

10% tuition hike proposed

Board to vote on largest tuition increase in 30 years



By Jyotika Aggarwal
Editor in Chief

A proposed 10% in-county tuition increase at Mercer County Community College, introduced by President Dr. Deborah Preston at a March 11 public hearing, would be the school's first double-digit hike in 30 years.

Over the past three decades, per credit in-county tuition has increased by an average of 3.9% per year, with most increases falling in the 2% to 4% range according to state and college data. Even a proposed 5% increase in 2022 drew heavy pushback, prompting the Board of Trustees to approve the original 3% increase proposed that year.

Tuition is not the only cost rising. The proposal also includes a \$2 increase to the technology fee and a \$4 increase to the college fee, both per credit. A student taking 12 credits would pay approximately \$279.90 more in tuition and fees in the upcoming academic year.

ing academic year.

Dr. Preston said students could rely on a range of financial aid options to offset the increase, including federal Pell Grants and SEOG, state programs such as NJ STARS, TAG and CCOG, as well as private scholarships and student loans

She noted that among Mercer students, "Only in the 30-something percent range" of students qualify for a Pell Grant, adding that when other forms of aid are included, that figure "gets up to 40 something."

She also acknowledged that some students may still face financial gaps, adding, "If a student is not eligible for any of the above aid, they can receive Foundation scholarships, completion fund, or student emergency funds."

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Students describe fight on bus back from class trip to NY

By Jyotika Aggarwal
Editor in Chief

Mercer County Community College opened a Human Resources investigation into events that occurred during a Nov. 12, 2025 class trip to the Apollo Theater in New York City.

More than a dozen students from MCCC's African American History class and the Educational Opportunity Fund program attended the trip, led by Assistant Vice President of Academic Affairs Dr. James Whitney and his then-executive assistant, who is no longer working at the college. Students dined at Red Rooster Harlem before attending a performance of the play "Hang Time." The incident occurred during the return trip to campus.

Separately, The VOICE requested copies of travel paperwork for the trip. After initially denying the request under

different explanations, the college later said it had no records of the documents.

Two students who attended the trip, both requesting anonymity out of concern for potential repercussions, said they witnessed an altercation involving students during the return bus ride. They said Dr. Whitney, who supervised the trip, had already exited the bus at the time.

After stopping at a highway rest area, the group began departing for Mercer when the two students said they saw an argument break out on the bus between a male student and the executive assistant's adult daughter.

The first student said the disagreement appeared to stem from frustration about the late hour and the length of the stop. She also alleged that the student made remarks about the executive assistant that escalat-

ed tensions with her daughter.

The first student said that during the confrontation—which lasted approximately 20 minutes—the male student and assistant's daughter exchanged profanity and threats as the bus began driving again. The student also alleged that the male student became hostile and verbally aggressive toward the daughter, who responded similarly.

The second student said, "They were going back-and-forth, back-and-forth. A couple people were trying to get in between to mediate things, but it didn't work too well."

The second student alleged that both the male student and the daughter "were up in each other's faces" but said he could not hear the full content of the argument.

Characterizing the altercation, the first student said, "It's as if I was at a bar and then two people just started bickering and then they had to get pulled



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION | JYOTIKA AGGARWAL

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MCCC students visited the Apollo Theater in Harlem during a Nov. class trip to see "Hangtime," before the incident on the return bus ride.

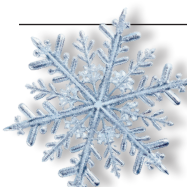
apart."

The first student said the assistant intervened to de-escalate, warning that a physical fight would force the bus to pull over and delay everyone's return to campus. The argument eventually subsided.

Both students said that

Dr. Whitney departed the bus before it arrived at Mercer. The first student, who has been on several trips with Dr. Whitney, said, "He always does that—where he will leave before we get back to Mercer. But it just

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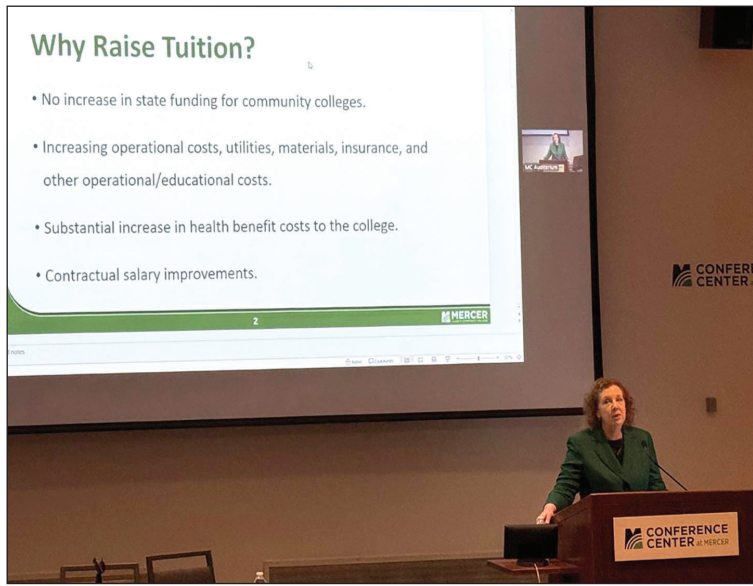
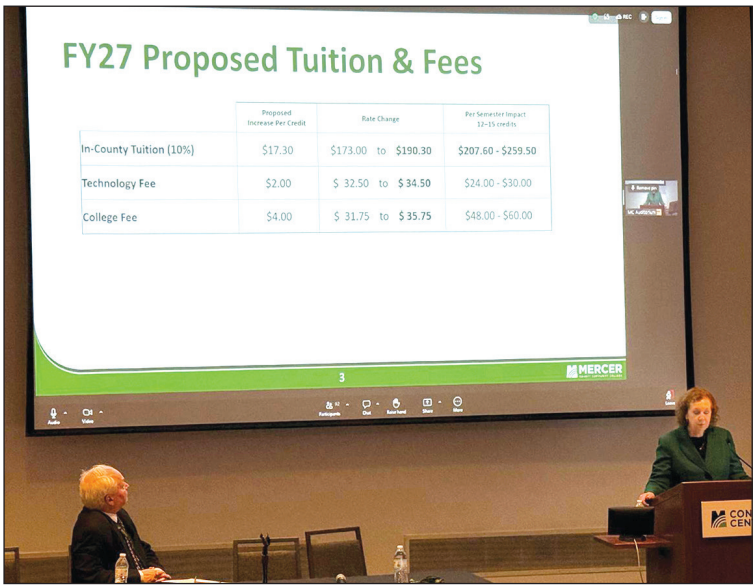
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College president Dr. Deborah Preston presented a proposed 10% tuition increase at an open meeting on March 11.

PHOTOS | JYOTIKA AGGARWAL

MCCC PER-CREDIT TUITION INCREASE SINCE 1996

YEAR	COST PER CREDIT	PERCENT INCREASE
1996	\$62.50	10.62%
1997	\$64.50	3.20%
1998	\$64.50	0.00%
1999	\$66.50	3.10%
2000	\$68.50	3.01%
2001	\$68.50	0.00%
2002	\$70.50	2.92%
2003	\$72.50	2.84%
2004	\$75.50	4.14%
2005	\$76.50	1.32%
2006	\$81.50	6.54%
2007	\$84.50	3.68%
2008	\$91.50	8.28%
2009	\$96.50	5.46%
2010	\$102.50	6.22%
2011	\$106.50	3.90%
2012	\$109.50	2.82%
2013	\$112.50	2.74%
2014	\$115.50	2.67%
2015	\$118.50	2.60%
2016	\$121.50	2.53%
2017	\$124.50	2.47%
2018	\$137.25	7.80%
2019	\$134.25	-2.19%
2020	\$140.50	4.66%
2021	\$143.30	1.99%
2022	\$146.15	1.99%
2023	\$153.50	5.03%
2024	\$161.00	4.89%
2025	\$173.00	7.45%
2026	\$190.30	10.00%

Figures above are drawn from IPEDS and MCCC online records and reflect in-county tuition only, with fees excluded. A shift toward higher per-credit fees in 2019 caused a slight dip in listed tuition.

- Tuition increase 10%+
- Tuition flat 0%
- Tuition increase above 6%

TUITION HIKE

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Many of these programs are competitive or have additional eligibility requirements.

Antonios Kantarakias, a Mercer funeral service major who had to take this semester off for financial reasons, says the change would make a difference for him.

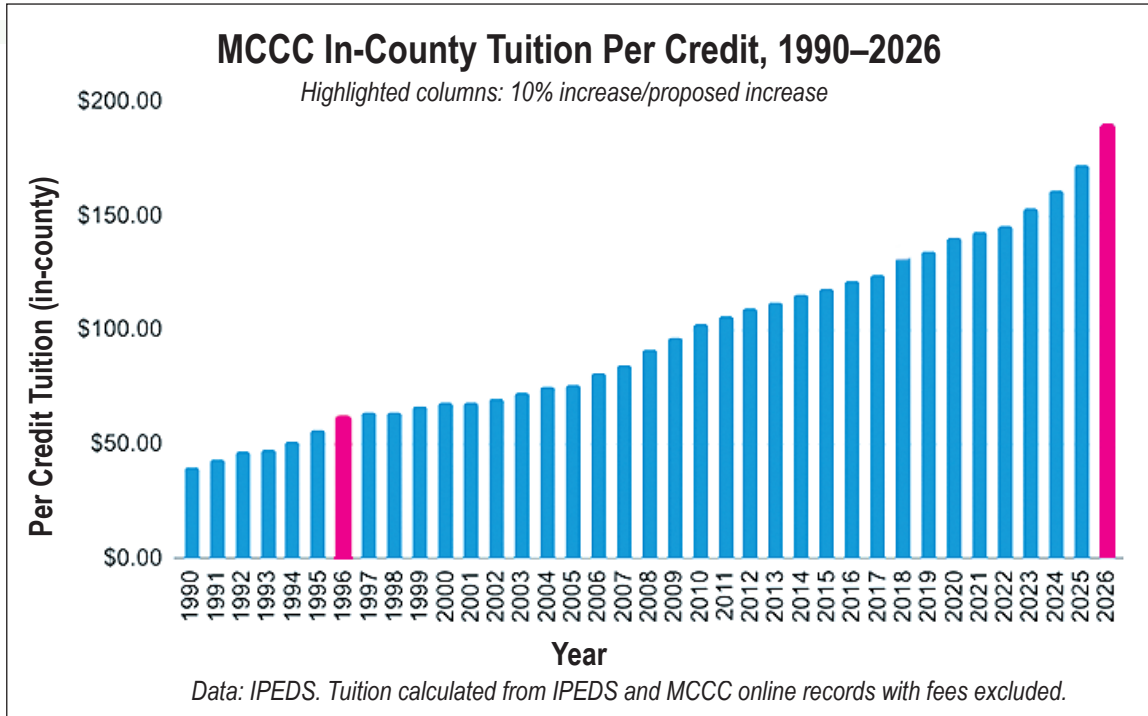
"This 10% increase would mean, even best-case scenario, a couple hundred dollars that I would have to start paying out of my pocket," Kantarakias said. He continued, "I would probably have to take on some extra hours once the fall semester comes around just to pay for that difference."

"If not," he added, "I genuinely may have to look elsewhere, to find a different funeral service program." Asked whether he expects to be able to return next semester, Kantarakias said, "As it currently stands, no."

Dr. Preston said there were several reasons for the proposed increase.

She said, "The budget from last year to this year is about \$4.2 million more ... We figure in the salary improvements on the collective bargaining agreements. Those are a significant amount. We figure in increases in utilities, which are going up every year. We figure in some inflationary costs for supplies."

Dr. Preston also cited increased health care costs for employees and a 5% drop in enrollment this semester as reasons for



the proposed increase.

Some faculty have questioned whether those factors fully explain the size of the hike.

Faculty salary increases and rising health care costs predate this year, and similar pressures have historically been addressed through smaller annual tuition increases, according to college data. Since 1996, the largest increase before this year was 8.28% during the Great Recession in 2008.

A faculty member who asked to remain anonymous for fear of reprisal said they believe poor leadership and administrative salary increases are more significant factors. Board minutes show several senior administra-

tors received salary increases of roughly 10% to 16% tied to promotions or reclassifications, while most non-union confidential employees received a 3.5% increase.

In the current academic year, the college has implemented staff reductions, beginning with outsourcing the financial aid department and followed by the elimination of 24 additional positions this semester, according to a summary of the February Board of Trustees meeting prepared by the faculty union.

Dr. Preston said at the meeting that the layoffs in financial aid had not been implemented as a cost-saving measure but were instead aimed to help more students more quickly.

She said, "I have heard concerns that some people don't feel like that is what has happened, and I assure you that I am way in the weeds trying to figure out if this was the right decision."

Dr. Preston said at the meeting, "Not all our students are struggling" and that she does not believe the college has "priced students out."

The Board of Trustees will vote on the tuition increase at their meeting on March 25.

The VOICE will continue to report on this story as it develops. Follow online at mcccvoice.org

NY TRIP

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seemed, in my opinion, farther [than usual], because we were 45 minutes away from Mercer."

The second student said, "Dr. Whitney, he got off as soon as the pit stop happened, and he was like, 'bye guys.'" She continued, saying his ride came to pick him up "by the time that all of us had gotten on the bus and had left."

After Dr. Whitney departed, students were supervised by his assistant for the remainder of the return trip. According to one of the students, the assistant appeared unwell during the trip and was seen being helped by her daughter during the rest area stop. It remains unclear to what extent the assistant was directly involved in the altercation.

The VOICE attempted to contact Dr. Whitney through email, phone, and multiple in-person visits. He did not respond to requests for comment.

Mark Chersevani, the Employee Relations Investigator leading the inquiry, confirmed that a complaint had been filed but declined to discuss details, saying the investigation would be submitted directly to the college president and could not be publicly disclosed.

The VOICE submitted an open public records (OPRA) request for the Travel Authorization Form and Justification Memo required for college-funded travel.

The college initially denied the request, citing legal exemptions for higher education institutions, and later said the ongoing investigation required the records to be withheld.

In a subsequent clarifi-

cation, the college's OPRA officer stated that she had attempted to obtain the documents but ultimately "was informed that these forms were not required for this student travel, therefore, do not exist."

Mike Heistand, an attorney at the Student Press Law Center, told the VOICE via a phone consultation, "The information that you're looking for, I think, ought to be clearly available to you. I don't see that there really is an exemption."

Dr. Deborah Preston, the college president, told the VOICE via email, "The investigation is a personnel matter protected by privacy laws. There will never be any information shared with anyone other than those directly involved and their supervisors."

MCCC's OMB 938 states that travel requests from members of the Executive Team require the signature of the college president.



Fund requests are made on the MCCC Travel Request Authorization Form. The college says no such form exists for the Nov. 2025 trip.

Trouble finding a flu shot

By Micah Witter
Senior Reporter

Temiz's experience reflects a broader trend. As flu cases rise across New Jersey and the country this winter, students are navigating illness without on-campus health services, raising concerns about access to care, vaccination, and the impact of missed work and classes.

In a survey of 35 students at Mercer County Community College, 25% reported being sick so far this semester.

"I was just sleeping the whole day—headache, fever. I think I had a fever of 102, it was so bad," Temiz said.

Several students said they delayed getting vaccinated and later became seriously ill. Benjamin Martin, a second-year business administration major, said, "I was just too lazy to do it, then I ended up getting the flu."

He continued, "It was a lot of fun, I got to be in bed for like two days. I barfed up everything I ate, and I couldn't even drink water, it was terrible."

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) weekly flu summary, about 18% of flu tests nationwide were positive as of Feb. 6.

In New Jersey, there was an 11% spike in flu rates between Dec. 20 and Jan. 3.

Dr. Laura Blinderman, a biology professor at MCCC, said, "I have a friend who's a general practitioner, and she says the hospital has been filled with flu patients."

In the same survey of MCCC students, about 8% indicated that they have not gotten their flu shot.

Temiz said that she did not get her flu vaccine this season. She said, "It's just like, we never thought of getting it. It wasn't a thing. I'm vaccinated [for COVID-19], but I just didn't get the flu vaccine."

Chloe Varnavas, a second-year business studies major, said, "My parents haven't taken me in a few years."

"It just hasn't come up, to be honest. I haven't asked," she said.

"The single best way to reduce the risk of seasonal flu and its potentially serious complications is to get vaccinated each year," the CDC states.

Ellen Genovesi, a biology professor at MCCC and chair spokesperson for the science program, said, "I got mine at CVS. They're readily available at most pharmacies if you don't have a primary care physician you can go to. You can just book an appointment online."

The college previously offered student sickness insurance but discontinued coverage, according to its website, which states: "Beginning with the fall 2013 semester, MCCC will no longer provide student sickness insurance coverage and will no longer include a health insurance fee on students' billing statements."

MCCC directed students to the Affordable Care Act (ACA) instead, stating that students are responsible for obtaining their own coverage.

Dr. Blinderman said that at one point, "For employees we had free flu shots, it was an event for faculty and staff called Flu Fair."

However, Flu Fair is no longer offered, reducing staff access to free vaccinations as well.

MCCC does not provide vaccines or on-campus health services and does not offer student health insurance coverage. As flu season persists, staying healthy at MCCC often depends on resources students must find beyond campus.

New Jersey blood shortage ended after winter decline

By Ashley Montojo
Reporter

New Jersey's statewide blood shortage, which began in early 2026, ended March 7, according to officials at a local donation center.

The New York Blood Center & New Jersey Blood Service declared a blood emergency on Jan. 6 and urged residents to donate. According to the New Jersey Department of Health, blood reserves were dangerously low. At one point, New Jersey had less than a one-week supply of red blood cells and less than a day's supply of platelets.

One local facility that helped combat the shortage is the American Red Cross donation center in Princeton, New Jersey. The center collects blood from donors in the surrounding region and ships the collected blood to be distributed. With the exception of holidays, the donation center is open daily.

Unlike blood drives, where usually only whole blood is collected, the Princeton center collects components of blood like red cells, platelets, plasma, as well as whole blood. Each type benefits different patients.

Red cells are used to treat trauma and surgery patients. Platelets are used to treat cancer patients, organ transplant patients and surgery patients. Plasma is used to treat patients with burns and bleeding disorders.

People can come into the center and donate whichever component they want. They can walk in or schedule an appointment.

Belinda Baa, the supervisor of the Princeton donation center, oversees operations and makes sure everything runs smoothly. When asked about why the blood shortage happened, she attributed it partially to the severe winter weather.

Baa said, "We just had a really big snowstorm twice. We don't want people to come out here and jeopardize their life because that defeats the purpose [of donating blood]."

According to the American Red Cross website, the winter storms forced the cancellation of more than 500 blood drives nationwide, leaving approximately 20,000 potential blood donations uncollected.

Although recent winter storms contributed to the drop in blood supplies, Baa said shortages are common during this time of year. She explained that donations often decline during the holiday season and winter break, when many people are traveling. Flu season can also prevent otherwise eligible donors from giving blood.

Baa said, "Being sick is a big deal. We can't take your blood. A flu, cold, or an infection can pass to somebody else and wind up killing somebody."

According to the American Blood Centers website, about 62% of the U.S. population, roughly 212 million people, are eligible to donate blood, yet only 3% do each year. For some residents, donating blood is not something they regularly consider.

Jim Serrano, a Princeton resident, said he has not donated blood recently. "No, I haven't. It's just something I don't really do."

Some MCCC students are not usually aware that a blood drive is happening. When asked about blood drives on campus, Sarah Hannah, an MCCC student, said, "I've never heard of one or no one told me. If I knew there was a blood drive, I wouldn't mind donating."

The blood shortage in New Jersey continued until March 7. According to an email Baa received, the shortage officially stopped on that date and the appeal to the public for blood dona-



COLLEGE VOICE FILE PHOTO

February's blood drive at MCCC was canceled due to snow but the college holds drives regularly such as this one in 2020.

tions ended. Baa said, "the donors picked back up, that's what stops the shortage."

Donation centers like this one in Princeton play an essential role in supporting hospitals across New Jersey and Pennsylvania. The Princeton center sends its collected blood to a lab in Philadelphia.

Amir Sorrell, a phlebotomist and apheresis technician at the Princeton donation center, said, "so everything goes to Philly just for them to test, make sure it's a qualified product to be able to be

sent out to hospitals."

From Philadelphia, the blood gets transported to wherever it is needed most.

The American Red Cross website lists donation centers and local blood drive.

"I've done two donations so far. I do it here and both of my donations went to a children's hospital. So it felt amazing that I was not only helping transfer blood, but also helping to save a life as well" said Sorrell.

Transfer fair offered many college options for students

By Jyotika Aggarwal, Domenica Gamero & Elijah Shepherd
EIC, ME, and Reporter

About 60 colleges and universities gathered at MCCC on Thursday, March 5, to recruit students during a transfer fair. The event, held on both floors of the Student Center from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., provided a hub for students to meet with admissions directors and explore academic opportunities.

The fair featured several New Jersey and Pennsylvania institutions, along with out-of-state schools looking to diversify their student populations.

Admissions staff focused on answering questions about credits, discussing scholarship eligibility, and easing the transition anxiety many community college students face.

Jen Cook, associate director of transfer admission at Rider University and a former transfer adviser at Mercer, said, "I think transfer students bring over a really unique perspective."

"They're also a very diverse group ... they generally know what they want to do and are very focused," Cook added.

Cook noted a shift in application trends this year, observing a slight decrease in business and technology applications at Rider, with a rise in liberal arts and humanities interests.

Other recruiters saw a different trend.

Sunita Bhargava, director of transfer and continuing education



Each of the roughly 60 colleges that came to the transfer fair on March 5, had its own booth.

PHOTO | ELIJAH SHEPHERD

at Drew University, said business is a big draw, along with psychology, which remains the primary interest for incoming transfer students.

For students in attendance, concerns such as affordability and career placement are important. Valentina Gomez, a Mercer student eyeing engineering programs at Rutgers and NJIT, said her search is driven by institutional support.

"The main factors I'm focusing on are the cost of the school, the scholarships they might offer, and the help they have for students, such as labs and internships," Gomez said.

While goals vary, recruit-

ers emphasized that the key to a successful transfer begins before the application deadline. Staff members from various institutions highlighted fit and academic rigor as the primary keys to admission.

"I would say [students] wait too long to start thinking about the process," Cook said. "They're coming in, have a goal in mind, and they talk to their advisers, and they have a plan. That makes the process a lot smoother."

Erin Barnard of The College of New Jersey agreed on the importance of early research. "I think a lot of students get caught up in names. It's really about fit," Barnard

said.

Recruiters also stressed the importance of a strong GPA. "Understand that having a strong GPA will result in excellent scholarships," Bhargava said. "If you want more doors to open to you, try to be a strong student academically."

The event concluded in the late afternoon. Transfer fairs aim to bridge the gap between associate degrees and future careers.

As Barnard noted, "Our main goal is to make the process as seamless as possible," to ensure students leave the Student Center with a clearer path toward their next chapter.

Hot Wheels monster trucks thrilled crowd at Trenton arena

By Keith Morris Jr.
Senior Reporter

The Hot Wheels Monster Trucks Live Glow-N-Fire show drew 14,500 attendees to the CURE Insurance Arena in Trenton, on Valentine's Day weekend who experienced a fiery, energized showdown. The event was hosted by Family Entertainment Live.

Monster truck rallies usually include massive trucks, typically around 12,000 pounds, doing skills competitions, donuts, free-styles, and racing.

The arena was alive, the aroma of butter popcorn ran through the air, while the arena became humid because of the packed crowd. The roars of monster trucks and dirt bikes echoed in the air, with the crowd screaming as background noise, with vibrant lights pointing into the crowd.

This rally was unique because not only did it have monster trucks, it also had dirt bikes performing stunts.

Prior to the start of the show, fans talked about what they were looking forward to.

David Donnelly, a parent from Philadelphia attended the show with his two kids and said his favorite moment from the shows is "High jumps. [The trucks] landing it!" His 11-year-old son, David Jr., said, "I like when they do the jumps over the cars."

One person who was able to talk about doing these stunts was



PHOTO | KEITH MORRIS JR.

Thirty-ton monster trucks on heavy duty suspensions lit up a packed house at Trenton's CURE Arena on Valentine's Day weekend as part of the Hot Wheels Live Glow-N-Fire performance.

motorcyclist Koltin Polinsky from Saint Ignatius, Montana.

"When I get to see those kids, you know, fired up in the crowd, it makes me just want to send it bigger," said Polinsky.

The engines of the dirt bikes roared throughout the arena as the riders launched in the air over ramps, doing flips and hanging on the dirt bikes, at times, only with their legs or arms.

For the fans, it's fun to watch, but for the performers, it's much more. For some of them, performing is a childhood wish come true.

Hunter Dyer, a motorcyclist from Pipersville Pennsylvania, said, "It's been a dream of mine

since I was little, so it's honestly pretty fun."

However, behind all the excitement, there's much more to the job than what the fans can see.

Cody Holman, a monster truck driver from Dayton, Ohio, said, "Hardest part is making sure you make all your passes because I mean it's a piece of machinery, so you can have problems in the middle of the show that you need to get resolved quickly before you make your next pass."

Passes are the different rounds a monster truck driver makes during the show. In the different Passes the drivers perform events like racing, stunting and more.

However, keeping the truck running throughout the show isn't the only conflict for the drivers on the track.

Polinsky said one of the most difficult things is that "Some of them [stunts] are pretty technical, and short run out and short run ins, but we make the most of it and try and send it out everytime."

Not only does the job involve technical difficulties, but it also requires drivers to put themselves in physical danger.

"I've had a broken wrist, got ten screws in there, got three anchors in my shoulder, I got three screws in my finger and two screws in my elbow," said Polinsky.

"Two broken wrists, bro-

ken thumbs, collapsed lung, broken scapula, ribs, but yeah it's all part of it," said Dyer.

Despite the risks, there are crews behind the scenes making sure the event runs smoothly and everything goes as planned.

It takes work from multiple teams to put on the show. Combined efforts from front-of-house crews, like ticket sellers and concession workers and back-of-house crews that handle the technical side behind the scenes, as well as union workers, operations staff and teams for video and audio get the show up and running.

Director of events at the CURE Insurance Arena, Giuliano Lerza, said these teams are "working in tandem... to make sure the show goes how it's expected to go."

However, much of this work begins long before the arena doors open to the public.

"So for a Hot Wheels show they start working on Thursday, they brought in their crushed cars, started painting the cars, and then for Friday just set up all their lighting, sound, video, making sure that was all good, it takes about 2 days and a half" said Lerza.

While the preparations for the event start way ahead of the actual performance day behind the scenes. The drivers themselves start their routine in the early morning of the show day.

"Show days we get up, try to get a little coffee and that's to get us going, and then we come out here and do some autographs for a bit and then we go out and send it," said Polinsky.

Princeton commuters weigh bus vs. train options to New York

By Ellen Vaknine
Community Reporter

On a weeknight after a long day in Manhattan, Lynn Docktor settles into a window seat on the Coach USA bus bound for Princeton. The lights dim. The aisle stays quiet.

"It's relaxing," Docktor says, adding, "There's no hubbub like the train station, you know, with a lot of people and noise."

For Docktor, the bus is not just transportation; it is an alternative to what many local commuters consider the default: NJ Transit's train service into Penn Station.

Though NJ Transit trains remain the default route into Manhattan for many Princeton-area riders, a number of commuters say the bus offers a quieter and less complicated alternative. Differences in travel time and service frequency, cost, parking convenience, ride comfort and arrival location in Manhattan shape how some locals choose between rail and road, with commuting patterns still adjusting after the pandemic.

NJ Transit offers more frequent service throughout the day, with as many as 40 trains on a weekday and 33 on the weekend, beginning much earlier in the morning and continuing until almost 1 a.m. Coach USA offers 18 buses on a weekday, beginning at 5 a.m. and ending at 10 p.m., and nine trips on a weekend, every two hours beginning at 6 a.m. and ending at 10 p.m.

Hamilton-area resident Leslie Bock rides both the train and bus and chooses her means of transport based on her evening's activity. Referring to the 10 p.m. de-

parture of the last bus, she says, "If you go to an evening show, unless it's an hour and a half show you're going to see, you might not make that last bus out of the city."

Travel times also vary. The bus ride takes about an hour and 40 minutes from Princeton to Port Authority. At peak commuting times, the train takes about an hour and seven minutes to Penn Station, including the Princeton "Dinky" to Princeton Junction, while off-peak trips can range from an hour and 20 minutes to as long as two hours.

According to the NJ Transit site, through March 15, 2026, passengers should allow additional time to accommodate train consolidations or cancellations due to Amtrak work on the new Portal North Bridge. Both the NJ Transit and Coach USA apps provide real-time tracking so that riders are alerted to delays or cancellations.

Princeton resident Zenaida Jacoby was once a regular rider on NJ Transit's Princeton-to-Manhattan service, but that changed several years ago when she and her husband discovered the service offered by Coach USA.

"My husband mentioned it," said Jacoby. "I don't know what made him look into it. I think he was just sick of the train. I guess having to drive over to Princeton Junction or Hamilton and standing out in the cold."

Hamilton resident Diane Carroll has concerns about the condition of NJ Transit trains.

"NJ Transit isn't getting any better," Carroll said. "Sometimes you can't even see out the windows, they're so deteriorated."

Ticket prices for the two options are similar. The current NJ



PHOTO | ELLEN VAKNINE

A New York commuter waits for the bus on Princeton's Nassau Street.

Transit one-way fare from Princeton Junction to New York is \$18.95 (\$21.00 from Princeton). A one-way Coach USA fare from Princeton is \$20.65. Both services offer 50% discounted child and senior fares.

The difference for many riders comes down to parking. Parking at Princeton Junction recently increased from \$6.00 to \$12.00 daily plus a \$1.75 processing fee. Riders who can walk to a bus stop or park nearby may find the bus less expensive overall.

The ease of parking is another reason that some riders prefer the bus.

"An advantage of the bus is the ease and lack of expense of parking the car," said Jack Byer of Newtown Borough, Pennsylvania. "And having the car waiting immediately right by the bus stop for me here in Princeton."

Arrival location in Manhattan can also influence the choice. Riders who take the bus arrive at Port Authority Bus Terminal, while NJ Transit trains arrive at Penn Station.

Byer said the difference in the stations can shape his preference.

"Arriving at a station with a train full of coaches of people? It's all congested. And trying to get to a narrow stairway or an escalator—which usually is not operating—in a dark, enclosed tunnel? None of that is avoided with the train. With the bus you have immediate access to the subway," Byer said.

Jacoby noted that perceptions about the bus terminal may still influence some riders.

"Apparently the Port Authority used to be quite sketchy," she said, adding, "I think it might be a holdover from what Port Authority used to be, so it's not an option to some people."

Destination in Manhattan can also play a role.

"For most of the things I'm interested in...If I'm doing things that are going to be lower on the west or east side, I might prefer to take the train," Byer said. "But if I'm doing things on the upper west side or around the Times Square

area, midtown, then the bus has an advantage."

Carroll said Penn Station often places her closer to where she needs to go.

"I prefer arriving into Penn Station rather than Port Authority as it's typically closer to where I'm heading, which is often downtown," she said.

Morris Docktor said he is comfortable navigating either terminal.

"We've never had a problem with either one," Docktor said. "You just have to get a little used to each one so you know where you're going."

Some riders say the bus remains less visible as an option.

"I think probably because they don't know anything about it," Carroll said. "I don't know if the bus advertises much."

According to NJ Transit's annual report for 2025, ridership across New Jersey has not fully returned to pre-pandemic levels. Materials prepared for the agency's recent fare adjustment hearings indicate overall ridership on the system has recovered to about 80 percent of what it was before COVID-19.

Coach driver Enil Perez said he has seen that shift firsthand on the Princeton route.

"Before the pandemic, there used to be a lot of people, but after the pandemic, it's nothing like it used to be," Perez said. "More people are working from home."

While changes are undeniable, old habits are hard to break.

Docktor said, "You grow up in Princeton and you never even think about taking the bus. You take the train."

African American Museum finally receives keys to new home

By **Jessie Shaffer**
Community Reporter

For years, volunteers from the First Baptist Church in Langhorne, Pennsylvania worked to share information about the history of Black experiences in the area, a project that would become the African American Museum of Bucks County (AAMBC). First in their own cars, and later in a donated van, they hauled exhibits, photographs and timelines to libraries, schools and community events throughout the region.

Now, the organization is preparing to move into a permanent home.

Bucks County officials turned over the keys to the restored Boone Farmhouse in Langhorne on Feb. 6, marking a major milestone for the grassroots museum, which was founded in 2012 and spent more than a decade operating as a traveling educational program focused on preserving and teaching local Black history.

Several of the original organizers didn't live to see their goal realized, including Harvey Spencer, the initiator of the proposal, Millard Mitchell, a local self-taught historian and tour guide of Bucks Underground Railroad stops, and former treasurer Alonso Salley.

Mechelle Connors, the AAMBC's former president, remembers Spencer's ambition, saying, "He was a collector of all things, and he really believed in Black history. There was a lot of history in Bucks County and Langhorne, but people didn't know because people were moving or dying."

Linda Salley still recalls the early struggles when her husband, Alonso, was treasurer. With laughter in her voice, she said, "We didn't have any money, and my husband kept saying, 'You keep spending my money, you keep spending my money.'" Even when using their own credit card, Salley said her husband was always supporting the effort.

Salley recalls taking Spencer and his wife to St. Mary's Hospital weekly for appointments during the last year of his life. As they traveled down 413 past an abandoned stone



PHOTO | JESSIE SHAFER

Linda Salley, African American Museum President speaks to board members and community volunteers at the Richardson House in Langhorne on Feb. 21

house at Boone Farmhouse, she said, "Every time he passed by, he would say [in his very strong voice], 'Sally, we need to get that building.'"

Salley remembers being in Quakertown with her whole team for an event and meeting up with Diane Ellis-Marseglia, county commissioner.

She said she looked to Marseglia for help, saying, "You see my people out there, in their 80s, late 70s, one in their 90s carrying things about?"

Marseglia understood why the project was important.

She said, "We needed to do something for African American history in Bucks County forever. We have almost nothing. There's some references to the Underground Railroad, and there's a Harriet Tubman statue in Bristol, but not much else."

Marseglia first helped the group obtain a county van. Later she enlisted the help of another county commissioner, Mike Fitzpatrick, and they worked to find a permanent location for the museum, knowing the organizers had Boone Farmhouse in mind.

At first they asked a Parks and Recreation director about the Route 413 location and were told, "There's nothing but vultures that can live in that place."

But Marseglia continued the effort, reaching out to the next director who agreed that, "Yes, it would cost some money but [Boone Farmhouse] could be redone."

Marseglia shared the news with Salley, and in 2020 Bucks County agreed to lease Boone Farmhouse and the 32-acre property dating back to 1716 to the African American Mu-

seum for \$1 a year for 30 years. Spencer's wishes had come true.

They broke ground in November 2022.

Pennsylvania state senator and longtime resident of Langhorne, Frank Farry, said, "I've been very conscious of the African American history here, locally, having grown up in Langhorne and going to Oliver Heckman with multigenerational families."

Farry had become an advocate for the project and says he surprised Linda Salley at the groundbreaking ceremony with major support.

"She did not know she was getting \$250,000" from the state for continued renovations, Farry says.

But delays hit almost immediately.

With a twelve month pro-

jected timeline, museum curators and volunteers were first slowed by the supply chain slowdown that followed the COVID-19 pandemic.

Opening dates were pushed back again and again.

Finally, on Feb. 6., almost 15 years since the program began, the keys were turned over from the county to the members of the AAMBC.

The museum's home on Route 413 in Langhorne is nearly ready for move-in, awaiting final interior finishing touches before exhibits are fully installed.

The farmhouse has been renovated to comply with ADA requirements for accessibility and has an indoor capacity of 60 people. The outdoor landscaping has been designed by Judith Stratton, an African American Penn State Master Gardener, and all of the plantings will come from local garden clubs.

Exhibition plans are extensive with seven rooms, four floors, and a gift shop. Murals adorn walls designed purposely to match themes and to meet visitor needs. They include information about slavery laws, the Great Migration, names and ages of people enslaved in Bucks County, and small doors that describe African American neighborhoods that existed.

Pat Mervine, museum volunteer and coordinator for the education committee said, "[The murals] are all low because they want kids to be able to really appreciate them."

The museum will house many treasures. According to Mervine these include "A 7-foot-by-4 foot bronze relief sculpture by African American artist and sculptor Selma Burke" and "a replica of the satchel that she (Harriet Tubman) carried and a compass and a lantern and an old antique pistol."

Linda Salley looks back on the commitment of the men with the original vision, saying, "This is the history that Harvey [Spencer] wanted to share with the young people, Harvey and Millard Mitchell. Their dream was to teach our children in Bucks County their history because there was no one teaching it."

Now their vision has a home.

Experimental film "Hale County" screens at Princeton Garden Theatre

By **Marcus Vik**
Community Reporter

The award-winning experimental documentary "Hale County This Morning, This Evening" by director RaMell Ross screened at the Princeton Garden Theatre on Feb. 25 as part of the venue's Black History Month programming in partnership with the Princeton YWCA.

The documentary follows two subjects in Hale County, Alabama, in the South's Black Belt region.

Daniel is a young Black man focused on playing basketball and the opportunities the sport can provide. He attends Selma University, plays on the school's basketball team and dreams of a career in the sport.

The other principal subject is a young Black man named Quincy, who is focused on raising a family with his partner Boosie. At the beginning of the film, Quincy and Boosie welcome their first son, Kyrie. Later Boosie gives birth to twins Karmen and Korbyn via caesarean section, with Quincy by her side. Tragically, the couple lose Korbyn to sudden infant death syndrome.

While depictions of Black people on film often dwell on tragedy, Ross' film takes a different approach. The College of New Jersey professor Samira Abdur-Rahman, Ph.D., who led the Q&A, called the film "a meditation." She said, "I think we've seen

a Black church service, right? I think we've seen Black people playing basketball."

Though only about a dozen people attended the 7 p.m. midweek showing, most of the audience stayed for the question-and-answer session afterward.

The Princeton YWCA's Equity and "Hale County" also eschews common narrative tools audiences expect in a documentary, including a narrator and traditional interviews, to compose a vignette of life for Black residents of Hale County, Alabama.

Instead, Ross draws from the discipline of photography, in which he earned a Master of Fine Arts from the Rhode Island School of Design. Nearly every frame in the 76-minute film seems artfully composed, enough to warrant being a framed photograph.

Ross is also a published writer, with pieces in Oxford American as well as The New York Times' Lens column.

In "Hale County," Ross uses intertitles — white text against a black screen — to organize the footage he selected from approximately 1,300 hours he shot, as Ross said in an interview with No Film School.

Mostly, these are questions: "What is the orbit of our dreaming?", "How do we not frame someone?" and "Whose child is this?"

The cost for the Garden Theatre to screen the film was a flat fee of \$250, paid to the film's distributor, according to Brendan Joyce, co-director of programming for the



PHOTO | MARCUS VIK

ABOVE: The Princeton YWCA's Equity and Outreach Coordinator Darlene Nawuridam, left, kicks off the Q&A led by TCNJ Professor Samira Abdur-Rahman, Ph.D., right. LEFT: Princeton Garden Theatre box office.

Garden and Renew Theaters, which manages the Garden.

Dr. Abdur-Rahman declined the honorarium usually offered by the YWCA for leading the discussion, the YW's director of mission advancement Brigitte Jean-Louis said and Abdur-Rahman confirmed.

Julia Mahony, director of educational programming for the Garden and Renew, said: "You're always taking a chance if you're doing a title that isn't as well known, but I still think it's just as important to take those chances, even if it's just a smaller group of people, but in general they're pretty successful."

"Hale County" is the fourth film the Princeton YWCA and Garden have presented together. The YW's Jean-Louis said: "It started in April

2023 with a showing of 'The Price of Silence,' which is a documentary about the often overlooked subject of enslaved people in New Jersey. 'We've really just grown from there,' Jean-Louis said.

Mahony said, "After 'The Price of Silence' was Spike Lee's 'Malcolm X.' And then last year we did a movie called 'Alma's Rainbow,' which is not as well known."

'Alma's Rainbow' is a celebrated coming-of-age tale released in 1994 from Black and Philadelphia-born filmmaker Ayoka Chenzira. During the conversation after the film, Jean-Louis said the next film presented by the partnership could be RaMell Ross' second film "Nickel Boys," a narrative feature film based on Colson Whitehead's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel.



PHOTO | MARCUS VIK

The Garden's Brendan Joyce said, "I think the success is based on the fact that we're collaborating with the YWCA, regardless of how many people come out, that's a partnership and collaboration we love to keep."

For those who missed the event, "Hale County" is currently available to watch via Kanopy, a streaming service available for free to anyone with a Mercer County library card. But watching the film with an audience of like-minded Mercer County residents is an experience that cannot be streamed.

Audience member Jacob Luckey of Lawrenceville, who has seen the film twice, said "I go to [The Garden's] website all the time, especially for stuff like this when they are showing special screenings for stuff I have either seen or wanted to see."

“Gaslight” delivers suspenseful revival at Kelsey Theatre

By **Maryanne Fiuza**
Reporter

Theater To Go's production of “Gaslight” premiered at Mercer's Kelsey Theatre from late January through early February. The play was directed by Ruth Markoe and is a stage adaptation of the 1944 film by the same name that starred Ingrid Bergman, Charles Boyer, and Joseph Cotten.

The story, set in Victorian London, is about a man who tries to convince his wife that she is insane in order to gain control of her estate and to recover valuables connected to a murder that he committed in their home ten years earlier.

Although the play deviates from the original 1944 film, the stage-adapted version captured the premise and intensity of the movie. “Gaslight” is an entertaining psychological thriller that unfolds with intense suspense.

Opening night on Jan. 30 was a wonderful experience even though the weather outside was frightful.

Despite the Victorian dialogue common to stories of this era, the play was gripping and held the audience's attention. One downside was that the plot was occasionally difficult to follow as the play didn't include some of the introductory elements and backstory that were in the film version.

“Gaslight” begins with Jack Manningham (played by Mark Violi) asking his wife, Bella (played by Kimberly Correll), to go to a play. As they prepare to leave, Jack discovers a painting missing and accuses Bella of moving it.

Bella denies it, but from that moment on, things keep disappearing. The gaslights on stage begin dimming and brightening on



Robert Brown and Kimberly Correll perform a tense parlor scene in Theatre to Go's “Gaslight.” PHOTO | MARYANNE FIUZA

their own, and Bella keeps hearing footsteps in the closed-off attic. Jack tells Bella that she is going crazy and probably needs to be sent to an insane asylum.

Kitty Getlick, the lighting designer for the show, praised how the director Ruth Markoe held the gripping narrative together.

One of the most important parts of “Gaslight” is the light and sound working hand-in-hand to make the show visually and auditorily appealing.

Eric Collins, a former Mercer student, has been working as the sound engineer at Kelsey

Theatre for more than ten years, ever since he graduated.

Collins explained that he studied the film carefully and applied what he learned in his Entertainment Technology class to transition into live sound work.

He shared that one of his biggest challenges was working on scenes where music played in the background, because he had to carefully decide what mood he wanted the music to create.

He said, “[I have to] kind of go out there and find songs that kind of match that vibe that I was going for. There's obviously a lot of

communication with the lighting department because it's ‘Gaslight.’”

Markoe said, “Our set designer [and] his crew were phenomenal.” She also expressed how important it was to bring these stories back to light years later, for generations new and old.

The set design for Gaslight effectively captured Victorian-era decor, from the detailed pictures on the walls, including one that was mysteriously missing, to the cleverly hidden Theater To Go mascot placed in plain sight.

Markoe pointed out a few of the Easter eggs. “There's a picture

of a dog on the stage. And that dog is Theater to Go's [the production company]'s mascot. His name is Rex. I found him...somebody was disposing of it... and I brought it home, and ever since then, he's been in every one of our shows,” she said.

She said, “The biggest challenge was that we lost a couple of three or four days of rehearsal because of the snow.”

The audience members cheered and laughed, and were on the edge of their seats. Many found the show shocking, as some of them didn't even know what the show was going to be about going in.

Madeline Makarowitz, a Mercer student from the audience supporting her friend who played the housemaid Nancy, said, “I didn't even know it was a movie before. So we heard, oh, it's a story about the origins of gaslighting, and that's all I knew going in.”

Makarowitz said further, “I thought it was amazing. It was really well done. I loved the lighting and the way it played into the story.”

Juan Diego Chico, another Mercer student, said, “I also enjoyed it too. I thought that a lot of the emotions were really raw and really good, especially the tension between the couple. I thought that their dynamic was really fun.”

Overall, “Gaslight” was a delightful show and a gripping classic psychological thriller. The cast and crew delivered strong performances, powerful tension, and impressive technical work. Theater to Go successfully honored the original story while making it engaging for today's audience.

“Generation Mel” exhibition showcases art professor's legacy



PHOTO | SCOTT TURNER



PHOTO | SCOTT TURNER

Artwork from the exhibition “Generation Mel” presented in The Gallery at MCCC in February. The pieces featured artwork both by and inspired by the beloved art professor.

By **Scott Turner**
Reporter

“Generation Mel,” an exhibition dedicated to painter and longtime MCCC professor Mel Leipzig, features artwork by several of his former students and is on display at MCCC's Art Gallery on the West Windsor Campus through February 27.

The exhibition highlights Leipzig's long career at Mercer County Community College and the impact he had on students over several decades, bringing together work from artists he taught throughout his time at the college.

Leipzig taught at MCCC for 45 years, working with students

both inside and outside the classroom.

Lucas Kelly, MCCC's gallery director and dean of Arts and Communication, discussed the exhibition and Leipzig's legacy. Kelly was also one of Leipzig's former students and colleagues.

Kelly said Leipzig “would run out of the classroom, come all the way back to his office, grab an art book, run all the way back to the painting studio across campus, and open it up just to show a student a picture, and in that picture, it might be just one little part of the painting that he wants to show. The black ribbon on Olympia's neck in Manet's Olympia, just to show how that black ribbon works in that painting.”

Leipzig's influence is reflected throughout the exhibition. According to Kelly, the Gallery at MCCC is booked out a couple of years in advance; however, when the show was presented to the staff as part of an organized series of exhibitions in celebration of Leipzig's 90th birthday, the gallery staff moved exhibitions to make “Generation Mel” happen.

Karolina Zbaski, gallery coordinator and professor of visual art and digital media arts, explained the exhibition's title.

“There are so many generations within this one exhibition. I mean, he [Leipzig] taught from the '70s, maybe the '60s, until, like, again, 2010, 2013. So a lot of influence, within the years of just artists building up their skills with Mel.”

Unlike other exhibitions at the gallery, “Generation Mel” was shaped directly by Leipzig before his passing.

Kelly said, “Mel actually selected the people who are in the show, from the 55 years that he taught here.”

Isabella Lentz, a student at Mercer and a staff member at the gallery, shared her perspective on Leipzig's legacy in the exhibition.

“I think it [the Exhibition] mainly shows his teachings in the students. Because I remember I looked at... the Instagram post for one of the paintings, Transition of the Martyr, and the painter, Khalilah Sabree, said that Mel taught her that a painting should invite you in. And when I was looking at the

paintings, I felt that sensation.”

Aileen Lutz, a student at Mercer and a staff member at the gallery, described learning about Leipzig through the exhibition.

“As a student who didn't know [Leipzig]... It's been very cool to learn little bits and pieces about him through the artwork as well as through people coming to the gallery.”

Through the exhibition, the collection of paintings reflects Leipzig's work as both a realist painter and a professor at MCCC.

Kelly said, “...To talk about, like, one generation or another generation, the way we say... Gen X, or Millennial, or Boomers, this kind of transcended all of that. And so Mel had somewhat created his own generation of painters.”

Social dancing offers connection in a lonely age

Old and young, skilled or brand new, dancing is bringing people together



PHOTO | IVONNE ROMAN

A Princeton University graduate student takes a lesson at the Salsa Club.

By Ivonne Roman
Community Reporter

"I wanted to dance and I always thought I had to have the boyfriend that wanted to dance and that never worked out," said Tracy Sullivan, a local graphic designer.

But Sullivan did end up dancing.

"I actually fell into it by accident," she said. "I was volunteering at my local animal shelter and we had a fundraiser at Joy to Dance, which is in Hillsborough. So that was my first introduction to it and I kind of liked it. At the time I was single. So I'm like, 'You know what? I'm gonna do it!'"

Getting started wasn't easy.

"I was so nervous. I was there thinking like I'm gonna be so out of place... I just felt very awkward. But as soon as I walked in there, I got hugs from everyone. I mean, they were so warm, so welcoming, they totally put me at ease. And they just became my family."

Across the Princeton area, social dance events are drawing students, retirees and working professionals onto the same dance floor. At a time when national studies warn of rising loneliness and declining face-to-face interaction, these gatherings have become rare spaces where people from different generations regularly meet in person.

Sergio Sotovando, 46, who has taught salsa with the Princeton Salsa Club since

2012, said, "I have students from the university and from the community. People of all ages come."

On the dance floor, generational and cultural differences quickly fade.

"You can see a 20-year-old dancing with someone who's 60, and both enjoying the music," Sotovando said. "Sometimes you're dancing with someone from China or Korea and everyone is singing along to Spanish music."

He also points to the mental challenge of learning choreography.

"I have students in their sixties who remember the steps we practiced the week before," he said. "It's great for memory."

In fact, studies have linked dance to cognitive and mental health benefits.

A 2024 systematic review published in the journal *Dance Research* found that dancing can improve psychological well-being and cognitive function while strengthening social connections.

Younger adults are seeking more opportunities for face-to-face connection as well. Those who grew up communicating largely online often report higher levels of social anxiety and fewer face-to-face interactions, according to a 2025 report by the Pew Research Center.

Vanessa Romero, 31, owner of VF Dance and Fitness Studio in Princeton and an instructor with the Princeton Bachata Club, said the structure of social dance classes helps make



Tracy Sullivan (center) dancing at the Princeton University Salsa Club.

PHOTO | IVONNE ROMAN



PHOTO | IVONNE ROMAN



PHOTO | IVONNE ROMAN

CENTER: Viva Dance Studio Haitian Band Anba Tonel played Caribbean and Afro-Latin music live. ABOVE: At the Center for Modern Aging in Princeton, Rolf Ryseck, 67, and Krista Cabrera, 28, dance together.

the environment welcoming.

"You don't need a partner. You can just come," she said. "Everyone starts somewhere."

For many participants, the experience gradually expands beyond the dance floor.

Tracy Sullivan now regularly attends Princeton Salsa Club events. She says "It's like micro-doses of getting to know people. You dance with someone for a short time, have a little moment, and then move on."

Music also helps build those connections.

"People from many

different backgrounds come together through the music and the dance," said Wioletta Wyszynski, 47, owner of Viva Dance Studio in Lawrenceville.

A recent social featured a Haitian band playing Caribbean and Afro-Latin rhythms while dancers filled the floor.

Studios across the region host regular events. South Street Salsa offers group classes and monthly socials at its Milltown and Marlboro locations.

Princeton University hosts weekly salsa classes on Tuesdays and bachata classes

on Thursdays, both open to the public.

Researchers say activities like social dancing can address challenges affecting different generations.

In Princeton, participants say those benefits play out every week on the dance floor.

For many dancers, the sense of connection is what keeps them coming back.

For Andrei Ursu, 22, who moved to Princeton last year, dancing became a way to build community.

"I started dancing so I could improve my social skills and meet other people. That's the main reason why I joined the Salsa Club in my university down in Florida. And then after that, it sort of paved the way into getting connections and really helped me with where I am in life right now."

He now attends the Princeton Bachata Club.

At the Center for Modern Aging, the nonprofit Central Jersey Dance organizes the monthly "Salsa Sensation" social on the first Saturday of each month.

Event manager Melissa Michalski said organizers have kept the admission price at \$15 to ensure the event remains accessible. Across the region, most socials cost between \$15 and \$25 and often include an hour of instruction before the dance begins.

Wendy Ford, a retiree who began as a student dancer and now teaches, said the structure of dance classes often makes social interaction easier.

"You start communicating about the steps and helping each other, and the conversation flows much easier," she said, adding, "Sometimes it's enjoyable to just quietly dance with somebody because the movements themselves are a conversation."

Mercer libraries lead in butterfly conservation

By Janet Rush
Community Reporter

During a recent Monarch butterfly tagging program at the Mercer County Library System in Lawrence, a young girl watched as a butterfly lifted from her hand and flew into the garden.

"This is the best day of my life," she told her mother.

For Christine Crawford, youth services director at the library, moments like that are the most rewarding part of the program.

Tagging the butterflies involves holding them carefully and affixing a tiny alphanumeric sticker to the underside of one wing.

According to Monarch Watch, the organization that supplies the tags and keeps track of the data, "Tagging helps answer questions about the origins of monarchs that reach Mexico, the timing and pace of the migration, mortality during the migration, and changes in geographic distribution."

Across Mercer County, libraries are becoming unlikely hubs for monarch butterfly conservation. At the Lawrence branch of the Mercer County Library System, staff and volunteers raise and tag monarch butterflies as part of a national migration tracking program while also building native pollinator gardens designed to support the declining species.

The effort, which began with a handful of milkweed plants outside the Lawrence library, is now expanding.

In the fall of 2021, Sharon Wang, adult programming librarian at MCLS, started the butterfly garden in front of the library with a few milkweed plants from her personal garden. In the spring of 2022, the Monarch Tag and Release program began.

Since that time, Kelly Rypkema, director of environmental education at Mercer County, brought another 1,500 native plants and grasses to MCLS.

The plants were chosen to be sustainable, lower maintenance, pollinator- and bird-friendly, and able to provide blossoms throughout three seasons of growth. Library staff and volunteers helped install them.

Wang says the reason for starting this program at MCLS is that the butterflies are a vulnerable species that makes them "a natural focus for our educational programming at the library."

She added, "Although the Monarch is the main focus of the program, Black Swallowtail, New Jersey's state butterfly, became part of the program as an opportunity to highlight another meaningful native species."

Some conservation groups caution that captive rearing of butterflies should be done carefully. The Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation notes that raising monarchs in captivity can "increase parasites that may spread to wild populations" and, when done repeatedly over multiple generations, may reduce genetic diversity.

At the same time, conservation organizations say restoring native habitat is one of the most effective ways communities can



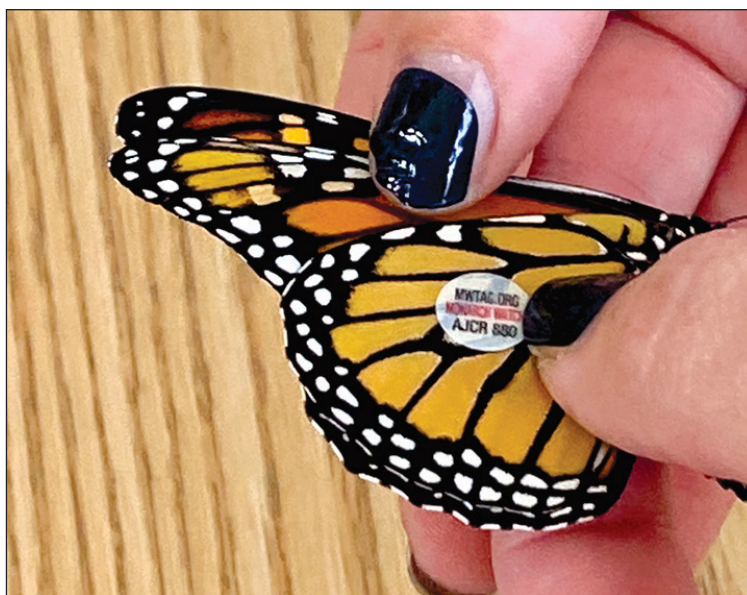
support monarch butterflies. The Monarch Joint Venture encourages planting milkweed and other native pollinator plants like those in the library gardens.

Because of its success, the butterfly garden at the Lawrence Library has become the model for other libraries in Mercer County to follow.

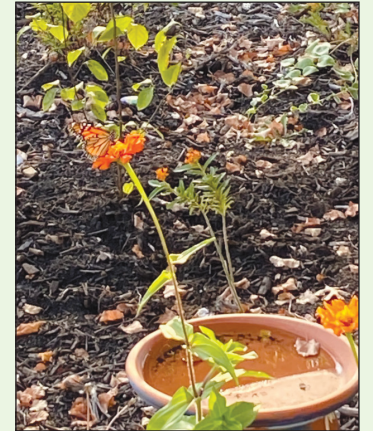
Rypkema has installed a native plant garden at the library branch in Hopewell and is in discussions with the Ewing, West Windsor, and Hickory Corner branches to do the same.

Mercer County Executive Dan Benson, along with the Mercer County Planning Department, has approved using funds from the county's open space trust fund to cover the cost of the native plant garden effort in recognition of this need, Rypkema says.

Rypkema said: "This was the first of a series of a grassroots initiative for native plant gardens that the County Executive gave me permission to install. As a first step, we're starting with some of the county libraries because they're community hubs, and it seemed to make a lot of sense to start there."



TOP: Librarian Sharon Wang originally began the Lawrence Library's butterfly program with a few milkweed plants from her house. Now the program is spreading to libraries throughout the county system. BOTTOM: A Monarch Watch data tag is safely affixed to a butterfly's wing. Tagging the butterflies involves holding them carefully and affixing a tiny alphanumeric sticker to the underside of one wing. PHOTOS | Janet Rush



How milkweed helps butterflies

Milkweed plays a critical role in the monarch butterfly's life cycle. Monarch caterpillars feed exclusively on milkweed leaves, making the plant essential for the species to reproduce and survive, according to the National Wildlife Federation.

Adult monarchs lay their eggs on milkweed plants. When the eggs hatch, the caterpillars rely on the leaves as their only food source before forming a chrysalis and eventually emerging as butterflies, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Because milkweed has declined across much of North America due to development, herbicide use, and changes in land management, conservation groups encourage individuals and communities to plant native milkweed varieties to help support monarch populations, according to the Monarch Joint Venture, a national monarch conservation partnership.

At the Mercer County Library System's Lawrence branch, milkweed is one of the key plants growing in the butterfly garden used for the monarch tagging program.

Library staff also distribute milkweed seed packets to visitors at the end of tagging events so families can plant their own pollinator-friendly gardens at home.

Planting milkweed and other native flowering plants can provide food and habitat not only for monarchs, but also for bees and other pollinators that play an important role in local ecosystems, according to the National Wildlife Federation.



TOP: Local butterfly enjoying milkweed. BOTTOM: Monarchs in a safe indoor habitat. PHOTOS | Janet Rush

Debate grows over ways to manage feral cat populations



By Tabitha Hilliard
Community Reporter

The morning sunlight is just beginning to peek through the trees onto the snow-covered terrain as an orange cat with a crooked tail quickly wends down a wooded path.

He is on a mission.

Ahead lies a plate of food, his lifeline in the frozen months.

An unknown caregiver uses a trail camera to track his eating schedule, making it easier to determine the best time of day to set a humane trap to catch him.

As Crooked Tail eats in solitude, across town, more cats begin arriving at People for Animals (PFA) in Robbinsville, New Jersey. This “super clinic” provides low-cost spay and neuter surgeries and vaccine services. The small clinic is bustling with activity. Ten cats are awaiting surgery, lined up in the hallway.

Kevin Moore, executive director of PFA, said, “We do about 24,000 cat spays and neuters a year, across the organization.”

He continued, “In addition to that volume of spay and neuter, we also have what we call wellness services, that’s really like a vaccine clinic where we do vaccines and basic preventative care, and some limited sick [care], if we can, and we probably see another, I would say about 16,000 animals that way. So, every year, we’re treating, be it through surgery or preventative care, like 40,000 animals a year.”

Many of these are free-roaming cats that are trapped, neutered, vaccinated for rabies, ear-tipped and returned in a practice commonly referred to as trap-neuter-return (TNR).

PFA does not have the personnel to trap cats themselves. Instead, caregivers and trappers



PHOTOS | TABITHA HILLIARD

LEFT: Crooked Tail finds food from a stranger left on a snowy trail. RIGHT: A feral cat that has been trapped and transported to be neutered before release.

can rent a trap from PFA for a small deposit, which they get back when the trap is returned. PFA will provide additional care if it’s needed for trapped cats.

“If a tail amputation is needed, or an eye needs to be removed, or whatever you can think of, we’re going to help those cats out,” Moore said.

When Elaine Bigelow, a six-year resident of Cream Ridge and longtime trapper, initially began the practice, she had concerns about the “return” portion of TNR.

Bigelow said, “Back then I was like, ‘Oh, these cats don’t want to stay out there, they want a nice warm bed.’”

Now Bigelow funds spay and neuter surgeries for local residents who cannot afford to pay. And in terms of the ethics of TNR, her opinion has completely shifted.

“As long as [the cats] have food, water, and shelter, they’re fine,” she said.

Other residents in the area have differing opinions. Larry Chiaravalle, a resident and busi-

ness owner in Cream Ridge, believes in trap-neuter-adoption (TNA), an alternative to TNR.

“If you can get [the cats] indoors, I would strongly prefer that as the methodology,” Chiaravalle said. “I think it’s better for the entire ecosystem.”

Grant Sizemore, director of invasive species programs for the American Bird Conservancy, agrees that outdoor cats are problematic.

“Sterilized or not, those cats cause harm in the environment,” Sizemore said. “Outdoor cats are among the world’s most harmful invasive species and have contributed to the extinction of 63 species worldwide. In the United States alone, they are estimated to kill about 2.4 billion birds every year.”

In a similar take to Chiaravalle, Sizemore believes the best method involves the removal of stray and feral cats from the landscape, and providing them with the opportunity for adoption or placement in a long-term facility.

“If all other opportunities are unavailable, then euthanasia, but under no circumstances should they be re-abandoned back to the outdoors,” Sizemore said.

Moore disagrees with the practice of trapping and killing.

“Trap and kill just doesn’t work. It’s never solved the problem,” he said. “Besides being unfair and showing a lack of reverence for life, in my opinion, it’s not effective.”

Many municipalities lack a TNR program to help cats like Crooked Tail, placing the financial burden of TNR on residents. PFA charges \$90 for a TNR procedure as opposed to its standard \$130 for domestic cats.

Recent efforts have been made to try and alleviate the expense of TNR for New Jersey residents, such as the Compassion for Community Cats Law (Bill A3635), reintroduced in February 2024.

“This bill will open [resources] up to people on government assistance who are trying to do the right thing, and trap com-

munity cats and fix them, who are currently paying out of their own pocket in this tough economy,” Moore said.

When municipalities lack TNR programs, clinics like PFA provide low-cost veterinary services for residents seeking TNR or other care for community cats.

At a Feb. 10 town hall meeting in Howell, residents described finding dead or injured kittens during recent near-zero temperatures. Several speakers argued that earlier spay-and-neuter efforts might have prevented the animals from being born outdoors.

For caregivers and trappers, TNR reduces the number of kittens born into conditions like the winter Crooked Tail recently endured. Soon, he too will be unable to contribute to the community cat population.

Moore said, “Some people have a tendency to view these cats as pests, but they’re just trying to survive in the situation they were put in.”

Ignored sick kitten at center of complaint against Animal Control

By Tabitha Hilliard
Community Reporter

Western Monmouth Animal Control is facing criticism after a resident’s emergency call about a sick kitten on Feb. 3 did not result in an in-person response, according to a resident who raised the issue at the Manalapan Township meeting on Feb. 25.

Andrea Burica, a longtime feline advocate and volunteer with Rescue Ridge, a nonprofit animal welfare organization, spoke up at the meeting. She said that a resident had discovered an ailing kitten on his property, saying “This kitten’s eyes were encrusted shut, the nasal airway was completely covered with mucus and she was frozen into the snow on the ground.”

Burica said that Western Animal Control did not come and that they told the caller “they would not be responding to the call due

to the fact that people living on his block feed the feral cats.”

Burica said after the meeting, “They responded by calling the person back. They did not respond to the scene as they should have. The law is, you have to pick up a sick or injured animal.”

Bella Kireyeva, another Manalapan resident, says she too has had interactions with Western Monmouth Animal Control when neighbors called them with complaints.

“I have had them come to my house for cats, for [my] feeding the cats,” Kireyeva said.

Now, she says of her neighbors, “they know me, and they stopped complaining about me.”

Kireyeva traps, neuters and releases the cats she cares for and said she wishes the township had a trap-neuter-return (TNR) program to help alleviate the expense.

Western Monmouth Animal Control previously provided



Manalapan Township Mayor-Committeeman Jack McNaboe, talking to Executive Director of Garden City Animal Rescue Center Brian Becker, at Feb. 25 Manalapan Township meeting attended by animal welfare advocates.



PHOTOS | TABITHA HILLIARD

animal control services to Freehold Borough until that relationship ended in 2023.

At the time, Freehold residents complained to the council that the agency was not responding in person to calls that residents believed warranted on-site visits, according to Annette Jordan, a councilwoman in Freehold Township.

Jordan said, “...a group

of residents [came] to the council about concerns about our animal control services, and we listened, and you know, we took action, and so we’ve switched over to Monmouth County SPCA and instituted our TNR program, and it’s been working quite well.”

Rescue Ridge, the organization that helped with the kitten in the Feb. 3 incident, is a central New

Jersey animal rescue that operates as a nonprofit and is run entirely by volunteers.

Jordan added, “When residents come and have a concern or a challenge, it’s really beneficial for the elected officials to listen to them.”

Western Monmouth Animal Control did not respond to multiple requests for comment.



Squinkies & mini collectibles
2010-2013



Silly Bandz
2010-2012



Nintendo 3DS
2011-2016



Hello Kitty plush
2000-2015

Cool moves fast

By **Domenica Gamero**
Managing Editor

For Marcos Junior Zayas, a second-year theater major, the memory of trend-chasing starts on the playground.

"If you had Silly Bandz, you was the coolest kid in kindergarten," Zayas recalled with a laugh. "You had the light-up Skechers and the Spider-Man sneakers. You're the coolest kid in school."

But as Zayas has grown, the "cool factor" has moved from the playground to a digital feed. The viral items are no longer rubber bands or fidget spinners, but a \$50 water bottle or a viral designer charm.

"It depends on how great the promotion is and what everybody likes," Zayas said. "Social media is always the first place... whatever catches the eye."

At Mercer, this hyper-accelerated cycle of consumption is becoming more common among students surveyed. In a VOICE survey of 40 students conducted in person on campus, nearly half said they forget trends within a month, while 73 percent cited TikTok and 53 percent Instagram as primary sources, and 68 percent said they still remember older trends like fidget spinners.

Edward Avery-Natale, a sociology professor at Mercer, said that while the "teenager"

emerged as a consumer, it then spread through word of mouth and a number of media channels.

"Trends then become more long-lasting," he explained. Today, that's what you saw yesterday, I'm going to see tomorrow... then that's hundred years really adds up."

The trend cycle is also those chasing the latest fad, he said.

Celia Carver, a sociology student and a 9-year-old, said she feels the pressure. "Young people on social media and friends just want to have what everyone else has."

Professor Avery-Natale said this trend-based consumption is becoming more common as signaling devices, say, like the 'cool kids,' you need a resource that displays that. He warns that today's market of students follow influencers and feel that "parasocial" feeling that they know them.

"When your friend is promoting a brand, it feels like you're promoting it," Avery-Natale said. "It's not just about the product, it's about the person."





Pokémon cards + Go
2016-2022



Nerf blasters
2010-2018



Beyblades (Burst)
2016-2020

ster and costs more

group in the 1950s, trends
word-of-mouth and a limited
channels.
had to spread slower...
ing trends," Prof. Avery-Natale
speed has shifted. "What I
g to see another trend tomor-
reds of dollars a year... that

le creates a divide between
trends and those footing the

re, a parent of both a Mercer
d, views this cycle as social
e buy things mostly for what
s sell them," she said. "They
everyone else has."
ry-Natale points to the
"cultural capital" to explain
merism. He describes trends
ving, "If you want to be one
ed to gain access to the
hat capital." However, he
cting is "insidious." Because
cers daily, they develop a
t they are friends.
avorite YouTuber is wear-
your friend is doing it," Prof.
more powerful than a TV

ad because you don't notice you're being sold
something."

For students at a community college,
where many balance tight budgets, this cycle
has a high cost. Eri Stenger, a second-year Edu-
cation major, points out that microtrends often
ignore the financial reality of those on a budget.

"People who are struggling to eat
are not going to be like, 'I need a Labubu right
now,'" Stenger said.
For some students, that pressure competes with
financial priorities.

Marcos Zayas agrees, valuing sub-
stance over hype. "It's gotta be something that's
gonna make my life worthwhile," Zayas said,
adding, "Man, I'll probably get a better apart-
ment, a better house. [...] Something beneficial,
something that's going to benefit me through
life."

As students weigh those tradeoffs,
the pressure to keep up may not carry the same
weight it once did.

"The people around you are not nec-
essarily going to like or hate you based on what
sweatshirt you're wearing," said Prof. Avery-
Natale.



Owala and Stanley Cups
2019-present



Long-running quoits league still going despite challenges

By Scott Turner
Reporter

The clang of steel quoits echoes through the room, followed by jokes, laughter and the occasional whistle. One moment, players are dead focused on their throws, and the next, those same players are laughing with one another, taking sips of their drinks. The score is tied, and both teams continue playing while talking and laughing between throws.

For nearly a century, the Mercer County Church Steel Quoit League has brought players together each week in Ewing, preserving a tradition that dates back generations. However, the league is shrinking, with fewer younger players joining and longtime members concerned about its future.

The league, founded in 1933, was described as possibly the only steel quoit league in the country in the 1974 New York Times article "Quoits Rings a Bell" by Jay Spearcy, and it continues to play every Monday at Ewing Presbyterian Church.

For nearly a century, the league has preserved community and tradition every year, with the only interruption during World War II.

According to the 2015 QuoitsUSA article "History of Trenton-Style Quoits," quoits dates back further than the traditional game of horseshoes and originated in Greco-Roman times.

The objective is to throw a steel ring, weighing about 2½ pounds, around a steel stake, or hub. Standard games usually go up to 21 or 25 points, but matches held by the Mercer County Church Steel Quoit League go up to 31 points, with two points awarded for throwing the ring around the hub and one point for getting the



PHOTO | SCOTT TURNER

John Maloney (left) and Mike Klidzia (right) are veteran quoits players in the Mercer County Church Steel Quoit League that has a history running back to the 1930s and is still going strong despite challenges in recruiting new players.

ring closest to the hub.

Matches are typically played one-on-one or in teams of two to four players and last around 20 minutes.

For many players, however, steel quoits is more than a sport with a long history; it's a game some of them grew up with.

Ron Towne, a player in the league, said he started young.

"That's all we've known as kids - there was always quoits in the backyard. So ever since I could pick up a quoit, I had a pit in the backyard, and I couldn't reach it, and then eventually, you know, you get older, you can reach. And then we play at parties, picnics, everywhere."

While growing up with quoits is what brought players into the league, it is not what primarily keeps them coming back.

Nick Lukasewycz, a casual participant in the league, said, "It's a camaraderie that goes on... People enjoy the back-and-forth and a little ball busting... But for every one idiot, there's twenty really, really good people, and I

think that's basically what gets people coming back."

Despite that sense of camaraderie, it is not enough to fill the gaps left by younger players.

When asked about the past 50 years of the league's growth, Jerry Golden, the oldest member of the league with 53 years of experience, said, "Nah, it's decreasing. We had... 16, 18 teams at one time... It had maybe... a hundred players total."

Golden said, "But it's, but as the people get older, it's harder to get younger people to play because when they start to play, they're not scoring points. It takes a long time, and they get frustrated, and they quit. So it's hard to get... That's why we're down to four teams now, out of roughly 16 or 18 teams we used to have."

According to John Maloney, president of the Mercer County Church Steel Quoit League, as of March 3, 2026, the league has 38 active players.

However, this number isn't increasing, largely due to the



PHOTO | SCOTT TURNER

Bill Scheidell (right) focuses, preparing to throw a quoit around a stake. The local quoits league players compete to a score of 31. Throwing a ring around the hub is two. The ring closes to the hub is one point.

lack of younger players.

When asked about where he sees the league in 10 years, Maloney said, "I think it's [going to be] probably about the same. We're trying to get some younger guys involved. Younger players."

Golden agreed that recruiting younger players would be essential for the league's future.

Golden said, "Yeah. Well, gosh, yes. Just so the, the, the game doesn't die off... If young people don't continue on to play and learn the game, it, it dies off."

This concern is not new.

As far back as 1974, the New York Times article "Quoits Rings a Bell" noted that "Today, Trenton may have the only steel quoit league in the country... Most

of the players are in their fifties and sixties and there is concern that the game might soon die."

Games are competitive, but they are also about camaraderie.

It is less about the outcome of the games and more about the time spent together. That strong bond between players and the tradition passed down through generations has kept the Mercer County Church Steel Quoit League active for nearly a century.

When asked about what separates steel quoits from other sports, Towne said, "You can hang out and throw some quoits and hold a beer. You can't do that in regular sports."

At Princeton ping pong Olympians train next generation of pros

By Helen Gu
Community Reporter

Last year, Ryan He, a local eighth grader, went to summer camp in China, an immersive training camp for ping pong.

Six months later he competed in a ping pong tournament at Princeton Pong and won against a field of adult players.

His strategy, he says, is to "try to make them move around because it's harder for them!"

Asked what contributes most to success in table tennis, he says, "my coach."

That would be three-time Olympian David Zhuang, head coach at Princeton Pong, an elite table tennis facility on Alexander Road in Princeton.

Princeton Pong is also the origin point for Major League Table Tennis (MLTT), the country's first professional league for the sport, which is helping give young players like He opportunities previously only available to students in other countries.

Zhuang, He's coach, remembers when he first arrived in the United States as a professional player. Opportunities for elite training were limited, and maintaining a highly competitive level was difficult.

Koyo Kanamitsu, a star player for the Princeton Revolution and a coach at Princeton Pong, who was ranked No. 1 in the world in the under-21 category in 2019, had the same problem.

Kanamitsu initially learned to play table tennis in China and then continued in Japan from the time he was 13 years old. He says it would have been "impossible" to rise to No. 1 in the under-21 world rankings if he had grown up in the U.S.

But the MLTT is growing fast. In addition to the Princeton Revolution, there are teams such as the New York Slice, the Atlanta Blazers, the Bay Area Blasters and the Florida Crocs. The league has East and West Coast divisions.

Princeton Pong and Major League Table Tennis (MLTT), America's first professional table tennis league, were both founded by local software entrepreneur and table tennis enthusiast Flint Lane in 2014 and 2023, respectively.

Asked to predict the league's future, Andre Liu, one of the Princeton Revolution's co-owners and a Princeton University alumnus, says that he thinks MLTT may one day become the No. 1 table tennis league in the world.

Whether or not that will happen, expansion is certainly un-

derway. Liu says the organization is planning to open a second Princeton Pong facility between early and mid-2028.

"The new club site will be 35,000 to 40,000 square feet, with 30 to 40 tables, locker rooms, and even individual working units for parents waiting for their children," Liu says.

Princeton Pong currently has 14 professional tables.

As the club grows alongside the professional league, its day-to-day operations have also expanded to serve a growing local membership.

Ben Rosenberg, Princeton Pong's general manager, says they have more than 250 members. Having worked there for 10 years, Rosenberg says he has dealt with countless issues facing the club while witnessing its continued growth.

The management team has developed strategies for building memberships and is currently launching several incentives, including weekday memberships and medical insurance coverage for seniors over 65.

While the solid skills foundation they built in China and Japan enabled them to become elite athletes, both Zhuang and Kanamitsu agree that the current



PHOTO | HELEN GU

Local table tennis star Ryan He moves in a whirl of energy at his training center, Princeton Pong.

table tennis environment in the U.S. is much better than it used to be, especially with the launch of Princeton Pong and MLTT and more elite players joining.

Zhuang and Kanamitsu acknowledge young players in the U.S. today cannot invest the same amount of time in training as their coaches did when they were teenagers. Zhuang says he is proud that many of his students, some of whom have gone on to Ivy League schools, gained opportunities be-

cause of table tennis, even if they do not become professional athletes.

As Zhuang says, "At least we offer one platform for the students."

While Ryan He says he hopes to go back to China to train more this summer, he will definitely come back in the fall to Princeton Pong and his coach.

"Winning a tournament is always fun and makes me feel good all the time," He says.

Behind the scenes as local 5K race season begins



PHOTO | JULIA HEINRICH

At the start of the Princeton 5k on March 21, 2026. The early season race raises funds for the Princeton High School Track and Cross Country teams. Jonathan Sewing (right) won the race in the men's division.

By Julia Heinrich
Community Reporter

Every March when Tara Wildszewski tightens up her sneakers and prepares to head out into the crisp air for the 5K run, she thinks of her son, Malcolm. He was just two when he died of sudden unexplained death in childhood (SUDC) in May 2020, but the ache she feels for his loss remains as fresh as the day it happened.

She and her wife, Rev. Kimberly Wildszewski, established the run in his honor and to raise funds for SUDC research.

The course starts at the Pennington Montessori School and winds through residential streets. Along the route, runners will see a sign that reads, "Smile Like Malcolm — You'll Run Faster." Its effect, Malcolm's parents say, is simple.

"It makes people smile and pick up their pace," Wildszewski says.

Across the greater Princeton area, nonprofit-hosted 5Ks are preparing to line up once again as race season gets underway. From memorial runs to trail fundraisers and free weekly gatherings, these events support a range of local causes. What participants rarely see is the network of volunteers, permits and partnerships that keeps them running year after year.

Organizational models vary. Some groups partner with organizations that provide turnkey support, such as SUDC for Miles for Malcolm or Run the Vineyards for the Hopewell Valley Vineyards Wine Run 5K. Others, such as HomeFront, Good Grief and LHT, use internal resources as they aim for large turnouts to sustain long-term programming.

Volunteers are indispensable for many of these events and benefit likewise, whether they are earning service credit, building résumés or simply showing up to help.

Miles for Malcolm represents one model for a fundraising run, where the Wildszewski family transformed personal loss during the pandemic into a meaningful



PHOTO | JULIA HEINRICH

Mia Terranova first place women's finisher crossed the line at the Princeton 5k on March 21.

annual tradition honoring Malcolm.

"We immediately started imagining ways to honor him ... because both of us are runners, a run felt natural," Tara said.

The SUDC Foundation receives 100% of proceeds and uses its resources to oversee all aspects of the event. Local businesses help cover remaining costs. The Wildszewskis handle certain expenses, including T-shirts, kids' activities and police road closures. Volunteers, including physical therapists leading warmups, School of Rock musicians and teachers from Malcolm's school, staff the event.

When weather worries arise, Tara reassures Kimberly.

"Remember why you're doing it. Even if 10 people show up, it will still be beautiful."

Building on this model of transforming personal stories to community action, HomeFront's



PHOTO | JULIA HEINRICH

Information about the Complete the Loop 5K is posted at Rosedale Park where the race begins.

annual run amplifies its mission of supporting families in need.

"It's incredibly complex to put together," development director Cassie Jaeger said. She named "police, EMS, permits, port-a-potties, signage, timing" as core logistics.

Participants can also form teams to raise additional funds for HomeFront's services. The event features a 5K, a 1-mile walk and a preschool pumpkin dash. Children's activities and sponsor tables round out the morning. School of Rock, a music school neighboring HomeFront's Lawrenceville center, plays at the start line.

Jaeger says this "makes it a fun starting line." She continues, "Success isn't just the dollars raised — it's returning participants, new volunteers and partnerships that continue after race day."

While HomeFront addresses essential needs like food, shelter and clothing, another organization supports families in a different way. Good Grief meets emotional needs through peer support groups, grief education and community advocacy. "Physical activity is one of the good ways to deal with strong emotions," executive director Christian Heiss said. The Good Grief 5K offers grieving families an additional space beyond support groups to spend time together.

Participants may form

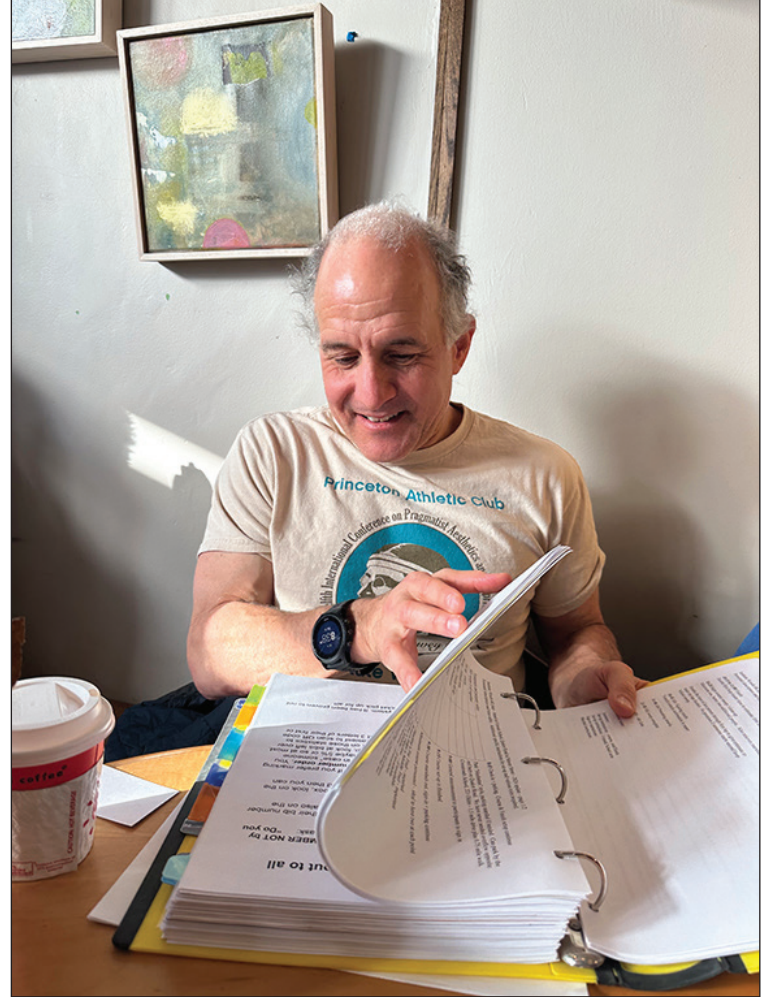


PHOTO | JULIA HEINRICH

Logistics are central to event planning. Lawren Smithline reviews plans for the Institute Woods 6K.

family or memorial teams, with optional donations supporting Good Grief's free programs. Children's events are especially loved.

"The 2-year-olds only have to run the width of this room — and then they get a medal. They think they're running five miles," development manager Christine Molino said, laughing.

Good Grief's Princeton race draws inspiration from its Morristown 5K, which attracts nearly 1,000 participants.

"Some people have never heard of Good Grief, and that's the first way they discover us," Heiss said.

Shifting from supporting families to supporting shared outdoor spaces is the Lawrence Hopewell Trail (LHT) 5K, "Complete the Loop." The race draws on Rosedale Park's extensive experience of hosting active outdoor events. The event includes a DJ, partner tables, a 1-mile fun run and a 5K course that runs along Rosedale Lake and into Mercer Meadows in Pennington.

"The LHT loop construction is funded through other sources," operations manager Claire Wille said. "This 5K helps sustain our staff, our year-round activities and our relationships with our property partners." She added, "We want runners to leave excited about the future of the LHT."

At the opposite end of the spectrum of race models, the Institute Woods 6K focuses on the running experience itself rather than fundraising.

"The main objective is the activity, not raising money for another cause," race director Lawren Smithline said.

He added that "the legal entity responsible is Princeton Athletic Club, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization set up for the purpose."

He assures the Institute for Advanced Study neighbors that the 6K will be nondisruptive, similar to a piano recital:

"There is some applause at the beginning; then the runners take off ... it is so quiet you could hear a pin drop ... then applause at the end ... and everyone goes home."

High school sports teams often volunteer, and PAC donates from the proceeds to their booster clubs.

In contrast to this minimalist approach, another model pairs commercial partners with nonprofits.

That occurred when Wine Run 5K approached Hopewell Valley Vineyards (HVV) to host a fundraiser benefiting their charity, which is Pennington Adult Living Services (PALS). PALS was founded by vineyard owners Sergio and Violetta Neri and Svein Hansen, a specialist in developmental disabilities. HVV provides the venue and leaves the donation logistics between PALS and Wine Run 5K.

Neri highlighted one PALS participant, Jack.

"He's a savant. Tell him your date of birth and he'll tell you what day it was," she said.

She explained that PALS serves more than 50 families. "We call them participants because they take part in a program that gives them space, grace, ability, understanding."

Across these events, organizers say races become more than fundraisers. They honor families, highlight open spaces and help local traditions endure.

Before Malcolm's run begins, toddlers take part in a brief fun run, some dressed as inflatable Pikachu or Baby Sharks. Afterward, children and spectators are entertained by activities such as face painting, balloon artists and games.

For Malcolm's family these moments capture what they hope the event represents.

"Hearing his name called out by hundreds of voices is life-giving ... it pulls him into the present," Kimberly Wildszewski said.

Ice harvesting on a frozen morning

Crowds come to Howell Living History Farm to learn old skills



Visitors learned to cut through 10-inch-thick ice. PHOTO | LOIS VEBER-ALTMAN



Volunteers used prongs and rope to pull an ice block up the ramp to the icehouse.

PHOTO | LOIS VEBER-ALTMAN

By Lois Veber-Altman
Community Reporter

More than 300 visitors braved single-digit temperatures to attend Howell Living History Farm's annual ice harvest on Jan. 31, the site's first public event after its winter break.

Howell Farm in Hopewell Township is a working farm where visitors experience life as it was at the turn of the 20th century. Its educational programs rotate with the agricultural seasons, and in the days before electricity, ice from its pond was crucial for food preservation.

Most people in the 1800s had an "icebox" for preserving food. The ice that "powered" it had to be harvested from lakes and ponds during winter and stored for year-round use.

Ice harvesting was a multi-million dollar industry in the 1800s. According to historical records, this farm was known as the "ice farm" because its pond yielded enough ice for its own needs and for the surrounding area.

Pete Watson, farm director, says that farmers who worked this property packed their milk cans in ice for the train ride to markets along the Delaware Canal. The Farm's mid-1800s icehouse is insulated to keep ice throughout the year, and on Saturday it got well stocked.

Out on the pond Saturday morning, Watson coached adults and children to use period ice harvesting equipment. Participants young and old applied themselves to tasks from long ago, things they had likely never heard of before.

Visitors quickly learned to use breaker bars, pikes and ice saws. The first steps involved scoring the surface into increasingly deeper grooves and sawing through 10 inches of ice.

Pulling up ice blocks came next, followed by sliding them across the pond to a ramp leading to the icehouse. Loading the ramp called for experienced guidance, and Kevin Watson, Pete Watson's son and assistant director, stepped in to secure ice blocks with rope. His spirited dog, Blue, encouraged every move.

Up at the icehouse, teams of farm hands and visitors hauled each block using ropes and pulleys. Once they positioned a block on the icehouse platform, they invited one



PHOTO | LOIS VEBER-ALTMAN

Pete Watson, farm director, coaches visitors in ice harvesting procedures with turn of the 20th century tools.

of the kids to push it into the underground cold storage cellar. By midday, that's where Pete Watson was layering tons of blocks with sawdust to keep them from freezing together.

Meanwhile above ground, visitors had options to participate in activities that demonstrated how ice was once essential to daily life and how it is still used at Howell Farm.

One option, ice cream making, is a crowd pleaser, even in cold weather. It didn't take much to lure people into the 1800s farmhouse to warm up by the wood-burning stove and learn how ice cream was made before refrigeration.

According to Jess Valenza, cow milker, sheep shearer, and cook, the mixture of chopped ice with rock salt lowers the temperature to freeze milk and cream into ice cream. She invited kids to participate by cranking an antique ice cream maker be-

fore she served up samples of the finished product.

Inside the farmhouse kitchen, visitors were able to see a vintage ice box. Kevin Watson said, "Everyone's heard of an icebox, but they don't really put it together what that means until they see one in the kitchen."

Another ice-themed activity featured the craft of ice candle making. Gail Trautz, a veteran Howell volunteer, helped visitors make their own. Here, ice chunks packed into a container mold create a random Swiss cheese shape once the wax sets and the ice melts.

One popular activity that visitors did not do on their own was drive the horse-drawn bobsled. This took a skilled teamster and visitors were lining up. Unlike an Olympic racing bobsled, the authentic 1800s model is basically a wooden wagon on sled runners, and the rides were



PHOTO | LOIS VEBER-ALTMAN

The ice harvest included family rides on an 1800s horse-drawn "bobsled" sleigh, ice candle dipping, and icecream churning activities.

a leisurely tour of wintery pastures dotted with stands of sugar maples.

People waiting for rides warmed their hands around a fire stoked with freshly chopped logs. Kids were free to "body sled" on the hard pack snow, build a snowman, and slide across the pond.

Visitor participation in rural lifeways and agricultural methods from the turn of the 20th century goes to the heart of what "living history" means at Howell Farm.

Larry Kidder, farm historian, said that living history here means that "this is a working farm, it's not an exhibition. It produces crops that are used." Much of what the Farm doesn't need for its programming is donated to local food banks.

The farm's programming follows the cycles of growing and harvesting. Spring events of maple sugaring and field and orchard preparation are followed by cultivating potatoes, corn, wheat, and apples. Meanwhile, farmhands are tending sheep, cows, chickens, pigs, horses, and bees, and inviting the public to join in during its free Saturday events.

Christine Madzy, programming coordinator, says, "We like all our visitors to get involved." She says that "kids learn best by doing" and "what we provide here is a hands-on experience you're not going to get elsewhere."

Interactive events like ice harvesting exemplify the vision of Inez Howell, who donated the pre-Revolutionary War farm to Mercer

County in 1974.

In her letter to the county, Inez Howell wrote: "I am offering the farm as a gift to Mercer County in memory of Charley [her husband]. To be used as a Living History Farm, where the way of living in its early days could not only be seen but actually tried by the public, especially children - milking a cow, gathering eggs in a homemade basket - helping to shear sheep, carding wool, spinning and weaving."

Experiences like these appear to be attracting increased attendance, and accommodating growth is one motivation for Mercer County's recent purchase of an adjacent 6-acre parcel to expand Howell Farm. In their announcement on Feb. 13, County officials said they consider the expansion as part of a new initiative to boost tourism in Mercer County.

Kevin Watson said the high turnout at this year's ice harvesting event "was a rare instance of extremely cold weather and some very intrepid visitors. It's an interesting enough program that piques everyone's interest enough that the cold doesn't bother them."

Marion Zukas of Princeton is a returning visitor who brought friends from Texas to the farm for horse-drawn rides on Valentine's Day.

"It's beautiful," she said. "Very historic. One of my friends is a teacher, and I thought she would appreciate the Farm with all its character. It's a learning experience. Something different."

The treacherous trudge to Trader Joe's

Route 1 bus stop leaves riders without safe path to shops

By **Trinidad Larrebourg**
Community Reporter

Along the Brunswick Pike, also known as Route 1, when the bus stops at Emmons Dr., the passengers step down directly onto grass or, most recently, up to twenty inches of snow. A sign marks the bus stop. No roof, no asphalt and no sidewalk connect it to the Shopping Square at West Windsor.

Around 40 yards stand between the passengers and the stores, but it's not an easy path.

Allen Haugh, who takes the bus regularly, said there are two options for making the trek to the stores.

The first option presents serious safety hazards.

"You can walk up along the highway to where cars come into the Trader Joe's plaza, and then you can walk... a couple hundred meters back to the Trader Joe's, but that's pretty inconvenient and then you have to walk alongside of the highway," Haugh said.

The second option presents even greater challenges.

One could walk in a straight line toward the shops, and Haugh acknowledges it is a shorter walk but says, "The problem with that is that it slopes downwards into what looks like a drainage or a sewage ditch, or something like that. And so it's filled with water at the bottom. And then you need to go all the way down, you need to hop over the ditch and then you need to climb back up the slope,

which is pretty inconvenient."

People do this with different levels of success and the risk of a fall is ever present.

Martin Palomo, a student and resident of Mercer County, said he has seen it happen.

"[It's] even worse during the snow. I have not fallen, but I've seen many people fall on their face, because there is no sidewalk. They just slip on snow," he said.

The absence of a sidewalk at Windsor Square is part of a broader challenge in Mercer County, where gaps in pedestrian infrastructure leave bus riders navigating unsafe terrain.

Advocates say addressing those gaps can be complicated, often requiring coordination across multiple jurisdictions.

Jerry Foster, a trustee of the West Windsor Bicycle and Pedestrian Alliance who has been in the organization since 2008, talked about their efforts as an organization. "Over the last 20 years, we've felt our way around, so to speak, and figured out how to at least get our desires known by the various jurisdictions that are responsible for getting things done here."

That is one of the bigger challenges they face, as changes require coordination across several layers of government and private actors.

"One of the interesting parts about our transportation system is that we have to work with private landowners...for any infrastructure we want on private land. We have to work with the township for local roads. We have to work



PHOTO | TRINIDAD LARREBOURE
Lacking a safe footpath, a bus rider trudges across a snowfield between Rt. 1 and Shopping Square at West Windsor.

with the county for county roads," Foster said.

"And we have to work with the state for anything that's a state road, like Route 1. And then in addition to all that, there's always New Jersey Transit...so we

have to work with them as well for things that are in their jurisdiction. So it gets a little complicated with all of that," he continued.

Within the tangle of different jurisdictions, there are organizations who seek to serve as

bridges, such as the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC).

The DVRPC coordinates infrastructure planning across nine counties including Mercer.

Connections 2050, the current transportation plan for the region, outlines how billions of dollars in transportation investments may be allocated through 2050.

There are opportunities for residents to weigh in on and inform themselves, as draft updates are periodically opened for public comment.

The DVRPC also offers workshops and online sessions with its Public Participation Task Force, which are promoted on their website and free to register.

When talking about infrastructure, pedestrian security or access to transit, changes aren't immediate, but things have improved according to Foster.

He said, "Over 20 years we have a lot of bike lanes. We have a lot of improved crossings. We have a lot of signage," she continues, "There are pedestrian crossings where you can push buttons that blink, [to] attract drivers' attention to the fact that somebody is using the crosswalk. So there's been a tremendous amount of improvement there."

But for some bus riders, the experience on the ground still feels different.

"It's kinda what you get for living in the suburbs, no sidewalks anywhere," Palomo said.

Food insecurity in Princeton draws growing community response

By **Ralitsa Zaharieva**
Community Reporter

On a biting cold, slushy December night, a longtime Princeton resident discovered a generous grocery delivery sitting in the dark on her porch. The bags were heavy with fresh produce, organic eggs, meats, and several gallons of Terhune Orchards cider. To her, it looked like a neighbor's holiday haul that had gone to the wrong address.

After a string of "not mine" responses from neighbors, she scanned a QR code on the packaging. It revealed an unexpected truth: the bags were actually a delivery from a local food pantry, destined for a house one block away.

The resident requested anonymity but shared an image of the misplaced delivery.

"I think of Princeton as a place where people live comfortably and prioritize a healthy diet," she said, adding, "It never occurred to me that someone on my street would be receiving food for free. The realization is jarring."

Food insecurity in Princeton is often obscured by its affluence. While U.S. Census data puts the poverty rate at 6.12%, housing costs remain a major pressure for many residents. Zillow estimates the average home value in Princeton at roughly \$946,000, and median rents exceed \$2,600. Overall living costs in the town are about 31 percent higher than the national average.

"The cost of housing is out of control," Jag Davies of the

Fair Share Housing Center told The Princetonian.

The average annual tax bill climbed to \$23,420, an issue Mayor Mark Freda addressed during an April 2025 budget hearing.

"If you have to leave the town because you cannot pay the taxes, at some point, you have to be realistic about everything," Freda told centraljersey.com.

As the need grows, the town's landscape is physically shifting. Small, wooden "mini food pantries" are now common fixtures next to churches, school hallways, and community centers.

The Princeton Mobile Food Pantry (PMFP) has emerged as a primary resource in the town's response to food insecurity, currently serving 300 homes and roughly 1,500 people out of a population of 30,756.

Debbie Bronfeld, the organization's new president, notes that the demand remains unrelenting and constant. In just the first week of February, seven new families joined their rolls.

Bronfeld says that past government shutdowns and benefit "cliffs" have left many families stranded.

"Socially conscious neighbors often reach out to help when the crisis hits the headlines," she says.

Volunteers step up to help: a blind volunteer bags day-old bagels from The Bagel Nook with her guide dog at her feet, a father and son work side-by-side in the storage room on evenings before deliveries. Stu-

dents from local schools complete their community service here, gaining awareness of the social gaps in town.

During the holidays, the focus shifts to "dignity on a plate" through partnerships with landmarks like Terhune Orchards for seasonal peaches and cider.

On the other end of town, in a driveway shared by the YWCA and YMCA, the Princeton Kindness Food Project works to address the same food insecurity problem by applying a different model known as "radical access." Inspired by community fridges in India, the project allows anyone to participate, even non-Princeton residents. No questions are asked.

"Anyone can come. If you show up hungry, you are fed," explains Lois Hilimire, a volunteer of three years.

Every Tuesday, residents line up there for fresh produce from Gravity Hill Farm and for meals prepared by the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen (TASK). The project even serves hot Indian meals once a month, a nod to the founder's heritage.

Neither organization claims to solve the root causes of poverty. However, by offering high-quality items not covered by SNAP—fresh produce, hygiene products, and baby care—they ensure members of the community aren't left behind when they are in need.

As Debbie Bronfeld puts it: "It's a little Band-Aid, but it's an important one. It offers nourishment, dignity, and the reassurance that someone cares."



PHOTO | RALITSA ZAHARIEVA
Bags misplaced on a Princeton resident's porch were actually food intended for a neighbor in need.

Local cafe creates jobs for workers with disabilities

Blue Bears highlights employment gaps and training efforts for locals with IDD

By Michael Rinelli
Community Reporter

One morning at Blue Bears Special Meals, CEO Céline Guillemot asked a young employee to clean the tables after the customers left. Minutes later, she spotted him seated beside a table of talking customers, waiting for them to finish and leave so he could do as he was asked.

She recalls that moment humorously.

"He was taking a break," Guillemot said. "We should have come with him and show him which tables he had to clean."

Moments like these capture the heart of Blue Bears, a French cafe on North Harrison Street in the Princeton Shopping Center. Founded in 2019 by a Rocky Hill family who adopted four children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), Blue Bears Special Meals is a nonprofit cafe designed to provide meaningful employment opportunities for people with disabilities after they finish school.

"They saw the need for employment opportunities for learning disabled individuals," Guillemot said, "and then they decided, because of their background, that it was going to be a cafe."

Today, 12 employees of varying abilities work for Blue Bears Special Meals, all earning New Jersey's minimum wage.

Training employees with disabilities, many of whom arrive without prior job skills, requires patience, Guillemot said.

"It's about 50% of the time just teaching," she said. It often comes with spilled coffee, broken plates and broken glasses.

But Guillemot said the investment pays off in small triumphs: a shy worker mastering table numbers after two years of practice; another proudly making her first sandwich alone; or a budding pastry chef preparing chocolate fondant and coconut macarons independently.

"Sometimes I have goosebumps," Guillemot said. "It's a question of time and patience and of having people helping them to learn."

Demand from families



PHOTO | MICHAEL RINELLI

Megan Cloyes prepares ingredients for sandwiches at Blue Bears in Princeton.

seeking employment for their children far exceeds available positions.

Guillemot said, "I have demands almost every day."

Stories like this stand out because they remain the exception. Employment opportunities for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities remain limited nationwide.

According to the Disability Employment Statistics from the U.S. Department of Labor, the unemployment rate for individuals without disabilities is about 3% to 4%. For individuals with physical or learning disabilities, the rate is almost double at 7.5% to 8.5%.

Changing that story requires more than willing employers; it also requires preparation. That preparation often starts in the classroom. At Mercer County Community College (MCCC), there are systems designed to help those who need this type of extra support.

Lisa Ward, a learning disability specialist for MCCC's Center for Accessibility Resources (CAR), spends her days guiding students diagnosed with IDD through college life. In what could be described as a typical day at CAR, she recalls a conversation she had with one freshman student.

"[The student] complained that they didn't understand why they had to write essays because they only had to write a

paragraph in high school," Ward said. "The student was very easily upset, and it was a very, very challenging first year."

CAR provides academic accommodations to roughly 7% of the college's enrollment, or about 600 MCCC students each semester. Many arrive with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 plan from high school and a pressing question: What happens now?

"The student drives the bus," Ward said. "The student is the first point of contact."

Students apply for accommodations, submit documentation of a diagnosed disability, and meet for a comprehensive intake that can last an hour or more. Together, CAR staff discuss what worked in high school and what might translate to college: extended test time, distraction-reduced testing, permission to record lectures, assistive technology, or a sign language interpreter.

"Every student is different," Ward said. "We meet them where they are."

For many students, the next step after college preparation is finding meaningful employment. Outside of the classroom, one of Mercer County's largest employers of people with disabilities is also doing just that. Local nonprofit organization The Arc Mercer works to bridge that gap between local employers and individuals with IDD.



PHOTO | MICHAEL RINELLI

Natasha Morris at Blue Bears in Princeton doing vegetable prep work.

The Arc Mercer works with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, and Down syndrome typically ages 18 to 21. Executive Director Steven Cook says this is a critical stage in life for individuals with IDD.

"Once you age out of school at 21, if you haven't had significant work experience, it doesn't take long in a window of a time where your habit is not to go to work," he said.

To prevent that habit from forming, The Arc Mercer provides vocational training in six areas — retail, food service, document scanning, landscaping, car detailing and janitorial services. Recently, the organization also added agriculture to the list after the purchase of a farm in Hopewell.

"Our goal is really to get them prepared to go into the community," Cook said. "We stay focused on those six career tracks because they're the ones we have found most people are interested in and we're good at placing them in."

The training coaches at The Arc Mercer will take course material and turn it into a training curriculum that meets the needs of individuals with IDD.

"Their method of learning is different, but their attention to detail can be incredible," Cook said.

The Arc Mercer has started several internal businesses where they employ individuals from their vocational training programs. Sometimes they are employed by The Arc Mercer itself, but are placed with a coach at a partnering business such as the food service organization at Rider University.

The ultimate goal of The Arc Mercer's program is to have the consumer leave the Arc Mercer nest and become a direct hire of the non-Arc business. Ward said the biggest barrier is often misconception.

"If employers knew it's really not as scary as they think," Ward said, noting that many workplace accommodations cost little or nothing, "it would be a better outcome for all."

Trent House series uses fabric and storytelling to explore history



PHOTO | NEISHA KELLY

"The Stories Fabrics Tell: An Illustrated History" was presented by Leslie Bramlett, a local storyteller, re-enactor, and seamstress, at the William Trent House Museum on March 1, 2026.

By Neisha Kelly
Community Reporter

"Fabric, Stories, and Memories" is a monthlong series of speakers and events hosted by the William Trent House Museum on Market Street in Trenton. The first event of the season, held March 1, was "The Stories Fabrics Tell: An Illustrated History," hosted by local storyteller, re-enactor and seamstress Leslie Bramlett.

The William Trent House Museum, built in 1719 and run by the city of Trenton, is a historic landmark surrounded by 2.5 acres of orchards in the heart of the capital city.

Samuel Stephens, executive director of the Trent House

Association, who helped organize "The Stories Fabrics Tell," said, "We want to engage our communities in telling their own stories. So that's a part of what this is about."

Bramlett said of the event that she has a passion for teaching and finds that "dressing up as the characters in [history] books or the people in the biographies gets kids to read," and become engaged in history on a deeper level.

She said, "If a student reads a book about Rosa Parks or Ida B. Wells or Martin Luther King Jr.," that may catch their interest and she tries to take it from there.

At the event, she moved through centuries of history, showing visual aids including the historically accurate garments she wore and made herself.

She described how, in the 1600s, regardless of status, most people wore two to five outfits at most. She showed a corset and skirts so wide they could barely fit through a doorway.

One attendee was Dr. Diane Campbell, former dean of students at Mercer County Community College, who also serves on the board of the William Trent House.

She said, "What drew me here was the chance to listen." She explained that she enjoys looking at fabric and that she related to the topic because she sews, too.

Stephens added, "We are looking for programs that have a resonance with our community. Because of the topic, the era, the people it's talking about and so much more."

Big storms, little snow removal help for local seniors



PHOTO | JESSICA RUANO

Neighbors worked to help neighbors but the blizzards of January and February left communities short handed.

By Keith Morris Jr.
Senior Reporter

Back-to-back winter storms that brought up to 24 inches of snow to parts of New Jersey in late January and February exposed a shortage of snow removal resources for seniors in Mercer County, leaving neighbors and nonprofit groups scrambling to help.

A 51-year-old Hamilton native, Brett Hogan, said, "When I looked outside [on January 26] I saw a lot of snow and a lot of work ahead of me. It took about an hour and a half to clear the driveway and sidewalk."

But his responsibilities did not end there. Like many New Jerseyans, he has family members who need help.

"The day before the storm hit I knew I was going to have to [shovel for my mother]," he continued. "I was worried that [the snow] would freeze over and break up, and I was also worried that someone would complain that it wasn't removed in a timely man-

ner because she lives on a corner lot where there's a lot of sidewalk," Hogan said.

The weight of the snow was a major factor in the first storm.

Dr. Anthony J. Broccoli, Distinguished Professor of Atmospheric Science at Rutgers University and Co-Director of the Rutgers Climate and Energy Institute, said, "One of the unusual things about [the January] storm is that in addition to getting a lot of snow, we got a lot of sleet, and a little bit of freezing rain, and that made the snow removal extremely difficult."

He said, "In some places it was only freezing rain and that's very dangerous because freezing rain is when the water falls as a liquid then freezes when it hits the surface. It can also bring down trees and power lines."

Because of these conditions, local organizations were limited in the services they could provide.

Evita Giron is the Program Coordinator of "Neighbors Helping Neighbors" within Interfaith Caregivers of Greater Mercer



PHOTO | COURTNEY RICHTER

February 23rd in Princeton, New Jersey which received 17.5 inches of snow in the second of two back to back winter storms.

County, a nonprofit organization that, among other things, "provides free nonmedical services to the homebound elderly."

Giron said, "I find that one of the challenges we discovered was that there's not many resources in Mercer County for seniors that need assistance with snow removal or shoveling."

She added, "We received a lot of calls from care receivers and from different people in our communities who were like, 'Do you guys know of any township snow removal help?' and there's really not any."

The lack of resources became clear a few days after the storm.

As a result, Giron said, "We've decided to take it upon our-

selves to see if we can find resources. I created a digital and print folder to try and collect information so that the next time around we at least have some resources that we can direct people to."

Because of the lack of resources, some neighbors decided to help those around them.

Ewing native Lawson McElroy III said, "I decided to ask my neighbor because he's much older and I know he didn't have any assistance so I helped him out."

McElroy ended up taking on a job that turned into an extended one.

"He had a much wider driveway so it took about two to two and a half hours," McElroy said.

In addition to helping others, he also had his own drive-

way to clear.

"To clean my driveway it took about an hour and a half to two hours. My car and my mom's took two hours," McElroy said.

The lengthy cleanup was the result of specific weather conditions.

Dr. Broccoli said, "To get a big storm like this you need a combination of cold air and a lot of moisture. We had the combination of the moisture coming from the southwest, and the air coming from the northwest."

He added, "This winter will probably be colder than most of the recent winters have been."

Indeed, the January storm was followed by two weeks of bitterly cold temperatures that led up to the February storm.

"The Prom" brings humor, heart and message to Kelsey Theatre

By Dylaney Talkpa
Reporter

"The Prom," presented at the Kelsey Theatre from Feb. 13-22, marked the first time the theater staged the musical. The production, by Thank You 5's, was directed by Laurie Gougher and produced by Beverly Kuo-Hamilton.

"The Prom" is a musical that follows four Broadway actors, Dee Dee Allen, Barry, Trent, Angie, and Sheldon. Lamenting their days of fame, they travel to the conservative town of Edgewater, Indiana, to help a lesbian student, Emma Nolan, who has had her entire prom cancelled.

"The Prom" is an engaging production that brings lots of laughs and relatability. Although playful on the exterior, the interior presents important topics such as homophobia that are still relevant today.

The set design for "The Prom" was not elaborate; instead, the spaciousness of the stage was utilized. Especially in the scenes portraying the high school, locker props were used in order to effectively capture the school setting.

Unbeknownst to the audience, little bits of the actors' personalities would be smuggled onto the stage such as Emma Nolan's wall posters being actual interests of the actor who plays her, Tori Cavallo.

The lead selections for this production, Tori Cavallo and Christina Parke, who played Dee Dee Allen, exhibited powerful and

emotional voices that demanded the attention of the audience.

Taking the stage with riffs, belts and dynamics, Dee Dee Allen's haughty and self-absorbed attitude is captured excellently in the first act with: It's Not About Me.

Similarly, Emma Nolan's unabashed strength in her identity is displayed in her duet with Alyssa Greene: Dance With You.

Cavallo said, "I thought it was hard, because it was hard. But it was also very just beautifully eye-opening to kind of explore a side of my life that I've never really explored before."

Cavallo additionally expressed, "I think the role speaks. That was a big, challenging take, just trying to find that balance of courage in both the character and in myself."

Parke said, "Dee Dee is a vocal powerhouse, and she's got to own it every single second. So for me, just kind of stepping back into that space and being confident that I can deliver that every time on stage has probably been one of the biggest challenges."

Michael Zweig, who played Barry Glickman, said, "Barry's portrayal is, shall we say, over the top, slightly inappropriate, flamboyant. But also, there is a heartfelt side to him that comes out throughout the show."

Fabiola Bien-Aimé, stage manager of "The Prom," states, "my vision for all shows is for people to come to see a good show, and for the actors to be a good show, be part of a good show, in the sense

of when the audience comes to the show, it starts a conversation, like they saw something after the fact."

Beverly Kuo-Hamilton, producer of "The Prom," said, "It went beyond what we thought, really. We knew when we cast it that we had a strong cast. But they went over and above what we ever thought could have happened."

Kuo-Hamilton added, "I think a lot of people didn't want to come see this show. But this is the kind of show that needs to be said during this time. You know, it really is about accepting yourself and accepting people that you are surrounded by, and honestly, I think that is such a strong message, especially in the times that we're living in right now."

The audience members were amused by the silly quips and lively personalities of the cast. Laughter rang throughout the audience, with some audience members repeatedly bursting with laughter.

Janet Quartarone, actor and director at her respective theater, said, "they did a beautiful job with this show. It's very clever. It's very witty. It has lots of heart and energy. And I have seen other productions that just didn't have the heart. And I felt like they had everything here."

Jaimie McMillin, who frequently attends Kelsey Theatre's productions, said, "yeah. It's very important. I don't want to single out the Kelsey Theater, but there are people here who have season tickets, they come to everything. And they might still be a little closed off,



PHOTO | DYLANEY TALKPA

Actors in "The Prom" at Kelsey Theatre presented a message of acceptance.

even though they love the theater, they still might be closed off to the realities of who does it."

McMillin added, "it's good to just like showcase it in a way that's fun and relatable, honestly, especially for teenagers, because no matter what year it is, they're still struggling. So to be who they are,

and that's a shame because they shouldn't have to."

Overall, "The Prom" was a charming and engaging production. The cast presented strong and entertaining performances, calling attention to the importance of showing audiences strong themes of homophobia, love, and acceptance.

VOICE STAFF DATE NIGHT MOVIE PICKS



The staff of the VOICE is busy but not too busy for a date night. Here are our picks for movies to watch!

Domi



Domenica likes to stop and enjoy the small things in life. You can often find her exploring nature. For her date night pick she suggests "About Time." She describes it as "A life-changing romance movie that not only portrays true love, but also teaches that true happiness comes from living every day as if it's our final day. Enjoy your family, your partner, and every little detail of this experience called life!"

Micah



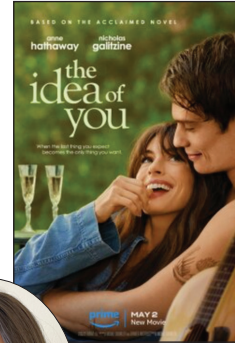
Micah's adrenaline filled pick is "The Falcon and the Winter Soldier." Micah describes it as "A quick, fun-filled show that follows the main characters and their acceptance of their new roles and each other after the death of their friend turns their life upside-down. A perfect show to watch for those who like action and romance!"

Jo



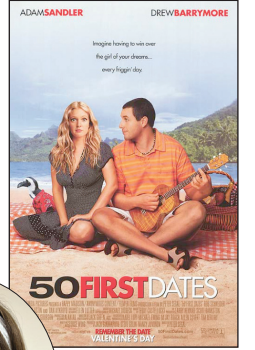
Of course the Editor in Chief picks a trilogy. She never does anything by halves. Jo describes "Before Sunrise" saying: "It's a beautifully told story about spontaneous and passionate young love that is sure to send sparks flying between you and your partner!"

Bianca



Bianca knows what makes people tick, as her fan following on social media proves. Her recommendation for date night is "The Idea of You." She says: "As a girl that grew up reading fanfictions, this is a must! It is a cheesy and charming rom-com that we all need to watch at least once."

Linnea

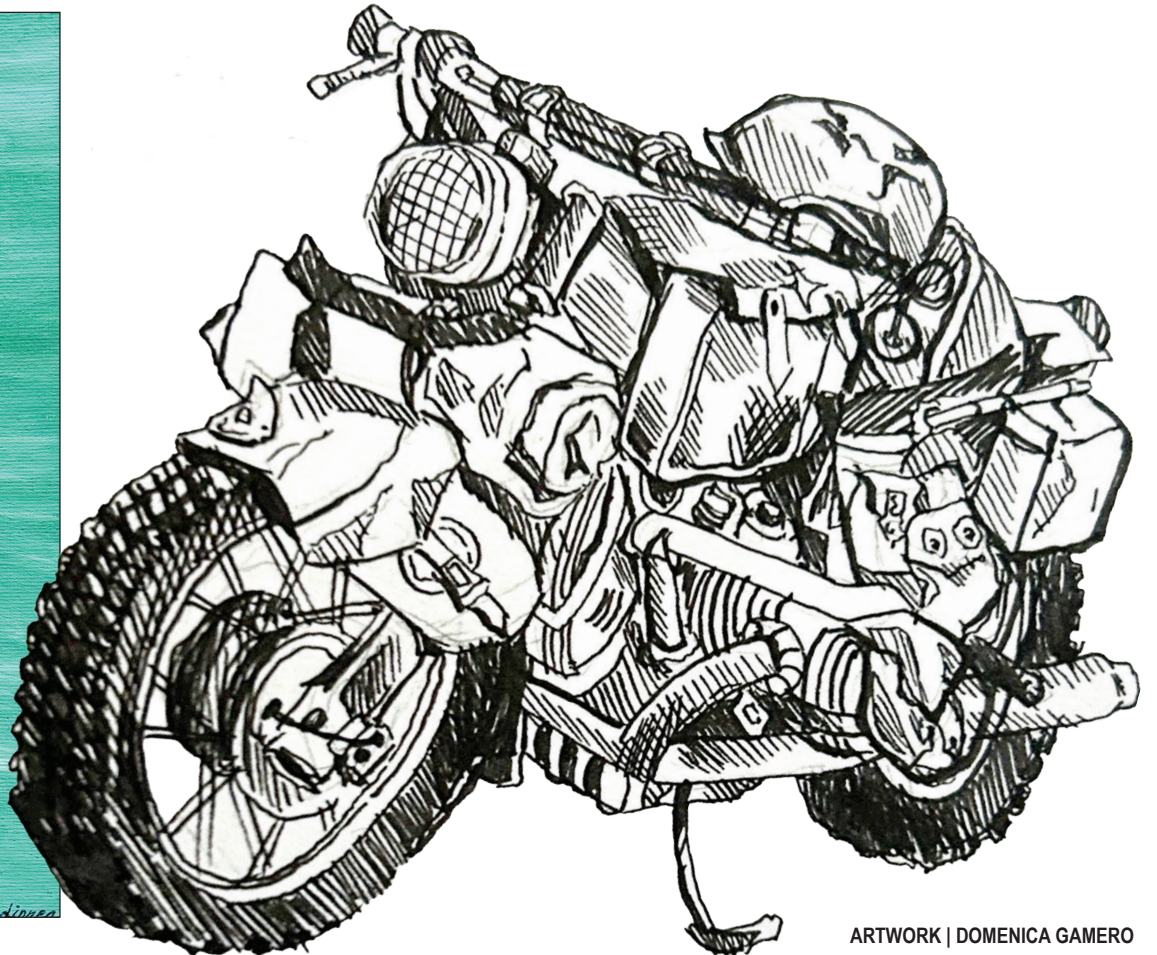


Linnea doesn't take the dating scene too seriously but always has time for a good movie night. Her pick? "Fifty First Dates." She says it is: "A funny romance movie that is not too serious but tells the story of no matter how hard the situation is there is always someone that will fight for you and if you mean enough to them they will not give up which I think is really sweet and fitting for Valentine's Day."

ARTISTS' CORNER



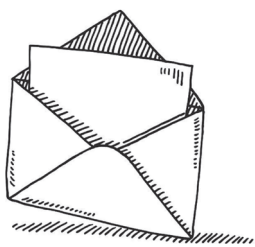
ARTWORK | LINNEA RAMEIL



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No more hating on fangirls

MY VIEW



Bianca Araujo Menezes

Fangirl culture is often reduced to a stereotype. Loud, emotional, irrational. Mostly because the majority of us are girls. But this narrative makes people miss what really goes on with fangirl culture. What looks like simple devotion from the outside is, in reality, a deeply creative force that drives culture forward in real time.

According to Urban Dictionary, a fangirl is “a fan of something (female) who is obsessed with the said subject to a certain degree (normally unhealthy)”. Which is wrong. Some of us are males too.

But fangirl culture is more than consuming content – we also produce it.

The fan edits that go viral

overnight and make your new favorite show famous? We did that. The new #1 book in The New York Times that used to be a Dramione fanfic? We did it. The streaming guides and online communities that keep artists relevant across countries? That was us too.

Entire aesthetics, phrases, and trends often trace back to fandom spaces before they hit mainstream.

What starts as an inside joke on X or a niche TikTok edit quickly becomes part of global internet culture, and entertainment companies, fashion brands, and even tech platforms monitor fan behavior closely because they know one thing: if fangirls care, the world will follow.

But of course, people love to reduce fangirls to extremes.

Either we are “harmless and cringe” or “completely unhinged”. And yes, if you look at fandom spaces long enough, you will find everything.

From casual fans who just like to listen to a few songs to fans who write a 176,511-word fanfic of their favorite idols just for fun, we do have it all.

But reducing an entire culture to only these moments ignores the bigger picture.

While fangirls are often dismissed as obsessive or trivial, the creativity, organizational skills, and cultural influence they demonstrate prove the opposite. These communities shape trends, drive engagement, and even spark social movements, showing their impact.

In 2020, after BTS donated \$1 million to Black Lives Matter, fans matched the donation in just 24 hours through the #MatchAMillion campaign. Through the “Love Myself” campaign with UNICEF, fans have helped raise funds to fight violence against youth. On a smaller scale, fanbases organize charity drives, plant trees, and fund community aid projects for birthdays and anniversaries.

I’ve seen that impact firsthand. Back in my hometown in Brazil, I helped organize a fundraiser through my BTS fanpage to support people during the oxygen crisis, raising thousands of Brazilian reais. What started as an Instagram campaign, turned into help to thousands of people.

According to a study by Jasmine Syifa Hermawan, fandoms have significant socioeconomic effects, shaping not only media consumption but also industries like travel, entertain-

ment, and retail.

They see us as these crazy girls who would do anything for their idols.

I mean, yes, I did camp outside of Central Park, slept on the ground with 30 other girls that I had never seen in my life, and had to stay awake because a rat ran by as I was sleeping on the floor with nothing but a sleeping bag and a thin \$5 Five Below blanket, all for a chance to see Jungkook from BTS and Stray Kids.

But it does not mean I am crazy. Just devoted.

These spaces gave me a voice and a community. I met my best friends through One Direction Facebook pages, others through fan meetings, or even on Discord.

Every time I go to a concert, my favorite part is not just the performance but when I get to meet my friends to see our favorite artists, singing our favorite songs, exchanging freebies and sometimes even making new connections along the way.

I am so deeply rooted in fangirl culture that I can’t even imagine where I would be without it. Or who I would be.

And honestly? The world would be a lot more boring without us.

It’s time to quiet quit on hustle culture

PERSPECTIVE



Domenica Gamero

Here is a radical thought: Be useless. Paint a tree so ugly you have to hide it for the simple pleasure of trying something new. Stare at a landscape for twenty minutes without a phone in your hand. While we’re told that every second must be optimized, the most productive thing you can do for your GPA (and your sanity) is to stop trying to maximize your life and start actually living it.

Hustle culture is the col-

lective delusion that if you aren’t using every second of your life on being productive, you’re basically rotting. It’s the philosophy that turns a Tuesday morning into a weird competition to see who can look the busiest.

Most of us start the day in a state of high alert, scrolling through notifications and emails before we’re even out of bed. Coffee isn’t enjoyable anymore; it’s just the fuel we need to rush through all the tasks we need to do. If we aren’t crushing it, we feel like the world is leaving us behind.

According to a 2024 study in The Australian Educational Researcher, this obsession with measurable output is a one-way ticket to burnout. It turns out that when you treat your brain like a factory every hour, every day, the machinery eventually catches fire.

The research shows that perceived pressure and expectations play a major role in emo-

tional exhaustion, sometimes even more than the workload itself. We aren’t actually getting more done; we’re just getting better at looking busy.

The real tragedy is the over-justification effect, as identified by psychologists like Edward Deci and Mark Lepper. Their research proves that the second you attach a productive goal or an external reward to something you actually enjoy—like drawing, cooking, or just hanging out—your internal human spark dies.

You aren’t baking because it’s fun anymore; you’re baking to prove you’re a domestic expert for your TikTok account. You’ve essentially traded your soul for a few likes and the false security of looking productive.

Recent research on workplace and academic stress also suggests that a significant portion of our time is spent performing productivity rather than actually engaging in meaningful

work. We spend nearly half our time putting on the appearance of being productive.

We aren’t developing real personalities; we’re curating an image for a social media account. We follow rigid routines not because they make us happy, but because we are terrified of being the only person in the room who isn’t winning at being a perfect, productive human.

The hard truth? Your productivity is probably a performance. We spend so much time planning, posting, and checking our progress that we’ve forgotten how to actually do the work.

I’ve realized that doing something for no apparent reason is the only way to actually clear your head and regain focus. We need to stop treating our hobbies like resume builders and start treating them like the mental break they’re supposed to be.

So, put the phone down. Be unproductive. Your brain—and your Mercer transcript—will thank you for it.

STRANGE BUT TRUE

Mercer has the only public Funeral Service degree program in NJ certified by the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE).

JOURNO LINGO

If you ever hear a VOICE reporter talking about “going to the morgue” it means doing background research. We are not all Funeral Service majors!

GREAT NEWS

The College VOICE won 14 New Jersey Press Foundation Awards including the highest honor of first place in General Excellence for 2026.

NEED TO KNOW

MCCC’s brand refresh includes a font switch to Gotham which is famous for being used by former President Barack Obama in both his campaigns.

Write to *The College VOICE!*

The College VOICE accepts letters to the editor. Submissions should be no more than 400 words. Send materials by email to an editor or a media adviser, and include your name and status at Mercer (major and year, faculty or staff position or alumnx) or local address. Letters to the editor are posted online and run in print. For more information see our policy manual at: www.mcccvoice.org/tools/policy-manual

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Editorial Policy:

The College VOICE is written and edited by students of Mercer County Community College and published each semester under the guidance of a faculty adviser. The material printed in *The College VOICE*, be it articles, advertisements or opinion pieces, does not necessarily represent the views of the editors, the faculty, staff, administration or the Board of Trustees of Mercer County Community College.

ADVICE - ASK THE VOICE



Dear VOICE, I keep seeing a goose staring at me near the parking lot. Is it... watching me?
-Sincerely, Uneasy

and commitment or whatever. The CORRECT answer is a case of watermelon Red Bull. We'll see you in the newsroom.
-The VOICE

Dear Uneasy, Yes, it is. That is campus security. With staff cutbacks the college has started outsourcing. Do not make sudden movements.
-The VOICE

Dear VOICE, Why do I spend more time planning my "productive day" than actually being productive?
-Day Planner

Dear VOICE, Once you have all your information for an article how do you write it so fast?
-Interested in Journalism

Dear Day Planner, This is an excellent question. Now we'll just get our notebook out and think about the best way to answer it. Yes, we'll make a really good plan and get back to you.
-The VOICE

Dear Interested, The boring answer is discipline

SUDOKU

INSTRUCTIONS:
Place a number in the empty boxes in such a way that each row across, each column down, and each small 9-box square contains all the numbers from one to nine.

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HOROSCOPES



Capricorn
Dec. 22 - Jan. 19

Honestly, no one asked for your opinion but you gave it anyway, and it's a good thing you did. Someone benefited from you speaking up. Do it more.



Aquarius
Jan. 20 - Feb. 18

You try not to be superstitious be a year with four Friday the 13ths in it is trying your patience. Good news, your bad luck is finally ending!



Pisces
Feb. 19 - Mar. 20

People start coming to you to ask for help this month. It's flattering but sometimes you forget it's okay to say no. Take care of yourself so you can end the month strong.



Aries
Mar. 21 - Apr. 19

A hobby you've had to ignore finally has time to come back into your life. Don't forget how much it mattered to you. It's not indulgent to do things that make you happy.



Taurus
Apr. 20 - May 20

When all is said and done, your friends will remember that you cared for them because you took time to do the little things to show your kindness.



Gemini
May 21 - Jun. 20

Spring is coming. Your month is near! And it will be a good one this year. Expect a birthday gift to arrive in a highly unusual package.



Cancer
Jun. 21 - Jul. 22

The algorithm has got you all wrong. What you really want to see is sunshine and fresh air, not people ski jumping off the sides of buildings. Turn off TikTok and get outside!



Leo
Jul. 23 - Aug. 22

You've had a couple of near misses -- moments when things could have broken either way. Another one is coming. Be sure to put yourself in the path of opportunity!



Virgo
Aug. 23 - Sept. 22

Fashion is finding you this month. Put on a favorite old T-shirt or pick up something nifty at the thrift shop. It's time to wow your friends with your fine threads.



Libra
Sept. 23 - Oct. 22

You have a lot of keys right now and they all go to different things. Don't let the things you care about get locked in. Free the world around you!



Scorpio
Oct. 23 - Nov. 21

Rain rain, go away! Or, not. This month is all about water for you. Showers, puddles... Work on your daily hydration routine and you will feel more alert and healthy.



Sagittarius
Nov. 22 - Dec. 21

You are starting to smell...all the sweet scents of spring. Listen to the birds chirping and watch the leaves coming back on the trees. This is a peaceful month for you.

King Crossword

ACROSS

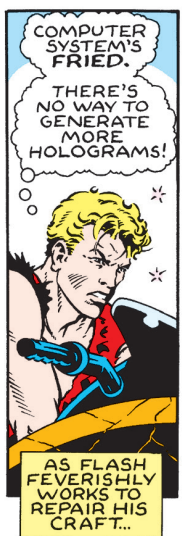
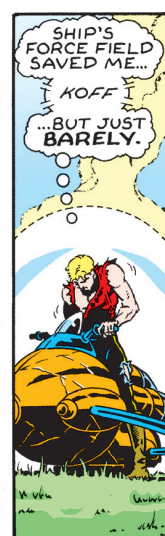
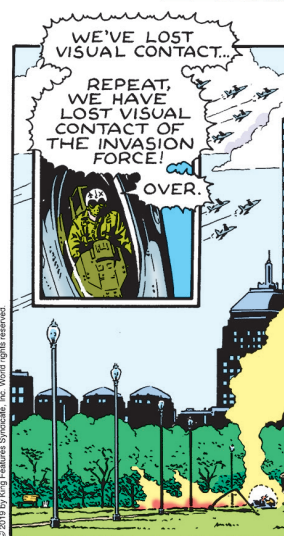
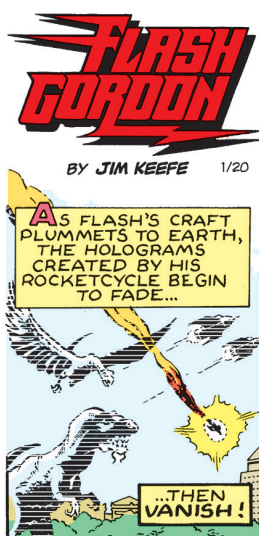
- 1 "Mamma Mial" group
- 5 Apprehend
- 8 Colorful fish
- 12 Clay-rich soil
- 13 Blunder
- 14 Portrayal
- 15 Democrat or Republican
- 17 Radiate
- 18 Faucet
- 19 Arouse
- 21 Fireworks reaction
- 22 Delany or Carvey
- 23 Venomous viper
- 26 Zodiac cat
- 28 Passenger
- 31 Prosperous time
- 33 Knock
- 35 Pepsi competitor
- 36 Soothe
- 38 Tatter
- 40 Actor Danson
- 41 A long time
- 43 Bugging device
- 45 Tranquil
- 47 Pencil end
- 51 Impulse carrier
- 52 Multiple marriage
- 54 Expectorate

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- 55 Ailing
- 56 Malaria symptom
- 57 Pop
- 58 Oklahoma city
- 59 Untouchable Eliot
- 6 Curved path
- 7 Wide
- 8 Occurring naturally
- 9 Bikini pattern?
- 10 Lotion additive
- 11 Chopped
- 16 Implement
- 20 Card game for two
- 23 Lawyers' org.
- 24 Scale member
- 25 Edwin Land's company
- 27 Rowing need
- 29 — out a living
- 30 Primary color
- 32 Purplish
- 30-Down
- 34 Kneecap
- 37 Longing
- 39 Indiana city
- 42 Brownish tone
- 44 Heathen
- 45 Back talk
- 46 World's fair
- 48 Wise one
- 49 Ostriches' kin
- 50 Deli loaves
- 53 On in years

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FLASH GORDON



CLASSIC PEANUTS x2

