

# OFF THE BLUFF

Edition 13



POSTCARDS  
from  
PITTSBURGH



CULTURE



PLACES



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## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Mike Dillon

Usually, my fall Magazine Journalism class enrolls 15-20 students. So when a scheduling conflict left me with only six students in the Fall of 2019, I worried that it might not be possible to produce the 13th edition of *Off the Bluff Magazine*, which features the Pittsburgh Neighborhoods Project. Since 2007, we've featured Uptown, Polish Hill, Squirrel Hill, Southside – and on and on, from one end of the city to the other.

But would it be possible to do a deep dive into one neighborhood with only six writers? I decided a better option would be to modify some of the typical story tropes from the Neighborhoods Project and give my writers free reign across the whole city. Their charge was to write a profile about an immigrant; to create a portrait of a place (a museum, a venue, a business); to learn about and explain how a city system or institution works; and to interview a prominent Pittsburgher about their perspective on the nature of the city and its people. But still I wondered: Will we come up with enough high-quality copy to produce an entire magazine?

The answer, I'm delighted to say, is an unqualified and emphatic yes.

Not only did the six young women who produced the stories for this edition of *Off the Bluff* find compelling people and places to write about, they did so with a sense of enthusiasm, curiosity and stick-to-itiveness that left me proud and impressed.

The small class size proved not to be an obstacle but

an absolute advantage. Students got to know each other. They helped and supported each other. They gave each other tips on sources and feedback on drafts. I found that I rarely had to lead discussions – they percolated naturally as we talked about their progress and problems in pursuing stories.

I also had the luxury of spending far more time working one-on-one with each student as they wrote and rewrote in the J-lab. With six students it was possible to do a "table read" of each student's next-to-final draft in the conference room. I'd make copies of each story, pass them around and one by one we'd discuss strengths, weaknesses and strategies for polishing the final version. I could not do that in 75 minutes with 20 students. In the process, this class became an amazing community as six young women – ranging from sophomores to second-year graduate students to an exchange student from Germany – wrote, critiqued, discussed and laughed as they produced story after story. I think they liked the table reads best ... I know I did.

Along with her writing duties, graduate student Emily Fitzgerald volunteered to serve as editor for this edition and that meant juggling all of the copy, art produced by Prof. Jim Vota's photography students for the project, and video and graphics produced by Prof. Robert Healy's Media Lab students. (Hats off to my colleagues and their students, by the way.) At the beginning of the Spring term I handed Emily an external hard drive so she could gather stories and art and get to work on designing and producing print and online versions of *Off the Bluff*.

Then the pandemic struck.

My spring classes moved to Zoom. Discussion boards on Blackboard began to fill up. The interns I supervise needed support and guidance, especially those slated to graduate. Truth be told, I did not give much thought to the fate of the magazine. Like everyone else I was too busy trying to simultaneously hunker down and keep things moving.

Then, in mid-April, a completed draft of *Off the Bluff* appeared in my inbox. Working by herself without editorial assistance (as would be typical during a normal spring semester) Emily had produced an entire magazine, which we then set to work proofing and refining to prepare it for publication.

I could not be more pleased or impressed that due to Emily's Herculean efforts *Off the Bluff* survived the pandemic – and unexpectedly created a snapshot of vibrant, busy Pittsburgh just as the city's streets emptied and most of its venues and businesses went dark. I hope you'll agree that the spirit of the city and its people that infuse this edition of *Off the Bluff* cannot possibly be stilled for long.

## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Emily Fitzgerald

Before I even enrolled as a student at Duquesne, I knew I wanted to take Dr. Dillon's Magazine Journalism course. Once I got the chance in my penultimate semester of graduate school, I knew I wanted to be the Editor-in-Chief and in charge of pulling this publication together. However, what I didn't know – and never could have predicted – was the situation I would find myself in during my last semester: spring of 2020.

There was no way anyone could have prepared for a pandemic outbreak that would shift classes online and completely disrupt our way of life. In a way, this edition of *Off the Bluff* became one of the most significant. A magazine that has served as a glimpse into the lives of Pittsburgh's neighborhoods suddenly became the last portrait of our Pittsburgh as we always knew it, but aren't likely to return to anytime soon.

Producing this magazine was no easy task. Tracking down photography credits, fact-checking story details and structuring the publication itself – all remotely and all while coming to terms with the fact that life as I knew it was rapidly changing – was an interesting challenge. However, some small part of me knew how important this edition was, even if I didn't realize it at first.



Despite everything, I felt a quiet motivation to edit and lay out pages; the stress of choosing a good font overpowered my sense of hopelessness at the idea of graduating in the middle of a pandemic-induced recession.

What started as a portfolio piece became a daily ritual that kept me sane: make coffee, light a candle, sit down and get to work. I found the monotony of checking spacing and spelling a small comfort in a difficult time. I got lost, not only in the editing, but in the stories themselves. They reminded me of something important that I almost forgot in the mayhem of adjusting to the new normal: Pittsburgh isn't defined solely

because of its buildings and bridges – the city is a by-product of all of us who live here. Pittsburgh is family restaurants sharing a taste of home and local, small businesses who know customers' pets by name. It's pierogi and pickles and always having a neighbor when you need one.

I am grateful for the opportunity to have served as the Editor-in-Chief of *Off the Bluff* and honored to produce this edition. It gave me hope in a very strange time and reminds me that the Pittsburgh we know and love will still be waiting for us when this is all over.



# PITTSBURGH: CITY OF BRIDGES, CITY OF STAIRS

Pittsburgh is known worldwide as the Steel City and the City of Bridges. What many people don't know is that it's also the City of Stairs – stairs that play a vital role in the city's public transportation and serves to connect communities.

Story + Photo by Julia Mudrock

Pittsburgh has more than 800 documented sets of stairs that are scattered across 66 of its 90 neighborhoods. There are more sets of stairs here than in any other U.S. city. The greatest concentration of stairs is on the South Side Slopes. Staircases were built to give hillside residents a way cheap and efficient way to commute to work, school, church, or the market. As automated transportation became a more common way to travel, the steps received less attention from the city and public; however, the need for their upkeep remains important for those who still choose to use them.

Joe Balaban is a dedicated member of the South Side Slopes Neighborhood Association (SSSNA). The group formed to advocate for the overall safety and wellbeing of Slopes residents. Joe values community and the positive action that can emerge from it.

He has lived in the Slopes since September of 1992 and has played a critical role in directing the city's attention towards the stairs through StepTrek, a noncompetitive walk throughout the neighborhood that brings awareness to both the stairs, the neighborhood's history and the beauty of Pittsburgh from various unique perspectives.

"We wanted to do something," Joe says. "The steps were in need of repair and made the neighborhood unique."

In the fall of 2000, at the same time SSSNA was trying to come up with a way to showcase the stairs and their need for maintenance, a geophysicist named Bob Regan was biking Pittsburgh's many hills to map the stairs using Geographic Information Systems technology. He used his research to

publish *The Stairs of Pittsburgh: Portrait of a City* and *Pittsburgh Steps: The Story of the City's Public Stairs*. It was Bob who originally suggested the StepTrek to bring awareness to the stairs so the city would repair them.

"It hadn't crossed our minds that people would pay money and take a self-guided tour in the SS," Joe says. "Bob had the vision that we could make an event out of it and our first one was in April of 2000. We change the course every year to put the city's attention on a different set of steps. It keeps the city's focus on repairing and maintaining them and keeps it interesting, because we do get a lot of repeat attendees."

In preparation for the StepTrek event, volunteers participate in scheduled clean-ups over several weekends. Residents want to show off the stair's functional value to city officials, as well as their picturesque value to Pittsburghers in general, as the various views of the city from them are unparalleled. Trekkers can enjoy the scenery while getting their heart rates up, a feat no gym can compete with.

"Many homes on the StepTrek route have million-dollar views and many people wouldn't think that of slope homes if they didn't experience it for themselves," Joe says.

Joe provides historical landmarks information to accompany the StepTrek so participants can learn about the history of the area and appreciate the role the stairs played in it as they zig zag across Southside's hills. Among these landmarks are Billy Buck Hill, St. Michael Church and the Kollar Club, where many Slovak immigrants would regularly com-

mute to learn English and to become oriented to life in America.

"I call [the stairs] the city's first mass transportation system," Bob says with a nostalgic expression, recalling years of meticulous work he dedicated to this project over two decades ago.

By working with the community and through trial and error, Pittsburgh has learned what works for efficiency. At one time all the stairs were wooden, but they've been replaced over time by concrete low-profile steps, which are built directly into the ground and require less maintenance.

"The wooden steps would break, or people would rip them off for firewood," Bob says. "The city had too many claims of the steps breaking and people hurting themselves. Then the city decided to put in aluminum handrails to minimize maintenance, but they soon learned that was a mistake – the handrails disappeared very quickly because people stole and sold them."

Stair maintenance and safety depend on the community working together. The steps are symbolic of the relationships that this city and its communities have built.

"This group is amazing, and I feel lucky to move into a neighborhood where people care. No one crosses their arms and looks at the city and says, 'What are you gonna do?' We get involved," says Joe. "We don't cop an attitude. We pitch in and roll up our sleeves to meet them halfway. It seems we have a real good relationship," Joe says. "If you have the will to help the city becomes a good partner." 

# BIKES TAKE PITTSBURGHERS FOR A HEALTHY RIDE

Story by Anna Westkaemper

The first time I thought I was going to die in America was on a bike.

It was my first week in Pittsburgh. I had just arrived from Germany, and I wanted to explore the Strip District. I rented a bike just around the corner from my apartment in Downtown and started off down the Penn Avenue bike lane.

"Cycling is really not as bad in the States as I thought it would be," I thought as I pedaled by the old warehouses.

As it turned out, I judged way too quickly.

While I was still trying to absorb the atmosphere of the new place I was discovering, looking anywhere around me but not right on the street ahead, the bike lane all of a sudden just stopped. Stopped! Penn Avenue had become a one-way-street and traffic was rushing toward me, led by huge trucks honking at me. Close to a heart attack I managed to get on the sidewalk and returned the bike at the next corner.

Since then I have asked myself numer-

**In 2018 around 80,000 trips were done with Healthy Ride**

ous times how bike-sharing and biking in general is possible and manageable in a city like Pittsburgh.

To find out, I spoke to Erin Potts, the director of Outreach and Marketing of Healthy Ride Pittsburgh, the bike sharing program that is available throughout the city. The Duquesne alum understood my fear at the end of the bike lane on Penn Avenue, as she uses this route every day to get to work. The Healthy Ride office is right at the end of the Strip District, at the border of Lawrenceville.

With many obstacles for bikers -- like bike lanes that suddenly vanish and incredibly steep hills -- Erin says that there were many doubts at the beginning of the bike-sharing project.

"People were like: 'No one is going to use this; we're not Amsterdam.' But they say that in almost every city, and it hasn't been the case. We had a strong start and our ridership increases."

Healthy Ride came to Pittsburgh in June 2015 with 500 bikes at 50 stations, but the process of implementing a bike share system in the city started way earlier. Healthy Ride is owned and operated by Pittsburgh Bike Share, which is a non-profit organization that was founded in 2012. The organization sees its mission as extending access to a form of public transit that is easy to use, affordable and active.

"Because Healthy Ride is a non-profit company, engaging in the community is a number one thing to do," says Erin. "We see ourselves as a program for the people, not just a product. In 2018 we launched our ambassador program. We hire members from communities to do outreach and events, to get more people on bikes -- especially those, who need it the most."

This mission specifically refers to people from low-income communities who may not own a car and have more difficulty getting around in the city and face issues of access, as well as gentrification which forces them move to other parts of Pittsburgh. Together, with the city of Pittsburgh, the organization is working on a network of bike lanes -- to avoid things like the sudden ending of the Penn Avenue bike lane.

"New types of infrastructure are a game changer," says Erin. "Since we launched Healthy Ride, a lot has changed. Not everything happens as fast as you want it to, but we definitely see improvement."

To get more people on bikes, not only does the infrastructure of the city have to change, but the bike sharing system itself has to change, too. This is why Healthy Ride massively increased its stations and bikes throughout the city in 2018 and 2019. 700 bikes are now available in Pittsburgh and the number of stations has been doubled to 175.

170,000 Pittsburghers are now living within a quarter mile of a Healthy Ride station. Building so many new stations requires a lot of money. Because Healthy Ride belongs to a non-profit, donors are needed to fund expansion.

"Highmark and Allegheny Health Network have been our title sponsors since we launched. For purchasing new bikes and new stations we need grant funding," says Erin.

But how does Healthy Ride decide where to put new stations? By including the community in the decision-making



Photos by Nicole Jones

process. It organized countless events in many Pittsburgh neighborhoods to ask people where they think a station is necessary. Moreover, an interactive map was implemented on their website, and everybody could put a pin at the spot where they would like to have a new station.

Based on the suggestions the team chose new spots that met the following criteria: connectivity (no farther than

**The average trip time for customers was about 35 minutes and about 10 minutes for subscribers**

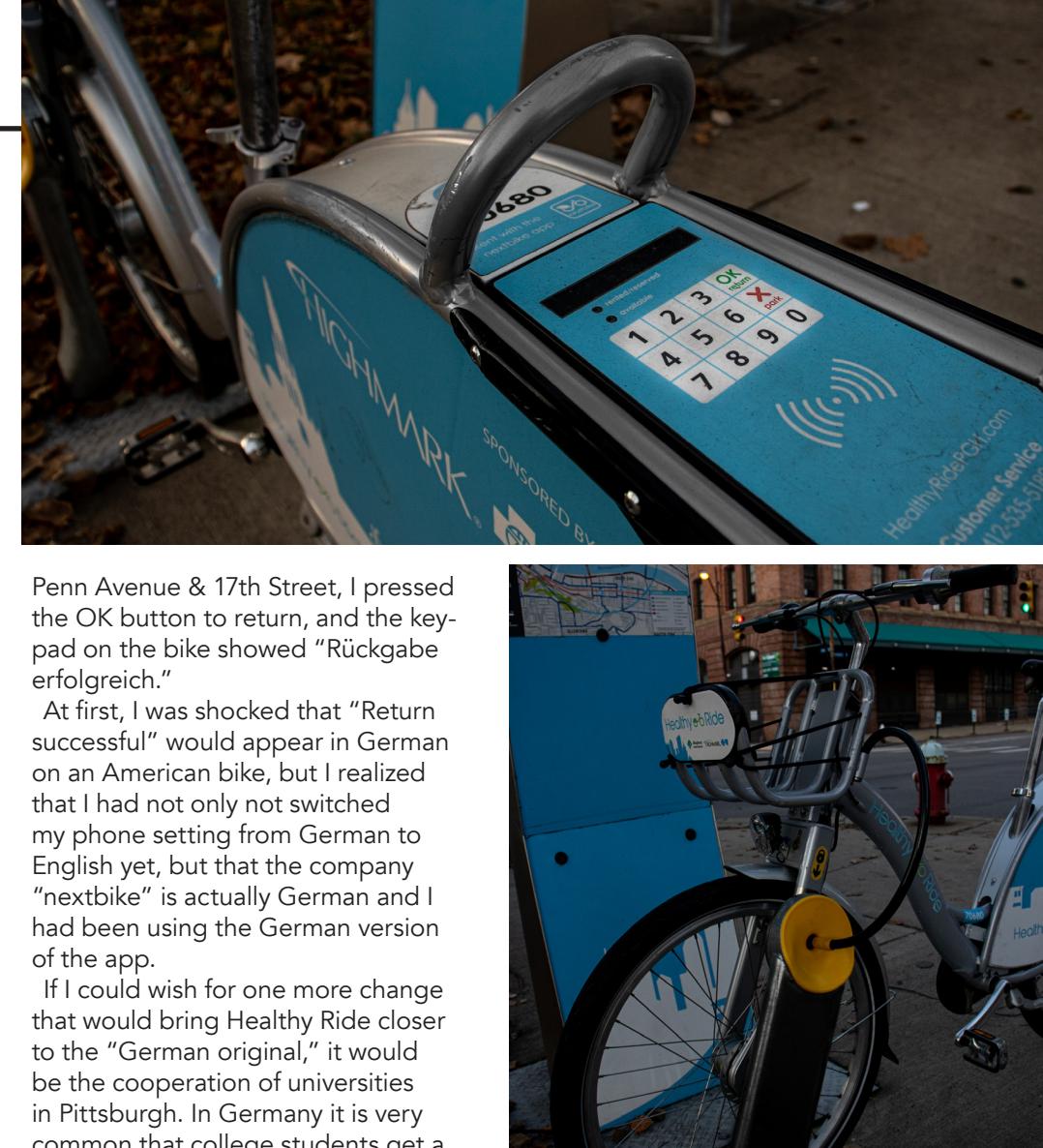
a quarter mile to another station), visibility (not on hidden side streets), footprint (not on a sidewalk or taking up space for public parking), access to sunlight and clear sky (for the solar batteries in the bikes), open to the public (not on private property) and clear of utilities such as hydrants or bus stops.

Even though so many new bikes and stations have appeared during the last couple of months, during the winter you might get the feeling that there are fewer bikes around -- and you're right. In the cold months from November to March, around 200 bikes are stored, because fewer people cycle -- myself included because stiff hands and watery eyes are not really the definition of a nice bike tour for me.

Of course, these 200 bikes do not magically disappear. They are picked up by the same people who make sure that there are enough bikes at every station during the day -- the rebalancing team. Five to six people are busy with transporting bikes from point A to B with a van and bringing back bikes to the workshop that need to be repaired by one of the four mechanics.

While the rebalance and mechanical work as well as most of the customer service is all done here in Pittsburgh, the software for the Healthy Bikes is coming from a totally different place -- my home country Germany, which I found out at the end of my Penn Avenue bike trip disaster.

As I pushed my bike to the station at



Penn Avenue & 17th Street, I pressed the OK button to return, and the keypad on the bike showed "Rückgabe erfolgreich."

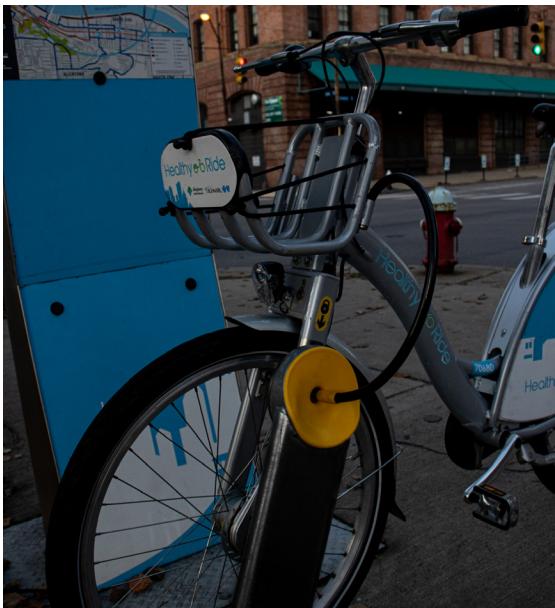
At first, I was shocked that "Return successful" would appear in German on an American bike, but I realized that I had not only not switched my phone setting from German to English yet, but that the company "nextbike" is actually German and I had been using the German version of the app.

If I could wish for one more change that would bring Healthy Ride closer to the "German original," it would be the cooperation of universities in Pittsburgh. In Germany it is very common that college students get a discount on bike sharing programs or are able to use the bikes for free for a 30-minute time frame.

Freshmen students at Pitt are now able to use Healthy Bikes for free for unlimited 30-minute drives, which Erin says is definitely a goal of the program, but most universities don't want to financially commit.

"This year we made our first partnership with Pitt, because the office of sustainability took the costs under their budget. We talked to all universities, but for most it is just not a priority, says Erin. "When we launched the partnership with Pitt, we couldn't keep our stations in Oakland full."

So, I keep my fingers crossed that Duquesne students will be able to use the program for free as well in the future. Until then, all that's left to say is: wear helmets, guys. I swear, your hairstyle is not as important as your health! 



## Renting a Healthy Bike

To hop on one of the silver-blue bikes yourself, you just have to follow a few easy steps.

1. Download the nextbike app for iOS or Android.
2. Sign up with your credit or debit card. You can choose whether you want to pay per 30-minute-ride (2 dollars), or get a monthly membership, for either unlimited 30 minutes (12 dollars) or unlimited 60 minutes (20 dollars) drives.
3. Find the nearest Healthy Ride station to you on the map in the app and see how many bikes are available.
4. Rent a bike by scanning the QR code or typing in the bike number in the app.
5. Return the bike at a Healthy Ride station by locking the bike and press the "OK" button on the keypad on the bike.

# GULF TOWER MAKES HISTORY FOR STANDING OUT

Story + Photos by Emily Fitzgerald

Though it no longer stands as the tallest building in downtown Pittsburgh, the Gulf Tower is certainly filled with the most stories.

What started as the headquarters for Gulf Oil Corporation in 1932 has kept its irreplaceable Art Deco aesthetic while modernizing its function to stay relevant in a 21st century Pittsburgh.

According to Larry Walsh, current owner of the Gulf Tower and COO of Rugby Realty, this combination of innovation and tradition is intentional.

"We'd like it to be known for the history of the architecture, but at the same time be as progressive and modern as any new building," says Walsh.

The U.S. Steel Tower may have stolen the title of "tallest building" in 1970, but the Gulf Tower – with its rich history and weather broadcasting system – still manages to stand out.



Many buildings in downtown use decorative lighting displays, so what makes the Gulf Tower so special? Other than being one of the pioneers of lighting displays, the Gulf Tower is the only one whose lights also serve a purpose: projecting a live weather broadcast. When the building first opened, there was a system of neon lighting installed which indicated if the weather for the next twelve hours would be rising or falling temperatures (red or blue), as well as if citizens could expect precipitation (flashing or steady lighting). After the energy crisis in the 1960s, the weather broadcast was ended until Rugby Realty purchased the building in 1986.

After a few failed attempts at relaunching the weather beacon over the years, CNC Lighting's Chris Popowich and Cindy Laurino were contacted to redesign the lighting display. In 2012, a new 12-color, LED bulb lighting feature was unveiled that not only displayed a real-time weather broadcast, but also lights up for special occasions and holidays.

Chris Popowich, whose background is in theater production lighting, wanted the weather system to serve as more than a function; he wanted it to be seen as a light sculpture.

"We approach lighting with a theatrical flair to it – it's not just conventional lighting that you see that engineers and architects put up that's very functional – our biggest thing is that we want the client to be part of it and say 'This is what I want,'" says Popowich.

And they've done just that. Though younger residents often don't realize that this historic building has a function, they may notice the themed holiday lighting or celebratory flashing during a Pirates or Penguins game.

Because Rugby Realty is a company of Pirates fans, they decided they

wanted to include a feature in the lighting that would update Pittsburgh residents when players hit a home run or when the team won a game. The successful idea was contagious and soon expanded to include the Penguins, flashing a red beacon similar to the goal indicator that goes off during a game. These effects were also meant to reinforce the Gulf Tower's purpose in the city. According to Popowich, they planned for this feature to become another resource to Pittsburgh residents.

"Our goal was really to let the city of Pittsburgh know that [the Pirates] hit a home run or won the game and they never had to watch the game – they could just look at the Gulf Tower," says Popowich.

The Gulf Tower was originally built to serve as the headquarters for an oil company and though it exists as retail and office space today, the weather beacon allows it to remain a necessary feature of the city. The beacon is a visual representation of Pittsburgh as a whole: rooted in history and tradition, but able to be innovative and expressive. The building connects with older Pittsburgh citizens who remember the original beacon and have seen it transition through the years, while newer residents appreciate the lighting for its aesthetic appeal.

Regardless of the reason, Larry Walsh is insistent on the building's significance to the city and says there are no plans to make any changes to the building anytime soon.

"There's a lot of nostalgia for the building because of the weather beacon. It's definitely a highly recognizable building from all angles ... It oftentimes is focused on post-cards and other pamphlets, the Gulf Tower seems to stand out as an iconic piece of the skyline – it still commands the respect of its history and its prominence," says Walsh.

Pittsburgh is a city that often feels bigger than it is and living in the city can be isolating. The next time you look at the skyline and notice the colorful stair-step of the Gulf Tower, remember that someone is still looking out for you.

And if the top floors are blue, grab a jacket. 



# SHOWTIME! CITY THEATER IN TWO ACTS

Story by Antonia Gelorme

Patrons enter through grand red double doors to secure their tickets while employees move through the lobby, changing posters and setting out playbills. Empty chairs sit in front of the bar and wooden flats are stacked neatly next to the box office.

Though it isn't time for a performance, the team at City Theatre is putting in the hours to prepare yet another piece for opening night. In a single day the lobby will be cleaned, the bar stocked and the box office buzzing with customers claiming their reservations.

The theater has been working to put on *One Night in Miami...* The play follows a conversation between Cassius Clay, Malcolm X, Sam Cooke and Jim Brown on the night Clay won the World Heavyweight Championship in 1964. The piece allows an all-black cast to meditate on racism, brotherhood and what it meant to be a black man at the top of his game in the mid-60s.

The play invites its audience into the time period with its impeccable production design and creativity. Before the stage was set or the first word read by the full cast, the staff at City Theatre dedicated their expertise and energy to bring a meaningful culmination to the stage on any given performance night.

Live theater, especially the pieces produced by companies like City Theatre, is brought together by so many moving parts in order to evoke and inspire its audiences.

## Act I

With a season that mounts six fully produced pieces within nine months, City Theatre is a company that has its development and rehearsal process down pat.

The cast has three weeks of full-time rehearsals, from the first table reading to the first dress rehearsal. According to *One Night* director Reginald L. Douglas, who is also a staff member with the company, these rehearsals are the time in which everyone has the chance to study and understand the piece, in addition to memorizing their lines and blocking.

"That is the time for everyone to do their research, ask their whys and have those deep conversations that are needed," Reginald says.

In *One Night*'s case, the cast is a mix of both local and national talent. Reginald worked with a casting agent in New York to find the actors who would portray these historic icons. The process took two months because the charac-

ters had to have the right "essence, look and spirit" for the roles, according to Reginald.

With five of the six cast members being brought in from the national pool to play a group of close friends, those three weeks of rehearsal are crucial. Even so, Reginald points to the tech rehearsals as the point where a production really begins to feel real.

The tech in theater is not just limited to lights and sound, but also costumes, props and the entire set design. City Theatre houses its own set-build shop, as well as an extensive costume and prop collection.

On the day before opening night of *One Night* the pink hotel room on stage is being touched up by half a dozen stagehands. While paint is being retouched on one side, plants are being added to the other, and the second story of the set is being stabilized. Because of City Theatre's tight season, massive pieces like the two-story motel model are built in separate pieces in the company's workshop, then assembled on stage.

The set, Reginald points out, was one of the first pieces of the production to come into the creative process. He worked alongside in-house designer Tony Ferrieri to create a set that was hyper-realistic, as if it were actually torn from a motel in Miami in 1964. The pink and aquamarine color scheme, coupled with outlandish lighting fixtures and collection of mid-century modern furniture brings the scene to life.

These four legendary men did spend that night in 1964 together, but playwright Kemp Powers' script is an imagined construction of what went on in that motel room. Reginald, intrigued by the aspect of imagination in the piece, also wanted the production to have a sort of magical realism to play against the hyper-realism of the characters and set. He points to his lighting designer, Andrew Ostrowski, for incorporating this sense of transportation within the single motel room. While the action may all take place in one setting, both the lighting and sound take the audience from one emotional landscape to the next.

Lights dim as Sam Cooke recalls a concert, placing a spotlight on him as if he were taking the stage again. The character is handed a microphone and puts on a performance within a performance – mimicking the crowd alongside his own crooning. After the song, even the audience applauds with the characters on stage. The motel room is forgotten



Photos by: Alec Schoenle

and, for one moment, both the cast and audience sit back to watch Dwayne Washington perform as Sam Cooke, all within Reginald, Kemp and Andrew's design.

## Act II

On a Sunday afternoon, toward the end of the show's run, the entire first row is filled with black students. The actors take their bows on stage, and the audience is invited to stay for a talk with the performers. Though the young men in the first row don't ask any questions themselves, they sit and listen to these men.

"What do you want the audience to get out of this show?" one patron asks.

The actors consider the question, then look toward the front row. All of them echo "brotherhood," and remind the young men that this performance was for them more than anyone else. Lamar K. Cheston, who played one of two bodyguards alongside the four historical figures, emphasized that the story was meant to be "unapologetically black," and should make the audience think about how emotions, friendships and masculinity are all affected by being black.

City Theatre, as a new works company, is dedicated to bringing unheard stories to the forefront of their production efforts. Just as they explore race in *One Night*, they continue on to explore sexuality, class and gender throughout

the rest of their season. It is a company that is dedicated to featuring these alternative narratives and making sure they are seen and heard.

Joel Ambrose, the company's Director of Ticketing & Patron Services, describes this work as trying to get people to "take a risk on a new show!" In addition to marketing these stories without giving too much away, the theater also hosts a number of ticketing services to ensure its productions are accessible to a wider audience.

For example, the theater hosts "Pick Your Price Previews," where patrons can pay as little as a penny to watch the last few dress rehearsal performances. Where other companies only feature student discounts, City Theatre has a discount for any patron under 30, as well as a local artist rate. Ambrose describes these prices, which may be seen as a loss on the theater's part, as an effort in bridging theater's "elitist" gap by inviting more and more people into their space.

At the end of the day, members of City Theatre like Joel and Reginald want audiences to know that they are an integral part of the theatrical performance. If tech, production design and acting are one half of the theater, then the audience occupies the other half.

"It's okay to be yourself here," Reginald says. "We want engagement, we want you to be alive and to be present. You should be laughing and oohing and ahing!"

# PENNSYLVANIA WORKS FOR WOMEN

Story by Marcela Mack

*The mission of Pennsylvania Women Work is to "transform women's lives through empowerment, employment and economic independence." Their goal is to help women - no matter their situation or background - to feel confident when heading into the job market. Whether they need to improve their interview skills or just set personal goals, Pennsylvania Women Work follows through on what its name promises.*

"I feel confident and ready," says Shirley York.

"I feel way more self-confident," says Lori Fitzgerald.

Confidence...this is a common outcome among those who graduated from the New Choices program of Pennsylvania Women Work.

Pennsylvania Women Work is a non-profit organization providing programs and outreach for women who want to join or re-join the workforce. Individuals who face barriers finding work have found a safe place where they can gain the skills they need to secure a salaried job, while developing some personal growth along the way, too. While women are the focus of this organization, its focus extends beyond women.

"Pennsylvania Women Work – and a few good men," says instructor Sandra McClain. "In one class, we can have someone with a GED and someone else with a Ph.D. Their circumstances are as unique as they are."

With several different programs, PAWW offers the chance to learn skills ranging from resume-writing and interviewing to networking. The programs include but are not limited to: Customer Service; New Choices (providing computer and career development classes to those in a transitional period to get back into the workforce); GROW (helping young, low-income mothers and fathers be ready for a job amidst being parents); RISE (Refugee and Immigrant Services for Employment); and 3 Cups of Coffee (a mentoring program that connects job-ready individuals to professionals in the field they aspire to).

This isn't your run of the mill sit-down class, though. The way the curriculum is designed, focusing on engaging and encouraging each other, clients come out with a whole new support system that will last a lifetime. Clients have complete ease with one another and enjoy themselves, forgetting it's even a class.

"It felt like the time flew by even though it was three hours," says Lori Fitzgerald.

People from all walks of life come to this organization for many different reasons, but what unites them is that they're all job seekers. In fact, client Shirley York taught high school science for 33 years, retired for 10 years, and bravely decided to go back into the workforce after a long hiatus.

"That thought terrified me. I didn't know how to do a resume. I hadn't interviewed for almost 40 years. I heard that things had changed so much," Shirley recalls. After completing the New Choices program, Shirley feels ready to rejoin the working

world.

"This was the most wonderful opportunity for me to catch up," says Shirley.

Many women find themselves out of the workforce because they had to stay home and care for their children. By the time they decided to return to the workforce, the world of hiring had changed completely due to changes in technology and the rise of social media.

Lori, who had a ten-year gap in her resume from staying home, was overwhelmed when she decided to go back to work.

"It was really hard to get back into the head-space of finding a job. This program got me up to speed on getting back into the mindset of interviewing, how to use online tools, what goes into a resume, and so much more," says Lori.

When the New Choices clients graduate from their nine-week program, there is sadness in the room as they leave the instructors and classmates who have impacted their lives. But amidst all the hugs and goodbyes, there is hope for what is to come from the valuable education they received in the program.

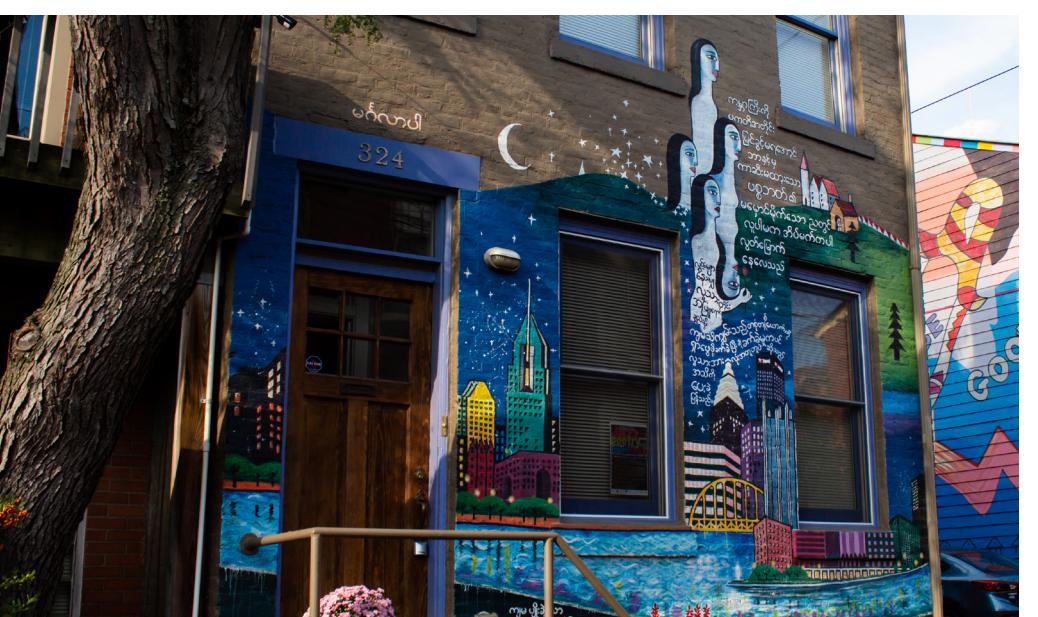
"We've learned more than just job skills here. Thank you for everything," says Shirley.

All of the programs at PAWW are free of charge and clients don't stop learning once they finish. The instructors encourage them to stay in touch, to reach out when they've gotten a job and to continue using the resources PAWW offers.

"Once a client of Pennsylvania Women Work, always a client of Pennsylvania Women Work," says Sandra.

While the skills learned at Pennsylvania Women Work are essential, the lessons go far deeper. The support and encouragement within this program instill a sense of confidence and self-worth in their clients.

"You see a client at the beginning of a class that is uncertain, unsure and their confidence is shaky," says Sandra. 'And then as a result of going through the program, they feel empowered and confident - it's the absolute best thing, seeing that is wonderful.' OTB



Photos by Julie Loesch

# QUARTET OF HOUSES CREATES A MELODY OF REFUGE

Story by Emily Fitzgerald

Walking into Alphabet City, an independent bookstore on the North Shore, the lights are already dimmed and the crowd is hushed in anticipation of the Jazz Poetry event that is about to begin. On cue, each audience member holds up a large sheet of paper with a different name printed in the middle. The back of the sheet reads, "In your hands you hold the name and story of a writer persecuted during the past year."

This is a tradition observed during each night of the City of Asylum's Jazz Poetry month. The awareness of the City of Asylum's mission and the hosting of a jazz event go hand in hand. Abby Lembersky, the Director of Programs at City of Asylum, has been with the organization for over 9 years and recognizes the significance of hosting collaborative programs like Jazz Poetry Month.

"There's a rich history of jazz in this city and so it's a way to honor the cultural history of Pittsburgh from the past. Our whole mission for our public programs is about freedom of expression and giving artists space to experiment and to innovate and to share the utmost creativity through their artistic voice. So that's the general mission of our public programming and jazz is the best manifestation of that mission within music," says Lembersky.

Back in Alphabet City, the tension is palpable as the audience awaits the start of the show. Four gentlemen take the stage and each finds his place either on a piano bench or beside an upright bass, drum kit or music stand. A muted cacophony of notes crash together in an intro that builds before it is halted all too soon and the next song begins. The quick and steady bass line beats beneath as piano, drums and saxophone churn out a melody that seems almost improvised, if not for the front man introducing each song before they begin again.

This is what it's like to be a part of Jazz Poetry month at City of Asylum on the North Shore – chaotic and harmonious and comforting all at once.

What started as a one-time celebration of poetry and music grew and transitioned into a month long event that supports and brings awareness to the mission of City of Asylum. It is more than just an organization; City of Asylum is truly its own small city, housing a restaurant, bookstore, and writer residencies all in a three block radius. The goal is to create and support a place where exiled writers can build new lives for themselves and continue to create.

"We're about art and artists engaging one

another and creating conversation...and you really see a manifestation of that when you see the musicians and poets on the stage," says Abby Lembersky, Director of Programs at City of Asylum.

Jazz Poetry Month is just one of many ways that City of Asylum serves exiled writers. It also provides them and their families with housing for two years, a stipend, medical benefits, and any other resources that they may need while they become stable and self-supporting.

City of Asylum has four houses available for writers to use during their residency with the organization. Walking down Sampsonia Way, the residency houses stand out amongst the stark white siding or red brick homes of their neighbors because each has been decorated by an individual who is key to the success of City of Asylum.

House Poem is a tall and dark building that was hand-painted by Huang Xiang, the first Writer in Residence in Pittsburgh, in 2004. This two-story home is a deep brown wood, which makes the white Chinese characters stand out even more. The writing spells out excerpts from Xiang's writings, writing that led to his persecution in China. The painting of the house serves as a metaphor for his newfound freedom that he gained when he came to City of Asylum.

Further down the street sits the Winged House. Without prior knowledge and without noticing the small metal plaque that adorns the front door, a passerby might not even know that the house was significant. The three large wooden wings fastened to the front of the house, though prominent, seem like nothing more than a bold choice made by an eccentric homeowner.

In reality, Winged House features the combined artwork of Wole Soyinka, a Nigerian writer and co-founder of one of the first asylum cities in Paris, with sculptures from Thaddeus Mosley. Soyinka wrote the text that was engraved into the glass front door, which is an excerpt from the time he was imprisoned in solitary confinement.

Next door is Pittsburgh-Burma House, whose art combines an almost-Impressionistic depiction of Pittsburgh on the front with Picasso-esque images of rural, Burmese peasants on its side. This combination of artistic styles came from the dream of one woman, the third exiled writer to come to Pittsburgh: Khet Mar. She wanted to blend her original home in Burma with her new life in Pittsburgh and the artwork on her home became the result.

The last of the four houses is certainly the most colorful, all bright blues and reds and yellows. Along one side is a large safety pin with the words "Just be good" woven throughout the image. The word "good" drips from the mouthpiece of an abstract saxophone, which matches the other saxophone on the front of the house. This is Jazz House.

All four houses create a quartet of their own, each providing an important voice that harmonizes and tells the story of City of Asylum. These homes for exiled writers are crucial to the goal of City of Asylum but they are just four pieces in a much bigger puzzle. Through programming that raises awareness, both for the organization and for the overarching issue of persecuting writers for using their voices, City of Asylum can continue and grow their impact on a global scale.

"When you bring artists together to collaborate and for audiences to engage with different artists and different forms of freedom of expression, you build understanding for one another's stories that are different from your own. This builds empathy and a better, stronger community," Abby Lembersky says.

On stage in Alphabet City, the saxophonist, Jure Pukl, introduces the band members in between songs. He briefly describes each of their origin stories and their journeys from home countries of Slovenia and Serbia.

"Thank you for having us. We came all the way from New York to be here and before that? Well, that's a long story." The audience chuckles and understands that within that small joke, lies the story and history of City of Asylum. 



# THE FEEL-GOOD PLACE FOR PITTSBURGHERS

Story by Anna Westkemper

*In the middle of the "steel city," a place where factories and mines used to shape the cityscape, you can find a remnant of the desire for a green oasis: Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Garden. When Henry Phipps opened the garden in 1893, the purpose was to educate and entertain citizens through the beauty of plants. In recent years, the conservatory has transformed into one of the greenest facilities in Pittsburgh and takes as its mission the promotion of sustainability.*

Photos by Justin Sines

After passing crowds of students on the University of Pittsburgh's campus and children playing in Schenley Park, stepping into the Phipps Conservatory feels like stepping into a bubble of calmness. It is not very crowded on a Monday - mostly elderly people and families with young children making their way through the different parts of the botanical garden. From the orchid room, colored in fifty shades of pink, to the desert room with exotic plants, Phipps seems to be a getaway for stressed citizens who want to enjoy some nature. However, the garden offers much more than simple respite.

Volunteer Olivia Zitelli sits in a humid hall where a little waterfall splashes in the background and immense green trees sprout up. Her navy-blue dress matches the frame of her glasses. Olivia touches the flower on her big silver necklace.

"This is my happiest place ever. I came here since I was a child. It was on my bucket list to become a volunteer here one day. When I was still working, I would use my vacation days on Fridays so I could come here," says Olivia.

After Olivia retired 1 1/2 years ago, she started working as a volunteer at Phipps. She guides the visitors through the garden and teaches not only about the plants, but about culture as well. The hall houses a special exhibit about Cuba that shows the many cultural facets of the country. This exhibit changes every three years, but always deals with a nation that is home to a tropical rainforest. Cultural education is one aim of the Botanical Garden. But as Olivia puts it: "It is all about sustainability here in Phipps."

**"We hope that people learn something on the way"**

Even before climate change became

a prominent public issue, the conservatory was a green spot in the city. Since the opening of the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified Welcome Center in 2005, the garden has tried to make all its buildings emission free. Now that there is a growing concern about the environment, the garden has strengthened its focus on education. A video series informs visitors about small changes in their daily life that can have a huge impact on their own CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, like switching to green energy or bicycling instead of driving more often. Children and adults can also sign up for a variety of classes in the garden to learn about plants and different kinds of vegetables and fruits.

Interactive Marketing Administrator Jessica Ignasky started working for Phipps in July, after the 23-year-old completed an internship there. She enjoys working in a place that matches her own standards for green living, including a fully vegetarian café.

"What I love about Phipps is: We don't just say – hey, you should do this. We actually do it," Jessica says.

While employees and volunteers are focused on the lessons the Phipps can teach about sustainability, Jessica knows that most people come to the botanical garden for the flowers.

"Sustainability is abstract to a lot of people. That is why we let people enter every building so they can feel what it is really about," says Jessica. She says that forcing people to educate themselves is not the goal of Phipps, but rather that they "come for the flower shows and learn something along the way."

**"Every time you find so many new things around here"**

Pittsburgh friends Pat Mattussi and Frank Di Angelo come to the botanical garden on a regular basis. Pat is a reso-

lute woman with short, grayish hair and a raspy voice.

"We came because of the Van Gogh exhibition. I love the different species and plants around here," says Mattussi.

The Van Gogh in Bloom exhibition features some of the most famous works of the Dutch painter – like "Self Portrait with Straw Hat" and "Wheat Field with Cypresses" -- recreated with hundreds of flowers planted in a mold. Visitors can compare the flower-arrangements with pictures of the Van-Gogh-paintings next to them. Frank carries a small camera to take some pictures of the exhibition. Frank worships the atmosphere of the garden. "It is very peaceful around here, especially during the weekdays," he explains.

No wonder, then, that when you look around you see a woman on one of the wooden benches, fully immersed in her book. Or an art student with a sketchpad, observing the koi fish in the pond. In the butterfly room, though, you look for butterflies in vain. The season is over for the sensitive creatures. Barb Cardenel-Busse and Jean Ingeth don't mind the absence of the butterflies. The two women are having a chat, looking at the glass artwork between the plants.

When talking about the botanical garden, they complete each other's statements, speaking with heavy Pittsburgh-accents. Barb says that she has probably visited the garden eight times already. "But it still feels like the first time, because you find so many new things around here." Like Pat and Frank, the two women came for the special exhibition. However, when Jean describes how the place allows them to slow down, she manages to put the vibe of Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Garden into words: "When do you actually take your time to look at things? Here you do!" OTB

# KARDS UNLIMITED GREETS SHADYSIDE VISITORS

Story by Sarah DuJordan

Barks, giggles, and cries of amazement can be heard coming out of Hallmark's "rebellious sibling"—Kards Unlimited, a one-stop shop for odd gifts on Walnut Street in Shadyside.

Once a speakeasy in the 1920's named The Hollywood Social Club, a narrow entrance full of audible floor creaks invites customers to wander through a maze of prayer candles, bearing the visages of William Shakespeare, John Lennon, and Frida Kahlo, as the smell of new books wafts about.

Kards Unlimited opened in 1968 with the intention of being a counter-culture store. Though it no longer has the same reputation, it remains outside the mainstream.

Outside, a simple American flag decorates the store's sign, a direct contrast to the hodgepodge of gifts and decor scattered throughout the store.

Inside, candles are named after classic novels, such as a peach-scented candle named James and the Giant Peach or The Secret Garden, named after its floral scent.

Customers who walk in will not only be greeted by the floor creaking beneath their feet, but the aroma of incense and soaps emulating the smells of "Morning People" and "The Middle Child."

Eclectic mugs that read "Stay Woke" and "No matter what age you are, you always need your mom" line the walls. Baby onesies that say "Russians hacked my diaper" and "Welcome to the S\*\*\* Show" hang from the ceiling above.

Kards Unlimited is not just a neighborhood card store, but a store that

is not shy about the idea of selling potentially so-called offensive items. Some more conservative shoppers may not appreciate a t-shirt that reads "Lesbiyinz," a stuffed animal weed leaf, or a breath spray promising an "instant gay accent."

Amanda Blair, manager and prospective owner, feels what makes the store itself unique is the lack of concern about carrying items some would consider "offensive."

Kards Unlimited welcomes people of all generations, races, and genders and even opens its doors to visitors of other species; Amanda can't help but treat customers' pets like her own.

"All kinds of people come in, and along with having regulars, we also have regular dogs," Blair says. "A woman and her dog were regulars to our store and when she told me her dog died it impacted me greatly."

Emma Eberly, a Duquesne student, saunters about the store looking for a last-minute card to get her boyfriend. It is her second time here.

"I came in here with my boyfriend the for the first time last month and we spent hours in here," Eberly says. "It's a really cool place to just wander around."

Blair describes the excitement she feels when hearing positive comments and reviews about the store and the experiences people often have.

"People often vocalize when they have their first experience here," Amanda says. "We love when we get feedback from people that reach out and say they are thankful for our store."

Nate Pearson, a local college



student, comments on the genuine energy he felt when first visiting Kards Unlimited.

"It was a cool place. They had lots of interesting stuff to offer, like books, games, and unique greeting

cards," Pearson says, "It was in a really neat area of town; I definitely would go back again."

Technology has woven itself into everyone's daily life, but Kards Unlimited refuses to conform to society's standards.

All inventory is done by hand and



Photos by Rachel Miller

"DIY culture and support of small businesses from the younger generation is what keeps our shop running," Blair states. "Despite technology, you still have to get your mother a Mother's Day card." OTB

# THE BLUE MOON: A QUEER HAVEN

Story + Photos by Julia Mudrock

Andy Henderson didn't set out to own Pittsburgh's best LGBTQ+ bar. In fact, Blue Moon Bar was originally intended to be a standard dive bar. Then the gay people came and lit the place up.

Andy works seven days a week. His days begin at 10 a.m., ordering alcohol and cleaning.

"We are an older bar, but I take a lot of pride in our bar being clean—if you have to use the bathroom you aren't scared," Andy jokes. "So to turn this old place into the #1 gay bar in the city has been a just a blast, it has been so much fun. It really is the best job I've ever had."

Blue Moon Bar has been voted Pittsburgh's best LGBTQ+ bar for four years running by the *Pittsburgh City Paper*. It has always been known as a safe haven for the queer community, especially at times when being open about one's sexuality could bring discrimination or even violence.

Blue Moon has achieved such great success because of its regular drag events. On Wednesday there's always an open stage drag show hosted by queen Bambi Dearest. Every Thursday, host Cindy Crotchford hosts "Bag that Drag," a game show. Every Saturday multiple queens, like Dixie Surewood, Cindy Crotchford, Scarlet Fairweather, Ripp Lee, Bambi and many more take the stage. Some Mondays are Mildred Mondays - the lunch lady who brings food like BBQ chicken wings and pierogi for \$2. On occasional Sundays, pop-up drag shows occur that each

have their own respective theme, and many Tuesdays feature a queen to host their "Dragula" viewing party.

It is both a home and a stage for performers like Bambi Dearest and Bellatrix Foxx.

Blue Moon is also successful because of its role as a pioneer of the Pittsburgh Drag Scene.

Now, other bars are following suit. Cavo has a drag night every Thursday. Hard Rock Café, Black Forge Coffee House II, Smiling Moose, and Olive or Twist all feature shows at least once per month and have drag brunches as well. The Andy Warhol Museum even features an annual kid's drag variety show called "Twinkle!" that started five years ago.

It wasn't always this way.

"We started doing drag shows way before them, when [the competition] used to make fun of us for doing it... now they're copying us, so we must be doing something right. I'm not angry, I'm flattered," Andy says.

Two of Blue Moon's pioneer drag queen acts included Sharon Needles and Alaska 5000, who went on to win their respective seasons of RuPaul's VH1 show "Drag Race," which won its second consecutive Emmy this year for Outstanding Competition Program.

These performers fueled Blue Moon's success and gained the bar national coverage. The reputation of Blue Moon extends far beyond Pittsburgh. Blue Moon Bar was named one of Buzzfeed's, "25 Amazing Gay Bars Around The World To Visit Before You Die."

The bar's motto is "Be nice or get out" and it is unapologetically rowdy, queer, and all-inclusive. It celebrates people who celebrate themselves—which is why many customers are regulars.

"This is my fourth time here this week," a customer proudly exclaims to Justin the bartender.

One autumn Sunday night Blue Moon hosts a witchy Halloween-themed show.

Bellatrix Foxx, the host, adjusts her witch hat and yells to the crowd. "Is your liquor kicking in yet?" she asks. They roar back; it most certainly is.

Next up is drag queen Bambi.

"In These Shoes" by Kristy MacCol begins to blare as she takes the stage, wearing a Jason (from Friday the 13th) mask and high black leather boots. She sashays around the stage singing the words with dramatic flair, while wielding a plastic machete. She drops to the ground without a sound and the song abruptly changes to an Eminem classic: "Cleanin' Out My Closet."

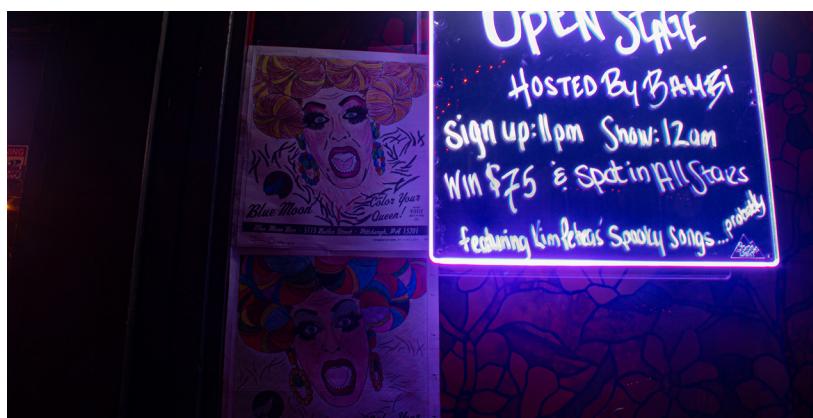
*Have you ever been hated or discriminated against?*

*I have, I've been protested and demonstrated against*

*Picket signs for my wicked rhymes, look at the times*

The raw emotion energizes the crowd. They begin chanting along with Bambi underneath the pair of disco balls.

Fueled by Justin's generous pour, pa-



trons race to hand her dollar bills—The song suddenly shifts again.

*Mamma mia, here I go again  
My my, how can I resist you?  
Mamma mia, does it show again?*

As Bambi finishes her performance Bellatrix shouts her approval to the crowd. "There's a reason she's a queen. Let's make some noise for Bambi."

The eclectic crowd cheers.

Andy says Blue Moon is like a family. "We fight, we cry, we laugh—together." Bambi agrees that there's more to Blue Moon than its exceptional dive bar drag.

It's a safe space. It's home. 



# BURNING BRIDGES: STANDING UP FOR COMEDY

Story by Antonia Gelorme

Photos by Calvin Smith

Off the Bluff - Spring 2020

Between pouring drinks for a smattering of customers, Karla Baur reflects on her career as a professional comedian, her family history and watching Pittsburgh change around her. Her proclamation of, "I know I'm funny, I know!" and natural flow of profanity are a welcome disruption to the sleepy afternoon.

When asked about the comedy scene in Pittsburgh, she is keen to point out its new sense of humor – one that doesn't push the same boundaries that she loves to challenge.

"Comedy should make you think," Baur says. "Everyone plays it safe here."

Baur, who is taking a break from performing, says her sets are about her whole family's history of heroin use and her experience as a white girl going to black-girl sleepovers, but the performers she sees take fewer risks. Without missing a beat, she turns serious: "Comedy is my therapy." For Baur, it is a vital avenue for processing personal trauma, as well as the state of the world. It shouldn't be taken lightly.

So, where does Pittsburgh fit into this world of comedy? What was once a gritty, working class, heavily segregated city is now a livable, student-filled heavily segregated city. Sure, the accent is laughable, but there hardly seems to be a robust, let alone notable, comedy scene when looking in from the outside. From within, though, the city is lively, with both professionals and amateurs and long open mic nights – like Monday night at Hambone's.

The stage at Hambone's bar is a small, raised corner in a room of filled with tables and booths that looks better suited for a town hall meeting than the Burning Bridges Comedy Club. The walls of this room are decorated with original local artwork (you can use PayPal to buy it). The crowd is sparse, but lively and a little too drunk for a Monday night. The front two tables, prime locations for being roasted by the rotation of performers, are full of university students eating dinner and anxiously awaiting their friends' sets.

When host Osha Dwyer steps up to the mic the lights in the room go down and the stage glows with red and blue lighting. She gives instructions to the performers, promising to sing ABBA if they don't step down when their time is up, and instructs the crowd to ignore the missing ceiling tiles above the stage – it's part of their "rustic warehouse theme."

A steady stream of performers steps on stage, each with only four minutes and 30 seconds to get through their sets. Topics vary from dating and sex to alcoholism and pot. The back of the room holds the rowdiest section of the audience: fellow performers. When a joke falls flat, enthusiastic cheers still erupt from their corner. Performers on stage thank their cheerleaders by name.

Among the regulars, Deric Brown steps up to take his turn. "I actually really like blackface," he begins. "I like how it completely ruins people's lives. I've actually been trying to get my white friends to do it for Halloween." His set pokes fun at his experience of being black in a demographically white area and also documents his attempts to adopt a retired police dog.

Paige Polesnak, smiling broadly, is next. Her set revolves around her being both bisexual and bipolar, and her own dating experiences. "If you can buy a lottery scratch-off, you can probably have sex with me," she begins. "It means you're

over 18 and you have a quarter."

Outside the bar, a handful of performers stand near the doorway to smoke or chat in the quiet night air.

Deric, a D.C. native turned Pittsburgher, laughs at the question What makes you think you're funny?

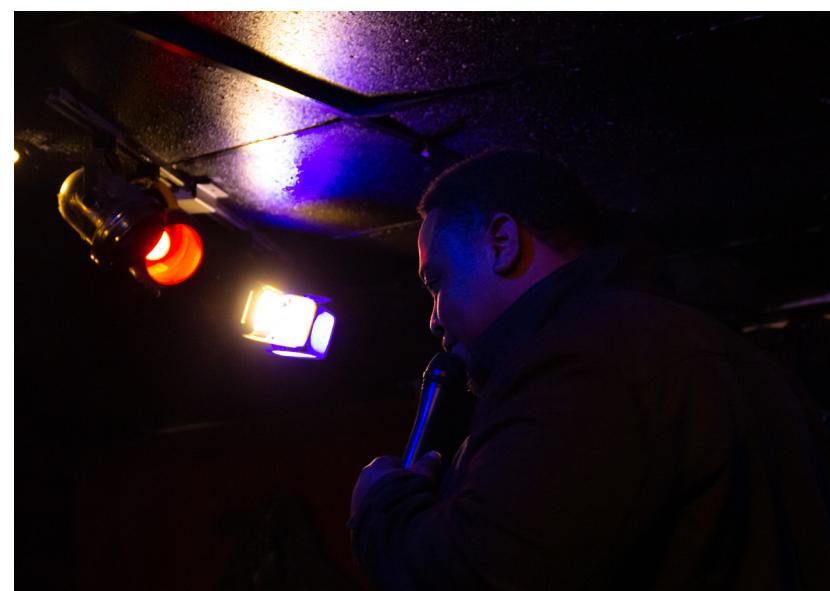
"Well, I started doing stand-up out of hate, really," he replies. According to him, all of his friends were going up at open mics and getting laughs, and they weren't even funny. So, he thought he could do better. "I also just wanted something else for myself," he continues. "I wanted to be funny, not just the black kid."

Paige compares her comedy to just reading pages from her diary on a stage. "This is like my dirty little secret, you know?" Since she has performed out in Midwestern venues before, she finds Lawrenceville to be a less conservative audience for her material.

For Deric, performing in Lawrenceville is a double-edged sword. "There are less minorities in a Pittsburgh crowd," he says "and there are so few open mics here. People seem to care more about sports in this city than comedy."

Even at Burning Bridges, which Deric highlights as his number one spot for its open mics, the majority of the Monday night crowd can also be found on the set list for the night. "The performers here really support each other, though. That's rare in most places," he says in comparison to D.C. There, he found there were a lot of gatekeepers blocking newcomers from popular performance areas.

Karla still remembers being "scared to death" in front of the crowds. "At the end of the day, the audience wants you to be funny. They don't want you to suck," she adds optimistically.



Whether it's 20 people at the Burning Bridges Comedy Club in Lawrenceville, or 20,000 audience members on a national tour, it takes some serious confidence to stand up and spill your guts in front of a crowd.

Among his peers out on the sidewalk, Deric Brown contemplates what makes someone fit to take the stage and do it well.

"Something has got to be off for someone to be a comedian, to have that knob turned all the way up." 

# OPEN DOORS + OPEN HEARTS IN EAST LIBERTY

Story + Photos by Emily Fitzgerald

East Liberty Presbyterian Church Pastor Randy Bush works hard to make the church a place of open doors in a neighborhood that is pushing already marginalized residents to the edges of society.

"The hardest barrier we face is actually getting people in our doors," Bush says. "Many people walk by and think...it's all wealthy white-folk; I wouldn't be welcome inside.' And over the years, many people have learned that's not the case...that literally all are welcome."

Through the content in his sermons and the community outreach programs at ELPC, Bush makes the church, and ultimately religion, an accessible and inclusive space for the residents of East Liberty and beyond.

Bush became pastor at ELPC – which brands itself as "The Cathedral of Hope" – in 2006. It was a time when East Liberty was locked in a struggle over urban development that had been fought for decades.

In the 1950s, East Liberty was home to Pennsylvania's third-largest shopping district and featured many attractions, including seven theaters, multiple major shopping stores and trolley lines. That all changed in the 1970s with the implementation of the Urban Renewal Plan, which demolished around 1,200 homes and reduced the size of the shopping district by 1 million square feet in an attempt to stop residents' movement to suburban areas. The plan was a disaster and led to decades of crime and vandalism in the East Liberty neighborhood that still affects the current residents. Bush has witnessed first-hand the role that this history has played in the way visitors and members of his church view the neighborhood.

"When I came [in 2006], people wouldn't come to East Liberty because they didn't feel it was safe. The church has always been a place that's opened its doors to welcome people – that served the community – people knew that, so basically since I've been here,



I've seen our church do even more," says Bush.

As Bush talks, the sounds of dump trucks and backhoes scraping and beeping signal construction in East Liberty just outside the windows. This sort of change leads to new business for the East Liberty area, but it also means displacement for its lower-income residents. Bush recognizes these concerns and emphasizes the benefits of the development as well as the social programs that ELPC has started to reach the populations that this construction may be pushing out.

"The new apartments and some of the new businesses were all in abandoned buildings, so it's not like anyone was displaced. They were dangerous, empty, abandoned buildings and a constant reminder of what East Liberty used to be," says Bush. "I think the downside is the struggles with some of the schools in the area and some of changing storefronts – not all – but some of the lower income population had to look elsewhere for some of their supplies or some things they need."

ELPC has many programs in place to help marginalized groups. Once the food pantry and soup kitchen moved from the church to its own building in the East End, it freed up space for ELPC to open Chapel Market, a program that provides clothing to underprivileged individuals at no cost. This is just one of many ways that ELPC uses its resources to give back to its community.

From marching in the Pittsburgh Pride Parade to providing leadership opportunities for women, ELPC is all about changing the perception of traditional religion. Bush recognizes the struggle of modern religious organizations – only 25% of individuals identify as "religious"

– and is actively working with his congregation to make changes. ELPC offers a solution to this disconnect in modern church-goers: allowing them to identify as members or simply as "friends."

"In today's culture, it is very difficult to get people to commit to a church congregation for a variety of reasons: they have not felt welcome, they've been kicked out, they've been abused, they've been disappointed in churches, so recognizing that dynamic ... they may not be comfortable with saying 'I want to be a member' but they want to affiliate here. So the category of "friend" is our way of accommodating people that are still exploring their faith," says Bush.

This option is just one of many face-lifts that ELPC has given to organized religion. Bush is a firm believer that "if it's out in the world, the church should be talking about it." For Bush, that means writing op-ed pieces for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette about the benefits that gay marriage provides to a church congregation or addressing serious political issues in Sunday's service. By incorporating themes of social justice into his sermons, Bush brings significant topics to the pulpit.

"It's a fine line to walk, but I will talk about racism and white privilege; I will talk about economic injustice and immigration," says Bush. "The bottom line is if people are talking about these issues on the streets or when they're going to their car after church or when they're sitting at home or when they're scrolling down, the church has to talk about it because there's no part of our life where God is not active." OTB



Photos by Nicole Martonik

## LIVING HISTORY: BRIAN BUTKO

Story by Julia Mudrock

Three rivers converge in the heart of Pittsburgh, a geographic metaphor well representative of its history. This city is and always has been a melting pot of different people and ideas. While Pittsburghers seem to be in love with their past, they're often careless when it comes to preserving it. That's where historian Brian Butko comes in – he has dedicated his career to documenting the life of the region in which he grew up.

Brian works at the confluence of Pittsburgh's past, present and future: The Heinz History Center. He has been named *Pittsburgh City Paper's* "Best Local Writer" in 2017, '18 and '19. He's the editor of the *Western Pennsylvania History Magazine* and the designer of the *Society for Commercial Archeology Journal*. His work in documenting people and places is aimed at inspiring people to not only look back on Western Pennsylvania's past, but also to see "what's beyond the horizon."

Pittsburgh has always been Brian's home and, in a way, part of his home will always be in Pittsburgh. The innovation section of the John Heinz History Center has a model of a 1950s home that's actually designed after the house he grew up in, in outlying McKeesport.

Brian's love for and interest in history extends back to his childhood when he would go on road trips with his parents.

"My dad liked to go to places when they opened, like the lookout tower at Gettysburg, which got me interested in the Civil War," Brian says. "And my mom often took us to historic sites around the region like Meadowcroft, Bowman's Castle and Fort Ligonier. Both of them always had an interest and respect for older businesses, so from a young age I was fascinated by the layers of the past."

Brian's life's work is to explore those layers of the past in Western Pennsylvania. The Heinz History Center, a Smithsonian Affiliate, is the largest museum and research center in Pennsylvania. Located in the historic Strip District, its brick-structure is adorned with a neon Heinz logo that used to loom over the condiment factory across the river. At night, its red neon glow can be spotted from miles away.

The History Center aims to preserve the area's heritage and

history – a mission that grows more urgent as Pittsburgh changes rapidly; recently, *Pittsburgh City Paper* published an article entitled: "Pittsburgh is one of the most gentrified cities in the U.S."

"It's difficult for people to see and understand what Pittsburgh used to look like," Brian says.

The Strip District, for example, was once the central portal for the entire city's supplies, full of warehouses and working class housing but it is now dominated by office buildings and condos. Additionally, neighborhoods like Lawrenceville, Bloomfield and Garfield have all had their share of gentrification and displacement, diluting their connections to Pittsburgh's blue-collar past.

Walking through the museum, Brian stops to point out the large Islay's sign, with a look of admiration similar to that of a report card that proudly hangs on a refrigerator. It's a reminder of the work that he's done for the museum and preserving the area's past.

"I did a book on Islay's – most famous for inventing the Klondike bar," Brian says. "When I was growing up, they were like McDonald's, everywhere. Then one day you looked around and they seemed to disappear. A lot of my work has been documenting how something could be such a thriving business, loved by the people who work and go there, and then just disappear."

With the rise of the internet and social media, it has become easier to locate the historical footprints of modern developments. Companies often use old photos or logos for throwback posts, in aims to make the consumer feel affection for their heritage as a way to sell products.

"History has almost become a commodity," Brian says. "Companies and people all consider history a thing that can be bought or sold and turned into ad campaigns...but this new fascination does not necessarily translate into preserving sites and structures."

Brian stops at the Mister Rogers exhibit to point out that all the artifacts are authentic. About five years ago, WQED cleared out their storage and the museum rescued them.

"It shows how quickly in that time how history has gone from, 'oh these are just taking up space,' to if it was now, I think perhaps they wouldn't give them away so easy," Brian says.

Mister Rogers, who called Squirrel Hill home, emphasized the idea of "a neighbor" and living in a "neighborhood." While Pittsburgh is a city, it's a city of 90 neighborhoods that together serve as a hub for many surrounding municipalities, some with industrial roots, some with rural roots.

"Pittsburgh is a city of contrasts," Brian says. And the change it is experiencing now is nothing new.

As the city grew during the Industrial Revolution and beyond, different cultural groups banded together in neighborhoods, establishing their own schools, churches and beneficial societies to pass their language and culture to the next generation. For instance, the Hill District originally had many Jewish and Italian immigrants and, later, African-Americans. The name Polish Hill tells the story of the neighborhood's origin. Troy Hill became home for German immigrants and Bloomfield attracted Italians – today it is still known as Pittsburgh's Little Italy. But gentrification and shifts in demographics have weakened the ethnic identities of many neighborhoods.

"Pittsburghers are proud of ethnic groups even as they continue to fade," Brian says. "When the city was new, wealthy lived downtown. That's called the 'rings of the city' – as the industry expands, and immigrants move in, the wealthy move out (in the late 1800s)," Brian says.

After World War II, the middle class also took flight. Class separation began. The Squirrel Hill and Liberty Tunnels, as well as the parkways, sped up migration to the suburbs.

"Even now the famous joke is that Pittsburghers hate to cross a river to get anywhere, especially two," Brian says. "My family lived near Kennywood, but we never made it to West View Park, an amusement park only 20 minutes away, because we would never cross the Monongahela and the Allegheny to get to it."

Today, Pittsburgh is experiencing a technological revolution as modern-day tech companies like Argo AI and Duolingo establish headquarters in historic neighborhoods like the Strip District and Lawrenceville.

"It's cool to think about how different that world was about 114 years ago, but how exactly the same people are," Brian says. "I like to say that in history nothing has changed except our style of clothes. People still have the same vices, worries, health and love issues." 



# FROM THE COUNTY JAIL TO COUNTY COUNCIL: BETHANY HALLAM'S UPWARD JOURNEY

Story by Anna Westkemper

## **How Bethany Hallam wants to make Pittsburgh a better place for everyone**

Bethany Hallam is an energetic young woman, a fast speaker who clicks her black and yellow painted fingernails on the tabletop as she speaks.

"I work during the day, and when I get off, I do politics all night. Whether it's going to events, or knocking doors, to find out what people need help with. I am done when I get home at night. But I love it. And I really feel like I am making a difference."

## **From opioid addiction to politician: Bethany's road to County Council**

On November 5, 30-year-old Bethany Hallam was elected to serve on the Allegheny County Council. In the May 2019 primary, the Pittsburgh born-and-raised and Duquesne University alum defeated Democratic council president John DeFazio, who had been a member of the County Council since its founding in 2000. The council consists of 15 elected officials, 13 district representatives and two-at-large (county wide) seats, one of which was taken by Hallam. Among other things, the council can change laws in the county.

In every election, candidates try to get voters on their side with a compelling backstory. Rarely do those stories include opioid addiction and jail time; Hallam's story does. Bethany is a big sports fan and played varsity lacrosse in high school. When she suffered from two knee injuries in a row, she was over-prescribed Vicodin and became addicted to opioids, an unfortunately common occurrence in Western Pennsylvania. Bethany's struggle with addiction led her to spending about six months in the Allegheny County Jail and losing her driver's license.

In prison Bethany was able to overcome her drug abuse. Once she got out of the county jail, she became even more involved with politics. She had already been a member of the Democratic committee before and had helped other politicians. After encouraging other people to run for office, she felt like it was her time to step up and run for a seat in the County Council.

## **"A big city with a small town feel"**

With policies regarding criminal justice, climate change or better conditions for people of color: Bethany has a vision of what she wants to change in Allegheny County and what she wants the city of Pittsburgh to look like. And after campaigning for months and traveling through every Pittsburgh neighborhood, she can surely tell what manner of city this is.

"Pittsburgh definitely is a big city with a small-town feel," she says. "I can go any-

where in the city and talk to anyone and we have a mutual friend, or we're cousins. Of all the cities I've been to, I've never found anything like that."

Bethany is a people person and talking to her neighbors, college students or on forums and panels about local politics is her passion. This kind of energy is rooted in her Pittsburgh roots, something she realized only later in her life.

"Everybody here is so friendly, and I always thought this was normal, until I traveled to other places – and to be honest, people suck in a lot of other places. Here I can talk to strangers on the street and nobody thinks I'm weird, because it's just what people do here."

**"You see the lives of minorities and people of color and they aren't feeling...the love."**

## **"Stronger than Hate?"**

Despite all the love for Pittsburgh that Hallam has, she also sees the aspects of the city that are not so great, especially since she became involved in politics. A recent study of the University of Pittsburgh showed that Pittsburgh is one of the worst cities to live in for people of color, specifically women of color. After the Tree of Life shooting in 2018 the message about being "Stronger than Hate" came up in Pittsburgh, but Hallam feels like this hasn't reached enough people yet.

"You see the lives of minorities and people of color and they aren't feeling it. They aren't feeling the love. I want my city to be known for being "Stronger than Hate" and for being inclusive for all people of color, all genders, socioeconomic status, race, or whatever it is. That is what I want my city to be known for, not for being one of the worst cities to live in as a person of color," says Bethany.

Being involved in politics and dealing with the county's problems on a daily basis could easily get frustrating, but Bethany, an unwavering optimist, understands her position in local politics is a chance to make her city a better place.

"I see that in local politics you have a lot more ability to affect change than you do nationally," she says. "If you have a problem, whether it is with the school of your kids, the bad condition of your street or your county jail, you're not going to call the White House. Or you could, but they won't answer or they won't do anything for you. But you can call your city council person or your county council person, they will answer your call and they will help you."

## **Bethany's game plan for the council**

As Bethany prepared to be sworn in, she had already set up a plan for her first 100 days in office, which started on January 2. A priority was to make jail phone calls free, explaining that her parents had to spend over \$5000 in less than six months when she talked on the phone with them for just 15 minutes a day. A lot of people do not have that privilege and spend months without talking to their loved ones. She also opposes fracking in the area and is advocate for environmental awareness.

"We have the fifth worst air quality in our nation. Here in Allegheny County, the fifth worst of the nation, that's scary!" she says. "And it is especially affecting low-income people. Because they are buildings these mills and these plants in their neighborhoods and the people there don't have the resources to fight back. People who are already disenfranchised by the system are further disenfranchised in multiple ways. I want to be a person who can fight for them."

Still, there are a lot of people who doubt that Bethany is able to hold office because of her past as an opioid addict. "I definitely have some haters out there. But it is okay, because I have been through so much in my life, that nothing can really faze me. Everything that you say to me, I thought worse about myself – so good luck!" 



## FINDING MOMENTUM

Story by Sarah DuJordan

*"Are you afraid of needles? I have to just quickly inject myself," says Alisa Grishman.*

*She manages the feat in between eating a well-deserved croissant and drinking a venti at her favorite Starbucks on Forbes Avenue, her blue hair bobbing as she wheels around the shop.*



Photos by Caroline Czap

Alisa was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis at age 19. By the time she turned 31, in 2013, her condition began deteriorating to the point where mobility became a problem. A big problem. Eventually, though, it became an opportunity, one that led to Alisa founding the advocacy group Access Mob Pittsburgh.

As her mobility declined, Alisa began to use a cane and walker. An improvement, but still a hazard on Pittsburgh's hilly and often ill-maintained walkways. One day, while navigating over cracks in a sidewalk she felt the walker shaking underneath the grip of her hands. She stumbled and flipped over.

She laid there feeling defeated and screaming.

"I felt like I was screaming at the wrong people," Alisa says, "It was such a dark and lonely point in my life. Then one day, I screamed at the right person."

Picking herself up, literally and figuratively, she began to meet with a group of other disabled people – some of whom were vision-impaired -- at a restaurant called 'Social' in Bakery Square. Since they spent so much time there, the restaurant management decided to make braille menus. Appreciative, they began promoting the restaurant, and helped it attract more customers.

When she met up with a friend and her friend's boss, a hotel manager, the episode at Social started to become a movement.

"I began telling them about what Social did," Alisa says, "The manager realized his hotel was right across the street from a school for the blind. He started coming up with all of these ideas and it was so exciting to see. That sparked the idea for Access Mob Pittsburgh."

Access Mob Pittsburgh is, for now, basically Alisa and some friends. While it may not yet have formal status, it does get results. Access Mob seeks out businesses that could improve their accommodations for disabled people – which they are mandated to do by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

"As of now, everything I do is out of pocket," she says. "If I had a non-profit standing behind me, that would mean I would no longer have to do this out of pocket."

She hopes in the future, that foundations will be willing to donate small grants to Access Mob and that tax-exempt status would encourage individual donations.

"I have a dream, that other businesses will see the success others accumulate when places accommodate to people with disabilities," Alisa says. "Hopefully, they will just voluntarily start doing it themselves. No one is going to complain about people spending money at their business, so I hope that incentive encourages change."

That was the case when a local liquor store installed a new wheelchair ramp. Alisa and others in her "mob" patronized the store and spread the word about its good citizenship.

"We wrote notes, and so did other people, that said things like 'My mom can now shop here because of the ramp' or 'Thank you for thinking

of us!' We must have spent \$600 in a week there to support the business that supports us," says Alisa.

Access Mob Pittsburgh is not an "angry protest type" of an organization. Alisa calls what she does an "unprotest." Though she may not be angry, sometimes the targets of her "unprotests" are.

"Trust me, I love a good angry protest, but there is a time and place for that." Alisa says, "Access Mob Pittsburgh is not that."

Alisa rolls up her sleeves to display the numerous tattoos etched into her skin. The right arm is decorated with flowers. Her left sports a chain wrapped around her wrist; it signifies her five arrests and she is proud of all of them.

One of these occurred in 2017 when Alisa headed to Columbus, Ohio, to join a protest of Sen. Rob Portman, who had opposed health care reform legislation. Alisa found herself pushed out of her wheelchair and then hauled into a squad car.

"I was actually pushed out of my wheelchair," she says. "Along with other people who should never be removed from their chairs. Yet they were. I was then left in an un-air conditioned car, and I have MS, so heat is a huge no-no. By the time they returned to me, I was described as unresponsive and delirious."

Despite the hardships, Alisa says she is actually grateful to be disabled.

She recounted a story of a picture she stumbled upon of Steven Hawking. He was walking up the steps to heaven, leaving his wheelchair behind – the caption read: 'He is finally free.'

"I saw that picture and I was confused because I want my wheelchair with me in heaven," Alisa says. "Had this never happened to me, I would just be plopping through jobs. I would not trade my disability for anything," Alisa says, "I have a beautiful life. I am a better person for my disability." 



Photos by Michael Buskirk



# FINDING PITTSBURGH'S VOICE

Story by Antonia Gelorme

*Mila Sanina's work begins at 9 a.m. sharp on a Wednesday morning. Bracing against the dull chill of fall in Uptown, she enters the inviting PublicSource office. After securing a cup of coffee, she settles into the bright green conference room, which is decorated with art made from recycled materials.*

Today, her first task (among many) is to edit a reporter's interview questions for Mayor Bill Peduto in the wake of Allegheny County's general elections.

Mila is the Executive Director of PublicSource, a non-profit "digital first" news organization that serves the Pittsburgh area. The organization focuses on pushing the boundaries of local journalism – starting with critically analyzing its own newsroom. Who gets to tell the story of Pittsburgh? How do the voices of its citizens – across the lines of racial diversity, gender identities and class divisions – come through in PublicSource's reporting?

Public Source's mission is reflected in some recent headlines:

**First person: Pittsburgh's museums have a diversity problem.**

**Women my age weren't called 'autistic' growing up. We were awkward or 'rude.' And we missed out on services.**

**The Pittsburgh area has stark racial inequities. Black Pittsburghers face a key question: Should they leave?**

Mila grew up in Almaty, Kazakhstan, where journalists were muzzled. However, when she enrolled at the University of Pittsburgh ten years ago to pursue a graduate degree in public policy, journalism began to seem like an enticing proposition. As an immigrant and student, she fell in love with Pittsburgh and journalism alike. She brings her experiences, as well as those working in national and international news, to her current position in leading Pittsburgh's local journalism.

"I can see it for what it is now, it has so much depth, knowledge, talent and legacy," she says about the city, now her home for over ten years. "It's deep, it really is. Some of it is messy, some triumphant."

In Pittsburgh, Mila sees a city that values its local identity while struggling with its global presence.

## Pittsburgh as a local stage

Unlike national media organizations, which often "helicopter" into a city briefly to cover a story, PublicSource practices a local journalism that values its connection to the community. Mila's mission is as much about responsible reporting as it is about developing valuable relationships with her sources.

"I'm not a person of scale. I'm not looking for a huge following, so it's much more meaningful to build these relationships," says Mila.

Mila understands that journalism happens in the community, not the newsroom. Later, standing outside of a local polling place, she notices the PublicSource interns are only speaking to subjects who mirror their age, gender or race. Despite the cold, rainy weather, interns are still functioning within their comfort zones. Mila is constantly pushing the newsroom to challenge themselves to reach out to community members who are different, outspoken and excited to share their story on a professional platform.

## Pittsburgh on the global stage

Despite the spirit of its locals, Pittsburgh finds itself in an era of growing pains, according to Mila. She recalls

hearing a quote about the city: "When the world ends, I want to be in Pittsburgh, because things come to Pittsburgh ten years later." Though it's a major city on a global scale, she still sees a close-minded attitude among its residents.

"People ask 'Why don't people move here? Why aren't there more immigrants?' But there is a closed access to power and opportunities here. We need to move beyond rhetoric to see a change," says Mila.

PublicSource is a mere eight years old and still finding its place in the city's media mix, but Mila is excited about its growing role in amplifying voices that do not always get heard. Recently it has tackled the city's LGBTQ+ history, low-wage living and systematic racial inequality.

"My hope is that the city will become aware of its existence on the global scale," Mila says.

Mila recalls a first-person essay written by local resident Joey Murphy about growing up as an autistic woman. Her piece, which highlighted the inequality in which young girls receive diagnoses and care for autism, became part of the global narrative after Greta Thunberg's speech at the U.N. Climate Action Summit.

Greta, who also has autism, became the subject of criticism and ridicule from an audience that didn't understand her condition. Mila says Joey's article, which had been published on PublicSource three months prior to the summit, started to trend around the world. People were seeking to learn more about women with autism and Joey's essay provided answers. Joey received messages of gratitude from all over the world.

## Pittsburgh, local journalism, and moving forward

While listing the lenses through which she views Pittsburgh, Mila moves fast: student, immigrant, reporter, mother, resident, professional. Despite being featured as a lecturer, panel member and workshop leader throughout the city, she has not spoken much about her role as a mother.

Mila became a mother in early 2019 and says the change has only deepened her appreciation for the work done at PublicSource.

"I'm thinking more and more about legacy, and what I will leave behind for my son," says Mila.

Education, climate change, white supremacy and community inclusivity weigh on her mind even more now. For Mila, there is more urgency for Pittsburgh, and its people, to grow and change.

Change happens through journalism, according to Mila. Elected officials have a difficult job, she says, but journalists also have a very tough profession. They work completely for the people, and often face harsh criticism from the powerful and vulnerable alike. She dreams of a community that will fully support news publications but hold them accountable.

Mila works at PublicSource every day to tell the truth for Pittsburgh. As it stands, local journalism may die very quietly in the city – a few years ago, the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* ceased daily publication and the *Post-Gazette* now prints only four days per week. Mila hopes that PublicSource will meet the community where it is, and encourage Pittsburghers to claim a stake in the life and death of journalism.

Getting these stories out into the community through responsible, ethical journalism is an effort in changing the city for the better. It's not about making people happy or angry. It's ultimately about making people heard. 



Photos by Jeordyn Cassidy

# FROM WARSAW TO THE WEST END: PASS THE PIEROGI

Story by Sarah DuJordan

Customers who walk up to Pierogies Plus immediately encounter the aroma of sauerkraut and sausage. At one time, the McKees Rocks building that houses the restaurant was a place to fill up with gas; now, it's a favorite place to fill up with pierogi.

Pierogies Plus, owned by Polish immigrant Helen Mannarino, invites customers to explore traditional Polish food. For Helen, it's like sharing a taste of home.

Helen was born in Warsaw and grew up working in her family's diner, which is where she learned to cook.

"Cooking was in my blood" she says. "It was always second nature to me."

When she first considered emigrating to the U.S. in the early 1970s, it was with apprehension – for good reason; Mannarino says Poles in the Cold War era were told terrible lies about America.

"Poland was a communist country at the time," Helen says. "There was lots of propaganda around Poland saying terrible things about America, like how you would get killed if you went there and that Americans are terrible people. So, I was very scared to come."

Still, America – and Pittsburgh in particular – held the possibility of a better life, of opportunity. Originally, she had hoped her passport application would be denied, but when she actually received the document she felt liberated..

"Once I got those two documents [visa and passport], I felt like a bird in a cage and I was set free to finally spread my wings." Helen says.

She arrived in 1974.



One of her first moments in America that Helen will never forget is meeting a couple in New York who offered to put Helen and her husband up in a hotel as they got settled. It was not what she had been led to expect.

"At that point, I was amazed, they were feeding us lies about Americans to us in Poland, but these people were going out of their way to help us." Helen says, "That was the best thing about coming to America, I will never forget that."

Helen had married in Poland, but the marriage did not survive the transition to America. She found herself starting a new life—as a single mother to her son Jaime.

"I found myself at a certain point of my life after my separation from my husband and I was a single mom and I needed to do something to support us," she says.

She prayed every night for a sign directing her what to do next: Further her education or pursue her dream of opening her own restaurant?

While she waited, Helen found a job with the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh. There she learned business skills and took this as her sign to open her own restaurant.

"Every time we went out to eat, I was always more interested in what was going on behind the counters, in the back of the kitchen." Helen says.

She looked for various locations to open a restaurant in Southside and Lawrenceville, but they were too expensive.

Helen then came across a gas station in McKeesport that was run down and that no one wanted to buy.

So she bought it and soon became "the gas station that pumps out pierogi."

Pierogies Plus opened for business on June 4, 1991, one day before Helen's 44th birthday.

When she opened, she was shocked at the line going out the door, so she researched the population of Pittsburgh and found that a significant amount of people in Pittsburgh were of Eastern European descent. Many knew

of their grandma's pierogi and asked her to make all kinds of flavors; a request even came in to make a peanut butter and jelly pierogi.

Though she has expanded her menu to over 40 flavors the PB&J pierogi did not make the cut.

One day, overworked and having a hard time finding employees, she came to the store and found that someone had stolen a picnic table. Feeling overwhelmed and tired, she decided to pray for help.

"While I was praying, I heard the phone ring, but I decided against answering it because I did not want to interrupt my prayer," Helen says, "I eventually answered it after praying and a friend from church, Debbie, was calling to see if I had any job openings."

Debbie had a neighbor from Ukraine, Nadia, who belonged to a Ukrainian church and once Nadia told her fellow parishioners Helen had plenty of prospective workers.

"Most people, this was their first job as a teenager and now they come back with their teenagers to show them where they used to work," Helen says.

Svieta Zabetchuk has been making pierogi for 40 years. As she stands at a table while rolling dough and pinching pierogi, she boasts about what it is like to work at Pierogies Plus.

"I really like working here, I like the job, we have a wonderful boss who treats us really well," Svieta says. "And the people are like family, we all get along."

Ten years ago Helen added on to the old gas station building as the restaurant grew. Eventually, Helen started a mail-order branch to the business.

Helen has advice for new immigrants – or anyone who wants to strike out and pursue a dream:

"Do pick something you like and that your heart is in," Helen says, "I love making people happy with food and seeing their smiling faces. This place not only touched my heart, but others." 



Photo by Matthew Flater

# ART AND IDENTITY: TSOHIL BHATIA REFRAMES HIMSELF

Story by Anna Westkaemper

You must have a fast step if you want to follow Tsohil Bhatia as he strides across the Carnegie Mellon University campus. It is hard to follow the petite man in the deep purple shirt and the magenta jacket. On the way to his studio he waves to friends before rushing up the stairs, his big, silver earrings swinging.

Tsohil, who came to Pittsburgh two years ago to pursue a Master of Fine Arts at CMU, is an up-and-coming artist from India. He does performances in places like the Warhol Museum and shows his video and photography works in various exhibitions throughout the city. Because he identifies as queer, a key topic of his work is gender – as well as memory, identity and domesticity.

As he reaches the top of the stairs, he steps into a small, white-painted room that contains completed art projects, materials with which Tsohil is working right now, and a futon for when he needs to nap. It's a work of art in itself, representing the life of an artist and graduate student in less than 50 square feet.

Born in New Delhi in 1992, he earned his undergraduate degree in Design and Technology in 2014 in Bangalore, Karnataka. After almost 25 years in the same country, he decided to seek new lands and new challenges.

"I wanted to go away from India," he says. "I think I would have continued to do similar kinds of work there."

Looking for graduate programs all around the world, Tsohil came across the MFA program at CMU. He didn't know a lot about Pittsburgh, but the length of the CMU program – three years – was ideal. Two of those years are already over. Two years in which Tsohil's art has very much evolved from where it started.

Tsohil's beginnings as an artist are linked to what was going on in his life in his teenage years, when he was figuring out his sexuality.

"We've all been drawing and making sketches when we were younger. But when I was 17, 18, 19, art started to become an identifying factor. I started taking photographs of myself, trying to figure out my body and trying to come out. The photos became a means to do that. They were not only directed towards a viewer, but directed to myself. Because you have to come out to yourself before you can do it to anybody else," says Tsohil.

As Tsohil began to understand his body, and himself better, he was eager to share this feeling with the world. Very eager. Maybe too eager.

"I was excessively sharing these photographs. They were on all social media. I was posting them all the time, getting blocked, because I was naked in most of them. But that kept me going. I was really rebellious," he says.

Tsohil's rebelliousness remains, but the output has changed over the years. The focus is no longer primarily on himself. He is mostly working with natural elements like water and sunlight, capturing them in

his photographs, videos or objects. Another big topic for him is time and various ways to represent it. For his final project at CMU he is planning to program a clock. 24 different people will be performing their measurement of time, counting one hour by lifting their fingers.

By this he wants to find out how the body keeps time in comparison to the universal, standardized system we know. Disobeying systems and norms are therefore still key points of Tsohil's work. But his view on the body, especially the naked body, in his art has changed.

"The body sells, and it sells really quick," he says.

Attention is a currency in the art world. A lot of people still respond to his self portraits, which deal with identity and sexuality – mostly because of the naked body that can be seen. For Tsohil, this has something to do with what he calls "identity-fetishism." Queer people like Tsohil and people of color in general are still often fetishized, by being looked at as something special or extraordinary, which often leads to a weird double standard in the art world.

"Right now, if you are a colored person who is queer, you have a higher chance of getting a show. And I know why that is important, because a lot of those people haven't got the options in the past. But I don't know if I want that to be the reason why I got a show," Tsohil says.

Conversations about representation of queer people and people of color in museums and galleries are of course very important to gain equality. However, artists like Tsohil don't want to be characterized just by belonging to a certain minority. "It feels like everybody expects me to tap into problems that I should have, but I don't. I consider myself privileged, I have always had people around me who have been fairly supportive - when it comes to my identity and my art."

The queer scene in Pittsburgh definitely became a part of Tsohil's support system. However, Pittsburgh is not the place where he sees himself living in the future. "This is the least international city I have lived in," he says. "Being from India I am so used to a big, bad, nasty, crowded city – and Pittsburgh is none of those things. It is peaceful, it is quiet. But to be able to work in quietness for myself, I need chaos around me."

Does that mean Tsohil is planning to head back to India soon? No, at least not for now.

"Maybe I will go back to India at some point. But right now, I want to be in different places. I want to learn things and equip myself with certain vocabularies, cultures and academics." 

# AGAINST ALL ODDS: KEYLA COOK FINDS HER CASA

Story by Marcela Mack

When Keyla Cook decided to open her own Brazilian culinary business, people said she would fail. The odds were against her; she was a single mother in a new country, didn't have much money, and had no easy access to the resources she needed.

Fortunately, Keyla doesn't give up easily. Today she successfully juggles being a co-owner and head chef of Casa Brazil in Highland Park, raising her 14-year-old son and teaching classes at Carnegie Mellon. After moving to the United States from Brazil in 2006, Keyla decided to show her new home the culinary ways of her old one.

"The cultural connection of missing my food and having people in the same boat as me, and sharing my heritage, food and culture with my son are some of the things that drove me to do this," Keyla says.

Starting up was difficult, as Keyla had to pay out of pocket for supplies and to rent kitchen spaces. Keyla began by starting her own catering company, "Keyla Cooks," but that soon became impractical.

"I loved doing private dinners and catering but it's really hard to follow all the guidelines from the health department when you don't have a working place," says Keyla.

Fast forward to 2017, Keyla has gained investors and grown her business. What once began as an occasional pop-up restaurant, has now found its permanent home in Highland Park as "Casa Brazil."

The restaurant features Brazilian art pieces and subtle decorations, such as a big wooden spoon on the ceiling. It is home to a vibrant, art-filled downstairs space where Casa Brazil hosts concerts and dancing.

Casa Brazil is a neighbor to other Highland Park establishments, including Asian and African restaurants and a French bakery. In a city that is slowly becoming more diverse, it is important to Keyla that Casa Brazil serves as a hub for bringing people together.

"Here at Casa Brazil, we try to open our doors to everyone to represent what the city should be," Keyla says.

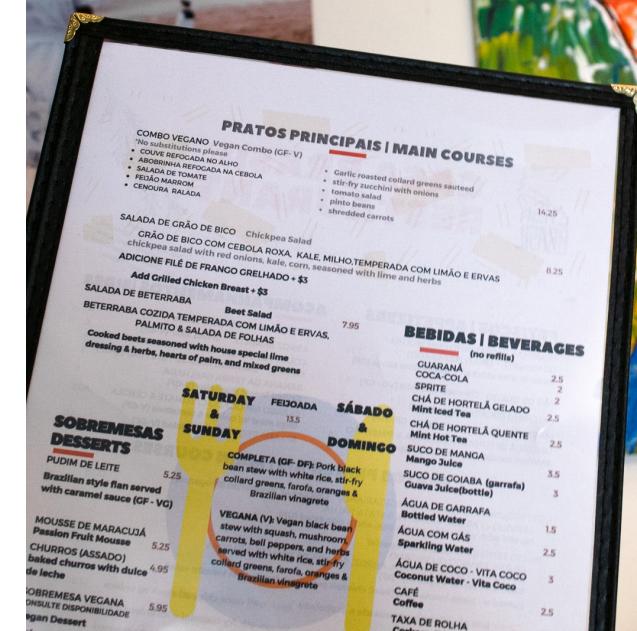
In fact, the restaurant offers weekly dinners prepared by guest chefs from other cultures through a program called "Residencia." They have had a refugee chef from Syria, as well as chefs from China, Poland, and Puerto Rico in order to create a "global space that breaks barriers that minorities face."

Keyla is also an active member of her community. She participates in "Cocinando con Arte" (Cooking with Art), a program where Latina women in Pittsburgh share their stories and recipes of their culture. She also does "Steel Chef," an after-school program in which teens learn about the food industry. On top of all that, Keyla works in the Carnegie Mellon finance department and robotics institute - and does this all while being a single mother to her 14-year-old son, Amyr. It's not just Keyla's work ethic and dedication, but her passion for what she does that makes her so successful.

"Cooking is a way to love people through food, share your flavors and dedicate yourself, represent your culture, find your identity, bring people together for whatever reasons it might be," she says. OTB



Photos by Adriana Gulli



# LONG VOYAGE TO LEADERSHIP

Story by Antonia Gelorme

Abdulkadir Chirambo was five years old when his father explained to him the meaning and importance their desperate journey out of Somalia.

"My dad said 'Fleeing from Somalia, some people run with a gun, some people run with money, some people run to the government and break it down to take something from there. But me, all I did was carry you and your two sisters to flee from Somalia to another country,'" says Chirambo.

That sojourn led Chirambo, now 29, to Pittsburgh, where he is president of the United Somali Bantu of Greater Pittsburgh, a group formed to serve the population of about 600 refugees who make their home in the city. Sitting in a small café in the Allegheny Alliance church, Chirambo beams while speaking about the organization. He even remembers the exact date of when the group began its work: November 15, 2015.

Since that day, Chirambo has been at the head of the project that would ultimately achieve his father's dream for him: to create a future that changes the life of their family and the lives of others in the community. The organization now has a full-time caseworker that connects Somali Bantu to resources around the city and even sponsors a community garden. Like the produce in that garden, Chirambo wants the Bantu community in Pittsburgh to continue to grow.

"I would like that happiness that I create to keep going on," Chirambo says.

Though it has made strides in providing for their community, he still worries about the future of many Somali Bantu children in Pittsburgh. Many Bantu students in Pittsburgh schools feel left behind, as do their families, he said. For example, performance issues aren't always reported to parents as children move through the school system.

Behavioral issues at school may have deep roots for many Bantu children. Without resources for childcare, most families are unable to acclimate their

youth before they reach kindergarten age. Additionally, acting out may also stem from untreated trauma in their community – from coming to America and fleeing their country at such a young age.

"If they aren't ready for high school, they have to drop out," says Chirambo.

Children act out throughout middle school and high school, but parents say they are only alerted in the last two years of high school, Chirambo says. By then, behaviors are embedded, and it's too late to address the causes of these problems.

"No one looks at all of that," according to Chirambo. "There is no budget for that kind of support."

Before his rise to leadership within the Somali Bantu community, Chirambo did not consider himself an activist. He attended high school in Erie, Pa. and moved to the city in 2008 to attend the Pittsburgh Technical Institute for criminal justice.

During the time Chirambo worked as a CYF caseworker he never brought his identity as a refugee into the work. "The only time I came into the city to be with the community was for soccer," he remembers. "That's where we met, at the soccer field, and that's where I ended it too."

In 2015, around Thanksgiving time, Chirambo learned that his best friend had been arrested on charges that seemed unfair. He doesn't go into details, but the case shook Chirambo out of the life he had been leading.

"I felt it was unconstitutional and unjust. He didn't murder anyone or shoot anyone."

Chirambo's best friend was deported. Looking down, he describes the fear for his friend that still lives in the back of his head.

"Whenever I remember him now, I'm thinking 'Is he alive?' over and over again."

After witnessing a minor encounter with the police lead to deportation

and a loss to the community, Chirambo became wary of people. He stopped going to the soccer field, limited who he talked to, and became more observant of who was involved in community activities.

However, this incident also changed the way the elders wanted to lead the community. They turned to Chirambo because of his education and his ability as an interpreter. This was the moment Chirambo not only became involved in his community, but rose to lead and unify it.

Still, after spearheading the formation of the United Somali Bantu of Greater Pittsburgh, Chirambo is stepping down from his presidency. He believes that it's important to give someone else the opportunity to build the community.

"If I stay, it would keep coming back the same. If it's someone else, they'll bring in a different way of addressing the community's needs."

Siraji Hassan, the new president, says that Chirambo has done an amazing job at building the organization and bringing it to a steady ground. "He did so much with nothing. It was a bumpy road, and I give him props for that. The work he did has made me feel comfortable to take on this position."

In 2020 and beyond, Chirambo will continue to work for his community. He plans to work with the national community of Somali Bantu refugees, return to school, and continue to care for his eight children. He sighs and laughs again after listing out his remaining responsibilities.

If that weren't enough, he also plans to continue to work under the elders at the community garden. He credits his wife, Jahara, for keeping him motivated throughout his leadership and the upcoming change.

"Sometimes it could be a frustration where I could not handle anything, but my wife finds a solution for that," he says with a smile. 

# TONY NORMAN: THE CONSCIENCE OF THE CITY

Story by Marcela Mack

**T**ony Norman was just getting by in 1987 when he made a decision to abandon his dream of becoming a filmmaker and move to Pittsburgh with his wife Ann instead. Here, he planned to write the Great American Novel. But that dream didn't quite work out either. Ann would come home from work each day to find him on the couch, still in his underwear, struggling with his literary ambition. Finally, she told Tony it was time to get a J-O-B.

After working as a telemarketer and being rejected for a position at the Pittsburgh Courier, Tony tried his luck at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. The talented African-American writer was hired instantly and is now a widely admired, award-winning columnist. He's also won acclaim and award for his cultural reporting and is a frequent guest on local talk shows. And he hasn't given up on that novel, either.

"I feel great fulfillment, I've won a lot of awards and I am working on a novel and a collection of essays," Tony says.

Tony's first beat at the Post-Gazette was covering the music industry. He quickly discovered that racial bias was a significant factor in what radio stations chose to play and which artists are signed to record labels.

As recording industry metrics and research entered the digital age, he found out "it wasn't Guns and Roses or whatever else that was big; it was Hip Hop." This rise in technology changed more than just the music ratings. It also changed the relationship between journalists and their audience. Tony explained that there was an intimacy to criticism in the earlier days, which is lacking now.

"People would write long, thoughtful letters to me or to the editor, respectfully explaining why they may disagree with my analysis. Now, the culture of talk back is really quite toxic. If you look at the comment box under my columns, they can be full of the most incredible racism and anger," he says.

When he was 35, Tony's career took another turn. He was covering a David Bowie and 9-Inch Nails show when a drunk attendee threw up all over him. He realized then he had aged out of the position of pop music critic.

"[I thought] I'm way too damn old for this; this is a young man's job. I don't relate to this anymore...I want to write about stuff that matters," Tony says.

From 1996 on, Tony Norman began a new assignment of writing essays about culture, politics, religion, social change and more things that he called "adult s\*\*\*."

Some critics complain that Tony's columns focus too much on race, but he dismisses that charge. While race is definitely not the sole focus of his columns, it is a vital social issue – as well as a personal one. Tony experienced the inequality first hand.

"I remember Jim Crow," he says. "I remember angry white kids throwing tomatoes at the school bus. I remember the first time I was called the N-word. I remember it all and it haunts me. It had an impact on me as it would anyone. So, it's strange to hear people say it's all in the past. It's still relevant," he says.

While society has made incredible strides toward racial equality in Tony's lifetime, there is still a long way to go. Tony sees how the problems he writes about exist in the city he calls home. Pittsburgh is often named by national publications as one of America's most livable cities, yet there are many drawbacks.

"It is livable, sure, but it isn't integrated, sophisticated, or racially cosmopolitan – it is backwards," he says. "I want my columns to reflect that tension that I feel as a citizen who has a tragic sense of history," Tony says.

Tony sees the demolition of the Lower Hill to build the Civic Arena (the old Igloo since demolished) as a dark chapter in the city's history. Before it was cut off from Downtown, there was a lively area in the Hill District filled with performers, poets, and other creative types. Black artists came through and white folks snuck up to see them perform.

"If Pittsburgh had just been that, that would have been cool. But it was destroyed on purpose. People understand that even when they had something, it was taken away. And that is the complicated legacy of Pittsburgh," Tony says.

While Pittsburgh has its problems and shortcomings, Tony also finds much to love about it. He admires the sense of community, how everyone seems to know one another, and how one can always find their voice in this town.

"For all the complaining I do about lack of diversity, once you find your niche here, it's hard to beat," he says. 

# FINDING YOUR TRIBE WHEREVER YOU GO

Story by Emily Fitzgerald

Aadam Soorma rarely meets a stranger. If he does, they don't stay that way for long.

Whether he's in a downtown coffee shop like La Prima, where they have his "usual" (a straight shot of espresso – or two, depending on the day) already brewing when he walks in, or taking Insta-worthy pictures of babies and dogs at a brunch festival in Lawrenceville he is all smiles, welcoming people and swapping information on upcoming local events.

From his bright yellow helmet that flashes by as he scooters around the city to his Steelers-printed socks, Aadam is all about promoting the Steel City.

"You guys talking about beer?" is the only introduction he needs and he's welcomed another person into his "tribe."

Aadam works as a Digital Creator for Very Local Pittsburgh, mostly telling the stories of individuals in the food and beverage industry, which has led to him becoming one of the most well known faces at breweries and food trucks alike.

However, his journey from a working summer jobs in a small Ohio town to Digital Content Creator for Very Local Pittsburgh was as fast-paced and unpredictable as the man himself.



Photos by Mariana Camacho Lopez

## Steel Mill to Steel City

Aadam started his first job working in the same steel mill as his dad in Canton, Ohio. The crew was welcoming, despite the two being "the only brown guys." Aadam, whose roots are in Rangoon, Burma, says getting to know the other mill workers and hearing about their lives lead to the realization that he wanted to pursue higher education, rather than live a life of hard labor.

"The best part was the people...I remember just hanging out with these mill workers and hearing their stories. It made me want to go to school and not pursue that lifestyle, but that was probably the best part was spending the time and getting to know these guys," says Aadam.

After a false start in public policy, Aadam realized that he wanted to do something more creative that would allow him to engage with those around him. That's when he first moved to Pittsburgh.

"There's a relatability and a friendliness to this city. It's very small and a lot of people just know each other or have heard of each other," Aadam says.

And he's not the only person who has noticed.

Cory Morton is an independent commercial advertising photographer who works with Aadam on various freelance projects. Though the city may be small, he also sees the big opportunities that Aadam has made for himself.

"The connections he's made throughout his career are just incredible. It really shows that a small city like Pittsburgh can be a really major player on a more global scale and it's people like Aadam that help that be achieved," says Cory.

Because of the work they have done together, Cory has witnessed first-hand the ease with which Aadam adapts himself to new communities.

"Something that Aadam's really great at is working on projects that allow him to immerse himself into the local culture and he just becomes part of it. It just becomes his own little world," says Cory.

Aadam became involved and invested in the Pittsburgh beer scene just as easily and has become one of the most recognized faces at many of the beer fests and events around the city. Despite the overall spirit of



community surrounding the industry, Aadam says that the lack of diversity in the food and beverage industry creates an inner-tribe type of connectedness between minority brewers or servers and their patrons.

"Being the only brown person, specifically in food and beverage industry is really really stark...I was bartending at the Western Pennsylvania Lamb Festival and it was pretty white... this black woman came up to me and just hugged me. She said 'Oh I'm so thankful to see a person of color here' and I just said 'No problem. I'm here; we're out here," says Aadam.

Being a familiar face in the crowd is one of the reasons Aadam enjoys being involved in the Pittsburgh community. By being present, he reinforces his belief in the significance of building communities.

Through his work with Very Local Pittsburgh, Aadam is able to not only share events happening around the city, but to produce editorial work that allows viewers to become familiar with the individuals who make it what it is.

"When I think about building community it's sort of like a function of credibility. So, to tell these stories through the Very Local channel and to do it through a community lens, I think it helps us." 



# FINDING THE AMERICAN DREAM AT THE TAJ MAHAL

Story + Photos by Julia Mudrock



Usha Sethi, the head cook and owner of The Taj Mahal Restaurant on McKnight Road, came to America for the same reason many immigrants do: She was seeking a land of opportunity, a place to pursue her dreams. Due to time and circumstances those dreams changed, but her work ethic did not.

"America was really the dream for everybody. It was known as the place where you could pursue your dreams. There were more opportunities, equality, justice, and other countries were far behind," says Usha.

Though she originally came from India in 1987 to study law, her ultimate destiny lay not in the Bar but in the kitchen. Today, she is an owner and the head cook of the Taj Mahal restaurant where she works seven days a week, 365 days a year. And her hard work has certainly paid off; the Pittsburgh City Paper has awarded the Taj Mahal "Best Indian Restaurant" every year since 2013.

Her catering business is booming as well. Due to Usha's dedication and diligence, word about the Taj Mahal has spread from New York to New Jersey to Ohio. Reshma Koka, Head of the Indian Nationality Room at the Cathedral of Learning was the very first person that Usha catered for in the summer of 1999. She describes Usha as the most hard-working and generous person she

knows – sometimes so hardworking that, due to her volume of catering orders, she even sleeps in her restaurant.

"The Nationality Room has an open house in December and a huge function in August that we get about 1,000 people for. She will cater 20 trays and is more than willing to just give it for free," Reshma says, "I keep getting mad at her. I say, 'How do you make money?'

That's the type of person Usha is: always willing to go above and beyond for her customers. Dr. Sunder Kekra, who teaches business at Carnegie Mellon University has known Usha since she opened the Taj Mahal and has witnessed this firsthand. Dr. Kekra shares an ancient Hindu scripture: Atithi Devo Bhava, which translates to: The guest is god, meaning that any guest who comes to your establishment should be treated like god.

"Customers should get the feeling you are treating them with affection and respect. That goes a long way and that is how you get customer loyalty," Dr. Kekra says, "Usha represents the best of quality and she goes beyond the call of duty, literally in rain or shine, with a smile."

She is an embodiment of what the scripture proscribes. Dr. Kekra emphasizes that despite her heavy workload it is this feeling of devotion and general



care that sticks with customers.

"She is like a machine. Consistently high quality with personal touch that is the icing on the cake. You can't replicate that. It has to come from within," Dr. Kekra says, "You get that warm feeling whenever you visit her restaurant, dining buffet, or catering and that's the reason she has grown so exponentially over the years."

Since opening, the Taj Mahal has been open every day—including holidays. Usha says this is because of the love she has for what she does, but it's also due to her dedication to her business and making it work in the country she now calls home.

"If you are honest, sincere, and willing to work hard, America is definitely the place for you. You can pursue any dreams that you have...but you have to make sure that you give back to the community," Usha says. 

# THE WRITERS' ROOM

## SARAH DUJORDAN

*All my life, Pittsburgh has been within a fingertip's reach, yet I never sought out experiences to fully immerse myself in my city.*

Yeah, I went ice-skating at PPG and went to 'Bring your daughter to work day' at the Steel Building. But never had I bothered to explore that restaurant that once used to be a gas station, or that card shop that is not just a card shop.

Not until this class.

Our first assignment was to go to a Pittsburgh neighborhood and just "blend in." So, I did just that. Turning off my phone and heading to Shadyside with a notebook and pencil, I sat on a bench—feeling very incognito, while eavesdropping on people's conversations and scanning the Walnut Street roadway that I had walked prior, laughing with my friends.

This time was different. I was alone and observing. That has been what this class has taught me on how to fully immerse myself in MY city: to be curious and just observe.

I grew up in the suburbs of Pittsburgh—in Jefferson Hills. I learned that where I lived could be considered a conservative area, which automatically made me think all of Pittsburgh was the same way.

Going out into the city and meeting various types of people, I learned that Pittsburgh is not stuck in its "steel-mill ways" and is attempting to be more progressive. Even if that means we are a little behind in comparison to larger cities.

Different organizations — like Access Mob Pittsburgh — stores, and people are what make Pittsburgh a stable living environment for everyone—no matter your race, gender, or sexuality.

Before this class I was doubtful of Pittsburgh. I will not lie, I thought, "I need to get out of here and explore; this place is so boring."

Due to this class, I have learned that I was the one making Pittsburgh boring and that it has so much to offer that I neglected to learn about.

Thanks to this class, I can say I am proud to be a "yinzer."

## EMILY FITZGERALD

*I had big expectations for Pittsburgh before I moved here.*

I thought it would be a slightly smaller version of the New York I didn't think I could handle. However, it turned out to be completely different and somehow even better. Pittsburgh is a big city made up of small neighborhoods that all have a hometown quality to them. It's full of distinct personalities and intense pride about where you're from and where you're going.

Throughout my time researching and writing for Off the Bluff, I have learned a lot about the city. By visiting the City of Asylum during its Jazz Poetry event, I've learned that being flexible and collaborating with others can lead to beautiful results. After interviewing Adam Soorma, I've learned that building a tribe makes life in Pittsburgh fuller and your tribe can never be too big. Talking to Reverend Randy Bush from East Liberty Presbyterian Church taught me that we have to look out for each other because the world can be a scary place and you never know who needs a friendly face. Through my research on the Gulf Building, I learned that you know more than you think and you should share your knowledge if it helps others.

Most of all, I learned that Pittsburgh is the city that you make it. It's a place full of potential and possibility if you open yourself up to it. And you hopefully don't have to cross a river to get there.

## ANTONIA GELORME

*A friend of mine from Louisiana once characterized Pittsburgh as a city where people shrug you off and move quickly – there's not nearly as much neighborly kindness as Mr. Rogers would have us believe. Coming from a suburban and rural background, I couldn't agree or disagree with him. I don't know any other city.*

However, working in this class on such diverse stories has given me the opportunity to know Pittsburgh. I believe Mr. Rogers' neighbors are just in unexpected places. They may not be slowing down to say hello in the street, but they are challenging Pittsburgh every day to be a better place.

My first piece will always be one of my favorite memories from school. I found myself at a bar in Lawrenceville on a Sunday afternoon, sick to my core at the thought of just asking random people questions about stand-up comedy. As soon as I sat down to ask the bartender a few questions, the world fell into place. A neighbor showed up.

Karla, a Pittsburgh native, spent the next two hours telling me about her life, her comedy and her feelings about the city. A young couple visiting from Canada shared the bar with us, asking questions and learning alongside me. We told them what a yinzer was, and they explained why Canadians spoke French. Karla told me the best thing I could do was live somewhere else for a little while, and the couple agreed.

People either love or hate this city. Even the people who do love it will balk at Canadian tourists and ask why they chose to visit Pittsburgh. Sometimes we oscillate between the two feelings.

I saw this struggle, too, when I spoke to people who spend their days serving the Pittsburgh community. Mila Sanina and Abdulkadir Chirambo showed me the sides of Pittsburgh that are less picturesque, from the underserved Somali Bantu community to the growing worry for local journalism. You can dedicate your work to improving this place because you love it, but Pittsburgh's failings will always live in the back of your head. Our neighbors have to recognize this, too, about our city.

At the end of the day, though, the city seems brighter to me because I've seen the people who are fighting for a better Pittsburgh. Where there are problems, there are neighbors facing them head on.



## MARCELA MACK

*In less than four months, I have learned more about Pittsburgh than I have in my three years of living here. After visiting many different areas and meeting people from different walks of life who've found a home here, I have seen much of what Pittsburgh has to offer.*

While the city has an urban center, there are also many surrounding areas that have culture and individuality.

I was delighted to find that there are many activists in Pittsburgh. I had the opportunity to meet with multiple officials of non-profit organizations. In a busy city, the places that are making differences for others tend to be overlooked. I visited Pennsylvania Women Work, an organization that helps women who have been out of the workforce develop the skills needed to find a job, and also assists refugees. Places like these work to make life better for those in the Pittsburgh community.

To meet with Keyla Cook, owner of Casa Brazil, I ventured out to Highland Park. I was shocked to find a colorful, cultural neighborhood full of restaurants and shops that share their international heritage with others. Residents came from all over to explore the cultures that coexist in the neighborhood – from Brazilian cuisine to French bakeries and Asian markets. This neighborhood was a safe place of expression with a sense of community.

As I met with people of color living here, I was able to not only see Pittsburgh through their eyes, but to relate to their experiences as a person of color myself. While there are great things in this city, I have realized that there still is an issue with segregation. I had the opportunity to sit down with Tony Norman, a columnist at the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* who often writes about racial issues, and he shared his thoughts on Pittsburgh's environment. "It is livable, sure, but it isn't integrated, sophisticated, or racially cosmopolitan – it is backwards," Norman said.

While Pittsburgh has a ways to go in terms of diversity and outreach for such issues, there is much to be thankful for in the city. Even though I am from Cleveland, a very similar city, Pittsburgh has a sense of community that is rare. Everyone knows everyone, no one is afraid to ask for or lend a helping hand, even professional athletes walk around casually and no one is surprised. It's a small world in this big city, making it feel like a home.



## JULIA MUDROCK

*Off the Bluff took me deep into the history and culture that make up Pittsburgh. Through conversation and observation, the city became my personal playground for finding the stories more people need to know.*

I explored Lawrenceville, The Strip District, and The South Side Slopes.

I found that Pittsburgh is full of opportunities to meet friendly people who are more than willing to share their stories and the stories of those they admire – if you are willing to seek them out.

Pittsburgh is full of life and people from all walks of it.

Some are born here. Some come for work or for play. Some people just arrived, having immigrated to this city of steel for the first time. It's not always easy living in a city, but in the words of Usha Sethi, head cook and owner of the Taj Mahal Restaurant, "If you are honest, sincere, and willing to work hard...You can pursue any dreams that you have."

I found Pittsburgh to be a city of grit. People here are willing to roll up their sleeves to get the job done.

Historian Brian Butko grew up in Pittsburgh and has seen the city adapt to embrace modernity. "All the things we take for granted didn't just happen. Even within the past 100-150 years how completely different Pittsburgh was."

I've found that change happens when like-minded people band together, an unavoidable occurrence within a community.

Under the care of Andy Henderson, Blue Moon takes community to the next level. "Employees have been with me a very long time. They stick around. We are all family here. We fight, we cry, we laugh—together."

I've found that Pittsburghers value neighbors and community, which is one reason many people end up calling it their permanent home. The South Side Slopes residents have created beauty in their community through art installations, gardens and events. They've also spread awareness of an underappreciated Pittsburgh attraction—the stairs. "I feel lucky to move into a neighborhood where people care," Joe Balaban says.

If you read my stories in this publication, you'll learn why Blue Moon Bar and The Taj Mahal win so many awards, that Pittsburgh's history is too interesting to fit into one piece (I tried my best), and that yinzers climb stairs not mountains.



## ANNA WESTKAEMPER

*For me this class and writing my magazine pieces was not only about getting to know Pittsburgh, but also getting to know the USA.*

I came here for one semester as an international student from Germany, who had never been in the United States before. Exploring Pittsburgh as a journalist helped me to see the city as the complex place that it instead of experiencing the tourist side of it.

I have to admit – a lot of clichés about Americans are true, and after traveling to several cities in the States, I realized that Pittsburgh is no exception to that. There is too much trash and huge cars everywhere, all of your bars close way too early, and every place considers itself the best in the nation, including their sports teams (myself slowly turning into a Steelers fan, I would give Pittsburgh the win on that one).

Through interviewing a lot of different people for my stories and talking to my classmates and Dr. Dillon, I was able to have a look behind the scenery. It is the people who make Pittsburgh a unique place, knowing all its flaws and getting angry about it, but loving the city to death at the same time.

Like Bethany Hallam, who just won her seat on the County Council and wants to fight for a Pittsburgh that becomes a better place to live for everyone. She also gave me a bunch of tips on where I could get the best food in town, which made it even harder for me to not gain five pounds in America.

Or Tsohil Bhatia, a performance artist from India, who came to Pittsburgh as a foreigner just like myself, and found his way here. Living in the U.S. made him fundamentally rethink the motifs in his art, and talking to him about it, I realized that my perspective on a lot of things has also shifted since I got to know American culture.

In the end I have to say that Pittsburgh treated me very well. Every person I spoke with made me feel comfortable, which made me almost forget that I was a stranger in this city. So, I want to say thank you Pittsburgh, and thank you to everyone who made my time here so special!



