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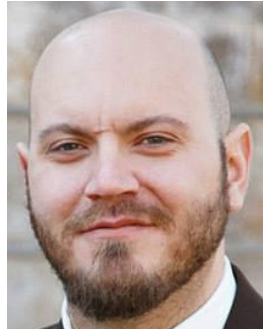
Editor's Notebook

A time for growth and change

Summer is a time for change. Students graduate. Educators retire. Some people go on trips or try new careers. And that's what we're about in this edition, telling stories of change and how some residents helped others, giving them a chance to get back on their feet, to change their circumstances.

Sure, change can be scary. When you make up your mind to try something new, it can be hard. But as we see in each of our stories this month, the reward is worth the effort. Think about it. How many of us have sat back after a unique trip or after sharing a story with friends only to think about how we need to put pen to paper and write it down? More than that, how many of us have done that and thought about sharing those stories with the world? That's what one Longwood professor has done, and done successfully. In this edition, reporter Sharon Johnson talks with Michael Lund about growing up on Route 66 and how he translated those life experiences into pretty popular novels.

Then we shift gears in this edition to celebrate with the Rotary Club of



Brian Carlton,
Editor

Farmville. Fresh off being named Nonprofit of the Year by the Farmville Area Chamber of Commerce, we look at some of the projects the group has put together over the last year, finding ways to help change the lives of their neighbors and Farmville residents.

Finally today, we let the community speak up through the voices of co-workers, as Virginia Gills says goodbye to Cumberland Elementary School. The beloved principal retired on June 30, leaving behind a legacy of not just change, but care and compassion. People share their stories with reporter Char Lavigne, telling tales about what Gills has meant to the school, to parents, to co-workers and the community as a whole during more than a decade at the facility. If you ever question change, for those who wonder if it's possible to have an impact in a child's life as an educator, we suggest you take a read. Even in retirement, Gills sets a standard that not just principals but all leaders should try to follow.

So sit back, relax and read about changes being inspired in many ways across the community. Who knows, maybe this will inspire you to make some changes, to take a leap on your own.

*Brian Carlton is Editor of Farmville the Magazine.
He can be reached at Brian.Carlton@FarmvilletheMag.com.*



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On the Cover: Cumberland Elementary Principal Virginia Gills, center right, takes a picture with national education speaker Todd Whittaker, center left, Cumberland Elementary Assistant Principal Wendy Tillett, left, and Pamela Stepko, right, at the Virginia Association of Elementary School Principals meeting.



Michael Lund

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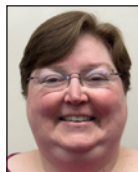
From the ground up

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Betty J. Ramsey
Publisher

Betty.Ramsey@FarmvilletheMag.com



Staci Bridge
Director of Operations

Staci.Bridge@FarmvilletheMag.com



Brian Carlton
Editor

Brian.Carlton@FarmvilletheMag.com



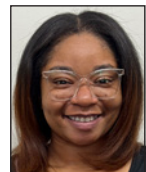
Debbie Evans
Marketing Consultant

Debbie.Evans@FarmvilletheMag.com



Emilee Farabaugh
Marketing Consultant

Emilee.Farabaugh@FarmvilletheMag.com



Regina Caraway
Receivables/Circulation

Regina.Caraway@FarmvilletheMag.com

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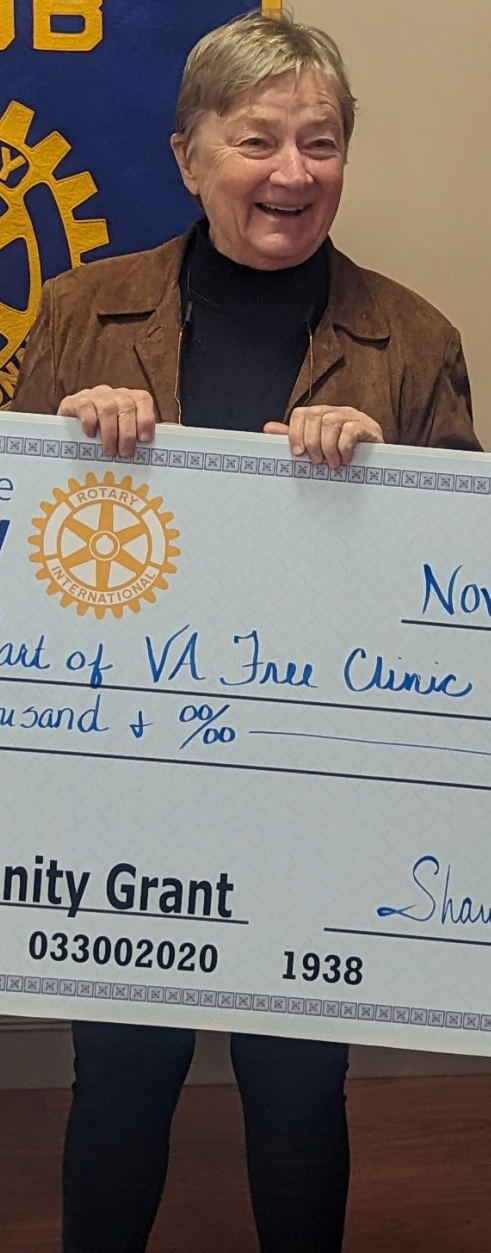
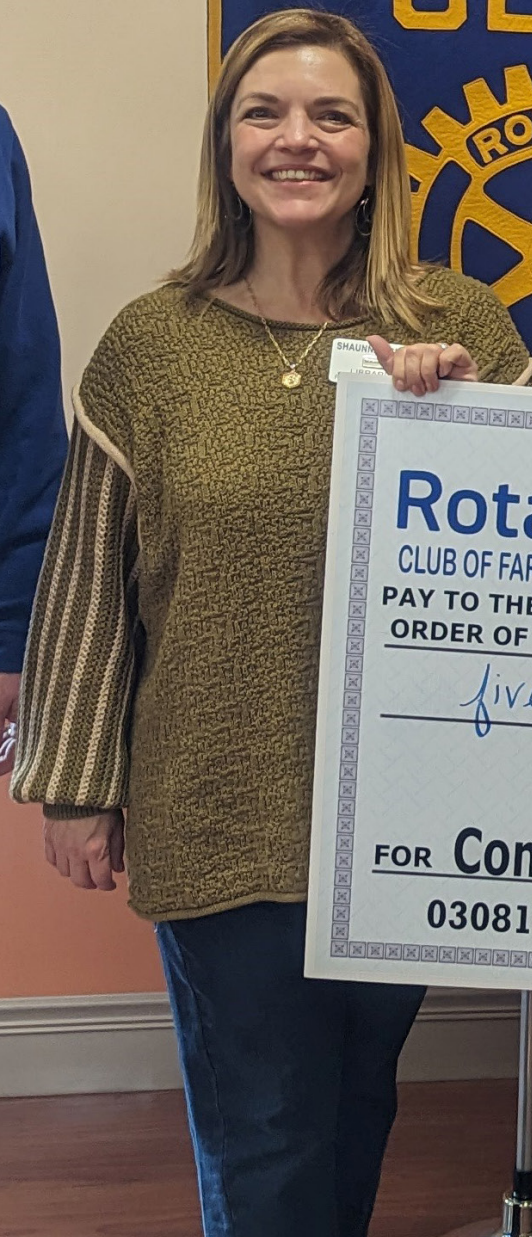


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Rotary helps people through projects

By Brian Carlton

How can we improve the quality of life for people in Prince Edward County? That's a question the Rotary Club of Farmville wants to answer. It's not a theoretical question either. They're actively putting support in place to make it happen.

Rotary club members are labeled as "People of Action," a title the Farmville club lives up to. Each year, you'll find the group cleaning up the area, doing repairs, raising money for a number of causes and in general, offering a helping hand.

Take this past fall, for example. The group offered community grants of up to \$5,000, available for any nonprofit that enriches the lives of Prince

Edward residents. These grants couldn't be used on salaries or anything other than a clear-cut project designed to help residents.

And that's just one example. In May, the group finished landscaping the four new Habitat homes on Andres Drive. They took a \$5,000 grant from the local Rotary District and used the money to pay for grading the lots, topsoil, grass seed, mulch and native plants. They worked with Piedmont Habitat for Humanity to get funding to finish the yards and the Heart of Virginia Master Gardeners chipped in to contribute on the final landscaping day. Right now, they're currently helping FACES, as the food pantry is down a number of volunteers since college let out



and most of the students went home for the summer.

For all this work, the Rotary earned the title of “Nonprofit of the Year” from the Farmville Area Chamber of Commerce in June.

Rotary Club of Farmville President Shaunna Hunter isn’t focused on the applause that comes with the award. She’s just happy the recognition might help increase her group’s impact.

“Our club supports numerous nonprofits like FACES, PSR, Habitat for Humanity, Better Days Farmville, and STEPS/Madeline’s House, and are thrilled to be collaborating with the Chamber over the next year,” Hunter said. “This honor will help us expand our local outreach and impact.”

OUTREACH DOESN’T STOP

And the outreach doesn’t stop just because summer is here. In fact, some might argue it just grows stronger, as the group finds more that need help. On June 29, a number of Rotarians visited FACES, to help the food

pantry.

“We’ll be volunteering with FACES several more times this summer to help them as they are down student volunteers,” Hunter said.

As of this month, there’s a new face stepping into the leadership role. Hunter’s term expired July 1 and Prince Edward County Administrator Doug Stanley will be stepping in.

NOTHING CHANGES

But regardless of who’s in charge, the mission remains the same, one they would love some help with.

The Rotary Club welcomes visitors, as well as people looking to join. They meet on Thursdays at noon at The Woodland, with a second group meeting at 5:30 p.m. at Three Roads Brewing Company.

You can find them on Facebook, and their website is <https://farmvillearotary.org/>.



Taking a moment from a busy day of mulching, planting and landscaping Piedmont Habitat for Humanity homes, are homeowners, volunteers and employees. Photo by Betty J. Ramsey.







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LEAVING A MARK:

Gills says goodbye

By Char Lavigne

She was there to help. If you had to sum up how people in general feel about Virginia Gills, it's that she's always been there to make a situation better. The longtime Cumberland County Elementary principal helped teachers, encouraged students and has been there to answer questions from the community as well.

"She didn't just stop at our door," said Pamela Stepko, the incoming assistant principal at Cumberland Elementary. "It was out into the community. Every decision she made, she made sure that it was something that was going to be right for our families."

Stepko, who as a teacher in 2022 won the prestigious Milken Award, often referred to as the 'Oscars of Teaching', labeled her former boss as a motivator who made the school a place both teachers and students wanted to come to.

That's something Gills takes pride in. After 10 years as principal and more before that as assistant principal at Cumberland, she's retiring. But there's no doubt she left her mark, both on the school and community.

It's something Gills said she set out from day one to do, to make everyone feel that Cumberland Elementary is a family.

"We really embraced the family theme," Gills said. "That was kind of a pivotal moment for us - that family theme has just stuck. That is a piece that just sets us apart from other schools. You can feel it when you walk through our door."

BUILDING A FAMILY TAKES TIME

The school's status as a family was one hard won by Gills, who became principal at a time when the school was divided. She recalled that "we all had lots of talents, but we weren't necessarily working together to shine - the collective efficacy just was not visible."

Wendy Tillett, who worked with Gills as her assistant principal and now takes over the head role, gives her former boss credit for turning around what had been a struggling school.

"She really came into a school that wasn't functioning and turned it into a positive family for anyone: children, adults, parents, caregivers," said Tillett.

And that message has translated into higher test scores as well. Since before the pandemic, the school has been significantly above the state average pass rate for English and Math. In Math, 88% of students passed this last year. By comparison, the state average is 70%. In English, 82% of students passed, more than the state's 75% average.

With constant work, Cumberland Elementary has become



Outgoing Cumberland Elementary Principal Virginia Gills, right, takes a photo with incoming assistant principal Pamela Stepko, left.



o with incoming Cumberland Elementary Principal Wendy Tillett, center and incoming Cumberland Elementary Assistant Principal

somewhat of a “unicorn”, Tillett said. And the staff point the credit for that in Gills’ direction.

“If anyone has a loss in their family, she’s quick to go and get a cooler full of drinks and a big bin full of snacks,” Tillett said. “We’re always going to go and provide something to let people know we’re here and we’re thinking about them. She’s very instrumental in that.”

Gills’ care for the staff she works with even extended to writing thank you letters to their parents, an early decision which has become a tradition

at the school.

“She actually wrote cards to their families, thanking them for the impact that the staff member has,” said Tillett. “She actually brought one to my mom this year.”

BUILDING TRADITIONS

The family aspect isn’t the only positive Gills brought to Cumberland over the years. Cumberland County Superintendent Dr. Chip Jones cited the many traditions Gills began at Cumberland Elementary – including home visits and social media shoutouts for students – for the school’s good reputation. “She had a huge impact on the school system. She’s always enthusiastic, she’s a go-getter, and she’s pursuing excellence,” he said.

One of Gills’ most well-known traditions didn’t apply to her students, though, but her. For years, Gills has worn shoes painted in blue and white, the school’s colors. “She would have our art teacher paint them,” said Stepko. “They were really unique to her.”

Gills’ shoes have been such an iconic part of her persona that she’s considering naming a consulting company after them as part of her plan for staying in the education sphere after her retirement. “I kind of tongue-in-cheek think if I started a business of recruiting and trying to put people in schools that I could call it ‘If the Shoe Fits,’” she said. “I haven’t yet ventured out into that world, but I do think I have something to offer people who are particularly interested in improving their school culture and climate and leveraging that to recruit and retain staff.”

WHAT’S NEXT?

Staying in education isn’t a question for Gills: she has goals for everything from working in higher education to assisting new principals get used to their jobs.

“I have a real desire to combat the teacher crisis that we have going on right now, and I’m really good at that,” Gills said, referring to the excellent teacher retainment at Cumberland Elementary.

Her dream is to participate in the Virginia Principals Mentoring Pilot, a new program being put on by the Virginia Department of Education that pairs recently retired principals with new principals located in at-risk schools.

Gills may be moving on from her role as principal of Cumberland Elementary, but the impact she has left on her students isn’t going anywhere.

“In just a really small way, I feel like I’ve been able to contribute to the foundational piece of their education,” Gills said.



At left, Virginia Gills shares “The Cumberland Elementary Story” at the Virginia Association of Elementary School Principals meeting.

Recipe

Candied nut and fresh cherry salad

with a fresh cherry vinaigrette



This candied nut and fresh cherry salad with chicken is filling, fruity and bright! It's a perfect summer dish.

Photos and recipe by Alexa Massey

Sometimes, recipes just come to me in a daydream. I'm staring out the window, hungry for lunch, when a particular flavor combination makes its way into my head. Oftentimes I've never made the dish I'm dreaming of but it's enticing enough that I hop into the kitchen and attempt to recreate that dream.

This dish is one of those recipes. While daydreaming, I began imagining the combination of homemade, crunchy candied cashews and walnuts with the acidity and bright tartness of fresh, red cherries. The two items seemed like they were made for each other, but it was a combination I'd never seen done on a salad before.

Well, it turns out my daydreaming mind was right and this is a flavor combo made in heaven! A little sweet, a little salty and a pleasant punch to the tastebuds, this candied nut and fresh cherry salad is served on top of spring mix greens with some simple blackened chicken. The highlight of the dish is an amazing and easy homemade cherry vinaigrette that will knock your socks off with flavor. It's a carefully curated flavor bomb that's fresh enough for summer and substantial enough for a real meal.

HERE'S THE RECIPE:

**Candied Nut and Fresh Cherry Salad
with Blackened Chicken**

Salad Base

6 cups spring mix or the preferred salad mix of your household (kale is great too!)

1 cup fresh red cherries, halved and pitted

Candied Nuts

2 cups cashews

2 cups walnuts

¼ cup light brown sugar

¼ cup white sugar

1 large pinch salt

½ tsp. cinnamon

1 egg white

1 tsp. Water

1 tsp. vanilla extract

Blackened Chicken

4 medium boneless skinless chicken breasts

Cooking spray (such as PAM)

1 tsp. each salt, cracked black pepper, paprika, garlic powder, onion powder

½ tsp. cayenne pepper and cumin (leave out if you don't like spicy food)

Fresh Cherry Vinaigrette

1 cup fresh red cherries, seeded

⅓ cup balsamic vinegar

2 tbs. olive oil

1 tbs. lemon juice

1 tsp. honey

1 tsp. sugar

1 pinch salt

Recipe

I would recommend making your candied nuts ahead of time and storing them in a cool, dry place where they will keep for several days. If you have a little extra time before dinner you can make them the same night you plan on serving the salad!



Our candied cashews and walnuts develop a beautiful, dark color after roasting in the oven.



It's very important to remove the pits of any cherries you consume. Cherry pits contain harmful toxins that are released when chewed or crushed.



Juicy chicken is a great topper for this salad. Other ingredients that would go well with nuts and cherries include goat cheese, feta cheese, shallots or even some fresh blueberries.

To make the nuts, begin by preheating your oven to 250° and mixing your water, egg white and vanilla in a bowl. Add in your cashews and walnuts and stir until the nuts are well-coated. In a separate bowl, stir together your brown and white sugar, salt and cinnamon. Add the dry ingredients to the wet ingredients and stir until the nuts are well-coated. Then, transfer the nuts to a parchment-lined baking sheet. Bake for 25 minutes before stirring and baking another 25 minutes. Allow the nuts to rest before breaking apart any that are stuck together.

To prepare your blackened chicken, turn your oven up to 350° and prepare a baking sheet sprayed with cooking spray. Get out your favorite cast iron skillet (a frying pan will work OK if you have to use it but I really recommend a cast iron skillet) and place it on the burner of your stove. Heat the skillet for about four minutes at medium-high heat. As your skillet heats up, spray your chicken breasts with cooking spray or any high-heat oil such as sunflower, avocado or canola oil. (Tip - olive oil is an amazing cooking tool but does not perform well at high temperatures. Butter will also burn if used in a pan at too high a temperature for too long and should only be added to dishes just before they are finished)

Coat each chicken breast with your seasoning mixture. Add them to the pan, being careful not to overcrowd the pan to lose that vital heat, and cook for one minute on each side. Once you have seared all the chicken breasts, transfer them to your greased pan and allow them to cook in the oven until they reach an internal temperature of 165° and their juices run clear. This will take about 12 minutes.

While your chicken is being finished off in the oven, you can make your cherry vinaigrette. To do so, add your pitted cherries, sugar, honey, balsamic vinegar, salt, olive oil and lemon juice to a blender and blitz until smooth. Pour the mixture through a fine mesh sieve to remove any little bits and make it velvety smooth.

(Important: You may have heard that it is dangerous to consume cherry pits as they contain toxins. According to healthline.com, it is true that consuming several cherry pits, when crushed or chewed, can expose you to the chemical amygdalin which your body converts into hydrogen cyanide. This compound is harmful to the body if more than a few chewed or crushed cherry seeds are consumed. Because of this risk, it is very important that you carefully remove the pits of every cherry you use in this recipe and dispose of them.)

To assemble your salad, wash your spring mix and add it to a plate. Top with your blackened chicken, vinaigrette, some candied cashews and walnut and garnish with some fresh, pitted cherry slices. Now it's time to dig in! This dish just tastes of summer and is both fruity and filling.



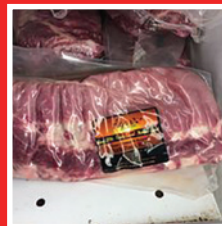
This recipe makes about 10 oz. of fresh cherry vinaigrette.



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From the Ground Up

Peonies

Photos and story by Dr. Cynthia Wood

Many years ago, Henry Mitchell, the Washington Post's much loved gardening columnist, wrote an essay praising the peony: "The fattest and most scrumptious of all flowers, a rare fusion of fluff and majesty, the peony is now coming into bloom."

He was right; peonies are fabulous. Gardeners have been growing and obsessing over peonies for centuries. The blooms are a favorite of brides, and home gardeners alike. The blooms are lush, available in both soft and bold colors, and have a heady fragrance capable of evoking memories of long-ago events. What's more, the plants are tough and can live for a hundred years or longer.

There are four groups of peony plants: herbaceous, tree, intersectional, and species. The herbaceous are the ones most commonly grown in the United States.

They can have single, Japanese, anemone, bomb, semi-double, or full-double flowers. Herbaceous peonies die back to the ground in fall. Tree peonies have thicker, woody stems that sprout new growth in spring. Intersectional peonies, or Itoh hybrids, are a cross between herbaceous and tree peonies. Species peonies are the wild plants that were used to create the first generation of modern hybrids.

Plant peonies in full sun and in an area where they won't be crowded. Peonies need 8 to 14 hours of sunlight to grow strong stems and to produce lots of blooms. They also require well-drained soil that is rich in organic matter. The rhizomes shouldn't be planted more than an inch below the soil and should be positioned with the eyes facing upwards. Watering is seldom necessary once plants are well established, but they are especially susceptible to dry weather in late summer/early fall and again in spring when blooming. When the foliage of herbaceous peonies dies back in late summer, cut it back to the ground.

Peonies have traditionally required support to prevent the plants from flopping onto the ground. Fortunately, there are now plants that have exceptionally strong stems. Look for plants that have the American Peony Society's Award of Landscape Merit. For example, Etched Salmon, a double pink; Old Faithful, a deep red semi double; Angel Cheeks, a pink bomb; and Bartzella, an intersectional with a semi-double bloom.

Peonies aren't susceptible to many pests, but the botrytis fungus can be a problem when there has been unusually heavy rain or when the plants have become too crowded. If necessary, apply a fungicide in early spring. Ants on peonies aren't a



The overall effect of a bomb type peony bloom is of a ball sitting on a plate.



The Do Tell peony has a anemone type bloom. (Photo by Ann Fowler)

Peony flowers are perfect for use in floral arrangements and in bridal bouquets.



Intersectional or Itoh peonies are a cross of tree and herbaceous plants. They offer the best of both types.

problem. It's a myth that peony buds need ants in order to open. Ants and peonies have a mutually beneficial relationship. The ants consume nectar and protect the blooms from insects that would eat them.

Peony blooms are so special that many gardeners like to store them for use 4 to 6 weeks after peak bloom season. Simply cut buds when they have the squishy feel of soft marshmallows, remove foliage, roll the buds in newspaper, and place the rolls in 2-gallon zip-closure bags. When ready to use them, cut 2 to 3 inches off the bottom of the stems and place them in a container of tepid water in a cool location until they begin to open.

Peonies may not be perfect garden plants, but they're tough, long-lived, and beautiful. They'll even grow in containers. And Henry Mitchell was right about their fluffy majesty.



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Telling tales from Route 66

By Sharon Johnson

One of the most popular roads in America, Route 66, snaked through more than 2,400 miles across the Midwest and the southwestern U.S. During its height, the historic highways inspired several novels and songs. Winding through hills and valleys, small towns and open plains, the journey across the route was much like author and Longwood University professor Michael Lund's career: long, exciting, and inspiring.

"I grew up on Route 66 in a small town in Missouri. The road actually went about a block and a half from my neighborhood," said Lund. "People going to and from were on an American journey, and when I began to think of my journey, it was within that context."

Lund's novels, *Route 66 to Vietnam: A Draftee's Story* and *Route 66: Déjà Vu*, were born out of his background. Much like *Route 66* mirroring the American journey through the Great Depression, war time and times of prosperity, Lund's journey with writing started during one of the most turbulent decades in the 20th century – the 1960s.

"I was an English major as an undergraduate. I liked stories and I liked language. It was a good time in the 60s to be in college," said Lund. "That led to a graduate program at Emory University in Atlanta, which I interrupted briefly for my Army career."

Although Lund mostly writes fiction, he was an Army correspondent during the early 1970s, writing news releases and features about the Vietnam War.

"We were trying not to focus on the combat. We were trying to negotiate a peace and convince the American people that the Vietnamese were becoming the kind of loyal ally, organized society that would be able to stand on its own and resist aggression from outside," said Lund. "I did a lot of stories about how we were helping build, say, a tuberculosis hospital out in the countryside, how we were trying to improve the fishing industry."

During his time in the military, Lund never lost his craving for writing literature. For him, writing fiction was therapeutic and introspective. Those feelings remained consistent for him in Vietnam.

"I was the only one in the office who did not say, 'When I get back, I'm going to write the true story of this war.' I thought I was going to put it behind me and focus on an academic career, and I did that for about 30 years," said Lund.

Lund said that changed for him during the war in Iraq.

"I think the war in Iraq reminded me too much of the war in Vietnam,

where we were trying to do things we probably really couldn't do, and we were asking soldiers to go back again, and again, and again, and try to accomplish these things," said Lund. "I felt if I had learned something from my experience, I should try to put it in a form that others could read, so that lead to novels."

Route 66 to Vietnam: A Draftee's Story is Lund's fictional account of two American soldiers in southeast Asia. *Route 66: Déjà Vu* is about a man discovering the differing perspectives of his classmates as he prepares for a 50th high school reunion.

"I saw the world from the male perspective: white, middle class and basically privileged. I didn't understand how privileged I was," said Lund. "Then we did have a 50th reunion. Although most of the things that I put in the book are fiction, that's exactly what I found out."

His fiction *Bridge* depicts people in a small town trying to preserve a community while moving forward.

"I hope it would open minds to what small town life can be," said Lund.

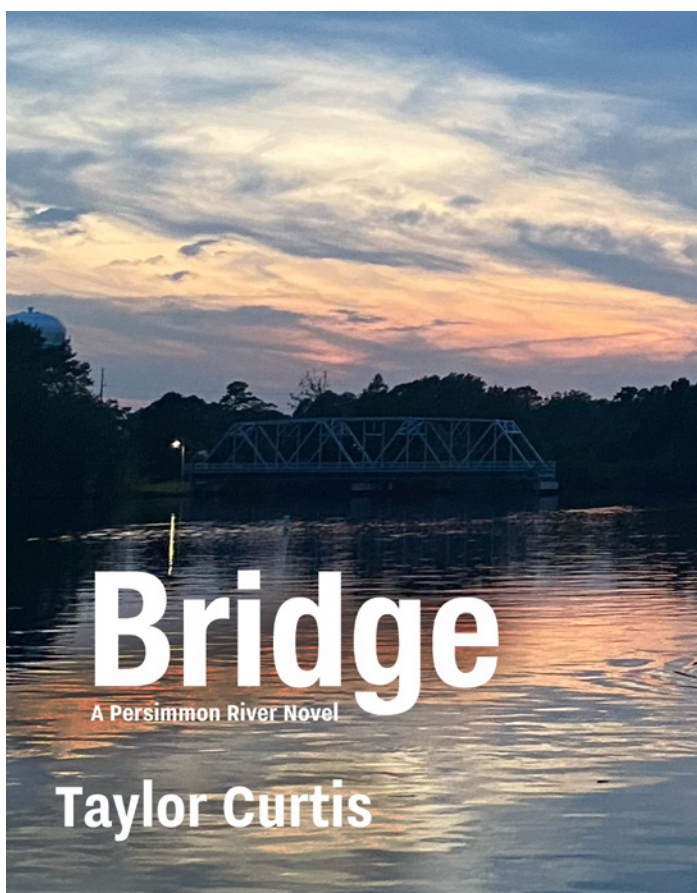
Lund formerly taught composition and literature at Longwood University and currently offers workshops through the school.

He offers a free writing workshop called *Home and Abroad* to military veterans. Lund helps veterans produce and print small booklets to deliver to family and friends. Lund said he offers the program for free because, "not all veterans think of themselves as writers, but they do have stories to tell."

"I think, today, a civilian population will benefit from reading about the

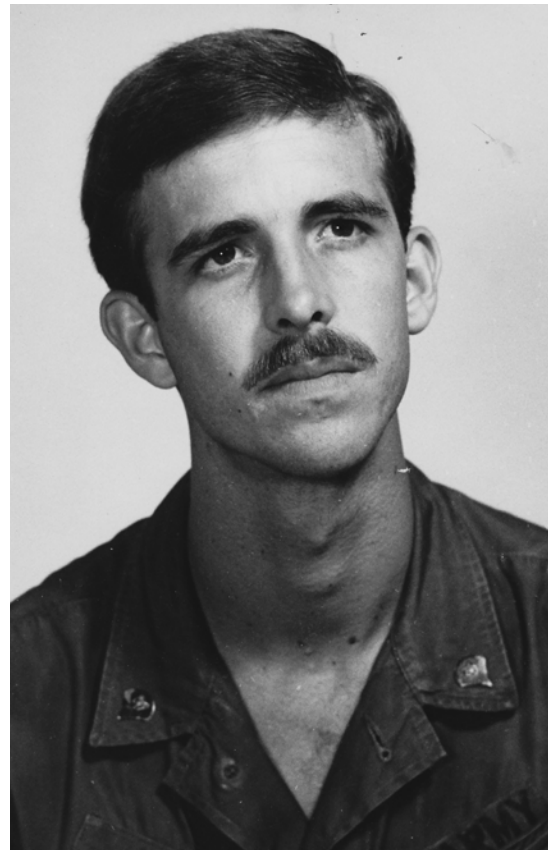


Professor Lund speaks to the crowd at his retirement.





Lund's love of travel stretches all the way back to his childhood. This was used in his first book.



A look at Lund during his career in the Army.

things the military does. Many have sort of a very narrow view," said Lund.

There has been a sharp increase in books banning efforts in school districts and libraries across the country over the past two years. Lund encourages aspiring authors to continue writing.

"To sort of adapt to a certain formula, it's defeating. It is a long, long battle - censorship of literature," said Lund.

"I've always said this to my students in studying literature that they should study what they want to know, what they want to understand. I've also said if you want to write, you must have something to say. Something inside you that drives you and you want to get it out there. I think we should write what we feel is important."



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CENTRA HEALTH CAREER CAMP 2024

Area middle and high school students from across the region were able to explore the fields of nursing, radiology, physical therapy, primary care, Centra One (helicopter and ambulance), emergency department, laboratory, along with visits to Longwood Speech and Hearing, Farmville Fire Department and PACE. The Southside middle school health career camp was started almost 20 years ago. This year, thanks to a generous grant from the Claude Moore Charitable Foundation, the camp was extended to include high school students. SUBMITTED PHOTOS



Mauricio Beltran Aguilera watches as Hunter Hathaway attempts to stop the blood flow of an open wound.



Just one of the many experiences students were able to participate in at the Centra Health Career Camp.



Kinsley Showalter tries her hand at extinguishing a fire during camp. Looking on are, from left, Gwendolyn Franssen, Adeline Jones, Kerry Mossler, Eden Zelle and Regan Vogel.



Middle school camper Adeline Jones peers through a microscope looking at white blood cells.



Middle school campers take a moment at the helicopter pad to pose for a photo. From left, far forward, Adeline Jones, Gwendolyn Franssen; campers in the second row, Regan Vogel, Charlotte Frank, Virginia McWilliams, Allee Call; backrow, Campbell Frank, Kinsley Showalter, Parker Hathaway, Hunter Hathaway, Mauricio Beltran Aguilera, Brentlee Franklin and Lexi Smith.



Eden Zelley listens for respiration sounds.



Campers, front row, Allee Call, Charlotte Frank, Virginia McWilliams, Hunter Hathaway; backrow, Campbell Frank and Kinsley Showalter.



Mentor Carolyn Blackwell, Annabelle Bryant, Melia Allen, Kerry Mossler, Ansley Jordan, Eleri Jordan, Rachel Coro, Sydni Allen and Da'Niyah Jefferson. Not pictured Allee Patton.

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CHAMBER GOLF TOURNAMENT A GREAT SUCCESS

Blue skies overlaid with passing clouds provided exceptional weather conditions for the 18th annual Farmville Area Chamber/Centra Southside Community Hospital Golf Tournament held May 11, at the Manor Golf Club in Farmville.

PHOTOS BY BETTY J. RAMSEY



Welcoming each golfer and spectator to the event are Michelle Walters, Jen Cox and Chamber Executive Director Anne Tyler Adams.



Joy Stump, Sarah Detrick and Carrington Detrick were also part of the welcoming group.



Taking a moment to pose for the camera are team Davenport & Company members Malcolm Adams, Thomas Watson, Brad Watson and Noel Encarnacion.



CEP Solar was on deck with team Rick Thomas, Jillian Stickley, Galen Green and Thomas Williams.



Team Liberty Timber members Brian Atkins, Colin Stokes and Kent Scruggs look on as Ken Scruggs takes a swing.



Above, representing The Woodland are Bryan Vasel, Damen Moyer, Donald Hunter and Erik Davis.



It takes great concentration and teamwork to line up the next shot.

PARTY *Pix*

CELEBRATING HEALTHCARE HEROES

This year's Centra Southside Community Hospital Week celebrations wrapped up with a parade and a picnic. A delicious lunch was provided by the Fishin' Pig.

SUBMITTED PHOTOS



*We believe that
women deserve
excellent care
close to home.*



Centra Southside's Women & Children's Health Team is here for you!

Whether you are bringing new life into the world, need routine wellness care or have been struggling with women's health issues, our experienced team of obstetricians & gynecologists, nurse-midwives and practitioners are here for you. At Centra, we believe that all women deserve excellent compassionate care close to home.

To learn more about the women's health and maternity services that are available in the Farmville area, please call **434.315.2950** or scan the QR code.



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