FOR THE OWNER OF ONE OF OUR CITY’S MOST POPULAR BARBECUE JOINTS, IT’S A FAMILY AFFAIR.
ENOUGH TO FEED A GRIZZLY
OUR 1660TH ISSUE 12.17.20

When the national COVID Tracking Project released its Monday data, there was a bit of shocking news: The “highest place in the world for new cases per population” is — wait for it — the state of Tennessee. The Volunteer State is one of two places in the world with more than 1,000 cases per million residents. Ohio is the other.

So, we’re number one, baby! Suck it, Buckeyes!

We’ve known that COVID is absolutely ravaging many of Tennessee’s rural counties, most of which don’t even have a hospital. But it’s gotten much worse. Lake County and Trousdale County, for example, have nearly double the state’s world-topping infection rate. Wayne, Obion, and Haywood Counties are also well over the state’s horrific average.

The good news? Here in Shelby County, we consistently have the lowest or one of the lowest rates of infection in Tennessee. So, congratulations to our health department and local leadership for their part in that. They’re doing it (relatively speaking) right.

In contrast to local efforts, Governor Bill Lee’s handling of the pandemic has been abysmal — squishy, mealy-mouthed, and inconsistent. Unsurprisingly, his behavior has echoed that of his hero, President Trump, every step of the way through this pandemic. Lee is much like him, leaving Tennessee’s counties and individuals to figure out how to fight it. The president is one of those. He ignored the pandemic at first, then mostly let it up to the states and individual Americans to figure out how to handle it. The president has led 55 lawsuits alleging voter fraud in six different states and all but one (a procedural technicality) were summarily thrown out of court, many by Republican judges, even some he appointed. His own (recently departed) attorney general, Bill Barr, has said there was no election fraud that would have impacted the national election results.

Also very Trumpian was the devastating story released by Nashville’s NewsChannel 5 this week about Lee’s administration awarding a $26 million no-bid contract for COVID testing to a politically connected Utah company with no testing experience, after a GOP political consultant pitched the contract. State employees warned Lee that the contract was a disaster waiting to happen, and they were right. The state paid $6 million to get out of the contract and no tests were performed. The Donald would be proud.

History is full of leaders who rose to high office and weren’t up to handling a major challenge once they got there. The president is one of those. He ignored the pandemic at first, then mostly left it up to the states and individual Americans to figure out how to fight it. Lee is much like him, leaving Tennessee’s counties and individuals to figure out the best response, using state money to reward his friends and political allies. (Remember the “sock masks”?)

So, kudos to all of you Shelby Countians who are wearing a mask and distancing, trying to flatten the curve as we head into what promises to be a very bleak January. We’re just now feeling the post-Thanksgiving surge, having hit almost 1,000 new cases in the county on Monday. If past is prologue, thousands of Tennesseans will gather for Christmas with their extended families. If you plan on doing that, please keep the gathering as small as possible and get everyone tested in advance. Consider gathering outside, maybe around a firepit or a patio heater.

The vaccine is here; a coordinated national response is coming; the worst of this will be over soon, but the pandemic is nearing its peak. Be smart. Be kind. Be safe. ■

Bruce VanWynGarden
brucev@memphisflyer.com

memphisflyer.com 3
WEEKLY VIRUS COUNTS
Monday: new - 311, total - 51,234, total deaths - 705
Tuesday: new - 541, total - 51,775, total deaths - 709
Wednesday: new - 588, total - 52,363, total deaths - 716
Thursday: new - 695, total - 53,058, total deaths - 722
Friday: new - 246, total - 53,304, total deaths - 726
Saturday: new - 930, total - 54,234, total deaths - 731
Sunday: new - 695, total - 54,929, total deaths - 738

VIRUS HALTS RECYCLING
Recycling services stalled last week as a quarter of the city's solid waste crews either have COVID-19 or are in quarantine, city officials said. Until further notice, recycling and garbage will be picked up as one.

VIRUS CLOSES RESTAURANTS
Nine restaurants and bars were closed last week by the Shelby County Health Department for violations of COVID-19 restrictions. Closed were The Blac Betty, Status Club, Tin Roof, Brinson’s, E2 Ultra Lounge, Menu Club, Tex’s Roadhouse, and two TJ Mulligan’s locations.

“PORK” FOUND HERE
Corporate welfare, Bluff City Law, and lax government spending topped the Beacon Center’s 2020 Pork Report for Memphis and Shelby County. The center claimed wasteful government spending was found in the state’s FastTrack program, which gives tax-funded grants to private companies, in a $4.2 million incentive package given to the producers of Bluff City Law and in the $200 million spent on the still-vacant Memphis Regional Megasite.

NEW DAY FOR TOM LEE PARK
Local leaders broke ground last week for a reimagined, $60-million Tom Lee Park. Construction on the first phase of the redesign is slated to begin next year, according to the Mississippi River Parks Partnership.

“EMBARRASSING” LAWSUIT
The Attorney General of Texas sued four swing states in the U.S. Supreme Court this week for favoring “Democrat voters.” The Tennessee Attorney General signed onto the suit, and the top Tennessee Democrat called this “embarrassing.”

FACEBOOK MONOPOLY SUIT
Tennessee joined 48 other states last week in a lawsuit that alleges Facebook bought up competitors and cut service to rival platforms. For these moves and more, the lawsuit labeled the company a monopoly.

PARK SPEND
Tennessee State Parks spent more money on big projects in West Tennessee this year than any other part of the state, according to data released last week. The state spent $17.6 million on capital projects in the western third of the state, including an $11.7 million renovation at Pickwick Landing State Park.

NAZI CASE DROPPED
German officials said last week they will not prosecute a man who served as a guard at a Nazi concentration camp and was ordered to be removed from the U.S. by a Memphis court in March, according to the Associated Press.

Visit the News Blog at memphisflyer.com for fuller versions of these stories and more local news.
WE’VE GOT THE CURE.

Being cooped up inside can cause a real case of cabin fever and the 2020 Blues, so load up the family or friends and head this way for a dose of the good kind of blues.

You can start at the B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center—where social distancing is easy—and understand the tough road B.B. King traveled before becoming one of the most beloved musicians of all time. Ranked by Trip Advisor in the Top Ten Percent of all listed properties, the museum features films and exhibits that weave a fascinating story of an icon and his birthplace. Make sure to also stop at nearby Mississippi Blues Trail markers that further explain the important music heritage of the area.

Go ahead and crank up some B.B. tunes to get primed for this perfect day trip of enjoying fabulous meals from unique restaurants as well as shopping for locally produced gourmet food items. We can almost guarantee that the real blues will be the prescription you need.

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Deadly Force

Legislation panned as a “loophole for shooting unarmed people.”

Local civil rights leaders are opposing a new bill that will allow the use of deadly force to prevent personal — or personal property — crimes.

House Bill 11 would allow citizens to take matters into their own hands if their personal property is being violated. At first glance, the bill seems reasonable, but local civil rights leaders fear that it will put innocent people in direct danger.

“Similar to what happened to Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia, they perceived him to have stolen something in that house then they chased him down and killed him,” said Rev. Walter Womack of the Southern Christian Leadership Council.

That incident turned out to be a case of mistaken identity, where neighbors thought a man jogging in their neighborhood was a criminal.

Shelby County Commissioner Van Turner, first vice-president of the Memphis chapter of the NAACP, raised the same concerns.

“This is a piece of legislation that comes from nowhere in the midst of a pandemic,” he said. “Every day, for the last two weeks, I’ve gotten a report of someone that I know who has passed from COVID-19. In the midst of all this death and despair, the efforts of our Tennessee General Assembly should focus on relieving folks from this.”

The Tennessee bill seems much like the Castle Doctrine law, better known as the “Stand Your Ground law,” where individuals have the right to use reasonable force, including deadly force, to protect themselves against an intruder in their home.

The difference in the House Bill 11 and the Castle Doctrine is that the language states, “When and to the degree the person reasonably believes deadly force is immediately necessary to prevent or terminate the other from committing or attempting to commit the following offenses . . .” This means that the person being violated would not have to be in immediate danger, themselves. Under current law, if a suspect is running away from the scene of the crime, you cannot legally shoot at them. If this bill is passed, a citizen can do so without penalty.

Rep. Jay Reedy, who sponsored the bill, argued that citizens should have the right to protect their possessions. “I would like to understand why people should not be able to protect their property, and I’m waiting for a returned phone call from the NAACP,” Reedy said.

As soon as the NAACP posted their grievance about the law, Reedy said his office tried to call and set up a meeting to hash out the language in the bill. Turner said that he has not received a call from Reedy’s office.
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John DeBerry had left his campaign financial account of roughly $200,000 untouched, spending none of it in his losing bid as an independent to newly elected Democratic successor Torrey Harris.

Certainly that conclusion seemed somewhat sensible in the wake of DeBerry’s four-to-one loss to Harris, but the fact was that DeBerry had not gone unspoken for. Especially in the latter stages of his race, a plethora of signs boosting his re-election had appeared at strategic locations of the sprawling District 90.

It was suggested that DeBerry, whose GOP-like positions had caused him to be banished by the state Democratic Party from its ballot, had been the beneficiary of contributors from a conservative Political Action Committee on his behalf. To some degree he had, but it now develops, according to the Tennessee Lookout, that DeBerry did in fact spend from his own resources, to the tune of some $90,000, and that he would shortly be amending his previous financial disclosure report to the state Election Registry.

Going forward, the former legislator is likely to have few financial worries. As previously reported, he has been hired by Republican Governor Bill Lee as an advisor, at an annual salary of $165,000. How he’ll earn that is a little uncertain. DeBerry had a certain fame in the General Assembly for his oratorical prowess, which he used in recent years on anti-abortion and pro-voucher subjects, among others. How that penchant translates into his new advisory role remains to be seen.

The aforementioned Lookout, which has a discernible progressive tilt, is renting space these days in the press room of the Cordell Hull building, which also houses legislators’ offices and meeting rooms, and will be covering the forthcoming legislative session from there.

Because of its arguable identity as an advocacy journal, there had been a modicum of controversy among the existing denizens of the press room, all serving established and ostensibly politically neutral periodicals, as to whether the Lookout should have a space there.

One of those considering the point rhetorically was Sam Stockard, a long-time journalist for various periodicals, most recently the Daily Memphian, for whom he rendered formidable service.

Somewhat to the astonishment of Stockard’s peers, the DM recently discontinued his role as their Capitol Hill correspondent. With the consent of his colleagues, Stockard will soldier on in Cordell Hull as the official lookout for the aforementioned Lookout.

• Even amid expectations of the imminent arrival of a COVID vaccine, the current spike of cases has raised anxiety in Shelby County. The auditorium of the Vasco Smith County Administration Building has suggested a ghost town for most of the pandemic in 2020. But it was filled to the maximum and beyond during a recent meeting at which county health department director Alisa Haushalter laid down new directives for dealing with the spike, which is currently setting new records for cases and deaths.

The new guidelines, which tightened mandates on mask-wearing, limited serving capacities, and established 10 p.m. closing times for restaurants, seemed moderate enough, at least by harsher standards applied elsewhere in the nation. But nearly 30 citizens came to the well to protest them, in sentiments ranging from sensible to troubled to outlandish.

One complainant advised the assembled commissioners and other county officials, “Listen to the mandate of the people in the referendum provided to you daily on social media.” Another inveighed against the restrictions as specimens of “communism.” And there were numerous spurious statistics spouted, such as a claim that there had been only some 13,000 COVID deaths nationally, and only 37 in Shelby County, with the rest actually being misreported cases of diabetes, cancer, and gunshot wounds.

Most of the commentary from the audience, however, concerned the legitimate anguish, economic and otherwise, of gym proprietors and restaurant owners who felt their livelihoods to be in serious jeopardy. Commission chairman Eddie Jones patiently and sympathetically moderated the public discussion period.
APPELLACHIAN TRAIL

SIX FEET APART? HOW ABOUT
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For the past 20 years, Desiree Robinson has been the heart and soul of the Cozy Corner Restaurant. At 83 and "semi-retired," she is the lynchpin that keeps the family business running. Known for their slow-cooked racks of ribs and immaculate service, the tiny establishment at North Parkway and Manassas has made a name for itself in a city filled with barbecue restaurants.

Desiree herself has also made waves. Earlier this year, she was inducted into the American Royal’s BBQ Hall of Fame, becoming the first African-American woman inducted. The national group, which inducts three new members a year, looks for those who “have made an outstanding impact on the world of barbecue.” The honor came as a surprise. She had never been inclined to push for any kind of recognition when it came to her work. For years she just tried to make Cozy Corner a place Memphians would love.

“I almost passed out,” she says. “I just couldn’t believe it, because I never thought of us as more than a great mom-and-pop restaurant where people would come in and bring their children for good food. I never thought about anything like this. It never crossed my mind. I was just amazed when they started talking about me.”

Desiree and her family moved to Memphis when she was young in search of better opportunities. “My mom said I would be going to school in Memphis,” she says. “So, I was 4 or 5 when we moved from Mississippi into the city. I pretty much grew up at 1201 Tutwiler in Memphis.”

From an early age, Desiree found herself working in the kitchen with her grandmother and mother, making family dinners. For years she would spend time perfecting her craft and trying new recipes while gaining a love for cooking.

“When I was 8 years old, I was cooking dinner for the family,” she says. “It had to be on the table at 5 o’clock Monday through Thursday. Cooking, and cooking for my family, was something that was always important for me when I was growing up.”

Desiree went to Manassas High School, where she met her husband, Raymond. The two were an instant match. They were engaged before they left high school and moved to Denver after Raymond got a job at Martin Marietta, a building-materials firm.

The Robinsons settled down in Denver, starting a family and cooking for their co-workers and neighbors on the weekends. People would often comment...
on Raymond’s prowess behind the grill. “Raymond was an awesome cook from day one,” she says. “Early in our marriage he sat me down one day and told me, ‘I love to cook!’ I remember smiling at him and telling him, ‘Okay then, I want to keep you happy.’ I didn’t do a lot of cooking. I’m an excellent cook, too, but I stepped back because he would enjoy himself so much when he was cooking. He would plan stuff out and always be testing new recipes. We had company almost every other day because people wanted to try his food.”

It was the initial interest from friends and co-workers in Denver that led to the creation of their first restaurant, Ray’s Barbecue, in Denver. Though successful, the couple’s time in Denver was limited. Both Raymond and Desiree came from single-parent households and neither wanted their parents, who were still living in Memphis, to struggle.

“We never meant to stay in Colorado for as long as we did,” she says. “Raymond and I were both only children and we didn’t want other people taking care of our parents as they grew older. We said when we went out there we would only stay a couple of years, actually. It just so happened that I liked it very well and we were out there for eight years. When we came back to Memphis, it was because both Raymond and I felt like we needed to take care of our parents. We both liked Colorado, but we knew we had to come back home.”

When the duo returned to Memphis, Raymond found work doing odd jobs in the city while Desiree opted to stay home and raise their children. By the time their two children, Ray Robinson Jr. and Val Bradley, had begun high school, memories of their Denver restaurant had started to linger on their minds.

“Aft er Colorado, Raymond had been missing the restaurant business. One day he came to me and said, ‘I want to open another restaurant.’ We both were...

continued on page 12
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BRANDON GILL

continued from page 11

qualified to do it. I then remember him saying, ‘One of us is going to run the restaurant and the other one is going to have to get a job.’ It was funny because prior to this he had told me that he didn’t want me to work after our kids were born. He forgot all about them!”

n 1977, Desiree and Raymond opened the Cozy Corner. Despite her involvement in the initial opening, Desiree ended up taking a job at BellSouth. Through the years, she would work at Cozy Corner during the weekends but largely spent her time away from the restaurant.

“By the time the restaurant opened, the kids were teenagers and worked there more than I did! I went to BellSouth and worked there until I retired. I did work in the restaurant some, but for the most part, it was Raymond and the kids running the show. The kids would leave school and go straight to Cozy Corner.”

During the first few years of Cozy Corner, the Robinsons worked with a single barbecue pit and a limited menu. At the time, Raymond was also the only chef. Nonetheless, the quality of the food and service kept hungry Memphians coming back for more.

“When we first opened, Raymond ended up doing all of the cooking. In hindsight, he probably wanted to do all of the cooking. He could turn a plain meal into a fabulous meal in a minute after I put it on the table. We played off each other really well. Even though I wasn’t in the kitchen at the time, I learned from just hearing him talk about what he was doing.”

Raymond’s warm personality was a reason for Cozy Corner’s early success, bringing in a stream of regular customers. “I think it was good that Raymond was at the restaurant in the beginning because of his personality,” Desiree says. “He was one of the nicest people you will ever meet. We had known each other for a long time and were married for 43 years before he passed away. In all that time, there was not one person who didn’t like him. He was so nice to be around. There was no one he wouldn’t talk to, and don’t you dare look discouraged. He would talk you out of it. We were exact opposites! I learned a lot from just watching him interact with others. I think it rubbed off on me over the years.”

Today Desiree Robinson is still a regular around Cozy Corner but has passed much of the day-to-day business off to her grandkids. She still makes her way down to the restaurant to make sure all of her guests feel like family.

When Raymond died suddenly in 2001, it was a shock for the entire family.

BRANDON GILL

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January 17-23, 2020

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BRANDON GILL

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When Raymond died suddenly in 2001, it was a shock for the entire family.
Desiree Robinson with her grandkids (left); Sean Robinson (right) with a barbecued Cornish hen

As a whole, they were devastated and his death put the future of Cozy Corner in limbo. While the family was mourning the loss, one of the first questions Desiree remembered asking the family was, “How are we going to keep the business open?”

After deliberating for a few days, she decided to step into Raymond’s place and run the business. “After he died, I went full-time at Cozy Corner. I wouldn’t have dreamed of doing it any other way. It was fun for everybody, and the customers were so glad they didn’t know what to do. Raymond had never met a person that didn’t like him, and he brought that energy to Cozy Corner every day. He was very likable, and I just wanted to keep that up.”

Desiree tried to maintain the small mom-and-pop feeling of the restaurant after Raymond’s death. Cozy Corner is a gathering ground for the Robinsons; four generations of the family now work in their kitchen. Her office in the back of the restaurant was converted to a nursery so that family members could still work in the restaurant with their young kids. Most of the staff in the restaurant are friends or family.

“It’s really a family thing,” she says. “We just added another one who’s only 8 months old, and we are trying to figure out how to get him in there. It’s a place where we can come together and laugh and enjoy life.”

Desiree can take credit for the continued success of Cozy Corner after Raymond’s death. She took the reins at the restaurant making sure that customers were shown the same attention and care that they had under Raymond’s ownership.

Under her leadership, Cozy Corner continued to make a name for itself in the local scene. It has won local and national awards and started making lists as a regional barbecue powerhouse. As Desiree pushed into her early 70s, she helped the restaurant expand its hours from closing at 5 p.m. to 9 p.m., a move that also expanded its popularity.

Today Desiree Robinson is still a regular around Cozy Corner but has passed much of the day-to-day business off to her grandkids. Though retired, she still makes her way down to the restaurant now and then to make sure that all of her guests feel like they are family.

“Come and eat with us,” she says, “and have the best food you’ve ever had with the best people you could ever meet.”

BRANDON DILL; MICHAEL DONAHUE

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Every presidential election season spawns calls for reform of our rickety, antiquated system for electing presidents and representatives. In light of recent events, the urgency has never been greater. Here are some options to consider that would fix our problems.

Electoral College: Take the Electoral College. (Please.) Under our Constitution, state legislatures have exclusive power regarding the Electoral College. Any federal legislation to the contrary would be unconstitutional.

You could consider having states allocate Electoral College votes by congressional district, as Maine and Nebraska do. But all that’s do is import the pathologies of gerrymandering into the presidential election.

Or states could allocate Electoral College votes pro rata, based on each candidate’s share of the statewide vote, rather than on the current winner-take-all basis. But this is only a slight improvement. It would still make a vote in Wyoming mathematically worth three times as much as a vote in California (because each state gets two Electoral votes, regardless of its population). More fundamentally, it would still allow a candidate with more nationwide votes to lose to a candidate with fewer. (These same two criticisms also apply to the Maine/Nebraska approach.)

And, as I explain in my book, Rethinking U.S. Election Law, mathematically, it would still allow a small number of large states to dominate the campaign and get outsized attention in governance, as they do now. Because most states have a small number of Electoral College votes (average is 11, median is 7), even the most aggressive campaign effort could only change one Electoral vote in most states. So the incentive would still be to focus on a few big states with 20 or more Electoral votes and ignore the rest.

Better is the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact (nationalpopularvote.com), an agreement among state legislatures to award their state’s Electoral votes to the nationwide winner regardless of the vote count in their own state. This makes every vote in the U.S. mathematically equal to every other. Swing states won’t dominate, no one is ignored, and a candidate with fewer nationwide votes can’t beat out someone with more.

Within the last 10 years, 14 states representing 196 Electoral College votes have signed on to the Compact. They’re now 70 percent of the way toward the goal of 270 Electoral votes, at which point the Compact takes effect and the Electoral College is rendered harmless.

Gerrymandering: That “proportionate share” approach works better as a solution to gerrymandering. Nonpartisan redistricting commissions should become de rigueur. We’re the only advanced democracy that still lets politicians draw their own district lines. Voters don’t choose their representatives — it’s the other way around.

But because of “the Big Sort,” with Democrats overconcentrated in big cities, even the best such commissions can’t avoid “natural gerrymanders” that result whenever you superimpose single-member district lines and winner-take-all elections onto the unruly, demographically clustered populations of the U.S.

You still have a “skew” which allows a party’s share of seats in the House to deviate significantly from its share of the overall vote. And you still have an overwhelming number of “safe” Republican and Democratic districts, where the only real competition is in the primaries. This incentivizes candidates to move to the extremes of left and right to avoid being “primaried,” with no real incentive to work across the aisle on constructive compromise.

Even better would be at-large or multi-member district elections using Proportional Representation, where 40 percent of the vote nets 40 percent of the seats. This would help Republicans in New York and Democrats in Mississippi get their fair share of representation; make all elections competitive with high turnout; and end gerrymandering once and for all.

The Fair Representation Act, currently pending in Congress, would give states the option to go this route, which has worked well in Australia for 60 years and in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for 80. (The multi-member districts would be drawn by nonpartisan commissions, but instead of a single winner-take-all election, three to five members would be elected at once, with each party getting its proportionate share of seats. And because the elections would use Ranked Choice Voting, where voters could choose their first, second, and third choices, third parties would have a decent shot at getting at least some representation.)

In conclusion, our electoral system needs real fixes. Now is the time to consider them. ■

Steve Mulroy teaches election law at the University of Memphis law school. He is a former Shelby County commissioner and Voting Section lawyer for the U.S. Justice Department.
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Oh, Nuts! By Julie Ray

If your holiday thing is the Nutcracker and you are not real nuts about seeing an adaptation, all I have to say is that sometimes a remake gets it right. Really right. That is definitely the case with Nut Remix, a modern reinvention of Tchaikovsky’s classic Nutcracker, by the savvy and talented team from New Ballet Ensemble & School.

The performance is set on Beale Street. The mash-up of dance and music styles really works. From ballet to breakdancing and flamenco to Memphis jookin, this uniquely Memphis production will mesmerize you from start to finish. This year, the production will be screened at the drive-in for your safety. If you’ve seen the production on stage and have made it your annual holiday tradition or if you’re seeing it for the first time, I can’t think of a better place to experience the magic of Memphis. Just remember to register for your tickets in advance. As part of the school’s mission to make the arts accessible to everyone, this screening is pay-what-you-can with a suggested donation of $40 per car.

Be sure to do it soon. After last week’s screening, word got around. According to New Ballet, “We sold out our original goal of 150 cars for next week’s screening, and we are now increasing our capacity to accommodate more viewers.”

Experience the uniquely Memphis reimagining of the Nutcracker with the whole family from the comfort and safety of your car.

NEW BALLET’S “NUT REMIX,” MALCO SUMMER DRIVE-IN, 5310 SUMMER, THURSDAY, DEC. 17, 6:30 P.M., PAY-WHAT-YOU-CAN WITH A SUGGESTED DONATION OF $40 PER CAR.

Get down, get down, get down with Wiseacre’s Gotta Get Up to Get Down. Brews, p. 25

If 2020 has been the year we grieved, maybe we can look forward with hope. The Last Word, p. 31

VARIOUS DAYS & TIMES December 17th - 23rd

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<td>Featuring work by jewelers and a conversation with artists Alicia Goodwin and Anna Johnson about their creative process, followed by a short Q&amp;A.</td>
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<td>Pre-recorded and online virtual performance by Germantown Community Chorus and Germantown Symphony Orchestra. Featuring traditional and contemporary music. Advance ticket required.</td>
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<td>Online from Opera Memphis and WKNO, wkno.org, Thursday, Dec. 17, 7 p.m., free</td>
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<td>Classical pieces and holiday favorites performed by Amanda Quinn, Shirley Hill, Philip Himebook, and Marcus King. Listen online or stream live at WKNO 91.1.</td>
<td>Bring your own blankets or chairs and get ready for holiday family movie magic as Clarence the angel gets his wings with a little help from George Bailey.</td>
<td>A Christmas experience featuring a two-hour cruise with dinner down the Mississippi River and a live blues and jazz band. Ugly Sweater Booze Cruise at 10:30 p.m. ($25).</td>
<td>Fill the truck with toys for families experiencing difficulties this season. Drop off new, unwrapped toys as well as cash, check, or credit card donations.</td>
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Still Life  By  Julie  Ray

When Memphis artist Christina Huntington began a weekly series of small, alla prima (wet-on-wet, in one sitting) oil paintings of still life arrangements, she did so as a way to reawaken her dormant art skills. On her website, christinhauntingtonart.com, Huntington states that most of the paintings for this first “real show” were produced in one sitting. The idea, inspired by Carol Marine’s book Daily Painting, is to practice a lot and enjoy it by not getting too invested in getting it right.

But she did get it right and has already sold nearly two dozen pieces framed in black resin or wood frames with glass, cropped to show the raw edges of under-painting, and floated on an off-white mat.

By day, Huntington is a senior information architect at Archer Malmo. She graduated from Rhodes College with degrees in studio art and creative writing but gained her appreciation for art-making from her father who maintained a lifelong art practice. Her mother is a Philippines-born Spaniard and her father is from Mississippi.

“My father is my biggest and first artistic influence,” Huntington says of her late father, who passed away eight years ago. “My mother struggled with English. I often helped her understand during a time when Memphis wasn’t as diverse. This plays into my work as an observer — taking in information and translating.”

Her brushwork in this series depicting fruits and vegetables, flowers, and nostalgic objects balances the illusion of depth and volume while honoring the medium of painting. ■

CLOSING RECEPTION FOR “RECENT STILL LIFES,” ECLECTIC EYE, 242 S. COOPER, FRIDAY, DEC. 18, 5:30-7:30 P.M., FREE.

Rev. Ivan Stang (above) talks about his secret origins in J.R. “Bob” Dobbs and the Church of the SubGenius. Film, p. 26

Magic of Memphis Holiday Spectacular!
Cannon Center for the Performing Arts, 255 N. Main, Saturday, Dec. 19, 7:30 p.m., $20
Enjoy your favorite holiday music from Memphis Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Robert Moody.

Pop-Up Market on Beale
Jerry Lee Lewis’ Cafe & Honky Tonk, 310 Beale, Saturday, Dec. 19, 1 p.m., free to shop
Shop with 20+ local small businesses for yourself or holiday gifts. Christmas-themed brunch and drink menu will be available.

Booksinging by Russ Thompson
901 Comics, 2162 Young, Saturday, Dec. 19, 1-4 p.m., free
The author reads and signs The Loop Breaker: A Beacon and the Darkness. Copies of the book will be on sale or you can bring your own pre-purchased copy.

Christmas Open House
Mid-South Artist Gallery, 2945 Shelby, Saturday-Sunday, Dec 19-20, 2-4 p.m., free
Featuring work by area artists including Jon Woodhams, Jean Wu, Sandra Horton, Marina Wurtz, Frederick Lyle Thrauthemburg Morris, and others.

Christmas Toss & Tunes: Cornhole Tournament
Tin Roof, 315 Beale, Monday, Dec. 21, 6:30 p.m., $10 buy-in
This is not your backyard cornhole tournament. Featuring round-robin doubles scoreholio with $200 added to the pot and live music with Frank Caswell.

X-Mas Movie Trivia & Ugly Sweater Contest
Flying Saucer Memphis, 130 Peabody Place, Tuesday, Dec. 22, 7 p.m., free
Get quizzed on holiday movies, TV, and music, including Home Alone, Elf, Die Hard, Love Actually, and more. The trivia champ prize is $50, plus a prize for best ugly sweater.
A similar motif runs through new (and reissued) releases from Memphis-centric groups Snowglobe, Two Way Radio, and the Smartest Man in the World. As with most local releases, the albums share some players. Two Way Radio’s *Succinct Extinction*, for example, features Snowglobe’s Brad Postlethwaite playing the singing saw. But the common thread running through these releases is the lush arrangements, the focus on melody.

Each release oozes atmosphere, overflowing with horn or string arrangements and layer upon layer of backing vocals. What’s more, it’s all tastefully done, even when horn lines, backing vocals. What’s more, it’s all arrangements and layer upon layer of overflowing with horn or string arrangements, the focus on melody.

The end result was *Succinct Extinction*, a multi-layered example of confectionary pop perfection. Though Bomar shopped the album around to different labels, no one bit, and it was eventually shelved. “It was definitely disappointing when the plug was pulled,” McCollan says. He and Reager muse that the stall on the album may have led to the band’s breaking up. Now, though, *Succinct Extinction* has found new life thanks to Reager’s Back to the Light label.

“Dirty Dishes” kicks off the album with an arpeggated piano melody played over restrained guitars and drums. Soon lyrics about Star Wars toys, taking out the trash, and doing the dishes find the sweet spot where the mundane and magical mingle. Kate Crowder’s voice, interwoven with the all-star cast of other vocalists, is the star of the show. “Can You Boss a Nova Around?” wins the award for cleverest song title, and “I Can Do Better,” “Waking Hours,” and “Succinct Extinction” are all standout tracks.

The Smartest Man in the World — “Adult Theater” (self-released)

“We have these ideas about who we are and what we’re going to be. They’re just ideas, but we believe them and they determine the course of our life,” says Dead Soldier frontman and self-styled Smartest Man in the World Michael Jasud. “We also have ideas about what kind of person we’re supposed to be with, and sometimes they’re quite bad ideas.”

The chorus’ vocal melody references Player’s “Baby Come Back,” even as Jasud’s
lyrics make clear how foolish an idea a reunion would be for the song’s erstwhile lovers. Though Jasud’s introspection and self-deprecating sense of humor help the songwriter tease out smart, catchy lyrics, the real MVP is the absolutely on-fire musical arrangement.

The players are Shawn Zorn on drums, Landon Moore on bass, Rick Steff on keys, with Kait Lawson and (Snowglobe collaborator) Luke White on backing vocals. “Victor Sawyer wrote the horn parts, which really highlight his incredible and understated sense of melody, and put them down with Jawaun Crawford on trumpet. And Toby Vest of course, my partner in crime and orchestrator of this whole project,” Jasud says. “All of those guys were really instrumental in this song coming together the way it did.”

Snowglobe — *Our Land Brains* (Nine Mile Records)

Snowglobe’s debut album, *Our Land Brains*, was originally released via Bardot Records in 2002. The album received favorable reviews and launched a band that would feature prominently in the Memphis music scene for the next two decades. Now, Nine Mile Records has released a remastered limited-edition double vinyl of *Our Land Brains* with new artwork by Andrew Kosten.

For Memphians aware of Snowglobe but unsure where to begin, the Nine Mile rerelease makes for an ideal jumping-on point. The album bustles with clean, crisp acoustic guitars, Nahshon Benford’s stellar horn lines, and more than a dozen pitch-perfect pop songs — more or less what a listener should expect from the band.

The album opener, “Waves Rolling,” is a slow, seductive entrée into Snowglobe’s dreamy wonderland. “Adrenaline Mother” weaves luxurious pathways through the listener’s brain; warbling slide guitar and horns create a dreamlike atmosphere. “Stubber” starts slowly and sparsely, but when the drums begin in earnest, the song feels as though it’s tapped into something undeniable. That’s the effect this group always has on me: I find myself nodding along, certain of the implicit truth of the song — even when I didn’t quite catch the words. That’s just the power of Snowglobe, and why the band’s name, with its connotations of magic and illusion, is such a perfect fit.
CALENDAR of EVENTS: December 17 - 23

THEATER

Germantown Community Theatre
Miracle on 34th Street Radio Play

Hatillo Theatre
A Holiday Cabaret

Kudzu Playhouse
Kudzu Playhouse Virtual, join Kudzu social media for donation based classes, games, scholarship opportunities, and more. Download the app for playwriting, and more. Free. Ongoing. 66 S. COOPER (726-4656).

Landers Center
Peter Pan, a timeless Broadway classic musical that whisks you away to a place where dreams are born and no one ever grows up. $20. Fri., 7 p.m., Sat., Sun., 2 & 7 p.m. and Wed., Thurs., 7 p.m. Through Dec. 17. 4560 VENTURE, SOUTHAVEN, MS 6862-200-8120.

P&H Holiday Art Auction at the P&H Café
Saturday, December 19th, 5 p.m.

The Orpheum
Orpheum Virtual Engagement, join Orpheum staff, artists, and students for activities, interviews, and more on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. Visit website for more information. Ongoing. 203 S. MAIN (525-3000).

Playhouse on the Square

Tennessee Shakespeare Company
A Christmas Carol

Theatre Memphis
A Christmas Carol On the Air, experience the full joy of the holidays and relive memories of Christmases past in the convenience of your own home. theatrememphis.org. $20. Through Jan. 3, 2021. Online on Stage, a Theatre Memphis Facebook group that serves as a clearinghouse for performers wanting to share their talents. Featuring storytime, readings, or performance art. Ongoing. 630 PERKINS EXT. (682-8323).

ARTIST RECEPTIONS

Mid-South Artist Gallery
Christmas Open House, exhibition of work by area artists. Sat.-Sun., Dec. 19-20, 2-4 p.m. 2945 SHELBY (409-8705).

OTHER ART HAPPENINGS

Arrow Creative Online Store
All sales benefit local creatives. Shop locally made jewelry, candles, greeting cards, soaps, and more. Ongoing. ARROW CREATIVE, 2535 BROAD, (901-525-3100), OPERAMEMPHIS.ORG.

Holiday Artist Market

Museum of Science and History
Pink Palace
WWW.MEMPHISMUSEUMS.ORG

Enchanted Forest
WWW.ENCHANTEDFORESTMEMPHIS.COM

HOLIDAY EXHIBIT

November 21 - December 31. Photos with Santa, Holiday Movies & Planetarium Shows.
Virtual Training & Group Fitness
YMCA of Memphis & the Mid-South offers workouts for anyone to try at home. Workouts include yoga, barre, boot camp, exercises for active older adults, and Les Mills training. Visit website to join. Free. Ongoing. Freecampusymca.org.

SPECIAL EVENTS
Lament to Hope: Prayer and Reflection
Participate in a community-wide call to prayer and reflection during the months of November and December online or in person at the historic Evans Chapel. Sundays, 9 a.m.-3 p.m., and Mondays-Fridays, 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Through Dec. 31. Germantown Presbyterian Church, 2225 S. Germantown (754-8254). Breakawaymemphis.org.

MEETINGS
Churches from the Presbytery of the Mid-South: Sunday Worship Livestream
Combined livestream worship. Visit website for more information and livestream links. Sun., 11 a.m. isewillscurch.org.

MycoCity Class
Introduction to mycology, the study of fungi and their use to humans as well as their dangers. Free. Sun., Dec. 20, 2 p.m. Volanttine-Evergreen Greenline at N. Audubon, 673 N. Audubon, Memphis, memphisymca.org/secretstree.

Prison Fellowship’s Angel Tree

HOLIDAY EVENTS
Arrow Creative Holiday Bazaar

Breakfast or Dinner with Santa
Enjoy a family-style meal and favorite zoo characters before Santa arrives. Santa will be available for photos during meal. Each child will receive a gift. $35 members, $40 non-members. Fri., Sat., 5:30-7:30 p.m., and Sat., Sun., 9-11 a.m. Through Dec. 20. Memphis Zoo. 200 Preston Place in Overton Park (333-4500).

Christmas Movies

Delight at Concourse

Enchanted Forest Festival of Trees
Exhibit benefiting Le Bonheur Children’s Hospital. Photos with Santa, pandemic-style, with Santa behind a Plexiglass shield that looks like a holiday snow globe. Wednesdays-Saturdays, 10:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Through Dec. 31. Memphis Pink Palace Museum, 3050 Central (683-2823).

Holiday Decor Photo Contest

Holiday Dinner & Music Cruise
A Christmas experience featuring a two-hour cruise with dinner down the Mississippi River and a live blues and jazz band. $65. Sat., Dec. 19, 6 p.m. Memphis riverboats, 45 S. Riverside (527-2428). Memphismembermagazine.net.

Holiday Lights at Crosstown Concourse

continue on page 23
We're sweetening the deal. Each holiday gift subscription includes 11 issues of MEMPHIS MAGAZINE. Plus a gift certificate for a milk or dark chocolate bar from Dinstuhl’s.

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more than 70% off the newsstand cover price!
Outdoor Holiday Movie Series
Bring your own blankets or chairs and get ready for holiday family movie magic. Free. Fri., 7 p.m. Through Dec. 18. OVERTON SQUARE, 2101 MADISON.

Holiday Wonders at the Garden
Snowy Nights in My Big Backyard, Under the Stars Outdoor Lounge, and City of Memphis Christmas Tree. Through Dec. 27. MEMPHIS BOTANIC GARDEN, 750 CHERRY (920-4100).

Love is Christmas
A virtual Christmas concert benefiting Le Bonheur Children’s Hospital, on Facebook Live. Donations encouraged to benefit Le Bonheur Children’s Hospital, on Facebook. Dec. 20, 7 p.m. JUSTGIVING.COM.

Phil’s Symphony Orchestra
Holiday music from the Memphis Symphony Orchestra. $22.50. CANNON CENTER, 255 N. MAIN (627-9400).

Magic of Memphis Holiday Spectacular
At the Cannon Center, Saturday, December 19th, 7:30 p.m. every Sunday until Christmas for socially distanced fun and holiday photos. Sun., 4-6 p.m. Through Dec. 20. OVERTON SQUARE, 2101 MADISON.

Santa’s Wonderland

Snow in Overton Square
Play in the snow at the Square (291-8200).

Zoo Lights
A winter wonderland of over 1M lights, activities, Santa Claus, and more. Visit on select nights. Zoo Lights closed Dec. 2, 3, 9, 10, 24, and 31. $10. Fridays-Sundays, 6-9:30 p.m., and Mondays, Tuesdays, 6-9:30 p.m. Through Dec. 29. MEMPHIS ZOO, 2000 PRENTISS PLACE IN OVERTON PARK (333-6500).

FOOD & DRINK EVENTS
Billie’s Pecans Holiday Pop-Up Shop
Stop by and grab your favorite treats. Thurs.-Sat., 10 a.m.-5 p.m., and Sun., 12-4 p.m. Through Dec. 20. MILSTONE MARKET & NURSERY, 6993 POPULAR (901-624-7404), BILLIESPECANS.COM.

Babe (1995) 25th Anniversary
Also screening at the Collierville Malco theater. $15. Sun., Dec. 20, 3 p.m.

Billie’s Pecans Holiday Pop-Up Shop
Stop by and grab your favorite treats. Thurs.-Sat., 10 a.m.-5 p.m., and Sun., 12-4 p.m. Through Dec. 20. 6993 POPLAR (800-624-7404), BILLIESPECANS.COM.

Interactive Holiday Wonderland: An Evening of Christmas Cheer
A winter wonderland featuring daily visits from Santa, local entertainment, and local vendors. Mondays-Saturdays, 11 a.m.-7 p.m., and Sundays, 1-7 p.m. Through Dec. 25. SANTA’S FOREST SOUTH, 3268 COMMERCIAL.

Snowball Jammies: Holiday Movie Series
At the Garden
Jump into your jammies, grab a cup of cocoa, and join Momandpop for a virtual winter-themed show via Zoom. Sign up for the live stream for a list of props and pre-show information. Free. Fri., Dec. 18, 6:30 p.m. GERMANtown PERFORMING ARTS CENTER, 1801 EXETER (751-7500).

A Virt-Yule Concert
Pre-recorded and online holiday virtual performance by Germantown Community Chorus and Germantown Symphony Orchestra. Advance ticket required. PWYC. Dec. 19-26, 7-9 p.m. GERMANtown Chorus.com.

Babe (1995) 25th Anniversary
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Event Page: Food & Drink
Help Support Lifesaving Cures
We are seeking blood and cell donors to support important medical research focused on fighting life-threatening diseases. You can make a big difference for patients seeking new hope.

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researchchampions.com

Memphis Flyer
t takes a lot for a new dish to break into that clique of traditional holiday favorites at the dinner table. But Sara Embrey’s mini coconut cream pies did just that this past Thanksgiving at our small outdoor family gathering.

Maybe not this Christmas, but in future holiday functions with the family, those little pies everyone was gobbling up will be there with the pumpkin pie, sweet potato and green bean casseroles, and turkey with cornbread dressing.

I asked Ruth McClallen Thompson, who brings the pies, where she gets them. She told me Sara Embrey in Coldwater, Mississippi, bakes them.

So I gave Embrey a call.

“Oh, gosh. My story is not exciting,” Embrey says. “I couldn’t cook when I got married. I didn’t have a clue. My sweet husband cooked the first year. Thank goodness my mother taught me to read. So I know how to read a recipe.”

“The first thing I ever cooked was spaghetti. And it was a package, a Lawry’s packaged seasoning. It just told you to add water, and I succeeded.”

Not all of Embrey’s efforts were successful. “I’d put it in the garbage can before my husband got home.”

She took a cake decorating class after they moved to Jackson, Mississippi. Students had to bake a cake before they decorated it.

“I would come home with the cake and my husband would very quickly take it to work the next day. He’s all about, ‘Let’s make a dollar here.’

“My family got sick of birthday cakes real quick, so we became pie people — or cobblers or something like that — for birthdays. And you learn to stick candles in that.”

After they moved back to Tate County 30 years ago, Embrey began baking petit fours, which she learned how to make in another class in Jackson, and selling them at little league baseball games and church functions. People began ordering them for their children’s birthday parties.

Embrey branched out to baking other things, including the coconut cream pies. “I kind of put three recipes together on those.”

One recipe was for the filling and another for the topping. “But the bottom part is such a simple thing,” she says. “All the crust is that store-bought cookie dough in those rolls that you cut. Just that with some flour added. You mix that up and put that in your tins and mash it around and make a pie crust.”

Embrey is particularly proud of her lemon-filled cupcakes. “It’s very similar to a lemon icebox pie, [with] that thick custard. I have a certain decorating tip you put down in there and you shoot that stuff down in the cupcake. The topping is some Cool Whip with the filling.”

The Embreys live on a farm, where they have 30 head of cattle. “We moved out to the family farm about six or seven years ago. And listen to me, it’s the best thing I’ve ever done. I’m feeding a calf right now.”

Embrey, who doesn’t even have a name for her business, does all her baking in her kitchen. “I have to keep my eye on the Mississippi Cottage Law to make sure I’m okay.”

She bakes everything except wedding cakes, which make her too nervous. “If somebody calls me for a birthday cake or anything, I’ll say, ‘Let me have a picture of what you’re thinking.’ And, I’m going to be very honest. If I feel I can’t do it justice, I’m not going to embarrass you or me. ‘This is not going to pay my house note, so I can say, ‘No.’ It’s not something I’m trying to make a living doing, but I have enjoyed doing it. There are some weeks where I may do 400 petit fours. But, as we say at my house, it’s either feast or famine, where [the orders are] massive and then weeks when we’re not doing anything. And that’s the week where you go fish.”

To order, call Embrey at (662) 560-3379 or email sissyembrey@icloud.com.
Gotta Get Up
Sometimes a fishing trip demands a breakfast beer.

orman Maclean certainly didn’t write the only book on fly-fishing, but he did write A River Runs Through It, which is undoubtedly the book on the subject. As Mrs. M and I were heading up through Arkansas to cast some wooly boogers into the Little Red River, I needed some spiritual guidance on the sport. Maclean’s poetic, quasi-religious text does touch on the subject of beer. Being Presbyterian, he abstained from drinking while fly-fishing. Being a Scot and from Montana, however, he didn’t consider beer to be ‘drinking.’

David Coggins, who writes a fair bit about fly-fishing, says that when he’s in Montana, he drinks a marvelously mediocre brew called Leinenkugels; when not on those waters, he defaults to Miller Lite. “I ask you not to think of it as bad beer,” he writes, “but think of it as good water.”

Which is about two teaspoons off of Mrs. M’s philosophical thoughts on Bud Light. Thanksgiving being what it was, there was plenty of that stuff in the fridge, along with a little Sweetwater 420 Extra Pale Ale, so it all went into the cooler. I’ve heard Sweetwater is too big to be considered a craft, but that’s a silly argument. All stouts are supposed to be roasty. What separates the milk stout — and makes it a great eye-opener — is the addition of lactose sugar to the brewing process. Because it doesn’t ferment (read: turn to alcohol), it adds a creamy sweetness to the beer that makes it hard to go wrong. Gotta Get Up comes in with a 5 percent ABV — which is important psychologically if you’re drinking it in lieu of your morning coffee. It is, admittedly, higher in alcohol than my espresso.

My grandmother used to make a wicked New Year’s punch that involved five gallons of French vanilla ice cream, a fifth of bourbon, and 12 cups of coffee. It served 40, because Gran was a bit of a New Orleans butterfly back in the day. Gatherings of that size, however, are frowned upon these days, and I don’t own a punch bowl big enough. Gotta Get Up to Get Down almost reminded me of the beer version of Gran’s New Year’s punch. And it comes in much less cumbersome packaging.

As for the fishing? Bucolic, beautiful, almost Zen. While I didn’t know it was a competition, Mrs. M was at pains to tell me she won. Which she did. Maybe it was her skill as an angler — or maybe because she didn’t join me for coffee. Her family is English; they drink tea.
When Fake Becomes Real
J.R. “Bob” Dobbs and the Church of the SubGenius

The World Ends Tomorrow and YOU MAY DIE!” So begins SubGenius Pamphlet #1, the mysterious missive that launched J.R. “Bob” Dobbs into the cultural consciousness. The story of the unlikely creation of the Church of the SubGenius and its sprawling influence is told in a new documentary by producer/director Sandy K. Boone. The “church” was the brainchild of two friends from Fort Worth, Texas, Douglass St. Clair Smith and Steve Wilcox. Steve Wilcox worked for AT&T. They were both self-proclaimed outsiders in the straight-laced Texas of the late 1970s, so when they met, they became fast friends.

The two were fascinated with all kinds of extreme beliefs and outsider art. They bonded over a common love of the psychedelic music of Captain Beefheart. This was the age of televangelists and the rise of Evangelical Christianity. Wilcox had been raised in a fundamentalist household and was intimately familiar with the culture, even though he rejected his parents’ religion.

The idea was to create a parody version of the pamphlets and flyers, such as the tracts from cartoonist Jack Chick, that littered public spaces in Fort Worth, so they created a fake religion that was supposed to seem just as insane as the kooky pamphlets they were satirizing. To do that, they needed a deity. Since their own artistic skills weren’t up to snuff, and they couldn’t afford to hire an illustrator, they turned to clip art, the open source IP of the day. In a book from the 1950s intended for use by salesmen, they found an image of a smiling white man clenching a pipe in his teeth. They named the image J.R. “Bob” Dobbs, and invented a backstory for him.

“Bob” (the quotation marks were mandatory) was a supernaturally gifted salesman who was contacted in the 1950s by a “wrathful alien space god from a corporate sin galaxy” who called himself JHVH-1. The mission of “Bob” was to bring Slack to the world. What Slack was, exactly, was left to the imagination, but in Wilcox’s words, “You know when you don’t have it.”

Slackers — Dr. Philo Drummond (left) and Rev. Ivan Stang come clean in J.R. “Bob” Dobbs and the Church of the SubGenius.

All religions need an adversary. The target audience for the pamphlet was defined on the front page: “Do people think you’re strange? Do you??” Since the two artists were in Dallas, conspiracy theories about the assassination of John F. Kennedy were fresh on their minds. Thus, the Conspiracy of Normals, intent on stealing Slack from the abnormals, was conjured into existence.

Smith renamed himself Rev. Ivan Stang, and Wilcox adopted the moniker Dr. Philo Drummond. The pamphlet included an address for the SubGenius Foundation with a pitch to send $1 in return for “Eternal salvation or triple your money back!” As Ivan Stang says in one of the many archival interviews in the documentary, “If Jim Jones convinced 900 people to kill themselves, we thought maybe we could convince 900 people to give us a dollar.”

Much to their surprise, they convinced a lot more than 900 people. Word spread quickly, and a network of artists creating copycat artworks sprang up around the country. “Bob” became an icon of ‘80s counterculture. The first meeting of the SubGenius, which Stang dubbed a “devival,” attracted Devo founders Mark Mothersbaugh and Jerry Casale. A radio show called The Hour of Slack soon followed. “Bob” popped up in the oddest places, such as on the wall of the set of Pee-wee’s Playhouse. Baffled journalists didn’t know if the SubGenius crew was joking or not, and Ivan Stang, who took over running...
the ramshackle church, wasn’t about to tell them. The devivals became chaotic touring shows, with bands like Doktors for Bob pioneering what would become known as noise music.

As Boone’s insightful and spritely paced documentary reveals, the genius of the SubGenius was deconstructing the elements all real religions shared and reconstructing them in a funhouse mirror. But much to Stang’s dismay, he found that even a parody religion attracted sincere followers. At a massive devival in San Francisco known as The Night of Slack, Stang was accosted by a SubG who demanded to know where the real “Bob” was. Like any religion worth its creed, schisms developed, and people took the “us vs. them” narrative way too seriously. In the documentary, Stang says he decided to break character and tell the real story of the church in order to avoid creating a new Scientology after he’s gone.

In many ways, the SubGenius were ahead of their time. The church was an early adopter of the internet, and “Bob” is a proto-meme. Slack lives on as the name of a popular business conferencing app. But as the documentary points out in its closing minutes, cult-like organizations such as QAnon learned the wrong lessons from the SubGenius: No matter how nutty a group seems, if it gives them a sense of belonging, people are willing to believe.

J.R. “Bob” Dobbs and the Church of the SubGenius is available on Amazon Prime Video and Vimeo On Demand.
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The Year We Grieved

I started this year as many do — ready to embark on new goals, embrace new beginnings, welcome a new year with hope. 2020 vision, we all said. What could go wrong?

My birthday is in January. I can’t remember what I did on what must have been an uneventful turn of age in 2020. February, too, is a bit of a blur. What marked the real start of this year — at least where my lasting memory of it will forever be marked — was grief.

A longtime friend overdosed on heroin in early March. She’d struggled with opioid addiction and substance abuse for years. I tried to help her through much of it, offering a place to stay, clothes and food when she’d lost everything (which was every few months), and connecting her to resources that could help with recovery. She had at least two false starts in rehab. After a couple months in the last one, she snuck out and had her final dance with a needle. I remember the moment I read the Facebook message: “I just wanted you to know that Kristin is in ICU in Methodist North from a heroin overdose. Doctor said that she will more than likely not make it.”

The punch in the pit of my gut, the pang in my heart, the panic. I spent the better part of that week at Methodist visiting my friend, who was in a coma, as doctors ran tests to be sure nothing else could be done, to sort out possible organ donation in the likely case that nothing could. Between my visits, the news was abuzz with the novel coronavirus. Cases had spread in Washington and it was beginning to look as though it was going to be a pretty big deal, even here. Face masks weren’t a thing yet, but every time I walked into the hospital, I wondered if I was at risk for COVID. Was someone infected there? Was this all being blown out of proportion? I stopped at sanitizing stations and rubbed my hands down to be safe.

At the end of an emotionally draining week, my friend was taken off life support. Her memorial service was the last large gathering I attended this year. I carried hand sanitizer, avoided hugs with anyone aside from Kristin’s mother, and winced when someone coughed or sneezed nearby. Had they not heard of coronavirus yet? There are too many people in this room, too close together, I thought.

I grieved for Kristin, of course, but not in the way I would have if it wouldn’t have coincided with the emergence of a worldwide pandemic. I’ve grieved for her throughout this year, but with no hugs, no face-to-face conversations with friends who knew and loved her, too. My sadness over her loss was inadvertently overridden by a new punch in the gut, a different type of panic — one I wasn’t familiar with at all. How many people will die? Will I die? How bad is this virus? How far will it spread?

As the next few months unfolded, we all grieved. We grieved for lost jobs, loved ones who succumbed to COVID. We grieved in the absence of friends and family, for the loss of “normalcy” whatever that might have been. We pined for gatherings, concerts, theater outings, for any thread of hope that this mess would right itself. We longed for conversations, handshakes, workplace camaraderie, a beer at a damn bar. The world turned upside down, and we were given no clear instructions on how to best proceed. There was no united front.

In some ways, I’m relieved that Kristin’s struggle ended just before the world’s battle with COVID began. She’d likely have been on the streets, risking infections of all types, but perhaps especially the virus. She wouldn’t have had a safe haven like some of us have, nor easy access to soap and showers and sinks. There are many others like her — homeless, struggling with addiction or mental illness, isolated in the truest sense.

With all that’s been lost this year, I’m more grateful than ever for what I do have. A roof over my head, a job (though we’ve been working remotely since March and I miss the shit out of my co-workers), a partner who handles my COVID-fueled existential crises in stride, and so much more.

If you’re reading this now, you have survived this year, too. Perhaps we’ve been through the worst of it. At the very least, we can look at these broken pieces and be thankful for what’s left and how far we’ve come — and to look with hope toward 2021.

Shara Clark is managing editor of the Flyer.

Looking with hope toward 2021

The Year We Grieved

Reflections on 2020, a time of loss and broken pieces.

By Shara Clark

This Modern World

Life in the Stupidverse

Joe Biden wants to force us all to wear masks — like a tyrant!

Donald Trump should release martial law and nuke the election, like a freedom-loving patriot!

According to my internet sources, space people from the planet Vodgon have the ability to shuffle into ballots for Joe Biden throughout the election.

I’m unsure if I’m open to reason. So I’ve spent hours looking up unrelenting that bummer, starting with the theoretical points of view:

You just set your friends the president to authorize the super-exclusive treatment reserved for super-rich hobos...and you’re fine!

The Widening Gyre

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