

RIVEREAST

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Jake Cavallo gazes down at his diploma after walking the stage at Monday's Bacon Academy graduation.

## July Graduation Lets Bacon Come Together

by Sloan Brewster

In what has become a rare occurrence in the wake of COVID-19, the Bacon Academy Class of 2020 came together this week for the first time – after months of solitary at-home studies – for its long-awaited commencement.

While many other area schools had their graduations in June, Colchester officials opted to wait a bit, knowing that on July 6 Gov. Ned Lamont would begin allowing in-person ceremonies.

And so it was that, on Monday morning, with a glaring sun hanging in the sky, graduates donned facemasks as they shuffled through the parking lot to their seats – spread safely apart – beside a stage set up in front of the school.

In an unconventional set-up that was another in a string of responses to the pandemic, parents and families of graduates sat in cars in the parking lot, watching the opening of the ceremony from afar while awaiting the chance to drive beside the stage and take some quick photos of their pride and joy receiving a diploma.

“Woo hoo!” shouted Principal Matthew Peel. “Are you ready to graduate?”

Before beginning his speech, Peel performed “a little test,” asking everyone observing from parked cars to honk if they were able to hear him “loud and clear through your radios.”

A crescendo of beeping paired with whoops and the loud honks of party horns rose over the crowd.

“We have made it,” Peel began. “The wonderful conclusion to the longest senior year in the history of the world.”

He spoke of the how seniors earned their diplomas “despite the upheaval of the entire world

and school and life” and the stressors and roadblocks they had to navigate. He applauded faculty for giving of themselves at “unprecedented levels.”

“The line between work time and personal time became insufferably blurred and they were truly amazing this year,” Peel said.

Through the training of “a series of extreme experiences,” he said, graduates have become the “most politically-aware and involved generation since the 1960s.”

He described how their perspective on safety had been “stretched through a disturbing trend” in school violence and how “intense and polarizing” politics has become.

“Right now our country is struggling with race relations and everyone is struggling with how to live a normal daily life safely,” he said. “All of these extreme experiences have galvanized your metal and taught you to take nothing for granted. Each has also taught you that the most important values continue to be respect, tolerance and acceptance.”

He promised the life would not always be chaotic and advised them to be “innovative and creative” and not to settle for their limitations.

Salutatorian Ariana Spearin took the podium next and spoke of the “huge accomplishment” of the rare graduation ceremony.

“I think that, nowadays, earning a diploma has become so common that the hard work behind it often goes unacknowledged,” she said. “The sheer volume of graduating seniors should not diminish each individual’s effort.”

She commented that despite the fact that all

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**July Graduation cont. from Front Page**

graduates wore the same attire – including blue facemasks – they were not the same, which she said “should be celebrated, not masked.”

“Over the past four years, we constructed our paths, yet none of us did it in the same way,” Spearin said. “They were paved by our differing challenges, priorities, motivations, and values.”

Despite all the challenges, graduates managed to get to the finish.

“We went different ways, but we reached the same goal,” she said. “We have proven that there is never a ‘right’ way to do something. There’s danger in the perspective that there is only one way. Our world has a tendency to find discomfort in anything considered different and we can break away from that.”

She said that while paths were different, none were superior.

“I don’t have a life plan, I don’t even know what I want to study in college,” she said. “But I know that that’s okay. I’m not intimidated by others’ journeys because I know that I have my whole life to figure mine out. I’m comforted by the fact that I can take a different approach and still be happy. We can all take different paths, and still find happiness.”

As each speaker closed and moved from the podium, head custodian Ray Watson – in a facemask and gloves – wiped down all the surfaces to assure a clean and sanitized area for the next person.

The next speaker was Christian Bvalocqua, a transfer student from Norwich and this year’s Gilbert Lamb Essayist, or winner of the senior essay competition. He read his winning essay, modified for the stage with help from English teacher Karen Christianson.

Bvalocqua described his years at Bacon in expressive and colorful terms, showing advanced vocabulary and a love of the English language.

“My senses enlivened when first introduced to the sandalwood incense in Parky’s room. The worn Tibetan prayer flags colored canary yellow, scarlet, and deep indigo dazzled my eyes and became the first wonder to intrigue me,” he said. “As soon as the Bhangra music started playing upon my first steps into my freshman geography class, I immediately found solace away from home.”

Through his classes he became “hooked” on “paramount global issues” and credited his “vent for making social change” with the efforts of his teachers.

“If I wanted to become anything like the teachers that inspired me, I knew I had to become an activist, dedicated leader, and staunch

advocate like them,” he said. “I took the lead and ran with every opportunity I had.”

Bvalocqua closed with commentary on the powerful weapon that is education and implored listeners to learn “about our sweeping world.”

“I promise that your strides to educate, inspire, and empower yourself, your friends, family members, and even future students, will have the velocity to change someone’s life completely - just like mine,” he concluded.

The keynote speech came in the form of inspiring words recorded by teachers and played over the sound system.

Teachers congratulated graduates and offered advice, such as not letting the pandemic stop them from following their dreams.

Donna Dessureault, from student services, offered graduates words of wisdom from her family members, including her 87-year old mother, who said she expects great things from them.

“My advice is to be forgiving,” Dessureault said he mother said. “To forgive shows strength, not to forgive shows weakness.”

Valedictorian Matthew Voiland spoke of the need to expect the unexpected and said no one could anticipate all the possibilities.

“COVID actually gave us something; it didn’t just take away things,” Voiland said. “Because of the virus, we’ve grown to be dependent on ourselves.”

He described the unexpected joy of car circles, and birthday parades and said the pandemic drew classmates closer together.

Superintendent of Schools Jeffrey Burt spoke of the priority to have the class together one last time.

“I’m hoping that this will be my last and only speech to a parking lot,” he quipped, giving thanks to the “outhouses” in the lot.

“My advice to you is you have power over your destiny,” he told graduates.

As graduates took the hallowed walk across the stage, parents and family members shouted words of love and encouragement from their cars, waving and hanging from sun and moon roofs.

“I love you sweetie,” one proud mother intoned.

“Love you too!” replied her daughter

“We love you,” another mother bellowed.

“You rock baby!”

**Class of 2020**

The members of the Bacon Academy Class of 2020 are:

\*Lindsay Amor, Cyrus Anelli, Nicholas Anelli, Christina Antila, Jacob Appell, Katelyn Ashe, Jaden Balaski, \*Sean Baldyga, Alison Banning, Delaney Bassett, Addison Belcamino,



**Sisters Bridget, Clare and Ellen McIntyre carry their diplomas, which they just received, as they walk away from the stage and make their way back around to their seats at Bacon Acamy Graduation on Monday.**

Amber Bennard, Hannah Benoit, Victoria Benoit, Gabriella Best, Emily Betz, \*%Christian Bevilacqua, Ryeli Borsari, Omni Bova, Alyssa Brown, Conor Brown, Liah Brown, Myra Brown, Damon Burger, Skyler Burzycki, Nathan Byrne, Cierra Caron, James Cassarino, Jake Cavallo, James Charland, Theodore Chesnes, Annaliese Ciarcia, Cole Cimbaro, Anastasia Cintron, Timothy Clarke, Gabriel Collin, Amy Collins, Emily Cowan, Isabella Crowell, Rachon Crump, Ethan Cuadro, Jackson Cushing, Morgan Darling, Kyle Denker, Hayden Dubiel, Lorea Duncan-Buckelew, Amber Duperry, Sanaa Farrell, Christopher Felix, Jacob Figueroa, Riley Fitzsimmons, Kyle Foley, Valerie Ford, Luke Fox, Emory Francis, Ryan Fries, \*Claire Galarneau, Meagan Gallacher, Aidan Gallagher, Kelsey Gallant, Terrell Gardner, Andrew Gatesman, Bailey Gilbert, Marlie Gill, Nyla Gill-Cerda, Abigail Glover, Ariana Golias, Christian Gonzalez, Ryan Graffin, Tyler Gudelski, Maria Guerriere, Melissa Hackworth, Julia Hall, Casey Hart, Emily Heald, Rebecca Henrikson, Deirdre Higgins, Reilly Hightower, Crystal Hines, Amzie Hinkley, Kayla Hinman, Hannah Holmes, Julia Horlitz, Kayla Hunt, Nicholas Janus, Hailey Jones, Daniel Komoroski, Izabella Korczak, Dylan Krepcio, Kiera Kress, \*Veronica Krystofik, Ethan Kunst, Elizabeth Ladegard, Kaya LaPointe, Cassidy Lasaracina,

\*Luke LaSaracina, Owen Lavender, Rachael Lebiszczak, Emery Lewis, Jamison Lombardi, Astrid Lorenzen, \*Ryan LoVetere, Jeremy Luizzi, Christian Marinoccio, Mason Mascaro, \*Erin Mathieu, \*Kaylie Maynard, Ashanti McDonald, Bridget McIntyre, \*Clare McIntyre, \*Ellen McIntyre, Evan Merchant, Morgan Merchant, Aubrey Merrill, Leah Migliaccio, Michael Morgan, Caitlin Murphy, Jules Myers, Christos Natsis, Vivian Nguyen, Evan Olesnevich, Abby Ondras, Jordan Ouellette, Rachael Parlee, Reese Patry, Amaya Pedraza, Evelena Picano, Tyler Pillow, John Pineau, Maddox Pingree, Nadia Plouf, Ethan Puetzer, Andrea Pugh, Carly Putnam, Vimarsh Rana, Cassidy Rapuano, Sean Reading, Luke Reynolds, Matthew Reynolds, Joseph Ringuette, Adam Rochette, Natalie Rolon-Issa, \*Catherine Rowlins, Davin Roy, Camille Running, Amy Saczawa, Kayden Sargent, Nicholas Sedor, Thomas Shellito, Morgan Shumaker, Lucas Slomski, \*##Ariana Spearin, Joseph Staley-Sisk, Darian Stanchina, Aubrey Standish, Caroline Stanton, Cameron Stewart, Kaitlyn Swett, Jackson Sylvester, Nicholas Talbot, Nicholas Tiziani, Jade Totten, Jillianne Trott, Konstantina Tsakiris, Zachary Tupper, Alyssa Ushchak, \*Brigid Utz, Jorge Vazquez, \*Noah Violette, \*#Matthew Voiland, Stephanie Walsh, Rachel Wells, Michael Whipple, Kieghley Whitcomb, Cleondra White, Rhiannon Wing, Kyle Wright, Joseph Zachas, Maureen Zachas

# Valedictorian

## Salutatorian

\* Member of National Honor Society in good standing

% Gilbert Lamb Essayist

# Local MOMS Chapter Disbands Following Photo Rejection

By Jack Lakowsky

The Portland/Middletown Moms Offering Moms Support (MOMS) Club chapter has disbanded, after the nonprofit's international leadership stopped a California chapter from posting an anti-racism photo collage on Facebook.

Portland MOMS Club members voted to disband in late June. The nonprofit group, which focuses on supporting women through the rigors of motherhood has operated in the Portland/Middletown area since the early 2000s, according to former Portland MOMS member Elizabeth Hibino.

The collage in question, from the Rancho Santa Margarita, Calif., MOMS chapter, shows families holding signs that collectively read "We Stand with All Moms and Pledge that Racial Discrimination will Stop with Our Kids."

The collage was posted in mid-June, following the death of George Floyd and the ensuing anti-police brutality protests that spread nationwide, and the multination push for racial equity.

Hibino said MOMS International's denial of the Rancho Santa Margarita MOMS club's June photo did not align with the values of local members. Hibino said Portland members asked International to explain its reasoning.

"The things they said were unclear, vague, and confusing," Hibino told the *Rivereast*.

Hibino said the reasoning of members of MOMS International was split and unsure. On one hand, they said they didn't want to divide members over "political statements," according to Hibino. On the other, they said they wanted to protect their nonprofit 501(c)3 status.

MOMS International told members that, as a nonprofit, the organization is legally forbidden from making political statements, and could lose its nonprofit status by doing so.

"That's just not true," said Hibino. Hibino explained that IRS law forbids nonprofits from endorsing or contributing to the campaigns of political candidates. The IRS website confirms Hibino's statement.

"Hiding behind their nonprofit status makes them look terribly uneducated and manipulative," said Hibino.

## Emails Offer Explanations

Hibino sent to the *Rivereast* emails, documents, and information collected by a group of former MOMS members. MOMS Club has a standard email response sent to members asking about this topic: "Our interpretations of the [rules] may be more narrowly defined than yours, but that does not make our interpretation wrong. We believe it is correct."

Hibino said the organization updated its bylaws soon after the controversy, widening the breadth of what International considers political or propagandistic.

In one of its updated "fact sheets" given to prospective clubs, MOMS said; "Some topics don't sound political on the surface but are definitely politically-intended[sic]."

Hibino said the vaguest explanation was when International said the organization would be seen as racist in retrospect after posting an anti-racist photo – that the organization feared it would be accused of being racist against Black/Indigenous/People of Color (BIPOC) before the posting of the collage.

In an email to Portland MOMS, MOMS International said; "[Graphics] like this collage and the statements [we've] been requested to post imply that our members have been racists before now. [MOMS] has never been a racist organization and never will be."

Hibino said the communications from International carried a punitive subtext of "if you don't follow the rules, the IRS will come after you."

MOMS leadership told Portland members: "The IRS could consider [any] income your chapter has collected [as] personal income. You could be penalized and could be personally taxed for that money."

Former Portland MOMS President Melissa Kelley shared with the *Rivereast* emails between the Portland/Middletown chapter and MOMS International. Portland sent a list of questions to MOMS leadership about this controversy.

Portland MOMS asked International what would happen if a local chapter willingly or unwillingly disobeyed nonpolitical requirements. International replied saying such action would jeopardize the nonprofit status of all chapters, a statement proven to be faulty.

"It seems like they're trying to silence chapters from speaking against racism by using faulty rationale," said Hibino.

The following is written in the MOMS club

bylaws: "No part of the [group's] activities shall consist of carrying on propaganda, or otherwise attempting to influence legislations, and the group shall not [participate] in any political campaign, including the publishing or distribution of statements, on behalf of any [political] candidate."

MOMS bylaws also read that groups can only affiliate with other MOMS club chapters. They also read that no outside organizations can take part in MOMS programs unless approved in advance.

After preventing the collage's posting, MOMS emailed a message to member groups.

"Unfortunately, situations with the police and racism in general have been politicized by others, [so any] statement we make could be considered political."

Of the collage, MOMS International said "[the] individual who started this [discussion] is very sincere, but we do not agree on her accuracy." International said it follows a "very narrow definition of the law."

Kelley told the *Rivereast* that MOMS International has deleted many of its social media accounts as questions about this controversy mounted.

"They've cut off paid members and coordinators who have questioned any of this," said Kelley. "They've blocked anyone who's spoken out from their [Instagram] page. They've untagged themselves from social media posts."

The *Rivereast* obtained copies of an email exchange between a MOMS state coordinator, a paid liaison position between local chapters and leadership, that confirm Kelley's statement of retaliatory behavior from MOMS International. The names of both parties have been obscured.

The state coordinator said she was disappointed in MOMS' response, but said she had no plans to resign. She asked for an explanation of why International's interpretation of nonprofit law seems faulty.

MOMS replied thanking the state coordinator for her resignation. She replied saying she offered no such resignation. Unidentified MOMS officials simply said, "your services are no longer required."

Kelley also shared screenshots of anti-Black Lives Matter posts shared on the personal Facebook account of a MOMS International board member.

MOMS International told Kelley that a public statement could be construed as not supporting anti-racism, but "for the political activity that activists are subverting these statements into." International did not define what exact political activities or activists they were referencing, and they did not expand on what anti-racist statements are subverted to.

MOMS International told Kelley that the club's actions over its 40-year history "speak more clearly than any words ever could."

Kelley said the club refuses to expressly forbid in its bylaws the use of racists slurs and hate speech. She said she never heard members of the International board say anything explicitly racist, but that they never supported BIPOC members.

"They call disbanded chapters 'weak,'" Kelley said.

Kelley said MOMS does not hesitate to help members after natural disasters or the death of a family member. Therefore, she questions why they can't support members who are asking them to denounce racism.

"It's disheartening to know that an organization I've been a proud member of for five years has their feet so firmly planted on the wrong side of history," said Kelley. "And they can't even see it."

MOMS told Kelley that "there will be as many viewpoints as there are members" and that no decision will make each member happy.

"[We] propose how you live your life says more than any required statement possibly could," said MOMS.

## A Departure of Many Mothers

Hibino said International's messages have been unclear and unsatisfactory. As a result, hundreds of MOMS across the country have resigned from the organization, and almost 100 chapters have disbanded, including in Portland.

Jill Coene, former president of the Rancho Santa Margarita chapter, was among the first to resign from MOMS.

"How can the MOMS club think our message to stop racial discrimination is political in any way?" Coene told California's *Orange County Register* newspaper in mid-June. "All we're saying is that we'll raise our kids not to be racist."

Coene expanded her stance via Facebook



This was the photo collage a California chapter of the MOMS Club wanted to post on Facebook. The collage was rejected by MOMS Club International – which led to the Portland/Middletown chapter to disband as a result. Photo via Facebook.

post.

"This is no longer about the collage," wrote Coene. "It is about the organization not supporting our BIPOC moms. If we cannot support mothers of color, we cannot support all moms."

Another chapter that disbanded in June was MOMS club of Evansville, Indiana. Former Evansville MOMS president Amanda Needham told the Evansville *Courier & Press* that the leadership's explanation rings hollow. She said International's 501(c)3 defense is "categorically inaccurate."

"Thousands of [nonprofits] have spoken out against [racism] very clearly and very blatantly," said Needham. "The Girl Scouts is one of the largest [nonprofits] in the nation, and if you go to their website [you'll] see a splash on their first page about Black Lives Matter and their stand against racial inequality."

Other prominent nonprofits to post anti-racist statements on their websites include Habitat for Humanity, the Boys and Girls Club, the Y, and Catholic Community Services.

On Sunday, Ohio's *Columbus Dispatch* reported that 75 MOMS Clubs have disbanded since June, including the Clintonville, Ohio chapter. There are nearly 1,000 chapters in the country.

Hibino said the leadership's hazy response to the controversy and to member inquiry worsened the situation and hastened the departure of many mothers.

International MOMS Club bylaws read the club denounces prejudice or discrimination against any minority group.

Hibino said many MOMS practices, like being zip-code restricted and forcing daytime meetings, passively discourage inclusion.

"MOMS doesn't have many women of color," said Hibino. "Why do you think that is?"

Hibino said the MOMS organizational structure is outdated. She said it's still shaped around the idea of the full-time, stay-at-home mother. This idea, she said, has become atypical.

Meetings, Hibino said, must take place during morning or early afternoon hours. Evening meetings can only be held after a special vote with all chapter members present. The club cannot vote on official business during evening meetings. Hibino said this practice excludes many working mothers.

Kelley said MOMS only recently ended its policy of excluding working mothers from the club. She said it takes a lot of privilege to be able to stay at home with children.

Hibino said membership is zip code-based, which further excludes many potential members. She said they weren't even allowed to include mothers from neighboring East Hampton. Fathers are also prohibited from joining.

"Systemic racism has caused many women of color to not be able to stay at home," said Hibino. "If [this club isn't] racist, and it wants

to support all moms, then it actually needs to be supportive."

MOMS Portland mentioned this inclusivity issue to MOMS International. Leadership replied saying night meetings would disrupt "family time." Adding to this reasoning, International said; "[Although] some husbands are willing to take care of their children by themselves after [work], some are not. If wives are going to have to choose between going to a [meeting] or letting their husbands relax, which do you think [they'll] choose?"

Finally, MOMS leadership reasoned that it's unsafe to encourage mothers to go out after dark, saying "rapes, robberies – and worse – are facts of life."

Hibino said MOMS updated a few practices during her six years with the organization, but that the club still works on outdated principles. Most emails, bylaws, and newsletters from leadership read MOMS Club supports "at-home" mothers, with no direct statements of supporting working mothers. Although working mothers used to be excluded, they can now join, she said, but the club's scheduling makes it difficult.

"Their model is still very much for the 'at-home' mother, and that rubs me the wrong way," said Hibino. "They're trying to stay in their little bubble and aren't seeing what moms need today. It's just not inclusive of nine-to-five workers."

MOMS Club was founded in California in 1983 by Mary James, who still serves as the club's president. A change.org petition calling for James to resign from the organization has been signed by more than 4,700 people and is rapidly approaching its goal of 5,000 signatures.

Club members said James has not made any public statements about this issue.

An unnamed, unidentified representative of MOMS International replied to questions emailed by the *Rivereast* on Monday.

MOMS said it has always been an inclusive organization, and is open to all mothers, working or nonworking, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or economic status.

"If [the Portland] chapter disbanded because we declined to post the collage on our social media, that is their prerogative," said MOMS. "It is not an issue of whether racism [is] political, but that the discussion and some of the groups involved in this become or are political."

MOMS officials ignored questions if posts supporting police departments or the LGBTQ community would also be considered political, saying such questions were "too vague to answer" and "misinformed."

MOMS of New London/Waterford and MOMS Wethersfield did not reply to request for comment on this story.

### **Town Officials Offer Support**

Mary Pont, Portland Youth Services director, said she's sad to see the local MOMS Club chapter disband, but that she and her department are willing to work with former members as they figure out their new directions. Pont said the Portland/Middletown MOMS has helped with many town events and activities, especially those geared toward infants and toddlers.

Portland First Selectwoman Susan Bransfield said she's not surprised a "strong group of parents who care deeply about the community" stood up for racial justice.

"I'm very proud of them," said Bransfield. "At some point, you have to take a stand, and they did just that. I stand with them. I hope they're able to continue the same work, just without the same moniker."

Bransfield encouraged former MOMS members to work with the Town of Portland to help continue the charitable work the club offered locals.

### **Former Members Reflect, Look Ahead**

Hibino said, despite this definitive incident, her experience with the Portland/Middletown MOMS Club chapter was otherwise wonderful. She said the group held fundraisers supporting many local nonprofits, including the Middletown chapter of New Haven-based Hope After Loss, a support group for those grieving the loss of a pregnancy or an infant. She said the local chapter had also donated to the Portland Public Library, as well as organizations working to end domestic and intimate-partner violence.

"It's a shame [International] made this thing so much worse for themselves," said Hibino. "We did good work. We were a very active nonprofit in town."

Hibino said she and other former Portland MOMS members are starting to look at creating a new, more inclusive nonprofit. Allowing fathers, other caregivers and guardians, people from other towns, and making a more flexible schedule are all ways Hibino said a new group could be more inclusive than MOMS.

She said she'd want to reach more moms in Middletown. The city once had its own chapter, but this was disbanded years ago. Since then, Hibino said, the Portland/Middletown chapter has been made up of mostly Portland mothers.

"Right now, we're figuring out what we'd do," said Hibino.

Hibino said she joined MOMS six years ago during her first pregnancy. She said she wanted to meet local mothers. She said the Portland club was very welcoming and supportive of her.

"I hope International changes," said Hibino. "I'm angry, but I'm also coming from a place of love."

Former MOMS member Julie McGovern joined the Portland club two years ago, when her first child was an infant.

"It's been a supportive group, and really helped me meet other parents of young kids in the area," said McGovern in an email to the *Rivereast*. "I was disappointed that International wouldn't stand up for racial justice. Disbanding was the right thing to do."

McGovern said she hopes leadership will reevaluate their stance if enough chapters close.

"They said making a statement against racism implies they were once racist," said McGovern. "I disagree."

Former member Laurel Steinhauser said she reluctantly joined MOMS just before the birth of her third child.

"I've never been a club person," said Steinhauser. "I never expected to make the connections and friendships that I made."

Steinhauser said joining MOMS helped her through the demands of raising simultaneously a newborn, a preschooler, and a toddler. Steinhauser served on the Portland MOMS board for two years.

"It was sad to vote to disband our chapter," said Steinhauser. "But if [International] is reluctant to condemn racism and injustice, then it's not an organization I want to belong to."

Steinhauser said Portland's chapter was made up of "beautiful, diverse women" and that the leadership's unwillingness to support BIPOC members and their children is "cowardly and hurtful."

Steinhauser believes MOMS is unlikely to reevaluate their practices or policy. She said they have only reiterated their initial position pledging to help end racism is a political matter.

"For chapters like ours, for whom this is unacceptable, we choose to move forward on our own," said Steinhauser.

"Regardless of what we call ourselves, we will remain the same great group of mothers," said Kelley.

Kelley said that she and other former Portland/Middletown MOMS are "in the works" of forming a more inclusive group, one that is in line with their beliefs. She explained that, although it may take a while to be granted 501(c)3 nonprofit status, she and other former MOMS will continue to support their community.

"We have so many strong, intelligent, passionate women in our group," said Kelley. "We will use that to our advantage."

# Water Leak at Gilead Hill Causes Damage

by Sloan Brewster

A water leak at Gilead Hill School last weekend caused damage to computers, furniture, carpeting and supplies.

When officials returned to the building Monday morning, they found water flooding the main hallway, office, and gym, said Superintendent of Schools Thomas Baird. While the cost of the damage is yet to be determined, Baird said it should be covered by the district's insurance carrier, sans the \$1,000 deductible, which the district will have to pay.

"We are still assessing the damage at this time," he said.

The leak was caused by a failed fitting on a newly-installed water fountain, Baird said. Since the leak was found, all fittings on water fountains in the school have been replaced by a plumber to prevent of any re-occurrences.

Damages include the carpet and some furniture in the main office, which Baird said will need to be replaced. Two damaged computers will also need to be replaced, as will some instructional supplies.

"This is a cleanup job, installing new carpet, and ordering replacement furniture and supplies," Baird said.

The damage will not impact the opening of schools in the fall, the superintendent said. "We could be open today if we needed to be."

## School Reopening Plans

In regards to reopening schools, which have been closed throughout the state since March in attempt to quell the spread of COVID-19, Baird said the district plans to release a re-entry plan next week.

In an update letter sent to families last week and available on the district's website, Baird said the district's Re-Entry Team has been planning what schools will look like in the fall. Administrators are working with the Chatham Health District and the RHAM Board of Education and have used feedback residents provided via email and a district survey.

According to preliminary plans – which, Baird stressed, are subject to change – school will be open for all students every day at the start of the school year though the first day may be changed to account for additional training time and orientation.

If data on COVID-19 calls for an alternate-day schedule, the district will go to a hybrid

model, which administrators will design in conjunction with RHAM administrators to assure siblings attend school on the same days whenever possible.

"The hybrid model will only be used if needed," Baird wrote.

All staff and students will have to wear facemasks, save students with documented disabilities that make safe mask-wearing impossible, Baird wrote. Whenever possible, students will learn outside where they will be able to safely take off their masks.

"Staff will work with students and families to build stamina with mask-wearing," Baird wrote. "There will not be disciplinary action/consequences for children who have difficulty acclimating to wearing masks."

According to the letter, administrators are considering dismissing school early on hot days and to let students acclimate to wearing masks.

Classrooms will be designed for maximum social distancing, with four or more feet between desks, the letter states.

"Our smaller class size allows for us to achieve the four feet with our existing class-

room teachers," Baird said.

Since it is not recommended at this time, Baird said, staff will not screen temperatures.

Visitors will not be allowed in schools, Baird said, and evening activities will not be allowed as custodians will be moving their hours around to do extra cleaning during the school day.

In addition, administrators will enhance distance learning with mini lessons recorded for viewing later.

"These will likely be done by our academic specialists rather than the classroom teachers," the letter reads. "This will allow classroom teachers more time to focus on providing feedback on assignments and checking in with students."

Once the official Re-Entry Plan is released, families will have two weeks to review it and let the district know if they will be sending children to school or continuing with distance learning. Parents will also need to let administrators know if they will be driving children to school or putting them on the school bus.

Driving children to school is "highly recommended," Baird wrote in the letter.

# Colchester School Officials Crafting Reopening Plan

by Karla Santos

Colchester Public Schools are looking to have a fresh start next month and school administrators are in the process of creating a reopening plan that will be presented to the Board of Education at a July 23 public meeting.

Burt said they had a team working on a plan for about eight weeks. However, their plans were limited because they were waiting on state guidance, which came out on June 25.

Burt said the district plans on having parent focus groups as well as a Town Hall meeting "to try to address some of the people's concerns or questions that they might have."

A parent survey was also recently sent to families that send children to the town schools. The survey included questions such as how comfortable are parents in sending their children back to school and how comfortable are parents in letting their children ride the school bus. In addition, the survey asked parents how distance learning would impact their work life.

Burt said the survey responses will give

school administrators a picture of what could happen for reopening or if they had to go into a distance learning model.

Burt said he communicates with his colleagues in the eastern part of the state on a regular basis and has heard from them that they are facing similar issues.

"How do we approach a reasonable re-entry into school while trying to work with the health concerns for both our staff and students?" Burt said. "I think that's pretty much standard across the entire state at this point."

Burt said they are looking at all the possible scenarios to prepare ahead as much as possible.

He said they are trying to figure out what to do if they get any positive coronavirus cases in a school.

"We still haven't received guidance on that and that really is something that we want to get sooner than later," he said.

Burt said that the district is looking at the space classrooms have at each of the schools to ensure they meet state guidelines.

"The guidance from the state [says] basically reasonable social distancing," Burt said. "There's no minimum requirement. We are weighting the benefits of having students in a classroom with the instruction and trying to split classrooms up, so that is something that we are closely looking at."

Students must wear a mask and teachers don't have to wear one if they are at a certain distance away from the students.

"The second they go to interact with a student they must put a mask on," Burt said.

In addition, Burt said that right now the main focus is for students to return back to school because that is what they have been asked to plan for from the state.

The goal is to meet safety standards as best

as possible within reason for students and staff.

The state has also asked for them to come up with a distance learning plan and a plan for a hybrid model in case schools have to go part-time in the classroom and part-time online.

Burt said school officials have yet to determine if they will be able to have sports in the fall.

"We want to make sure that everyone is safe and doing their best," he said.

Selectman Denise Mizla, who serves as the board's liaison to the Board of Education, told the *Riverast* her hope is to see children go back to the classroom if safety measures allow it. She stressed it is also important to keep in mind that some teachers are more at risk because of their age. She also said the district must be ready for all possible scenarios, as the COVID-19 situation continues to change.

Colchester Public Schools are due to go back in session on Aug. 26.

Regional | Regional | Regional | Regional | Regional | Regional | Regional | Regional | Regional | Regional | Regional | Regional | Regional | Regional | Regional

# Health Director Criticizes Funding

by Jack Lakowsky

Chatham Health District Director Russell Melmed said state lawmakers are underfunding public health departments across the state, at amounts lower than state statute requires.

Melmed said this is misconduct on the part of the state Appropriations Committee.

Melmed said state statute mandates the state provide \$1.85 per capita funding to regional health departments, overseen by the state Department of Public Health (DPH). He said the state this year provided funding to Chatham Health of about \$1.18 per capita.

State Sen. Cathy Osten (D-19), whose district includes Hebron and Marlborough, said she appreciates the extra workload carried by local health departments, and that they are doing more work now than ever before.

Osten agreed that public health departments per capita state funding has been below 100% of the statutory requirement for a few years, but that, this year, DPH received about 90% of the statutory requirement, about \$1.67 per capita.

Osten explained that for municipal health departments like Chatham's, which serve a population of 50,000 people or more, receive \$1.18 per capita funding by statute. The \$1.85, she said, is for department's serving regions with at least three towns of 50,000 people or more.

Osten said through grants and stimulus packages, local health departments have "strong financial support."

Last fiscal year, Chatham Health received about \$116,400 from the state. For FY 2020-'21, which began this month, it will receive less

than \$107,000, a reduction of about 8.5%, or about \$10,000.

According to Chatham Health budget documents, Melmed's requested \$1.15 million budget was reduced to about \$1.11, for an overall reduction of almost 4%.

Melmed explained that, although \$10,000 is only about 1% of Chatham's total budget, every dollar counts when operating on a tight budget.

Melmed said local taxes from Chatham's towns – East Hampton, Portland, Marlborough, Colchester and Hebron – fund more than 65% of Chatham's budget.

Melmed said Connecticut received from the federal government about \$20 million in aid for state and regional health officials to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. Of that sum, Chatham health received about \$30,000 to help cover the costs of preparing its communities against coronavirus.

Melmed said this extra funding was intended to cover pandemic-related costs from March of this year to March 2021. Melmed said this amount of money is woefully inadequate.

"We'll burn through that in two months with overtime," said Melmed. He said Chatham has one full-time nurse, who is currently working between 60- and 70-hour weeks, doing primarily contact tracing.

Melmed also expressed reservations about a possibility the state may use volunteers to conduct contact tracing – as he said he felt this is too important to leave up to volunteers, and was also concerned about them eventually getting burned out.

In the budget for the just-wrapped 2019-20 fiscal year – which was crafted long before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic – Melmed budgeted \$5,000 in overtime costs. After March, April and May – the height of the pandemic in Connecticut – overtime costs totaled almost \$33,000.

Melmed said, although the \$10,000 cut in state funding may look small on paper, it comes at a time when public health workers are dealing with a tremendous workload. He also said regardless of the amount, the state did not fulfill its statutory requirement, or alter the statute itself.

"We don't have any fat in our budget," said Melmed.

Melmed added that cuts to public health budgets have been a consistent trend for more than five years. He said this trend is unsustainable.

"We're going to burn through our reserves very quickly," said Melmed.

Melmed said the extra costs of retrofitting an entire group of towns to prevent the spread of COVID-19 has stretched Chatham's resources, and staff, very thin. Chatham is tasked with helping all its region's schools, businesses, and governments prepare themselves.

Melmed said, despite budget limitations, he and his staff have successfully aided residents, businesses, and public officials in all Chatham communities.

Melmed said he hopes the state stays in the current lull of pandemic spread, but that even in normal public health conditions, constant cuts to health department budgets will cause

service quality to suffer.

State Rep. Christie Carpino (R-32) serves on the Public Health Committee in the state legislature. She represents the towns of Portland and Cromwell.

"Local health districts have proven they are key in supporting public health," said Carpino in an email to the *Riverast*. "In the midst of a public health emergency, additional funding and resources must be directed to health districts, as they stand on the front line, keeping communities healthy."

Melmed said his industry association, the Connecticut Association of Directors of Health (CADH), recently began discussion of this issue with the State Appropriations Committee.

CADH president Stephen Civitelli, who also heads the Town of Wallingford Health Department, met with state lawmakers on behalf of Chatham Health and other regional health departments.

"In general, it was a productive discussion," said Civitelli.

Civitelli said the conversation thus far has been two pronged, with dual focus on per capita baseline funding and funds for response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although discussions with the state are still in their initial stages, Civitelli affirmed Melmed's statement that the state is not meeting its statutory obligations to public health. He said, overall, the state Department of Public Health's budget was cut more than 8%.

"They aren't meeting their requirements, and reductions have been consistent," said Civitelli.

# Andover Seeking Funding for Community Center

by Sloan Brewster

The Board of Selectmen has given the town administrator the go-ahead to apply for a grant to build a new senior center.

At Monday's Board of Selectmen meeting, board member Scott Person, who is also a member of the Community/Senior Center Building Committee, said the committee had its first meeting and had discussed goals to build a multi-use building for seniors and community members.

After talking through pros and cons for various locations for the building, the committee came to a consensus, he said.

"Town Hall is probably the best place, in between the school and Town Hall, for a bunch of different reasons we don't need to get into right now," Person said.

Person said the committee was looking for approval to do a feasibility study.

Town Administrator Eric Anderson said he had recently learned the state was offering grants under the Small Town Economic Assistance Program (STEAP).

First Selectman Jeff Maguire said the town should apply for the grant and that selectmen should come up with ideas for working with state Rep. Robin Green (R-55) and state Sen. Steve Cassano (D-4) to aid the town in getting approval.

"We have enough funding set aside for that building, if we could get a STEAP grant to assist maybe we could get that done sooner than later," Maguire said.

In a phone call Wednesday, Anderson said the town has \$450,000 set aside to construct a multi-use building. He said it was too soon to estimate how much the project would run.

"We've got to make decisions about exactly what we want to do with it, what we want to include with it and where we want it to go," he said.

Putting the center next to town hall is still only a recommendation, Anderson said. It has to be vetted by officials and the community and

then decisions on whether to add a new wing to Town Hall or construct a freestanding building need to be made.

In a 2018 survey, the majority of residents responded favorably to the notion of a new community center and picked the area around town hall as an ideal location, Anderson said.

The building committee has asked the town to set aside funding for a feasibility study to determine if the center can go in the spot and what it would look like, Anderson said.

"I don't know of any major obstacles to locating it here, that's not to say that there aren't [any]," he said. "That's just to say I don't know of any."

At the time of the meeting, the state had not given guidelines for the STEAP grant currently being offered, Anderson said. He has since learned it will have a lower dollar threshold than offerings in past years. The maximum grant award will be \$128,000 and the town will be expected to foot a 100 percent match.

"What they're tailoring this STEAP grant around is much faster projects, shovel ready," he said.

The application process began Monday with an August 14 deadline to get all the paperwork in to the state, Anderson said.

Anderson pointed out to selectmen that the town has already applied for STEAP funding for the community center project and did not get it, which he said could be a good thing when it comes to a possible approval, but there was a caveat to that.

"You're always more likely to get it the second time," he said. "The bad news is that this is the fourth time we are applying for the community center."

Anderson said the town in 2005 used a \$500,000 STEAP grant to construct a new wing on Town Hall with a community room, but that application was originally for a community center. Then, in 2010 the town again applied

for and was not awarded funding for the construction of a new community center. In 2011, the town received a grant for a new recreation area at Long Hill Road and in 2016 it applied again for a grant for the construction of a new senior center and was awarded \$250,000.

Officials determined \$250,000 was not enough for a senior center and, with approval from the state, redirected the funds toward the rec field, something the state no longer allows, Anderson said.

"The flexibility in the STEAP grant program that existed in the past isn't really there now," he said.

Anderson told selectmen that while applying for a STEAP grant for the building was a logical step, he wasn't sure if the state would respond positively.

"I wonder whether the state is not going to look too favorably since we have a habit of applying for the same thing," he said.

Maguire recommended a more positive outlook.

"The number of applications Andover's been approved for in the past 20 years is small," he said. "We've done a terrible job of applying."

Anderson said the town does have a good chance of getting the grant.

"I think we can put together a good application and make a real good case for why we need it," he said. "Since our previous community center has been, you know, condemned because of mold so I think we have a valid reason for applying for it and I think the fact that we've applied for it twice and been rejected the last go-around strengthens our case."

In October 2018, the Board of Selectmen shut down the old firehouse on Center Street – which was used for a senior center and meeting space – due to a mold infestation.

## New Town Website Launched

In other town news, the town's new website launched last Thursday – at the same address

as before, [www.andoverconnecticut.org](http://www.andoverconnecticut.org).

Selectman Paula Cole said it was still a work in progress and said the successful launch was the result of a group effort. Cole lauded Amanda Gibson, member of the Website Development Committee.

"You were the backbone of the committee," she said.

Gibson agreed it was a work in progress and asked that folks send ideas and comments her way.

Other selectmen echoed Cole's complimentary remarks.

"It looks fantastic, light years ahead of where we were," said Adrian Mandeville.

"Hallelujah," Gibson replied.

On Wednesday, Anderson reiterated that the website has been successful and said officials were "very happy with it." He added that the town is still tweaking it and said anyone with questions or comments should use the "contact us" link to leave feedback.

Paired with the new online look will be a broadening of the town's alert system, Anderson said. Until now, the alerts were for emergencies only; now there will be notifications of community events, items of interest, and meetings of board and commissions.

Anderson said folks should go to the website and sign up for the alerts they are interested in getting and the means of delivery for the messages.

To sign up, go to the website home page, click on the link below the picture that says "subscribe to news and alerts" and follow directions.

## Roadwork

This summer, the town has been doing "a fair amount of roadwork" and trying some new things, Anderson said. He's looking for feedback from residents and said anyone with comments, "whether they like it or are happy with surfaces or not" should email him at [eanderson@andoverct.org](mailto:eanderson@andoverct.org).

# Marlborough Parents Favor Sending Kids Back to Classrooms

by Karla Santos

The Marlborough school district is working on a reopening plan; and through a survey that was overwhelmingly answered, it was found that most parents are willing to send students back to classrooms.

According to school administrators, they are still in the process of creating the plan, and the survey, which closed about a week ago, is part of the process.

Questions included whether parents would send kids back to school or opt for distance learning and what their plans were in terms of how children would get to and from school, said Dan White, Elmer Thienes-Mary Hall Elementary School principal.

A small number of parents indicated they were in favor of distance learning and a negligible amount said they were considering home schooling their children.

Some parents admitted to uncertainty on their back to school plans.

"At some point we'll ask families for, kind of, their final thinking because our guess is that most of them were uncertain," White added, noting that families probably want to see what the reopening plan looks like before making a final decision.

In terms of transportation, there was a split between those looking to have their children ride the school bus and planning to drop off and pick up their children.

Every district's plan has to be turned in to the state by July 24 and, White said, Marlborough's plan will be disclosed to the

Board of Education on July 23.

He noted that administrators have shared small pieces of the plan to families in weekly email updates to prepare them for things, such as the requirement for students and staff to wear masks.

"Teachers can take their masks off if they are at a certain distance," White said.

When completed, the plan will be posted on the school's website.

"We'll send the link out to families, and then we'll give them a little bit of time to make a final decision as to whether they are coming to school or, kind of, continuing with the distance learning model and we'll make sure we are ready for both," White said.

Assistant Principal Kim Kelley noted the district is using guidance from the state in its plan. A team has been created to help facilitate the process in Marlborough.

"We are lucky to have an absolutely terrific Reopening Taskforce that we talk with weekly," she said.

The taskforce has representation from Chatham Health, the town of Marlborough, school staff, the school nurse, school cafeteria staff, the Board of Education, the superintendent, parents and more.

A large group from different parts of the community, the taskforce provides the district with "very specific feedback," Kelley said.

Fulltime in-person learning and distance learning are two of three options the state has asked the school to provide families, Kelley

said. The district must also devise a hybrid model that would bring half the students to school at a time. Administrators are in the process of developing that plan and determining what it would look like for the school.

According to White, there is enough space in the school for fulltime in-person learning.

"We do have some rooms that weren't being used, so we would be able to spread our kids out a little bit more," he noted. "[The state is] recommending a desk for everybody, so our teachers who used tables in the past will be using desks to start the school year."

The state is also recommending that desks are six feet apart when feasible, he said.

In addition, White said the staff has measured classrooms and, depending on their size, they can support between 14 and 16 desks with a teacher's desk.

"We definitely have room if every single student wanted to come back," he said.

White said the school administration has been asked to group students as best as they can and will keep groups together as much as possible.

In the past, there was more flexibility for one group of students to be joined by students from another classroom, but that practice will be put on hold, White said.

"We'll try to keep a core group of that 14 to 16 kids together as much as possible throughout the school day," he said.

The distance learning plan they all jumped

into when schools closed in March has provided a point of reflection, Kelley said. Staff has been able to highlight strengths and areas they need to look at deeply and will take that learning experience into consideration in the fall.

White said one of the main challenges of this process is how things are changing continuously at the state level, causing the need to alter plans. Having to create three different plans has also been a challenge.

"Our staff, they like to have a plan and families like to have a plan," White said. "We can only give them what we have right now with the disclaimer that things are subject to change; and they can change at a moment's notice. That's been the most frustrating piece, I think, for everybody"

Ruth Kelly, chairperson of the Board of Education, said she personally thinks children "need to go back to school."

Kelly said three to four Board of Education members are part of the Reopening Taskforce and noted the group is working hard to ensure the safety of children when they return to the school building. She highlighted one of the measures being taken – the installment of touchless faucets and water stations and said other things, such as having open trash cans, are part of the plan to help prevent or lessen the spread of the coronavirus.

The school year is scheduled to start on Sept. 2, according to White.

# CRC Considers Town Manager Form of Government in Marlborough

by Karla Santos

Because of COVID-19 and the commitment to provide an in-depth review, Marlborough's Charter Revision Commission will not present proposed charter changes – which may include switching to a town manager form of government – until next spring, allowing citizens to weigh in at the November 2021 election.

Last week, the commission, which was established in January and had its first meeting in February, presented a statement to the Board of Selectmen explaining that it fell behind when it was unable to convene for about three weeks due to COVID-19 restrictions and could not meet the August 2020 deadline.

The commission, which is made up of seven members and two alternates, is charged with studying the town charter, identifying areas that need change and making recommendations for said changes. The voters would then decide if those recommendations will be adopted.

The Board of Selectmen assigned the commission to two areas of revision – the town's form of government and the number of selectmen on the Board of Selectmen.

Robert Ragusa, chairman of the commission, and Julie Revaz, vice chair, told the *RiverEast* the group is leaning towards switching the form of government to a town manager and enlarging the Board of Selectmen.

Residents have also suggested other spots where the 35-year old document needs adjusting, including the creation of a conflict of interest policy, a code of ethics, questions about the Board of Finance, merging the Planning and Zoning Commissions, quorums, supermajorities, possible changes to the Board of Education and updating the charter language

to be more inclusive.

In total, the commission will review 135 items.

Revaz said the commission is educating itself to ensure members are aware of the consequences of the choices they make.

For instance, Ragusa and Revaz noted, changing the form of government to a town manager will come with a price tag. Paying a first selectman runs in the low- to mid-\$80,000 per year, while a town manager could cost an additional \$40,000 to \$60,000.

"People would tend to react in a certain way when they hear it would cost that much for a town manager," Ragusa said. "It's not fair to react that way until you understand all the benefits that you get with a town manager."

He noted there are a number of benefits to having a town manager, including an increase in grants and opportunities to lower expenses in areas that require legal representation.

In addition, a town manager is a professional, trained to run the government and town more effectively and efficiently, Ragusa noted.

Ragusa also said that the experience that comes with a town manager is beneficial to a town. He said the commission wouldn't want someone fresh out of school in the job; it would want someone with years of experience.

Some town managers belong to a network of other town managers, he added. According to Ragusa, this is beneficial because town managers share lessons learned with each other.

"That goes a long way when it comes to trying to solve a problem in a town that the town may not have been exposed to before," he said

If the town decides to change its form of gov-

ernment, it would need to establish a search committee with representatives of current town leadership, members of other boards and residents.

Ragusa said the commission's position right now is not to have a residency requirement for the town manager and has not decided when the job would begin.

The commission is also leaning toward a larger Board of Selectmen but has not decided how many additional selectmen would be of benefit to the board, according to the statement. That may depend on if they are volunteer positions or if they come with some form of compensation.

Revaz and Ragusa said the commission has met and interviewed a variety of leaders from other towns to hear from their experiences with forms of government.

"Town managers, as you probably know, tend to be paid more handsomely than first selectmen and we were told again and again that you get what you pay for," the statement said.

While the commission seems to have agreed on some of the items that will impact the town charter, they are still in the process of analyzing some questions, including if town residents are prepared to pay more for changing the form of government.

"And if a Board of Selectmen is uncompensated, will we get qualified candidates to run?" the statement said. "What about a Board of Finance – with a larger Board of Selectmen – will we still need one?"

Amongst town leaders the commissioners recently interviewed, are those who have recently eliminated or reinstated a Board of Fi-

nance.

Commission members said they "learned something new in each discussion."

Ragusa said that the inability to meet face to face continues to be a challenge. He said that for collaborative effort, meeting in person creates more interaction and efficiency.

Because of COVID-19 restrictions, the group has been meeting through Zoom but is looking into meeting through another video conference platform – Google Meet.

Before the commission's final product is presented, members plan to hold another public hearing. They said they look forward to hearing from townspeople and getting their reaction to the ideas the commission has formulated.

First Selectmen Greg Lowrey, after hearing the statement from the commission, said he had hoped to have its work ready next month for inclusion in the 2020 presidential election, which would have a bigger turnout than the election in 2021. He said, however, that he understands the commission's position and its need for more time to present a better product.

The commission's meetings are recorded and posted on the town's website. Live meetings can also be accessed via information provided in each meeting agenda. Agendas are also posted on the town's website. Residents interested in providing input, can send comments to the commission through email and they will be added to the meeting minutes. The commission can be contacted at [firstoffice@marlboroughct.net](mailto:firstoffice@marlboroughct.net), include "CRC Public Meeting Comments" in the subject line.

*From the Editor's Desk*

# Observations & Ruminations

by **Mike Thompson**

When most people think of Carl Reiner – who passed away recently at the age of 98 – they think of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. I know I do. But when most people think of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, they probably don't think "explosion."

But I do.

In my later years of high school, I discovered the classic 1960s sitcom in repeats on Nick at Nite. I quickly became a fan; I found the show to be so well-written, the characters so three-dimensional, and the stories so relatable. So I watched it most chances I could get.

One of those chances was Sunday night, Nov. 10, 1996. I didn't have school the next day, because of Veterans Day, so I was still up at 11 p.m., watching *Dick Van Dyke*, in the downstairs family room.

About midway through the episode, I heard – and felt – a rather large boom. I couldn't tell where it came from. My first impulse was to run upstairs and check on my parents, who were asleep, and make sure they were okay and that nothing fell in their room or anything. The boom sounded that close.

They were both fine, thankfully, although they said they had heard the noise themselves. So I went outside – nothing. I ran down the street, and turned the corner, and could hear there was something going on, some kind of commotion. I heard fire engines, could see flashing lights bouncing off of trees. I followed the noise, turned the corner again onto Center Street – the street located behind our house – and saw a sight I'll never forget.

It was a building, absolutely engulfed in flames. I stood and watched, along with others, as balls of fire just shot out of all corners. A firehouse in town was fortunately located not too far up the street from the

blaze, so firefighters had responded pretty quickly, and were obviously doing their best. But the building – which housed a cake shop and an auto parts business – was absolutely engulfed. There was nothing they could do.

I watched the fire for a bit then returned home and told my parents what had happened.

Not surprisingly, the blaze was the talk of the neighborhood for the next few days. And the story of what happened to cause the massive inferno eventually became clear. Tragically, a man's body was pulled from the rubble Monday morning. Firefighters had heard the man inside, screaming for help, but were unable to get to him because the firefighters feared the floor was going to cave in.

According to newspaper reports from the time, that man, Dennis Smith of Florida, was the father of the Manchester woman who owned Flo's Cake Decorating Supplies. Police alleged that Smith was trying to torch the business to collect the insurance money.

The auto parts store that was also destroyed in the inferno later moved across town. To my knowledge, Flo's never reopened. And nothing was ever built to take the place of the destroyed building. To this day, the corner of Center and Knox streets is an empty field.

*The Dick Van Dyke Show* has provided me with a ton of laughs over the years. I occasionally still will put on an episode (the entire series is available on a couple of the streaming platforms) when I'm seeking a good chuckle. But it has also provided me, in an indirect way, with another memory.

It's what I was watching when I felt my house shake.

\* \* \*

See you next week.



## Obituaries

### Portland

#### Alice Corrinne Kearns

Alice Corrinne Kearns, 72, passed away Friday, July 3, at Middlesex Health Care Facility in Middletown. She was born Dec. 28, 1947, in Norwalk, to Vinnie Braud and Corrinne (Poirier) Braud.



She split her childhood between Connecticut, Florida and Louisiana. She was a 1966 graduate of Central Catholic High School. She worked as a business manager for a multitude of businesses where she shined as a dedicated, organized boss.

Alice truly lived life. She loved to travel; her first big trip was to Germany where her husband was stationed with the Army. On weekends she would travel all over Europe by train to see as much as possible. After two years, she returned to Connecticut to start her family, but never lost the travel bug. Her favorite place was by the water. As a child she was an accomplished Junior Olympic swimmer and one of the youngest lifeguards on the Atlantic Coast. After raising her children, she made the move to the ocean. She lived for 25 years in Stuart, Fla., where she had a lot of friends and loved gardening and going to the shore. She returned to Connecticut to be with her two granddaughters that were truly the loves of her life.

She is predeceased by her father, Vinnie Braud; her mother, Corrinne Poirier Braud; and her brother, Hermas Braud. She is survived by her son, Sean Kearns; her daughter, Colleen McMeken and husband Cliff, their two daughters, Jaelyn and Brynn; her sister, Kathy Braud; and brothers, Arthur and Henry Braud. She also leaves behind many cousins, nieces, nephews and lifelong friends.

The family has chosen to honor her wishes of being returned to the ocean at a later date. In lieu of flowers, they would like you to make a donation to the Dementia Society of America in her name.

The Portland Memorial Funeral Home, 231 Main St, Portland, is in charge of arrangements.

### Colchester

#### Rebecca Lynn Connolly

Rebecca Lynn Connolly of Huntington, N.Y., previously of Colchester, departed this life Sunday, July 5. She was the pride and joy of her father and mother, Christopher and Donna Connolly, and her sister and best friend, Erin Connolly.



She leaves to cherish her memory her grandparents, James and Eva Maguder and Andrea Connolly. She is also survived by her boyfriend, John Vincente; her devoted aunts, uncle, and cousins; as well as countless friends.

She was predeceased by her "Poppy" Joseph L. Connolly Jr. Born Jan. 13, 1997, Rebecca was raised in Hamden and Colchester. She attended Bacon Academy and, while a student there, traveled to England, Ireland, and Wales. A 2018 graduate of Hofstra University, Rebecca was pursuing a career in marketing.

Rebecca was our ray of sunshine. In the words of her sister Erin, she lit up every room she walked into and people fell in love the minute they met her. She will forever be our angel.

The visiting hours were Sunday, July 12, at The Havens Family, North Haven Funeral Home, 36 Washington Avenue, North Haven. Burial was private.

In lieu of flowers, please consider donating to Catpurrccinos Cat Café ([www.catpurrccinos.com](http://www.catpurrccinos.com)) 322 Main St., Huntington, N.Y. — a cat rescue from which Rebecca and John adopted their two kittens.

For online condolences, visit [www.northhavenfuneral.com](http://www.northhavenfuneral.com).

### Andover

#### Russell Jay Muller

Russell Jay Muller of Andover departed from this life Wednesday, July 1, at Hartford Hospital, after a short illness. He was predeceased by his beloved wife of 60 years, Lois Ellen Pfau. He was born in Hartford Dec. 15, 1929, to Kenneth S. Muller and Evaline Smith Muller.



He is survived by his daughter Kimberly and son-in law, David Farrington of Old Saybrook, along with his dearest friend and partner, Julia Haverl of Andover.

He will be greatly missed by his sister and her husband, Sandra and Sivert Jacobson of Wallingford, and his brother, Douglas Muller Sr. and his partner Frances Drake of Louisville, Ky.; his extended family of nieces, nephews and their children and grandchildren, along with his new family, Julia's daughter Christina and her husband Frank Tamburro, and their children, Cecelia, Paul and Daniel of Andover, and her son, Carl Haverl and his wife Susanna Blackwell of Aptos, Calif.

Big Russ started working at Pfau's Hardware in 1945, when he answered a frantic call to help clear the store basement during a water main break in West Hartford Center. He never left the store, after marrying the boss's youngest daughter and finally rising to the position of manager, then to vice president, where he served in that capacity until 1998. He remained active in the business until 2011. Customers would queue in line to talk to him; his warmth, patience and quiet assurance were what they needed as they wrestled with endless hardware problems. Even after his retirement, customers still would ask him for help when he stopped by to purchase hardware himself.

He served his country during the Korean War by serving in the Connecticut National Guard from 1950-1952, serving at the level of sergeant first class. He was stationed in Okinawa, Japan, working as a supply sergeant for his unit.

Russ was member of the Evening Star Lodge #101 AF and AM in Unionville for over 55 years. He served actively in the lodge in many capacities over the years including being inducted as the Worshipful Master of the Lodge in January 1973. It was through his years in the lodge that he developed many long-term friendships and he was so proud to be a Freemason.

Summers would find Russ at his second home in southern Vermont, working on endless projects to keep it running as a rental property for the upcoming ski season. Every late afternoon would find him sitting on the deck reading and watching the sun set over Mount Snow. His attachment to the rural life was well known; his mother's family were dairy farmers.

After the death of his first wife, when he met Julia, he moved from his home of 61 years in Farmington, to live with her in Andover, fully embracing his new home and gardens, both flower and vegetable. He was a founding member and board member for several years of the Nutmeg State Orchid Society, orchids played a large part of his life. In his later years, Russ and Julie received awards for the displays that they set up at many award-winning displays at orchid shows throughout Connecticut and Massachusetts.

A memorial service to celebrate his life will be held on a future date.

In lieu of flowers memorial donations may be made to the First Congregational Church, U.C.C., P.O. Box 55, Andover, CT 06232.

Funeral arrangements are being handled by The Ahern Funeral Homes Inc.

### Marlborough

#### Gerald Esposito III

Gerald (Jerry) Peter Esposito III, 32, of Meriden, formerly of Marlborough, passed away suddenly Tuesday, June 30. He is remembered for his loving, giving heart and the love he had for his family and friends. Also, his love of the Dallas Cowboys and 'the field.'



He leaves behind his father and mother, Gerald P. and Beth C. Esposito, his brother, Scott A. Esposito, his wife and their two sons, all of Cookeville, Tenn.; his grandfather, Gerald P. Esposito Sr. of St. Petersburg, Fla.; as well as many aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews and many friends.

Services are private for the family.

Belmont Funeral Home LLC has been entrusted with Jerry's care. To share memories or express condolences, visit [www.belmontfh.com](http://www.belmontfh.com).

### Colchester

#### Joseph Frank Surwill Sr.

Joseph Frank Surwill Sr., 73, of Henrico, N.C., passed away peacefully at his home Thursday, July 2. He was born Oct. 31, 1946, in Norwich, and grew up in Colchester. Known to many as "Butch," he was the son of the late Joseph and Elsie (Hills) Surwill.



Joseph was a veteran, serving in the United States Air Force as an airman with the 835th Civil Engineering Squadron (TAC) attaining rank of sergeant (SGT E-4) at McConnell AFB in Wichita, Kan. He retired from The Traveler's Insurance Company in Hartford, after working in data processing for over 20 years; was a business entrepreneur, opening a Cherrybrook Pet Supply Store in Manchester and Dunn-Rite Cleaning Services in Wethersfield, before retiring to North Carolina.

Joseph was a former member of the Goldwing Motorcycle Club, Chapter D in Coventry; a former member of Lake Gaston Resort Men's Bowling League #300 in Gasburg, Va., before becoming an active member of the Mixed Bowling League #304. He loved sharing time and traveling with his family and enjoyed being out in nature, boating, fishing, camping, and traveling around the country to almost every state. Joseph was an avid sports fan who closely followed the New England Patriots, Washington Redskins, UConn, NASCAR and enjoyed coaching football and umpiring baseball.

He had a love of raising and showing his champion Rottweilers. Joseph had a wonderful sense of humor like none, a boyish charm, generous heart, and a broad smile that would light up any room. He was a great source of strength and comfort to many and will be forever loved and remembered by his wife, Diane (Miller) Surwill of North Carolina; his children, Anne Marie (James) Lussier of Georgia, Joseph Surwill Jr. of Colchester, Kimberly Allard of Vernon, Wayne (Donna) Allard of East Hartland, Michelle (John) Rawson of Ellington; nephew, Luke Surwill of Ellington; granddaughters, Chellsie Ann, Hailey, Tina, Alyssa; grandson, John; numerous great-grandchildren; extended family and friends near and far.

In addition to his parents, he was predeceased by his brother, William Surwill, and granddaughter Alisa Marie Allard.

Walk-through calling hours will be held Saturday, July 18, from 11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m., directly at the Aurora-McCarthy Funeral Home, 167 Old Hartford Road, Colchester (please wear a mask and maintain social distancing), followed by a 1 p.m. Mass of Christian Burial at St. Andrew Catholic Church, with Father Richard officiating. Burial with full Military Honors to follow in the New St. Andrew Cemetery, Colchester.

At the request of the family, in lieu of flowers memorial donations can be made to the Alzheimer's Association, American Heart Association or Patriot Guard Riders.

For online condolences, please visit [www.auroramccarthyfuneralhome.com](http://www.auroramccarthyfuneralhome.com).

### Portland

#### Helen T. Dabkowski

Helen T. (Gala) Dabkowski, 101, beloved wife of the late Henry Dabkowski, entered into eternal life Tuesday, July 7. She was born Feb. 23, 1919, in New Britain, daughter of the Late Frank and Rozalia (Swider) Gala. She lived in New Britain, Portland, Columbia and most recently Lebanon.

Helen was formerly employed by American Hardware. She is survived by a sister, Genevieve Alberti of New Britain; a brother-in-law and sister-in-law, Walter and Joan Zeh of Thompson; a sister-in-law, Susan Dabkowski of New Britain; and several nieces and nephews.

"Niece Mary Anne Zeh, thanks for the help and care you have given me." "Niece Janet Zeh thanks for your care and daily telephone calls." "Mr. and Mrs. George Judkins, thanks for the help you gave me."

She was predeceased by two brothers, Frank Gala Jr., Henry Gala; and nephew, Robert Gala. A Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated Tuesday, July 14, followed by burial in Sacred Heart Cemetery, New Britain.

Memorial contributions may be made to the American Cancer Society.

### Middle Haddam

#### Cynthia Wyeth Peterson

It is with a deep sadness that we report the loss of Cynthia Wyeth Peterson — she was an exceptional wife, mother, grandmother and scientist.



She leaves her husband of 62 years, Gerald and her son Tycho (Michelle) and grandchildren William and Annabelle, and her daughter Celeste (Johan) and grandchildren Siri and Anna.

She was a longtime resident of Middle Haddam. She was born April 28, 1933, in Chestnut Hill, Pa., to Francis and Helen Wyeth (Gafney) and was predeceased by her parents and brother, John Wyeth. Cynthia and Gerald were married in Oslo, Norway in 1957 and lived there for the subsequent year, where she worked at the Astrophysics Institute.

Cynthia was a professor of physics at the University of Connecticut for 49 years and a pioneer for women in science. She specialized in teaching astronomy. Prior to that, she taught at Wesleyan University, and did research at Yale University and the Harvard University Blue Hill Atmospheric Observatory. She had an undergraduate degree in physics and mathematics from Bryn Mawr College and a PhD in experimental physics from Cornell University.

She developed a love for science in high school working at The Franklin Institute in Philadelphia and in 1950 was a finalist in the Westinghouse Science Talent Search.

Her career was notable for both outreach and research. On outreach, she shared her enthusiasm for science with people of all ages, giving lectures and star parties at libraries, schools and clubs. She was also one of the founders of KAST, a summer science camp for elementary school students. She was one of three regular participants on an engaging radio show, *The Scientists*, and the media for interpretation of astronomical events frequently consulted her. Over the decades, she did research and published papers in the fields of astronomy, chemistry and biophysics, which she continued well into her 80s. She also developed a lab in archeological dating. Along the way, she mentored many students.

Cynthia's wit and good humor were well known. She loved doing projects, often science-based, with her children and grandchildren. As a hobby, she and her husband traveled the world collecting 11 total solar eclipses. In her 40s, she became an avid runner. In the end, she often finished last, but got the trophy for the oldest runner. Later in her life, she took up downhill skiing to be with her children. She was a friend of nature and enjoyed hiking, canoeing and being outdoors. She was also an accomplished harmonica player and was extremely fond of folk music.

There will be a private burial service for the immediate family.

In lieu of flowers, donations can be made to the Sierra Club, National Audubon Society and American Association of University Women (AAUW).

To leave online condolences, please visit [www.spencerfuneralhomeinc.com](http://www.spencerfuneralhomeinc.com).

## Obituaries continued

### Marlborough

#### Doris Rosa Conway

Doris Rosa (Wied) Conway, longtime resident of Marlborough, passed away peacefully in her sleep Thursday, May 7. She courageously battled several cancers since the age of 55, most recently oral cancer.



Doris was born in Wangen, Germany on May 21, 1940 to Erwin and Rosa Wied. She married and came to America in 1966. She will be deeply missed by her daughters, Dorothea Blomquist, Laura (Darren) Lessard, Gloria (Michael) Wilkinson and Linda (Ryan) Romanowski. Doris instilled her work ethic and resilience in her daughters. She loved being a grandmother and "Oma" to her seven grandchildren, Christie (Chris) Berlin and Tyler (Kara) Blomquist, Owen Tardif, Caitlynn and Ethan Lessard, and Luke and Lillian Romanowski. She was fortunate to be a great-grandmother to Chase, Oaklyn and Palmer Blomquist. She will be missed by her family and friends near and far. In Germany, her sister, Ursula, nephews Martin, Klaus, Tomas and Bernhardt.

She was predeceased by her newborn daughter, Elizabeth Olszewski; former husbands, George J. Olszewski Jr. and James T. Conway; as well as her brother, Dieter Wied.

Doris learned to sew during her teenage years. She worked as a talented seamstress throughout her lifetime. She also had a long career in manufacturing beginning at Salamander Shoes in Germany. After coming to America, she worked at Colt Firearms where she met her lifelong friend, Betty Varni. She drove special needs children to/from school while her daughters were growing up. She later became employed at Reliable Electric Motors in Hartford, Marlborough Health Care Center and Intelligent Motion Systems, both in Marlborough.

Doris loved gardening and planted gardens not only where she lived but also where she worked, attended church and at the Marlborough Post Office. The numerous gardens on the grounds of the Florence S. Lord Senior Housing Center serve as a beautiful living legacy to her "green thumb." Doris lived her life to the fullest and was always ready for an adventure. In addition to gardening, she enjoyed traveling, tag sales, camping, fishing, dancing and sunbathing at the beach. She was a caring person always willing to help someone in need. Doris was a member of the Colt's Girls Club, First Spiritualist Church of Willimantic, The Red Hat Society, The Loyal Order of Moose Lodge and the American Legion. Her presence will be missed by those who knew her.

A memorial service celebrating Doris' life will be held Saturday, July 18, at 11 a.m., at D'Esopo-East Hartford Memorial Chapel, 30 Carter St, East Hartford, CT 06118.

Memorial donations in Doris' name may be made to Florence S. Lord Senior Housing Center, 155 South Main St., #1, Marlborough, CT 06447. Checks can be made payable to FLS with a note for Residence Fund in memory of Doris.

### Colchester

#### Mary Loretta Windel

Mary Loretta Windel, 72, of Colchester, passed away peacefully at Chestelm Health & Rehabilitation Center Friday, June 26, following a long, very courageous battle with cancer. Born in Plattsburgh, N.Y., Aug. 9, 1947, she was the only daughter of Helen (Ormsby) Durgan and the late Charles Durgan.



Mary grew up in New York and graduated from Peru High School with the class of 1965. Shortly after graduation on Sept. 11, 1965, Mary and the love of her life, Mr. Paul Windel, were married; the couple moved to Colchester in 1971, where they made their home and raised their family.

Mary was a hard worker; she worked for Whelen Engineering in Chester in the light bar kitting department until her retirement in 2012. She enjoyed playing Monday night bingo at the American Legion Post 156 in Moodus and sometimes also at Foxwoods Casino. Mary enjoyed coffee and conversations with her good friend, Jen. However, above all, the greatest happiness in Mary's life came from her family. She especially adored her grandsons and enjoyed watching them compete in tractor pulling competitions; they were her pride and joy.

Mary will be forever loved and missed by her beloved husband of over 54 years, Paul Windel of Colchester; her cherished children, Karen Moore and her husband Bruce of Marlborough, Terry Swol of East Hampton, and Brenda Windel of Colchester; her mother, Helen Durgan of Morrisonville, N.Y.; her adored grandsons, Matthew and Joshua; her brothers, Gary Durgan of Morrisonville, N.Y., and Tony Durgan and his wife Denise of Peru, N.Y.; as well as numerous extended family members and friends.

She was predeceased by her father, Charles Durgan as well as her brother, Joseph Durgan.

Mary's family would like to thank the staff of Middlesex Health Hospice as well as the staff of Chestelm Health & Rehabilitation Center for providing the most exceptional care and kindness during the difficult times.

Services were held at the Aurora McCarthy Funeral Home of Colchester on Tuesday, June 30, and Mary was interred in Linwood Cemetery.

In lieu of flowers, memorial donations can be made to Middlesex Health Hospice, 28 Crescent St., Middletown, CT 06457.

For online condolences, visit [www.auroramccarthyfuneralhome.com](http://www.auroramccarthyfuneralhome.com).