effects. Parents may want to use their own judgment when deciding whether to bring young children.

Carols, cocktails and extra cheer

On select dates to be announced, carolers from the South County Chamber Singers will offer pre-show holiday music.

The theater is also bringing back its Christmas Cheer Bundle. This package combines a pair of tickets to "A Christmas Carol" with two tickets to the CTC's Christmas Cocktail Cabaret — an evening featuring holiday scenes, carols, and festive music at The Towers on December 18.

"A Christmas Carol" will run December 4 to 20 at The Contemporary Theater Company, 327 Main St., Wakefield. Performances are Fridays and Saturdays, December 4 to 19, at 7 p.m.; Thursdays, December 10 and 17, at 7 p.m.; and Sundays, December 6, 13, and 20, at 2 p.m.

Seating is general admission, with a limited number of accessible seats available by request. Glen said the show tends to sell out, especially the matinees, so early ticket purchase is recommended. For tickets, visit the CTC website at contemporarytheatercompany.com or call the box office at 401-218-0282.

LEFT Phil Iredale, left, and Desmond Hanlon will play Scrooge and Tiny Tim as the Contemporary Theater Company brings "A Christmas Carol" to the stage December 4-20.





DECK THE HALLS

For over 40 years, the Chorus of Westerly's Christmas Pops has been one of the premiere events in Southern RI and with good reason. Take a look inside the time-honored tradition.

Story by Rob Duguay

Christmas is just around the corner, which means that there's no shortage of events on the horizon to celebrate the most festive time of the year. This includes Tree Lightings, Caroling, Secret Santas and even personal get-togethers with friends and family members to catch up and reflect.

When it comes to the best places to hear live holiday music, though, there's one event unlike any other in Southern Rhode Island: the Chorus of Westerly's annual Christmas Pops performances.

With three shows taking place December 19 at 6 p.m. and December 20 at 3 p.m. and 5:30 p.m., the Chorus of Westerly will bring all of the traditional holiday classics to George Kent Performance Hall — located on 119 High Street — and even some songs you might not expect.

The concert series was initially conceived as a counterpart to the Summer Pops, which takes place at Wilcox Park in June and draws over 20,000 people. As one of the events of the chorus' season, there's a ton of planning that goes into it with things getting ramped up roughly a month beforehand.

"In terms of putting it together, it gets a fair amount of attention, but our Music Director Andrew Howell starts working on repertoire and other things for all of our concerts about 10 to 12 months out to set the schedule for the year," Executive Director Ryan Saunders says. "Rehearsal wise for it, the chorus will really only pick it up once we complete our November concert on the 15th of that month, so we really have a month to put it together musically. We know what's going to happen, obviously with planning of the program and all that stuff, but we tend to do all of those things in the summertime."

Regarding its status as part of the chorus' annual season, the Christmas Pops is definitely at a high echelon. At the same time, it's presented in a way that caters to families and people of all walks of life in a proper manner.

"It's our biggest holiday event, if you will, so it's one of our marquee events," Saunders mentions. "All of the different activities that we pull off at different concerts, they all have different flavors and style, so this one is probably the most accessible concert to audience members because it's a mix of familiar with new, but new in terms of there often being new arrangements to Carols, Christmas music, and stuff like that. It's the concert that's the most relaxed while being presented on a professional level along with being family-friendly in a warm environment."

The organization of the series comes from Howell making executive decisions, but there's a team effort involved. This is evident through the involvement of Saunders himself along with a person who contributes to the overall vision.

"It's Andrew's job to put on exciting events, but he certainly works alongside me as we talk about what's going to fit for the program and for the year," he says. "We also have an artistic partner who's a composer in New York named John Tafone who does a lot of arrangements of music for us. If there's a particular idea that Andrew has or even John has that's floating around between all of us here and even our staff, we talk about it, but at the end of the day, it's Andrew's decision. With any of the programming, he's trying to find a balance that works first and foremost so the singers themselves can learn, the orchestra can play, and people will like. It's one of those things where there's so many traditional carols and things for Christmas you might hear, you're not going to rearrange Leroy Anderson's "Sleigh Ride," which is a staple of the concert."

"It might be time to do a new arrangement of a traditional song like 'The First Noel' or something like that, so we work with John a lot to make that happen," Saunders adds. "Then we try to bring in some new arrangements of things if they are out there, so anything that goes for the chorus season, there's a lot of looking at scores and listening and talking, but at the end of the day, it's Andrew's call."

The people performing on stage during these shows are practically on staff for the chorus while the orchestra is hired out. The latter is chock full of professionals who have stellar resumes while the learning and rehearsing of the material is relatively seamless.

"On the singer end, The Chorus of Westerly singers are the existing roster of the organization," Saunders said. "There are 180 singers who are on that roster and all of the adult singers are auditioned annually, so they have to audition to get into the chorus. There are 110 or so who are adults, and then we have kids and teens who are involved in our organization, and they also audition to get into the group, but it's more like a placement. They start working on all sorts of music for the season around Labor Day after the kids go to a camp during the summer. For the orchestra, we hire a professional orchestra and everyone in the orchestra is a pro. A lot of them play in orchestras all around New England with the Rhode Island Philharmonic, the New Haven Symphony, the Hartford Symphony, and places like that."

"We have an orchestra contractor who works with Andrew to bring in the group, so all of our orchestras for anything we do are contracted out a couple months in advance," he adds. "It's our job to get the orchestra to remember their music ahead of time, so they practice it at home and then we don't really get all the forces together until the actual week of the concert itself. Then we have a couple rehearsals and we go for it."

For anyone who attends the Christmas Pops, they will be kicking off the holiday season in fantastic fashion. They're also going to experience the concert in an intimate setting where they can feel the music.

"I think it's just a magical start to the holiday season and for the people who are coming out, they should be prepared for a lot of sound," Saunders says. "It's quite a lot to have an orchestra with over 50 in a chorus and just over 200 performing at you. Our hall here in Westerly is actually quite intimate, it only seats around 420, so you're kind of right in the thick of it. One of the neat things about experiencing any of the concerts at Kent Hall is that you're sort of enveloped in sound, but it's a joyous production. It's really meant to bring some light during the darkest time of the year and to have everybody check off their holidays in style."

The Chorus of Westerly will once again present its annual Christmas Pops showcase at the George Kent Performance Hall this holiday season, with three performances scheduled for December 19 at 6 p.m. and December 20 at 3 p.m. and 5:30 p.m. *Submitted Photo*

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

It's not easy for a beloved institution to try new things but, with the help of Max Buchholz, Clark Farms is re-imagining tradition.

Story by Stephanie Bernaba

If you have watched a Clark Farms employee demonstrate how to carry a hanging basket, or seen an aerial shot of 10,000 pumpkins in a South County field, you have experienced the work of Max Buchholz. Because the 31-year-old marketing manager transitioned into the position with roots in hands-on horticulture instead of social media management, his content connects with audiences in a particularly authentic way.

A Baltimore native, Buchholz traveled the world for a year after high school, including a sail across the Indian Ocean, then studied plant biology and mycology at the University of Vermont, graduating in 2018. He moved to Rhode Island to become head grower at the Rhode Island Mushroom Company and, after a pandemic layoff, joined Clark Farms in 2022 as a horticulturist and salesperson. He lives in Hopkinton.

When the farm's marketing specialist left in April 2023, Buchholz took over its Instagram account, aiming for fun, relatable, educational posts. He added drone footage and recruited coworkers to appear on camera. A popular clip showing Hailey, the head grower, clarifying why carrying a pair of hanging baskets is better than carrying just one has accumulated around 1.5 million views.

The farm has steadily expanded alongside its audience. Last year, Clark Farms added 130 neighboring acres to its original 30. This past June, the farm debuted pick-your-own strawberries. It planted more than 10,000 strawberry plants in



Max Buchholz, the marketing manager at Clark Farms, flies a drone in the greenhouse to capture images for marketing material on a recent afternoon. *Photo: Michael Derr*

six varieties on the far side of the property, where the farm now grows much of the produce sold at its farm stand.

A new entrance on Matunuck Schoolhouse Road welcomed hundreds of guests to the pick-your-own fields. Next year, Buchholz hopes to transform the gathering into an annual "Strawberry Spectacular," complete with local vendors and freshly made strawberry doughnuts.

Pick-your-own flower sales have also roughly doubled. The farm's seasonal markets now draw more than 1,000 people a day. This fall, its all-you-can-carry pumpkin deal, $25 for as many pumpkins as you can hold, drew a Columbus Day line and a story on NBC 10. Within days, the farm also appeared in a national NBC News report on how social media is fueling crowds at pumpkin patches across the country.

Through all the growth, however, Buchholz wants the farm to remain a place where families can slow down.

"We really want this to be a place where parents and children can come, and they can feel safe and comfortable, and you can let the kids run," he said. "The world is so tumultuous nowadays, and we want this to be a safe space for families and kids in South County to be able to run free a little bit."

The farm's second annual Holiday Market, hosted in its greenhouse, takes place November 28-29 and December 5-6 from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. The event brings together around 80 local vendors, and features live music, hot chocolate, bonfires with complimentary s'mores, and a few special holiday visitors. Christmas trees, wreaths, and garland arrive around Thanksgiving week.

Clark Farms is located at 2984 Commodore Oliver Perry Highway in Wakefield and is open Monday through Saturday from 9 a.m.-5 p.m. and Sunday from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. More information is available at clarkfarms.com and on the farm's social media.

A Conversation with Max Buchholz

Q: How do your ideas go from concept to reality at the farm?

A: "As soon as I came here, I had a lot of ideas. The boss has been running this place since 1989, and he's a smart guy. Every time I brought up a suggestion that first year, he said, 'That's a great idea. We're just not there yet.' But eventually a couple of ideas clicked. A really big one for us was markets. Rich [Clark] was hesitant, but he said, 'All right, let's try it. This didn't work 10 years ago, but maybe it'll work now.' The response was fantastic."

Q: How did it feel to make the national news with your pumpkin display?

A: "Funny enough, about a month before, Rich said, 'Who knows, maybe we'll make it on the national news.' It all started with a dream to have this crazy interactive pumpkin art display with 10,000 pumpkins. It was hundreds of hours of labor, but once we got the drone shot and put it on social media, it was well worth it. We came up with the idea to do all-you-can-carry for $25 or all-you-can-cart for $100, and it became more than just coming to get your pumpkins. You saw whole families, groups of 10 people, trying to stack pumpkins on top of mom or dad."

Q: Did you have a social media background, or did you jump in after taking on this role?

A: "I basically jumped in after taking on this role. The marketing person who was in charge left in April 2023, so I was thrown into it. My background in horticulture has made it a lot easier to make our page educational and informative. I'm trying to take complex information — let's say about hydrangeas and how to prune them — and make it easily digestible for our audience, because I was that gardener once, too. I've also got a little bit of weirdness and funkiness in me, which is important, because our Instagram has to be lighthearted, fun, and engaging. I'm only one person at a place that employs 70, 80 people, so I can't be everywhere at once. I've been trying to get the team to collaborate with me and send me footage, so it's really a team effort."

Q: What's your wildest dream for Clark Farms?

A: "My big dream is to extend our season so we can keep our employees on year-round, because right now we shut down for a couple of months in the winter. I'd love a bigger, heated greenhouse with houseplants that's open in December, January, and February. I want to host concerts and get a stage out here. Another would be a Christmas tree farm, which is in the works."

Q: Do you see yourself settling in and helping to grow this place?

A: "Absolutely. This place is family, and I feel fairly ingrained in the business now because I've developed a voice for our social media. This place has so much potential to be a staple in the South County community, serving good local food and hosting events that draw the entire community, whether it's family fun, concerts and music, or markets. What you get at Clark Farms is the employees, and they go above and beyond. Our mission is to delight customers, and when it comes to someone shopping for plants, that means I want them to be happy three years after we've helped them design and plant their garden."

Q: What sets your Christmas trees apart?

A: "We name all of our trees here at the farm. That was my idea two years ago. I thought, how can I stand out from all these other Christmas tree farms? Customers came back the second year and said, 'I had Miguelito last year, and it was the best tree ever.' I name some of them after cartoon characters, too, so you've got SpongeBob somewhere out there. You can pick your tree by its look, by its name, or both."

Q: What's your favorite plant or tree?

A: "My favorite tree might be a crape myrtle. It's a Southern tree, and we're on the northern limit of where it's able to grow, but there are varieties that do grow here. I had a massive one in my front yard growing up in Baltimore. My other answer is anything native. Natives are very important for our pollinators and the environment as a whole. So anytime you can go native, I'd say go native."

Q: Which local Rhode Island foods do you enjoy the most?

A: "Probably a Matunuck oyster or a quahog."

Q: What do you love most about the holiday season?

A: "I love Thanksgiving, getting together with family and being surrounded by loved ones. Most of my family is back in Baltimore, and because I have half-sisters, we've always done a second Thanksgiving there the Saturday after the holiday. This year I'll spend Thanksgiving Day with my girlfriend and her family here in Rhode Island, and since our Baltimore celebration would fall on our first holiday market, we moved it to the weekend before. So I get an early turkey dinner this year."


RHODE
RAGE
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VAAKS
7





It doesn't matter the year. It doesn't matter the roster. When it comes to the most hotly-contested rivalries in sports, few stand up to that of the URI and PC mens basketball teams. Why? It's a Rhode Island thing.

Story by Ellis Santoro

The rivalry between the men's basketball teams of the University of Rhode Island and Providence College used to outpace the seating capacity.

Way before the Ryan Center was built, URI would wheel the football bleachers into their Keaney Gymnasium when the Friars came to South County, increasing the original capacity of 3,385 by a couple thousand. They added extra seating on the open stage behind one of the baskets and filled every available space.

Games against the Friars were such a big deal that after URI's 1972 victory, the schools agreed to play every future game at the much larger Providence Civic Center — now called the Amica Mutual Pavilion — until the Ryan Center opened in 2002.

"You have people from the state of Rhode Island who are enamored with Providence College," said former URI team captain Abu Bakr, who played forward and center on the 1972 team. "Whether it be alums or businesspeople, and certainly students, they want to beat URI. They do not want to come away from that game with a loss."

URI, on the other hand, are the perpetual underdogs. The Friars play in a higher-tier conference, the Big East, and are expected to beat the Rams. It makes it more impressive when the opposite happens.



Those familiar with it call it one of the nation's best rivalries. It's nationally televised for a reason. This year, it's at the Ryan Center, broadcast on CBS Sports, and is set to tip off at noon on Dec. 5.

"That game is on your mind 365 days a year," URI head coach Archie Miller said before last year's game. "It really is. It means

There is no bigger sports rivalry in the Ocean State than that of the University of Rhode Island and Providence Mens Basketball teams. Over the years, URI players like Alex Crawford, far left, Malik Martin, top left, defenders Cam Estevez, Luis Kortright and Always Wright, top right, and Fatts Russell, above, have all shined in big moments for the Rams against the Friars.
File Photos

a lot to the tradition of both places. There's a lot of great players and great coaches that have competed in that game. Whether you play here or you play there, it's the best of the best. You want to be in those games, those environments, and as a player, you want to be able to thrive in those environments."

No matter how good or bad the Rams and Friars are in any given year, fans can always count on the rivalry being an automatic highlight. Since turning it into an annual tradition in 1935, they've missed only two seasons: 1943-44 and 2020-21.

URI's program has struggled in recent years, and yet there's no lack of excitement when the calendar flips to December. It's even better when the Rams are good. In 2024, when the Rams were on fire to start the year before collapsing later in the season, fans sold out the Ryan Center with a reported attendance of 7,685 to watch URI beat Providence 69-63 and improve to 9-0. Sebastian Thomas drilled a contested pull-up shot from way beyond the 3-point line, serving as the dagger with 23 seconds left and eliciting one of the loudest reactions that the building had seen in years.

Then, there are the blowouts. Led by program legend Tyson Wheeler, the Rams ran the Friars out of their own arena in a 96-79 win in 1996. They beat the Friars again in 1997 by 69-58 score in a season when URI went all the way to the NCAA Tournament's Elite 8.

URI had to wait until 2002 for its next win over the Friars. The Rams won that game 73-71 thanks to a Brian Woodward driving layup with 1:15 left.

That's the last time the Rams have won the matchup in the state's capital. The Ryan Center opened the next year, and the teams went back to alternating home games. The Rams have lost 11 straight at the AMP.

On the other hand, the Rams seem to play significantly better in front of their home crowd. They hold a 7-4 record at the Ryan Center. They're winning at home despite usually being outmatched on paper.

"It's no secret that with [name, image and likeness] now and the ability for players to transfer, Providence has the greater opportunity to pull in higher-level players now than they were able to before," Bakr said. "So the playing field is not as level as it used to be, but because of the nature of the rivalry and the fact that you do have quality players on both sides, that's how you get a URI to come in and be competitive against a team on paper that should be better. In many ways, that goes out the window when you have this rivalry being played."

Bakr remembers his 1972 win over the Friars fondly. The teams used to face each other twice per year, and the game on Feb. 15 was the second in 10 days.

The differences went beyond the obvious playstyle changes from the 1970s version of basketball. In an era when players usually stayed in their program for the full four years without transferring, URI and Providence would scrimmage each other during the offseason. The players all knew each other and had personal grudges from meetings in previous years. It gave the matchups some more flavor.

The Friars were ranked No. 13 nationally when they visited the Keaney Gym that year. They were led by Ernie DiGregorio, who was selected No. 3 in the 1973 NBA Draft, and Marvin Barnes, who went No. 2 in the following year's draft.



"For a while, I thought it was going to be another nightmare," URI head coach Tom Carmody said in a 1972 story in the Narragansett Times.

Instead, URI won the matchup 75-73, stunning the Friars in front of 5,274 fans — almost 2,000 over the listed capacity of the Keaney Gym.

Going farther back, the first games of the rivalry were played in a small gymnasium in URI's Lippitt Hall, which had a basketball court on the third floor — and is now long gone. Eventually, games moved to the Rodman Hall and were in such high demand that fans sat in chairs elevated in the rafters.

The rivalry can be traced back to 1920, but there's controversy surrounding that. A story by the Providence Journal last year detailed a disagreement between programs about the first two games in the series. The Friars insist that the games in 1920 and 1921 were exhibitions and don't count toward the overall series record, and that the real games started in 1935. URI believes the early games, which were both won by the Rams at the Lippitt Gym, should count.

Going by URI's version, the Friars still lead the all-time series 78-59. The Rams dominated it in its early days until Providence turned a corner in the mid 1950s.

Now, the Friars are expected to win every year. In the grand scheme of things, URI is one of their weaker opponents on their non-conference schedule, and yet fans still fill out the AMP.

URI has other in-state rivals, including Bryant, which the Rams face occasionally. More notably, the Rams face Brown every year and have actually played more games against the Bears than the Friars. Brown and URI will meet at the Ryan Center on Dec. 1.

But that game doesn't have the same draw. There's something about the URI and Providence rivalry that creates fanfare.

"When you play this game for these two schools, it doesn't matter how good you are or bad you are," Miller said. "It just matters on that day. Everyone has to understand that, because it's one of the most underrated games in college basketball."

ABOVE URI's RJ Johnson battles PC's Oswin Erhunmwunse for a loose ball during last year's URI-PC game. The next installment of the annual Rams and Friars rivalry takes place at the Ryan Center in Kingston on December 5.
File Photo: Michael Derr

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FEELING FESTIVE

No holiday season in Southern RI is complete without a visit from Santa and the Wickford Festival of Lights, a celebration that combines the sights and sounds of Christmas with a sense of true community spirit.

Story by Bill Seymour

Wickford's holiday season shortly will arrive by land, by sea and, once again, by the glow of thousands of white lights.

It's the annual Festival of Lights and what keeps this event returning year after year, say many who look forward to the event, is the partnership between an old harbor village and the people who turn its streets into a place to gather every December as human contact becomes more important in an increasingly online world.

"I visit when the lights are on. It's a wonderful display. It fills people with holiday cheer and I go my family, who enjoys it. Any event that brings the community together is worthwhile," James Sheehan, former state senator and recently elected state representative, said recently.

The historic North Kingstown waterfront village celebrates its 41st annual Festival of Lights Dec. 3-6, with a tree lighting, an Elf Parade, boat-borne Santa visits and horse-drawn hayrides.

The ceremony launches a weekend of music, illuminated storefronts, family activities and extended shopping hours.

Carole Stone said after last year's event, "It was a wonderful family weekend.

Wickford's annual Festival of Lights celebration turns the quaint North Kingstown village into a must-see world of Christmas cheer. At left, The Olde English Carolers, including Paula Clare, left, Nick Lupino and Maryhazel, perform during the 2024 festival. Above, Santa arrives to greet a crowd during last year's event.
File Photos: Michael Derr (left), Laura Paton (above)

Thank you everyone who made the magic happen."

And Gaele Anderson commented in 2025, "Wickford Village is one of my favorite places to visit when I come home to visit. It's so incredibly charming."

For four days, merchants and neighbors will turn familiar streets and shop windows into a holiday gathering place built around a tradition that began in 1986.

The festivities open Thursday, Dec. 3, at 6 p.m. The North Kingstown Chamber of Commerce-sponsored town tree lighting takes place in Updike Park, where Santa also makes an appearance.

According to the Wickford Village Association, Friday brings the festival's signature waterfront entrance.

At 5:30 p.m. Dec. 4, Santa — in one of several scheduled appearances — plans to arrive at the Brown Street town dock aboard a Safe Sea boat, escorted by the Kayak Centre's kayakers and paddleboarders dressed as reindeer.

From 6-8 p.m., he will join horse-drawn hayrides departing from the dockside parking lot, with tickets costing $3 per person, payable by cash or Venmo.

Saturday belongs to the elves. Families are invited to gather Dec. 5 at at 11 a.m. at St. Paul's Parish Hall, 76 Main St., for complimentary hot cocoa and cookies supplied by Sweet Marie's Tea Cottage.

The free Elf Parade begins at noon, sending costumed children and adults through Wickford to greet Santa at the town dock, with Sunday, Dec. 6, designated as its rain date.

Santa's dockside appearances continue throughout the weekend. He is scheduled to arrive by boat at 12:30 p.m. both Saturday and Sunday, followed by hayrides from 1-4 p.m. each day.

The Ladies of the Rolling Pin are scheduled to perform in Updike Park from 3-3:45 p.m. on both days. There is also other entertainment beyond the festival route.

The Lafayette Band plans a holiday concert at First Baptist Church at approximately 7:15 p.m. Friday, while the North Kingstown Community Chorus has its 'Mistletoe Memories' concerts scheduled Saturday and Sunday.

Smith's Castle offers 'Christmas at the Castle' on both weekend days, and a 'Jingle Jangle Jamboree' at St. Paul's Church on Nov. 28 provides an earlier seasonal prelude.

Shopping remains central to the celebration. Many stores plan to stay open until 9 p.m. Friday and Saturday, with owners competing for recognition through their holiday window displays.

Restaurants, music and unhurried browsing are part of an event designed not simply to attract visitors, but to keep Wickford's small-business district lively into winter.

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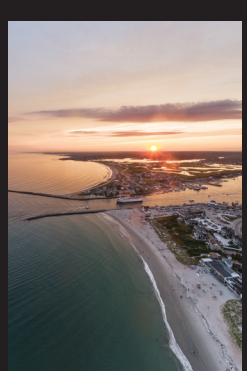


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Sense of Connection

Visitors and townsfolk alike have expressed the sense of connection to the holiday season — and to each other as these people did in the last few years — that this festival can bring.

When looking at scores of comments on social media, Wickford's Festival of Lights inspires affection beyond its decorations. Families celebrate the Elf Parade and Santa's arrival by boat. Facebook comments capture the joy of gathering on the waterfront.

"What an awesome day!" "We loved marching in the parade & greeting Santa as he arrived in his boat!!!" Karen Myers wrote about the celebration.

Memories linger after the lights go dark. Visitors praise the village's charm and thank the volunteers. For others, photographs stir nostalgia for a place they once called home as Gaele Anderson pointed out.

Enthusiasm reaches beyond Wickford. Laurie Jean DeRuosi said the scenes made her homesick, while Sharon Valliere expressed affection for the holiday festivities. The celebration turns familiar streets into a shared holiday gathering.

"It was lovely! Thanks to all the people that put the weekend together!" Lisa Fullerton O'Brien wrote in a Facebook response.

Anticipation is part of the tradition. Sarah Matthews called it a favorite North Kingstown weekend, while Kathy Bunker said she always looks forward to it. The festival continues bringing residents and visitors together.

Deep Roots

This combined tradition with growing attractions and festivities has deep roots.

The festival's annual numbering places its first edition in 1986. Over time, the weekend acquired traditions that distinguish it from a conventional tree lighting.

For instance, in 2011 North Kingstown hosted its first Elf Parade. It has become a spectacle on its own with families in elf costumes, holiday sweaters and reindeer antlers assembled before marching past Main Street businesses toward the waterfront.

Attendance has grown from a few participating families in the parade's early years to hundreds, turning a small addition to the festival into a beloved local ritual.

Santa even offered an explanation for his unusual transportation. "The reindeer can only fly on Christmas Eve. They depend on the positive energy from Christmas spirit.," he offered last year.

The Wickford Village Association, a volunteer-driven nonprofit supporting village businesses, presents the festival with assistance this year from Navigant Credit Union and the North Kingstown Arts Council.

It also credits the North Kingstown Chamber of Commerce, Safe Sea, the Kayak Centre and Sweet Marie's Tea Cottage for individual events and activities.

Those wanting to visit or peruse events can find the program and updates through the association's website, wickfordvillage.org, or its 'I Love Wickford Village' social media pages.

Write to Bill Seymour, a freelance writer, at independent.southcountylife@gmail.com.








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Menu

THE SWEET SPOT

Who doesn't love a tasty little treat for the holidays? Four South County chocolate shops share their festive, offbeat, and artisan offerings sure to delight everyone on your gift list this season.

Story by Stephanie Bernaba, Photography by Michael Derr

Come December, South County seems to run on hot cocoa. Shop windows fill with foil-wrapped Santas, kitchens work overtime to create popular seasonal treats, and weekend shoppers stand in line for European hot chocolates and ribbon-adorned gifts.

The local chocolate scene has never been sweeter. Within a short drive, chocolate lovers can visit a Wickford shop inspired by a beloved movie, a father-daughter team making internationally award-winning chocolate from raw Peruvian cacao, a new owner putting her stamp on a longtime Wakefield favorite, and a family institution that has been in business for more than 70 years.

Each brings something different to the holiday table, from hand-painted truffles and spirited local collaborations to a gluten-free Advent calendar and artisan peppermint bark. Whether you're filling stockings, thanking clients, or treating yourself after a long day of shopping, you can find the season's best sweets and treats here.

Parlez-Vous Français?

Narragansett's Teresa "TC" Coletta has seen the 2000 film "Chocolat" so many times that she's lost count. She fell in love with the story and the movie's chocolate shop, with its fine furniture and delectable morsels. Inspired by that film, she opened The Chocolate Shoppe in Wickford Village in October 2022.

"I wanted the chocolate shop to be that," Coletta said. "So I went out and got all the antiques and French music softly playing all the time."

She considered naming the shop after characters from the film, but then decided on something simpler. "The Chocolate Shoppe was more memorable and easy to say," she said.

Inside, the accordion's rising and falling notes fill the air, and chocolates are displayed on and around antique furniture. Coletta credits The Breakers in Newport for the shop's hooded wicker chair, where customers can relax and sample.

Coletta is a professional interior designer and taught at the Rhode Island School of Design. She orders everything the shop sells, and she, her family, or her staff taste every product before it hits the floor.

The shop chooses its chocolates and truffles from around the world for their high-quality ingredients. Coletta said each truffle is dipped and decorated by hand rather than by machine.



For the holidays, the shop carries Christmas novelties, chocolate Santas, Christmas gift boxes, and stocking stuffers. She said the sea salt caramels, nonpareils, and malted milk balls sell especially well. The shop also sells imported hot chocolate, marshmallows, and vegan and sugar-free chocolates.

For non-chocolate lovers, the shop carries hand-made

LEFT Ella Schneider, co-founder of Gansett Craft Chocolate, prepares a cup of European hot chocolate in her Wakefield shop recently. RIGHT Andrew Baril, manager of The Chocolate Shoppe in Wickford, is pictured with a variety of truffles.

licorice from Amish country. It also carries dog treats for the Village's four-footed friends.

According to Coletta, the shop has earned a reputation for its distinctive greeting card selection, featuring hand-quilled designs and artist series cards displaying works by Monet, Renoir, and Van Gogh.

"They're not ordinary," she said. "Anybody can do ordinary."

Gift wrapping is available for a fee, using Italian paper and an assortment of ribbons. To send gifts to loved ones elsewhere in the country, customers simply make their choices, and the team packs and mails them. In hot weather, staff adds small ice packs to boxes and bags.

Four years after opening, Coletta says she loves coming to work.

"What's not to love?" she said. "People are always happy when they come here. It's not a sad job."

The Chocolate Shoppe, 7 West Main St., Wickford Village, North Kingstown. 401-641-1008, thechocolateshoppe.net. Open 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily except Tuesdays. Hours shift seasonally after Christmas.

Raising the Bar

Ella Schneider, co-founder of Gansett Craft Chocolate, draws a clear line between chocolatiers and chocolate makers. Chocolatiers buy chocolate in big blocks, melt it, and remold it into truffles, bonbons, and lollipops. Schneider and her father, Dr. Steven Schneider, are chocolate makers. Their process begins with the bean.

The company buys about two metric tons of raw cacao beans a year from one farm in Peru through an importer who works directly with the farm. Everything else is done in-house. The company roasts and separates the beans, then refines the chocolate for three days straight to make it smooth and not bitter. Gansett was the state's first bean-to-bar chocolate maker, though Schneider said it is no longer the only one.

The business began as a hobby just before the pandemic. Steven Schneider, an OB-GYN at South County Hospital, enjoyed culinary experiments such as dry-aging meat. He researched chocolate making online, bought an at-home refiner, and tried cacao beans from Belize, Colombia, Fiji, and India. Ella, then a sophomore at Narragansett High School, joined in.

When COVID-19 hit, the family kept making chocolate. Ella shared it with friends, family, and teachers, and her father passed it around the hospital's women's wing. Encouraged by such positive feedback, they formed an LLC and launched production in June 2022, right as Ella graduated.

Five months later, their milk chocolate won gold at the Northwest Chocolate Festival in Seattle, tying with Goodnow Farms of Sudbury, Massachusetts.

"We're like, 'Oh my gosh, I guess we're doing something right,'" Ella said.

Around that time, her father fell ill with COVID and wasn't sure he wanted to keep the business. So Ella learned the whole process herself.

"We kind of winged everything," she laughed.

She studied entrepreneurship at the University of Rhode Island, nearly dropped out as the business grew, and then went part-time, taking online and summer classes. She ended up graduating on time.

The Schneiders opened their Robinson Street shop in December 2024. Gansett now has 17 international awards, and all eight of its main bar flavors have won awards. The limited-batch whiskey bar is made with cacao nibs soaked in Sons of Liberty Battle Cry whiskey for about three weeks, then air-dried. Schneider said she believes it earned silver in the Americas round of the International Chocolate Awards.

With two employees, Jessica and Michaela, now on staff, Dr. Schneider no longer has to come in on his days off. He talks with his patients about the shop, and some stop in afterward. "They're like, 'I just saw your dad for my annual exam,'" Ella said.

Her mother is often at the shop and does much of the packaging.

The shop's top seller is its European hot chocolate, available all winter. Each cup uses a full dark chocolate bar's worth of chocolate, plus whole milk and cream. The shop pipes homemade marshmallow fluff around the rim of the cup and torches it, then places a dollop of homemade whipped cream in the center. Schneider also offers single servings of French-style chocolate mousse for pre-order during the holidays.

Schneider is introducing quantity boxed chocolates for the first time this holiday season. The shop's lineup features peppermint patties topped with crushed peppermint candy, made with vegetable colorings instead of synthetic dyes, and presented in new custom packaging. New boxes with shiny gold lettering house dark chocolate sea salt caramels made with Newport Sea Salt. The collection includes hand-painted truffles adorned with color-coordinated edible luster dust, plus upcoming spirit-infused specialties: a honey chamomile whiskey truffle created in partnership with Sons of Liberty and a spiced rum truffle infused with Spiribam-curated spirits.

Both the chocolate-covered espresso beans, crafted with Seaworthy Coffee Roasters beans, and the cocoa powder-dusted whole cacao beans covered in chocolate are vegan. Schneider describes the cacao beans as crunchy, with an almost nutty flavor.

Schneider expects to have 10 or 11 bar flavors available during the holiday season. Lil' Rhody Sea Salt is her top seller, followed by Rhode Island Coffee Milk, a white chocolate made with Seaworthy coffee. The plain milk chocolate has earned the most awards. Other flavors include dark chocolate peppermint crunch, dark chocolate raspberry made with freeze-dried raspberry powder, mocha, lavender, brown butter sage, and plain dark chocolate. Everything is nut-free, gluten-free, and soy-free, and several items are vegan. Bars cost $11, and Schneider ordered ribbon so bars and boxes can be tied together as gifts.

"We like to think of ourselves as an affordable luxury," she said.

The shop gets busy on weekends. Schneider said customers are more likely to find everything in stock if they visit early in the day. Chocolate bars keep well, but the truffles and caramels are made fresh and last only about three to four weeks. The store sells and ships bars online and sells gift certificates in-store. Select local retailers carry Gansett Craft Chocolate. You can find a full list of retail locations on its website.

Gansett Craft Chocolate, 227 Robinson St., Wakefield. 401-486-0850, gansettcraftchocolate.com. Open noon to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday and noon to 4 p.m. Sunday, with extra days added around Christmas.

New Owner, Sweet Traditions

Dana Dowdell Mitchell bought Jennifer's Chocolates in Wakefield from its founder, Jen, in October 2025. Last year, during her first holiday season as owner, the shop's holiday truffles were a huge hit, and they're back. Available flavors are gingerbread in milk chocolate, eggnog in white chocolate, and peppermint mocha in dark chocolate. The truffles are gluten- and nut-free, as is the shop's new 25-day pop-out Advent calendar.

"We try so hard to make that available to people," Dowdell Mitchell said of

allergy-friendly options.

Truffles come prepackaged in sleeves of five, which Mitchell suggests as a gift for a dinner party, holiday party, or coworkers. Customers can also build their own boxes.

Peppermint bark, a staple under the previous owner, returns this year. Dowdell Mitchell is also looking for a popcorn supplier in order to bring back the caramel popcorn Jen used to make. The shop candies its own Cara Cara oranges and dips half-slices in chocolate. Last year, the shop offered champagne gummy bears as an alternative to chocolate.

Dowdell Mitchell also hopes to carry a popular holiday mint malt ball again if she can get it.

"We're heavy on chocolate around the holidays," she said.

Online ordering is new this year, letting customers place orders ahead for pickup or arrange shipping. While customers can order the shop's house-made chocolates directly through the website, they can ship other items like fudge by calling the store. Note that the shipping deadline for Christmas delivery is December 18, and digital gift certificates are also available online.

For corporate client gifting, Dowdell Mitchell offers personalized holiday gift boxes complete with handwritten notes. Jennifer's is also participating in holiday markets for the first time this year, including the Field of Artisans event in Newport on November 29 and the Holiday Market at Whalers on December 17.

Jennifer's Chocolates, 160 Old Tower Hill Road, Wakefield. 401-783-8423, jenschocolates.com. Open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Friday, 9:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. Saturday, and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Sunday.

The Foundation of South County's Sweets

Sweenor's Chocolates, a family business that has been making chocolate for more than 70 years, has shops in Wakefield and Cranston. Boxed chocolates are its signature product, and prepacked boxes sell well at Christmas because, as Lisa Sweenor Dunham put it, "no one's going to return it."

Sweenor Dunham advises grabbing the peppermint bark early, as the kitchen prepares both the topping and bark in a single day, and once it sells out, it's gone. Their popular chocolate lollipops feature about 10 festive designs, including a variety of Santas, a sprinkle-embellished Christmas star, and a Christmas tree, priced from $1.95 to $3.25 each. Minuets, sold in boxes, offer caramel- or peanut butter-filled chocolates molded into holiday shapes like snowmen, Santas, and Christmas trees. Sweenor's only non-chocolate house-made holiday candy is its traditional candy canes.

Sweenor's ships nationwide, and its website lets customers build their own boxes. Prepared gift baskets include assorted chocolates and other popular candy. Corporate clients can send a spreadsheet of recipients, and the shop will ship to everyone on the list.

Sweenor's Chocolates, 21 Charles St., Wakefield. 401-783-4433, sweenorschocolates.com. Open 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Saturday and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. A second shop is at 43 Hillside Road, Cranston, 401-942-2720.

The Sweetest Gift

Together, the four shops cover nearly every name on a gift list, from a $1.95 Santa pop for a stocking to an award-winning $11 bar, a 25-day Advent calendar, and a box of hand-decorated imported truffles.

As for who is buying, Ella Schneider has that figured out.

"Who doesn't like chocolate? Literally 1% of people don't like chocolate," she said. "And those people buy chocolate as a gift for other people."

The other 99% are already in line.



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HEARTS OF GLASS



Sometimes, the best Christmas gifts are the ones you can't find anywhere else … they're the ones you make. At Clancy Designs Glass Studio, the holiday season is a time to create.

Story by Rachel Philipson, Photography by Michael Derr

Glassblowing is the artistic technique of gathering molten glass on the end of a metal tube and inflating it into a desired shape. For Jennifer and David Clancy, the husband-and-wife collaboration team behind Clancy Designs Glass Studio, teaching the craft is as important as creating it.

The duo teaches three types of appointment-only lessons: ornaments, paperweights and vessels (a small cup, bowl or vase). Lessons are available during the months the couple works in their studio, typically May through February. Jennifer Clancy said the educational offerings are a unique opportunity to directly share how the magic of glassblowing happens in a safe and entertaining way that leaves individuals with tangible, take-away mementos.

"Blowing glass is a lot like learning a musical instrument," Jennifer Clancy said. "It takes years and years of practice in order to be proficient with it. When we are teaching, we are handling the parts that might be more complicated for a student or potentially dangerous if they don't know what they are doing… [but] they definitely get to have hands-on experience when they are in the glass studio with us."



David Clancy initially opened the studio, originally as David Clancy Designs, in the early 90s. He met fellow glassblower artist Jennifer in 1998 through mutual connections in the greater Providence glassblowing community and the pair got married a year later. The couple would update the studio name to be Clancy Designs Glass Studio, which they have owned and operated together ever since. In the early 2000s, they built their current studio space next to their house in Jamestown.

Nowadays, the husband-and-wife team maintains a true collaborative artistic spirit by designing and making all their decorative and functional glasswork together. Jennifer Clancy shared that one of their favorite projects was a series of plant stimulating sculptures as these pieces were both technically challenging and fun to make — an exhilarating balance that keeps them artistically stimulated.

The pair also coordinates on lesson









Jennifer and David Clancy, top right, are shown working in their shop at Clancy Designs Glass Studio, where they not only create unique art for sale, like a piece titled “Kelp Forest with Silver Fish” at left, but offer classes on how to make your own.

instruction and a myriad of other studio administrative responsibilities. Jennifer Clancy said the instructional lessons are an invigorating way to connect with glass art lovers directly in their studio space. While it is extra work to organize, she said it is a crucial fixture to the Clancy Designs Glass Studio.

Jennifer Clancy said there are multiple advantages to having two instructors for the classes, most notably having two simultaneous perspectives who can provide different advice and assistance while coaching beginners who have no previous glassblowing experience.

"A lot of people have actually commented saying it's like a dance, the way the two of us move throughout the space and work together," Jennifer Clancy said. "There's a lot of fluidity and grace throughout the movement."

Students in the appointment-only glassblowing lessons have ranged from age seven to 77. Regardless of age, all have been transformed into an artist in their own right, Jennifer Clancy said. She emphasizes that the classes are more experiential, rather than strictly instructional, as it would be unsafe for complete beginners to try and make an entire glass object by themselves in a limited timeframe with foreign tools.

The lessons begin with a demonstration with Jennifer and David Clancy walking through the process and how to use the tools. The husband-and-wife duo start the creation process by gathering the glass out of the furnace by winding the molten glass around the blow pipe. The student will then work with the Clancys to blow bubbles through the pipe into the glass to begin the artistic transformation, as well as getting assistance on using hand tools to finalize the shape. Attendees will also be able to add customizable elements to their pieces.

"When they take their piece home the next day or whenever they come to pick it up, they want to feel like they actually had the experience and that they made it," Jennifer Clancy said. "That's one of the joys of making things by hand. If you can't see that your hand was in it, it's not the same level of special."

Every now and then, the Clancys will have someone ask them why someone should buy handblown glass or consider taking a lesson, instead of purchasing an existing massively produced glass object. Jennifer Clancy said functionality does not truly capture the pleasure of a handmade piece.

"When they see us work, they get why hand-crafted glass or hand-crafted ornaments have a little bit more joy in it or a lot of bit more joy in it, rather than something that is factory made," she said.

The future of the studio is to keep continuing exactly what they are doing, Jennifer Clancy said. Their heart of the studio has always been to foster the creation of decorative and functional glass and have people enjoy their work. That will never change.

Jennifer Clancy said she hopes to be able to add more opportunities for individuals to visit the studio and be a part of Jamestown and South County art community events. For now, she encourages locals and tourists alike to consider adding a glassblowing lesson into their upcoming holiday season activity lineup.

"It's a fun experience for people to do, especially around the holidays when they have friends and family coming into town and they want to find something fun and entertaining that they can all do together," Jennifer Clancy said.

Clancy Designs Glass Studio is located at 382 North Road in Jamestown. The ornament making lessons are $60, the paperweight making lessons are $80 and the vessel making lessons are $100. For more details, visit clancydesigns.com.



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THE GIVING TREE

What started out as an eighth grader's service project has grown into a decade-long holiday initiative, passed from one local teen to another.

Story by Stephanie Bernaba

Every fall, a finished basement in Wakefield slowly disappears under cardboard. Amazon boxes begin trickling in throughout October and arrive almost daily by December, until the couch is buried in headphones, hoodies, makeup, basketballs, and gift cards.

"The whole room is basically covered in gifts," said Jack Iredale, a junior at the Prout School.

Those boxes are for Teens for Teens, a holiday gift drive run by teenagers for teenagers whose families need extra help during the holidays. Donors purchase gifts from an Amazon wishlist a student leader builds each year, and the gifts ship directly to the leader's home. Each December, every gift collected is delivered to Charlestown's Rhode Island Center Assisting Those in Need (RICAN), where families and loved ones select presents for their children at no cost.

Iredale, now in his second year leading this initiative, is the third teen to manage it. Olivia Barber of Wakefield launched it as an eighth grader in 2016, then handed it off to Kylie Hoffman of Richmond, who ran it for four years before passing it to him.

While holiday drives regularly collect items for younger kids, preteens and teenagers are frequently overlooked. Teenagers comprise the largest group of young people RICAN supports. Suitable items for teens

ABOVE Prout junior Jack Iredale is pictured with some of the early donations that he has received for the "Teens for Teens RI" annual gift drive program, which he is overseeing.
Photo: Michael Derr

and adolescents tend to be more difficult to choose and come with higher price tags, making targeted donations even more vital.

By focusing on this group, Teens for Teens has provided RICAN with some welcome relief.

"It's been wonderful. We really needed it," said Lorie Dubee, a RICAN board member and coordinator of its holiday program. "The toys that come in are mostly always for young children, so our teens are always kind of the most neglected."

A Lightbulb at the Dollar Store

Teens for Teens began as a school service project. In 2016, Elizabeth "Buff" Wessman, then the religion teacher and service club leader at Monsignor Clarke School in Wakefield, asked her eighth graders to design service projects for the first time. Wessman is now a theology teacher and the Christian service-learning coordinator at the Prout School.

Barber, now 24 and a nurse at South County Hospital, was still searching for a project idea when a dollar-store cashier asked her and her mother whether they wanted to donate to Toys for Tots.

"A lightbulb kind of went off," Barber said. "I started thinking there's a bunch of kids like me that are my age that needed gifts for Christmas, too. They're not exempt from poor financial situations."

She first planned a collection inside Monsignor Clarke, then realized its families, with children from pre-K through eighth grade, had little sense of what teenagers wanted. Barber needed some guidance, too.

"I was kind of a tomboy, so especially with the girly stuff, I needed some help picking out those toys," she said.

So she gathered her friends' Christmas lists and canvassed others on Instagram, then built an Amazon wishlist, a tool so new at the time that setting it up took some maneuvering.

That first year, Barber and her friends collected and wrapped about 200 presents for the Narragansett Housing Authority's holiday collection.

When Barber arrived at Prout, school officials told her she could not run her own drive because the school already ran one. At her mother's suggestion, Barber moved the drive online, and a Facebook page brought the effort beyond the walls of the school.

That second year, the donations went to RICAN, which Barber preferred because parents could choose gifts for their own children. She also volunteered at the event as an "elf," helping families choose gifts.

"Especially those first couple years, I remember that the only gifts donated for that age demographic were the ones coming from Teens for Teens," she said.

Those first encounters with parents profoundly impacted Barber and reinforced the drive's core purpose.

"I think that really changed me at such a young age, to realize that these material items are so much bigger than gifts that you get on Christmas," Barber said. "The ability for these parents to give their children something that they asked for for Christmas — that was the whole point."

Every season ended with a car packed with gifts, a photo celebrating the collected donations, and a thank-you gift for the Amazon driver.

Barber led the drive through her senior year. Bound for nursing school at the University of Florida and aging out of the group herself, she passed it along to Hoffman.

A Little Amazon Headquarters

Hoffman, 20 and a University of Rhode Island student, already knew Barber. Both attended Monsignor Clarke School, and their fathers work together as police officers. Hoffman stepped into the role in 2021, during her sophomore year at Chariho High School.

Barber's mom handled onboarding Hoffman since Barber had already left for school. She helped Hoffman gain access to the Amazon wishlist and Facebook page. This would be Hoffman's first time using the social media platform.

Each year, Hoffman built a list for ages 10 to 18, mixing clothing, cosmetics, hygiene products, and books with sports equipment, games, and electronics. She launched the drive around Amazon Prime Day each year to jumpstart donations.

"Basically my house became like a little Amazon headquarters," she laughed.

After setting up, she spent each distribution event as an elf, helping parents choose what their teenagers might like. To her, it just made sense to have teens leading the effort.

"Us as teenagers know or understand what other teens look for," Hoffman said.

Echo speakers, hair tools, and nail polish were always in demand, but some of the most welcome gifts were the practical ones. Hoffman put Carhartt winter hats on the list every year, and one season she collected 30 of them. Families, she said, were grateful for something as simple as a warm hat.

Even from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, about 1,000 miles away, Hoffman ran the drive through social media while her family collected the packages at home.

"I didn't want to just stop it altogether, especially after seeing its impact," she said.

Her favorite memory began with a stranger. Someone who came across the Facebook page sent an anonymous $5,000 donation, and Hoffman headed to Walmart with RICAN volunteers, where they filled three or four carts with gifts.

By her count, she collected about 1,200 gifts worth roughly $20,000 during her four years of running Teens for Teens.

"I have always been fortunate enough to come from a family where I've never really had to think about waking up on Christmas and not having a gift to open," Hoffman said. She said that making sure other children had something to unwrap was the most rewarding part.

Balancing the demands of college, she hoped to pass the drive on to someone who could devote more time to it. She thought of Iredale's mother, Emily, whose classroom she had interned in as a Chariho senior, and asked whether her son might be interested. He said yes and took over in early 2025.

"It's definitely very weird not running it anymore," Hoffman said. "Around this time of year, I'm like, 'Hmm, I would be doing this...'"

Watching the initiative grow, she said, has been rewarding.

"That's all I wanted when I passed it down, to see it continue and to see its impact continue," she said.

Room to Grow

Iredale, also a Monsignor Clarke alum, understands the importance of the gap the drive fills.

"Often charities go to young kids, and oftentimes teenagers don't really get a lot of the attention," he said.

He builds each year's wishlist from the numbers Hoffman recorded, adds whatever

is popular, and logs every gift and its value in a spreadsheet. Last year brought roughly 330 gifts worth about $4,500, from UNO decks and LED room lights to wireless headphones and laser tag sets. A donation from a local charitable group paid for a Walmart run to purchase additional items.

Until December arrives, the family's basement serves as prime storage space. About a week before RICAN's distribution, the gifts fill every inch of his father's truck and his mother's car.

He hopes to match or beat that total by reaching out to more organizations and the Prout community.

"Often you don't realize how many people out there might need help," he said. "It's nice to see that even someone like me, some high school student, can have a positive impact on my community."

Tears of Relief

During the holiday season, RICAN volunteers turn an upstairs room into a space Dubee compares to Toys R Us. The program now serves at least 500 South County children, 200 to 250 of them preteens and teens.

Those older kids have always been the hardest to shop for.

"The gifts are more expensive, and when you're looking, most people are going to donate the truck or the doll," Dubee said.

Before Teens for Teens, she said, the teen tables came up short.

"There weren't enough toys," Dubee said. "So it just really makes a difference."

Teen boys remain the toughest to shop for, she added, and video game gift cards are always welcome.

This year, parents will shop on Sunday, December 13, and grandparents on Monday, December 14. Shoppers arrive in groups of six, each with a volunteer elf, and browse tables organized by age. Every teen receives a gift and a gift card, and Boy Scouts help families carry bags to the cars.

Any remaining young children's gifts are shared with other local nonprofits such as Perspectives Corporation in North Kingstown and the WARM Center in Westerly.

For many families, the day is emotional.

"I've seen parents crying up there when they see the gifts and realizing that this is free and they're going to have a Christmas for their child," Dubee said. "They can make it year-round, but then Christmas comes, and it's a burden."

How to Give

The Amazon wishlist link can be found on the Teens for Teens RI Facebook page. Anyone who would rather donate cash can message the page directly.

"It's just a simple way to be able to help people who need it," Iredale said.

The leaders who came before him are still giving. Hoffman donates and is still close with RICAN volunteers. Barber has already bought from this year's list and hopes to return as an elf.

She never imagined her eighth-grade service project would outlast the school year, let alone pass through the hands of new student leaders over a decade.

"This is a really good example of why getting kids involved in service is so important, because even just a small act, a small assignment that happened in eighth grade, has reached such a far margin here," Barber said. "I'm so grateful that younger generations, the kids after me, are still passionate about giving back to the community."



ONGOING

Bernadette Hackett: Memento Mori Artist — An art exhibition by Karen Carroll of the late Bernadette Hackett's work. On display through December 19. Hera Gallery, 10 High Street, Wakefield. heragallery.org.

55th Holiday Pottery & Art Sale — Event. Wednesdays-Sundays through December 19 from 10 a.m.-6 p.m. South County Art Association, 2587 Kingstown Rd, Kingston. southcountyart.org.

Holiday Small Works — Art Exhibit. On display through December 22. Wickford Art Association, 36 Beach Street, North Kingstown. 401-294-6840.

Members' Show— Art Exhibit. On display through January 9. Jamestown Arts Center, 18 Valley Street, Jamestown. 401-560-0979. jamestownartcenter.org.

Molly Kugler Dickinson Of Longing and Loss— Art Exhibit. On display through January 9. Jamestown Arts Center, 18 Valley Street, Jamestown. 401-560-0979. jamestownartcenter.org.

Landscapes by Roberta Richman — Hera Gallery Art Exhibit, on display at the Domestic Violence Resource Center of South County through May 1, 2027. 61 Main Street, Wakefield. heragallery.org.

JAVA JAM— Event, Saturdays, 2-5 p.m. Java Madness, 134 Salt Pond Road, Wakefield. javamadness.com.

NOV. 27

Jake Frezza — Live Music. 7 p.m., Oak Hill Tavern, 565 Tower Hill Road, North Kingstown. 294-3282, oakhilltavern.com.

Jabbawaukee w./ Special Guests Rhode To Bali — Live Music. 8-11:59 p.m. $13.86 General Admission. 21+. Ocean Mist, 895 Matunuck Beach Rd, South Kingstown. oceanmist.net.

NOV. 28

Ray Kenyon — Live Music, 11 a.m.-1 p.m. Java Madness, 134 Salt Pond Road, Wakefield. javamadness.com.

Steve Walason — Live Music. 7 p.m., Oak Hill Tavern, 565 Tower Hill Road, North Kingstown. 294-3282, oakhilltavern.com.



Rolling Stones-Blushing Brides — Concert. 7:30 p.m. $30.86-$39.09. Courthouse Center for the Arts, 3481 Kingstown Rd, West Kingston. 401-782-1018. courthousearts.org.

Roomful of Blues — Live Music. 7:30 p.m. $30. The United Theatre Black Box Auditorium, 5 Canal Street, Westerly. unitedtheatre.org.

I Am The Avalanche w./ Special Guest Born without Bones & Classic Traffic — Live Music. 8-11 p.m. $33.30 General Admission. 21+. Ocean Mist, 895 Matunuck Beach Rd, South Kingstown. oceanmist.net.

NOV. 29

Kathy & Rick — Live Music, 11 a.m.-1 p.m. Java Madness, 134 Salt Pond Road, Wakefield. javamadness.com.

Sunday Funday with Steve Smith and the Nakeds — Live Music. 4-7 p.m. $5 cover upon entry. Ocean Mist, 895 Matunuck Beach Rd, South Kingstown. oceanmist.net.

Joe Parillo and the New Ensemble — Live Music. 6 p.m. $24. United Gallery Events Space, 5 Canal Street, Westerly. unitedtheatre.org.

NOV. 30, DEC. 7

Clay Together: Parent-Child 2-Day Holiday Workshop — Art Workshop with instructor Levi Barrington. 3:30-5:30 p.m. both days. $37.50 per person (minimum 2 registrations per family, maximum three registrations per family.) Jamestown Arts Center, 18 Valley Street, Jamestown. 401-560-0979. jamestownartcenter.org.

DEC. 1

Stuffed Ornaments Workshop — Art Workshop with instructor Petra Napolitano. 3-5 p.m. For children and adults 13+ years old. Children under 13 welcome with a parent. $40. Jamestown Arts Center, 18 Valley Street, Jamestown. 401-560-0979. jamestownartcenter.org.

Jazz on a School Night Open Jam — Event. 7 p.m. Free. The Knick Music Lab, 35 Railroad Ave., Westerly. unitedtheatre.org.

DEC. 2

Ceramic Jewelry Workshop — Art Workshop with instructor Ellen Bulger. 6-9 p.m. For children and adults 16+ years old. Children 12-16 welcome with a guardian. $60. Jamestown Arts Center, 18 Valley Street, Jamestown. 401-560-0979. jamestownartcenter.org.

DEC. 3

Linocut Cards Workshop — Art Workshop with instructor Denise Marks. 5-8 p.m. For children and adults 16+ years old. $55. Jamestown Arts Center, 18 Valley Street, Jamestown. 401-560-0979. jamestownartcenter.org.

Antarctica Day Talk — Event. 6 p.m.

United Gallery Events Space, 5 Canal Street, Westerly. unitedtheatre.org.

Artist Talk: Kathie Florsheim and Barbara Pagh — Event in support of "In Flux: More Notes From The Coast" exhibition. 7-8 p.m. Hera Gallery, 10 High Street, Wakefield. heragallery.org.

Flock of Seagulls with Men Without Hats — Concert. 8 p.m., $92-$101. Greenwich Odeum, 59 Main Street, East Greenwich. 401-885-4000. greenwichodeum.com.

DEC. 4–DEC. 20

A Christmas Carol — Event. 7 p.m. performances on December 4-5, 10-12, 17, 19. 2 p.m. performances on December 6, 13, 20. $12.50-$47.50. Contemporary Theater Company, 327 Main Street, Wakefield. contemporarytheatercompany.com.

DEC. 4–DEC. 13

Cabaret — Live Theater. 7:30 p.m. performances on Dec 4-5, 9-12; 2 p.m. performances on Dec. 6, 13. $20 Faculty, Students, Senior Citizens; $25 General Public. The University of Rhode Island Theatre Department, Robert E. Will Theatre at the Fine Arts Center of The University of Rhode Island, 105 Upper College Road, Kingston. https://web.uri.edu/theatre.

DEC. 4

Holiday Arts Market — Event. 5:30-7:30 p.m. Free. Jamestown Arts Center, 18 Valley Street, Jamestown. 401-560-0979. jamestownartcenter.org.

Doobie Brothers- Takin' It To The Streets — Concert. 7:30 p.m. $27.78-$38.07. Courthouse Center for the Arts, 3481 Kingstown Rd, West Kingston. 401-782-1018. courthousearts.org.

Pink Talking Fish — Concert. 8 p.m., $45. Greenwich Odeum, 59 Main Street, East Greenwich. 401-885-4000. greenwichodeum.com.

Watkins Family Hour — Live Music. 8 p.m. $35-$47. The United Theatre Black Box Auditorium, 5 Canal Street, Westerly. unitedtheatre.org.

DEC. 5

Holiday Arts Market — Event. 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Free. Jamestown Arts Center, 18 Valley Street, Jamestown. 401-560-0979. jamestownartcenter.org.

Jack Valentine — Live Music, 11 a.m.-1 p.m. Java Madness, 134 Salt Pond Road, Wakefield. javamadness.com.

Christmas at the Castle — Event. 12-4 p.m. $12 Adults, $10 Seniors & Military, $6 Children age 6-12 (Family Cap $35), Children under 6 Free. Discount for Smith's Castle Members. Smith's Castle. 55 Richard Smith Drive, North Kingstown. 294-3521. smithscastle.org.

Van Morrison-Moondance — Concert. 7:30 p.m. $30.86-$41.15. Courthouse Center for the Arts, 3481 Kingstown Rd, West Kingston. 401-782-1018. courthousearts.org.

The End of Prohibition Soiree — Event featuring live music by Miss Wednesday and a Roaring '20s Costume Contest. 8-11 p.m. The Charlestown Rathskeller, 489a Old Coach Road, Charlestown. thecharlestownrathskeller.com.



Martin Sexton: Live Wide Open Tour — Concert. 8 p.m., $62-$72. Greenwich Odeum, 59 Main Street, East Greenwich. 401-885-4000. greenwichodeum.com.

DEC. 6

Christmas at the Castle — Event. 12-4 p.m. $12 Adults, $10 Seniors & Military, $6 Children age 6-12 (Family Cap $35), Children under 6 Free. Discount for Smith's Castle Members. Smith's Castle. 55 Richard Smith Drive, North Kingstown. 294-3521. smithscastle.org.

Noel & Al w./ Sarah Windsor — Live Music, 12-2 p.m. Java Madness, 134 Salt Pond Road, Wakefield. javamadness.com.

United Holiday Spectacular-We Need More Lights — Live Music. 1:30 and 4 p.m. $30. The United Theatre Black Box Auditorium, 5 Canal Street, Westerly. unitedtheatre.org.

Art Law and Artists' Rights for Creators, Authors and Artists — Event with Art Law Attorney Gale P. Elston. 3-5 p.m. Free. Jamestown Arts Center, 18 Valley Street, Jamestown. 401-560-0979. jamestownartcenter.org.

DEC. 7

Teresa Giudice — Event. 12 p.m., $75-$165. Greenwich Odeum, 59 Main Street, East Greenwich. 401-885-4000. greenwichodeum.com.

DEC. 8

Pop-Up Book Ornaments Workshop — Art Workshop with instructor Andre Lee Bassuet. 5-8 p.m. For children and adults 16+ years old. Children 12-16 welcome with a parent. $65. Jamestown Arts Center, 18 Valley Street, Jamestown. 401-560-0979. jamestownartcenter.org.

LEFT Children decorate cookies at a previous Christmas at the Castle at Smith's Castle in North Kingstown. This year's event takes place December 6. ABOVE Contemporary Theater Company's annual Christmas Cocktail Cabaret event, one of the theater's most beloved annual traditions, is set for December 18th at the Towers in Narragansett.
File Photo: Michael Derr

DEC. 9, DEC. 16

Clay Together: Parent-Child 2-Day Holiday Workshop — Art Workshop with instructor Levi Barrington. 3:30-5:30 p.m. both days. $37.50 per person (minimum 2 registrations per family, maximum three registrations per family.) Jamestown Arts Center, 18 Valley Street, Jamestown. 401-560-0979. jamestownartcenter.org.

DEC. 10

Photolithography Workshop: Ceramic Image Transfer — Art Workshop with instructor Ava Moniz. 3-6 p.m. For children and adults 16+ years old. $55. Jamestown Arts Center, 18 Valley Street, Jamestown. 401-560-0979. jamestownartcenter.org.

Odeum Classic Films: Love Actually — Film Screening. 7 p.m., $16. Greenwich Odeum, 59 Main Street, East Greenwich. 401-885-4000. greenwichodeum.com.

Ana Gasteyer Sugar & Booze Holiday Spectacular — Live Music. 8 p.m. $60-$75. The United Theatre Black Box Auditorium, 5 Canal Street, Westerly. unitedtheatre.org.

DEC. 11

Rock N Roll Nashville Christmas — Concert. 7 p.m. $27.78-$38.07. Courthouse Center for the Arts, 3481 Kingstown Rd, West Kingston. 401-782-1018. courthousearts.org.

Pure Prairie League — Concert. 8 p.m., $64-$69. Greenwich Odeum, 59 Main Street, East Greenwich. 401-885-4000. greenwichodeum.com.

DEC. 12

Ryan Kenyon — Live Music, 11 a.m.-1 p.m. Java Madness, 134 Salt Pond Road, Wakefield. javamadness.com.

Elvis Christmas-Dan Fontaine & Memphis Sun Mafia Band — Concert. 7 p.m. $32.92-$39.09. Courthouse Center for the Arts, 3481 Kingstown Rd, West Kingston. 401-782-1018. courthousearts.org.

Fred Tackett & Scott Sharrard (From Little Feat) — Concert. 8 p.m., $59-$67. Greenwich Odeum, 59 Main Street, East Greenwich. 401-885-4000. greenwichodeum.com.

Rickie Lee Jones — Live Music. 8 p.m. $54-$65. The United Theatre Black Box Auditorium, 5 Canal Street, Westerly. unitedtheatre.org.

DEC. 13

Gran'Pa J — Live Music, 11 a.m.-1 p.m. Java Madness, 134 Salt Pond Road, Wakefield. javamadness.com.

Lunch with Santa — Event. 1-3 p.m. The Charlestown Rathskeller, 489a Old Coach Road, Charlestown. thecharlestownrathskeller.com.

Christmas Tea: With Ladies of the Greene Colonial Fashion Show — Event. The "Ladies of the Greene" is a volunteer living history group associated with the Nathanael Greene Homestead, dedicated to educating the public on 18th-century civilian life during the American Revolution. 2:30-5:30 p.m. Smith's Castle. SOLD OUT. 55 Richard Smith Drive, North Kingstown. 294-3521. smithscastle.org.

Sunday Funday with Crushed Velvet — Live Music. 4-7 p.m. $5 cover upon entry. Ocean Mist, 895 Matunuck Beach Rd, South Kingstown. oceanmist.net.

The United Table-A Tasting Journey Across Seven Fishes — Live Music. 4 p.m. The United Theatre Black Box Auditorium, 5 Canal Street, Westerly. unitedtheatre.org.

DEC. 14

Experimental Screen Printing Workshop: Tote Bags, T-Shirts and Posters — Art Workshop with instructor Priyanka Kumar. 3-6 p.m. For children and adults 10+ years old. $55. Jamestown Arts Center, 18 Valley Street, Jamestown. 401-560-0979. jamestownartcenter.org.

DEC. 17

Odeum Classic Films: It's A Wonderful Life — Film Screening.. 8 p.m., $16. Greenwich Odeum, 59 Main Street, East Greenwich. 401-885-4000. greenwichodeum.com.

DEC. 18

Contemporary Theater Company: Christmas Cocktail Cabaret — Event. 6 p.m. Cocktail Hour. 7 p.m. show. $72.75 Standard Ticket, $102.75 VIP Cup of Good Cheer. The Towers, 35 Ocean Rd, Narragansett. contemporarytheatercompany.com.

Aging Disgracefully-Christmas — Event. 7 p.m. $25.72-$36.01. Courthouse Center for the Arts, 3481 Kingstown Rd, West Kingston. 401-782-1018. courthousearts.org.

The Del Fuegos — Concert. 8 p.m., $55-$62. Greenwich Odeum, 59 Main Street, East Greenwich. 401-885-4000. greenwichodeum.com.

DEC. 19

Ed McGuirl — Live Music, 11 a.m.-1 p.m. Java Madness, 134 Salt Pond Road, Wakefield. javamadness.com.

John Mellencamp-Paper in Fire Christmas — Concert. 7:30 p.m. $25.50-$35.50. Courthouse Center for the Arts, 3481 Kingstown Rd, West Kingston. 401-782-1018. courthousearts.org.

DEC. 20

Josh Schurman — Live Music, 12-2 p.m. Java Madness, 134 Salt Pond Road, Wakefield. javamadness.com.

Sunday Funday with Take It To The Bridge — Live Music. 4-7 p.m. $5 cover upon entry. Ocean Mist, 895 Matunuck Beach Rd, South Kingstown. oceanmist.net.

Christmas with the Celts — Event. 7 p.m., $71-$81. Greenwich Odeum, 59 Main Street, East Greenwich. 401-885-4000. greenwichodeum.com.

DEC. 21

Roots Music Stomp-The Vox Hunters and Anayis Wright — Live Music. 6 p.m. $12. United Gallery Events Space, 5 Canal Street, Westerly. unitedtheatre.org.

DEC. 26

Marie Claude — Live Music, 11 a.m.-1 p.m. Java Madness, 134 Salt Pond Road, Wakefield. javamadness.com.

DEC. 27

Kathy & Rick — Live Music, 11 a.m.-1 p.m. Java Madness, 134 Salt Pond Road, Wakefield. javamadness.com.



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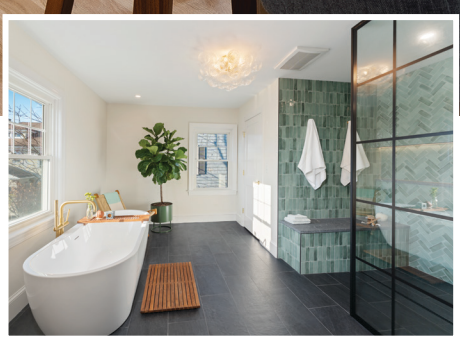

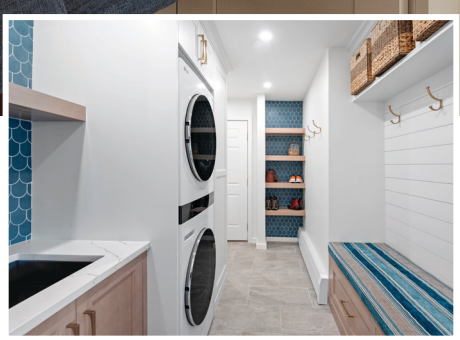



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