

INSIDE: Meet the unsung heroes of South County's school systems.

free

SOUTH COUNTY

SEPTEMBER 2023

Life
MAGAZINE

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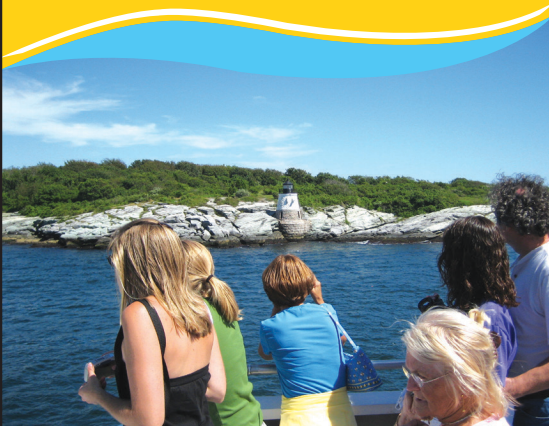
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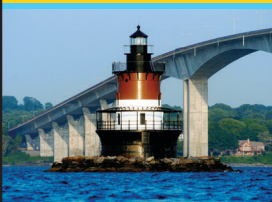
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editor's welcome

A beautiful harvest

In many ways, fall might be the purest season of all in South County.

After an incredible summer of non-stop beach-worthy afternoons, more waves than we know to do with it and amazing nights of good food, great fun and memories we'll cherish for a lifetime, fall in many ways represents a return to normal.

There's a reason why school years start in September and why — at least before the age of streaming began — the period right after Labor Day kick-started every new television season and the arrival of beloved products like pumpkin spice lattes and flannels.

But, before you really dive deep into the season, we think it's important this month to take a moment while we can to appreciate fall's greatest theme: the harvest.

In many ways, fall is the time of year when patience and planning pay off with beautiful crops and we can take stock of what it took for us to get where we are and what it WILL take to get where we want to go.

At least that's the theme in this month's cover story "Keeping It Real" as reporter Rachel Philpson catches up with the owners of Tockwotton Farm, a local institution in North Kingstown for well over two centuries.

Tockwotton Farm represents what we love about fall in South County. With a rich history passed down generation after generation, current owners Bart Madison, Manton E. (Matt) Madison II and Kyla Madison could have easily chosen to rest of their laurels and just kept their property the way it's always been.

Instead, the Madisons are always looking for ways to get their hands dirty, literally, and they take pride in their work because the goal isn't just to honor the farm's past, it's creating a solid foundation for its future as well.

In many ways, Tockwotton Farm serves as an inspiration locally, especially for

the business at the heart of Philpson's second story this month, "The Perfect Arrangement" which profiles beloved South County Flowers and its quest to find a new identity after shifting its focus from serving as a wedding venue for years to a future goal of being a food production farm.

It's never easy to try new things and that's why one of our favorite stories this month comes from reporter Liz Boardman as she takes an up close look at one of South County's fastest growing new traditions: The Atlantis RIsing sand sculpture competition.

Atlantis RIsing debuted last fall and, with a dedicated focus on giving local families a weekend of fun, live music and entertainment, we can't wait to see what it does in year No. 2.

It's amazing the work that often goes without credit to put on a successful event like Atlantis RIsing and the same can be said about our second focus in this month's magazine as we take a deep dive into what it takes to go "Back to School."

In "It Takes a Village," reporter Bill Seymour shines a light on the often unknown folks who keep South County's schools running like clockwork. Whether it's the bus drivers, janitors or administrators who often go unheralded, it truly does take a village to build the next generation of local students.

Rounding out this month's issue is a look at one of the people shaping young minds as Boardman catches up with URI professor Cheryl Foster for a candid talk about ethics, philosophy, the humanities and their roles in today's college atmosphere.

Thanks for picking up this edition of our magazine. We hope the fall proves to be a beautiful season for you and your loved ones and that you savor every moment of it.

We certainly will.

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College students are taught a lot in their time in school but, perhaps, the most important skillset they'll gain is a sense of ethics. At least, that's what URI professor Cheryl Foster hopes.

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It's not easy changing the vision for a well-known local business but, for South County Flowers, the next step might be the most colorful after all.

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For over 200 years, Tockwotton Farm in NK has been a go-to spot for quality and its owners have no intention of seeing that change. Ever.

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South County Instagrammers.

ON THE COVER

Ryleigh Madison, 10, cuts marigolds at Tockwotton Farm in North Kingstown. In addition to helping out at her family's farm stand, she also spearheads an annual fundraising effort for The Tomorrow Fund by selling bouquets.

Photo: Michael Derr



SEEING IS BELIEVING

SK residents team up with RI PBS to give an in-depth look into area for 'Our Town'

South Kingstown resident Elise Torello has always enjoyed watching nature in action.

Sometimes when she scrolls through her files, she finds a clip of a bobcat or coyote that she forgot about.

"My favorite part of the process, I think, was going through my hundreds and hundreds of trail camera captures and picking my favorite ones," she said. "...It made me appreciate how special a place this is, with its wild and scenic rivers and coastal habitats and forests and rivers, and what a magnet for wildlife that is. The wildlife diversity in South Kingstown is really remarkable, considering how suburban it is."

Torello utilizes five different camera stations scattered across a half mile, around her property, to capture shots of animals going about their business, without interfering. She has captured footage of raccoons, squirrels, chipmunks and even river otters in the past.

Next month, clips of what she has captured will be available for the public eye. Torello, along with a group of local contributors, have gathered their own content to assist Rhode Island PBS in its quest to create a feature documentary for each of the 39 municipalities in Rhode Island. It is a project the station has been working on for almost 10 years.

Rhode Island PBS will premiere "Our Town: South Kingstown" — the 16th installment of its active series — Sept. 6 at 8 p.m. The documentary is just over an hour long and filmed by the town's residents.

Those interested in seeing the film prior to its broadcast can go to the community screening on Sept. 5 at South Kingstown High School. The doors will open at 5:30 p.m., with



Elise Torello captures images of wildlife such as this bobcat on her Matunuck property with trail cameras. She provided some of the footage to the "Our Town: South Kingstown" documentary by Rhode Island PBS.

screening beginning at 6 p.m. The event is free. Registration can be found at ripbs.org.

The film is a combination of a documentary, community builder, fundraiser, and "day-in-the-life" scrapbook. Producers added that the goal of the ongoing series is to collect local names, historical events, and personal memoirs from Rhode Island's towns and villages.

The station provided help with filming assistance and equipment and edited the different stories together.

"I hope that coming out of this, people in South Kingstown appreciate more of what an amazing place it is," Torello said. "...We're very fortunate to have such an incredible place right here."

Rhode Island PBS announced South Kingstown as the next project at the start of 2023 and asked residents, businesses, organizations, and schools to send story ideas and footage.

Jodi Mesolella, Rhode Island PBS Director

Continued on page 6



Elise Torello is pictured next to one of her trail cameras, which captures images of wildlife such as bobcats, otters, and coyotes on her Matunuck property.

Photos: Elise Torello (At top), Michael Derr (At left)

Continued from page 5

of Membership & Special Projects, said the station initially chose South Kingstown to be a featured town back in 2020.

"We had started and then the pandemic hit," Mesolella said. "So, we were trying to get the episode to happen, but we ended up postponing it in May of 2020. We had just kicked it off at the end of February. And it was just too hard to get folks out and get stories together."

Still, South Kingstown was a project RI PBS wanted to revisit. It reattained prominence on its radar, when Joanne Esposito, the town's 300th Anniversary Steering Committee Director called to disclose an upcoming yearlong celebration of the town's founding.

"We thought it would be a great time to revisit the town to kind of help them celebrate their 300th but also to help the filmmakers," Mesolella said. "Time-wise, it worked out very well."

The next featured town, after South Kingstown, will be Lincoln. Mesolella said. The station takes geography into account, so there aren't consecutive episodes in one area of the state. Lincoln's episode is scheduled to air in March 2024.

"They parallel each other," Mesolella said of the airing process. "So, while one episode is kind of finalized, we have already begun working with filmmakers in the next town to get them started."

Torello's content will encapsulate the documentary's chapter "Wild South Kingstown."

The documentary also highlights the town's villages, businesses, Belmont Market, Winterhawk Vineyards, Kinney Azalea Gardens — which are open year-round — the South Kingstown Land Trust, which has worked for 30 years to preserve 3,000 acres of environment, the town's art community, and the Hera Gallery, one of the first women-owned artist co-ops in the country.

Additionally, the film delves into the town's history and packs segments on Hurricane Sandy, the South Kingstown Library, the history behind South Kingstown's status as a "Medal of Honor town," and its 300-year celebration — which will round out the episode.

"We have over 16 stories (from South Kingstown) and this is one of our largest compilations of stories in the town," Mesolella said. "We're really proud of that ... I don't know if I have a favorite (segment) because each one has a unique meaning to the storyteller."

Because they are resident and filmmaker submitted, Rhode Island PBS does not choose which topics are included.

"We don't specify," Mesolella said. "People come to us and tell us the stories."

Mesolella added, South Kingstown's documentary is one of the longer episodes produced. Normally, towns generate 10-12 stories.

"South Kingstown was above-average, in that regard," she said. "... Every town we go to is so different. It's always great when we have a great turnout like we did."

Claremary Sweeney, the contributor of the "Whodunnit" section of the documentary, is a local author, who started out by writing children's books — with the setting in Massachusetts' Berkshires — set around Stockbridge and Lenox.

But Sweeney decided to take another step and sought to create something more localized, for adults. What she arrived at was a fictional murder-mystery series that spans over six books.

In the stories, are fictional characters who explore real historic local settings in town. So far, villages and areas in Sweeney's writing include



Author Claremary Sweeney is pictured in her Wakefield home on Tuesday afternoon. She is among the residents who are featured in the "Our Town: South Kingstown" documentary by Rhode Island PBS, which will premiere this month.

Kingston, the University of Rhode Island, Wakefield and Westerly.

"All the characters in my books are composites of different characters who I've known," Sweeney said. "Except for where I'm talking about historic (and local) backgrounds. All the set-ups are real."

This allows for readers to learn about key areas in town while acting as a shout out to the locals who call the featured places home.

"That's what people love about it," Sweeney said. "People around here love to be able to identify with the places ... Each village is represented, and people really like that."

Sweeney went to college at URI and quickly fell in love with the area. She wanted to stay and is today a resident of the birthday-town. Like Torello, Sweeney said, she hopes the documentary can help people realize the beauty that surrounds them.

"It's extremely important for us," Sweeney said. "We have 39 towns and they've (RI PBS) been doing an excellent job on each one ... But this one is special, this is a 300-year anniversary one. So, they've got the parade in it, and they've got people in it, from South Kingstown, talking about how much we care about South Kingstown."

- Vincent Gallo

NERVES OF STEAL

South County Art Association promises latest exhibition quite a deal for art fans

On a typical day, art galleries prohibit patrons from touching — let alone stealing — artwork from exhibitions but, now in its 18th year, South County Art Association encourages patrons to “steal” during its Great Art Heist on September 16.

Each year, artists donate artwork that is on display at South County Art Association (SCAA) for a month before it is “stolen” on the night of the event. On the night of the Heist, ticket holders are selected in a random order by the host to take their desired artwork home — straight off the wall. SCAA only sells as many tickets as donated artwork they receive, meaning all ticket holders leave with original art.

Jason Fong, SCAA exhibitions director, said the Great Art Heist was created by the SCAA board of directors as a distinctive event to raise “much needed funds” for the Art Association. Every year, it has expanded, with last year having a record-breaking 120 donations of art with several artworks valued at over \$1,000. He said it’s a game of chance that is thrilling for everyone involved.

“Not only have the number of donations increased, the demand for tickets has grown as well,” Fong said. “It’s an experience, it’s fun, and those who participate once often return the next year. The event generates a lot of excitement.”

Starting today, patrons can stop by the gallery in person to start getting inspired for the piece they want to grab during the event. For those who want to view virtually, they can do so on the SCAA website after Sunday. The Great Art Heist will begin on September 16 at 6 p.m.

“While the exhibit is up, we ask visitors to vote for their favorite pieces,” Fong said. “The three artists who receive the most votes receive the People’s Choice Awards, a free ticket to participate in the drawing and steal a piece on the night of the event.”

Jen Ferry, SCAA executive director, said everyone wins with the fundraiser. The artists who donate know their art encourages ticket sales, which will go on to provide educational and exhibition programs. For participants, they are going home with an original artwork (in which the value surpasses the ticket price) that they get the joy of choosing.

“One of the best things about this event is that everyone has different tastes in the artwork,” Ferry said. “There’s never a ‘best’ artwork that everyone loves, it’s whatever speaks to that particular person. A lot of people go home with their



South County Art Association member Christine Sullivan “steals” a piece of artwork at The Great Art Heist. This year, SCAA will host its signature event on September 16.

first choice.”

Most of the artwork comes from SCAA members, those who have already invested in supporting the organization, Fong said. However, SCAA is happy to accept art from any artist willing to donate it. They do ask that the artwork be given by the artist who produced the work and be valued at the \$75 event ticket price or more.

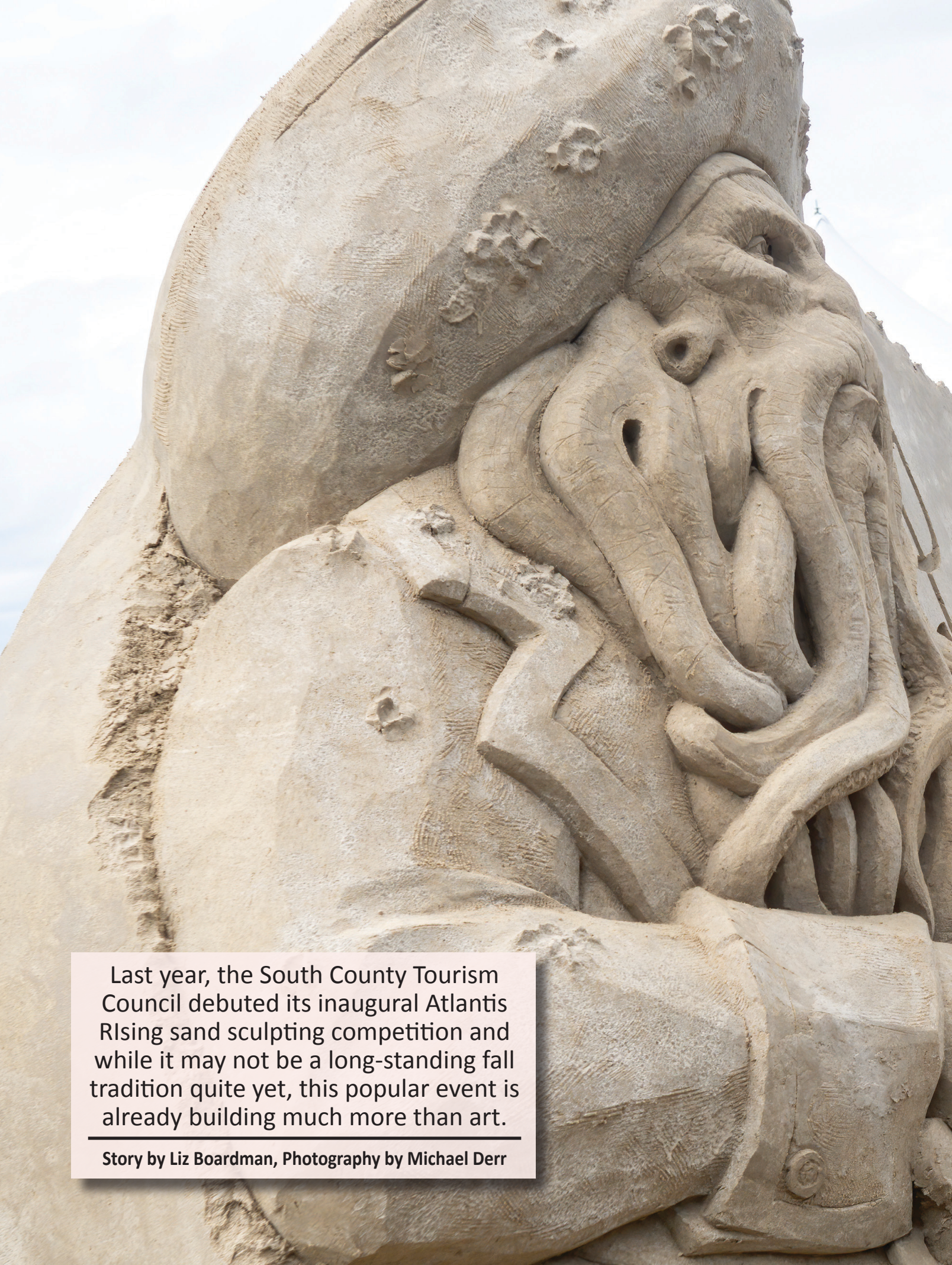
“Many of the donating artists buy tickets as well, which I think speaks to the quality of the work being offered,” Fong said.

The SCAA staff is encouraging ticket holders to bring a list of their favorites and a pen on the night of the Heist, so they can cross off any heisted art as they are announced. That way, ticket holders can immediately know which pieces are left on their list that are ready for heisting when their name is called.

Tickets for The Great Art Heist are currently on sale and will be until the first drawing on September 16 at 6:30 pm or until they are sold out. Tickets are available for \$75 to the public.

For more information about The Great Art Heist, visit the SCAA website site: <https://www.southcountyart.org/art-heist.html>.

-Rachel Philipson



Last year, the South County Tourism Council debuted its inaugural Atlantis Rising sand sculpting competition and while it may not be a long-standing fall tradition quite yet, this popular event is already building much more than art.

Story by Liz Boardman, Photography by Michael Derr

ENTER SANDMAN



Sand sculptor Greg Grady works on a sculpture made from 14 tons of sand during the Charlestown Seafood Festival in Ninigret Park in August. The sculpture was made to promote the "Atlantis Rising" sand sculpture competition, which will be held in October at Misquamicut State Beach in Westerly.



When officials with the South County Tourism Council sought to create a new event in the fall that could bring local families to the area, they asked Greg Grady for his help creating Atlantis RIing, a sand sculpting event similar to one he created in Hampton Beach, New Hampshire that has run for nearly 25 years. The inaugural event took place last October and drew quite a crowd to Misquamicut State Beach in Westerly.

Master Sand Sculptor Greg Grady got his start burying his siblings in the sand during his family's annual trip to Cape Cod.

"Seeing the downside of that, they encouraged me to do other things," Grady says.

He started building ramps and rolling balls into the ocean, and kept at it. By the time he had kids of his own, he was building complex sand sculptures.

"Thirty or so years ago, I actually Googled and drilled down on sand sculpture and found out there was a world of sand sculptors out there," he says. "Once I went to my first competition, my first masters competition, I was hooked. I never looked back."

Grady founded the Sand Sculpting Classic in Hampton Beach, New Hampshire, now in its 24th year, and is the artistic force behind the South County Tourism Council's big Columbus Day weekend event, Atlantis RIing.

The South County Tourism Council was looking for a big, family-friendly event to attract people to South County during the fall shoulder season, says Louise Bishop, president and CEO of the tourism council.

They created Atlantis RIing, a sand sculpture competition that invites 10 of the world's most creative sand artists to Westerly to compete for a cash prize.

There's more to the festival than sand sculptures, Bishop says. It also includes food trucks, vendors, a line-up of music that includes a Saturday night concert by country music star and Westerly native Billy Gilman, and a Saturday night laser drone show.



This year's Atlantis RIing is sure to attract visitors from throughout the region, in and out of costume, when it takes place October 6-9.

TO GO:

When: Friday, Oct. 6, noon-6 p.m.; Saturday, Oct. 7, 10 a.m.-7 p.m.; Sunday, Oct. 8, 10 a.m.-6 p.m.; Monday, Oct. 9, 10 a.m.-6 p.m.

Where: Misquamicut State Beach, 257 Atlantic Ave., Westerly

Tickets: \$5-\$12 in advance, \$15 at the door.

For more information and to purchase tickets, visit southcountryri.com/atlantis-rising/ for more information.

But the sculptures are the main draw. To build them, the competitors need (literally) tons of sand – and not just any sand, but a special formula that's perfect for construction.

"I put 1,300 miles on my vehicle, finding the sand," Grady says. "For a Rhode Island show, I wanted Rhode Island sand. And what I found was Rhode Island has some of the best sand in the country – I mean, to the point where now they're shipping it into other events."

The sand comes from a Rhode Island gravel yard, where sand is sifted and screened for different uses, Grady says. The best for building is the gradation formula. Tons of it are trucked to the site, and the 10 competitors, who are coming from as far away as South Korea and the Netherlands, arrive a week ahead and begin their work. By the time the festival begins on Friday, they are putting the finishing touches on their entries. They choose their designs. The cash prize goes to the people's choice – each attendee gets colored kidney beans to cast their vote.

The sponsors' sculptures – a separate area from the competition – will feature sand creations built to the theme of pirates arriving in Rhode Island, with a sponsor's name carved into each one. But Grady said he didn't want to restrict the artists to a single theme – the sculptures might get too repetitive.

What if it rains? The festival goes on.

"We persevere," Grady says. "That happened last year. We had torrential downpours throughout the whole thing. And as sculptors, we're used to this. Everybody is in the same boat, so everybody has the same playing field."



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IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Long before the halls and classrooms of South County's schools are full of excited children ready to learn, a small army of unsung heroes work behind the scenes to ensure going 'back to school' is smooth and easy. Let's meet some of them.

Story by Bill Seymour, Photography by Michael Derr





Christopher Fiore is as excited for the start of the school year as the students who will soon fill the halls at Narragansett High School. After seven years at H. Frank Carey High School on Long Island, Fiore officially took the reins as the new NHS principal this summer, succeeding Dan Warner, who served in the role for 20 years before retiring this year.



The first day of school is usually one of the most exciting days of the year for both students and educators in Southern Rhode Island but the work to make that day successful starts long before children walk through the door, like these students pictured arriving for the first day of school at Narragansett Elementary School last fall.

School doors have opened, buses are running and classes have started. Fall school sports take favor these days over going to the beach and summer is moving into the rearview mirror.

What a difference August to September makes, especially when getting ready to open school doors.

A cast of people is involved, perhaps like those found behind the scenes for a theater or concert production. Superintendents, teachers and top-level administrators are often public-facing, but scores of unseen others make things happen.

While preparing to open a school district is a months-long, some say continuous plan, there is that one day—bigger, brighter, bolder—than all others. The First Day.

These folks behind the scenes, and numbering upwards of more than 100 or more in many school districts, are the unsung heroes. Without them, school

doors might remain locked. Classrooms would remain empty, lights turned off and buildings without life in them.

So who are they and what do they do?

Derek DePalo is the Narragansett School System's transportation supervisor. Like others in similar jobs statewide, he makes sure buses roll to get children to school and home again as planned.

"It's so wonderful to see our drivers and monitors excited to start a new school year. They love seeing familiar faces as well as new faces boarding the bus— all sharp and eager to be starting a new grade," he said.

Every year, though, these and other jobs come with challenges, especially at the beginning of the year to kick off the annual September ritual.

"It is always challenging to accommodate yearly changes to routes and rosters, however by the end of the first week of school, both students and staff set forth a new rhythm that lasts the school year," DePalo said.

School buses need drivers. Lee Anne Gooding has been behind the bus wheel for over two decades in North Kingstown.

"I look forward to seeing all my students and hearing about their summer.

Safety is number one and I am consistent with rules to keep everyone safe at all times," she said.

"Getting ready to start school means making sure the bus is clean and safe for the upcoming year. Once we get our runs, we drive them to make sure roads are safe and clear of any hazards," she explained.

Gooding added, "Starting year number 28 as a North Kingstown Bus Contractor is a great honor. My bus is my happy place."

School buildings need attention. Without that key part, educating anyone is beyond difficult.

Steve Gormley is Narragansett's director of operations, which includes maintenance and custodial services. He puts succinctly his desire for the first day: "A Fresh Clean Building."

The work is plentiful for reaching that goal, so having enough time to reach it can be challenging each year, he added.

No matter the district, those keeping schools maintained provide opportunities — as much as teachers and administrators — for the daily atmosphere where a school community spends hours socializing, learning, and teaching inside and outside the buildings.

Those maintaining it all are in many ways fix-it-masters, make-it-happen folks and johnny-on-the-spot kind of people.

For instance, they fix cabinetry, they paint, and they do tiling. They even put together an entire room, complete with crown molding and trim. They wash floors, dust, clean up spills and keep the grounds trimmed and neat. They also prepare the place each day for the next day.

In addition, they also are friendly faces for students who get to know them as part of the school family.

In South Kingstown, John Caporelli is a member of his district's maintenance team.

"Without him and others on our team, schools would never have been ready to open on September 5th. With two schools

closing, there has been a ton of movement and our maintenance team has been integral to our operations," said Eric Loneragan, spokesman for the South Kingstown School District.

Martha Badigian, a teacher and school library media specialist at Peace Dale Elementary School in Wakefield, accented that point.

"The custodians have been working EXTRA hard moving everyone around and our maintenance folks are cheerfully rebuilding things they have built for teachers previously because they are moving classrooms, and doing any number of things to help us. Always with great attitudes. School would not function without them!" she said.

Caporelli said about his job, "It may sound corny, but I like helping teachers so they have what they need to provide the best education for the kids."

The most challenging part, he added, is "getting everything moved and into the right place so the teacher can get set up. The summer seems long, but it goes by in a blink."

Among the many other unsung heroes

are registrars and secretaries.

A registrar does just that: records the data about the students attending the system's schools. They are also among the first touch points for parents and make the first impression about the district.

Kristen Gleason, the registrar in South Kingstown, oversees the basic step of enrolling a student in school as well as records pertaining to all students.

"I enjoy meeting the new students and families coming into the district. Most challenging is making sure that everything that needs to be done is done in time for the first day of school," she said.

In school front offices across the state are principals, but the first people met — and for students often the go-to individual in that office — are the secretaries and the clerks. They are lifelines for teachers, too.

Valerie Gagnon is a secretary at Peace Dale Elementary School. She and others like her handle all those parent calls, put the grease on the wheels — and sometimes are the wheels — to make a front office work.

Continued on page 16

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Continued from page 15

"One of the things I most enjoy is interacting with all the people who come through the office while getting ready for the new year," she said, adding that "one of the challenges of starting a new school year is getting to know all the staff, students, and parents."

In today's society with advanced technology integrated into most schools, Nickie Stoker Russell, a South Kingstown High School science teacher since 2001, pointed out the importance of the instructional technology staff.

For nearly all schools today, "The IT folks" are must-haves in this day and age with online, in-class digital technology and integrated connections with hundreds of software programs that enhance education along with all the wires, grids, servers and connections they keep going.

"The IT (staff) are kind of silently behind the scenes making sure every kid's, teacher's, admin's computer tech is working, in addition to the equipment in each room!" she commented.

For schools around the region, it also

includes getting students ready with laptops, iPads, email addresses, teachers and librarians needing hardware and software ready and the many different programs administrators need for efficiency and administrative tasks.

Megan Collier Reilly, who keeps a watchful eye in North Kingstown on all things school related, noted that administrative assistants "work very hard and have to juggle a lot all year long. And the ones I know can name every student and parent in their respective schools."

The cafeteria staff must be remembered, too, she added.

"The cafeteria staff (at least at the schools I frequently work in) work hard to ensure that no child goes hungry. They know the kids' names and even their food preferences and work hard to keep everything running smoothly and the cafeterias clean," she said.

The list of others, and most importantly, their contributions, is long.

They include librarian/media specialists, reading specialists, athletic directors and coaches, club and class advisers, school nurses, financial directors and staff, crossing guards, paraprofessional aides,

school security personnel and school resource officers.

Elected school committee officials set policies, examine procedures and review bland to controversial issues that ripple through a school system. They, too, prepare for opening day with those tasks.

In addition, local police and fire help to ensure that safety is reviewed and critical actions — if ever needed — are rehearsed and established with school administrators before the start of school.

School administrators, teachers and even public critics say these often unseen staff work tirelessly, often without recognition, to ensure that schools run smoothly and provide students with a safe and nurturing environment.

Some professional associations, such as the New Jersey School Boards Association, invite the public to nominate the "superheroes" in their school districts and shine a light on them in a program called "Unsung Superheroes in Education."

Of course, though, teachers, principals, a cadre of various administrators, assistant

Continued on page 18



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The advertisement for Aunt Carrie's features a red background with white text. At the top, there are two images: a chocolate ice cream cone and a plate of fried chicken. At the bottom, there are two more images: a plate of lobster and a plate of food. The text in the center reads: "AUNT CARRIE'S NARRAGANSETT, RHODE ISLAND. We specialize in FRESH. Open Friday, Saturday & Sundays in September. Dine In or Take Out. www.auntcarriesri.com".




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The advertisement for Children's Wishes has a white background with a red border. At the top is a logo of a yellow star on a red and white bus. Below it is the text "children's wishes®" and "YOUR WISH ★ OUR JOURNEY". In the center is a QR code. At the bottom is the address "2364 Post Road, Suite 200, Warwick, RI 02886", the phone number "(401) 921-1300", and the website "childrens-wishes.org".



Bob Leonard has been a bus driver for the Narragansett School System for 10 years. Leonard, like most bus drivers in South County, are often tasked with learning new routes and meeting new students for the first time at the start of a new school year. By the end of the first week, however, they typically have their new routines down pat.

Continued from page 16

school superintendents and superintendents also bring the system to life and often are the public face of the school system.

A school superintendent is a mix of chief operating officer and political tap dancer with elected school committees and other town officials. Many say it is a job walking a tightrope most days of the week and hopefully staying on track.

Among many duties, they are the last stop on any budget, spending and school cost matters, they handle minor to significant crises, collaborate and set strategic direction, bring leadership to the staff and community, enforce compliance with state and federal regulations and guide district development with a team of advisors.

For districts like North Kingstown that have seen a revolving door of superintendents, a new superintendent also brings stability. South Kingstown as this year begins is searching for a new superintendent and has temporary leaders in that position.

"The start of a new school year is always

an exciting and busy time of year," said Kenneth Duva, North Kingstown's superintendent starting this year.

"This is the beginning of a new vision and culture for the members of our school community. Residents can expect to see an increase of clear communication from the district level, an eagerness to collaborate and to share a vision of positive success for all students," he said.

It also means the introduction of a new district-level leadership team for the school department, he said about changes occurring here and elsewhere in South County.

"A priority of this leadership team will be on rebuilding relationships, bringing our community together, and the overall healthy, safe, and academically engaging learning environments for our students," he said.

Many have checklists for opening schools each September, including Superintendent Peter Cummings in Narragansett, that help guide them through the process for opening day.

Cummings said, "I love the excitement of our students and staff. We are fortunate to have a structure where we have an opportunity to 'reset' every September and



Derek DePalo, the supervisor of transportation for the Narragansett School System, is pictured in his office prior to the start of the new school year.

build on and learn from the work and experiences of the previous year."

"The start of the school year is an opportunity to help our students achieve their hopes and dreams as well as set a positive and productive tone for the year," he added.

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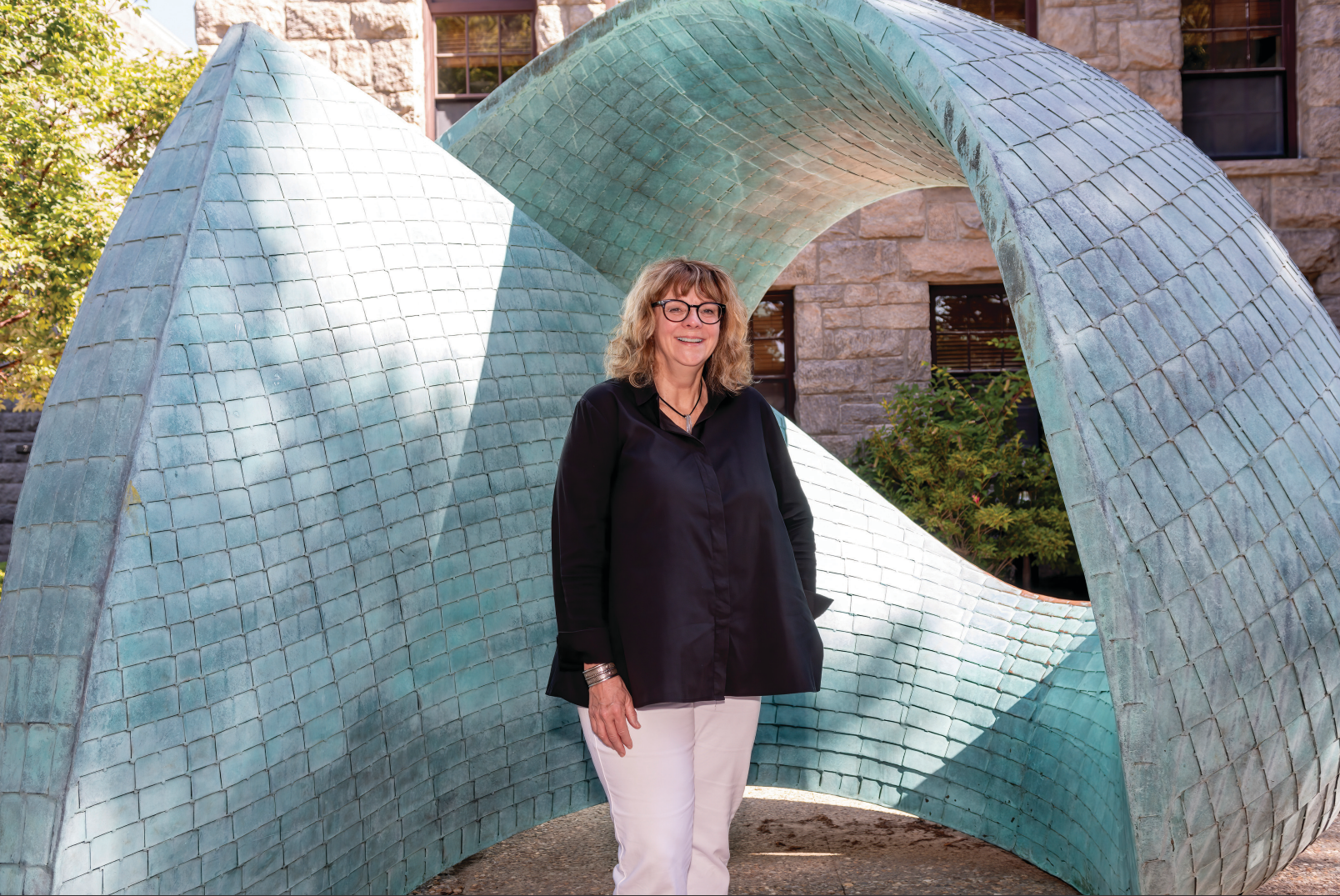
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THE THEORY OF EVERYTHING

Story by Liz Boardman,
Photography by
Michael Derr

Cheryl Foster has seen a lot of things change in her time as a professor at URI. But one thing remains the same: Her duty to guide the next generation on all things ethics.





Cheryl Foster, a political science professor at the University of Rhode Island, is pictured next to the Torsion III sculpture on the Kingston campus.

Cheryl Foster became a philosophy, political science, and ethics professor by accident. She majored in philosophy as an undergrad, earned a master's in the humanities, and was entertaining job offers in journalism and theater.

A fellowship opportunity lured her to Edinburgh, Scotland, where she earned a doctorate in philosophy, volunteered at a theater and wrote reviews for an art magazine. During that fellowship, an advisor encouraged her to teach and as encouragement, gave her a job teaching ethics and moral philosophy.

"I loved it. Philosophy has some of the public inquiry aspects of journalism — looking for the truth, looking for facts," Cheryl says. "The teaching piece has a bit of the performative theater."

She joined the faculty of University of Rhode Island in 1992—and has been there ever since. Now in the Political Science Department, she researches and teaches an interdisciplinary mix of political theory, ethics, and theories of knowledge, among others.

South County Life sat down with Cheryl recently to talk about ethics, if the humanities are "useless," and if college students have really changed over the years.

Rhode Island has long had a reputation for being ethically challenged. But it seems like a good moment in history to think about what's right, and deal with issues as they come

up, doesn't it?

Oh, absolutely. But here's the thing about ethics—it's not a set of rules for right and wrong. Theoretically, there are different models for defining what we think of as right and wrong action, good and bad outcomes.

The first ethicist would say the right thing to do in any given situation is to maximize the greatest good for the greatest number. They put the emphasis on the outcome — no one action is right or wrong in itself.

The second would focus on the action, they don't care about the outcome. They don't care about what you intend. They only care if anybody in this situation could do what you're about to do. They universalize it as a rule for everybody's behavior.

The third doesn't emphasize the action or the outcome. They emphasize the individual making the decision. What would a good person do in this situation? They ask "What are my intentions? Am I doing the right thing in the right way, for this situation?" That's a tricky one, because that takes more time.

Teaching ethics, we invite people to reflect on the ordinary experiences they encounter in their own workplace or their own lives, and show them why they constitute ethical dilemmas. We start with a generic case anyone can relate to, then we work into how do you recognize an ethical dilemma? The second step is giving folks frameworks — what are the norms? What are the ways I could

"The humanities and the fine arts can teach us durable transportable skills – critical thinking, collaborating with others in conversation, problem solving, systematic analytical capacity for accurate assessment of what's happening.

CHERYL FOSTER

Political science professor at the University of Rhode Island

approach this? The third step is giving them new cases, and have them talk to someone in their same sector or area, and work it out together. Ethics is best done in dialogue with others.

Have college students changed over the years?

URI increasingly reflects the face of America along all kinds of demographic indicators, and we have a lot more older students, more adult students, including veterans, stepping onto conventional college campuses, along with the conventionally college-aged students.

But yes, of course, the young, conventionally college-aged students have changed. Young people today, the digital natives, don't know a world without things like heightened national security, and the instant capacity to ask questions and get what you want to know. The way they connect with each other is mediated much more than in the past. That has implications for how they function in the world. They have a heightened aesthetic sense, just from having been in that

digital world. They are also living in a moment where they're going to inherit some big social issues and environmental issues from us.

The way those students have not changed is that it's an important moment developmentally. There's an openness to exploration intellectually, socially, politically, and in terms of community. I think that piece of it has never changed. There's always been a sort of goodwill and a fellow traveler sensibility among the young – a sense of let's get into this together.

Are the humanities a 'useless degree' as some say?

The humanities reckon with ideas that have persisted through time. That's exciting to people because everybody eventually has someone die, people get sick, we have our hearts broken, we face ethical dilemmas. These things don't go away. They are universal. The great power of the humanities is to allow us to reckon with and process them in community.

I think the humanities and the arts are under threat and have been for quite a while. But this happens every so often. What doesn't work is to stamp our feet and say, "but these things matter." We are challenged to do a better job of bringing folks into the circle of recognition that these things have value. There's value in some things being useless – that's why we like movies, it's why we space out on the beach. But at the same time access to the great legacy of the humanities in the arts, like Democracy, is hard won and easily lost.

I have never seen such low enrollment numbers in these majors. At the same time. I also have never seen more hunger for the kinds of questions and community that we offer.



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THE PERFECT ARRANGEMENT

Story by Rachel Philipson,
Photography by
Michael Derr

From 'I Do's' to
Hearing Moos: South
County Flowers
prepares its transition
from cute and cozy
wedding venue to
food production farm





Dean and Nancy Viseth, owners of South County Flowers, are pictured above on their farm in Charlestown. The pair have owned the family farm for the last 15 years but after hosting weddings for both of their children this year, the pair decided the time had come to transition from being a wedding venue for local couples and visitors to serving a new and exciting role as a food production farm. Nancy Viseth is also pictured at left cutting dahlias.

For the Charlestown-based seasonal cut flower farm South County Flowers, 2023 has been a year of gradual change. South County Flowers co-owners and married couple Nancy and Dean Viseth are pausing the wedding venue portion of the business and will be focusing on its rapidly growing community-supported agriculture membership, “DIY Brides” program and supplying local florists.

After taking ownership of the family farm in 2008, Nancy Viseth said it’s been an incredibly fulfilling venture. Even though South County Farms has no plans to resume using the farm as a wedding venue, the farm has been busy planning the addition of food production to their repertoire with a future availability of beef and lamb.

“It’s a wonderful opportunity,” Nancy Viseth said. “I am looking forward to this next chapter. We are always going to [have]

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In addition to fresh cut flowers, Dean and Nancy Viseth, owners of South County Flowers, are also raising livestock on their farm in Charlestown.

Continued from page 23

a small and unique vibe with the highest quality products...It's a small operation and it always will be."

Nancy Viseth said the farm already had cows, but the addition of sheep was prompted particularly by having access to nutritional sheep's milk. The Viseths are eager to share the animals with the community via their community-supported agriculture (CSA) membership

"It's such a good experience to know exactly where your food is coming from,"

Nancy Viseth said.

The transition from wedding venue to food production was inspired by Nancy and Dean Viseth's two children planning to get married in June 2023. They both got married on the farm — ceremoniously marking the culmination of South County Farm as a wedding venue.

"We are entering a new phase of life," Nancy Viseth said. "We are not going to slow down completely; we are just making a shift."

Originally, South County Flowers started as a wholesale flower farm for florists. Nancy

Viseth said the farm started with a delivery van that went around Westerly and Wickford, slowly expanding their radius throughout South County.

In the first summer on the farm, they grew only a small patch of sunflowers and zinnias. After harvesting them, the Viseths put them in the back of the pickup truck and drove around South County introducing themselves to florists. After several local florist shops expressed an interest, the Viseths were ecstatic with the community's need for fresh cut locally grown flowers and expanded the delivery route to over thirty florists, small independent grocery stores and designers.

Eventually, Nancy Viseth added a self-service stand at the front of the farm to allow community members to buy directly from them, but it wasn't the right fit for the community. The Viseths then started the CSA membership that is still active with a loyal customer base, Nancy Viseth said. While most CSAs are typically vegetable-based, the South County Flower CSA is flower-based. Every week, members are surprised with a variety of unique and heirloom cut flowers, combined with farm



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grown foliage and herbs.

When the farm eventually has beef and lamb available, the current CSA Flower Share members will be the first ones offered the pasture-raised meats, Nancy Viseth said.

When the CSA took off, people began asking for wedding flowers, Nancy Viseth said. This sparked Nancy Viseth into doing arrangements and centerpieces, delivering them to other venues. After getting tired of doing multiple venue deliveries, an idea popped into Nancy Viseth's head: Why not use the farm as a wedding venue?

"We had a great time [as a wedding venue,]" Nancy Viseth said. "Everybody loved it. All of the vendors and all the couples

we met and their families were all amazing. Everyone appreciated the beauty of the farm and how hard we had worked to make it look nice. We really enjoyed those relationships that we made."

With the wedding venue portion of the farm now halted, couples still have a unique opportunity to design their own wedding flowers with the South County Flowers' "DIY Bride" program. The farm offers buckets of an assortment of focal flowers, delicate accent flowers, foliage and herbs based on the event's season and the couple's chosen color palette.

"I pretty much curate the buckets for them so they can't go wrong, a mix of focal

flowers, filler flowers, foliage that all look good together," Nancy Viseth said. "Usually, they can pick their color palette and they just do all of the arrangements themselves. They leave here with buckets of flowers and they make everything at home. It's sometimes fun for them to get together with their bridesmaids or their families and do that."

The farm is open by appointment only and during the CSA pick-up hours, and they do not do daily deliveries of single orders. For the "DIY Brides," reservations are recommended well in advance of the wedding date, with the flowers needing to

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Dean Viseth, co-owner of South County Flowers, tends to the Mangalitsa pigs that are raised on his farm in Charlestown. Dean and his wife Nancy plan to offer beef and lamb meats at the farm in the near future.

Continued from page 25

be picked up by appointment one to two days before the event. However, going forward, Nancy Viseth said there is potential of opening the farm up for community events, such as flower workshops.

As for the future of South County Flowers, Nancy Viseth said the operations will always remain “very small and very local.” While the flower farm may be changing its primary avenues, its fundamental values will never change.

“I still don’t know how to answer what we are looking forward to most, other than a slightly slower pace of life, working with the animals, a chance to build up our soil fertility, while, of course, continuing to grow flowers,” Nancy Viseth said.

Over the years, Nancy Viseth said the wonderful community support from all of the neighbors. It was a blessing to have the support when South County Flowers started as the venue and when people started to come back year after year to take part in the CSA. Nancy Viseth hopes the

community will remain as loyal as they did before during the transition.

“It takes a little extra effort to drive to a farm at the same time every week to pick up your flowers rather than just picking them up when you are at the store anyway and people really go out of their way to get the local flowers that I grow and I really appreciate that,” Nancy Viseth said.

For more information, visit the South County Flowers’ website: <https://www.southcountyflowers.com/>

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Since the 1790s, Tockwotton Farm has been well known to Southern Rhode Island residents looking for quality products from a family-run business. But how do the Madisons stay current generation after generation? That's easy: By offering real farming and real food.

Story by Rachel Philipson,
Photography by
Michael Derr



For over 200 years, The Farm Stand at Tockwotton Farm has been a local family-run business that remains committed to providing the highest quality products to the greater North Kingstown community. Nowadays, owners and operators Bart Madison, Manton E. (Matt) Madison II, and Kyla Madison have made it their top priority to grow fresh produce without any chemicals or pesticides for their customers.

Matt and Kyla Madison use the slogan “real farming, real food” to describe their farm’s modern-day vision of naturally grown vegetables. To protect the vegetables, they follow organic guidelines using natural products, such as neem and thyme oil, to make sure everything is as safe as possible for consumption.

“We just feel like, for us, real farming is getting out there on the land, working as a family, getting our hands dirty every day, for real food that is not with chemicals or waxes,” Kyla Madison said.

Locally grown food has multiple benefits, including a fresher taste. Matt and Kyla Madison said fruits and vegetables start to lose their nutrients 24 hours after being harvested. Many vegetables in the supermarket have been picked days in advance and then shipped before being sold, in addition to potential chemicals and waxes commonly used to help protect food during long transports. At The Farm Stand at Tockwotton Farm, this is never the case.

“Our customers will come and taste the tomatoes we have versus store bought and they say they can’t get enough of our tomatoes during the summertime,” Matt Madison said. “The flavor difference is night and day.”

The property has been in the Madison family since the 1790s. In the late 1920s, it was incorporated as Tockwotton Jersey Farms, operating as one of the largest dairy farms in Rhode Island and was the first electric dairy farm in the state. It eventually evolved into fields and greenhouses that are currently in place today. The Farm Stand was initially by Bart Madison (one of the current owners of Tockwotton Farm) in the 1970s alongside his late wife Debbie Madison. After operating the roadside stand for many years, Bart and Debbie Madison paused the stand to focus on their family.



Kyla and Matt Madison, co-owners of The Farm Stand at Tockwotton Farm in North Kingstown, help customers Katie Zimmerman and her children, Charlotte, 10, and Kai, 7, of North Kingstown on a recent summer afternoon.

In 2015, Matt and Kyla Madison brought the property and wanted to bring The Farm Stand back to life. With the support of the Madison family, their dream became a reality.

“It means a lot,” Matt Madison said. “My grandfather [Manton E. Madison] was a big mentor for me, work-ethic wise, and working with the land, he truly loved it. To be able to carry on something that served so much joy in him, it means a lot to me too. It’s hard work but it’s rewarding at the end of the day.”

It turns out reopening The Farm Strand wasn’t just a dream come to true for the Madison family. Kyla Madison said customers often share childhood stories about buying fresh produce and how happy they are to do it once again. She added they try to acknowledge the farm’s history whenever they can.

“We try to tie in some of the history of the farm,” she said. “At some of our events, we use some of the old milk bottles as vases. We have one of the original signs of the farms hanging in our area where we prep our CSAs... We have some of the old ads that were taken here on the farm when it was a dairy farm displayed. We try to remember the roots and where we came from and use it in our day-to-day.”

When the Madison family calls The Farm Stand at Tockwotton Farm a family business, they mean it. The farm has no formal

employees, only family members and close friends. Kyla and Matt Madison said Matt’s sister, Mary Macia, has been instrumental with assisting in the day-to-day operations. Kyla and Matt Madison noted it has been especially helpful to have dedicated family members helping on the farm this year, as Matt was injured this year and needed rotator cuff surgery.

“I feel so many of my husband’s friends and cousins and relatives feel like this is home,” Kyla Madison said. “They have all grown up here and spent a great deal of time here and because of that, lots of people are willing to pitch in and help.”

From their own children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews, the Madison family has been teaching the next generation everything it takes to run a successful farm. Matt Madison said it will give them skills they use their entire life.

“One of the biggest things when we started this for him was it was important for him to carry on his family’s heritage/tradition and continue to use the land to its fullest,” Kyla Madison said. “We had this land at our fingertips, we felt that we owed it to our family and community to do something with it and it’s been a lot of work, but it’s been really rewarding. We love teaching our kids how to grow their own food, being self-sufficient, having a good work ethic and taking pride

in your work. All of the kids here have learned so much from here."

Since the reopening in 2015, the farm has been selling their products from their roadside stand, open five days a week. As of 2022, they expanded into a community supported agriculture membership (CSA) that runs from mid-June to mid-September. For those who pay the up-front cost into the program, they receive fresh vegetables weekly. During the 14-week program, members can expect to receive fun perks from the farm (such as farm fresh eggs, hand-crafted wood items, maple syrup or honey), participate in optional member challenges (including this year's salsa contest, and attend CSA member-only nights.

"You get to know them," Kyla Madison said. "You get to know the things they enjoy. It's nice knowing that you are making them happy, doing the extras. We are investing in them just as much as they are investing in us."

The Madisons hope to continue to grow the CSA program, adding more greenhouses to the farm that will aid in growing more fresh and chemical free vegetables.

"If it keeps up at this pace, I believe the CSA membership is going to be growing and will be the backbone of the farm," he said. "It really helps support us as a farm. It's early start-up money and it really pushes us to our best."

At the end of the day, Matt and Kyla Madison are incredibly thankful for the support they get from the community. They often try to give back and pay it forward — including a yearly fundraising project inspired by their daughter called Bouquets By Ryleigh that sells fresh flower bouquets and donates the proceeds to the Tomorrow Fund.

Simply put, the Madison family strives to bring the best to families around them from the love and support of their family.

"One thing we would tell people about Tockwotton Farm is that we thrive to bring people together (family, friends and community members) whether it's buying vegetables, a community event at the farm or working together to fundraise and give back we believe in bringing people together for the greater good," Matt and Kyla Madison said.

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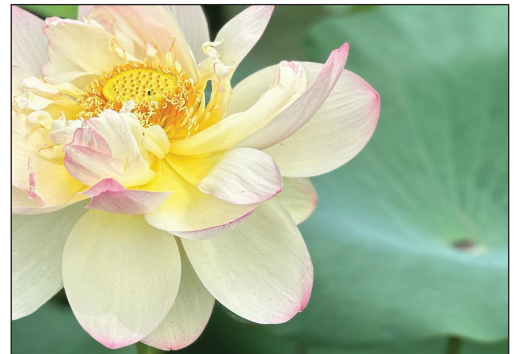
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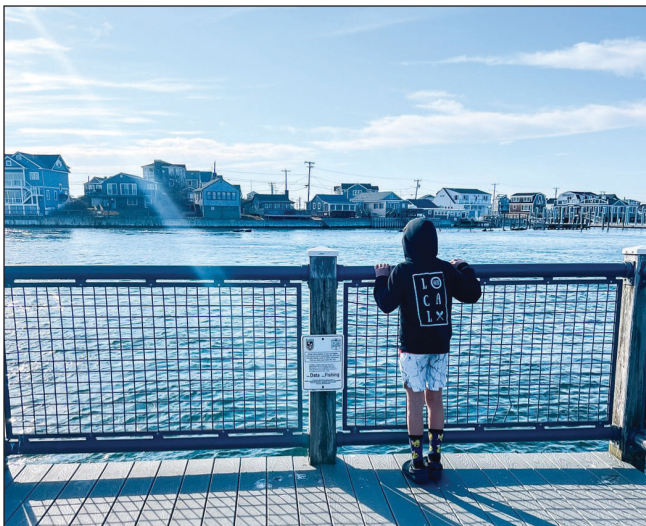
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