

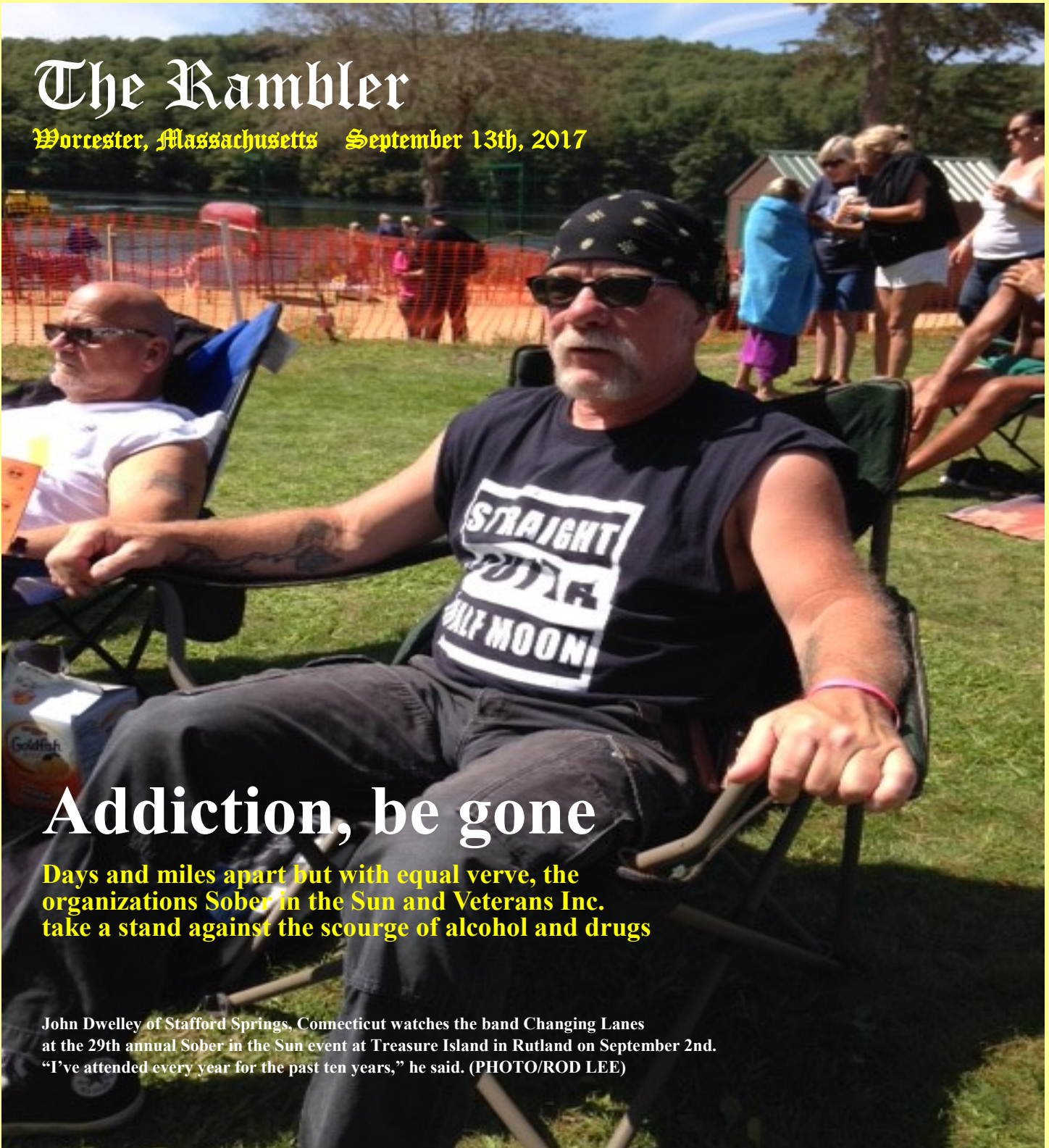


Betsey Brewer, friend of the rhino

An environmental crusader on several fronts, Southwick's Zoo's Betsey Brewer recently traveled with a team of colleagues to a private preserve in southern China to raise awareness about rhino poaching. Her voice is needed. According to renowned wildlife conservationist and rhino-rehabilitation specialist Karen Trendler the crisis in South Africa alone is far from over even though the number of rhino carcasses found in Kruger National Park (for example) in the first six months of this year is down 34% from the same period in 2016. Ms. Brewer talks about why rhino horn is "not medicine" and the campaign to save these animals from extinction. **PAGE 4.**

The Rambler

Worcester, Massachusetts September 13th, 2017



Addiction, be gone

Days and miles apart but with equal verve, the organizations Sober in the Sun and Veterans Inc. take a stand against the scourge of alcohol and drugs

John Dwelley of Stafford Springs, Connecticut watches the band Changing Lanes at the 29th annual Sober in the Sun event at Treasure Island in Rutland on September 2nd. "I've attended every year for the past ten years," he said. (PHOTO/ROD LEE)

THE COVER STORY

In the fight

By ROD LEE

The news from the David Feherty front hit like the proverbial ton of bricks, which only made what the nonprofit organizations Veterans Inc. and Sober in the Sun are doing to combat substance abuse that much more compelling.

My heart sagged in learning a week or so ago that Shey William Feherty, eldest son of the popular NBC Sports and Golf channel commentator and former PGA Tour pro from Northern Ireland, had OD'd.

"My first born is gone from me, dying from an overdose on his 29th birthday," Mr. Feherty posted in a tweet. "Bless his sweet heart, I will carry on."

Shey Feherty's death takes on particular poignancy in light of his father's own battles with alcoholism and mental illness. For years Mr. Feherty regularly consumed weed, cocaine, Vicodin and whiskey. He is also bipolar and has suffered from insomnia and depression. Described by the *New York Times* as "a cross between Oprah Winfrey and Johnny Carson" for the humor and wit he exhibits while interviewing guests on his show "Feherty," he once told *Rolling Stone* "if they came up with a drug that helps you play golf better, I am going to be so



Vendor Mike Houle and his owner/artist wife Charlene of Peace of Heart Creations in Westerly, Rhode Island participated in Sober in the Sun for the third straight year.



"This truly is a watershed moment, not only for our agency, but for veterans and their families throughout New England. 2016 marked the tipping point in the opiate epidemic when opiate overdose became the leading cause of death for anyone in the country under the age of 50. Independence Hall will help to end that epidemic and help lead veterans into healthy recovery."

—Denis Leary, executive director of Veterans Inc. (third from the left), with DA Joe Early, State Rep. Hannah Kane, Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito, Veterans Inc. President/CEO Vin Perrone, Sheriff Lew Evangelidis and State Sen. Mike Moore at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the organization's Independence Hall treatment and recovery center in Shrewsbury. (PHOTO/COURTESY OF ERIN DALEY STELMACH)

pissed—I looked for that for years."

Mr. Feherty was top of mind as I thought about Veterans Inc.'s recent opening of the first-of-its-kind-in-the-country veterans-specific, licensed treatment center for addiction recovery operated by a community nonprofit at Independence Hall on South St. in Shrewsbury, and then in heading to Rutland on September 2nd for the 29th edition of the Sober in the Sun (S.I.T.S.) festival at Treasure Valley—a Boy Scout reservation.

Mr. Feherty would undoubtedly hail the efforts of two friends of mine who together with many others have been integral to the success of both organizations. Vin Perrone is president and CEO of Veterans Inc., the leading provider of support services to veterans in New England. Joe Cutroni Jr. is one of the founders of Sober in the Sun, then a director, treasurer, guest and this year a volunteer in the ticket booth over the Labor Day weekend.

Like Veterans Inc., which was incorpo-

rated in 1990, Sober in the Sun has come far since its early days at the 4-H Club before finding a permanent home at Treasure Valley, Joe said. When I mentioned the number of golf carts scurrying about the grounds (I rode down to the music area from day parking in one of them, driven by Susan Morin), he said "we were lucky to have five golf carts that worked when we started." Attendance the first year was "around two hundred, and one hundred of them were volunteers."

Hundreds now turn out for the four-day celebration of sobriety, just as scores of staff members, health professionals and invited guests showed up for Veterans Inc.'s ribbon-cutting commemorating the launch of a seventy-bed facility that will offer both intensive residential intervention and follow-up clinical transition as well as day-treatment programs and therapeutic outpatient services to veterans in need.

Veterans Inc. steps up its efforts at a
CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



Festival goers dance to the music of the band Changing Lanes at the 29th Sober in the Sun.

—VETERANS INC., S.I.T.S.

Continued from Page 2

critical time with the opioid crisis raging.

Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito, State Sen. Michael Moore, State Rep. Hannah Kane and Worcester County Sheriff Lew Evangelidis all were present at the ceremony at Independence Hall and praised Veterans Inc. for the role it is taking on.

In her remarks, Lt. Gov., who calls Shrewsbury home, said “we owe so much to our returning military veterans for the sacrifices they have made for our Commonwealth and the nation and we are proud that Massachusetts is a national leader in veteran benefits.” On behalf of Gov. Baker, she applauded Veterans Inc. for joining the battle with the opening of Independence Hall.

The Lt. Governor’s appearance came at almost the same moment that Gov. Baker was proposing a new get-tough

policy toward dealers of lethal drugs. Legislation the governor wants passed would define the illegal distribution of drugs resulting in death as manslaughter—punishable by a minimum of five years in prison which is the same sentence an under-the-influence driver faces for killing a person. While Setti Warren, the Democratic mayor of Newton, subsequently accused the governor of flip-flopping on the issue, citing Mr. Baker’s previous opposition to mandatory minimum sentencing laws for drug offenses, the move reflects the seriousness of the situation.

Sen. Moore, Rep. Kane and Sheriff Evangelidis all acknowledged this, Sen. Moore referring to Veterans Inc.’s involvement as a call to duty. “This new center will enable Veterans Inc. to provide much-needed and potentially life-saving substance-abuse treatment programs for veterans in our community,” Sen. Moore said. “I am proud to have supported funding in the state budget to help bring this project to fruition.” Rep. Kane described Veterans Inc. as “a caring organization” that sees “each veteran as an individual.” She commended Veterans Inc. for its willingness to “help [veterans] one step at a time.” Sheriff Evangelidis asked that with so much attention being centered on the opioid crisis “who better to help than those who have served our country?”

Mr. Perrone said “Veterans Inc. is proud to be the first on the scene to offer this type of clinical treatment delivered with an expert focus on veterans’ culture. Veterans represent a disproportionate share of the opiate-dependent population and we are dedicated to bringing that to an end.”

Sober in the Sun is similarly making a difference, as ratification of an initiative begun nearly three decades ago with tentative but inspired earnestness by such early visionaries as Joe Cutroni Jr., Rick LeClaire and Troy Tyree. The scene in the music area at around noontime at Treasure Valley on September 2nd was euphoric, men and women dancing on the grass to the feel-good sounds provided by the band Changing Lanes as it ripped through familiar tunes: “What I Like About You,” “Love Shack,” “Walking on Sunshine,” “Rocking in the USA,” “Last Dance with Mary Jane” and a high-powered version of “All Along the Watchtower.”

There was not a downcast note or a despondent face on the grounds. One man was long jumping and exchanging high fives with his son. Several people were playing Haki Sak. A man, bare chested and wearing a straw hat, was pulling what Miranda Lambert would have called “my little red wagon” except it was green and white. Announcement was made of a canoe race on Browning Pond at two o’clock, accompanied by the question “can you canoe?”

My pal Joe was in his element. He was camping all weekend in “Hemlock” and eager to reminisce and to give me the grand tour. In a “Full Circle” Facebook post after the event, Joe wrote:

“I was able to experience a full range of weather—from hot sun to cold nights to torrential downpours. Along the way, I was able to camp and hike in a most beautiful site, hear some incredible music, eat some fabulous food and see some old friends...I got a chance to talk to Don White about life, the universe and everything after his performance on the main stage (Don has performed at every Sober in the Sun since year two). Best of all, I got to meet and talk to some amazing people, some in groups, some with sober houses. Some were clean and sober for the few hours they were there, some for a day, some for many years. All had a story to tell as to why they came. I heard from folks who came for the camping or music. Some were encouraged to come for the first time by friends. For many, the weekend held a deeper meaning. I heard many stories [about] how they had sunk to the lowest depths of alcohol and/or drug addiction, and what this festival means in their continuing struggle. I witnessed the hard work, dedication and love that the directors, staff and volunteers put into making Sober in the Sun the best Labor Day experience for everyone.

“I saw early-morning yoga on the beach; people dancing in the rain; children playing in the leftover puddles and mud. I saw families and friends sharing a common bond—without drugs or alcohol. I even saw the next generation of festival goers (Ted Croteau, Sober in the Sun president, with his grandson). Even a rainbow, just before Don White’s set.

“Yet I don’t feel I have come fully full circle. The 30th Sober in the Sun Labor Day weekend festival is less than a year away.

“I can’t wait!”



CONSERVATION

To China, for the rhinos

Betsey Brewer's devotion to "Environmental Awareness of Resources and Threatened Habitats" is what prompted her to found the organization EARTH Ltd. (an acronym for the cause she feels so passionately about) and then more recently to develop the "Rhino Encounters" experience at Southwick's Zoo in Mendon.

It is also what took her as part of a team to a one million-acre cloud forest five thousand feet up in southern China to promote rhino conservation—in July.

Talking about her visit to Sun River—a privately owned preserve—in her office on the second floor of the new Galliford's restaurant at Southwick's Zoo on August 28th, Ms. Brewer said she did not think that the ten-day excursion would be a "valuable" one for her and her colleagues. The Americans had their concerns about extensive rhino poaching taking place in various parts of the world including Asia and South Africa and the Chinese had their misgivings about their guests' intentions in coming to Pu'er, China.

There were other impediments too. "I don't speak Chinese and they don't speak English," Ms. Brewer said. "Facebook, YouTube, those kind of things were blocked. We couldn't even access Dropbox. I thought 'no Dropbox?

What's wrong with Dropbox?'"

The preserve was also heavily guarded. Security cameras mounted on trees looked like birdhouses.

Nevertheless there was an overwhelming desire to be there. "For three years we had been trying to develop a relationship with a zoo in China," she said. Finally, with an assist from Keran Yang at Wheaton College (Ms. Brewer's alma mater), arrangements were made.

What Ms. Brewer found surprised her. Sun River is home to seven rhinos, all of them reasonably healthy in her opinion. She told her hosts only that their rhinos weren't getting enough exercise. But the indoor enclosures in which they are housed are "good," she said, although also noting that these spaces should be kept as moisture-free and dried out as possible to prevent sores and fungus from appearing on the rhinos' feet and skin. "We talked for about two and a half hours about rhino conservation and they agreed that we need it. So we're trying to work together and keep the momentum going."

For this to happen, rhino poaching, ostensibly for medical purposes, has to stop, she said. Despite what many in China and elsewhere believe, "rhino horn is not a cure for anything, and rhinos are savagely killed for their horns." Asked if rhinos have to be slaughtered for their horns to be harvested, she said "no, but it costs thirty-five cents for a bullet and hundreds of dollars for a tranquilizer gun.

"People still think rhino horn is proper medicine. The president of Vietnam said it cured his cancer and after that the demand skyrocketed. It's used for all sorts of things." Saying that, Ms. Brewer went to where she keeps examples "under lock and key" and brought them out. Rhino horn, which is compacted hair, turned into a bottle of pills. A packet of powder. Tea balls. A small tobacco container.

"Rhinos are the most poached species," she said. "There has been an explosion of rhino poaching in South Africa, a 5000 percent increase since 2007. People think it can cure cancer, that it can cure a hangover! It is such an organized crime and high-value crime. It can lead to all sorts of direct violence. It's illegal in China to trade in rhino horn but there is a black market for it. We have to take a stand now."

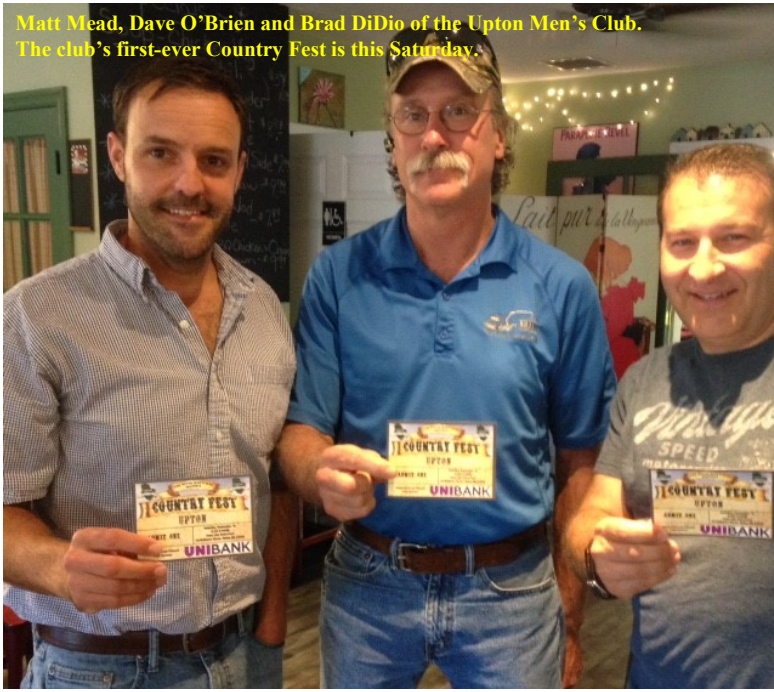
Ms. Brewer has a childlike enthusiasm for conservation. She understands how hard it is to build support for the protection of animals and the planet. Her EARTH Ltd.'s progress since being established in 2000 has been "a very slow crawl." Rhino Encounters at Southwick's Zoo help get the word out. As she is fond of saying, "they are our costliest ticket at one hundred dollars but also our most popular. I had a man last year who came three times for a rhino encounter."

Rhinos, which date to prehistoric times and can weigh four thousand pounds, are typical of animals that are poached for profit.

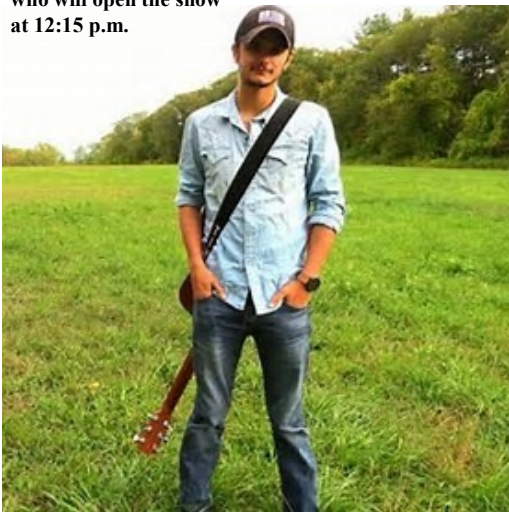
"Wildlife trafficking is right up there with guns, humans and drugs," she said. "We have come to a point where extinction rates are dropping so fast, and there's climate change and overpopulation." Pulling up the "human population growth clock" on her computer screen, an exercise she conducts periodically, she pointed to the current number: 7.6 billion people living on the planet.

Next month, in her continuing attempts to make a difference in the campaign to save the rhino, Ms. Brewer is bringing Simon Morgan of Project Rhino KZN to Galliford's for a "Winos for Rhinos" function. Tickets for this event, on October 3rd, may be purchased through the Southwick's and EARTH Ltd. website.

Matt Mead, Dave O'Brien and Brad DiDio of the Upton Men's Club. The club's first-ever Country Fest is this Saturday.



Upton's own Tim Buono, who will open the show at 12:15 p.m.



THE ENTERTAINMENT SCENE

Country Fest makes its debut

Tim Buono was talking by telephone on September 8th about what a privilege it is for him to be the opening act at 12:15 p.m. for the Upton Men's Club's first-ever Country Fest this Saturday (September 16th).

A self-described "musical free spirit" who got hooked on Country listening to Brad Paisley with his dad at the age of nine and who then got his first guitar that Christmas (in 2004), Mr. Buono is what Darius Rucker would describe as a "homegrown honey" if he were female. A resident of Upton, he performed at the Upton Men's Club's fireworks show two months ago and now will take the stage again on the club's behalf—again too in his own backyard.

The festival, which also features the groups Backyard Swagger, Thirty6 Red and Tailgates Down, runs from noon to 6:00 p.m. at Town Line Dairy Farm on Williams St. in

Upton.

For tickets, go to uptonmensclub.org or call 617-448-8881.

Country Fest is a plunge into the unknown for both the Upton Men's Club and Mr. Buono but it is not like they haven't already proven themselves. The club, which is currently presided over by Mike Howell, who works for TJX, has gained a reputation in town for tackling all kinds of projects to improve community life. Meanwhile Mr. Buono is quickly building a name for himself (and a following) with covers and original compositions (and through the wonder of social media).

A recent trip to Nashville resulted in Mr. Buono being featured on Silverado Records' "Summer On Retreat." He has been an in-studio guest on Milford's WMRC 1490 FM and spotlighted as Boston Country's 102.5 FM's "Catch of the Week." Also, after hearing Mr. Buono's cover of his hit "Say You Do," Dierks Bentley was so impressed that he shared it with his thousands of fans. Mr. Buono's cell phone immediately began "blowing up" in the aftermath of that exposure.

With a voice that contains the twang that can be heard on his acoustic demo "Back To You," in which he sings about seeing only stars in the rearview mirror of his pickup truck instead of the eyes and lips of the girl he dreams of returning to, Mr.

Buono said he is "just riding the wave" of his popularity while playing local gigs and charting his future direction. Thoughts of relocating to Nashville were dispelled for him by Kristian Bush, one-half of the power duo Sugarland (with Jennifer Nettles). Mr. Bush, a multi-instrumentalist whose solo album "Southern Gravity" came out in 2015, told Mr. Buono "don't move here. You'll be like every other artist. Stay put."

In discussing the prospects for Country Fest over breakfast at Rebecca's Place in Upton the morning of August 17th, Brad DiDio of the Upton Men's Club said "it's an augural. Our rookie year." As was the case with so many of the club's initiatives, Country Fest came together amid a whirlwind of talk and planning that began last November. It would not have materialized at all if John Lindquist of Town Line Dairy Farm, a UMC member, had not offered he and wife Crystal's property as the host site. Town Line Dairy Farm gives Country Fest "a Great Woods-like" setting, Matt Mead, Dave O'Brien and Mr. DiDio said at Rebecca's Place.

As is typical of its approach, the club is sparing no effort to make sure the event is a success. The club will be "doing our own food," the men said. There will be a beer garden, corn-hole boards, a mechanical bull, professionally-done sound and a master of ceremonies. Patrons are encouraged to bring folding chairs or picnic blankets.

The bands, including Mr. Buono's (he will be backed by "The Valley Boys," friends and former schoolmates of his) are all from the region. Backyard Swagger's music is defined by lead singer Diane Ferullo's "searing vocals." Thirty6 Red is Foxborough-based and well-traveled. Tailgates Down's mantra is "you're all invited to the party" for covers of Jason Aldean, Chris Stapleton, Miranda Lambert, Carrie Underwood and other Country greats.

"I'm thrilled that we are tapped to be doing it again in Upton," Mr. Buono said.

"It's super Country and super awesome."

THE WORLD OF BUSINESS

A custom shop that has the job covered

Richard Robertson doesn't come around Bay State Canvas on Town Forest Road in Webster much anymore. He doesn't need to. The business, which he turned over to his son Jim in 1995, is in good hands. In fact, it is now a third-generation enterprise with Jim Robertson Jr. on board and learning the trade side-by-side with his dad.

That the Robertson's take pride in their work is apparent in the nearly fifty years they have been at it. Much has changed from the early days, the elder Robertson said one morning in late August while reminiscing outside the building Bay State Canvas occupies to the rear of Hazard Marine. After going to college with designs on a job as a schoolteacher and positions with companies like International Harvester and Johnson Canvas, he went on his own, establishing Bay State Canvas in Shrewsbury in 1969.

There was a demand for his canvas almost from the start. Canvas blinds for the Quabbin Reservoir. Canvas for Wonder Bread bakeries, fifty-two of them, "all over the country." Canvas protectors for conveyor belts for Gillette. Canvas tents for the Smithsonian. Uniforms for the military. Canvas for the city of Worcester's centennial (all of the canvas for the stagecoaches used in that event). Flags for Guarantee Bank. Teepees. Suitcases for the Norton Co. for trips to Russia. Mats for yoga. "We (Mr. Robertson and his wife Leona) invented and made a harness for motorcycles"—for extraction purposes at accident sites—that "helped keep guys alive."

Back then, Mr. Robertson said, "Worcester was one of the most industrialized cities in the U.S. Foundries. Machine shops. Now all gone for the most part. Those trade people, all gone. We did work for Wyman-Gordon, Norton, Morgan Construction, Parini, IT&T. We had customers in the Philippines, customers in the Caribbean."

Mr. Robertson is pleased that Bay State Canvas's reputation for craftsmanship continues today as it has for decades. Jim Robertson makes sure of that with the same commitment as his father to quality industrial stitching, canvas repair and covers for boats and other jobs (a cover for a nineteen-foot boat on the premises on August 23rd would be "rope-tied" as opposed to snap-tied, he pointed out). A no-nonsense man in the mold of his dad, Jim Robertson started in the business at the age of ten. Back then, he said, "there were fifteen or sixteen canvas companies doing boat covers and truck covers. It was a huge market. If you bought a boat at a marina you bought a custom cover." Change came in the 1970s, he said, when "blue plastic tarp hit the industry." More affordable and obtainable than canvas, blue plastic tarp tested canvas companies' ability to compete. "If you didn't keep up with the industry you didn't survive. My dad had foresight. He got involved with companies like Norton and Bay State Abrasives. As other canvas companies were closing down we became more of a name on the street. As a kid I remember making the heat shield that went into Skylab."

Bay State Canvas is not "just a boat company," Jim Robertson said. Blue plastic tarp was easy for people to choose instead of canvas. "We got the one-half of one percent who come in and say 'I have a wood pile. I need a good canvas cover.' I lose so much work to China. But we are truly a custom shop. I cater to people who know what they want."

When the Rowe nuclear power plant was decommissioned, he said (the facility was shut down in 1992), "we went in there and covered everything with canvas. We were the last guys in."

Canvas as a material remains in demand. Bay State Canvas did awnings "for the Masons in Auburn," for example, he said. "Awnings are a whole business in themselves." Repair work is too. Prospective customers view his company as the solution to their issues. Years ago, he said, "I was working on a boat in Mystic, Connecticut and a woman pulled in and said 'can you make me a harness for my dog?' She had a golden retriever."

Jim Jr. joined the company in March and has made "a huge difference," his father said. "I thought my dad was living in the Middle Ages"—inferring that Jim Jr. must think the same of him. While Jim Jr. brings a fresh perspective and a young person's familiarity with the Internet and social media to the business, "the old way with a pencil and a calculator, it's the only way to do it. Everything here is old because old works," he said, pointing to sewing machines one of which dates to 1920. He keeps them in top working condition.

"I'm an old-time Yankee," Richard Robertson said. "I fixed everything and made everything. The day we sold the company to my son he went to a computer. We still don't have a computer in our home." But, he noted, Jim Robertson is "a perfectionist. He does super work."



Three generations...Richard Robertson with his son Jim and grandson Jim Jr. at Bay State Canvas.



Jim Robertson was introduced to the canvas industry on this double-needle heavy industrial sewing machine, still in use.

MATTERS OF FAITH



The Lord Always Saved Me

When I feel dark and not bright
 Makes me sad I'm so out of sight
 Taking all emotions away
 Searching for a warm happy day
 To each his own I will do
 There's someone I can rely on and turn to
 Don't matter what's right what's wrong
 It's so almighty builds my spirit, mind so strong
 I've been there done that
 Can't take it now how I've sat
 What you reap what you sow
 For some they just may not know
 It's said He rules this whole universe
 Can walk on water put fire on earth
 These clues bring an inkling
 I wish for you to have prayer in thinking
 Sometimes it seems He's not around
 Smarter than that He's smiling down
 After all He granted the greatest gift
 When you turn to Him trillions he can lift
 Whatever chaos you have been through
 Problems, matters, dilemma, mayhem knew
 It is our unconditional Father and loving one
 God created the heavens, earth, moon and sun
 If you pray to Jesus his chosen sacrifice do ask
 He will unconditionally conquer any and all tasks
 So don't sit forlorn defeated to lose
 It's your decision now do choose
 His only goals? Love, peace, joy
 With this he will not toy
 I know for I have thankfully learned
 God will win do the unexplainable for which I've yearned
 Now just if you may look up and so gratefully see
 I know it's face the Lord our God always saved me

—Daniel J. Lee
 Oxford, Massachusetts
 2017

Call us Cornerstone

Ministering in what he calls “a post-Christian age” when forty to fifty percent of the population is “unchurched” is not an easy proposition, Jamie Walton, senior pastor of Cornerstone Church (formerly North Uxbridge Baptist Church, or simply NUBC), said the morning of August 30th as he discussed the reasoning behind the fairly dramatic decision his congregation made several months ago to implement a name change.

Dropping the words “North Uxbridge” and “Baptist” and adopting “Cornerstone Church” as an identifier was every bit as difficult a move as eliminating Sunday school and replacing that fixture ingredient on the church’s weekly calendar with a Wednesday-evening



“Awana” program for children. It was driven by the changing dynamics (as was the more recent name change). People just didn’t want to spend all day in church on Sundays, the pastor said. The switch to a Wednesday-night alternative worked. Eighty to a hundred kids turn out during the school year.

Changing the name of the church from the one by which it has been known since Christian immigrants flooded into the Blackstone Valley and divided up based on territory and religious denomination was done only after “careful consideration and prayer,” Pastor Jamie and his staff pointed out in a press release that accompanied announcement of the rebranding.

Conversations around such a move began years ago and then started to gain traction at a Board retreat in April of 2016. The pastor personally liked “Lighthouse for Christ” or “Lighthouse” but other possible names emerged including “Crossroads.” Cornerstone had appeal too in that Christ is referenced in the Bible as the foundation of the church.

“We decided to present the idea to the church (family) which was done in an email. We dealt with a little bit of backlash. We spent the next six to eight months letting the whole church know and then we had a night here and I did a power-point presentation. According to our church constitution a change of this sort has to be done by a two-thirds vote and this was accomplished by ballot on a Sunday.”

Some church members were bummed about it, the pastor said. “They said ‘the whole world is changing and now my church is changing.’ We rolled it out slowly and in general the response has been great.”

Factors such as “our location no longer limits who we are here to serve” were a driving force. Also being linked with “negative stereotypes” perpetrated by the “hateful actions” of churches like Westboro Baptist in Kansas. In the end it came down to adjusting to a changing landscape. “We are not going to keep programs just because they were effective in the 1950s or 1980s,” he said. “It’s like a human being. You’re growing or you’re dying.”



MY BACK PAGES/Rod Lee

Best school system in the U.S.?

Some would sneer at any inference that the Worcester Public Schools should be considered among the finest anywhere, given the seemingly unrelenting challenges that so often result in “bad press” for a large and at-times ungainly system. Managing forty-four schools and more than 25,000 children pre-K through 12 is not an easy task for an apparatus that prides itself on “Delivering on High Expectations and Outstanding Results for All Students.” There are bound to be heard negative soundings. There are certain to be seen situations fraught with peril.

This school year had not even begun when that once again became obvious. A too-long-festering labor dispute between the administration and its teachers was not finally resolved until the eleventh hour and even then those whose positions are the most important to the job at hand—the educators—were not completely satisfied with the new three-year contract they got; never mind the bitter taste that must have remained on their tongues in the aftermath of protracted and often-contentious deliberations.

Almost simultaneously, a dark cloud hovered in the form of a threatened job action by Teamsters Local 170’s bus drivers; also rectified at the last minute with ratification of a new five-year agreement with Durham School Services.

Immediately following an otherwise uplifting kickoff gathering that drew 4100 of Superintendent Binienda’s rank-and-file to the DCU Center to hear remarks by Manny Scott too came a Facebook grumble from Melissa Below-Fontaine, who wrote “I can’t believe the city of Worcester didn’t give recognition to the bus drivers and monitors who are the first to greet our students in the AM and the last to see them home safely in the PM. Pretty sad.”

Another, posted by Krissy Ly, read “I am a sophomore without a bus stop. The closest stop is 1.3 miles away. Not only that, we live in MA where it snows in the winter. But even worse, I have to cross a highway bridge with no crosswalks and walk past an area where I don’t see many people. I consider that too hazardous just for an education. I love my school and am unwilling to transfer. Please don’t ignore this I beseech you.”

If fairness were to prevail, a system that exhibits a strong reliance on the arts (as evidenced by murals painted by POWWOW artists at the Worcester Arts Magnet School, musical shows, plays and productions) and reading (in collaboration with the Worcester Public Library along with School Committee member John Monfredo and his wife Anne-Marie’s promotion of that activity), that makes a “Stand for the Silent” in opposition to bullying, that plays an active role in “Worcester Cares” for Hurricane Harvey relief and that operates schools that the website greatschools.org deems to be top-flight institutions of learning (West Tatnuck, Worcester Arts Magnet, Flagg Street, May Street, Forest Grove, Lakeview and Thorndyke Road), that in essence is doing so many things right, ought to be viewed in a kinder light.

Especially in terms of its power to overcome the sometimes seemingly impossible.

“Late this summer,” the Worcester School Committee was confronted with “two potentially disruptive situations” (the aforementioned) that were resolved satisfactorily, Member Brian O’Connell told me. Fortunately, Mr. O’Connell said, “we have dealt with such challenges in the past, and that fact helped us to confront them now. We worked closely and cooperatively with our teachers,



Mr. O’Connell.

negotiating intensely during the summer, with some informal sessions during weekends, involving our mayor and Educational Association of Worcester leadership, exploring settlement options. Because we had dealt with a threatened school bus work stoppage in the late 1980s—I recall it vividly!—those of us who were integrally involved with bringing that situation to a constructive conclusion were able to apply similar strategies now, while the key negotiators for Durham and the Teamsters pressed forward to reach a settlement.

“I believe that, in both instances, our ‘institutional memory’ was helpful, as we knew from experience what practices we could utilize to help bring our negotiations with our teachers to a satisfactory conclusion and to ‘keep our buses rolling.’ We are very grateful to the EAW, to Durham and to the Teamsters for helping us to begin the school year for our students in a calm, stable and ordered manner. Mayor Petty’s ‘behind the scenes’ conversations and meetings with key parties at pivotal times were most effective here as well. With our new contract with the EAW and with the Durham resolution, we are able to focus on what is most important to us—improving and enriching the education for our 25,000 young people.”

On the totality of their performance under what appears to be virtually constant duress, the Worcester Public Schools measure up.

The Rambler

Issue No. 5

September 13th, 2017

The Rambler is a literary journal dedicated to commentary and reflections on life in Massachusetts. It is produced at the discretion and whim of Founder, Editor & Publisher Rod Lee.

Submissions of up to 1000 words on Arts & Culture, Business, Crime & Punishment, Education, Entertainment, Politics, Sports, Volunteerism and other topics of interest to the general public are welcome.

Contributors receive a small stipend for their efforts.

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