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April 2026 *Fresh Perspectives*

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THE ART OF JOHN POTTER

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MESSAGE FROM OUR *Editor*



"IT'S NOT WHAT THE WORLD HOLDS FOR YOU, IT'S WHAT YOU BRING TO IT."

— L.M. MONTGOMERY, ANNE OF GREEN GABLES

A stranger stopped me outside the latest Anthology Market to talk about this month's setup. Before we parted ways, she recognized me and told me how much she loves the magazine. Each month, she said, she tears out my editor's note to share with a loved one. She wanted me to know it makes a difference. I walked away from that conversation encouraged and smiling. I was grateful for the unexpected connection and reminded that someone notices.

During an early morning coffee study, I noticed the barista had really beautiful hair. When she brought our drinks out, I told her, "Your hair is such a pretty color." She thanked me and lit up. She walked away a little taller and more cheerful than when we first met.

Recently, a school staff member struck up a conversation with my daughter about a shirt and earrings she was wearing. A few days later, she brought my daughter a pair of socks in the same theme because they made her think of her. My daughter felt truly seen that day.

A smile can make a difference. A compliment can brighten someone's day. An encouraging text or phone call can remind someone they are not alone. Remembering the details that matter to people and making a point to learn someone's name and use it shows care. Sharing life through laughter, pain, prayers, or sometimes simply sitting in silence with someone is another way we show up for one another.

These small gestures cost little more than a moment, yet they make a world of difference in helping people feel seen, loved, noticed, and appreciated. They remind us to pause and take in the beauty this one precious life holds. We are not meant to carry life alone, and it feels lighter when we walk through it together.

As we move through our days, it is easy to become so distracted that we miss the wonder waiting for us in this one beautiful life we have been given. We can forget that we are surrounded by people who hurt as we do and who might just need a little sunshine in their step.

I hope you are encouraged to call your mom or grandma, even when you do not feel like it. You will be glad you did, and it will mean the world to her. Make time for your family and do not leave things unsaid, because they will not always be around. Speak life over others and notice when someone could use a little extra kindness in their day. Offer an encouraging word when it comes to mind. Carry the burdens of others in whatever ways you can. Choose an attitude that says it is not what I can get out of this life, but what I can give away that matters most.

Always leave the world a little better than you found it.

Love,

Stephanie

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JENNY BARRIGER
Owner | Founder



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Executive Director | Editor



SYNDA ROREX
Art Director



TOVE OBLANDER
Creative + Digital Engagement



TATUM JAGODA
Social + Digital Engagement



ASHLEY FISHER
Senior Account Executive



BRE ROBBINS
Account Executive



NICOLE ALLEN
Operations Specialist



BETSY HARRIS
Billings 365 Event Coordinator

PUBLISHER
Simply Family Magazine, Inc.
PO Box 21587 ~ Billings, MT 59104
406.702.0267

OWNER | FOUNDER
Jenny Barriger
jenny@simplylocalmagazine.com

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR | EDITOR
Stephanie Toews
stephanie@simplylocalmagazine.com

CALENDAR
b365@simplylocalmagazine.com

ADVERTISING SALES
For advertising inquiries contact
advertising@simplylocalmagazine.com

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photography | videography

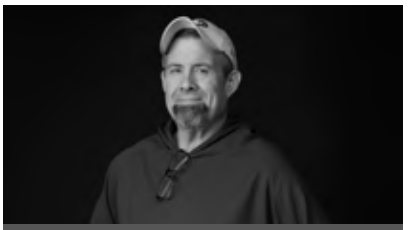
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(406) 794-2790 | www.jessicaplance.com



Keely M Zimmerman PHOTOGRAPHY

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AMG PRODUCTIONS

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EDITORIAL



MALOREE MURPHY
eat + drink



MARIA WEIDICH
health + wellness



HANNAH OLSON
arts + entertainment



JENNIFER MILLER
home + lifestyle



JESSICA PLANCE
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listening to the quiet

The Art of John Potter

Article and photos by Jessica Plance

Red Lodge artist John Potter and his wife, Tracie Garfield, have always been active. They are the couple you see bundled up and moving through town in the middle of winter, snow falling softly around them while most people stay inside. Morning walks. Evening walks. Long canyon climbs. Cross-country ski days when the trails allow.

At 69, Potter is working toward a self-imposed milestone: 70 hikes before his 70th birthday. The only rules are that each hike must be longer than four miles and no trail can be repeated. It's an ambitious goal, especially during a Montana winter, but for Potter, the hikes are less about mileage and more about intention. Walking isn't just exercise; it's practice. The same kind of practice that shapes his paintings.

He grew up with one foot in two worlds, living in a middle-class home north of Chicago with his mother and stepfather, and spending time on the Lac du Flambeau reservation in northern Wisconsin. This back-and-forth shaped him early. Chicago brought asphalt, noise, and tension, while the reservation offered woods, water, and his uncle, Nick Hockings.

As a teenager, when home life felt volatile, Potter escaped into the forest. He practiced sitting still, slowing his breathing and heartbeat until birds and deer resumed their natural rhythms around him. Sketchbook balanced on his knees, he drew. "When you're still, animals come out," he says. "Because you're just part of the landscape."

Over time, he started to recognize individual animals. A doe with a notch in her ear. A buck with slightly wider-set eyes. He observed generations grow, recognizing the offspring of animals he had once sketched. These animals weren't just symbols or scenery; they were beings with emotions and memories. Good days. Bad days. Hungry. Playful. Wary.

That attention, which was patient, reverent, and deeply observant, would later define his work. But first, there were detours. In high school, an art teacher told him he had no future as an artist. Raised to respect elders, he believed her. He left for Utah State University to study wildlife science, hoping distance might settle something restless in him. It didn't take long to realize that Western science, labs, formulas, and periodic tables did not speak to him. The art department did.

Utah State's nationally recognized illustration program drew him back to the pencil and brush he had never truly abandoned. He graduated with degrees in illustration and fine art. Job offers followed: Hallmark Cards in Kansas City and an animation studio in Los Angeles. He turned both down, not wanting to do conveyor belt art or live in L.A.

Instead, he ended up in Greybull, Wyoming, working at a bentonite clay plant, hauling 100-pound bags of a substance used in everything from oil drilling to ice cream and cosmetics. It was tough, tiring work. An accident there left him with a concussion, broken ribs, and a strong feeling that something had to change.

In 1981, he applied for a position as a newsroom artist at the Billings Gazette. He got the job. The move was sudden, going from the factory floor to an air-conditioned newsroom. Potter became a one-man art department, creating editorial cartoons, courtroom sketches, wildlife illustrations, maps, charts, and portraits of politicians and celebrities. He even took a pay cut to make the switch. "I got to draw all day," he says. "That was enough."

Eventually, the paper asked him to write a column providing a Native perspective. At the time, coverage of Indigenous communities largely centered on crime or conflict. Potter's column blended commentary with Native humor. It was sharp, unflinching, and often disarming. He didn't pull punches. He made some enemies, but gained many friends.

"HIKING IS WALKING, BUT IT'S MORE THAN JUST THAT. IT'S A WAKENING."

-JOHN POTTER



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BUFFALO BILL



Humor still runs easily through him. He recalls Wyoming Senator Al Simpson stopping by the newsroom after a cartoon ran. "John," Simpson would say, "you've got my ears too small." But beneath the wit lies something steadier.

When Potter was 16, he told his Uncle Nick he planned to return to the reservation after high school and just be an artist. Nick told him otherwise. "You need to get off the reservation," Nick said. "There's a quiet dignity in the natural world. Capture that. Educate people about who we were, who we are, and who we can be together if we learn to listen." He pointed to his ears. "Not with these. With this," tapping his chest.

Nick Hockings later became a respected cultural educator, building an 80-acre walk-through museum on the reservation. He crafted traditional lodges, canoes, and fish traps, teaching thousands of schoolchildren about seasonal lifeways and Indigenous knowledge. He earned two Emmy Awards for his work with PBS. Potter quit drinking at 28 and helped Nick do the same. Their bond deepened as their lives shifted toward clarity and purpose. That sense of responsibility lives in Potter's canvases.

Since leaving the Gazette in 2001, he has painted full-time, building a career that includes galleries in Jackson, Sedona, and Santa Fe, along with exhibitions at the National Museum of Wildlife Art and the Buffalo Bill Art Show, where he has won top honors. His wildlife paintings are technically masterful, but what sets them apart is restraint. His elk, bison, and deer are not trophies frozen in spectacle. They are present, alert, grounded, and embody that quiet dignity his uncle named decades ago.

In 2012, Potter settled in Red Lodge. Tracie joined him in 2024, and she encourages his teaching, helps run the studio, and was the architect of the 70-hike challenge. "You're almost 70," she told him. "Time to give back."

He now conducts workshops, teaching fundamentals, value, composition, and light to younger artists. For an introvert, standing in front of a group doesn't come naturally. But he remembers what it meant to have someone believe in him when others did not. And he keeps walking.

"Hiking is walking, but it's more than just that. It's a wakening." He said, "It reawakens that primal part of us all that needs connection with the Earth and the Wild. Can't do that on the couch." On the trail, the layers peel away, the awards, titles, and expectations. He becomes what he was as a boy in the Wisconsin woods: still, attentive, listening.

In a culture that values speed and spectacle, John Potter paints and walks toward something different. Something slower. Something quieter. He captures the dignity of simply belonging to the land. **SLM**



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Small Steps, BIG VIEWS: Exploring Billings' Trails *with kids*



Article and photos by Kara Schwalbe

Sometimes hiking with kids requires adjusting expectations. Other times it calls for rebranding. You might just need exciting snacks and an activity or two up your sleeve. If you've been hoping to hit the trails more often with your family, here's how to shift from "are we there yet?" to "let's keep going!"

ADJUSTING EXPECTATIONS

Whether you're an experienced trekker or a casual stroller, remember that hiking with kids is about the experience, not the destination. To make sure they want to go back again, focus on their enjoyment rather than your total miles.

- **Quality Over Quantity:** Time spent outside together is a win, regardless of how far you actually travel.
- **The Comfort Rule:** Do your best to prevent a child from becoming too hot, cold, thirsty, hungry, or tired.
- **Harness Imagination:** Kids discover wonder and fun in the smallest details; a "boring" rock can become a dragon egg with the right story.
- **The Backup Plan:** If your kids are young, always bring a carrier, even if they insist they can walk.

KNOW WHERE TO GO: BILLINGS FAVORITES

We are fortunate to have amazing trails near Billings that provide a quick trip but a thrilling experience.

LOCATION	WHY WE LOVE IT FOR FAMILIES	THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND
PHIPPS PARK	The "big" hill feels like a massive peak conquest for little legs.	The hill is steep! Trekking poles are recommended to save adult knees on the way down.
BACK 9	The prairie dog town at the trailhead is a hit, and then the forested area feels worlds away from town.	Watch for mountain bikers; they frequent these trails and move fast.
FOUR DANCES NATURAL AREA	Short hike, big payoff with the river overlook.	Wind can be a factor here; check the forecast before heading out.
JOHN DOVER MEMORIAL PARK	Huge variety to explore suspension bridges, riverfront, steep hills and even rusty old machinery.	No dogs allowed at this location
PICTOGRAPH CAVE	Short loop with prehistoric "cool factor" and a great visitor center.	There is a small vehicle entry fee for non-residents.

Other honorable mentions: Norm's Island, Riverfront Park, Two Moon Park and Acton Recreation Area.





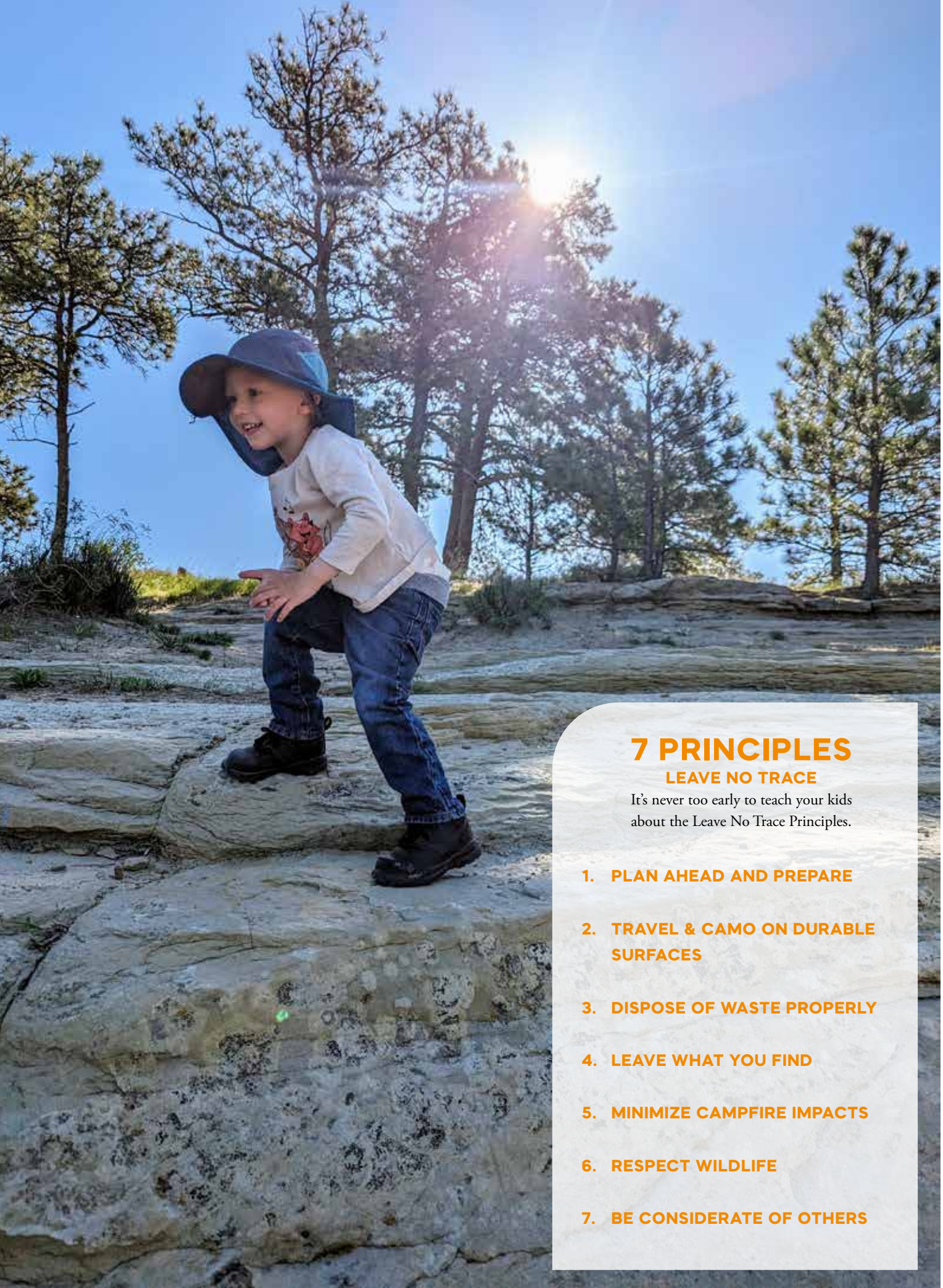
TRAILSIDE ACTIVITIES: KEEPING THEM ENGAGED

When attention spans waver, pull these ideas out of your pack:

- **Scavenger Hunt:** Use ours or create your own. Don't forget a crayon! Look for our curated scavenger hunt here:
- **Sights, Scents, & Sounds:** Turn it into a sensory game. Look for tracks or "scat" (animal droppings) to play nature detective. Can they find the smell of sagebrush or juniper? Can they hear a distant train or meadowlark?
- **The Junior Navigator:** Let your child "lead" using a simple paper map or a tracking app on your phone. Being in charge of the turns keeps them moving forward.

GETTING OUT THE DOOR

Sometimes the hardest mile is the one between the couch and the car. If just the word "hiking" triggers a meltdown, try rebranding it as an "adventure" or an "exploration." Make it special with "trail-only" gear, like their own binoculars or a dedicated backpack filled with "power snacks" (extra chocolate chip cookies or fruit snacks usually help). By fostering a love of the outdoors early, you aren't just burning off energy; you're creating family memories that last a lifetime. **SLM**



7 PRINCIPLES

LEAVE NO TRACE

It's never too early to teach your kids about the Leave No Trace Principles.

1. **PLAN AHEAD AND PREPARE**
2. **TRAVEL & CAMO ON DURABLE SURFACES**
3. **DISPOSE OF WASTE PROPERLY**
4. **LEAVE WHAT YOU FIND**
5. **MINIMIZE CAMPFIRE IMPACTS**
6. **RESPECT WILDLIFE**
7. **BE CONSIDERATE OF OTHERS**

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5 Books That Will Renew Your Relationship to Outdoor Recreation



Article and photo by Jessica Plance

1. Braiding Sweetgrass:

Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants **by Robin Wall Kimmerer**

This beautifully written collection weaves together Native ways of knowing, science, and gratitude for the land. It invites readers to rethink not only how they hike or camp but also how they relate to the natural world.

2. A Walk in the Woods:

Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail **by Bill Bryson**

A hilariously human and surprisingly insightful journey along one of America's most iconic trails. Bryson blends humor, history, and self-discovery, reminding us that the outdoors is for everyone, not just expert hikers.

3. The Nature Fix:

Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative **by Florence Williams**

Drawing on neuroscience and field research from around the globe, Williams explores how even small doses of time outside, such as a daily walk, transform our well-being.

4. The Outermost House:

A Year of Life on the Great Beach of Cape Cod **by Henry Beston**

A lyrical, immersive look at a year spent in near solitude with the tides and seasons. It reframes outdoor time from recreation to deep presence and observation.

5. The Lost Art of Reading Nature's Signs:

Use Outdoor Clues to Find Your Way, Locate Water, Track Animals, and Other Forgotten Skills **by Tristan Gooley**

Part fieldcraft manual, part mindfulness guide, this book trains your eye and mind to notice patterns in the natural world, from clouds and wind to animal behavior, enriching every hike or walk. **SLM**


ROW

TERRY ZEE LEE'S LIFELONG MISSION

to bring art to the sky

Article by Kara Schwalbe
Photos by Keely Zimmerman

To Terry Zee Lee, a kite is much more than a child's toy. It embodies art, science, storytelling, and sport. It serves as a way to engage and educate a community, and it is pure joy visible against the sky. She fondly remembers childhood beach days in Oregon, saying, "My mother would tie a kite to each one of our wrists, and we'd spend the day on the sand flying kites." Today, Terry is a renowned kite artist, curator, and educator living in Billings, Montana. Through her entrepreneurial spirit and unwavering dedication to community impact, she has turned a childhood passion into an art form that has brought joy and education to thousands.

FROM LEATHER TO LIFTOFF: AN ENTREPRENEUR'S JOURNEY

Although kites have always been Terry's passion, her career started in Denver with leatherwork, where she developed her skills working with garments and materials. When she moved to Billings in 1972, she made leather clothes for local families to support herself while managing her ranch and raising children. However, Terry's entrepreneurial spirit wouldn't stay grounded for long.

She started the Spiffy Company, preparing houses for sale and applying her leatherworking skills to hang wallpaper with accuracy. As she became more involved in the community, Terry realized that downtown Billings needed a distinct identity to boost local tourism. Her solution? The Red Velvet Carriage Company, where residents and visitors could tour the town on trolleys or carriages pulled by six of her draft horses.

This venture eventually led to her role with the Chamber of Commerce, where she served as chair of the tourism branch for Billings from 1991 to 1992. In this capacity, she made her most lasting mark on the city.

WHEN ART TAKES FLIGHT: THE BIRTH OF AN ARTFORM

The breakthrough moment occurred at an unexpected location: the Billings airport baggage claim. As chair of tourism on the Billings Chamber of Commerce board, Terry realized that the new baggage claim area desperately needed some artwork. She considered many ideas before settling on the perfect solution.

On November 9th, 1999, Terry's first kite exhibit was installed, celebrating the new millennium. The display was a breakthrough. It featured art that was accessible, joyful, and conversational; art that made people look up, both literally and figuratively. Its success led to her nonprofit efforts (initially SkyWindWorld and later Zee Lee Kites), providing artists with a unique platform and continuously bringing beauty and creativity to spaces and skies.





THE CURATOR'S VISION: ART WITH ALTITUDE

Terry's process for curating an exhibit is meticulous and highly collaborative. She starts with a theme, such as the history of the buffalo and birds of America or water conservation, among others, then commissions kite builders to create works that represent some aspect of that theme. Each artist interprets the concept through their own lens, resulting in a collection that is both cohesive and diverse, and they all fly perfectly.

When installation day arrives, Terry hangs each of the kites herself (with help from trusted friends), carefully considering lighting and spacing to honor the incredible work of each artist. To date, she has curated 18 unique exhibits. Many have traveled and been displayed in multiple locations, often in highly visible public spaces, always aiming to share the artwork, the artist's stories, and messages with as many people as possible.

SPOTLIGHT: VISIONS OF LEWIS & CLARK

One of Terry's most notable traveling exhibits is "Visions of Lewis and Clark," a striking blend of history, art, and education. The idea: use kites to highlight the challenging journey of Lewis and Clark and honor the Native Americans who offered vital support along the way.

Terry chose 30 journal quotes from Lewis and Clark that show what they saw, experienced, and learned. Each quote was given to a different national kite builder, who then researched and turned it into a unique kite that tells a story.

The exhibit has traveled to many communities along Lewis & Clark's route, engaging audiences and teaching them about this important journey. When the exhibit arrives in a new city, Terry offers STEM-based kite-building lessons at local schools, and a local artist is chosen to create a kite that shows their city's connection to the expedition. The exhibit recently returned to Montana and is now on display at the Mansfield Library in Missoula and at various locations around town.

LESSONS ON THE WIND: KITES AND KIDS

- Beyond the museum-quality exhibits, Terry appreciates the powerful educational value of kites. In one lesson, a kite can teach children concepts, all while they enjoy the exciting experience of watching something they made fly into the sky.
- Physics and aerodynamics
- Materials, science, and technology
- Art and history
- Knots
- Meteorology

She estimates she has taught over 7000 students, each decorating, building, and flying their own kite. "They are so proud to say, 'Look at me, look at my kite!' and they are just so happy," she says. Her voice warms with the memory of thousands of upturned faces. "This is what keeps kite flyers and educators going back for more." Now, she enjoys using her kite program to host birthday parties for children.

TERRY'S WHY: JOY WITHOUT BARRIERS

What drives Terry after all these years? It's simple and profound: the excitement she sees on children's faces when their kites catch the wind for the first time. The astonishment, joy, and wonder that a kite brings its flyer, regardless of age or ability.

"Kites are for anyone," Terry says with a smile, "What's great about kites is that they are accessible to everyone: old, young, active people, people in wheelchairs. They are a way to give everyone something to enjoy."



You can fly kites casually with your family on a Sunday afternoon, or you can dive deep into the American Kitefliers Association (AKA) and enter competitions for sport or for art. The possibilities, like the sky itself, are endless.

Terry's philosophy is beautifully simple: "If you're having a bad day, go fly a kite; if you're having a good day, go fly a kite." For Terry Zee Lee, that string in her hand connects more than just fabric to the earth; it links people to wonder, students to learning, communities to their stories, and all of us to the simple, transcendent joy of watching something beautiful dance in the wind. **SLM**

GO FLY A KITE:

TERRY'S TOP LOCATIONS FOR FLYING A KITE IN BILLINGS

If you want to fly a kite in Billings, you'll find plenty of wind and open spaces. Choose a dry day when the wind is steadily between 5 and 15 mph.

AMEND PARK
CASTLE ROCK PARK
RIMROCK WEST PARK
ANY OPEN AREA

away from powerlines or trees
- as long as you have permission from the landowner

DON'T HAVE A KITE?

Build your own or buy a DIY kite kit from sites like kitekits.com that provides everything you need to decorate, assemble, and fly your kite.

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IN FOCUS:
Yellowstone Eye Care's Next Chapter

Article by Maria Weidich
Photos by Jessica Plance

For the doctors at Yellowstone Eye Care, vision has always felt deeply personal. Dr. Shawn Lebsock says that the calling drew him in from the start. "The eye is just such a unique organ," he says. "To most people, their most precious sense is their eyesight, and we need to care for that precious gift."

For over 75 years, families in Billings have trusted the same clinic with their eyesight. Since opening in 1951, Yellowstone Eye Care has grown naturally from a small family practice into a key part of healthcare, blending modern technology with personalized care that keeps generations of patients returning.

Today, a close-knit team of doctors bears the responsibility of guiding the clinic into its next chapter. Alongside Dr. Lebsock is Dr. Joseph Steiner, who joined the practice in 2011, followed by Drs. Angie Biskupiak and Dixon Maggard, who came on board in 2022. Together, they embody a new generation of providers rooted in the clinic's longstanding tradition of relationship-based eye care.

THE EARLY YEARS

Decades before the name Yellowstone Eye Care was displayed over the door, the practice was simply known as McBride Optometry. Dr. James McBride started the clinic in 1951 with a clear philosophy: treat your neighbors like family. Over time, his three sons, Drs. Doug and Kevin, as optometrists, and Tim, as the clinic's longtime optician, built a true family business that served Billings for many years.

As a child, Dr. Doug remembers riding his bike to visit his father at work. "The clinic never felt separate from family life; it was an extension of it," he recalls. "Those visits left a lasting impression on me. Not just of my father's work ethic, but of his commitment to care for people and serving the community."

"I saw the passion that my dad had for optometry and felt excited to join my family in continuing to grow the office and expand the level of care we offered our patients," echoes Dr. Kevin. "We were a lifelong part of the community, and we worked hard to build trust and provide excellent care to our patients."

Their younger brother Tim joined the team as an optician in 1979 and remained the clinic's most expert glass and contact lens fitter for 45 years, longer than either of his brothers. "I enjoyed working with dad's patients who were lifelong patients. I know our father was very proud of his legacy that lived on."

PASSING THE TORCH

But the transition to today's team didn't happen overnight. For years, Drs. Steiner and Lebsock worked closely with the McBride brothers, learning not only the clinical aspects of optometry but also the culture of care that shaped the practice.

"We saw firsthand that they were excellent practitioners who understood and embraced our mission of quality, family-centered care," Dr. Doug recalls. "These doctors will continue the legacy of quality, caring eye care for the Billings community."

"Dr. Steiner and Dr. Lebsock have honored what our father began in 1951 and what we built during our own careers," echoes Dr. Kevin. "They are now taking the practice to higher heights, and we couldn't ask for more in transferring the mission of exceptional eye care to these doctors."

"We're a big, small town," Dr. Lebsock adds. "That's what separates this community from a big city. We provide the same care we'd provide our own family and friends, just like the McBride brothers demonstrated. They passed the torch, and we're gonna take that same approach."

NEW NAME, SAME COMMITMENT

By 2023, all three McBride brothers retired, and the doctors knew the next chapter needed room to grow. "The local nature of the eye clinic is not lost on the doctors at Yellowstone Eye Care," says Dr. Lebsock. "We wanted to create stable recognition and something that lets you know we're reliable for many years to come."

"Yellowstone" may not be flashy, but it's familiar, just like the clinic itself. While the name on the building might be new, the commitment behind it hasn't changed a bit. Eye care is becoming more and more important to the general population, Dr. Steiner explains. "Growth is essential. Modern technology, procedures, and



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APRIL EVENTS

CYCLE TO SOAR

Date: Saturday, April 11
Time: 8:00AM – 1:00PM
Location: Billings Family YMCA

Pedal with a purpose at Cycle to Soar, returning for its fourth year at the Billings Family YMCA. This high-energy event brings the community together for a morning of fun, teamwork, and mission-driven fundraising in support of Eagle Mount's adaptive recreation programs for children, adults, and veterans. Participation is free, and all are welcome to ride, cheer, and get involved. To learn more or explore sponsorship opportunities, contact Lynn at lynnm@eaglemountbillings.org or call 406.969.2949. Additional details and registration are available at:

WHITE STAG RACE

Date: Saturday, April 4
Time: 10:00AM – 3:00PM
Location: @Red Lodge Mountain

Join fellow skiers and spectators for the annual White Stag Race, a beloved local tradition first held in 1940. Open to the public, this enduring event features a giant slalom course set on Turnpike and welcomes a wide range of participants. Racers complete two runs, one on the blue course and one on the red course, with combined times determining results and awards presented by age group within each gender. The top eight finishers advance to head-to-head rounds until a champion is crowned. For more information, visit:

equipment are a bright spot for me. We want to be at the forefront of newer technology and always be practicing at our highest scope of practice."

MORE THAN VISION CARE

Today, an eye exam at Yellowstone Eye Care often reveals more than just vision clarity. Vision health is closely linked to overall body health, making each appointment an opportunity to identify issues that extend beyond a simple prescription update.

Using technology and retinal scans enables the eye to serve as a window into the rest of the body, Dr. Steiner explains. Such images can be used as a diagnostic tool to help detect vision problems or even life-threatening disorders and diseases, even before symptoms appear. "Neurologically speaking, eyes are one of the most active nerves that you can see in the body's normal anatomy without an MRI or surgery. The blood vessels in the back of the eye can tell us about cardiovascular conditions, blood pressure, and arterial disease; there are so many things that the eye can tell us."

"We're here to take care of your injuries, diseases, not just the basics," he says. "We push to know whatever we can do within our scope that allows us to care for our patients." Recent legislative changes have even broadened that scope to include diagnosing and treating eye disease as well as performing minor laser procedures, a significant departure from the optometry of decades ago.

BILLINGS AND BEYOND

In addition to growing with modern technology, Yellowstone Eye Care expanded to Red Lodge this January, bringing care closer to many patients who previously had to drive to Billings. "Red Lodge feels like an extension of Billings, and we have a lot of patients who live there," Dr. Steiner says. "The biggest positive is seeing how happy they are to have this service, where they don't have to drive an hour. It's a tight-knit community, and they're very appreciative of our time."

Even for patients who believe their vision is "fine," the doctors agree that small adjustments can make a big difference, leading to fewer headaches, less strain, sharper focus, and better quality of life.

"We tell our patients we want them to work smarter, not harder," Dr. Steiner adds. "If there is measurable strain, you don't have to live with it. Sometimes a simple pair of glasses can help your eyes relax. The more help we can give them, the better. We'll do whatever it takes for you to get you to see your sharpest."

After 75 years, Yellowstone Eye Care's mission remains both clear and personal: to help neighbors see their best and care for them like family, just as the McBrides did. For Drs. Steiner, Lebsock, Biskupiak, and Maggard, it's more than a profession; it's a responsibility they uphold every day.

"We truly care about our patients," Dr. Lebsock says. "We listen, we hear what they're telling us, and we provide the same care we'd provide to our own family and friends. We get two eyes. It really is a gift, and we don't take that lightly." **SLM**









5 WAYS TO PROTECT YOUR VISION

From long days glued to our screens to the bright Montana sun, our eyes deserve some attention. The team at Yellowstone Eye Care believes many common vision issues are preventable with simple everyday care. Here are their favorite tips for keeping our eyes healthy and our vision sharp.

Follow the 20-20-20 Rule

Hours spent on computers, tablets, and phones can make eyes tired, dry, and strained. The 20-20-20 rule is easy to follow: every 20 minutes, look at something 20 feet away for at least 20 seconds. This allows your eye muscles to relax and helps prevent fatigue, dryness, and headaches from long screen use. Additionally, limiting screen time, especially an hour before bed, and keeping screens at a proper height and distance from your eyes is recommended. “Otherwise, they’re gonna run out of gas and they’re gonna let you know it,” Dr. Steiner says.

Be Sun Smart

Sun protection isn’t just for your skin. Prolonged exposure to ultraviolet rays raises your risk of cataracts, macular degeneration, and even eye cancers. Choose sunglasses that block 100% of UVA and UVB rays whenever you’re outdoors, even on cloudy days. Consider wraparound styles for the best protection, and don’t forget hats and kids’ sunglasses too.

Eat for Eye Health

Carrots alone won’t improve your vision, but a colorful diet can support eye health. Leafy greens provide antioxidants that protect against macular degeneration, omega-3s benefit the retina and dry eyes, and vitamin C and A-rich fruits and vegetables support overall vision, especially at night.

Rested Eyes See Better

Your eyes need rest, too. Although they never truly stop working, sleep helps restore tear production, repair tissues, and prevent dryness and irritation. Lack of sleep often causes eye spasms, dry eyes, blurry vision, and light sensitivity. Aim for 7-8 hours of quality sleep each night to keep your eyes refreshed and ready for the day.

Don’t Skip Your Yearly Eye Exam

Even if your vision seems perfect, don’t skip your yearly exams. “If there is measurable strain, you don’t have to live with it,” says Dr. Steiner. Additionally, many serious eye conditions, including glaucoma, macular degeneration, and diabetic retinopathy, develop gradually without obvious symptoms. An annual comprehensive eye exam not only checks vision but can also detect early signs of systemic health issues like diabetes and high blood pressure. Children should have their first exam at six months, another at age three, and then before starting school.



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- Kristen Beaver, MD
Anesthesiologist

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A CELEBRATION OF *culture* & COMPETITION



Article by Jessica Renstrom

The Special Olympics Montana State Summer Games are returning to Billings this May, where more than 1,000 athletes from around the state will display their skills and determination.

The Special Olympics Summer Games give athletes with intellectual disabilities the chance to compete in various sports, such as track and field, golf, cycling, bocce, soccer, gymnastics, and swimming, while also broadening their communities and leadership opportunities.

"These are not patronizing activities to keep people with intellectual disabilities busy," explains Holly Netz, Senior Director of Marketing and Communications for Special Olympics Montana. "These individuals are athletes. They train, and they're there to win."







The State Summer Games, scheduled for May 13–15, rotate between Montana's larger cities every three years. With Billings hosting for the last time before the Games move to Missoula next year, organizers saw an opportunity to create something truly meaningful: an opening ceremony that not only celebrates athletic achievement but also deeply honors Native American culture. "We really wanted to honor our Native American athletes," says Holly. "This seemed like the perfect year to do that."

At this year's Opening Ceremony, two Native American athletes from Billings serve as co-emcees: Laci Nomee, a member of the Crow tribe who has competed in Special Olympics since 2004 and participates in track and field, cycling, basketball, and bowling; and Keith King, a seasoned athlete and mile runner known for his fierce competitiveness and leadership. Keith, a member of the Assiniboine tribe, is a Native dancer and drum circle member. He has completed Special Olympics' athlete leadership training and has been a prominent advocate and public speaker across the state.

In addition to the parade of athletes, this year's Opening Ceremony will feature Native American dancers, drummers, singers, and flag carriers, all coordinated in partnership with Native leaders and educators. Behind the stage, large screens will display the flags of tribes from across Montana and beyond, emphasizing the ceremony's theme of cultural recognition and unity. "The reason we have chosen our Opening Ceremony to honor the rich Native American culture in Montana is to honor our Native American athletes. Sports provide a wonderful way to support them, showcase their talents, and bring everyone together," says Holly. "It's inspiring to see the joy and growth they experience through sports."

Opening ceremonies will be held at the Metra and are free and open to the public. Similarly, the public is welcome and encouraged to attend the Games and witness their far-reaching impact: "If you want to see the good of humanity, come to a Special Olympics event," Holly encourages. "I've never met anyone who was involved, even in a tiny way, who wasn't changed."

With over 1,200 volunteers required to organize the three-day event and more than a thousand athletes gearing up to compete, the Games promise intense competition and moments of true joy. **SLM**

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Interested in attending the Games or volunteering? Check out the Special Olympics of Montana website for all the details:

Special Olympics Montana

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CREATING A HOME *that tells your story*



Article by Jennifer Miller
Photos by Nathan Satran

After years of sleek lines, cool tones, and carefully curated minimalism, something is changing inside our homes. According to local designer Tiff Blades of Davidson Designs, clients are longing for something different. Less formula. More emotion.

"The quick answer," she says, "is that we are seeing personality, character, warmth, charm, individuality, and nostalgia returning to our interiors." It is not about chasing the next big thing. It is about creating spaces that feel lived in and personal again.

MOVING AWAY FROM THE LOOK-ALIKE HOME

For a long time, inspiration often came directly from social media feeds. Light wood floors. White walls. Streamlined furniture. Everything is deliberate and curated. Now, Blades observes homeowners moving away from that template. "We are longing to have our own unique style, not something you see on Pinterest and Instagram," she explains.

Instead of recreating a saved image, clients are asking how to showcase their personal story in their home. What pieces matter most? What colors feel right? What makes a room welcoming after a long day? It's a subtle but important shift. Design is becoming less about copying and more about expressing identity.

WARM, RICH LAYERS

One of the most noticeable changes is color. Cool grays and stark whites are giving way to warmer, richer shades. Deep greens, saturated blues, earthy reds, and layered neutrals are appearing on walls and cabinetry. Wallpaper and dimensional wall treatments are also making a comeback, adding depth and texture where flat paint once dominated. These elements make rooms feel warm and grounded instead of stark.

Furniture trends are evolving. Upholstery appears softer and more intricate. Rounded arms are replacing sharp angles. Skirts, fringe, and trim are reappearing in subtle yet thoughtful ways. Pieces feel more collected rather than sourced from a single catalog.

Wood tones are also becoming richer. Instead of light, flat finishes, Blades notes a shift toward darker woods with visible grain and more traditional details. The overall effect feels warmer and more welcoming. There is a noticeable shift from strict minimalism to comfort.

THE RETURN OF ANTIQUES & HEIRLOOMS

Another prominent theme in current projects is nostalgia. Antiques and family heirlooms are no longer hidden away or solely used in formal rooms. They are being integrated into everyday living spaces. A vintage cabinet in the kitchen. An inherited side table in the living room. A well-loved rug layered beneath newer furniture. These pieces add character. They also keep a home from feeling too polished or staged.

When rooms include items that have been passed down or thoughtfully sourced, they gain depth. They seem established rather than newly put together. Blades views this as part of a broader desire for familiarity. “Our homes should tell our story and be a place of comfort and familiarity,” she says. In a fast-moving world, there is a comforting feeling in surrounding yourself with meaningful possessions.

SOFTER LINES & FLUID FORM

Along with richer finishes and layered textures, shapes are evolving. Blades notes that furniture silhouettes are becoming more fluid, with softer lines, gentle curves, and interesting forms that feel organic rather than strictly geometric.

This shift fosters movement within a space. Rooms feel less stiff and more welcoming. Seating encourages interaction rather than remaining perfectly upright and untouched. The overall message is clear: homes are being designed for living, not just for display.

COMFORT AS THE ULTIMATE COMPLIMENT

At the core of this design movement is a simple goal: comfort. Not just physical comfort, although that is important. But emotional comfort, too. Blades believes the best compliment a homeowner can receive isn't about a specific finish or trend. “The best compliment I think someone can get,” she says, “is for people to tell them how comfortable they feel in their home.”

Comfort comes from layered lighting, substantial upholstery, warm colors rather than cold ones, and rooms that mirror the personalities of those who live there. It also stems from permission—permission to mix old and new, to hang wallpaper if you love it, to select a rich paint color instead of defaulting to white, and to keep the antique table even if it doesn't match everything else.

This return to personality and warmth is not just a fleeting aesthetic. It reflects a wider desire to slow down and make thoughtful choices. Homes are shifting from perfection to being more about presence. And maybe that's the most welcomed trend of all. **SLM**



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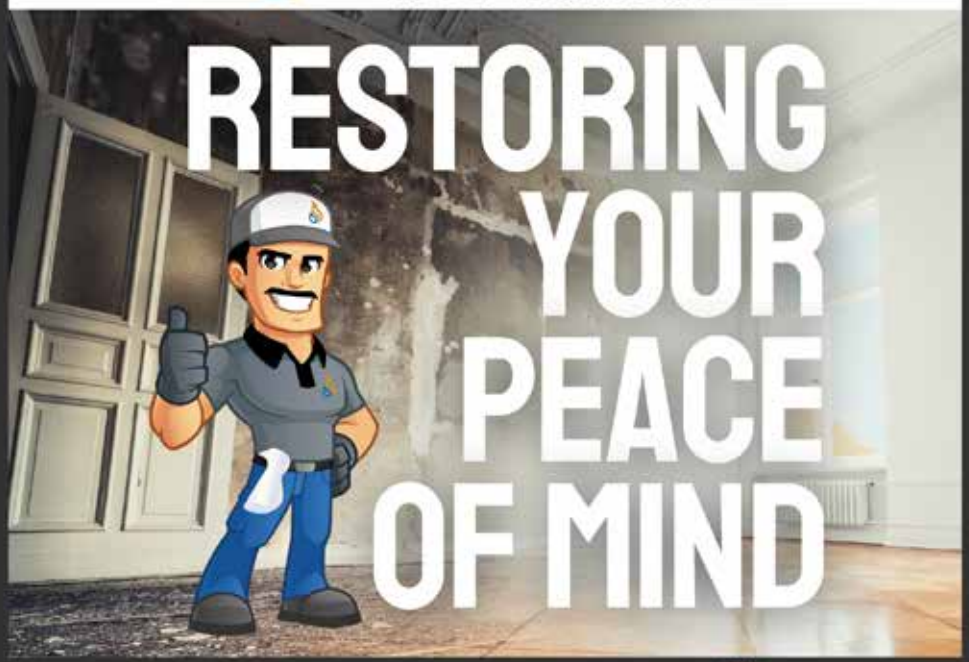
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Comebacks

Article by Maloree Murphy
Photos courtesy of Passages

I sat down with Travis Dickinson, the Food Services Manager, and Gina Poor, the Director of Passages, to discuss CAP, Montana's longest-running corrections culinary program. I was immediately impressed by the creativity and passion of CAP's students.

When I asked about the most creative things students had made, Travis didn't hesitate. "I had one woman who was determined to make emoji cupcakes," he says, grinning. Gina nods, recalling another student who created an elaborate cotton-candy castle cake. "Everything on it was like this castle made entirely of cotton candy," Travis adds.

CAP, in a nutshell, is an 18-month program where women build knife and life skills side by side. Here, Norwegian casseroles made with chicken, bananas, and peanut butter can be a perfectly normal Tuesday. Unlike a typical restaurant kitchen, which Travis describes as "always chaotic, with loud music and people yelling," this kitchen runs on patience and the belief that something better is possible.

THE CHEF FOR A DAY

The highlight of the program comes in the final weeks, when each student serves as head chef for a CAP lunch. For two weeks, they run the kitchen, choose a country or culture to spotlight, build a full menu from the ground up, test recipes, and shape the experience from start to finish. One recent graduate, a Blackfeet tribal member, created a menu centered on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. She served Native American tacos while educating CAP students about a crisis that hits close to home.

"We challenge them to be the chef for the day," Travis explains. "They're the boss. They're the leader. And it's not just a menu; it's the whole experience." That includes decorations and centerpieces, often made from nearly nothing during trips to Hobby Lobby. Students taste ingredients they may never have encountered before. If they don't like something, they still have to try it. "We make them explore their boundaries," Travis says. "We want them to broaden their horizons."

MORE THAN JUST COOKING

Gina says many women who arrive at CAP are moderate- to high-risk offenders who've already participated in other programs. Many arrive with low self-esteem and limited work experience. "Many don't have much experience being around other people or working around other people," she explains. "But going to these events and working with Travis and his crew, their self-esteem, and how they feel about themselves, increases. And that's going to increase their ability to stay out."

Students help provide 1,200 meals a day, year-round, seven days a week. At that pace, they're also learning a broad range of culinary techniques, including handmade pasta, wild game, quick breads, and "hobo bread" baked in aluminum cans. They make bag bread in a Ziploc, poke, Japanese tostadas, and yes, the poop emoji cupcakes. "We try to instill self-worth," Travis says. "We tell them the past is the past. There is a life after what you've done and the mistakes you've made."

"We try to instill self-worth, We tell them the past is the past. There is a life after what you've done and the mistakes you've made."

-TRAVIS DICKINSON

THE GRADUATION GIFT

After 18 months of evening shifts, morning prep work, and pre-release, students graduate and receive embroidered chef coats with their names stitched on. They also receive a beginner's cookbook and, most importantly, a personalized cookbook filled with every recipe they've learned and want to remember. CAP Manager Larissa assembles these custom cookbooks with care.

They also receive the benefit of potential job placement. The list of community partnerships is extensive. Travis explains that over the past three to four years, about 75-80% of graduates have entered the food service industry, and local restaurants have actively recruited them. Travis hears it from friends in the industry: "Thank you for sending so-and-so my way because she's working circles around people who have been working here for years."

AN INVITATION

Travis and Gina want Billings restaurant owners to know that CAP graduates are committed, accountable, and ready to work. "You are getting someone who is committed," Gina says. "Their self-esteem is good. They have basic food knowledge and the capability of doing just about anything in Billings as far as prep work, anything in the kitchen." More than that, they're ready to keep growing and learning.

To support the program, Passages welcomes event inquiries. In a community increasingly open to alternatives to incarceration, CAP offers something genuinely hopeful. It shows women, in practical ways, that mistakes don't have the final word. It makes room for creativity, even on hard days. And it proves that sometimes the best recipe includes a second chance. Also, every so often, emoji cupcakes. **SLM**

By the Numbers

PROGRAM LENGTH:
18 months (longest in Montana Department of Corrections)

CAPACITY:
10-15 women at a time

MEAL SERVICE:
1,200 meals per day, 365 days a year

PLACEMENT RATE:
75-80% go into food service partnership: Montana Board of Labor and Industry (apprenticeship certificate upon completion)

WHAT THEY LEARN:
Wild game, seafood, baking, different cooking temperatures, handmade pasta, sanitation, punctuality, teamwork, work ethics, and much more.

SPECIAL EVENTS:
Catering for nonprofits, community organizations, and events at the Capitol

GRADUATION GIFTS:
Embroidered chef coats, beginner cookbooks, personalized recipe collections

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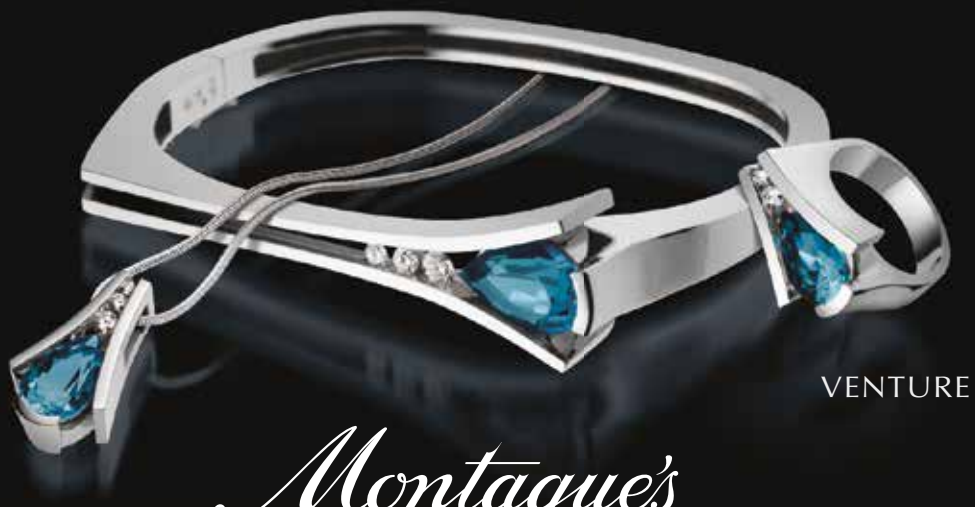
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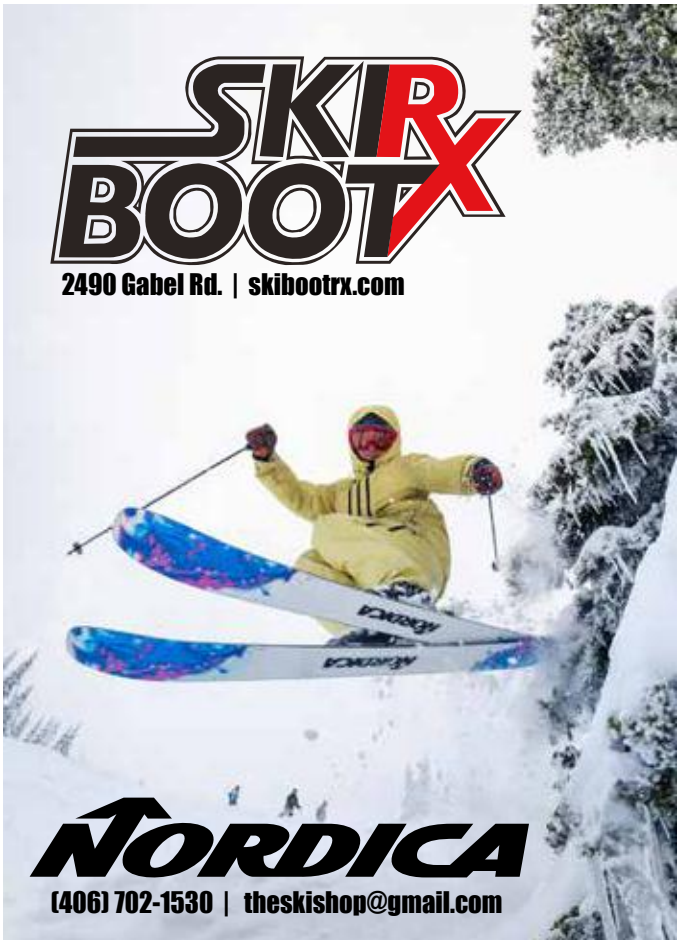
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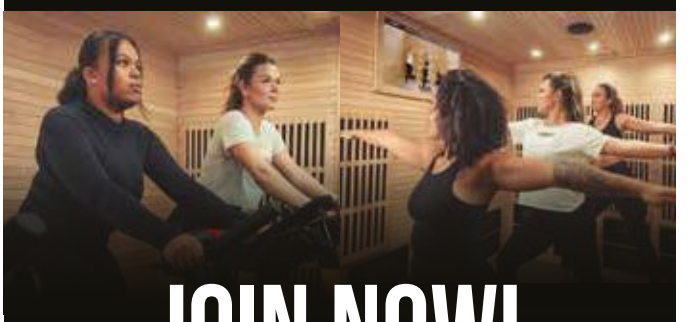
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Who's Hiring Teens This Summer?

Finding your first summer job as a teenager is a rite of passage, but it can be daunting to know where to start applying, particularly if you want something other than food services.

Karla Stanton, HR Director for the City of Billings, says a first job is an important part of growing up. "It's good for them to have a job, and it gives them responsibility," she said. "They need to show up on time, fulfill their shifts, not call in sick. It teaches them a good life skill. You're going to work your whole life, so I think it's critical that they learn these things."

The following local businesses and organizations are hiring hundreds of teens this summer:

- With nearly 300 openings, the **City of Billings** is the largest employer of high school and college students home for the summer. From camps and sports instruction to cashiering and lifeguarding, there are hundreds of seasonal openings to choose from. Employment opportunities are posted on their website. Visit https://www.billingsmt.gov/411/Employment-Opportunities-and-Procedures for more information. The Amend Recreation Center is projected to open later this year and is expected to hire another 150 to 200 people for year-round employment. City jobs are flexible, with work that supports student athletics and academics. At the beginning of the season, they ask students to provide their schedules, and managers will do their best to accommodate them.

- **Oasis WaterPark** is hiring for about 100 seasonal positions, including lifeguards, concessions, and admissions. Apply online at https://billingsoasis.com/.

- **Billings YMCA** hires year-round but ramps up employment opportunities for summer camps. Summer openings were posted on March 31, and camps start on June 1. Ongoing opportunities include after-school staff, membership, and lifeguards. Visit billingsymca.org/employment to see listings and find applications.

- **Montana Audubon Center** is looking for summer camp counselors and teacher naturalists. Join the flock at https://mtaudubon.org/about/jobs-and-opportunities/

- **Wise Wonders** is seeking help with summer outreach and museum floor operations. Apply online at https://wisewonders.org/employment-opportunities.

- **ZooMontana** hires students in the summer to work in gift shop sales, admissions, and memberships. Check out openings at https://www.zoomontana.org/support/employment.

- **Golf clubs** are another great source of employment opportunities for teens and college students. **Yegen Golf Club** is hiring for cart and range work, and for those 18 and up, to work in the pro shop. Call 406-656-8099 and ask for Jason. **Par 3 Golf Course** is looking for employees to keep the range picked up, stocking, and parking carts; call 406-652-2553 and ask for Austin or Matt. If you have a course closer to you, consider calling and asking for their openings. **SLM**

If you are a teen looking for a summer job or a business who would like to hire teens this summer scan here!

Article by Stephanie Hobby

THE HEART BEHIND VELDT CLOTHING



Article by Jessica Renstrom
Photos by Arianna Skoog

This month, Veldt Clothing marks its two-year anniversary, a meaningful milestone for owner Lauren Perry. When Lauren opened the doors of Veldt, a charming women's boutique in Shiloh Commons, she was stepping into a vision that had been quietly taking shape for years.

Lauren has always been a hard worker by nature and enjoys staying busy. "I was a stay-at-home mom for eight years," Lauren shares. "And before I was a stay-at-home mom, I always worked two to five jobs. I just always worked all the time." That same drive naturally carried into another part of her life that continued to grow over time: her love of fashion. Despite her self-described tomboy style as a child, Lauren became passionate about fashion in high school.

Before opening her storefront, Lauren spent years running an online boutique from home, creating a space where friends could shop and try on pieces in a comfortable, personal setting. What began as a side venture gradually grew into something more, offering both creative fulfillment and a renewed sense of purpose after years at home with her children.



"I just like to make people feel good in clothes that fit them and the body they have right now."

-Lauren Perry


VELDT
clothing



When her husband sold his company and retired, Lauren sensed a shift. She noticed a gap in the local clothing market for pieces aimed at women in their mid-30s and decided to leap into closing that gap and pursuing fashion full-time: "In January of 2024, I told my husband, 'I want to open a boutique.' Within a month, the lease was signed. It was very fast and furious once I decided that we were going to do that."

Since then, Lauren has been very intentional about creating an environment inside Veldt where women can feel calm and at peace. "Sometimes people walk in and just say, 'Oh my gosh, this is so light and airy.' It makes you feel good when you walk in because it's not cluttered." That feeling is certainly not accidental. Inspired by Scandinavian design, the boutique features natural textures, muted tones, and thoughtful details like pampas grass, seashell accents, and clean lines that invite women to slow down and focus on how they feel in the clothes they're wearing.

The space itself reflects that attention to detail, with thoughtful and unexpected elements woven throughout. Even the dressing room curtains carry a unique story, repurposed from Justin Timberlake's former home, adding a subtle layer of personality to the boutique.

Veldt has carved out a distinct place in the Billings retail scene by appealing to a wide range of women. The boutique brings together styles that resonate across generations, creating a shopping experience that feels approachable and inclusive. That sense of connection is reinforced through attentive customer service and a genuine focus on how each woman feels when she leaves the store.

The pieces Lauren curates reflect both style and intention. From customer-favorite denim that keeps shoppers coming back, to unique offerings like Winifred Jewelry, Veldt provides options that feel both elevated and accessible. As the only store in Billings to carry the repurposed designer jewelry line, the boutique offers something truly one-of-a-kind to its customers.

For Lauren, Veldt's influence extends well beyond fabric and fit. She has a strong desire to uplift the women who wear her pieces within our community. For example, every Christmas season, she teams up with a local nonprofit to provide gifts for low-income pregnant women in the area. "I just feel like these women are part of a forgotten group." Her aim is clear: "just make them feel loved and seen during the holidays, which can be a really hard time for some people."

That same heart for giving back continues through thoughtful initiatives like the boutique's annual Angel Tree, where participants share a bit about themselves so gifts can be selected with care and intention. It is one of the many ways Veldt stays connected to the community it serves.

Year-round, Lauren aims to help all women feel confident in their ever-changing bodies: "I just always want people to feel good about themselves, and especially where they're at with their bodies. Everybody has a different journey of where they're at, whether it's being shaped by motherhood or health reasons." Lauren explains. "I just like to make people feel good in clothes that fit them and the body they have right now."

Being part of the Billings community has played an important role in Veldt's growth, with strong local support helping shape the boutique into what it is today.

As Veldt celebrates its two-year anniversary, Lauren is inviting the community to be part of the moment. On April 25th from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., the boutique will host a special anniversary event at its Shiloh Commons location. It is a chance to step inside, shop, and experience the calm, welcoming space she has created, while celebrating both how far Veldt has come and what lies ahead. **SLM**



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Saturday 10 AM – 5 PM, Sunday 10 AM – 2 PM
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a new chapter at THE PAPER MILL



Photos provided by the paper mill

Article by Jessica Renstrom
Photo by Patricia Marie Photography

The familiar brick walls that once housed home goods at Liberty & Vine are welcoming Billings residents back in an entirely new way.

"When Liberty & Vine Country Store closed, leaving behind a 16,000 sq ft historical brick building, I realized there was an opportunity to create a space to share with the community," says Teresa Larsen, owner of The Paper Mill, Billings' newest event venue. This large space has served the community for over 100 years, but for most of that time, it functioned very differently: as a paper company.

The main part of the building was built in 1917 by the Western Newspaper Union. Soon after, the Carpenter Paper Company expanded into Montana and joined to share the space. In those early days, deliveries were made by horse and buggy. Then in 1951, Carpenter Paper Company expanded the site with a warehouse addition designed by Cushing & Terrell, creating the east and west sections that help define the structure today.





BECOMING AN EVENT VENUE

"The main floor's expansive open layout and striking brick backdrop make it ideal for a wide range of events; it just needed a few updates," explains Teresa. Those updates included demolition work, installing a custom bar, refinishing the floors, replacing windows, and adding five bathrooms to accommodate larger gatherings. During this process, Teresa also hired Event Manager Nikita Ratzburg. "Because of her many years in hospitality, she provided and continues to provide many fabulous recommendations to better help our clients bring their dreams to reality," says Teresa.

For Nikita, the building itself already does a wonderful job creating a space for celebration. "The ambiance and aesthetic are already built into the space," explains Nikita. "People don't have to do much for decor because the building is charming on its own. It's timeless and incredibly versatile, naturally creating an elegant backdrop for any event."

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORICAL PLACES

While walking through The Paper Mill, it's clear that the updates were intentionally chosen, blending modern elements with its historic charm and original features like the large old paper scale. "No matter the person, age, or background, each stop to investigate and wonder what its purpose was back in the day and stand on it to see if it still works," says Teresa.

The history of this space has officially been recognized with the building's inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. The designation came after a thorough application process, which included submitting a detailed history to the Montana State Historic Preservation Office, and it received final approval from the National Park Service in January 2026.

"It is an honor to have the building officially identified as a historical building," exclaims Teresa. "The recognition will encourage the preservation of the existing structure and bring more awareness to the cultural and economic contribution the Western Newspaper Union and Carpenter Paper Company (which later became Unisource) had to Billings, Montana. I am very excited to keep the building's history alive."

THE FUTURE OF THE PAPER MILL

Besides hosting weddings and private celebrations, the team sees The Paper Mill as a true community space. Teresa & Nikita aim to hold vendor markets, fairs, and public gatherings that connect people and address a gap in the local event scene.

"I envisioned the event center as a place where everyone could connect while celebrating life's great moments," Teresa says. "I never imagined how blessed I'd feel witnessing those joys, when the lights dim, the music starts, and the smiles and laughter carry the joy through to the end. Let the party begin!" **SLM**

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CELEBRATIONS

guide

2026

Celebrations mark the moments we cherish, from important milestones to everyday gatherings that bring people together. In Billings, those moments are shaped by community, thoughtful details, and local businesses that know how to make each occasion feel personal. Our 2026 Celebrations Guide highlights businesses that turn ideas into memorable experiences, ranging from weddings and birthdays to corporate events and seasonal get-togethers. Whether planning something small or on a larger scale, this guide provides a starting point for celebrating well, supporting local businesses, and creating moments that feel just right.

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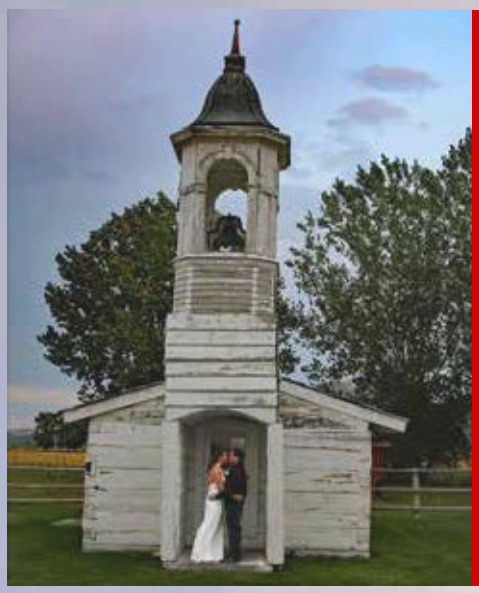
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Leah LaGrange on Dance, Purpose, & Choosing Billings



Article by Hannah Olson
Photos by Arianna Skoog

Before she could walk, she was dancing. "Pretty much when I first started standing, before I even started walking, I was dancing and grooving," Leah LaGrange says with a laugh. By the time she was ten, it wasn't a hobby or an extracurricular. "By the time I was ten, I knew that's what I wanted to do for a career. It never wavered."

For some artists, passion unfolds slowly. For Leah, it was immediate, instinctive, physical, and certain. She grew up in Lafayette, Louisiana, a kid who loved movement and the way it made her feel alive. Competition dance wasn't always financially accessible, but that didn't dilute her ambition. She became a national champion on her high school dance team and carried her vision forward with clarity: "I always knew I wanted to own a dance studio; I wanted to be a dancer; I wanted to be a choreographer." So, she did what dreamers do. She moved to Los Angeles.

THE DREAM & THE DISILLUSIONMENT

"I thought, if I didn't move to LA and try to dance, I'd regret it," she remembers telling herself. She went alone. "I knew nobody in LA at all." For three years, she built a life from the ground up, working in restaurants, babysitting, taking background acting jobs on shows like The Ellen Show and Community, chasing auditions, and enduring rejection. "It took me probably about three years to really get into the groove of things," she says. Ironically, auditions weren't where she found her success. "The only things that I really booked were from word of mouth, 'Oh, she's actually really talented, let's hire her on.'"



She eventually worked with major artists and brands. She assisted with choreography for Olivia Rodrigo during the surreal early days of the pandemic. She served as the Movement Director for Nike Jordan. She built the kind of résumé young dancers strive to compile. And yet, "I felt like I was living a lie in a way," she says quietly. "I didn't feel like I was fulfilling my purpose."

The industry was political. The grind was relentless. The validation never quite filled the space she expected. "It was cool to be on these sets, but it just didn't fulfill me like I hoped it would." For a while, she pushed through the dissonance. But eventually, clarity came. She didn't want fame. She wanted impact. And impact, she realized, doesn't always happen on the biggest stages.

WHY BILLINGS

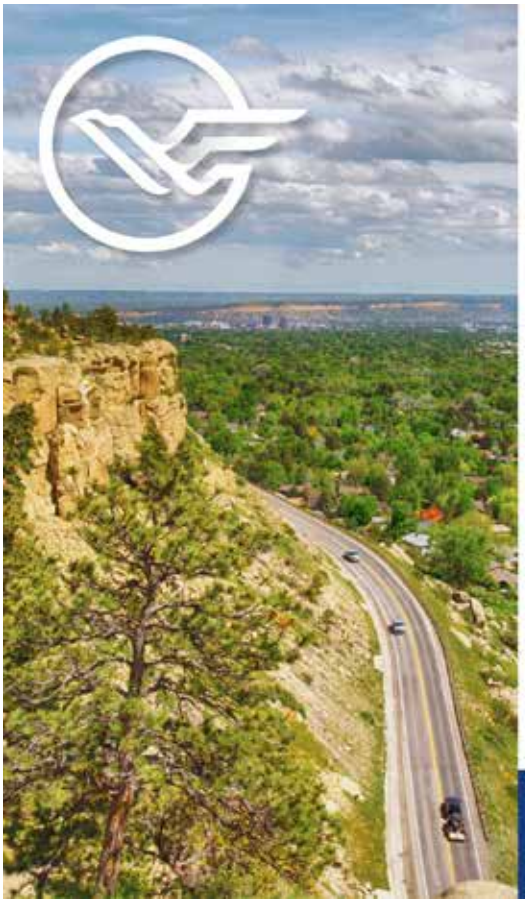
Of all the places a dancer with an LA résumé could land, Billings, Montana, might seem unexpected. But Leah's move wasn't about geography. It was about alignment. After reconnecting with a college friend who had relocated here, she began to imagine a different kind of life, one where art wasn't about access or optics but about community. One where homeownership and stability weren't out of reach. One where she could build something instead of constantly auditioning for it.

She took a year in her home state of Louisiana to reset and listen to herself. Then she came to Montana. Here, she found something familiar in a new way: grit, loyalty, and families invested in their kids. She found leadership that shared her values. She found space to breathe. And she stepped into her role as Company Director at Diversity Dance Studio.

GOOD HUMANS FIRST, GOOD DANCERS SECOND

Leah teaches five hours a day. She spends four to five additional hours on administration: scheduling, editing music, planning, selecting costumes, and preparing competition logistics. On weekends, she works with private students and travels nationally to choreograph. Her schedule is full, but it's intentional. "My biggest job beyond just teaching dance is teaching them to be good humans," she says. "Good human first, good dancer second."

In a competitive world where trophies can distort perspective, Leah holds a steady course. "It is painful, and it hurts. And you are allowed to be let down," she tells her dancers after setbacks. "The way you handle that setback and that pain is what's most important." She urges them to handle it with grace, respect, and awareness of what's within their control. "We control what we're in control of," she repeats often.



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Her studio culture isn't built on comparison. It's built on character, discipline, and accountability. In her view, competition should strengthen work ethic, not ego. She encourages her dancers to seek growth wherever they can. For her, dance is bigger than winning. It's about resilience. It's about striving with integrity. It's about becoming the kind of person who works hard, treats others well, and keeps showing up.

ART HEALS

"I think art heals the world," Leah says simply. It's not dramatic. It's declarative. She has seen it happen. Kids who arrive unsure and guarded slowly find their confidence. Students are learning to process disappointment without shrinking from it. Families are forming bonds that extend beyond rehearsal rooms.

"We're in the trenches together, blood, sweat, and tears," she says. "That bond is something you can't really get anywhere else." She understands the weight of her role. "Their child is a delicate flower in my hands," she says. "It is a massive responsibility that I don't take lightly at all." She laughs easily and admits freely, "I make mistakes constantly, but I'm constantly trying to learn from them." There's humility in that and strength.

RAISING A GENERATION THROUGH MOVEMENT

For Leah, dance is not about perfect pirouettes. It's about resilience, communication, self-advocacy, and emotional intelligence. "I try to stay as open and safe as I can so they feel like they can advocate for themselves," she says. Her dancers learn discipline, accountability, and how to celebrate others even when it hurts. Eventually, she tells them, "Your time will come. It may not look the way you wanted it to." That's not just choreography. That's life.

THE IMPACT

Leah could have stayed in LA. She could still be assisting major artists and building commercial credits. Instead, she chose Billings. She chose kids who will remember the woman who taught them not only how to perform but also how to show up. She chose families who trust her with their children. She chose a community that might not have Los Angeles's scale but has something just as powerful: connection.

"We're just teaching dance," she says with perspective. "It's not that serious." She doesn't mean it doesn't matter. She means it isn't about ego or headlines. It's about learning to fall short and try again. And anyone who has watched a young dancer find her confidence knows it is serious in the ways that count. It shapes lives.

Art heals, and sometimes the most powerful stages aren't in Los Angeles. They're in local dance studios, where a teacher who once chased the Hollywood dream now pours everything she's learned into the next generation. Good humans first. Good dancers second. She's still dancing. Only now, she's teaching others how to stand first. And that's the kind of legacy that lasts longer than applause. **SLM**



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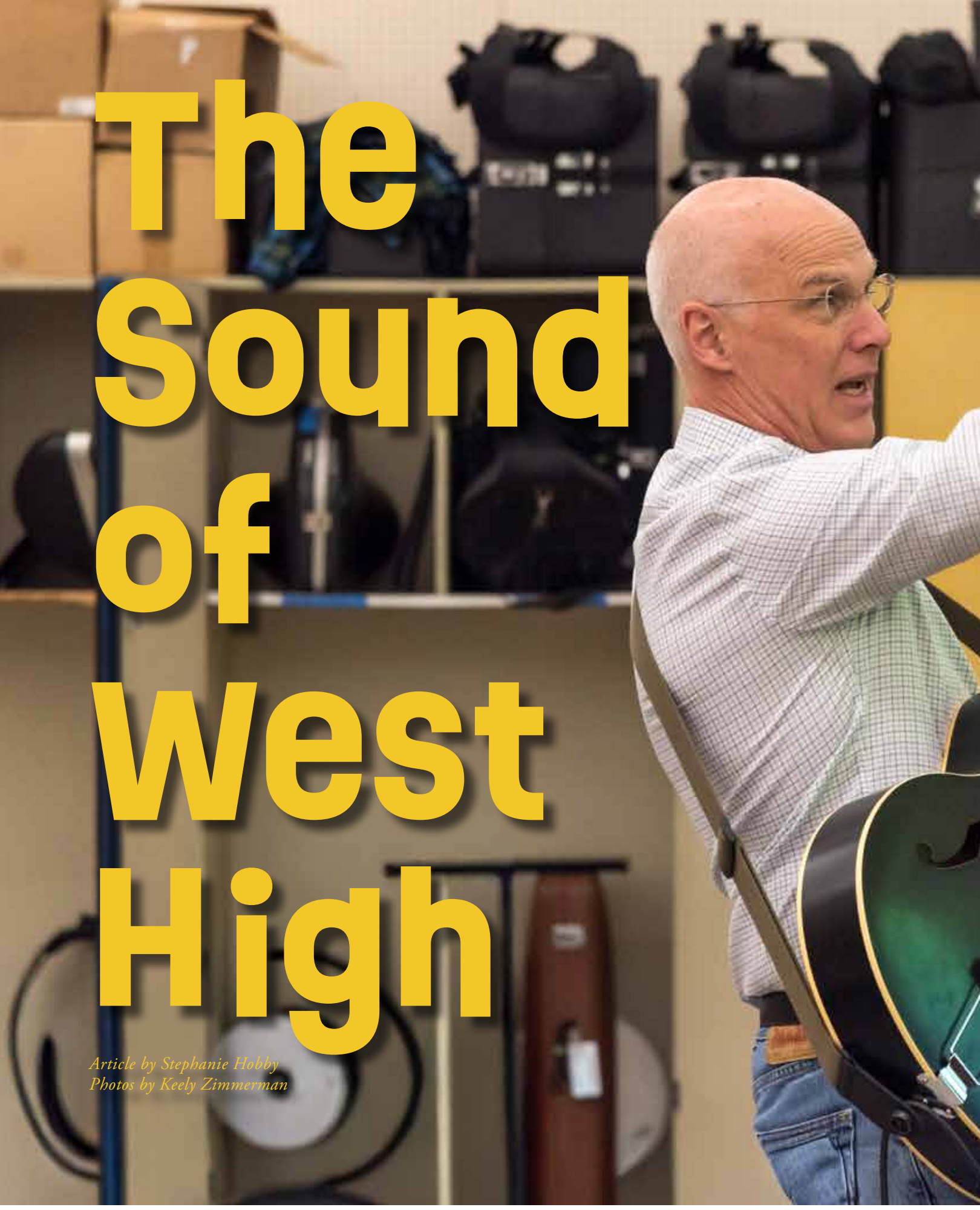
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The Sound of West High



Article by Stephanie Hobby
Photos by Keely Zimmerman



Billings West High School is brimming with musical talent, and if you haven't caught a concert lately, you're missing out. As you settle into the wooden auditorium seats, you probably aren't expecting a goosebump-worthy performance - it is a high school, after all - but ten minutes in, as the music soars, you might have to remind yourself these are teenagers. Even more amazing? Many of these performers picked up their instruments only a few years ago in a middle school music class.

Band Director Steve Patton, Choral Director Angie Langeliers, and Orchestra Director Harmony Hoover are responsible for nurturing this talent. The trio oversees more than 400 students across 19 musical groups: six bands, four orchestras, and nine choral groups, not including soloists and smaller ensembles that meet after school and on weekends.

It takes untold devotion to cultivate harmony among individuals with varying natural talents and work ethic, but faculty members say it is a joy to see performers coalesce and deliver complex, spectacular performances. They credit the progress to a hefty dose of patience during freshman year, when students repeat mundane warm-ups, techniques, and scales. It's usually not until the start of the second semester that those basics begin to pay off.



"My freshman band is to the point where they're like, 'Oh my gosh, we can sound good. We can do this.' They think they sound really good when they come in, but all of a sudden, they're realizing, 'Wow, we sound totally different,'" said Patton, who is retiring after his twenty-fifth year at West, and, before that, 12 years in Laurel.

Hoover and Langeliers agreed that while the goal of middle school music programs is to excite and engage students, high school programs shift the focus toward skill-building. "Sometimes you have to do these things of, 'I promise you're going to love this piece in another language, or I promise that you're going to love that you can sing in six- and eight-part harmonies when you master these patterns, when you master these scales,'" said Langeliers. "It's really beautiful to see their tone just sync up." Hoover echoed, "Seeing the results from this time of year, all that work that we did, and just hearing the groups and the progress is exciting."

Hoover, who is in her sixteenth year at West High, splits her time between West High and Riverside Middle School, where Arts Without Boundaries (AWB) is piloting a program that provides students with musical instruments. AWB supports arts and music education to bolster academic success and increase school retention rates for at-risk students, and it also supports Patton's band students. Through AWB, high school musicians offer music lessons to middle school students four nights a week.





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Mutual respect is at the heart of their success. "We're all strong, talented musicians and very capable, but when it comes to teaching and working with students, you have to have the connection with the kids. They have to trust you and understand your vision and that you have their best interests at heart," Langeliers said.

Erinn Ackley, the music department's secretary, keeps it all organized, allowing the teachers to focus on teaching rather than collecting permission slips, planning performance logistics, or managing office tasks. Having an office close to the classrooms offers pretty great perks. "I will literally get goosebumps some days and just find myself smiling, and I'm just so proud. Once in a while, I will have to stand up and look out the window to see if it's a recording playing or if it's the students."

West High's concert collaborations showcase the students' abilities; hearing a choir perform with orchestra and band students is nothing short of magical. This collaborative spirit extends to pep bands. Despite on-field rivalries, Patton wants his musicians to sit with and play alongside students from other schools. "We have more fun, and the camaraderie is amazing," Patton said, adding that the spirit extends to music teachers across the state, who share advice, raise funds, help each other's students, and support new teachers.

Last year, West High started a local branch of the national Tri-M Music Honor Society, which encourages students to use their talents to serve others. For Valentine's Day, Langeliers's students arranged a visit to a local retirement home to offer singing Valentine's. Their lineup included classics such as *My Girl* and *For the Longest Time*.



Toward the end of every school year, the school's top performers are selected to go on tour to learn from university music departments and attend well-known symphonies in cities such as Denver, Seattle, Minneapolis, Edmonton, and Los Angeles. "Tour is brutal. It's long, long days on a bus with kids, and they're excited," Patton said. "But every tour I've been on, there's been a moment where I've said, 'Okay, it's worth it.' You recognize a kid whose life just changed. They got accepted to something that they had never been accepted to before. I've always had that moment on every tour where I went, 'Oh, that's why we do this.'"

End-of-year performances are scheduled throughout May. For all performances at West, admission is $7 per adult, $5 for students and senior citizens, and free for children in fifth grade or younger. The band concert and senior solos are scheduled for May 12. The orchestra concert will be on May 14 at 6 p.m., and the choir concerts will be on May 18 and 19 at 6:30 p.m. The State Music Festival will be held at Skyview High School on May 1-2. On May 8 at 7p.m., students will host a Big Band Dance at St. John's. **SLM**

For more information, visit

APRIL EVENTS

406 JERSEY DAY: FIGHTING FOOD INSECURITY FOR STUDENTS

Thursday, April 2, Friday, April 3

Team up against hunger! 406 Jersey Day is your chance to support the 800 elementary students who receive backpack meals and the additional 800 students who access our 35 school pantries. Wear your jersey or favorite team shirt, donate what you can, and be a champion for our students!

Visit:

KINDERREADY PROGRAM FOR BILLINGS SCHOOLS

Saturday, April 25
9:30am–2:00pm
Community Room, Billings Public Library

Pre-K literacy program.
Email piltzt@billingsschools.org for more information and to reserve your spot.

CAT TALES – PRACTICE READING SKILLS WITH SHELTER CATS

Friday, April 24
4:00pm–5:00pm

Reading aloud helps your beginning reader expand their vocabulary and improve reading comprehension. Learning to read can be scary; a friendly face, particularly one with a soothing purr, can ease reading anxieties and build confidence. This Reading Program gives children who are learning to read time to read to a group of shelter cats in a safe and controlled environment. Children can share a book with foster/shelter cats from Yellowstone Valley Animal Shelter and learn about adoption options. Registration must be done in person at the Children's desk on the day of the event, beginning at 9 AM. Each family registering will have 15 minutes in the Story Tower. SPACE IS LIMITED!

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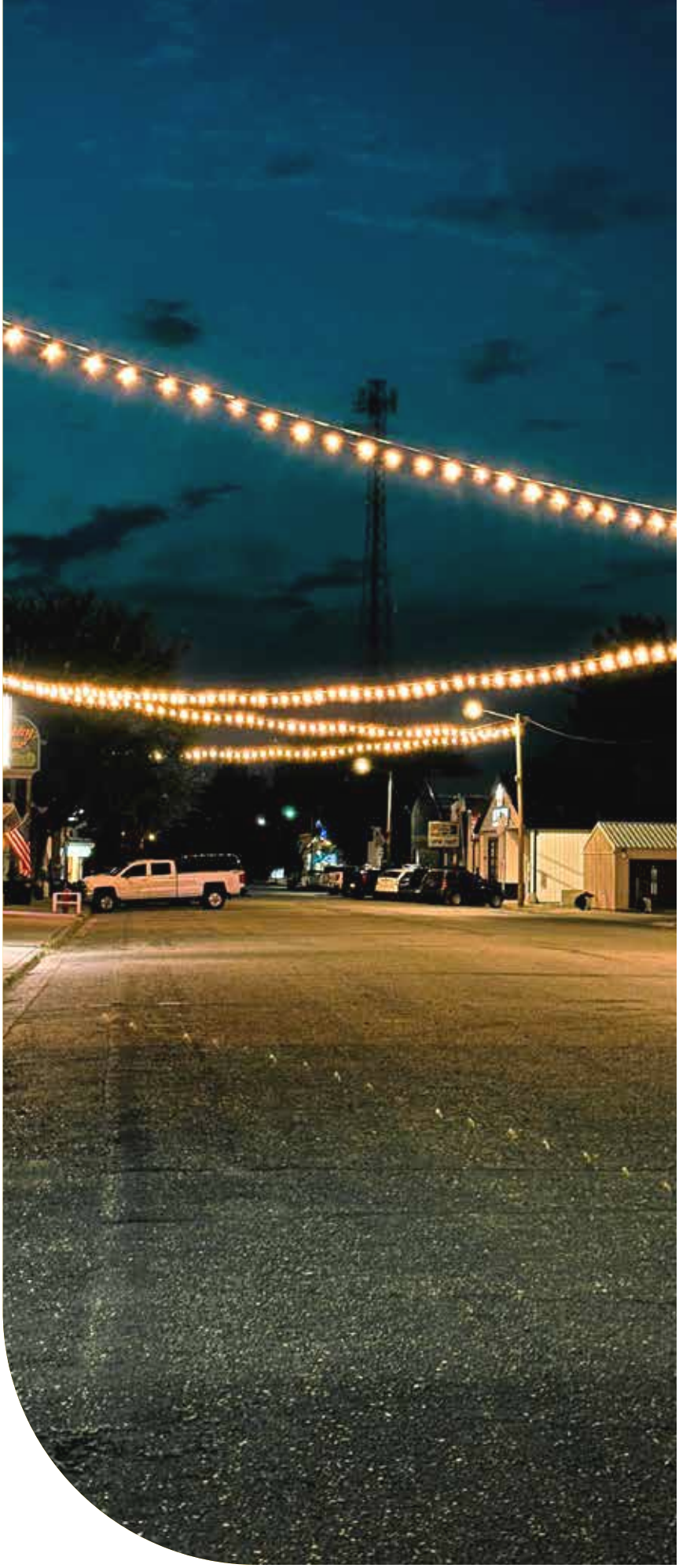
Article by Hannah Olson
Photos courtesy of Big Sky Economic Development

There are places we pass every day without noticing. Empty corners. Blank walls. Overgrown lots. Forgotten stretches of sidewalk. And then there are places that feel different, where someone thought to add a bench, plant flowers, paint a mural, hang lights, or build something that invites you to stay a while. The difference between the two isn't always money. Sometimes, it's permission.

That's the heart of Space2Place, a creative placemaking micro-grant program launched in 2018 by Big Sky Economic Development. Its purpose is simple and quietly powerful: help residents of Yellowstone County transform overlooked spaces into meaningful places, places that invite gathering, spark connection, and build pride. "It's really a way for people to do grassroots efforts, give back to their community, and create a place that is more inviting," says Dianne Lehm, Director of Community Development at BSED.









GRASSROOTS BY DESIGN

The emphasis is on grassroots. Space2Place isn't limited to large organizations or professional developers. Individuals, youth groups, businesses, schools, neighborhood coalitions, small towns, and community task forces can all apply. From the beginning, inclusion mattered. "It was really important for me to make sure that we included youth," Lehm says, noting that the program was intentionally structured to encourage younger generations to step forward and shape the communities they're inheriting.





Since its launch, Space2Place has funded more than 50 projects across Yellowstone County, not just in Billings but also in Laurel, Lockwood, Huntley, Worden, Shepherd, and beyond. "It isn't specific to Billings," Lehm says. "We really cover the entire area." The projects reflect that wide lens.

While murals often capture attention, the program is far more expansive. Funded projects have included community gardens, outdoor gathering spaces, welcome planters, underpass improvements, musical installations, low-ropes courses, seating areas, lighting projects, and small civic enhancements that change how people experience a space. "We're not married to any specific type of project as long as it meets the placemaking criteria," Lehm says. "We really love to see the creativity of what people come up with."

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MORE THAN BEAUTIFICATION

At its core, placemaking is about four things: access, comfort, activity, and sociability. Is the space easy to reach? Does it feel welcoming? Is there something to do? Does it encourage people to connect? When those elements come together, something subtle yet important happens. "People are engaged with one another. They're volunteering together," Lehm says.

Because Space2Place expects a community match, often in the form of volunteer labor, the transformation doesn't just appear in the finished product. It unfolds in the process. Neighbors work side by side. Students collaborate with mentors. Local businesses contribute materials. People show up. "You'll see people working together, coming together for a common good," she says. The impact lasts beyond the ribbon cutting. "The spaces are more activated," Lehm explains. "People are there enjoying the areas that were created. So, it's not a stagnant space any longer."

There's also a practical benefit: safety and stewardship. "When you've got more people around in a spot, it's safer and feels more comfortable," she says. "There's less questionable activity going on." In spaces that once felt forgotten, people begin to linger. They take ownership. They care for what they helped build. "You don't see the litter, the messes that sometimes can be seen in areas that are almost forgotten," Lehm notes. "People are more respectful." It's economic development in a quieter form, not large infrastructure or sweeping policy, but incremental, visible improvements that signal something deeper: this place matters.

THE INVITATION

Each year, applicants may request up to $5,000, and total project budgets are capped at $10,000. A review committee of community members, staff, and board representatives evaluate proposals based on impact, feasibility, and alignment with placemaking principles. "We look at whether the project could still be done if it didn't receive full funding," Lehm says. "We try to make the money we do have go the furthest."

The funds come through Big Sky Economic Development's Community Development Program, supported by county partnerships and contributions. Since 2018, the program has grown in both scale and awareness. "It's a program that people are now starting to watch for so they can get involved," Lehm says. And that's perhaps the most powerful part: it invites people to imagine what's possible. What if that blank wall told a story? What if that corner lot hosted a gathering? What if a bench sparked a conversation? Space2Place doesn't dictate the answers. It poses the question and trusts the community to respond.

The 2026 Space2Place grant winners have already been selected and will be announced soon. Community members are invited to attend Big Sky Economic Development's event on April 23 at 105 Brewing to hear which projects will move forward this year. Details will be available on the BSED website, where residents can also explore past projects and begin thinking about ideas for the next cycle. "Every year is a different year," Lehm says. "I'm not really sure what to expect."

But that uncertainty is part of the beauty. It means creativity is alive. It means the next transformation could come from anyone: a student, a retiree, a small-town committee, or a business owner with a vision. A space becomes a place the moment someone decides it's worth caring about. Space2Place simply provides the tools to begin. **SLM**

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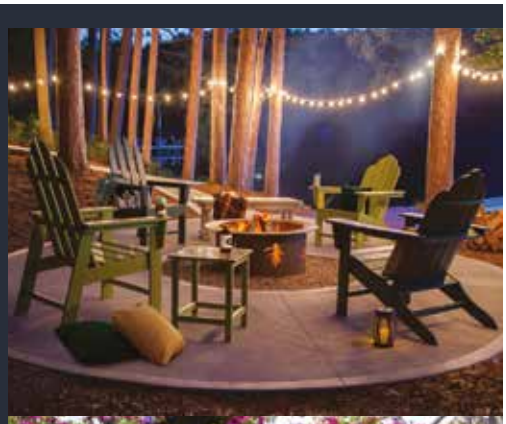
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APRIL EVENTS

WINE & FOOD FESTIVAL

April 16-17
MetraPark

The Wine & Food Festival at MetraPark celebrates regional flavors and culinary creativity with tastings, craft beverages, and gourmet bites — a delight for foodies and festivalgoers alike.

BILLINGS SYMPHONY PRESENTS FIRE. FURY. VERDI.

Saturday, April 25 at 7:30 PM

Experience the dramatic intensity and sweeping emotion of Verdi's music with Fire & Fury. Part of the Billings Symphony's Classic Series, this concert showcases passionate orchestral works sure to captivate classical music lovers.

QUALITY OF LIFE CASINO NIGHT 2026

Saturday, March 14
Billings Hotel & Convention Center

Quality of Life Casino Night 2026 is an evening of high-energy entertainment, community connection, and friendly competition. Guests can enjoy classic casino-style games, prizes, food, and drinks — all while supporting initiatives that enhance quality of life in the Billings area. Whether you're testing your luck at the tables or simply enjoying a night out with friends, this event offers a lively and meaningful way to give back.

PBR – PROFESSIONAL BULL RIDERS

April 17-18
MetraPark

PBR returns to Billings with high-intensity rodeo competition featuring elite riders and bulls. This action-packed event brings authentic Western sport excitement to the region's premier event space.

NOVATURE

Friday, April 24 at 6:00 PM
The Northern Hotel

"NOVAture “All That Jazz” aims to celebrate and fund all of NOVA’s ongoing and growing programs for youth and adults. Wear your best roaring twenties themed outfit and join us for an evening of food, drink, music, and a chance to support the arts!

MOMIX – Alice

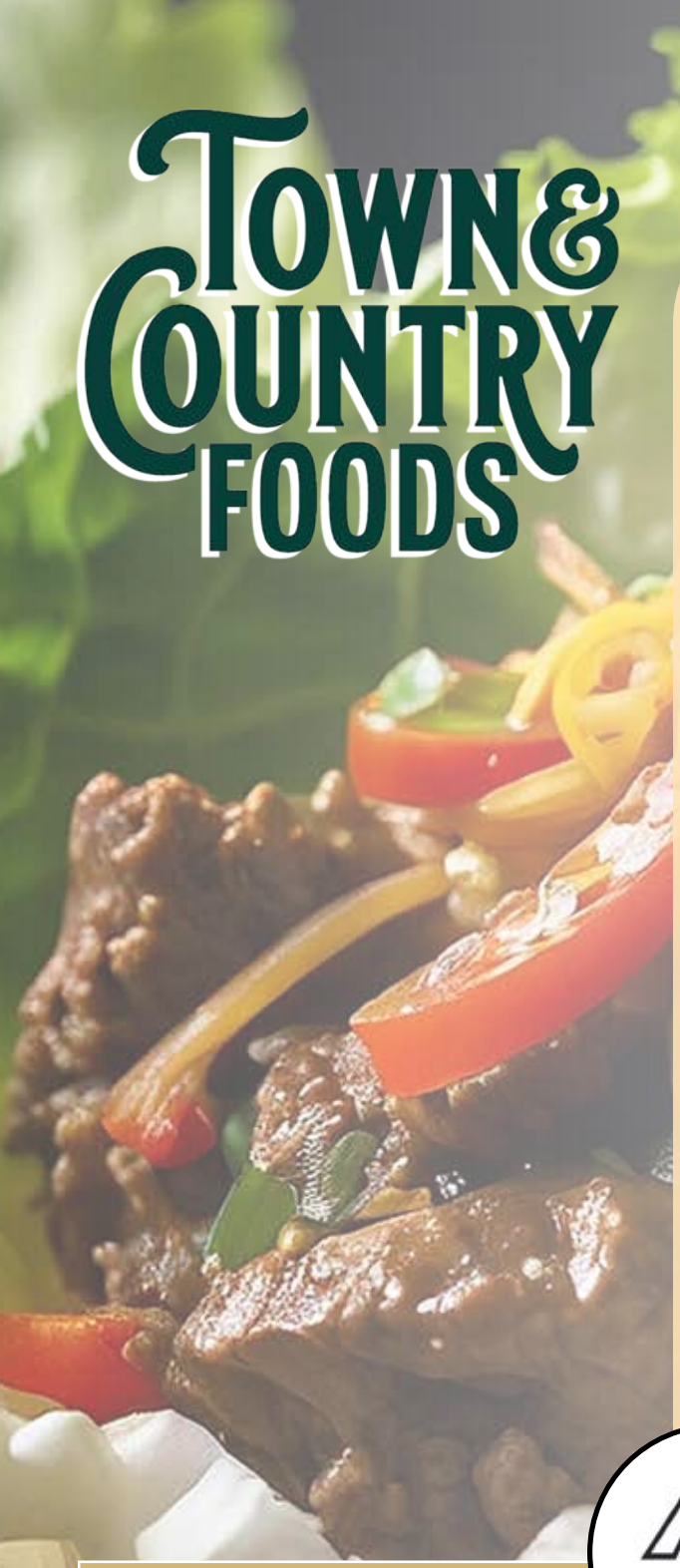
Thursday, April 2 at 7:30 PM
Alberta Bair Theater

MOMIX Alice is a visually breathtaking dance production inspired by Alice in Wonderland. Known for blending athleticism, illusion, and theatrical movement, MOMIX creates a surreal performance that defies expectation and invites audiences into a world where nothing is quite as it seems.

SCAN HERE FOR MORE APRIL EVENTS!







TOWN & COUNTRY FOODS

SHREDDED BEEF LETTUCE CUPS

Tender shredded beef simmers in a savory-sweet pineapple and soy sauce glaze with peppers, carrots, and onion until rich and flavorful. Spoon it into crisp lettuce cups for a fresh, hands-on meal that's equal parts comforting and vibrant.

INGREDIENTS

3 medium carrots, chopped
2 medium sweet red peppers, chopped
1 medium onion, chopped
1 boneless beef chuck roast (approx. 2 pounds)
1 can (8 ounces) unsweetened crushed pineapple, undrained
1/2 cup soy sauce
2 tablespoons brown sugar
2 tablespoons white vinegar
1 garlic clove, minced
1/2 teaspoon pepper
3 tablespoons cornstarch
3 tablespoons water
24 Butter lettuce leaves
Sliced green onions, optional

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Combine carrots, red peppers and onion in a 6-qt. pressure cooker. Top with roast. In a small bowl combine pineapple, soy sauce, brown sugar, vinegar, garlic and pepper; pour over roast. Lock lid; close pressure-release valve. Adjust to pressure-cook on high for 40 minutes. Let pressure release naturally. Press cancel. Remove roast from pressure cooker. Cool slightly; shred roast with forks.
2. Strain fat from cooking juices; return juices and vegetables to pressure cooker. In a small bowl, mix cornstarch and water until smooth; stir into pressure cooker. Select saute setting and adjust for low heat. Simmer, stirring constantly, until thickened. Return beef to pressure cooker; heat through.
3. Serve in lettuce leaves.

If desired, sprinkle with green onions.

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QUICK MEALS FOR BUSY SPORTS FAMILIES

Article by Maloree Murphy

Spring sports season turns dinner into a relay race. You leave the house feeling organized, and five minutes later, you're eating something questionable in a folding chair while yelling, "Great hustle!" The goal isn't fancy; it's food that holds up in a cooler, survives the drive, and doesn't require a plate on your lap. Here are a few sideline meals that feel like a real dinner, even when you're basically living out of your trunk.

DIY PASTA SALAD JARS:

Layer cooked pasta, cherry tomatoes, cucumber, mozzarella balls, and Italian dressing or pesto in mason jars the night before. You can shake and eat straight from the jar. Add pepperoni or rotisserie chicken for extra protein. No utensils needed if you use small pasta shapes!



Cold Sesame Noodle Bowls:

Toss the cooked rice noodles with soy sauce, sesame oil, a splash of rice vinegar, and a spoonful of peanut butter until well coated. Add shredded carrots, edamame, and sliced cucumbers. Pack into containers and top with sesame seeds. Serve cold or at room temperature. They taste better after sitting for a few hours.

Peanut Butter Energy Balls:

Mix peanut butter, honey, oats, mini chocolate chips, and ground flaxseed. Roll into balls and refrigerate. Pack 3-4 per person with apple slices and cheese sticks. These protein-packed bites provide sustained energy without the sugar crash.

BLT Sandwich Skewers:

Thread cherry tomatoes, folded bacon strips, pita bread, and lettuce onto wooden skewers. Serve with small containers of mayo for dipping. This deconstructed approach keeps the bread from getting soggy. Make them the morning of and store them in the cooler.

Veggie Hummus Wraps:

Spread a thick layer of hummus on whole wheat tortillas, then top with shredded carrots, cucumbers, bell peppers, and spinach. Roll tightly, then slice into pinwheels or leave whole. Pack with pita chips and extra hummus for dipping. These hold up well and won't get soggy while sitting in the cooler.

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APRIL FOOD EVENTS

1Ō5 BREWING, 1 YEAR BEER ANNIVERSARY

Saturday, April 25, 2026 | 3:00 PM–4:00 PM
1Ō5 Brewing (Billings Heights)

A quick, celebratory "raise-a-glass" hour marking one year of beer at 1Ō5. Stop by, grab a pint, and help them toast this milestone with friends, familiar faces, and great beer.

2026 WINE & FOOD FESTIVAL (MSU BILLINGS FOUNDATION)

Thursday–Friday, April 16–17, 2026
MetraPark, Montana Pavilion

The MSU Billings Foundation is hosting the 2026 Wine & Food Festival, a two-night fundraiser centered around wine, chef-driven cuisine, and a dressed-up night out. Thursday's WineMaster Soirée opens at 5:45 PM, with the program beginning at 6:15 PM. Friday's A Vintage Affair opens at 5:00 PM, with the program beginning at 6:20 PM, and includes a champagne reception and opportunities to browse auction items.

Easy Protein Balls



Ingredients

- 1/2 Cup Nut Butter
- 1/4 Cup honey
- 1-2 Cups protein powder
- 1/4 Cup water
- 2 Cups raw uncooked oats

Instructions

1. Place all ingredients in bowl
2. Mix well
3. Roll into balls and place on a plate or cutting board
4. Refrigerate

Get Creative

Some optional add ins:

Chocolate chips
Coconut
Cinnamon
Chopped nuts
Hemp hearts
Dried fruit
Sunflower seeds
Orange zest
Crushed pretzels
Pumpkin spice

SLM

Restoring *Vintage Charm* in a Laurel, Montana Home

Article by Jennifer Miller
Photos by Nathan Satran





When Jentrey and Dustin Hopkins started house hunting in 2019, they were first-time buyers with a modest budget and realistic expectations. Their options in Billings were limited within their price range, so their realtor recommended looking in Laurel. It wasn't initially on Jentrey's radar, but one showing changed that.

The home had been passed down through a family and was later used as a rental. It showed signs of aging. Walls bore the marks of heavy wear and tear, and layers of flooring covered older ones, with minimal updates. Still, she noticed details that mattered. "It had thick molding you just don't see anymore," she says. "And it had a sun porch. I always wanted a sun porch."

That was enough. By the time they officially moved in, the home had been cleaned, painted a neutral beige, and made functional. What remained were the original features and the opportunity to gradually shape it over time.



WORKING WITH WHAT WAS THERE

Instead of gutting the house, they chose to make gradual updates. The kitchen retains its original deep cabinets and retro yellow countertops. "At first, the countertops bothered me," she admits. "But now I'm so glad we kept them. They're charming."

Instead of replacing everything, they painted wood paneling, updated light fixtures, and installed a black-and-white peel-and-stick kitchen floor after receiving a much higher quote for traditional tile. The affordable option worked, and the impact it made on the space was well worth it.

When they uncovered hardwood floors beneath layers of carpet and laminate, curiosity took over. They pulled back a small corner. Hardwood was revealed underneath. The floors are not refinished. Some areas are stained and worn. With a young daughter, a dog, a bunny, and backyard chickens, perfection was never the goal. "They're not perfect, but that adds character," she says. "You don't feel like you have to protect everything."

In the bathroom, beadboard added texture. Built-ins were painted a bold yellow that nods to the home's vintage personality rather than competing with it. Each decision was layered in gradually, shaped by budget and season of life.



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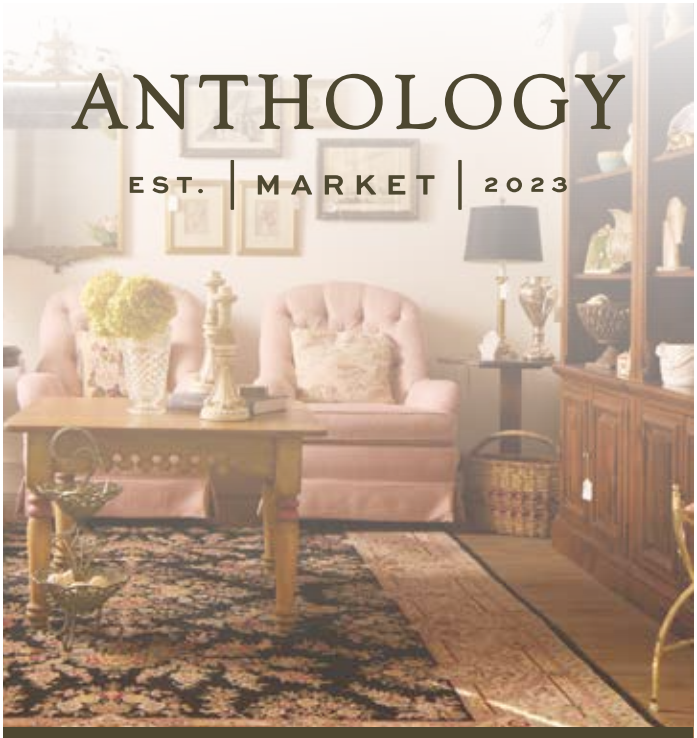
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"You don't need a huge budget to make a space feel personal. Paint goes a long way." -JENTREY HOPKINS



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A STYLE THAT EVOLVED OVER TIME

Jentrey's aesthetic did not arrive all at once. Before becoming a stay-at-home mom, she worked as an EMT and later as a hairstylist. Creativity has always been part of her life, and thrifting was a hobby long before she had a home to fill.

Today, her style favors an English country cottage look with a diverse collection of antiques. Ironstone dishes, china cabinets, wash bowls, and ceramic figurines are carefully gathered from thrift stores, antique booths, Facebook Marketplace, and the local shop Anthology.

"I've learned to be more intentional," she says. "There were times I'd bring something home and not know where it would go." With a smaller footprint and one income, contentment influences every decision. "You don't need a huge budget to make a space feel personal. Paint goes a long way."

That philosophy is evident in her sun porch, now used as a craft room. A recently painted, quilt-inspired floor in a clearance red transformed the space with minimal cost. It is where she sews, creates, and enjoys quiet moments.

The kitchen remains her favorite gathering space. "I love to cook and bake. Now my daughter wants to bake with me. It's where we spend time together."





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CHOOSING FEELING OVER PERFECTION

The home isn't fully renovated, and some projects remain unfinished. Walls aren't perfectly straight, and corners lack precision. However, the living and dining areas feel warm and inviting. Toys often spill into shared spaces. The hardwood floors are scratched and tell a story, while the kitchen counters show signs of daily use. The home reflects real life.

When asked what advice she would give to other first-time buyers, especially those working within a budget, her response is practical. “Pay attention to how a house makes you feel. You can change light fixtures and paint. But you can’t change the light coming through the windows. Can you picture drinking coffee there? Hosting dinner? Putting a Christmas tree in the corner?”

In an age of rapid design cycles and constant upgrades, her approach remains steady. Keep what works. Make updates gradually. Select pieces that feel meaningful. “Be content. Pick what you love. That doesn’t go out of style.”

Her Laurel home isn't defined by square footage or luxury finishes. It is defined by intention. By working with what was already there. By letting style develop naturally. It proves that charm doesn't have to be manufactured. Sometimes, it is simply uncovered, layer by layer. **SLM**

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