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QUEEN CITY NERVE



Doomsday for Dispensaries?

4/20 ISSUE

INDUSTRY ADVOCATES WORK TO SAVE NC'S HEMP INDUSTRY WITH FEDERAL BAN LOOMING

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FOOD: PostScript keeps things in the neighborhood ◊ pg. 11

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HEMP & TEA COMPANY

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BELMONT
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N. CHARLOTTE
→ 8720 Arbor Creek Dr, Charlotte, NC 28269
GALLERIA (S. CHARLOTTE)
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CBHD hosted a Legislative Leadership Summit for hemp advocates in March. Photo courtesy of CBHD

EVERYTHING TO LOSE

CBHD fights for the NC hemp industry at an especially urgent juncture

BY RYAN PITKIN

Look into the work of political lobbying organizations representing any industry in the United States and you're likely to find a group of people fighting to strip away regulations, lower taxes on a given industry, and do whatever they can to keep the government out of their affairs.

Cultivating Breakthroughs in Healthy Development (CBHD) is not your average lobbying organization.

With a mission to educate and advocate for smart regulation of North Carolina's hemp industry at a time when stigmas and misinformation have threatened its very existence, CBHD was formed to bring some clarity to an issue that has been hidden behind a smokescreen for so many legislators in the state.

Representing business owners around the state that want to see their industry treated with the same respect as other goods and services, CBHD lobbies for child-resistant packaging, age restrictions, lab testing and free-market principles that they say can remove the stigma and weed out the bad actors in the trade.

"It's almost impossible to believe that we are a group that's going to the legislature to seek regulation and to pay excise taxes," said Neal Orr, executive director of CBHD. "Hardly any group on the planet will say that."

Though organizers began putting the group together in summer 2025, CBHD received its official licensing in November, just as lawmakers reached a deal to reopen the federal government that included a countrywide ban on the sorts of products that have driven the hemp industry in North Carolina over the last eight years.

The new regulation, which has been called "an industry killer," lowers the amount of THC — the psychoactive ingredient in cannabis that gets the user high — allowed in products from 0.3% to 0.4 milligrams, outlawing many currently legal products and making it nearly impossible to grow hemp plants at all.

It's scheduled to take effect in November 2026.

Though unexpected at the time CBHD began coming together in June 2025, the inexplicable deal brought new urgency to the organization's work.

"One of our biggest fears is that nothing happens [at the] federal or state [levels] this year," said Orr. "And if that happens, then there's no more CBHD. There's no more industry, period. We're all done."

With the North Carolina General Assembly reconvening on April 21, CBHD is now lobbying for the passage of Senate Bill 265 (SB265), a bill that would enact age restrictions and standards for packaging and labeling to prevent underage usage of hemp products, implement mandatory third-party testing to ensure products meet all legal caps on THC levels, and establish a licensing system to ensure accountability among manufacturers, distributors and retailers.

The bill would also keep the state's THC limit for hemp products at 0.3% rather than 0.4 milligrams, allowing companies to continue selling Delta 8, Delta 9, THC-A and other similar products that retailers say have kept the hemp industry afloat in recent years.

How did we get here?

CBHD formed out of the North Carolina Healthy Alternatives Association (NCHAA), a 501c3 that launched in 2022 with the simple goal of helping to get an actual definition of hemp into North Carolina statute as the state tried to get ahead of the expiration of a hemp pilot program that had been established following passage of the 2018 Farm Bill.

The Farm Bill was the catalyst for a new market for THC and other hemp-derived products. Since the bill went into effect, the hemp industry has grown exponentially, generating about $1.1 billion annually, according to a 2023 Whitney Economics report. The report also estimated that the hemp industry supported around 328,000 jobs in North Carolina, paying out more than $13 billion in wages.

The Farm Bill — or Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018 — redefined hemp as any part of the cannabis plant or its derivatives that contain no more than 0.3% delta-9 THC on a dry-weight basis. Under the bill, hemp was no longer considered a controlled substance and could be sold legally.

Delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) is a cannabis-specific compound, or cannabinoid, that is considered the main psychoactive ingredient in cannabis.

The "loophole" that the Farm Bill's language created allowed folks in the hemp industry to produce cannabis products that contained less than 0.3% delta-9 THC while not accounting for variations like delta-8, delta-10, THC-O, THCP, and HHC that totaled a THC concentration exceeding 0.3%.

On Oct. 24, 2025, 38 attorneys general from across the country, including NC Attorney General Jeff Jackson, signed a letter to Congress asking for clarification on the federal definition of hemp, claiming that the ambiguity of the law as it existed allows "bad actors" to exploit the law and "racket dangerous drugs to the American public."

The letter stated "potent, psychoactive THC products" are "packaged and sold in ways meant deliberately to appeal to children."

"In other words, industry actors have nefariously misinterpreted the Farm Bill's legalization of low concentrations of hemp-derived delta-9 and the Bill's silence regarding hemp-derived THC products other than delta-9 to claim that the Farm Bill allows them to produce and sell various synthetic cannabinoids regardless of the chemicals' potency and psychoactive effects," it read. "In this way, legal, nonintoxicating hemp is used to make Frankenstein THC products that get adults high and harm and even kill children."

On Nov. 12, Donald Trump signed the government spending bill that would reopen the government into law. A six-page provision tucked into the 394-page bill aims to ban all intoxicating hemp products, potentially dooming the North Carolina cannabis industry when it goes into effect in November 2026.

From education to advocacy

Still active today as a nonprofit, NCHAA is limited in the ways it can involve itself in political advocacy. Operating wholly separate from NCHAA, CBHD was formed as a charitable solicitor, giving it wider berth to engage in politics and lobby lawmakers.

"Ultimately, it was decided that we need to start looking at another vehicle that can be a little more aggressive, a little more specific on the mission, and get involved politically versus just educationally," said Orr.



CBHD's Board of Directors at the March summit. Photo courtesy of CBHD

Enter April Byrd. Having worked with NCHAA on formulating the state's hemp definition in 2022, Byrd is now one of two lobbyists working with CBHD to push for the passage of SB265.

Byrd told Queen City Nerve that, while the hemp industry has grown exponentially since the 2018 Farm Bill, it's still been threatened by outdated views on what hemp products are, with state legislators "still kind of stuck in that mindset of the '60s and '70s that it's just a bunch of hippies smoking joints on the corner, not making a contribution to society."

She insisted that this lack of understanding — intensified by statements such as the attorneys general's letter that cited "Frankenstein THC products" that "kill children" — has made it harder to pass common-sense regulations that would help control the industry and mitigate harm.

"We've got a ton of regulations on the books in North Carolina with regards to how you can build a house; permits are required, inspections are required, certain materials can be used, certain materials cannot be used. It's a regulated industry," Byrd explained. "There are still bad actors in the housing industry. However, the bad actors are mitigated because of the regulations that are on the books.

"It's kind of the same in this industry," she continued. "You're taking an industry that has grown really fast since the passage of the 2018 Farm Bill. There are a lot of innovators in this space that have developed products that have helped millions of people throughout the country. And at the same time, you've got bad actors that have just taken advantage and have put some illegal, noncompliant, bad products out in the marketplace that are unfortunately being accessed by kids."

She said it was a wish to protect kids like her teenage nephews that inspired her to take on the work of NCHAA and later CBHD.

Byrd said that, as the NCGA prepares to reconvene and with seven months until the federal regulations take effect in states like North Carolina that have no clear laws on the books regulating hemp for themselves, she is cautiously optimistic about seeing something get done before November.

"There are tons of advocates throughout the state that are being more vocal, and I think that's helped," she said. "They're becoming more comfortable reaching out to their legislators, to their House members and their senators. And then just the work we've done overall on educating members on a bipartisan basis on the need for these regulations. I'm more optimistic than I have been.

"I'm not a gambler, it'd be hard for me to place odds," she continued, "but I'm cautiously optimistic that we probably are in the best position to see something happen than we have been in years past."

Visit cbhd.news to learn more about the organization's work and what's included in Senate Bill 265. You can also sign a petition to support the legislation on the website.

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THC, CBD, and Delta-9 products line the shelves at Redhead Hemp in Raleigh. Photo by Brandon Kingdollar/NC Newsline

STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

NC cannabis report emphasizes shutting off kids' access while allowing 'regulated adult market'

BY LYNN BONNER, NC NEWSLINE

Unregulated sales of intoxicating cannabis products have created a "wild west" where items are sold with no testing, uniform labeling or potency limits, a state advisory council said in a report release on April 2.

The North Carolina legislature needs to pass a law regulating the sale of cannabis, the North Carolina Advisory Council on Cannabis wrote in its interim report.

Gov. Josh Stein appointed the advisory council to make recommendations to "create a safe, legal market for adults that protects kids," he said in a June 2025 announcement.

Gummies, drinks, and other edibles containing intoxicating THC derived from hemp are currently legal. North Carolina has no age restrictions on sales, so children can buy them.

"Intoxicating hemp-derived cannabinoid products, often marketed as legal alternatives to marijuana, are being sold in an environment without any uniform standards for manufacturing, testing, labeling, packaging, or age verification, and absent any enforcement or oversight authority," the advisory council report states.

"As a result, North Carolina's cannabis marketplace has been characterized as a 'wild west' landscape. North Carolinians — including our youth — can legally purchase intoxicating hemp-derived products devoid of any potency limits, standardized laboratory testing, or clear labeling requirements, raising significant and widespread concerns regarding consumer safety, youth access, and public health. The absence of statewide enforcement authority and regulatory guardrails have created uncertainty for consumers, responsible businesses, healthcare providers, educators, parents, and law enforcement and most importantly, have put North Carolinians at risk."

The legislature has attempted to pass laws regulating hemp-derived products, but differences between Republicans in the House and Senate have doomed those efforts.

Discussion of regulating THC in the state is taking place against a shifting federal backdrop.

A 2018 federal Farm Bill legalized hemp production and paved the way for legal sales of products containing THC. A federal law passed last year meant to close "the Farm Bill loophole" caps the amount of THC in each container. Producers and sellers of products containing THC derived from hemp say the restriction will drive them out of business.

Last December, President Donald Trump issued an executive order that would ease restrictions on marijuana, making it easier to conduct research into medical uses. The order also encourages revisiting the hemp-derived THC limits.

The state advisory council is set to produce a final report in December.

Among its recommendations so far are regulating products based on total THC, no matter whether it comes from hemp or marijuana.

The advisory council co-chairs, Dr. Lawrence Greenblatt, state health director and chief medical officer at the NC Department of Health and Human Services, and Robeson County District Attorney Matthew Scott, propose a legal, regulated market for adults, with protections for medical marijuana users.

"It provides a way for the state to oversee and regulate the existing but unregulated market in North Carolina," the report says.

The day the report was published, Gov. Stein released a statement thanking the council for its work and reiterating the "Wild West" narrative that inspired it.

Last year, I charged this group with developing a comprehensive solution to the unregulated sale of cannabis that is grounded in public health and public safety, with a special focus on keeping young people safe," Stein wrote. "This report provides the General Assembly with guidance and makes clear that a well-regulated market, including both oversight and enforcement authority, is a safer market for our state. Our state's unregulated cannabis market today is the Wild West and is crying for order. Let's get this right. Let's protect our kids and create a safe, legal, and well-regulated market for adults."

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Got a backyard you're proud of?

We're putting together a special Backyard Inspiration photo spread for our **Charlotte Outdoor Living Guide** and we want to feature real local yards — not stock photos.

We're looking for the spaces you actually live in and love:
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How to enter:

- Snap a few photos of your outdoor space.
- Email them to info@qcnerve.com with the subject line "My Backyard."
- Optional: add 2–3 sentences about what inspired your outdoor space or what you love most about it.

Selected yards will be featured in our upcoming **Charlotte Summer Outdoor Living Guide** in print and online.



Inside Hemp & Tea Co. Photo courtesy of H&TC

THE LOOMING LAW

A local hemp professional considers the effects of legislation that threatens her way of life

BY RYAN PITKIN

For Olivia Merlock, cannabis is not just a lifestyle but a livelihood.

Now a senior manager with the Charlotte-based Hemp & Tea Company, the Vermont native entered the hemp industry in 2022 shortly after moving to Charlotte from South Carolina. She was working in the corporate world when she applied for a job with The Happy Camper Cannabis Dispensary and Lounge on a whim, a move that would change her life.

"When I got that job, within six months I quit my corporate job and went full-time with them," she recalled. "I knew pretty immediately like, this is where I will be for the rest of my life."

Four years later, she has come off of the SSRI antidepressant medication she was on at the time. Since joining the team at Hemp & Tea Co., she said she has become more interested in holistic living.

She's also fallen in love with the Queen City. Merlock and her wife are Charlotte FC season ticket holders and enjoy catching the wide range of concerts that come to the city.

"I was always meant to be in Charlotte," she told Queen City Nerve.

However, the life she's built here is now at risk of being pulled out from under her as new federal regulations loom. Put in place by a federal government spending deal passed in November 2025, the regulations are set to take effect in November 2026, which could place her professional future and that of the company where she's found a home in jeopardy.

"My dream is to be in the cannabis industry," she said. "I don't ever want to leave Charlotte, but I've had to have a conversation where it's like, come November, do I stay in Charlotte or do I give up my dream? And that is something that's very personal for me because I have to let one of those things that I absolutely adore go. Either I have to leave Charlotte or I have to give up my dream."

Hemp & Tea Company's beginnings

Founded in 2019, Hemp & Tea Co. opened its first location just months before COVID-19 clamped down on the city and the rest of the world. It came out of that struggle to flourish in a state that saw the hemp industry grow exponentially into a billion-dollar industry following the 2018 passage of the Farm Bill.

The company now has eight locations in the Charlotte area — four in Charlotte proper and shops in Huntersville, Belmont, Mooresville, and Concord. The company takes a holistic approach to hemp, centering the mental and physical health benefits of hemp tea.

"We really like to hone in on the productive stoner, if you will, and teach people, educate them that this plant can be used for health benefits but also artistic benefits, or a little boost in your mood, a little boost in your day," Merlock said. "And that can be Delta-9 or CBD. So pairing that with the tea as well is just an overall holistic and mindful approach to both the tea plant and the cannabis plant."

She shared that the clientele at Hemp & Tea Co. is a bit older and more health-focused than at previous companies she has worked for.

While the store does offer a line of teas from India, China and other countries that are not blended with hemp, she estimated that about 85% of the products sold by the company are hemp-infused and would be deemed illegal by the new standards set in place by the November spending bill.

Merlock believes strongly in better regulating hemp through licensing and third-party testing so that convenience stores and other unlicensed actors can't make mysterious products accessible to children.

"They're not getting the education, they're just getting high," Merlock said of consumers left vulnerable by North Carolina's unclear laws. "Some of these kids out here are just getting hurt from it. So Hemp & Tea firmly believes in regulation and we're on the side of that. But of course, a ban would just tear lives down and I think that if you're on the right side of things, you should be wanting to build them up and not tear them down."

An agonizing decision

While Merlock said her boss Michael Modia, managing partner and cofounder of Hemp & Tea Co., is confident the business can survive even if the new federal laws are allowed to take effect without any state action to override them, she estimated that they would have to close six out of their eight locations based on the percentage of products that would be deemed illegal.

She voiced her frustration with alcohol and pharmaceutical lobbyists who have tried to block hemp and cannabis legalization at every corner due to the effects its use can have on their industries.

Merlock said she was presented with an opportunity to open a dispensary of her own for a respectable cost early this year. The offer was an opportunity to go into business for herself, a chance to live her dream, but looming federal ban on hemp products made it impossible for her to follow through.

"In that time I was like, 'Well, that's only 11 months 'til November. Who knows what's going to happen at that point?'"

Merlock speculates that, if no action is taken and the new federal laws take effect in North Carolina, she may return to her home state of Vermont, where marijuana is legalized. She hates the winters there, however, so California is another option.

Either way, it would be an agonizing decision to leave the city she has come to love.

"If you choose where you want to stay and where you want to stay does not allow that, then unfortunately it's just something you have to put to rest," she said. "That kills me to say, and it kills me to know that all the like-minded individuals that I've met, all the people that have put so much effort into saving this industry, who put their livelihoods in there, are thinking the same. I hope that one day we can all figure out a way to band together and continue living the way that we know is the right way to live."

Visit hempandteaco.com to learn more about Hemp & Tea Co.

RPITKIN@QCNERVE.COM



Olivia Merlock (left) with wife Charlie. Photo courtesy of Olivia Merlock

FOMO: MUSEUM BLOCK PARTY

April 15 • 5 p.m. • Levine Avenue of the Arts • $2 donation suggested • tinyurl.com/FOMOMuseum2026

The Mint Museum, Harvey B. Gantt Center and Bechtler Museum of Modern Art team up with Charlotte SHOUT!, My Brother's Keeper, and 5th St. District for an Uptown bash that includes free events at each museum as well as a party in the Wells Fargo Plaza. The soiree features poets Jay Ward and Bluz at the Wonderdome, Alice in Wonderland-inspired fashion installation Will White's Wondrous Wardrobe, Nigel Malone's Song on the Spot mobile studio set up, and more. After 9 p.m., SHOUT! After Dark takes over the 5th Street bars with art by Mullet Vision and music by DJ E Sudd, Dammit Wesley and Harvey Cummings.

WILLIAM SHATNER LIVE ON STAGE

April 17 • 7:30 p.m. • Ovens Auditorium, 2900 E. Independence Blvd. • $59 and up • boplex.com

Although there have been more than 10 TV series and 13 Star Trek movies since *Star Trek* first went warp speed in 1966, it's impossible to think of the sturdy franchise without picturing William Shatner. The Canadian actor's hammy performance as the studly starship commander is iconic for its oddly phased dramatic pauses and the scene in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* where he bellows his antagonist's name while the camera has a bad case of the bed spins. Shatner goes beyond Trek following this screening to share stories from his 75-year acting career — and hopefully his real-life journey into space at age 90.

JACKIE VENSON

April 17 • 7:30 p.m. • Evening Muse, 3227 N. Davidson St. • $38 • eveningmuse.com

With searing, emotive, bent-note playing that makes her guitar sing and soulful, gritty vocals to match, Jackie Venson burst onto the blues rock scene with her 2019 debut album Joy. Drawing praise from fellow Black guitarists like Living Color founder Vernon Reid and blues-infused player Gary Clark Jr., Venson continues to grow. She explored eclectic electro-funk on her 2023 release *Ghost in The Machine* and unleashed funky, soul-laced reinventions of tunes from her debut on that year's *Evolution of Joy*. Throughout her career, Venson has innovated while harkening back to the emotional punch of Black guitarist and godmother of rock 'n' roll Sister Rosetta Tharpe.

CLT EDGEFEST

April 18 • 11 a.m.-9 p.m. • First Ward Park, 301 E. 7th St. • Free • tinyurl.com/Edgefest26

Presented under the aegis of the Charlotte SHOUT! banner, this festival sets up an arts bazaar and creative enclave in the heart of Uptown. Art vendors, yoga classes, spoken-word performances, interactive exhibits, a scavenger hunt and a chalk art display are all on the docket, transforming First ward Park into a garden of earthly delights. Starting at 3 p.m., main stage Edgefest acts include spoken-word artist Shane Manier, Carolinas Dance's breakdancing explosion, designer and street vendor Irena Robinson's Street Fashion Show in partnership with Dillard's, and a jam session and drum circle with the Friday Jones Family Band and Rocky & Kennon.

3RD ANNUAL CHARLOTTE FOLK MUSIC FESTIVAL

April 18 • noon-7 p.m. • St. Martin's Episcopal Church, 1510 E. 7th St. • $10-$15 • folksociety.org

Whether it's bluegrass, Celtic or old-time music, the unifying thread of folk is that it's community-based music passed down orally/aurally through generations. For its annual festival this year, the Charlotte Folk Society ensures there's even more to enjoy by expanding to three stages. Teenage banjoist and self-styled "trad-scendental" bluegrass master Ettore Buzzini, the Will Burgin String Band and Province of Thieves are among the acts taking the main stage, joined by Toad and Possum, Peregrine North, Tim Cook Band and many more spread across St. Martin's campus. The celebration also includes dance demonstrations and lessons, storytelling and a contra dance to conclude the fest.

EGBE: SOUL FAMILY ART EXHIBITION

April 22 • 5 p.m. • The Arts Factory, 1545 W. Trade St. • Free • tinyurl.com/EgbeSoulFamily

The Yoruba word "egbe" means "community" in English, and "egbe orun" is "our soul family," which connects and guides us throughout our earthly journeys. Thus, the Egbe: Soul Family exhibition is the culmination of QC Family Tree's Spring 2026 Culture Bearers creative residency. Over the course of a 10-week residency, local artists Nellie Ashford, Yazz Atmore, Monique Norris and Tiffonye' Wilkins were mentored by Jasiatic Usher and Michael Maxwell as they explored concepts including family, friendships, soulmates, Yoruban spirituality and more. Their artwork will line the walls of The Arts Factory, with the Rhizome Arts Market setting up in the lobby.



Egbe: Soul Family
Via Eventbrite
4/22



Jackie Venson
Photo by Ismael Quintanilla III
4/17

POOL KIDS, PRETTY BITTER

April 24 • 8 p.m. • Neighborhood Theatre, 511 E. 36th St. • $25 • neighborhoodtheatre.com

"*I know that you're bad for me/ But sometimes you're the only one I want...*" Christine Goodwyne's resonant alto intones on Pool Kids' 2025 tune "Easier Said Than Done." Drawing on the anthemic emo of Paramore and effusive '90s pop rock, the Florida foursome retains a rock edge with crisp drumming and muscular bass. "*The call from 911 dropped and it felt like a child again...*" Mel Bleker's dreamy vocals croon on Pretty Bitter's 2025 single "Thrill Eater." The activist Washington D.C. combo's storytelling entwines the everyday with the potentially catastrophic, set to eclectic, punchy pop rock that makes room for banjos and disco beats.

DEXTA DAPS

April 25 • 9 p.m. • The Underground, 820 Hamilton St. • $56-$73 • fillmorenc.com

Jamaican dancehall arose in the late '70s in response to the dominant roots reggae of artists like Bob Marley. Stripping the roots rhythms to the bone and adopting electronic beats, DJs created rapid-fire rap analogs called toasting and touched on explicitly political and sexual topics. Dancehall unleashed a musical movement and accompanying culture ('80s kids may recall the alliterative Jamaican-accented toasting of The English Beat's Rankin' Roger.) With his sensual, soulful 2025 hit "Champagne" and undeniable charisma and swagger, toaster Dexta Daps is arguably the new face of dancehall, coupling contemporary EDM production with a lush vibe as old as Barry White's sensuous slow jams.

PANCHIKO, REHASH, SUNDOTS

April 26 • 8 p.m. • The Fillmore, 820 Hamilton St. • $190 • fillmorenc.com

Named after a misspelling of pachinko — an old-school Japanese gaming device — experimental English indie band Panchiko launched in 1997 and promptly vanished. When a copy of the band's debut EP surfaced in 2016, it was uploaded online and garnered a fanbase. Finally, the disbanded Nottingham trio was tracked down and informed they were cool again. It would just be a great story if the music wasn't so engaging. Plangent 2025 single "Lifestyle Trainers" is a tuneful mix of post-punk melancholy, an irresistible groove and solid songwriting. Florida's Rehash crafts hazy grunge-inflected emo. With strummed guitars and swarming harmonies, Sundots essays wistful experimental alt-pop gems.

'THE DOWNSIDE' LIVE PODCAST

April 28 • 7 p.m. • Comedy Zone, 900 NC Music Factory Blvd. • $36 • cltcomedyzone.com

Whether they're baffled by the success of manosphere grifters, discussing racist Uber drivers, remembering the worst hookups ever or calculating the expenses of being a drag queen, standup comedian Gianmarco Soresi and cohost Russell Daniels are bound to bring up something you've contemplated but never wanted to admit in public. On *The Downside* podcast, Soresi and Daniels interview people more famous than themselves, encourage complaining, celebrate negativity and debunk silver linings. "Misery loves company," the podcast's website proudly proclaims, "and when Gianmarco is with company he loves talking about their miseries."



Sharon Dowell (center) with a mural she painted to honor Deborah Triplett. Photo by Ryan Pitkin

A BLURRED IMAGE

Questions surround forgotten Light Factory crowdsourcing campaign to honor late artist

BY RYAN PITKIN & PAT MORAN

A recent Facebook post from Charlotte artist Sharon Dowell has raised questions about what happened to thousands of dollars in funding that was raised three years ago to launch a photography mentorship program in honor of late artist Deborah Triplett.

Charlotte photography studio The Light Factory raised more than $6,500 through a GoFundMe campaign to launch the Deborah Triplett Flower Power Photo Experience (DTFPPE), described at the time as "an enrichment experience for emerging female photographers that includes female mentorship and training, access to The Light Factory resources and facilities, enrollment in The Light Factory classes and workshops, that will lead to a gallery exhibition."

With years having passed and the person who created the GoFundMe no longer in the picture at The Light Factory, donors are asking for answers about where the money has gone.

Queen City Nerve spoke with Kay Tuttle, who was the executive director of The Light Factory at the time of the fundraiser and whose name is attached to the campaign's web page. Tuttle said she would still like to spearhead the project but no longer has access to the funding that was raised.

Her successor Titus Brooks Heagins insisted he had no knowledge of the funding upon taking the position and no knowledge of its whereabouts now, nor any plans for the program.

Meanwhile, photographer Corine Olarte, the first mentee chosen to go through the DTFPPE program in September 2023, has spoken out about her experience with The Light Factory following that announcement, a time she said was defined by delays, broken promises and eventually a cut with the organization.

Donors are calling for The Light Factory to either return the funding or relaunch DTFPPE as a way to account for the thousands of dollars that remain unaccounted for.

Heagins has promised to investigate where the remaining pool of money has gone and potentially return it to donors if it can be found.

A botched program launch

Deborah Triplett was a Charlotte photographer and creative who founded Yard Art Day in Plaza Midwood and served as a friend and ardent supporter of artists throughout the city. In February 2023, she passed away at 73 years old after a years-long battle with lung cancer.

Citing Triplett's influence on her in her early years as an artist, Sharon Dowell unveiled a mural paying respect to the late photographer in 2024. Dowell's mural depicts Triplett on the side of a large rental building on Commonwealth Avenue in the heart of the Plaza Midwood neighborhood.

On April 1, Dowell was the first to speak up about the lack of action around the Deborah Triplett Flower Power Photo Experience, a campaign she donated to in 2023. She described being stonewalled in her efforts to get answers from The Light Factory since then.

"Several fellow donors have also expressed disappointment and confusion about how these funds have been managed," Dowell wrote on Facebook, "particularly given that they were raised in honor of Deborah, a dear friend and valued member of not just only the arts community, but Charlotte and beyond ... This situation isn't consistent with the intent behind the fundraising effort or the respect owed to her legacy."

The following day, Charlotte photographer Corine Olarte took to social media to recount her own experience as the first beneficiary of the DTFPPE program.

Citing Dowell's April 1 post as inspiring her to "be a little braver," Olarte laid out her experience, beginning with The Light Factory's public announcement of Olarte as the first "winner" of the DTFPPE in October 2023, followed by constant delays and mixed messaging over the span of 18 months.

That all led to the indefinite postponement of an exhibit that was promised to Olarte as the culmination of the program.

Olarte's experience at The Light Factory

Though organized by a number of Triplett's friends and loved ones, the 2023 GoFundMe campaign that raised the money to launch DTFPPE was officially created by "Kay Tuttle for The Light Factory," according to the website.

Tuttle worked as executive director of The Light Factory from March 2015 to June 2024, when Titus Brooks Heagins took over the position.

Heagins had been working under Tuttle at The Light Factory, leading workshops for emerging photographers, as he describes in an open letter he wrote to supporters following his appointment to the executive director role.

Olarte said that, when she started with DTFPPE in November 2023, she was informed the program would be combined with Heagins' mentorship program.

She said she raised concerns with The Light Factory in February 2024 about the deviation from the original DTFPPE description, which promised a female mentor. The following month, she said she was separated from Heagins' program and assigned a woman mentor.

During that span, she said her exhibit was pushed back a total of four times, from its original slot in summer 2024 to April 2025. Finally, Olarte said she was informed that her exhibition would be postponed indefinitely due to renovations at the Visual and Performing Arts (VAPA) Center where The Light Factory is located.

Then, in March 2025, The Light Factory announced a new exhibition that would run from March 31-May 9, which Olarte took to conflict with claims that her exhibition had been postponed due to construction in the space.

Olarte said she had been promised a $1,000 stipend in addition to the $500 allotment that both she and her new mentor had received in March 2024. The second stipend was meant to cover the cost of film stock, developing, lenses and other materials that were needed in January 2025 in order to complete her project by April 2025, Olarte said.

Upon learning of the new exhibit at The Light Factory in March 2025, Olarte sent a release and settlement letter to Heagins asking for the rights to exhibit her work elsewhere and for the $1,000 stipend she had been promised.

Heagins responded that he had no intention of signing the contract, claiming Olarte had failed to fulfill requests for a synopsis of her planned exhibit and sample images, requests Olarte insisted she fulfilled in an email thread in February 2025.

In her social media post, Olarte explained that, since May 2025, she has "exhausted many avenues to find a resolution" to the issue, claiming to still be owed the $1,000 stipend she was promised.

"I never got to meet Deborah Triplett, but I deeply respect her legacy," Olarte wrote. "She is fondly remembered by many of her loved ones and by the Charlotte creative community ... My aim has always been to support a meaningful memorial, especially because the grief is ongoing."

Visit qcnerve.com to read the remainder of this story.

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Corine Olarte Photo by Oxana Photography

SOUNDWAVE

CHARLOTTE'S LIVE MUSIC CALENDAR * APR. 15 - APR. 28 *

WEDNESDAY APR. 15

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Bush (Skyla Credit Union Amphitheatre)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Sarah Kinsley (The Underground)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Josh Daniel & Friends (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Hiram (Comet Grill)
JAZZ/BLUES
Kenya Templeton (Middle C Jazz)
Wednesday Jazz Jam feat. Lovell Bradford Trio (VisArt Video)*
EXPERIMENTAL/MIXED-GENRE/FESTIVAL
Motherfuckers JMB & Co. w/ Sweat Transfer, Infinitefreefall (Snug Harbor)
OPEN MIC
Singer/Songwriter Open Mic (The Rooster)*
Starlight Jams Open Mic (Starlight on 22nd)*

THURSDAY APR. 16

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Jackson Fig w/ Clementine, Fifth Floor, Flannelmouth, Ma (The Milestone)
Dark Tranquillity w/ Soen (The Underground)
JAZZ/BLUES
The Real McCoy Band (Eighty Eights)
GA-20 w/ Jontavious Willis (Visulite Theatre)
HIP-HOP/SOUL/R&B
Karen Briggs, Jazmin Ghent & Maria Howell (Booth Playhouse)
Baby Keem (The Fillmore)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Brooke Lee (Amos' Southend)
Barnaby Bright (Evening Muse)
The Band of Heathens (Neighborhood Theatre)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Josh Daniel (Comet Grill)
FUNK/JAM BANDS/REGGAE
Strutman Lane w/ Nathan Harris & The Flood, Sales Dept (Petra's)
Shana Blake's Musical Menagerie (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Pan!c: Emo Night (Crown Station)
Soul Sessions (The Long Room)
CHRISTIAN/GOSPEL/RELIGIOUS
David & Tamela Mann (Ovens Auditorium)
COVER BANDS
Jazzy Blu Lovers & Legends (Middle C Jazz)

FRIDAY APR. 17

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
St. Paul & the Broken Bones (The Fillmore)
Holyroller w/ Florist, Gurthworm, Tyger (The Milestone)
Homemade Haircuts w/ Willingdon, Cherry Motel (Petra's)
Somnium w/ I Hate Dave, Space Corolla, Mindvac (Snug Harbor)
Mt. Joy (Truliant Amphitheater)
JAZZ/BLUES
Jackie Venson (Evening Muse)
Selina Albright (Middle C Jazz)
Mojo Stomp (The Rooster)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Happy Landing w/ The Ocho (Amos' Southend)
Cody Webb w/ Bailey Marie, Out of the Blue (Coyote Joe's)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Best of Both Worlds Rave (Blackbox Theater)
Tom & Collins (The Music Yard)
La Brava (The Spoke Easy)
COVER BANDS
Confetti Cannon w/ Caleb Davis (Goldie's)
Avery Creek (Heist Brewery & Barrel Arts)
Wallace Roney Jr. Quartet (Miles Davis tribute) (Stage Door Theater)
Gone Country (TD Amp Ballantyne)
Grungefest (The Underground)
The Chain (Fleetwood Mac tribute) (Visulite Theatre)

SATURDAY APR. 18

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
West 22nd (Neighborhood Theatre)
Cheer Up! w/ Midsummers, True Lilith (Petra's)
Gov't Mule w/ Larkin Poe (Neighborhood Theatre)
Black Pistol Fire w/ Teddy At Night (Visulite Theatre)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Digital Noir feat. DJ Spider, DJ Chris, XAQ Fixx (The Milestone)
J Worra (The Music Yard)
Emo Nite (The Underground)
JAZZ/BLUES
Shane Wheeler (Eighty Eights)
Al Di Meola (Middle C Jazz)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Hunters Travesty (Comet Grill)
Ashley Kutcher w/ Bellah Mae (Evening Muse)
Laura Vinson w/ Square Roots (Goldie's)
FUNK/JAM BANDS/REGGAE
Father Sun w/ Mountain Walrus (Primal Brewery)
Warp Street w/ SanPriest Patton, Groove Skeletons (Starlight on 22nd)
COVER BANDS
Emo Night CLT feat. Tremont, Alex Melton, DJ Skid (Amos' Southend)
Human Clay (Creed tribute) (The Rooster)
Wallace Roney Jr. Quartet (Miles Davis tribute) (Stage Door Theater)

SUNDAY APR. 19

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Endless w/ Nameless, Snide, Napalm Cruiser, Peace & Quiet (The Milestone)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Midnight (The Fillmore)
Hazy Sunday (Petra's)
JAZZ/BLUES
Braxton Bateman (Eighty Eights)
Tony Hightower (Middle C Jazz)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Pat McGee (Evening Muse)
David Childers (Free Range Brewing)
James Brock & Friends (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*
HIP-HOP/SOUL/R&B
Danny Brown (The Underground)
CHRISTIAN/GOSPEL/RELIGIOUS
Brandon Lake w/ Pat Barrett (Spectrum Center)
COVER BANDS
Jump (Van Halen tribute) (Neighborhood Theatre)

MONDAY APR. 20

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Boys Like Girls (The Fillmore)
JAZZ/BLUES
The Bill Hanna Legacy Jazz Session (Petra's)
OPEN MIC
Find Your Muse Open Mic feat. Mandako (Evening Muse)

TUESDAY APR. 21

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Dollhaver w/ Straightjacket, Backwash, Lovergrrrl (Snug Harbor)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Fantastic Cat w/ Jilette Johnson (Evening Muse)
Sneaky Miles w/ Emily June, Group Therapy (Petra's)
OPEN MIC
Crown Collab Funk Jam & Open Mic (Crown Station)*
Open Mic Night feat. The Smokin J's (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*

WEDNESDAY APR. 22

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Peach Rings w/ Motocrossed, Edging, Those Dogs, Ruminations (The Milestone)
JAZZ/BLUES
Wednesday Jazz Jam feat. Lovell Bradford Trio (VisArt Video)*
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Timothy Chandler (Comet Grill)
Josh Daniel & Friends (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*
HIP-HOP/SOUL/R&B
K.O.N w/ JUNE!, Jyou, Sumthing Orange (Snug Harbor)
Concrete Boys (The Underground)
COMEDY
OCT (Evening Muse)
COVER BANDS
House of Funk: Funk of The Beatles (Middle C Jazz)
Falco & Book play Jerry Garcia (Neighborhood Theatre)
OPEN MIC
Singer/Songwriter Open Mic (The Rooster)*
Starlight Jams Open Mic (Starlight on 22nd)*

THURSDAY APR. 23

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
The Maine (The Fillmore)
This Island Earth w/ Zombii, Horse Island, Little Heart Machine (The Milestone)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Ramona & the Holy Smokes w/ Rebecca Porter (Evening Muse)
Breakfield (Neighborhood Theatre)
FUNK/JAM BANDS/REGGAE
Shana Blake's Musical Menagerie (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Goldford (The Underground)
JAZZ/BLUES
John Shaughnessy Quartet (Eighty Eights)
Alex Austin (Middle C Jazz)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Ben Gatlin (Comet Grill)

FRIDAY APR. 24

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
The Lenny Federal Band (Comet Grill)*
Pool Kids (Neighborhood Theatre)
Microwave (The Underground)
JAZZ/BLUES
Jeremy Turgeon (Eighty Eights)
Jessy J (Middle C Jazz)
HIP-HOP/SOUL/R&B
Floetry (Ovens Auditorium)
COUNTRY/FOLK/AMERICANA
Philip Bowen w/ Jordan Lee King (Evening Muse)
POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
Shadow Play (Crown Station)
Victor Jones (Snug Harbor)
CLASSICAL/INSTRUMENTAL
Charlotte Symphony: Gershwin & Bernstein (Belk Theater)
FUNK/JAM BANDS/REGGAE
Barnhouse w/ The Band Memo (Evening Muse)
Of Good Nature (The Music Yard)
Steven Massey w/ Skiway, King Yugi & The Royal Hearts (The Rooster)
EXPERIMENTAL/MIXED-GENRE/FESTIVAL
Carolina Open Air (Blackbox Theater)
Blood Sugar Fest Magic (The Milestone)
Coughing Dove w/ Shaun B (The Spoke Easy)
COVER BANDS
Make Yourself w/ Sugar, Frizzie Fries (Amos' Southend)
Big 80s Tribute Band w/ Six Year Hiatus (Goldie's)
Runaway Gin (Phish tribute) (Visulite Theatre)

***WEEKLY EVENTS THAT MAY BE SUBJECT TO CHANGE. VISIT QCNERVE.COM FOR THE FULL SOUNDWAVE LISTING**

SATURDAY APR. 25

POP/DANCE/ELECTRONIC/DJ
R&B Only (The Fillmore)
Heated Rivalry Dance Party (Neighborhood Theatre)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Erick Baker (Evening Muse)
CeceCoakley w/ Horsepower (Snug Harbor)
FUNK/JAM BANDS/REGGAE
The Relics (Comet Grill)
Krooked Kings w/ Night Cap (The Music Yard)
Dexta Daps (The Underground)
JAZZ/BLUES
Lovell Bradford (Eighty Eights)
Adam Hawley (Middle C Jazz)
CLASSICAL/INSTRUMENTAL
Charlotte Symphony: Gershwin & Bernstein (Belk Theater)
One Voice Chorus: Chroma (The Long Room)
Joyful Sounds: Spring Recital (Stage Door Theater)
LATIN/K-POP/WORLD
UltimaNota w/ Julio & Rafa (Petra's)
Peso Pluma w/ Tito Double P (Truliant Amphitheater)
EXPERIMENTAL/MIXED-GENRE/FESTIVAL
Carolina Open Air (Blackbox Theater)
Blood Sugar Fest Magic (The Milestone)
Mariah Van Kleef w/ Modern Moxie, Sweat Transfer (Starlight on 22nd)
COVER BANDS
The Rush Experience (Amos' Southend)
Joey Boretti Band w/ Grievous Angels (Goldie's)
Scandal (The Rooster)
Shoot to Thrill (AC/DC tribute) (Visulite Theatre)

SUNDAY APR. 26

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Panchiko (The Fillmore)
Lacuna Coil (The Underground)
JAZZ/BLUES
Braxton Bateman (Eighty Eights)
Joe Grandsen's Sunday Second Line (Middle C Jazz)
Jason Jackson (Middle C Jazz)
Marc Broussard (Neighborhood Theatre)
CHRISTIAN/GOSPEL/RELIGIOUS
David Wickham (Bojangles Coliseum)
FUNK/JAM BANDS/REGGAE
Leonid and Friends (Belk Theater)
Mike Strauss Band (Free Range Brewing)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
James Brock & Friends (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*
EXPERIMENTAL/MIXED-GENRE/FESTIVAL
Blood Sugar Fest Magic (The Milestone)

MONDAY APR. 27

JAZZ/BLUES
The Bill Hanna Legacy Jazz Session (Petra's)
LATIN/K-Pop/WORLD
Get Sad Y'all: Divorced Dad Rock Night (Snug Harbor)
OPEN MIC
Find Your Muse Open Mic feat. Alejandro Meola (Evening Muse)

TUESDAY APR. 28

ROCK/PUNK/METAL
Red Rocking Chair (Comet Grill)*
In Your Grave w/ For Fear Itself, Sewer, Fault Reset, The White Horse (The Milestone)
FUNK/JAM BANDS/REGGAE
Protoje (Neighborhood Theatre)
SINGER-SONGWRITER/ACOUSTIC
Howie Day (Evening Muse)
EXPERIMENTAL/MIXED-GENRE/FESTIVAL
The Convenience w/ Ego Death Machine, Joshua Cotterino (Snug Harbor)
OPEN MIC
Crown Collab Funk Jam & Open Mic (Crown Station)*
Open Mic Night feat. The Smokin J's (Smokey Joe's Cafe & Bar)*



Creatures of the Sun earned Readers' Pick as Best New Band in our 2025 Best in the Nest. Photo by Bob Gourley

SLOW DANCING WHILE THE SUN BURNS OUT

Creatures of the Sun make illuminating psychedelic rock

BY PAT MORAN

Garret Ballard's crooning drawl threads through rattlesnake coils of surf guitar, clacking freight-train drums and growling Harley Davidson bass: "*You were obfuscated/ A thief in the night / You were obfuscated/ Now things don't feel so right...*"

Charlotte trio Creatures of the Sun (COTS) gets points for using "obfuscated," from Latin obfuscat, meaning "darkened," in the shadowy yet invigorating "Hell If I Know," slated for an early June release. The irresistible tune conjures the surfin' ghosts of Link Wray and garage rockers The Seeds, but transcends its forebears by spreading a message of community and connection in a genre too often defined by hallucinations and illusions.

"Hell If I Know," like all COTS tunes, benefits from a delectable dualism. One one hand, sardonic lyrics are Ballard's métier as the band's founder, songwriter and vocalist. On the other, the upbeat music takes the edge off the tenebrous undertow of the lyrics.

"Everything I write, it has to come out where there's a bit of an edge to it," Ballard says. With its chorus of "*How'd we end up here?/ The hell if I know...,*" the song was inspired by Ballard's move back home to Vail in the North Carolina foothills.

"There was this disconnect with how I thought things would be versus how they were," Ballard recalls.

When Ballard tracked the tune at Mt. Airy's Fallen Trees Recording Studio with his bandmates, bassist Benjamin Fortenberry and drummer James Mozina, the band's surfy, reverberating groove transformed the song's meaning.

"It turned more positive," Ballard asserts. "It became this feeling of riding this wave through life. 'I don't know how we ended up here, but here we are ... taking things as they come.'"

"Taking things as they come" could well be Ballard's motto. He moved around a lot growing up and describes his childhood as tumultuous. Ballard discovered music young, picking up his mother's nylon-string acoustic guitar one day and never putting it down.

"It became a way for me ... to use my voice and express myself," Ballard maintains. Writing songs at 14, he began playing in metal and hardcore groups in Jacksonville, Florida at age 17. Moving to Charlotte, Ballard played bass in moody rock foursome The Carbonari. He cofounded psychedelic, country-rock quintet The Snakebirds, which released a self-titled EP of rollicking backwoods sci-fi vignettes in 2015.

"Me and those guys, we all lived together and were watching a lot of *X-Files* late at night," Ballard recollects. "We'd try to spin some of these [episodes] into songs."

By 2017, Ballard needed a change. He decamped with his then-girlfriend to Roanoke, Virginia, where he enrolled in remote classes at Orlando's Full Sail University, studying audio engineering and production. At Full Sail, Ballard also pursued an interest in graphic design, a skill that recently resurfaced in the flyers, albums and merch he designs for COTS.

Ballard's relationship fizzled and he moved back down to Jacksonville in 2018. There, he finished earning his bachelor's degree from Full Sail and met Victoria Havekost. In the meantime, Ballard's friend and former Snakebird Ben Fortenberry reached out. He was playing bass with Charlotte art/noise/dance band Family Video, which had just lost its guitarist. He asked if Ballard was interested in the gig.

"[Ballard] came up a couple random weekends all the way from Florida to play with us," Fortenberry says.

Perhaps that was the nudge Ballard needed to come home. In 2023, he and Victoria married, moved back to Vail and subsequently bought a house. Ballard continued to play guitar in Family Video.

After releasing the melancholic, mystic and ultimately uplifting folk tune "A Thousand Little Deaths" under his own name, Ballard cast about for a new musical direction. He found it in a psychedelic tune about a man's love affair with weed. Against a jaunty garage-rock beat and coiling pointillist guitar, Ballard affects a lazy nasal drawl: "*Green queen/ your perfume drives me wild/ You don't say much/ but baby you get loud...*"

It's the very first COTS song, and like all of the band's early tunes, Ballard plays all the instruments.

"[The song] is talking about fading away into oblivion with weed," Ballard explains. "I wrote it when I was stoned, obviously."

Ballard still likes the song, though he no longer relates to it.

"I actually am a year and a half substance-free, but I used to smoke a lot of weed and I used to drink," he offers. "As an artist, I had this perception that I needed to smoke or drink and it would open me up creatively," Barrett reasons. "But, since I stopped smoking [and] drinking, I've been able to write a lot more stuff and get a lot more in tune with how I am actually feeling."

When "Green Queen" was written, Ballard was thinking of COTS as a studio-only project. As he continued to write, Ballard felt more and more drawn to the sounds of classic surf rock like Dick Dale and newer psych-rock like The Growlers.

"Something about it speaks to me, that kind of grit, the vibe of it," Ballard says. "[Psychedelia] is about expanding awareness."

Ballard maintains that psychedelic rock's spatial effects, like reverb and delay, play with perceptions of time in creative ways. "When I'm writing ... and playing those upbeat, rock-based riffs, it makes me feel good."

There's no better illustration of Ballard's assertion than "In Your Wave," a bopping, ebullient slice of psych that Ballard says is about falling in love with his wife.

"It's about how I felt the first time I was caught in her wave, her aura," he says.

Determined to turn COTS into a full-time band, Ballard split amicably with Family Video in April 2025 and sent a demo of his tunes to Fortenberry, who joined COTS in January 2025. Drummer Gabriel Avon completed the lineup and COTS played its first show on Valentine's Day 2025 at Petra's.

After Avon left the band in August, Mozina replied to a post on the Charlotte Facebook musicians group looking for a drummer. The name Creatures of the Sun and Ballard's deft, storytelling songwriting appealed to the drummer, who had primarily played punk rock up to that point. The band members jammed in a NoDa storage facility, then COTS played its first gig with Mozina in Raleigh. Just months later, they'd be voted Best New Band by Queen City Nerve readers in our 2025 Best in the Nest issue.

"It's been almost a year and it's been great," Mozina says.

The band recently signed to startup indie label Charlotte Court Records. Label owner Chad Barnard is also the owner and lead engineer for Fallen Tree Studios, the Mt. Airy facility where COTS is completing the 10 tracks that comprise the surfing psych-rock trio's self-titled debut album, slated for an August release.

"I have this line that ... encapsulates the band, and what I'm trying to do," Ballard says. From one of COTS's upcoming songs, "Kings of the Wasteland," it's a characteristically evocative lyric: "*Slow dancing while the sun burns out...*"

"It's like we're here right now, writing our names in the sand," Ballard expounds. "We're all slow dancing while the sun burns out. We're not sure about the future [or] how we got to where we are. But we can choose how to show up, connect, spread some love and have some fun."

"Garrett's a great songwriter," Fortenberry adds. "He's able to find a message, convey it really well [and] put it together with music."

With beguiling riffs and kaleidoscopic production, COTS makes surfy, psychedelic garage rock designed to empower people. Ballard is encouraging folks to catch the COTS wave, immerse themselves in the band's musical duality, acknowledging the shadows and embracing the light — until the day the darkness dissolves.

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Garret Ballard with Creatures of the Sun. Photo by Noah Francisco



Amber Donoghue (left) and Dean Orr at PostScript. Photo by Jess Lawrence

COMMUNITY COMES FIRST

PostScript is one couple's way of spreading love to their east Charlotte neighborhood

BY RYAN PITKIN

Unbeknownst to all but their closest friends and family, Amber Donoghue and husband Dean Orr already had a foot out of Charlotte's door in December 2024 when Letty Ketner announced she would be closing Letty's, her popular neighborhood restaurant on Shamrock Drive.

Donoghue, who had already found an apartment a block away from Central Park on the Upper West Side of New York City, came across Ketner's Facebook post seconds after it was made and immediately knew what it might mean for her life.

"I screenshotted it before I could think and just immediately sent it to Dean," Donoghue recalled. "And then I screamed a four-letter obscenity."

As she wrote in a bio for her website, which will come online with the publication of this article, "At that moment she knew the days of free weekends, dinners at a decent hour, and life in the daylight were numbered."

Fifteen months later, the couple opened PostScript, a homey neighborhood restaurant that carries on the traditions and memories created at 2121 Shamrock Drive, originally home to Pike's Soda Shop, followed by Foskoskies and then Letty's.

As residents of the Plaza-Shamrock neighborhood where Letty's operated, Donoghue and Orr knew the importance of the space and couldn't bear to see it changed into something that wasn't going to carry the sense of community that had permeated the space for decades.

Having both spent years in the hospitality industry — Orr as an acclaimed chef and Donoghue helping to open more than 40 restaurants before the couple launched a small catering company together in 2019 — the implications of Letty's closure was apparent to them both early on.

They inquired with property owner Jennifer Keller, granddaughter of Pike's founder Jesse Pike and current owner of Pike's Pharmacy next door, who said the lease was theirs if they wanted it.

"I said, 'I am 41 and I have a great job, so does my husband, and we have no business taking over this lease,'" recalled Donoghue of that early-2025 conversation. "But I can't let something else that I love so much in my neighborhood disappear."

She got into the car with Dean after the meeting and screamed the same four-letter word she had screamed when she first heard the news of Letty's closure. Despite her reluctance to upend her entire life, it was a dream she knew was worth pursuing.

"[Dean] said, 'So you know we have to do this, right?' I was like, 'Yeah,'" she recalled.

And so began the journey that led to PostScript, which opened on March 18 with no fanfare — no media night, no influencer invitations. Just the flick of a switch on the sign out front.

The two spent a year renovating the space, mostly taking a DIY approach.

Donoghue replaced the tile herself in some of the areas where the floor was damaged, a project that became important to her after learning that original owner Elizabeth Pike laid the tile around 40 years ago.

When everything was finally ready, Donoghue and Orr simply turned on the neon sign facing Shamrock Drive that reads, "Sincerely, Open" and waited for their neighbors to show up.

Service has kicked off with a small but impressive menu full of comfort items thoughtfully curated by Orr.

The popular French onion soup bread bowl is the star of the starters category while entrees include a number of European dishes such as the rich wild mushroom stroganoff cavatelli and a remarkably flavorful chicken scarpariello.

Currently open daily from 4-10 p.m., PostScript will soon take on a coffee residency, with Dyad Coffee operating in the space during the day before Donoghue and Orr transition to dinner service each night.

Owned by Morgan Eynard and partner Jon Langford, Dyad moved from its original location on Rozzelle's Ferry Road to North Davidson Street near Parkwood Avenue. They lost that when they learned the space was not approved for commercial use, as recently reported by Unpretentious Palate.

The two have been operating a pop-up coffee cart and will have a home again inside PostScript sometime in the coming weeks.

Further out, Donoghue and Orr have their eyes on launching a brunch menu that will pay homage to the establishments that came before them in the space, including the famed honey pecan chicken that's been a favorite on the property since Pike's Soda Shop opened in 1994.

"Every single establishment that's ever been in this building has had [the honey pecan chicken]," said Orr. "So we're gonna do it on our brunch menu. Because that's the thing; we're forging our own identity, but so much of this is about paying respect to the space and where we are."

A restaurant built on community

There are a few punny reasons for the name PostScript, most of which are related to the couple's mission to pay respect to the space.

Their own history began with a long-distance relationship that involved posting letters and gift boxes to one another on a regular basis. When Orr moved to Charlotte to be with Donoghue, it meant no more trips to the post office.

The name is an homage to Pike's Pharmacy, which was once home to a post office so local residents could take care of their post while grabbing a prescription. The initials also serve as a nod to the surrounding Plaza Shamrock neighborhood.

During their year of renovations, Donoghue and Orr met countless neighbors who stopped in to check on the space and inquire about what was to come.

People couldn't wait to share their memories, including one couple who said they had their first date at Letty's in 2015. They have since married, and upon their visit to PostScript, Donoghue sat them at Table 25, where they had enjoyed their first date, and dropped a bottle of champagne off after dinner.

Much of the staff also lives in the surrounding neighborhoods, including bar manager Erica Bodiker, who popped in to chat with Donoghue during the renovation period.

"I've watched her for years. I've always liked her work," Donghue said. "I knew her through her glasses, through her cocktails. It was crazy to find out that she lives just around the corner."

The couple told Queen City Nerve they're not focused on spreading the word to other parts of town but serving the folks who live in the surrounding area — Plaza Shamrock, Country Club, Windsor Park, Shannon Park, etc.

If they draw crowds from elsewhere in the city, that's great, but PostScript aims to be a neighborhood establishment above all else.

"The idea is not to be trendy and new; I want to be reliable," said Donoghue. "I don't want to see you on your birthday night or your anniversary, I want to see you on Wednesday because you're tired and you don't have all the things in your refrigerator to put together a composed meal. Or if you have friends in town and it's like, 'Oh, we'll go to the place up the street. They know us there.' We're just a neighborhood haunt."

PostScript is located at 2121 Shamrock Drive. Follow @postscriptrestaurant for updates or visit postscriptrestaurant.com for more information.

RPITKIN@QCNERVE.COM



Inside PostScript Photos by Jess Lawrence

VISIT Changing Hearts Farm Sanctuary



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HOROSCOPE

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APRIL 15 - APRIL 21

ARIES (March 21 to April 19) Aspects indicate a potential for confusion or misunderstandings. Keep the lines of communication open between you and your mate or significant other.

TAURUS (April 20 to May 20) Romantic aspects are strong but confusing. Be alert! Use your good Bovine sense to avoid charging into something that isn't quite what it seems to be.

GEMINI (May 21 to June 20) Working out problems with family members or others who are close to you should be your priority. Meanwhile, travel aspects are strong, especially in job-related situations.

CANCER (June 21 to July 22) The Cancerian Crab likes to take charge of things. But be careful that you don't pinch off more than you can hold, or you might find it all slipping out of your grasp.

LEO (July 23 to August 22) A new opportunity beckons for Leos and Leonas who are ready to take on some tough challenges. Additionally, family matters continue to improve but still need close attention.

VIRGO (August 23 to September 22) What seems to be a disappointment could be a blessing in disguise. Use your good Virgan mind to analyze the situation and learn some valuable lessons.

LIBRA (September 23 to October 22) There are some conflicting considerations that will need careful sorting out. Remember, you do best when you're able to balance sense and sentiment.

SCORPIO (October 23 to November 21) Aspects show conflicting signs around friendships. Be careful about taking advice from someone who might have an agenda that isn't in your best interests.

SAGITTARIUS (November 22 to December 21) Relationships are supposed to be about give-and-take, but you might find that you've been doing all the giving while getting little in return.

CAPRICORN (December 22 to January 19) Sometimes indecision can be a positive factor in helping to resolve doubts about a potential commitment. Don't be rushed into acting before you feel ready to do so.

AQUARIUS (January 20 to February 18) Take off your rose-colored glasses and see this new situation for what it is — and for what it isn't. Remember, you haven't been told the whole truth yet.

PISCES (February 19 to March 20) Watch that you don't drain your energy reserves as you dive into a new and increasingly demanding project. Take time out for rest and relaxation.

BORN THIS WEEK: You live your life on a finely tuned balance between the passions of an ARIES and the perception of a Taurus. You most likely excel in the arts.

APRIL 22 - APRIL 28

ARIES (March 21 to April 19) You can easily handle your tasks this week, thanks to your high-energy levels that never seem to run down. But pace yourself, Lamb, for a demanding week ahead.

TAURUS (April 20 to May 20) With the arts dominant this week, you might want to pick up any creative projects that you've neglected. Meanwhile, a workplace situation benefits from some fresh insight.

GEMINI (May 21 to June 20) Music helps replenish your energy levels. Press play and put your phone on Do Not Disturb if you must. However, a live concert could prove more rewarding, especially if you go with a very special someone.

CANCER (June 21 to July 22) Close friends reach out to help perk up your lagging social life. A workplace situation also eases, leaving you time to do more fun things by week's end.

LEO (July 23 to August 22) A revelation clears up a perplexing job-related problem. Some changes will have to be made, which, no doubt, will have to meet the Big Cat's roaring approval. Good luck!

VIRGO (August 23 to September 22) Reaching out to someone in need is the noble thing to do. But try to restrain the temptation to add a lecture to your good deed, no matter how well-intended.

LIBRA (September 23 to October 22) There could be another tough challenge to face before the month is over. But all your hard work is winning you lots of important recognition from your peers.

SCORPIO (October 23 to November 21) Keeping to your work schedule could prove difficult with some personal distractions. Best advice: Stay with it. There'll be time later for socializing.

SAGITTARIUS (November 22 to December 21) Jumping hurdles this week might be vexing for most, but not for the sage Sagittarian who recognizes that meeting a challenge can open up opportunities.

CAPRICORN (December 22 to January 19) More obstacles might be thrown in your path as you try to finalize a new agreement. But the sure-footed Goat ignores the stumbling blocks and stays the course.

AQUARIUS (January 20 to February 18) We know the Water Bearer takes pleasure in giving to others. But why not let someone else enjoy the experience, too, by accepting an offer of help?

PISCES (February 19 to March 20) You might find that you need to ease up on your hectic schedule this week. Don't fret about it. It could be helpful to take a break and replenish your energy supply.

BORN THIS WEEK: You have a way of finding practical solutions to complex problems, and you do it with grace.

TRIVIA TEST
BY FIFI RODRIGUEZ

1. GEOGRAPHY: Which country is also known to residents as Hellas?
2. U.S. STATES: Which state is the least populated?
3. ENTERTAINERS: Which show launched the career of comedian/actor Jim Carrey?
4. MOVIES: What museum is featured in the movie "Night at the Museum"?
5. HISTORY: When was Earth Day first celebrated?
6. MUSIC: Which song begins with the lines, "Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy"?
7. TELEVISION: Who starred in the title role of the TV drama "Designated Survivor"?
8. GENERAL KNOWLEDGE: What is the only sport that has been played on the moon?
9. LITERATURE: What is the name of the language used in the novel "1984"?
10. ANIMAL KINGDOM: What is a group of giraffes called?

SUDOKU
BY LINDA THISTLE

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		9	3	4	8	1		7
3		1		9		4		
8	7		1					3
						8		
4		2			3		5	9
	9	8	5	2	4			6
				1	2		3	4
	4		6		9			8
	3		4	8		6		1

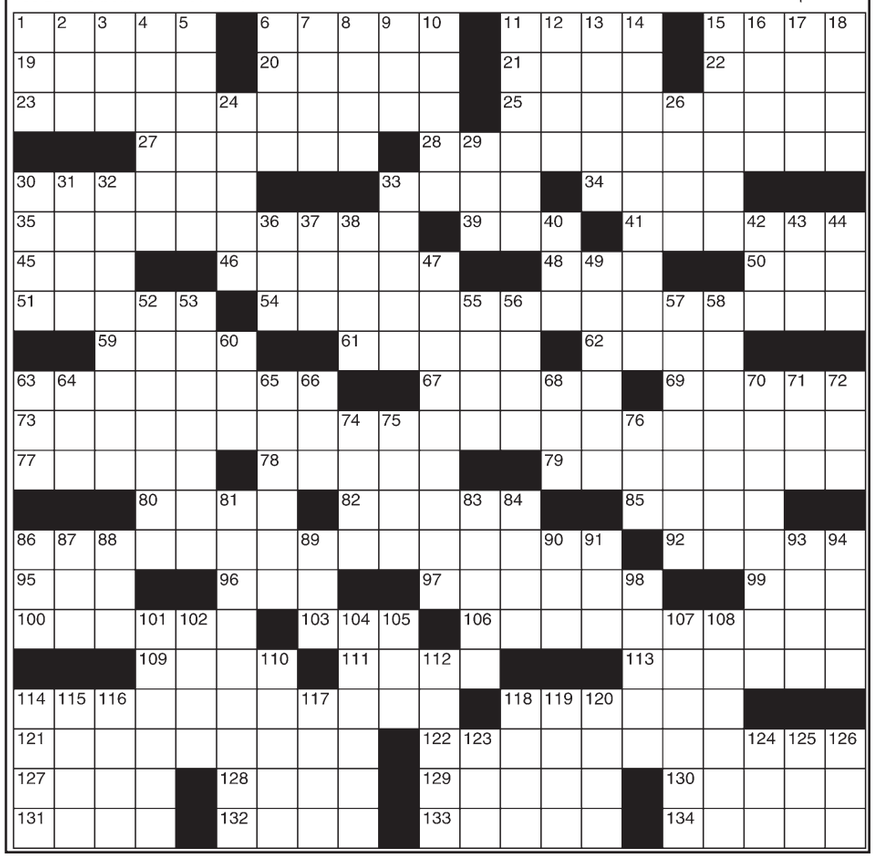
PLACE A NUMBER IN THE EMPTY BOXES IN SUCH A WAY THAT EACH ROW ACROSS, EACH COLUMN DOWN AND EACH SMALL 9-BOX SQUARE CONTAINS ALL OF THE NUMBERS ONE TO NINE.

CROSSWORD
QUADRENNIAL ARRIVALS

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ACROSS
1 Elite roster
6 Yard tool
11 Attorney's job
15 Close loudly
19 Maui porch
20 Yankee Yogi
21 Penne — vodka
22 Imogene of comedy
23 Motivational speaker who wrote "Unlimited Power" [1960]
25 Tooth-saving procedure
27 Takes effect
28 He convoked the Council of Trent [1468]
30 Via walking
33 Rolling car part, in Leeds
34 Suffix with Rock
35 Lead singer on the 2010 hit "Pumped Up Kicks" [1984]
39 And more: Abbr.
41 "Always on Time" rapper [1976]
45 Suffix with Rock
46 Aquanaut's abode
48 "Equi-" cousin
50 Bovine bellow
51 — B. DeMille
54 Director of "Wings," the first Best Picture winner [1896]
59 Santa — (hot winds)
61 Platoon VIP
62 Morales of "Freejack"
63 Liquidy Japanese bowlful
67 Gave it a shot
69 Crime doers
73 When the people featured in this puzzle were born
77 Sniffed (around)
78 Tale
79 More prying
80 Political admin.
82 Dianne of "Parenthood"
85 — marché (cheaply, in Paris)
86 He played Jagger Cates on "General Hospital" [1972]
92 Finished
95 Color grade
96 Hwy. offense
97 Overly long sentences
99 Bread variety
100 Founder of the Shakers in America [1736]
103 "Adios!"
106 "Anniversary Song" singer [1916]
109 Wise to
111 Catch sight of
113 Fled to marry
114 "So Rare" bandleader [1904]
118 Thick-trunked African tree
121 Criminal court of London
122 Designation for the people featured in this puzzle
127 Maui, e.g.
128 Facet
129 Fessed (up)
130 Actress Kemper
131 Depilatory brand
132 Co. honchos
133 Requires
134 Be in power

DOWN
1 Key near Ctrl
2 China's — -tzu
3 Motel's kin
4 Consents verbally
5 Get bored by
6 Recedes
7 Actress Mazar of "Younger"
8 Smile widely
9 Suffix with north
10 Hoarse
11 Rug
12 Healing plant
13 Skiing site
14 Classic neon diner sign
15 Mountain climber, e.g.
16 TV actress Anderson
17 Brazilian berry
18 African nation
24 Klemperer and Preminger
26 — rug (dance)
29 Raw metal
30 Quad VIP
31 Elis' college
32 Noisy fights
33 Merry song syllables
36 Stitch
37 Mai —
38 Right-angled annexes
40 Covert U.S. org.
42 Steak- — (frozen beef brand)
43 Mauna —
44 Huge time stretch
47 What the number in brackets is for the people featured in this puzzle
49 Stockholm is its capital
52 During a single sitting
53 1996 Mario Puzo novel, with "The"
55 Farming-related prefix
56 "Correct — I'm wrong"
57 Blanket for the legs
58 Rest atop
60 Tofu source
63 Everest, e.g.: Abbr.
64 — Jima
65 Remove from the cargo hold, e.g.
66 Fruit stone
68 Failing grades
70 Bit of precipitation
71 Lead-in to nuptial
72 Leb. neighbor
74 "And — word from our sponsor"
75 Chi-Town daily paper
76 Constricting snake
81 Part of DVD
83 Cram, e.g.
84 Novelist Morrison
86 "I've got it!"
87 Mother superior, e.g.
88 Five pairs
89 Sis or bro
90 Actor Hamm
91 Single-stranded cell stuff
93 Brontë's Jane
94 Feat of skill
98 "Come Back, Little —" (1952 film)
101 Supple
102 "Exile" New Age singer
104 "For sure!"
105 Jargon suffix
107 "Buffy the Vampire —"
108 Walk with a limp
110 "It's true!"
112 Aviator's guidepost
114 Connect
115 "Casablanca" heroine
116 Roman 1,551
117 Make anew
118 Cause of ruin
119 Mimicked
120 Chances
123 Ram's mate
124 Muhammad of the ring
125 Large
126 Money unit of Japan



Even Exchange
by Donna Pettman

Each numbered row contains two clues and two 6-letter answers. The two answers differ from each other by only one letter, which has already been inserted. For example, if you exchange the A from MASTER for an I, you get MISTER. Do not change the order of the letters.

1. Raucous crow	__ __ __ P __ __	Actress, Dame Smith	__ __ __ G __ __
2. Rigid	__ __ I __ __	Shepherd's stick	__ __ A __ __
3. Deep red gem	__ __ __ N __ __	Artist's loft	__ __ __ R __ __
4. Oz notable	W __ __ __ __ __	Iguana or gecko	L __ __ __ __ __
5. Concise	__ __ R __ __	Taut	__ __ N __ __
6. Actress Field	__ A __ __ __	Goofy	__ I __ __ __
7. Shaver's foam	__ __ __ H __ __	Second mentioned	__ __ __ T __ __
8. Handbag	__ __ R __ __	Heartbeat	__ __ L __ __
9. Largest city in Idaho	B __ __ __ __	Clatter and clamor	N __ __ __ __
10. Mom or Dad	__ __ R __ __ __	Copyright	__ __ T __ __ __

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CryptoQuip

This is a simple substitution cipher in which each letter used stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Solution is accomplished by trial and error.

Clue: **Y** equals **S**

MOX MT TVFX EMCVXY MT JZHXI HGZH PZOR HRSXY LMWDC GZFX DXZIOXC ZEMWH ER JZHLGVON "YXYZPX YHIXXH": DZSX XIOVX.

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CryptoQuote

AXYDLBAAXR is **LONGFELLOW**

One letter stands for another. In this sample, **A** is used for the three L's, **X** for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each week the code letters are different.

PMBEMG JK EMV YJIV LI KTZHV LI EJGV UZQHVU EMPLCRM. — HVHJY EZBYLP

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GO FIGURE!

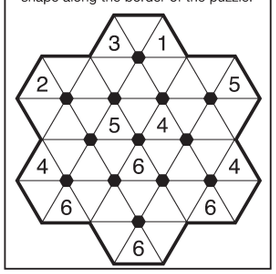
The idea of Go Figure is to arrive at the figures given at the bottom and right-hand columns of the diagram by following the arithmetic signs in the order they are given (that is, from left to right and top to bottom). Use only the numbers below the diagram to complete its blank squares and use each of the nine numbers only once.

	−		+		= 7			
+		+		+				
	+		÷		= 1			
÷		+		−				
	+		×		= 35			
= 11		= 15		= 4				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

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SNOWFLAKES
by Japheth Light

There are 13 black hexagons in the puzzle. Place the numbers 1 - 6 around each of them. No number can be repeated in any partial hexagon shape along the border of the puzzle.



AERIN IT OUT

GROOVES & GLIZZIES

Groovers Listening Room provides space to light up the dance floor

BY AERIN SPRUILL

If you'd told me at the outset of any given Friday that I'd be sweating out my edges while standing completely still, wearing my full work bag at a bar in South End by the end of the night, I'd have insisted that you read my cards wrong.

And yet, on one recent Friday in early spring, I was doing exactly that at Groovers Listening Room, a new dance club located at 1510 S. Mint St., next to Blue Door.

"Girl, you did this to yourself," I thought as the plans I'd instigated days in advance played out before me — uncancelable, made with girlfriends who were unshakable in their resolve to get their groove on at the popular Charleston import that opened its doors in February.

Clutching my emotional support backpack like it was insured under a separate policy, I approached the line already feeling defeated. There was no abandoning my gear; everything I owned was in there, including my MacBook.

And as I inched forward, fully aware that my bag rivaled Hermione's, undetectable extension charm included, I accepted my fate. I was about to be that person holding up the line.

I chuckled nervously, avoiding eye contact with the bouncer. In a single glance, he knew inspecting the far reaches of this bag wasn't going to jive. He lowered his flashlight.

His gaze begged, "What the hell you got in here?" But his mouth said, "You good."

The neon squares of the LED dance floor bounced off glittering disco balls arranged in a concentric installation on the ceiling. A wall of vinyl illuminated by moody lighting served as the backdrop behind the bar, tickling a sense of nostalgia I'd never even experienced.

The smell of sweat hung in the air as patrons of all ages (23 years and older) shook their groove thang — some in full-blown '70s costumes with flared legs sweeping the floor and platform heels clicking with precision, others in fits that made you wonder if they missed a turn and ended up on the wrong night entirely, moving like the beat hadn't yet found them.

Observing the mosaic of flavors, ages and vibes from a comfortable distance, the scene unfolded much like the dance sequence in Sinners, where past and present met on the same floor, moving to a shared groove.

For a moment, that sense of community people romanticize about the '70s, mirrored on the dance floor and set to "Show Me Love," started to pull me from the fringes to the center of the chaos. Then I remembered my now rather weighty backpack, which had by then officially lost its status as an emotional support accessory, and I snapped back to reality.

The dance party spilled into every corner of the room, and the first-come, first-serve lounge seating was long gone, claimed early and held with intention.

With nowhere to sit and barely anywhere to stand, even a second glass of wine couldn't make me forget that I was beyond overstimulated and putting my blowout at risk with every passing minute.

That's when my escape plan appeared as an angel dropped from heaven: Lizzy's Glizzy's. The golden order window came into view and I suddenly remembered Groovers has build-your-own hot dogs and glizzy specials! I could taste it. I was so close...

Enter record scratch: my girlfriend's groom-to-be.

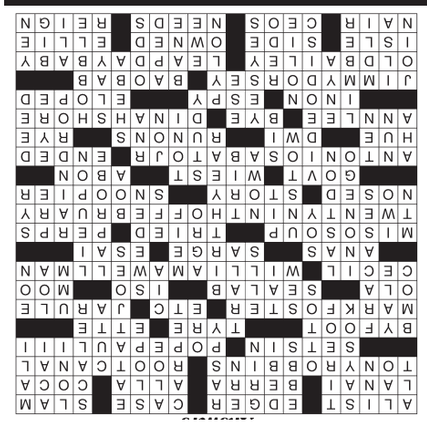
True to form, his arrival, paired with a twerk session to "It's Tricky," stole the show but also flipped the track, bringing a collective realization that it was time for everyone to go home.

We retreated to the back patio for fresh air and refuge for my edges. Next time, Lizzy. Next time, I'm getting a glizzy and leaving my backpack at home. And maybe, just maybe, we'll bring my girlfriend's hubby for the entertainment.

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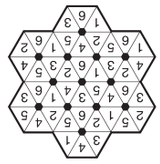
PUZZLE ANSWERS

1	9	6	5	8	4	7	3	2
8	7	2	9	3	6	5	4	1
4	3	5	2	1	7	6	8	9
6	1	3	4	2	5	8	9	7
9	5	7	3	6	8	2	1	4
3	2	9	6	4	1	5	7	8
2	8	4	7	9	3	1	6	5
5	4	1	8	7	2	9	3	6
7	6	8	1	5	9	3	2	4



Trivia Answers

1. Greece.
2. Wyoming.
3. "In Living Color."
4. The American Museum of Natural History in New York City.
5. April 22, 1970.
6. "Bohemian Rhapsody" by Queen.
7. Kiefer Sutherland.
8. Golf.
9. Newspeak.
10. A tower.



CryptoQuote

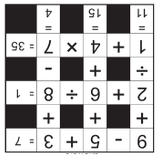
answer

Rhythm is the life of space of time danced through. — Cecil Taylor

CryptoQuip

answer

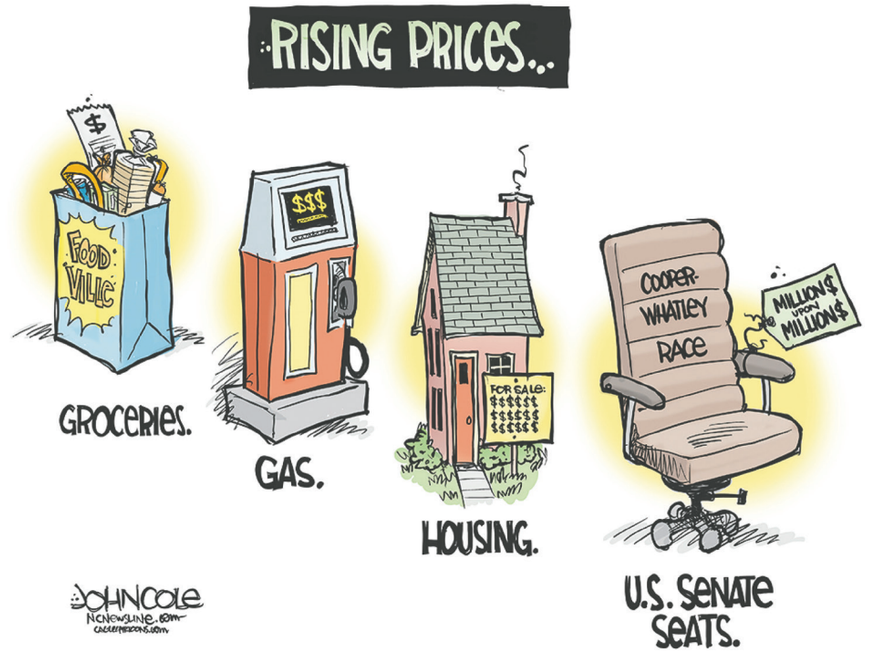
One of five bodies of water that many tykes could have learned about by watching "Sesame Street": Lake Erie.



Even Exchange

answers

1. Magpie, Maggie
2. Stiff, Staff
3. Garnet, Garret
4. Wizard, Lizard
5. Terse, Tense
6. Sally, Silly
7. Lather, Latter
8. Purse, Pulse
9. Boise, Noise
10. Parent, Patent



"Rising Prices" by John Cole via NC Newsline

SAVAGE LOVE

SHOW & TELL

Crossroads in marriage

BY DAN SAVAGE

I've been married to my wife for nine years and we share a beautiful life together with our two young children. I came out to her as bi late last year after working through some major intimacy issues that are still ongoing. She accepts me and the issues are getting better. We are monogamous and I feel like we are still not as intimate as I would like. I don't blame her; our lives are chaotic. Needless to say, sex is very important to me. Working with a therapist, I think I'm hypersexual due to past sexual trauma with men. I've never stopped fantasizing about my assaults and I recently attended an all-male sex gathering where I masturbated in front of 30 men without my wife's knowledge. It was cathartic being in a respectful environment where I was able to communicate my boundaries — which included not allowing anyone else to touch me — and consent was so clearly defined. I was able to find my voice, rewrite some past trauma and fulfill a voyeurism/exhibitionism kink in a queer safe space.

This was definitely just a one-off experience, and I don't intend to move forward with any other same-sex play without communicating with my wife about it. I deeply love her, and I would never want to harm her health. Still, I feel so selfish, and a part of me feels like I really messed up badly, but I can't shake how empowered I felt after it happened and how empowered I still feel. I'm extremely conflicted. My question is this: Should I tell my wife about it and risk ruining our amazing marriage? Or can I just let this truly be a one-off experience and forget about ever mentioning it?

Jerking Off Somehow Enabled Significant Healing

"I don't think JOSESH messed up badly," said Dr. Joe Kort, a psychotherapist who has worked with many male survivors of childhood sexual abuse. "He didn't put his health at risk or his wife's health at risk — and he didn't risk legal issues that could have had consequences for his wife and family."

In other words, JOSESH, unlike some men who are drawn to voyeurism and exhibitionism, you didn't risk arrest by pulling your dick out in a public place or by peering through a window and observing someone without their awareness, much less their consent.

"JOSESH found men who provided him with informed consent and respected his boundaries about not being touched," said Dr. Kort, "and created a corrective emotional experience for himself, one that helped him resolve part of his childhood trauma. We just don't like to talk about this, but it is normal for a person to fantasize about childhood assaults. Clients come to me feeling very shamed about this and I tell them it is normal. The idea is that we were not in charge of it happening to us as a child, but we are in charge of the fantasy now. And taking charge like JOSESH did can be very empowering, so his feelings make sense."

As for the wife…

"I always ask my clients facing similar decisions, 'What is the reason to tell?' Is it for you? Or is it for her? If a client says it's for her, I ask, 'How will being told benefit her?' In JOSESH's case, I don't think being told about this one-off experience will benefit his wife. Therefore, I would advise him not to tell his wife."

While you cut moral corners, JOSESH, and while you definitely stepped outside of your zone of erotic autonomy, you didn't do anything that put your wife at risk. If you'd done something riskier — if you'd gotten fucked in the ass by all those men — your wife would need to get tested and/or wait until you were in the clear before having sex with you again. If your wife needed to get a full STI screening, she would "benefit" from knowing why (she would demand to know why); if you couldn't have sex with her while you waited for your STI screening to come back, she would likewise benefit from and/or demand to know why.

"I do like the idea of JOSESH running the idea by her about doing it again in the future," said Dr. Kort. "She knows her husband is bisexual, so the conversation about how he might want to act on it makes sense. Then he can decide — based on her reaction — whether he might want to tell her about what he did."

Dr. Kort wanted to address one other thing in your letter: your use of the term "hypersexual" to describe yourself.

"I'd be cautious with that label," said Dr. Kort. "What JOSESH describes may be less about excess and more about unintegrated sexual energy tied to trauma, shame and identity. This wasn't random acting out — it wasn't 'hyper' — it was organized, contained, and meaning-driven."

Dr. Joe Kort is the author of Is My Husband Gay, Straight or Bi: a Guide for Women Concerned About Their Men*, among other books. You can follow him on Instagram @DrJoeKort and learn more about his work at joekort.com.*

My wife and I have been together for 30 years. Our sex life has been up and down throughout that time — trending down for the past five years. We can go months without any sexual interaction. We have two teenagers at home and one of our kids has severe anxiety issues, where she always has to be with either me or my wife. So, my wife and I have not been alone together outside the home for close to two years. No dates, no dinners, no weekends away. It has been hard on both of us. Our kid is in therapy and is definitely on an upward trend, which is great.

I have voiced my displeasure about our sex life and she hardly engages back. She blames perimenopause and the current situation with our kid, which is understandable. About five months ago, she decided to sleep in a separate room and sleeping apart has made things even worse. The manner in which she switched rooms was abrupt. There was no discussion.

Over the past five years, she has gone away by herself to hang with friends or on non-mandatory work trips. She takes lingerie, sex toys and "going out on the town" clothes on these trips. I have asked to participate in these excursions via phone or video chat — I've also suggested we get sex toys that can be controlled remotely — but she never wants me to participate in these activities with her, not even remotely. I want her to be happy, and I know getting away does that. Earlier this year, I voiced my concerns about her hooking up with other people on these trips when our own sex life is in such a dismal state. She insists she's not hooking up and added that she wants me to be happy "whether that's with me, with someone else, or a combination of the two." I really don't want to be with anyone besides her. When she says she doesn't hook up with other people, I want to believe her, but I have doubts. Honestly, why wouldn't she hook up?

My questions:

1. Is she hooking up with other people?

2. If I do start hooking up with other people — per her suggestion — what would be the best method? I have never been on a dating or hookup app. I know some people in my area who are single, but I am unsure if it would be wise to ask one of them to be my "sex partner." Is that a thing people do?

3. What is the best way to have more frequent sex with my wife? I have tried many things over the years. We went to a counselor one time decades ago and it didn't really help our sex life or marriage, and she refuses to see another counselor.

Husband Upset By Situation

1. I don't know whether your wife is fucking other people — I couldn't possibly know that — but your wife is definitely fucking other people. Packing lingerie and "going out on the town" clothes for her solo trips is a tell, HUBS, because she wouldn't need crotchless panties and a cocktail dress if she was just ordering room service and having a wank. Another tell: When someone in a monogamous relationship urges their spouse to start fucking other people, HUBS, it's often a sign they've already started to fuck other people themselves.

2. Unless a single person in your area has unambiguously expressed an interest in fucking you, hitting on a single friend, neighbor, coworkers, etc., would be highly unwise. And by "unambiguously expressed an interest in fucking you," I don't mean a single laughed at one of your jokes. I mean a single literally looked you in the eye, HUBS, and said, "I want you to fuck me." Any attempt on your part to interpret non-verbal cues as a sign someone wants to fuck you — acting on anything short of a clearly and unambiguously expressed desire to fuck you — will be tainted by dickful thinking and highly likely to end in disaster. To find a single person who wants to fuck you, get on the apps, post some current photos, and be honest about your situation: You're in a sexless marriage and — with your wife's consent — you are looking for other partners. You should also be open to fucking married women who are also in sexless marriages.

3. I can't know for sure whether your wife will ever fuck you again, HUBS, but your wife is never going to fuck you again. So, if you want to have sex again sometime, you will have to get over only wanting to fuck her. And even if she does fuck you again someday, it's better to be pleasantly surprised on the day it happens than to be devastated every single day that it doesn't.

Gay cis man married to another gay cis man for a decade with three young kids that we had together. We both experience low desire, but his desire for sex has always been lower than mine. Things were going well when I was initiating but I needed to feel desired and wanted. So, I left it to him to initiate but we ended up in bed with our backs to each other every night. Now we have no sex and no intimacy. I want to stay married and I don't want to cheat, but I don't want to be trapped in a sexless marriage either. I signed up for monogamy and not abstinence. What's the best way to approach him to ask for some sexual freedom without losing him or his trust? I am really struggling and feeling very lonely in my marriage.

Sexless Marriage And Spousal Happiness

I think we can rule out perimenopause, SMASH, as you and your husband are both cis men. (I got quite rightly dinged in the comments last week for failing to tell husbands in sexless marriages to read up on perimenopause before asking to open their marriages.) The issue is most likely exhaustion — three young kids is a lot of fucking work — and the fallout from your decision to stop initiating sex.

So, SMASH, did you tell your husband you were going to stop initiating — did you tell him initiating was his job now — or did you just stop? If you didn't tell him, your exhausted husband (who is not a mind reader) might've assumed you were just as exhausted as he is and that things would return to normal, i.e. that you would start initiating again when things got less hectic. If you told him you were going to stop initiating sex, SMASH, he might feel like you're withholding sex to punish him for being who he's always been, e.g. the one with the lower libido, the one who never initiated.

You say you don't want to get divorced or cheat, SMASH, and you say that you signed up for monogamy. So, I don't think your first move here is a request to open your marriage. Your first move is (or should be) telling your husband you miss sex and intimacy, SMASH, and then asking him to work with you on reviving your sexual connection. He's unlikely to become someone he's not —initiating sex might remain your job — but if you can set aside your resentment, SMASH, you might be able to recognize the ways in which your husband has been demonstrating his desire for you all along. If he was enthusiastic about sex when you initiated it — if he was almost always down to fuck, if he inhaled your cock once you got things started, if he was happy about the pounding he got — you could interpret his enthusiasm as proof he's always wanted and desired you and wants and desires you still.

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