

THE RESTON
LETTER

Historic Holiday Parade kicks off the season

By Gene Policinski, Staff Writer

Thousands lined streets in Reston Town Center on Nov. 28 for the 2025 Reston Holiday Parade and evening tree lighting event, bundled against brisk winds and wind-chill temperatures near 20 degrees.

The 33rd annual parade down Market Street featured multiple choral and dance troupes, the Washington Nationals’ “racing presidents” mascots, and costumed Kiwanis Club marchers promoting the group’s annual “Polar Dip.” The 2026 plunge into Lake Anne is set for Feb. 7, raising funds for groups that support children’s services.

The parade—recognized first in 2015 by USA TODAY as one of the nation’s leading holiday festivities—featured around 60 parade groups and hundreds of marchers, including giant balloons, scout troops, members of the Shriners’ fraternal organization driving tiny racing cars, and local sports league team champions.

Police and fire and rescue units from Fairfax County, Fair Oaks, Sterling, and Washington D.C. drove the route, some with lights and sirens blaring, along with motorcycle teams. Several thousand spectators standing three- and four-deep on sidewalks saw costumed characters Frosty the Polar Bear, Peppermint Penguin, and The Grinch strolling down Market Street. The characters remained afterwards for “selfies” with spectators.

Some sightseers said they arrived as early as 7:30 a.m. to gain curbside seats along the route. Others said they had attended the parade as children and now bring their youngsters. The crowd included families from Herndon, Sterling, Fairfax, and South Riding, holiday visitors from New York City and Chicago, and families from several other nations.



Festive parade participants, made up of 60 groups and hundreds of marchers, brightened up the morning on Nov. 28. Photo by Patricia Kovacs

Angie Goff and Marina Marraco from Fox 5 DC were parade hosts. They noted that the SLHS marching band, marching near the parade’s conclusion, is preparing to represent Virginia at the national Pearl Harbor Memorial Parade on Dec. 7 in Hawaii.

A notable parade participant was Fairfax County Sheriff Stacey Kincaid, riding in an open car, the first woman to hold that law enforcement post. Newly elected U.S. Representative James Walk-inshaw, Fairfax County Supervisor Walter Alcorn, State Delegate Karen Keys Garmarra, and State Sen. Jennifer Boysko also rode in the parade.

The SLHS Vocal Arts Chorus began the parade with the national anthem, along with the Fairfax County Police Honor Guard—which the parade host noted had performed earlier this year at the funeral of former president Jimmy Carter. The arrival of Santa Claus and

Mrs. Claus, in a horse-drawn carriage, closed the one-hour, half-mile parade. They returned about 6:30 p.m. for the lighting of the Town Center holiday tree.

During the day, the holiday celebration along Market Street featured ice skating, ice carving demonstrations, mini train and horse-drawn carriage rides, a special mailbox for “letters to Santa,” and live holiday music from the Reston Chorale and the Reston Orchestra.

BPX, Reston Town Center Association and Reston Community Center are partners and sponsors of the parade and tree lighting. A representative from Town Center developer BPX said in e-mail comments that planning for each year’s parade begins in the first three months of the year.

Video coverage of the entire 2025 parade Fox 5 News is available at <https://www.fox5dc.com/video/1748382>

bulletin



Books by Restonians, Jingle on the Lake and Winterfest return to make Reston’s holiday season special, RCC partners with NoVa Youth Ensemble

education



Former Restonian elected governor of New Jersey, Cappies reviews, South Lakes seniors experience Ethics Day

kids



Color images from the new Reston Letter coloring book, learn how to make peppermint bark, Calm Corner, book recommendations

lifestyle



Restaurant review on Ruth’s Chris, pointers for timeless remodeling, Reston roofing before and after, noticing our seasonal surroundings in the Inside Art column

opinions

A lesson from a dog, and what’s your EQ?

The Reston Letter to change distribution model in 2026
Subscriptions now required to receive newspaper in mailboxes

By Dawn Crosson,
Owner, Publisher, Editor

For three years without pause, The Reston Letter has provided monthly copies of our publication to almost two-thirds of Reston mailboxes free of charge. After trial and error, wins and losses, we have decided to take a fresh approach to our distribution model in 2026. With enormous confidence in the quality and importance of our community-supported and volunteer-run publication, we will continue to make it free to everyone and available at public locations around town.

However, we will now offer a Reston Letter subscription option for those who would like copies delivered directly to their mailboxes and to enjoy members-only benefits. Those monthly subscriptions will serve to help continue our mission. Some great news about this fresh approach is that it will not

limit distribution to Reston zip codes, as our previous model did; you can pay for a subscription to be mailed to you wherever you live— in Herndon, or all the way in Oregon— and by doing so support local, independent journalism in our country. These members will be ‘Friends of The Reston Letter’ and along with copies in their mailboxes, will enjoy exclusive content, invitations to members-only events, discounts from Reston businesses, and other perks.

Thank you for your three years of love and support. We constantly hear how beloved our paper has become to many residents. Please continue to read and enjoy The Letter, and if you’re able to, support us on a monthly basis via a membership plan and get the most out of what we can offer.

Please sign up now for a monthly cost of \$5 to secure your next issue in your mailbox and your membership rewards.

Spread the word!

This is the last issue that will be delivered for free to Reston mailboxes. To order your subscription, please visit our subscription portal linked below or visit our website: therestonletter.com.

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THE BULLETIN

Mission Statement:
The Reston Letter seeks to inform the Reston community of local events, highlight local group and individual accomplishments, and, secondarily, to provide a platform for residents to weigh in on local topics relevant to the majority of readers.

Local author wins National Moonbeam Award for children’s book

By Anthony Ozdemir, Staff Writer

It’s not often that an author wins a national award with their first published work, but this past October, Reston’s own Sarah Carpenter did just that. Her interactive children’s book of poems and short stories, “Beware of the Jornsnot,” won the 2025 Moonbeam Children’s Book Award in the Children’s Poetry category. The recognition was meaningful, but for Carpenter, the journey—and the community that supported it—matters just as much.

A few years ago, Carpenter decided she wanted to try something new. She committed to writing every day for a month and enlisted her children as her most honest—and toughest—editors. “So for 30 days, I just wrote something every single day, and to do that, you have to be mindful and present and look for opportunities to capture special moments,” she said. “At the end of the day, the kids would be my really tough editors. And that’s how it started.”

That daily practice, combined with time spent listening to her own kids and

others in the Reston community, sparked the idea for her book. She noticed that children see the world with a kind of clarity and creativity adults often lose. “I just mindfully watched my kids and the kids in my neighborhood and listened to their conversations,” she said. “Kids will notice things adults never do. They’ll say sentences that have never been said in the history of humankind. Their perspective is so beautiful and fresh, so present. Really, what I did was take the things they noticed, give it a framework, give it words and art, and give it back to them.”

From that inspiration came Arnie, the misunderstood, pizza-loving, “fearsome and terrifying” Jornsnot. Carpenter says Arnie’s story carries a simple message: “When you’re scared of something, you just need to learn about it more. You can miss out on a really good friendship if you just go off what people say.”

“Beware of the Jornsnot” eventually grew into a collection of 56 poems and short stories, filled with memorable characters and interactive prompts that invite readers to participate in the adventure.

“The biggest feedback I get from fam-

ilies is that they really appreciate the little questions,” Carpenter said. “Before you know it, you’ve learned something about your kid you hadn’t known before. It’s so easy just to sit next to each other and read and feel like you’ve connected.”

Carpenter helped spread Jornsnot’s legend by setting up a booth at the Reston Farmers Market, where she read poems, talked with children about creative writing, and encouraged them to explore their own imaginations. The experience was meaningful not only for the kids and their families, but for her as well.

“That’s how I knew the experience—not just the book—was special,” she said. “Connecting with kids, helping them love reading, encouraging them to move from observer to artist. All of a sudden, you’re an author; all of a sudden you’re an illustrator.”

Carpenter plans to return to the market when it reopens. Her gratitude for the community, she says, is as deep as her pride in the award. “I have overwhelming gratitude for the families in Reston who have bought the book at the market, sat with me, and been so supportive,” she said. “I can’t express my thanks enough



Sarah reads her book at Lake Anne. Photo contributed by Sarah Carpenter

for the kind words and for lending their kids to me for a few minutes so we could have fun together. This award is like the icing on the cake of a really beautiful experience.”

To buy a copy of “Beware of the Jornsnot” or learn more about Sarah Carpenter, visit www.bewareofthejornsnot.com.

Rotary Club honors Veterans with pancake breakfast

By Jane Nash, Rotary Club

The Rotary Club of Herndon-Reston’s annual Veterans Pancake Breakfast on Nov. 15 at Trinity Presbyterian Church brought together local Herndon and Reston veterans, families, Rotarians, and community leaders for a morning of gratitude and celebration.

Club President Arti Agarwal opened the event with a heartfelt message recognizing veterans for their service both in uniform and in the communities they continue to strengthen. The program also featured expressions of thanks for area veterans’ sacrifice and dedication from several distinguished guests, including Mayor Keven LeBlanc, Dranesville District Supervisor Jimmy Bierman.

A performance by members of the Pride of Herndon Band added a patriotic and uplifting spirit to the morning. Veterans were honored with special pins, and handmade cards local schoolchildren created.

The club thanks Trinity Presbyterian for hosting, the volunteer Rotarians and friends who prepared and served, sponsors and donors, and Rotarian Andy Polk for his leadership, and also expresses deep gratitude to all veterans and their families for their courage, sacrifice, and continued service.

Striking the right chord: How teen and adult musicians make music together in local partnership

By Ellyn Wexler, Staff Writer

Nowhere is Reston’s musical spirit more visible than in the growing partnership between the Reston Community Orchestra (RCO) and the NoVa Youth Ensembles (NYE). What began as a single holiday collaboration has become a mentorship program that nurtures young musicians and strengthens the local arts ecosystem.

The partnership took root last season when RCO conductor Maestro Dietrich Paredes invited NYE students to join the orchestra for its annual holiday sing-along. Their preparation and professionalism were immediately apparent.

“The NYE students arrived on time at their first rehearsal, prepared, eager to take direction, and willing to be challenged,” Paredes said. “Our adult instrumentalists welcomed the youth as stand partners and quickly realized they needed to play their best when others were modeling them.” The success of that concert sparked a deeper collaboration that students, parents, and orchestra members now eagerly anticipate.

Director Laura Readyoff founded NYE to address a gap in local arts education. Although the D.C. region offers several youth ensembles, young players in Reston, Herndon, and Sterling lacked accessible, affordable opportunities close to home.

“Many students faced long commutes or barriers due to skill level, financial circumstance, or the absence of inclusive programs,” Readyoff said. “NYE was built to be a welcoming place where every child—regardless of background—could develop musicianship, discover joy, and find belonging.”

Families quickly embraced that mission. Parent Nina Li saw her 11-year-old daughter, Katie Tung, a sixth-grade violist at Sunrise Valley Elementary, flourish. “She had outgrown her school program, but we weren’t ready for an expensive, intense private studio,” Li said. “NYE was exactly what we needed.”

For students, rehearsing alongside experienced adults has been both inspiring and intimidating. Violinist Alexandra Castro, 14, said the biggest hurdle was conquering nerves. “Rehearsing with adult musicians means getting rid of the fear of making mistakes,” said the Park View High School freshman. “But it changed how I think about music and my future because it encouraged me to reach for my passion.”

Park View sophomore and cellist Heidi Andrews, 15, agreed: “Playing with the RCO has helped me improve and encouraged me to possibly explore a career in music.”



Reston Community Orchestra and NoVa Youth Ensembles have created a mentorship space where young musicians rehearse and perform alongside adults. Photo contributed by Laura Readyoff

For others, the experience has been transformative. NYE violinist Dishant Maharjan said adjusting to the ensemble’s size and sound pushed him to new levels. “This experience allowed me to understand what professional music could sound like,” said the 15-year-old South Lakes High School sophomore. His mother, Shanti Maharjan Ranjitkar, saw immediate growth: “His tone, versatility, and emotion have been phenomenal. NYE creates the platform where kids can learn with experienced adults and respect the value they bring.”

For RCO, the partnership reinforces its longstanding mission. As President Dave Tiller noted, mentoring has been central to the orchestra since its founding in 1987. “Our mission is to be Reston’s all-volunteer ensemble devoted to music,

Continued on page 4

THE BULLETIN

A tea party for everyone: Author brings boys to the table

By Kaydence Smith, Staff Writer

When longtime tea enthusiast Susan Baime set out to find an English-language children’s book about tea for her grandson in Amsterdam, she didn’t expect to discover a glaring gap on the shelves. Almost every tea-themed book she found starred girls—often in princess-like roles—and not a single one centered on a boy. That absence became the spark for her debut picture book, “A Tea Party for George”

“Princessy girls are not going to appeal to a 9-year-old boy,” Baime said with a laugh. Realizing boys were missing from the tea-party narrative, she simply decided, “Okay, I better write one.” The result is a joyful story about George, a young boy invited to tea—proof that tea-time isn’t just for girls.

Tea has woven through Susan’s life

since childhood visits to her grandmother, who always served tea and cookies. Over the years, she passed that love along to her siblings, her children, and now her grandchildren. Today, she works at Elden Street Tea Shop, hosts tea events, and even travels the world in search of memorable afternoon teas.

When it came time to write her book, Susan immersed herself in the craft. She checked out every children’s book writing guide she could find, learned the typical word counts and illustration norms, and researched publishing options. She ultimately chose a hybrid publishing route with Archway Publishing, part of Simon & Schuster. The process was more involved than she expected, especially when translating her vision into illustrations. Her sister, a retired preschool teacher, became a trusted second set of eyes and helped shape several positive

revisions. For Susan, “A Tea Party for George” is deeply personal—“another baby,” she says—complete with characters named after family members.

Her goal was never commercial success; it was to create a story that included everyone and challenged the stigma that boys don’t drink tea. What she hopes readers of all ages take away is simple: tea is for everyone, and it can be a comforting ritual in a chaotic world. She notes a recent New York Times article highlighting afternoon tea’s resurgence amid global uncertainty, a trend she sees daily at the shop, where people—men included—gather over cups of tea instead of beer. “Why not?” she says. “It’s relaxing, it’s calming. It brings people together.”

“A Tea Party for George” is available through Amazon, ThriftBooks, Barnes & Noble, Ingram, and Bookshop.org.



A Tea Party for George front cover



RA's Third annual 'Winterfest' a smashing success



Each year, Reston Association has improved their Christmas walk-through lightshow, 'Winterfest.' This was its third and best year yet. They had 60 community-sponsored Christmas trees, 40 food and craft vendors, and drew 10,500 people to the area between Brown’s Chapel, Lake Newport, and the Lake House for three festive nights of holiday fun. There were picture opportunities not only with Santa, but also with the Grinch. Firepits with marshmallows for roasting, mulled wine and hot cocoa, and plenty of community spirit. Free shuttles brought in people from different parts of Reston. This event is free for members of Reston Association. Photos by Benjamin Burgess

Reston Association calls for board of directors candidates

Contributed by Reston Association

Reston was founded on a bold vision: a place where people could live, work, and play in harmony with nature and with one another. That vision continues to thrive today, thanks in part to the leadership of the Reston Association [RA] Board of Directors. Residents who care about Reston’s future and want a voice in shaping community policies and priorities are encouraged to consider running for a seat on the Board.

The RA Elections Committee is seeking candidates for four open positions:

At-Large Director (3-year term): Open to any current RA member in good standing.

Hunters Woods/Dogwood District Director (3-year term): Open to RA members in good standing who live in the Hunters Woods/Dogwood District.

Lake Anne/Tall Oaks District Director (2-year term): Open to RA members in good standing residing in the Lake Anne/Tall Oaks District.

Apartment Owners’ Representative (3-year term): Chosen by Category B Members (Apartment Owners) to serve as their Designated Director.

“The Reston Association Board plays a vital role in guiding the direction of our community,” said Richard Chew, Chair of RA’s Election Committee. “Board members are stewards of Reston’s values and advocates for initiatives that protect property values, preserve our neighborhoods, and enhance quality of life for all members.”

The Board is responsible for ensuring that RA’s organizational goals are met and for setting policy in areas such as finance and budgeting, personnel and compensation, and strategic planning.

Candidacy forms are available at Reston Association headquarters (12001 Sunrise Valley Drive) and online at www.reston.org/election. An informational session for potential candidates will be held Jan. 13, 2026 (time TBA) at RA headquarters.

Completed candidacy forms are due by 5 p.m. on Jan. 23, and may be submitted via email to electionscommittee@reston.org or delivered in person. Forms received after the deadline will not be considered.

Voting in the annual RA Board of Directors election begins at 5 p.m. on Feb. 27 and continues through March 31. The newly elected Board will be seated following the RA Annual Meeting in April.

For questions, contact electionscommittee@reston.org.

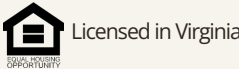
New Year, New House!

It’s a great time to begin planning for a home sale or purchase. To those who trusted me this year to help buy or sell, I look forward to being a resource for you and your referrals in 2026.

Best wishes for the holiday season.



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THE RESTON LETTER

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Do you want a voice in shaping policy and vision for Reston’s future?

Consider running for a seat on the Board of Directors.

LEARN MORE

Elections Information Session Jan. 13, 2026 at 6 p.m.
Candidate applications due Jan. 23, 2026 by 5 p.m.

THE BULLETIN

Jingle on the Lake brings holiday cheer to Lake Anne

By Marisol Yanguas,
Guest Writer

The holiday season is officially underway, and one of Reston’s favorite traditions returned to Lake Anne on Dec. 6: Jingle on the Lake. This festive, annual event brings Santa and Mrs. Claus across the lake by pontoon boat, accompanied by a lively crew of holiday characters and paddle-boarding elves who delight crowds of families gathered along the waterfront. Festivities continue at Lake Anne Plaza with a Christmas market, holiday crafts for children, and performances from local schools and community groups. Indoors, Reston Community Center holds its annual holiday arts and crafts shopping event—perfect for picking up unique gifts for everyone’s lists.

This year visitors also enjoyed music from the Lake Anne and Sunrise Valley elementary schools’ choirs, several South Lakes High School A Cappella Groups, the Reston Conservatory Ballet, and the Vienna Singing Princesses.

As the years have come and gone, more traditions have been added to Jingle on the Lake. In 2016, lifelong Restonian Steve Gurney helped expand the long-standing tradition of Santa arriving on a pontoon boat by adding paddle-boarding “elves” to the mix. The idea came up casually and Steve, an avid paddle-boarder, decided to give it a try. The first year was a bit challenging, with cold weather and strong winds, but the enthusiasm of the participants and the excitement from onlookers made the event an instant favorite. Since then, it has continued to grow and become a cherished tradition that showcases the creativity and spirit of Reston residents.

“Kids LOVE Santa,” Steve said. “Last year, as we were pulling up to the dock, I realized this must be what it’s like to be a rock star—kids were losing their minds, and I’m one of Santa’s backup singers!”



Paddle-boarding elves escort Santa and Mrs. Claus to greet crowds of adoring families. Photos by Sol Street Photo

"This must be what it's like to be a rock star."
Steve said.



Correction:
*In the article about Chalkfest in our November issue, we incorrectly identified the event organizer. Ricki Marion is the executive director and organizer of Chalkfest.

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Music, cont'd from page 2

the community, and mentoring young musicians,” he said. That guidance takes many forms—shared stands, help with bowings and phrasing, encouragement through tricky passages, and even opportunities for youth to conduct or perform original compositions.

That spirit was on full display at the March 2025 concert, when 17 NYE students joined RCO for Vivaldi’s “Concerto for Double String Orchestra.” Seated as their own section but surrounded by adult musicians, the students were literally encircled by sup-

port. Paredes led from his violin rather than the podium, modeling technique and pushing the tempo. The students rose to the challenge, practiced diligently, and earned a standing ovation.

The impact continues to grow. Readyoff is preparing to expand NYE into band, choir, guitar, and percussion, noting that partnerships like this raise artistic standards and deepen community support. For RCO, the program helps ensure a love of orchestral music will thrive in the next generation.

“Our hope is that many of these youth will continue studying their instruments through

and beyond their school years, eventually joining RCO,” Paredes said.

Families already see the results. “NYE is a great balance between quality instruction and a welcoming community,” Li said. “My daughter feels supported and looks forward to rehearsals every week.”

And for young musicians like Katie, Alexandra, Heidi, and Dishant, the partnership is shaping not just their musical skills but also their confidence and connection to the community—proof that making music together can foster belonging, mentorship, and joy.

4

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Crossword Corner

By Reston crossword constructor, Joe O'Neill

Joe O'Neill, a 40-year Reston resident, is a retired English professor and IT executive who recently began writing and submitting crossword puzzles to major U.S. daily newspapers.

Joe's puzzles have appeared in the New York Times and Wall Street Journal. This is O'Neill's 29th crossword puzzle creation, made specifically for The Reston Letter readers!

Xmas Xamples

ACROSS

1. Extinct New Zealand bird

4. Rednosed sleigh-team driver

6. Rednosed sleigh-team leader
8. Suffix with Siam

9. "The good old ____" (abbr.)

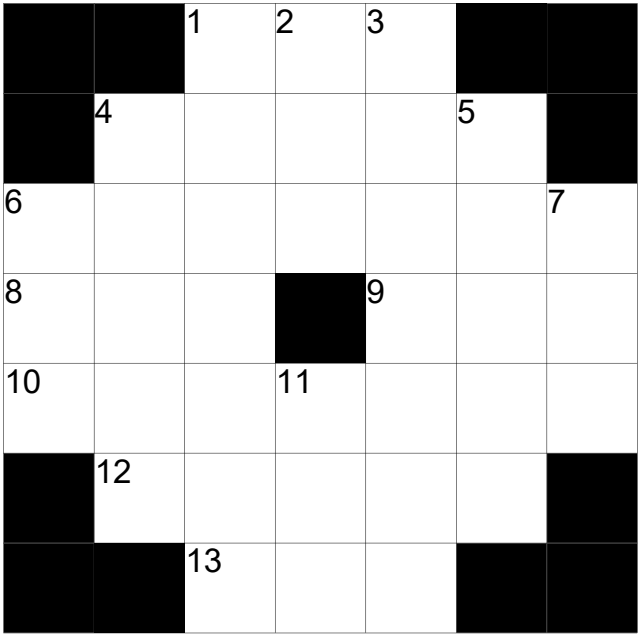
10. Redbrick way-in for 4. Across

12. Classic Camaros

13. Butt end?

DOWN

1. Portuguese dessert wine
2. Yoko's surname
3. Out of the office for a bite
4. Food served with wasabi
5. Churches' arched recesses
6. Leisure activities center? (abbr.)
7. Food for 6. Across
11. Dec and Jan (abbr.)




COMMUNITY CALENDAR

<div><div>11DEC</div><div>Ice Skating at Reston Town Center Pavilion</div></div> <div>11:30 a.m. Closing times vary Rentals available. Open daily (weather permitting) Reston Town Center Pavilion</div>	<div><div>11DEC</div><div>Holiday Luncheon</div></div> <div>RCC's annual holiday celebration for adults 18 and older Reston Community Center 2310 Colts Neck Rd</div>	<div><div>12DEC</div><div>Ravel Dance Company: "The Nutcracker"</div></div> <div>Multiple dates and times Tickets available at the RCC Box Office and online 2310 Colts Neck Road</div>	<div><div>13DEC</div><div>Reston Town Center Holiday Performances: Beltway Brass</div></div> <div>12/13 12 p.m. 11916 Market St.</div>
<div><div>13DEC</div><div>Holiday Carriage Rides</div></div> <div>12/13 & 12/20 4-9 p.m. Departures in front of ice rink. Reservations required! Up to 6 people in a carriage. Reservations required: https://www.eventbrite.com/e/holiday-carriage-rides-at-reston-town-center-tickets1962552818310?aff=oddtcreator</div>	<div><div>13DEC</div><div>Holiday Paint Night</div></div> <div>6:30-8:30 p.m. A fun-filled evening of creativity. \$50 la Madeleine 1833 FountainDrive</div>	<div><div>14DEC</div><div>Brunch with the Grinch</div></div> <div>11:30 a.m. - 1:30 p.m. Family-friendly photo moments and holiday menu The Simon 11350 Reston Station Blvd</div>	<div><div>14DEC</div><div>Holiday Mini Train Rides</div></div> <div>12/14 & 12/21 12 p.m. Departures from ice rink. Reservations required! 4 people per train car https://www.eventbrite.com/e/holiday-train-rides-at-reston-town-center-tickets1962552711992?aff=oddtcreator</div>
<div><div>17DEC</div><div>Senior Movie Day</div></div> <div>9:15 a.m. FREE movie at Town Center's LOOK Cinemas Movie: Singin' in the Rain</div>	<div><div>20DEC</div><div>Reston Town Center Holiday Performances: The Holiday Carolers</div></div> <div>12 p.m. 11916 Market St</div>	<div><div>20DEC</div><div>"Navidad Flamenca" Presented by Furia Flamenca</div></div> <div>8 p.m. Celebrate the Spanish and Puerto Rican Way Reston Community Center 2310 Colts Neck Rd</div>	<div><div>30DEC</div><div>Winter Bird Class- An Introduction</div></div> <div>8:30 p.m. Walker Nature Center 11450 Glade Drive</div>
<div><div>31DEC</div><div>Inner Caucus & WHUR 96.3 FM's New Year's Eve International Gala</div></div> <div>8 p.m. Annual elegant event. \$150/dinner and admission. The Hyatt Regency, 1800 Presidents Street Tickets: https://www.eventbrite.com/e/inner-caucus-new-years-eve-international-gala-tickets-1766057227709</div>	<div><div>1JAN</div><div>Reston Art Gallery and Studios (RAGS): "WinterWinds"</div></div> <div>Found art, sculpture and Oriental Brush Painting artists Reception: Sun. Jan. 11, 2-4 p.m. Reston Community Center Lake Anne 1633 Washington Plz N</div>	<div><div>5JAN</div><div>Movies That Move: "1776"</div></div> <div>10 a.m. The nation's fathers harmonize their way through the founding of America. Rated G Reston Community Center 2310 Colts Neck Rd</div>	<div><div>8JAN</div><div>Curriculum Night</div></div> <div>6:30 p.m. Teachers from each department share info for 2026-27. Seahawks and rising Seahawks welcome! South Lakes High School 11400 South Lakes Dr.</div>

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A major reason people struggle to improve is that the root cause of their pain is never clearly identified. Even when it is, treatment is often too general. Broad stretching routines or generic mobility exercises can feel helpful, but they rarely solve the underlying problem.

Our practice takes a different approach. We use the McKenzie Method, which helps us pinpoint the exact source of the issue. From there, we provide highly specific treatment aimed directly at the cause — no extra exercises or therapies “just because.” Many patients experience significant relief within weeks, sometimes sooner, and return to activities such as yoga, Pilates, weightlifting, travel, or simply long walks without fear.

Another key element of our care is patient empowerment. We teach people why their pain developed, what movements aggravate it, and which ones help it improve. With this understanding, they can manage symptoms independently and make better decisions about their daily activities. For many, that confidence is just as transformative as becoming pain-free.

Finally, we help patients avoid another common pitfall: doing too many treatments at once. When people try to juggle multiple approaches, they rarely give any single one enough time to work. By stripping away unnecessary interventions and focusing on what truly creates change, recovery becomes clearer and faster.

Our upcoming workshop, “Exploring New Paths: How to Overcome Back Limitations,” takes place at 10 a.m. Saturday, Jan. 17. Attendance is free, but space is limited. Reserve your spot by calling or texting 571-308-8251 or emailing info@healthwatcherspt.com.

Maybe a White Christmas?

By Scott L. Parkin, Staff Writer

When we first moved to Reston, there was a lot more snow and ice.

For several years, there was enough snow on the ground for a week or two so that I could take out my cross-country skis, drive to Reston National Golf or Hidden Creek and ski for hours, often without seeing another soul.

Similarly, I could take the kids to the top of “Reston Mountain” and sled down for more than one weekend a year. It might be an urban or suburban myth, but I was told there was once a rope tow there for downhill skiers.

Regardless, it remains steep and long enough for a thrill ride to the bottom as long as there’s enough snow.

While I know it was probably unsafe, I skated on Lake Audubon more than once in the last thirty years. This was only when the temperatures were in the teens for more than a week and there were no visible breaks in the ice. I know it’s frowned upon for good reason especially since it’s rare for there to be enough cold days in a row.

In the mid-80s, we owned a four-wheel drive (not all wheel-drive) Subaru wagon. I was proud of its ability to weather almost any storm and looked for any opportunity to use the drive. Since I mostly commuted to work via bus

and train, I remember one day knowing it was going to snow using the car instead. That night, I kindly offered to drive my boss to her North Reston home from downtown DC in a raging blizzard. The wagon easily braved the rolling Baron Cameron hills and plowed through drifts on North Village Road to get her safely home.

Since then, I don’t think there has been a winter that required four-wheel drive to traverse Reston’s streets, allowed for much skiing of any kind, or much sledding on the mountain. I don’t think it’s been possible to safely skate on our lakes.

Of course, I’m probably too old to take advantage of any but winter driving.

We now own an all-wheel drive that I know can hold its own. The Farmer’s Almanac says we may have a white Christmas and more snow and cold than usual.

Meanwhile, there may be a neighbor of yours who is elderly, alone and unable to get out because of snow or ice storms. Knock on the door, give them a call, email or text them to make sure they are ok.

Scott L. Parkin is president of Reston for a Lifetime (www.RestonforaLifetime.org), a nonprofit organization with a mission to inform and educate residents about aging in place.

EDUCATION

Rock star teacher strikes a chord at Common Ground

By Holly Weatherwax, Staff Writer

You might think a celebrity has arrived when Josh Brooks walks into a classroom at Common Ground Day Care Center. The children erupt in excitement, knowing he’s about to pull out his guitar and serenade them with Disney favorites.

A Reston native, Brooks attended Langston Hughes Middle School, South Lakes High School, and NOVA before earning a psychology degree from George Mason University. While in college, he worked at Common Ground as a teacher’s aide, floating between classrooms as needed.

After graduation, he tried a “real” job with a government contractor. Nine months later, he realized it wasn’t for him

and returned to Common Ground in a new role—as the school’s Social-Emotional Teacher.

Brooks had never imagined such a specialty existed. Today, he visits every class daily, teaching lessons on everything from basic conversation to handling big feelings, while pitching in wherever needed.

Music has always been part of Brooks’ life. Although he abandoned guitar lessons as a child—“I didn’t like practicing,” he admits—he later found a great teacher at Reston Music and joined the guitar ensemble at South Lakes. He even toured with a friend’s band when he was 22. These days, aside from the occasional child’s birthday party, professional performing is behind him.

But when he brings out his guitar at

school, the rock star returns. “No matter the age, students always go crazy when the guitar comes out,” he says. “Even young babies seem to move in response to music.” Parents have told him their children were inspired to ask for guitars and start lessons—a deeply rewarding outcome for Brooks.

While his personal taste leans toward heavy metal, his classroom repertoire features classic children’s songs, Disney tunes, and age-appropriate pop and rock.

Brooks’ role at Common Ground blends his psychology background with his love of music. What began as a college job has become a meaningful career. “Seeing Social-Emotional Learning gain traction—and getting to add my guitar to the mix—is an added bonus,” he says.



Kids at Common Ground love Josh and his guitar. Photo contributed by Josh Brooks

South Lakes seniors face dilemmas at 33rd annual Ethics Day

By Gene Powell, Staff Writer

South Lakes High School’s senior class confronted three ethical dilemmas on Nov. 24 during the 33rd annual “Ethics Day,” hosted by the Greater Reston Chamber of Commerce.

In three separate sessions, students considered issues involving organ transplants and artificial intelligence, and served as jurors in a mock trial involving a manslaughter charge stemming from the alcohol-related death of a fictional student.

The Chamber created the day-long event to give students “an opportunity to discuss real-life issues before they leave high school,” said interim Chamber CEO Courtney Bulger. “We want them to be prepared for such discussions,” she said, by grappling with issues “close to real cases.”

The Hyatt Regency Reston donated a second-level ballroom for the program. This year’s \$20,000 cost was covered by business sponsors and up to 65 adult volunteers from Reston-area companies.

Leidos, a major tech firm headquartered in Reston, served as one of the top sponsors. Chris Pharo, a Leidos executive who led the AI discussions, said the company supports Ethics Day because it “encourages integrity” in everyday life, “a core value of our company.”

SLHS Principal Carlos Seward said the day aligns with the school’s goal of producing “critical thinkers who include ethical issues in their thinking.” Several SLHS educators accompanied the students.

Organizers divided the students into three groups, which rotated among three large rooms, each devoted

to one scenario.

In the mock courtroom, adult volunteers sat with 9 to 10 student “jurors” at each of 14 tables to hear a prosecutor and defense attorney present witnesses and deliver closing arguments. Students then had 15 minutes to reach a verdict. The case centered on a teenage girl charged with manslaughter after deciding to drive her intoxicated friend home. Although she had little driving experience and no driver’s license, she attempted the trip, crashed into a tree, and her friend died.

The prosecutor urged students to weigh the legal requirements of manslaughter and the fatal consequences of her choice to drive. The defense attorney asked jurors to consider the girl’s good intentions and the accidental nature of the death.

In an open survey of each table, seven groups returned guilty verdicts, one group voted not guilty, and six tables produced hung juries. Student spokespeople for the guilty ver-

dicts noted—as the prosecutor had emphasized—that good intentions did not excuse poor judgment. One student said the defendant “could have called someone else ... or parents” to take the intoxicated friend home.

Many students dressed in what school officials called “business attire” and received box lunches. During the lunch break, several participants said they valued the discussions.

“DW” (identified by initials to protect the privacy of a student under 18) said the scenarios reminded her that “not everything is black-and-white” outside the classroom and offered a glimpse of the “real world.”

“JJ” said the sessions exposed him to “things that we don’t get in the classroom regularly.” He added that the day helped prepare him for job-seeking and life after graduation. “It was good to be in a professional setting,” he said, noting that the

format required students to move beyond their friend groups as they were re-seated by participant number.

Bulger said the Chamber team will meet soon to plan the 2026 Ethics Day program and consider “whether it is meeting the needs” of students and Reston businesses. The Chamber evaluates the program annually, she added, noting that the AI session was among recent additions. She praised the continuing support of local businesses, many of which send employees to a training session to prepare for roles such as table discussion leaders.

In addition to Hyatt and Leidos, sponsors included Reston Community Center; Atlantic Union Bank; Bean, Kinney & Korman, P.C.; Wegmans; Northwest Federal Credit Union; Raba Letteri – Weichert Realtors; Reston Law Group; Micki Moravitz – Realtor at Century 21 New Millennium; and Dental Group at Reston Station.

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EDUCATION

Making an Impact

Mikie Sherrill

By Chuck Cascio, Author and Former South Lakes Teacher

Stepping forward in today's dynamic political landscape would seem to be a difficult decision to make—scrutiny has never been higher, social media contribute to informational skepticism, and an increased public profile often results in individuals being targeted in unique ways. Still, dynamic leaders are needed and are arguably more essential than ever. Taking that major step forward is former Congresswoman Mikie Sherrill (D-NJ), who grew up in Reston and was recently elected Governor of New Jersey.

For Mikie (aka Rebecca Michelle Sherrill), taking the step to move from Congress to the leader of her state, is rooted in her longtime commitment to public service. "I have always been motivated by service—to country, to community, and to those around me," she says. "Serving others has always been my focus, and I look forward to continuing to do that as Governor of New Jersey."

Mikie's dedication to service is reinforced by her personal history. After graduating from South Lakes High School in 1990, she attended the Naval Academy and then served for nearly a decade as a helicopter pilot and a Russian Policy Officer. "After leaving the Navy, I went to law school and eventually became the first outreach and reentry coordinator in the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of New Jersey," she says. "In that role, I was able to make sure the people leaving prison—and their families—were set up for success with a steady job, a safe place to live, and adequate healthcare."

Contributing to her impressive personal background is the fact that she also earned a Master of Science de-

gree from the London School of Economics and a certificate in Arabic language from the American University in Cairo. Her military service deeply fed Mikie's awareness of differences that she feels need to be addressed: "The experiences I had serving in countries where women and minorities were second class citizens and where people often didn't have equal rights or protections impacted my understanding of how important our Constitution and good government are. Those are certainly some of the experiences that led me to want to continue serving the country as an elected official, first as a member of Congress and now as Governor of New Jersey."

Her commitment to addressing those issues is at the core of Mikie's objectives as she moves into the role of Governor. In defeating her Republican opponent Jack Ciattarelli by 14.4% she ran on three main issues—"lowering costs, protecting our kids, and bringing transparency and accountability to state government in Trenton," she says, adding that "On Day One as Governor, I'll declare a state of emergency on utility costs and freeze rate hikes to lower resident's bills. I'll cut through red tape to help reduce the time it takes to get projects into our energy grid."

Mikie's own energy has been apparent since her early days roaming around Reston, swimming for the Fox Mill Woods Swim team, and playing soccer for the Reston Rowdies. At SLHS, she was a cheerleader ("which was especially fun at basketball games with Grant Hill playing," she says) and a French horn player in the band as well as an outstanding student ("I still remember learning about the gene mapping project in Mrs. Cascio's biology class, and I would have considered a major in biology if the Naval Academy had offered it.").



Mikie Sherrill

Upon reflection, Mikie recognizes that spending her youth in Reston influenced her worldview and impacted a major decision in her own life. "Growing up in Reston with my two younger sisters, Megan and Mary, I took many of the experiences we had for granted," she says. "Reston was diverse, many families had also lived in other countries, and a lot of parents were public servants." As a result, after leaving the military, going into law, moving to New York, getting married, and starting a family of four children, Mikie says, "As my husband and I were living in New York and deciding where to raise our kids, I wanted them to grow up in the same kind of community. So Reston impacted one of the biggest decisions I made!"

From Reston to all over the world to New York and then to New Jersey, Mikie Sherrill has never backed away from taking the major step. She recognizes and embraces what that means, saying, "I'll work to ensure that New Jerseyans know exactly where their tax dollars are going and that those programs are delivering for their community. When I'm Governor, the buck stops with me."

Cappies review for South Lakes' "A Monster Calls"

The Cappies is a student-led program that trains high school theatre and journalism students across the DMV to attend productions at other schools, write reviews, and have their work considered for publication in local media. Participating critics highlight the work of young performers, designers, and crews while helping determine regional award nominations. Each season concludes with a gala at the Kennedy Center. Below is the student review of South Lakes High's fall play, "A Monster Calls." Next month, we will print the Cappies review of the Herndon review.

A Monster Calls, presented by South Lakes High School

By Julie Kessel of Albert Einstein High School

"The yew tree is a healing tree," able to cure grievous ills. However, in South Lakes High School's production of "A Monster Calls," its power might not be enough to heal the wounds that grief can rend.

"A Monster Calls" is a play based on the novel of the same name, conceptualized by Siobhan Dowd and written by Patrick Ness. South Lakes' version of the show was devised by director Michael Viola and the company, taking inspiration from a previous professional production while collaborating to create something wholly unique. The play follows Conor, a young boy whose mother is battling cancer. At night, a monster visits him, telling three tales before demanding to hear a fourth one whose truth forces Conor to confront everything he's been hiding from.

As the titular Monster, Liam Birch commanded the stage as a captivating storyteller. Birch's menacing growl and

booming voice, alongside a stalking walk and intense facial expressions, fully encapsulated the inhuman aspects of the character, while his strong and rooted posture grounded him in reality. However, as the story entered the fourth tale and the monster began to comfort Conor (Jahlil Greene), Birch's posture softened, and his voice and facial expressions became solemn and kind. The Monster's clear character shift impressively matched the change in the play's tone from fantastical to raw and devastating.

Greene's Conor portrayed a masterful emotional arc over the course of the play. His initially suppressed emotions as he tried to deny his grief shockingly contrasted with his breakdown at the end of Act 1. Unrestrained movements, a feral yell, and devastating expressions combined to echo the utter destruction Conor left in his wake. Greene's relationship with his mother, played by Sitina Tochterman, was equally moving. Their tender expressions, relaxed body language, and soft voices made the pair's interactions paint a touching picture of a tight-knit mother-son relationship. Further, Greene's guttural cry upon losing her brought the audience to tears, as did Tochterman's emotionally delivered final message to her son.

The core ensemble of "A Monster Calls" was the beating heart of the show. With seamless set changes, where they artfully arranged the many hanging ropes that made up the simplistic set (created by Grace Gibbens, Ellah Skoy, and the "A Monster Calls" Scenic Design and Construction Crew), and delicate dancing, the ensemble was consistently engaged. Their stillness and stoic expres-



"A Monster Calls" company creates a human tree. Photo by Jennifer Heffner, East 27 Creative

sions when creating captivating tree-like tableaux were breathtaking, while their superb characterization and smooth movements brought each of the monster's tales to life.

"A Monster Calls" choreography, created by Sitina Tochterman, Jahlil Greene, and Hudson Koonce, was particularly effective. While an enthralling contemporary style was used throughout most of the show, ingenious fight choreography provided a striking contrast. The ensemble's sharp movements were perfectly coordinated with each other and the accompanying music (by Brooklyn Whyte and the "A Monster Calls" Sound Crew), whose fast pace heightened the tension of the scene. Further, red side lighting and strobe effects (by Alexandra Farrell,

Eamon O'Leary, Sebastian Harman, and the "A Monster Calls" Lighting Crew) enhanced the violent atmosphere. The addition of projections, with animations created by Taylor Clawson and design and editing by Emilie Fiske and Isabelle Philippe, amplified the surreal quality of the show, especially through the psychedelic images used in the dream sequences.

Every story has meaning, and South Lakes' wild and heart-wrenching production of "A Monster Calls" was no different. Once unleashed, this story provided pure catharsis for the audience, making them question the difference between good and evil while helping them accept, just a bit more, the powerful nature of grief.



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SPORTS

South Lakes XC Girls win first-ever region title, finish fourth at States

By Shanen Elliott, Guest Writer

The South Lakes Girls Varsity Cross Country Team capped its 2025 fall season with an outstanding post-season run. After a razor-thin, one-point second-place finish to Oakton at the Concorde District Championship, Coach Scott Raczek's squad turned the tables the following week, capturing its first-ever Northern Region Girls Cross Country title over Oakton.

The Seahawks finished with 53 points, 10 ahead of Oakton's 63 (cross country scoring favors the lowest total). The scoring quintet—seniors Caroline Elliott (3rd) and Aya Ryan (7th), freshman Quinn Jackson (6th), sophomore Olivia Levey (15th), and junior Lillian Swartzbaugh (23rd)—was bolstered by strong 28th and 30th-place finishes from sophomore Charlotte Captain and senior Irene

Ha.

Elliott, Jackson, and Ryan earned All-Region honors, recording three of the top 10 times in South Lakes XC history on Burke Lake's renowned 2.98-mile course. Elliott set a new school record with a 17:09 finish, surpassing the previous mark of 17:23.

The Seahawks closed the season with a fourth-place finish at the Virginia Class 6 State Championship on the challenging Oatlands 5000-meter course in Leesburg. Scoring runners Elliott (4th, All-State), Jackson (14th), Levey (31st), Ryan (34th), and Captain (52nd) combined for 101 points, just two shy of third-place Woodson (99). State champion Robinson (58) and runner-up West Springfield (84) finished 1-2 for the second consecutive year.

Looking ahead, the Seahawks hope to carry their momentum into the 2025–26



South Lakes cross country runners Aya Ryan and Quinn Jackson lead the pack at state tournament. Photo by Julian Brown

Indoor Track season. Seniors Elliott and Ryan will lead the team, both heading to Division I programs next year—Elliott at the University of Virginia and Ryan at the University of Richmond. With this leadership, South Lakes is expected to be strong contenders at the district, regional, and state levels.

Herndon lands new head basketball coach

By McAllister Pearce-Biney, Student Writer

There's plenty of buzz in the Hornets Nest as the Herndon boys basketball team begins its season under new Head Coach Austin Hamilton. But the gym is hardly new territory for him. The 2011 Herndon graduate was a first-team all-state and all-metro selection, scored more than 1,000 career points, and helped lead the Hornets to their first district title during his senior year. His standout high-school career took him to Elon University, where he played at the collegiate level.

Hamilton says his biggest influence growing up was NBA star Allen Iverson. "He had the swagger and toughness that I

resonated with, especially as a smaller guard," he said. His older brothers—Walter, Brandon, and Marshall—also played a major role by introducing him to the sport and teaching him the fundamentals that shaped him as a player.

What motivated him to return to Herndon as head coach was simple: his love for the community. "I love the Herndon community first and foremost. It truly is a special place," Hamilton said. "I've always had a passion for teaching the game and helping young athletes become better players and better people. There's no place I'd rather be coaching than Herndon High School." The town supported him as a player, and he sees this new role as a way to

give back.

Now in his first season as a head coach, Hamilton embraces the challenge and the chance to lead the school he once called home. He believes this year's team has the grit, work ethic, and determination to reach its goals—including winning the district. Players say he brings renewed energy and joy to the program.

When asked what a successful season looks like beyond wins and losses, Hamilton was clear: "Having a memorable experience for the players, fans, and everyone associated with the program is what I hope this year brings."

He also stresses that Herndon Basketball should unite the school and wider community.



Austin Hamilton has taken over at the helm for the Hornets varsity basketball team. Photo by Karl Majer

Off the court, he expects his players to maintain a 3.0 GPA or higher, graduate on time, and give back through service—showing that the program values character as much as athletic ability.

Hamilton and his brothers also founded The Goods Basketball, an organization focused not only on developing basketball skills, but also on teaching life lessons. It's another sign of his commitment to the community where he grew up.

South Lakes Boys Basketball defends the Seahawk Nest with a season opening win over West Potomac

By Varun Phadke, Student Writer

As the Winter season begins, the Seahawks return to Wendell G. Byrd Gymnasium with a new group of players ready to step into bigger roles. After significant talent graduating from last year's squad, this season's group faces the challenge, and opportunity, of carrying forward the program's reputation as back-to-back state champs.

The South Lakes High School boys varsity basketball team started off strong on Monday, Dec. 1, with a season-opening victory over the West Potomac Wolverines. This win marks a promising start for the Seahawks.

One standout performer during Monday's match-up was No. 15, freshman David Landeryou, who had been playing on the ninth grade team just a week ago. Thrown into varsity action, Landeryou made an immediate impact, playing a major role in leading the team to

victory. "It was a big jump, but that's what the coaches expected when they brought me up; they expected me to be a leader," he said. Landeryou had a major hustle play in the first quarter, forcing a turnover when a Wolverine player jogged to retrieve a loose ball thinking it was uncontested. Catching the opponent off guard, Landeryou stole the ball and finished with an underhand layup. "Right when I saw him jogging, my first thought was, 'go get it,'" he said.

Head Coach Mike Desmond said the first game unfolded as expected, given the team's youth, first-game nerves, and inevitable early season mistakes. Still, encouraged by the positive aspects of the game, he said, "The guys showed a lot of mental toughness to not let the ups and downs hurt them, and we played great defense to get the win." With many players young or inexperienced at the varsity level, he emphasized that practice and repetition will play a key role in shaping this year's group. "This group gets to take their time to grow



Makhai Ramos heads down the court during the South Lakes home opener on Dec. 1. Photo by Varun Phadke

as a unit," he said, adding that the goal is to become a strong and respectable contender by the time district play comes around, and that every team is different.

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SPORTS

South Lakes 'Seahucks' go undefeated at first out-of-state ultimate frisbee tournament

By Matt Reider, Staff Writer

Fifteen members of the South Lakes High School Ultimate Frisbee team, known as the Seahucks, spent the first weekend in November competing in New Jersey at the 17th annual DEVYL Ultimate Coconut Classic. This marked the team's first travel tournament outside Virginia.

The Ultimate Coconut Classic began in 2007 as a one-day, three-team event and has grown steadily, with the tournament canceled only in 2012 due to SuperStorm Sandy and in 2020 due to COVID-19. This year, 32 teams from New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, D.C., participated, including 24 open teams and eight girls-only teams. Games were played over two days on 18 fields at Turkey Swamp Park and Milestone Park.

On Nov. 1, South Lakes competed in Pool E against Westfields High School, Whitman (Bethesda, Md.), and Watchung Hills (New Jersey). After defeating their longtime rivals at Westfields, the Seahucks cruised past Whitman 13-3 and Watchung Hills 13-2, finishing the

first day undefeated.

Ultimate Frisbee emphasizes more than just the score through its "Spirit of the Game" philosophy. Opponents assign each team a "Spirit Score" from 1 to 5, with 3 indicating respect toward opponents, officials, and spectators, and 5 reserved for rare, exceptional displays of sportsmanship. "The purpose of a Spirit Score is to determine how well the team followed the basic understanding of the game, which is to be spirited and have fun," Team Captain Jackson Snell explained. Spirit Scores are tracked separately from game points, allowing teams to earn recognition for sportsmanship even if they don't win.

South Lakes continued their dominance on Nov. 2, defeating Bethesda-Chevy Chase 13-8 and closing out their weekend against J.R. Masterman in a dramatic final game. The match came down to "Universe Point," ultimate frisbee's sudden-death overtime rule. With the score tied at 12-12 at the end of regulation, a key block by Zane Mott kept the Seahucks in the game. After a strategic timeout by coach Eric Miner, South



South Lakes 'Seahucks' ultimate frisbee team celebrates their win. Photo by Matt Reider

Lakes scored the decisive point to win 14-13, completing an undefeated tournament run. Jackson described the moment as "an amazing feeling...we all celebrated winning our final game in overtime."

Jackson hopes the experience will strengthen the team in future competitions. "Going to a travel tournament allowed us to grow as a team and become

more competitive. Spending a whole weekend together really builds connections and team chemistry, and it's fun for everybody." Lessons from the trip are expected to benefit South Lakes in upcoming local and state tournaments, including an invite-only tournament in Arlington next March featuring teams from across the Eastern Seaboard.

Herndon defeats South Lakes in Boys Volleyball



Rivals Seahawks and Hornets square up for a competitive match in the VA State Regional Tournament. Photo by Matt Reider

By Matt Reider, Staff Writer

Although Boys Volleyball has returned as a varsity sport at South Lakes High School for only two years, the traditional rivalry with nearby Herndon remains strong. The two teams met Nov. 6 in the first round of the Virginia State Regional Tournament, Class 6, Region D.

South Lakes finished the season with a 16-8 overall record and was second in the Concorde District at 8-4. Herndon also finished 16-8 but placed third in the Liberty Region with a 3-4 record.

The game was hosted at South Lakes, which had defeated Herndon 3-1 in a late-September matchup. Herndon, however, came in as the more established team, led by nine seniors including Max McDermott, who averaged 3.4 kills per set, and Rafael Baez, who totaled 31 blocks. Senior Mason Harris led Herndon in service aces with 59 for the season. South Lakes' leaders included seniors Shaheer Salarzai, Andrei Saycon, and Micah Capati. Capati earned all-district honors, along with sophomore Younus Quraishi and junior Anand Gautham, who was named Libero of the Year.

With the schools only eight miles apart, both teams enjoyed strong fan support, and the crowd wit-

nessed an exciting contest. South Lakes led the first set the entire way, winning 25-20. In the second set, Herndon surged to a 12-8 lead before a South Lakes timeout sparked a brief comeback, closing the gap to 22-19. Herndon secured the set, tying the match at one apiece, and dominated the third set 25-14.

The fourth set was a back-and-forth battle, with ties at 18, 21, and 22 points. South Lakes edged ahead 24-22 after a decisive cross-court serve from Xander Holmes and captured the set to force a fifth and final set.

The fifth set was tense. Herndon led early, 4-1, before South Lakes fought back to 5-4. The lead changed hands several times, with neither team able to pull away. Herndon finally took control late, scoring four of the final five points to win 15-14 and advance in the playoffs.

For South Lakes' seniors, the loss was emotional. They were pioneers in reviving a sport that returned to varsity status after a 20-year absence and represented their school with distinction. Herndon and its fans celebrated their hard-fought victory, although the following week they fell to McLean, 3-0.

Both schools demonstrated skill, determination, and competitive spirit. With such close matches and impressive seasons, this rivalry shows no signs of slowing down.

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FOLLOW ON SOCIAL!

KIDS

Write your own story: How mindfulness helps us choose our path

By Victoria Stacy,
Kids Section Co-Editor

Imagine if life came with a magical pause button—not to stop time, but to give you a moment to breathe when things get tough. When a project goes wrong, someone says something hurtful, or your day suddenly feels upside down, wouldn't it be nice to step back for just a moment?

The good news is that you already have that button. It's called mindfulness. Mindfulness means paying attention to what's happening right now—inside your mind and body—without pushing anything away or clinging too tightly. Think of it as turning on a tiny flashlight that helps you notice the present

moment. One of the most powerful lessons mindfulness teaches is this: it's not the events in our lives that cause distress; it's our reaction to them.

For example, two people can experience the same situation, like losing a soccer game, and feel completely different about it. The event is the same, but their reactions differ. Our thoughts and feelings shape how we experience each moment.

This is where the pause comes in. By practicing a pause—taking one slow breath before reacting—we create a small space. In that space, we can step back and see the moment with fresh eyes. It's almost like watching a scene in a movie instead of being trapped inside

it. Suddenly, we're the audience, not the actor who has to react immediately.

And from this calmer, wider perspective, something amazing happens: we can choose our next move.

Maybe we choose patience instead of frustration. Maybe curiosity instead of anger. Maybe just one more breath before saying something we don't mean. With each choice, we become the authors of our own story.

Mindfulness doesn't mean everything will go perfectly. Life is full of surprises, challenges, messy moments, and big feelings. But with mindfulness, we don't let those moments write our whole story. We decide what happens next.

Try the Mindful Pause:
When something stressful or surprising

- happens, take these steps:
1. Pause. Stop just for a moment.
 2. Breathe. Slow in...slow out.
 3. Notice. What's happening? What are you feeling?
 4. Choose. What do you want the next part of your story to be?
- Every moment is a new page. And with mindfulness, you have the power to write a story that feels calm, thoughtful, and true to who you are.



Stories of light & love

By Victoria Stacy, Kids Section Co-Editor

As winter approaches and the days grow shorter, people around the world celebrate with light. Many cultures have stories and holidays that use light to express courage, love, hope, and peace.

Hanukkah is a Jewish holiday that remembers a special event from long ago. After a difficult period in history, the Jewish people rededicated their Temple in Jerusalem. They had only a small amount of oil to keep the Temple lamp burning for one night, but the light stayed lit for eight. Because of this, families today light a menorah for eight evenings to celebrate hope and the belief that light can endure even in dark times.

In South Asia and many other places, people celebrate Diwali, the Festival of Lights. Diwali has different stories in Hindu, Sikh, and Jain traditions, but all honor the victory of light over darkness and good over evil. Families place small clay lamps called diyas around their homes, make colorful decorations, share sweets, and enjoy time together as they welcome new beginnings.

Kwanzaa, created in 1966, is a celebration that honors African and African American culture. During the seven days of Kwanzaa, families reflect on seven important principles, such as unity, creativity, and working together. Each night, a candle on the kinara is lit, reminding everyone to take pride in their heritage and to help build strong, caring communities.

In many Arab and Muslim communities, Ramadan is celebrated with bright, colorful fanoos lanterns. This tradition began hundreds of years ago in Egypt. Today, lanterns hang in homes, stores, and streets. Their warm glow reminds families of joy, generosity, and the special togetherness felt during evening meals after a day of fasting.

Christmas is celebrated by many people around the world as a time of compassion, generosity, and peace. Its origins come from the nativity story, which tells of the birth of Jesus. Families today celebrate in many ways—decorating trees, giving gifts, and filling their homes with lights. These traditions encourage kindness, goodwill, and time spent with loved ones throughout the season.

Together, these celebrations show that light is more than something that brightens a room; it shines in our friendships, our families, and our communities.

Holiday book recommendations

By Erin Gibbens, Kids' Section Co-Editor

Jan Brett's Winter Stories

Beautiful illustrations, cozy winter settings, and animals you'll fall in love with. These books feel like stepping into a snowy world where everything is magical. Great for all ages.

The Gift of the Magi by O. Henry

A short, heartwarming story about giving up something important to make someone else happy. Sweet, surprising, and thought-provoking, it really makes you consider what a gift truly means.

Skippping Christmas by John Grisham

A funny story about a family who tries to avoid the holidays—and how everything goes hilariously wrong. Fast-moving and silly, with a movie adaptation (Christmas with the Kranks) that's just

as enjoyable.

A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens

A classic ghost story with a timeless message: it's never too late to change and be kind. Plus, there are countless movie adaptations, from the Muppets to modern versions.

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever by Barbara Robinson

A funny, quick read about the wildest kids in town joining the school Christmas play. Total chaos, and surprisingly heartwarming.

The Vanderbeekers of 141st Street by Karina Yan Glaser

A heartwarming story about a big family trying to save their home right before the holidays. Funny, sweet, and full of adventure.

Little hands, big bites: Peppermint Bark

By Alexis Estep, mom, chef, Restonian

December brings cool, crisp air and wonderful holidays to celebrate the warmth of the season. No matter which holiday you celebrate, this is a time of year to show the people around you how much they mean to you. And what better way is there than to cook, bake, or make something?

I love giving homemade gifts; a special amount of love goes into creating something for someone else. Whether a handmade card/picture or a treat you baked, the recipient feels the love. Use the spirit of the season to get creative; no gift is too small when you make it by yourself.

Enjoy this simple recipe for Peppermint Bark, an easy to make, giftable snack anyone will appreciate! (Adapted from Ree Drummond, "The Pioneer Woman")

Ingredients

- 16 oz. white chocolate, chopped
- 3 drops food-grade peppermint oil or extract
- 3/4 cup crushed candy canes or peppermint candies
- 2 tbsp holiday colored sprinkles
- 3/4 cup pretzels, chopped

Directions:

1. Line a baking sheet with a silicone baking mat or parchment paper.
2. Place the white chocolate in a heatproof bowl.
3. Set the bowl over a saucepan with a few inches of simmering water over low heat

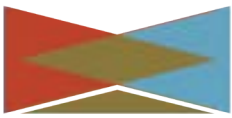


The Estep kids (Quinn, Mailin, Leif and Lars) think the bark tastes better when made wearing matching Grinch jammies! Photo by Alexis Estep.

- (do not let the bottom of the bowl touch the water).
4. Gently melt the white chocolate, stirring occasionally, until only a few lumps remain, about 3 minutes. Alternatively, you can melt the chocolate in the microwave at 30-second intervals until a few lumps remain.
5. Remove from the heat and stir until completely smooth.
6. Stir in the peppermint oil.
7. Pour the white chocolate onto the lined baking sheet, smoothing it into an even layer with an offset spatula.
8. Sprinkle with the crushed candy, sprinkle, and pretzels.
9. Let set at room temperature (if the room is cool) or in the refrigerator, 1 to 2 hours.
10. Once the bark has completely hardened, break it into pieces.
11. Gift in a tin or decorative plastic bag.

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GREENFARE

A lesson from my dog

When Dillon, my Shetland Sheepdog stopped eating; it was very worrisome. For him, eating meant things were good; when he stopped, it usually signaled that something was wrong. The natural reaction of veterinarians is often to address the symptom by prescribing an appetite stimulant. While that might have made him eat, it wouldn't have addressed the root cause of why he suddenly lost interest in food. Animals, it turns out, instinctively understand something we are only beginning to appreciate about autophagy—the body's accelerated healing process that occurs under certain types of stress. In this case, the stress is the absence of food. Because digestion uses a large share of the body's energy, giving the system a rest can allow it to focus on repair. This is part of the growing interest in intermittent fasting: fewer meals mean more time for the body to "clean house."

Autophagy is essentially the body's housekeeping, activated by things like fasting, exercise, and exposure to

hot and cold temperatures. In the Netflix series "You Are What You Eat," the topic is discussed by Christopher Gardner, M.D., of Stanford University in the context of promoting longevity. Periods of famine can have dramatic benefits; for example, a 30-day water fast is routinely used at the TrueNorth Health Center in Santa Rosa, California, where some chronic conditions have been shown to improve. In that medical setting, stopping food intake is used to stimulate autophagy—the breakdown of aging or damaged cellular components and the generation of new, healthy ones. After a week-long water fast, my own long-term knee pain disappeared and has not returned.

The benefits of exercise are widely known; even a daily half-hour walk has been linked to increased lifespan. Autophagy plays a role here, too, in everything from improving metabolic health and reducing inflammation to slowing aspects of aging. Many cultures also embrace the health effects of temperature extremes. In Scandinavian countries, people routinely move between ice baths and hot springs or saunas as part of their wellness habits.

I was in Africa last month for several weeks, and midway through the trip, about six of us developed food poisoning, likely from contaminated water used to wash uncooked produce. One woman ended up in the hospital, and another had a severe reaction to an antibiotic. I chose to fast, drink water, and rest. After two solid days of sleep, I emerged feeling fine. The absence of food had given my body time to heal itself. It remains striking that animals know to stop eating when they are sick. Today, we have science that helps explain why that instinct is often a wise one.

Ask Doctor S.

How's your EQ?

Intelligence is often described as the ability to learn, reason, solve problems, and adapt to new situations. Emotional intelligence, or EQ, is the ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions in ourselves and in others. Over the past few decades, researchers and writers have made a strong case for why EQ can matter just as much as, and sometimes even more than, traditional IQ when it comes to things like school success, mental well-being, leadership, and positive relationships.

Since the early 1990s—and especially after Daniel Goleman's book "Emotional Intelligence" came out in 1995—many well-known authors, academics, and leadership experts have helped bring EQ into everyday conversation. While studies show that IQ is influenced heavily by genetics, EQ is shaped far more by our environment: the homes, schools, and community spaces where we grow up. Skills like empathy and regulating our emotions are learned, often by watching the adults around us.

For many of us who grew up in or before the 1980s, talking openly about emotions wasn't common. Our parents often didn't have those conversations themselves. The good news is that EQ can be taught and strengthened at any age. Much of how we respond to emotions was learned early in life, but with awareness and practice, those patterns can change.

Every interaction with someone who is feeling something strongly—whether a child, friend, partner, co-worker, or relative—gives us a chance to notice and improve our own EQ. Think about the last time someone expressed a big emotion in your presence. How did you respond? Did you take it personally, jump to problem-solving, try to smooth things over, feel overwhelmed, or offer comfort? Most of us fall back on the strategies we learned long ago, even if they no longer

cont'd on page 16



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LIFESTYLE

Timeless design decisions to maximize your remodel

Contributed by Synergy Design & Construction

Every season brings new colors, materials, and styles that inspire us to reimagine how our homes look and feel. But when you’re planning a remodel, it’s important to think beyond what’s current and consider what will still feel right for you years from now—not just this season.

Incorporating timeless design elements allows your home to evolve with you, keeping it both beautiful and functional well into the future.

Timeless design doesn’t mean avoiding trends; it means making choices that blend what you love today with what will serve you well later. Here are a few ways to ensure your remodel feels fresh now and endures gracefully over time.

1. Start with Function: A well-functioning home never goes out of style. Focus on how each space supports your daily life—from open layouts that encourage connection to smart storage that reduces clutter. Timeless design often starts with thoughtful planning, understanding how you use your home, and creating solutions that make everyday life easier. A functional home adapts effortlessly as your family, lifestyle, and needs evolve.

2. Use Classic Materials as Your Foundation: Materials like wood, stone, and tile have a lasting appeal that works with nearly any aesthetic. They pair beautifully with modern fixtures, bold patterns, or minimalist finishes, giving you the flexibility to shift your style over time. By establishing a neutral, durable foundation, you can confidently layer in trend-forward accents while keeping your overall design cohesive as styles change.

3. Choose a Versatile Palette: Color trends come and go,

but balance lasts. Begin with a versatile palette of warm neutrals or soft tones that can adapt as your preferences evolve. Then bring in personality through artwork, textiles, and décor that can be refreshed without a major overhaul. A thoughtful palette makes your home feel harmonious and inviting while giving you the freedom to update accents with the seasons.

4. Mix Eras Thoughtfully: Blending modern and traditional design elements adds depth and character. Think clean-lined cabinetry paired with classic fixtures, or contemporary furniture softened by vintage-inspired textures. These contrasts create balance, helping your home feel both current and enduring rather than tied to one specific moment in design history.

5. Prioritize Quality Over Quantity: When decisions are made with intention, less truly becomes more. Investing in durable materials, custom craftsmanship, and details that enhance comfort and longevity ensures your remodel will look and function beautifully for years. Prioritizing quality leads to long-term satisfaction over quick fixes and focuses your investment on what genuinely improves the way you live.

When your home is grounded in thoughtful choices and quality design, it grows with you, reflecting who you are at every stage of life. If you’re ready to create a home that feels effortlessly lasting, the team at Synergy is here to help. Visit www.RenovateHappy.com or call 703-766-6333 to start the conversation.



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Consider timeless designs when remodeling your home. Photo contributed by Synergy Design and Construction



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LIFESTYLE

Inside Art

By Louise Seirmarco-Yale,
Reston Artist



Learning the art of seeing—not just looking—is an invaluable skill during the holidays, when our

environment changes so noticeably. From Halloween through the New Year, our everyday world transforms through creative expression.

We can train ourselves to see rather than simply glance. December's decorations offer a wealth of visual experiences where we can practice seeing art.

Notice both the subtle changes and the noisy, obvious ones in your surroundings. Look at the holiday lights. Then see how the lights glow, how shadows fall around each bulb, and how reflections on windows or ornaments add an extra layer of art to the nightly view.

Ornaments, tinsel, and lights on shiny surfaces can create reflective patterns that feel visually loud. Try to notice all these effects.

A holiday silhouette might be a tree outlined against the evening sky or a wreath shape on a door. The edges and subtle shapes that give these scenes their beauty deserve attention too.

Consider the rhythms and patterns created by strings of lights, rows of wreaths, or stacked garlands. Nature meets décor in pine boughs paired with electric lights, holly in a metal pot, or bare twigs arranged in a vase with a bow. In a minimal holiday scene, less is more—one quiet vignette, like snow on a branch, can become the center of your focus.

One bright ornament, one vivid ribbon, or a single light in a dark setting can offer a striking accent of color. Ask yourself, "What draws my eye?" Learn to focus on the art element. Lines of tinsel or the long sweep of ribbon down a tree help define the shapes we see. Look for lines.

Time-worn garlands and vintage ornaments add the texture of age and tradition. Rusty sleds, old tree stands, and childhood decorations form a collage of memories. Children's handprints in the snow, a stocking hung, or boots lined up by the door remind us of the sweetness of human presence during the holidays. Notice how a doorway dressed in greenery, a window display, or a decorated mantel frames what you see.

Art is emotional and cements memories. As holiday artist-photographers, we edit, crop, and assemble images to archive our personal experiences. Use one favorite visual moment this month to make a piece of photo art.

How does it feel to bring new awareness to decorations you once saw as ordinary? Practice seeing instead of simply looking. The potential for art is always there. Try something new this year as you unpack familiar décor. Notice the lines, colors, designs, shapes, textures, and contrasts. Remember that art lives within all of us, all the time.

Have fun—and then photograph it. Happy holidays!
Louise Seirmarco-Yale is a Reston artist, speaker, teacher and author of "Art. You Be The Judge. Reawaken your Instincts and Enjoy Art On Your Own Terms", available on Amazon, or download for free at www.peopleneedart.com, email Louise at: hello@peopleneedart.com, or follow her on FB and Instagram: [louise_seirmarco_art](https://www.instagram.com/louise_seirmarco_art)

Ruth's Chris: A rare treat well done

By Phantom Foodie

Ms. Foodie and I tossed the budget aside this month and went all in on a special date night at Ruth's Chris. It was a welcome change—and a truly memorable one.

In fact, it was so nice we did it twice: once at the restaurant and once at the happy hour bar, on two separate nights. Whether you're stopping by for an after-work drink or settling in for a full steakhouse dinner, this local favorite delivers on both fronts.

First, the bar. If you want a high-quality experience at a friendlier price point, try happy hour, Sunday through Friday from 4 to 6 p.m. We were impressed by the expansive yet cozy bar, with news and sports on the TVs and a well-balanced music mix in the background.

The happy hour menu features sandwiches and shareables—zucchini fries, goat cheese and artichoke dip, spicy shrimp, and seared ahi tuna, to name a few. We chose the seared tuna and the steak sandwich, served with perfectly cooked, flavorful fries. Our bar mates praised the cheeseburger and the artisan chicken sandwich: a cilantro-marinated breast topped with mango chutney and Brie.

Night number two moved us from bar to booth. The dining room carries that same confident ease, with floor-to-ceiling wine displays that tempt at every turn. The room is filled with ambiance—ideal for a classic romantic dinner or a polished business meal. Booths and tables offer ample comfort, with partitions that allow for easy, intimate conversation.

The staff are pros—warm but never overbearing, quick with recommendations, and clearly proud of the food they present. The service was impeccable, complete with a manager stop-by to check on our experience. It was seamless team service from start to finish.

And the filet? Textbook perfection: buttery, tender, and cooked precisely to order—medium rare (none of that "medium rare-ish" or "medium rare plus" business). It arrived glistening in a signature pool of sizzling butter that melts in your mouth and dares your arteries to complain.

Add a classic side like creamed spinach or a gigantic loaded baked potato, and you remember instantly why steakhouses became special-occasion staples. While the chef's fall selections were tempting, Ms. Foodie went straight for the three-course option—comforting, filling, and spot-on: steak house salad with homemade balsamic, garlic mashed potatoes, and a steak with lobster tail.

Save room for dessert. The creamy cheesecake or the flourless Chocolate Sin Cake makes for a deeply satisfying, timeless finale.

For a night out that blends polish with indulgence, Ruth's Chris Reston is a sure bet. Steaks, seafood, and service—done right.

Private events. Online ordering. Gift cards. Christmas and New Years options available for dine-in or take-home.

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Filet and lobster tail. Photo by Phantom Foodie.

How's your EQ?, cont'd from page 14

serve us well.

Many people try to strengthen their EQ without even realizing it—by reading, listening to podcasts, talking with other parents, or seeking guidance from teachers, pediatricians, or therapists. A supportive counseling relationship can also provide a place to learn and practice new skills.

With self-awareness and a willingness to reflect on where our habits came from, we can all grow in this area. And when we do, we not only feel more grounded ourselves—we also show up in more thoughtful and supportive ways for the people in our lives.

Wishing everyone the happiest of holidays!
Psychd to see you next YEAR! Happy 2026! - Dr. S. Dr. Hayley B. Sherwood is a longtime Clinical Psychologist in Reston/Herndon. To learn more, please visit her website at www.oakhillpsychological.com. Please visit the About Us section on our website to learn more about our team of therapists!



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