

## **Rabbi Alan Alpert**

Muskegon

Congregation B’Nai Israel



*“The question isn’t what have I contributed to Muskegon?  
It’s how has the community shaped me?”*

He was called to Muskegon by Congregation B’Nai Israel in 1976, a young rabbi from Los Angeles, new to small-town life and ways.

But from the moment he landed in his new home, he reached into every corner of town, essentially becoming rabbi to all of Muskegon — preacher, teacher, pastor, consoler, confidante, friend, teller of notoriously bad jokes.

“I like to make people smile,” he says. “It brightens the day.”

As always, his words turn into a lesson.

“We have to be somewhat optimistic in these times,” he says. “I know, these can be discouraging times, but we have to look for God within ourselves and others. We have to do what we can for each other.”

Especially now that anti-Semitism is on the rise in parts of the country, loving one’s neighbor can be a challenge. Threats of violence and acts of hate happen rarely here “but enough to cause concern.”

When he was growing up, he says, “you were conscious of being Jewish, and you stayed quiet.”

“But this is a small enough community, a good community, so we can know each other,” he says. “We can call each other by name.”

Ever modest, always someone who deflects the attention onto someone else, Muskegon’s rabbi says his place in the community is only possible because other clergy were “open to me so I could be a part of things.”

He is everywhere, active in community organizations, instrumental in interfaith dialogues and gatherings. As rabbi, he introduces not only his own congregation, but those not in the Jewish community, to the most ancient of faith traditions.

“We’ve been blessed,” he says. “Hopefully, we’ve been a blessing to others.”

## Michael Anderson

Holton

Captain, Republic Airways

*“I’m not built for an office. I need a larger view.”*

Mike Anderson was in second grade, out for recess, when he remembers seeing his first vapor trail, left by a jet, high in the sky. He was mesmerized.

“I can remember thinking: They’re going somewhere. There are people on that plane,” he says.

As young as he was, he wanted to go with them — but in the pilot’s seat. It was a goal he never let go.

“Nothing stuck, except airplanes,” he says.

Stick it did. Today Mike is a captain for Republic Airways, one of the country’s largest regional airlines. And how’s this for what he calls “the best of both worlds?” He lives in Holton, near family, close to where he grew up — but he flies in and out of LaGuardia, a busy airport in Queens, New York.

Fourteen days a month, he flies an Embreair 175 – the largest regional jet there is – with 76 “souls” and four crewmembers aboard, to Washington, D.C., Boston, and other East Coast cities. He makes four flights a day, getting people where they need to go.

The rest of the month he’s home in Holton, working on a house he and his wife, Camille, bought recently.

“Growing up the way I did with lots of family around, I don’t particularly enjoy being on my own, so far away from them,” he says. “With this job, I can live anywhere.”

Mike was just 19 when he got his pilot’s license, then earned his degree from Western Michigan University. And no, at 6-feet, 7-inches tall, he isn’t built for an office. The sky is his workplace.

“When I’m in the air, it’s a Zen moment,” he says. “I’m only thinking about flying.”



## Dee Arnold-Johnson

Muskegon

Muskegon Museum of Art Head Custodian, Community Volunteer



*“I wake up every morning thinking: ‘Who can I help?’ ”*

Truth is, Dee Arnold-Johnson has opened doors for so many of us, in so many ways.

But let’s start here at the Muskegon Museum of Art, where she works as a custodian and preaches the gospel of art to all who will hear. She has been and is a valuable member of the committee called together to plan this exhibition. Always opening doors of one kind or another, she is responsible for nominating so many people whose images and stories are on these walls — neighbors we might not have met without Dee’s introduction.

“You gotta do what you gotta do,” she says. “You gotta know each other.”

Now it is her turn. Time to tell her story, part of it at least.

Dee is at a time in life when she could retire, but she’s raising an 11-year-old great-nephew. She wants him to see the rewards of hard work — and the doors it can open.

“If something comes up, I say just do it,” she says.

She took on unimaginable responsibility at a young age. When she was just 21, her mother died, leaving behind five children at home. Dee was married, with four children of her own, but she took in her siblings and raised them as her own.

She was everywhere in their lives: church, school, the neighborhood. For 34 years, she worked as a custodian in Muskegon Public Schools. In retirement, she moved to the art museum. It is part of her strategy, intentionally connecting the many people and places in her life, starting with that 11-year-old at home.

“Look, we are one big family,” she says. “We just have to get to know each other.”

## **Drs. Timothy and Nicholas Beechnau**

Ravenna

Ravenna Family Practice

*“They’re not just our patients. These are our neighbors. They’re our friends.” — Dr. Tim Beechnau*

This is a story for people yearning for the good old days, back when doctors called you by your first name and spent as much time in the office with you as you needed — and even made house calls.

This is a story about Ravenna’s two doctors.

Dr. Timothy Beechnau and his son, Dr. Nicholas Beechnau.

They say they probably couldn’t practice medicine the way they do if they weren’t in Ravenna, a small town located deep in Muskegon County, rich in country values.

“It’s not that we’re nicer people than our colleagues,” Dr. Tim says. “I think they’d like to do what we do, but they can’t. We’re lucky we still can.”

His son adds: “It wouldn’t be possible if we didn’t live here.”

The two of them count themselves doubly blessed to work together, father and son, in a practice started by Dr. Tim’s father, Dr. Lou Beechnau.

“Medicine out here is a lot of fun,” Dr. Nick says.

He grew up going with his dad on calls, answering the door at home when people showed up with various ailments and crises before hours, after hours, and everything in between.

“I saw how hard my dad worked. He was on call 24-7,” Dr. Nick says.

He decided early that medicine wasn’t for him and started a career in engineering — but he didn’t get the satisfaction his dad did, bringing babies into the world, stitching up and casting injuries, walking alongside their patients whatever the diagnosis. Soon he switched his major and joined his dad on the job, caring for the community they call home.

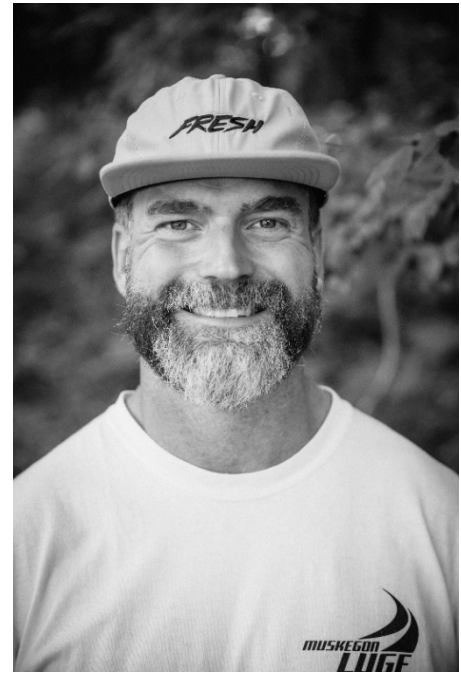
“Oh, you grieve with them. You worry about them,” Dr. Tim says. “You love them,” Dr. Nick says. “They’re like family.”





## **Daniel Bonner Jr.**

Muskegon  
Outdoor Adventure Specialist,  
Muskegon Luge Adventure Sports Park



*“I want to help people find their adventure.”*

Look for Daniel Bonner at the luge.

If he’s not there, find him at the ice rink, the cross country ski trails, or sledding hill. Weather permitting, which won’t be until spring, he’ll be at the 1,400-foot-long zip line in the dunes. Or leading hikes.

An outdoor adventure specialist at the complex, he wants to share the great outdoors with everyone who comes to this place located within Muskegon State Park.

“This is a really special space for the community,” he says.

It shouldn’t come as a surprise, given his passion for the outdoors, that Daniel spent a lot of time here as a kid. He explored every inch of it, learning as much as he could about its geography and its unique place in the ecosystem of dunes, woods, and lake.

Now he gets to share that wonder — and sense of adventure — every day. With it comes another commitment: a healthy lifestyle. With ice rinks, trails to ski and hike, and two luge tracks, there is no excuse to stay on the couch, secluded from the land that makes this part of the country unlike other spots on the map.

“People needed something to do that was healthy in the winter time,” he says.

He practices what he preaches. He and his rescue dog, Toski, are familiar figures in these woods, always on the move. So what does he do after hours?

Yoga.

Daniel, the outdoor guy who urges people to challenge themselves physically, also teaches yoga — a combination of movement, breathing, and meditation. What might seem an odd pairing of interests to some seems perfectly natural to him.

“I love this,” he says. “Love being part of this.”

## **Robert Bowyer**

Muskegon

CEO and founder, Operation Black Sheep



*“If you are broken, you belong to us.”*

Sometimes a boat is just a boat.

But there are times, times like these, that a boat is so much more.

Such is the story of Operation Black Sheep, a non-profit founded by Robert Bowyer. He is a combat veteran, who felt very broken after returning home from Afghanistan.

Robert, who served 15 years in the Army, came home from war with a Traumatic Brain Injury from airborne operations — and, no doubt, a serious case of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He served as an infantryman and parachute rigger in the 173rd Airborne Brigade where he spent 27 months in Afghanistan. During his second tour he volunteered as the rifle cordon sergeant where he would honor and place the fallen on their final flight home.

At first, he didn’t know what to do with his memories, the emotions attached, the wounds no one else saw. And he struggled. But in 2016, he found an answer in an unlikely source for a man who fought in the desert: a river boat from the Vietnam War.

It’s more complicated than this, but Robert found a Patrol Boat, River — PBR 7331, to be exact — that needed a whole lot of restoration. It is the perfect place for veterans, some from Vietnam, others from Afghanistan and Iraq, to gather, to work, to share stories, to heal.

Sometimes a boat is a beacon of hope.

“I ask people: Are you looking for a place to heal?” he says.

Robert has met Vietnam vets who have never talked about the war until they set foot on the PBR, a small patrol boat that maneuvered in the shallow rivers of Vietnam. He has seen vets from different wars, different generations, in conversation and camaraderie.

The boat is in storage at the Mart Dock until Memorial Day but come spring it will be back on the water.

“You just never know what battle, what struggle someone’s going through,” Robert says. “Do you need to talk? You have a voice here.”

**Brenda Coleman**  
Muskegon Heights  
Cook, Supper House

*“This is more than just preparing meals every day.”*

Six nights a week, Brenda Coleman invites the community to dinner. She never knows how many will show up. Forty? More than 100?

She sets the tables, prays for those who will come, then opens the doors.

She does not do this alone.

Supper House is an ecumenical ministry housed at Temple United Methodist Church in the heart of Muskegon Heights. More than 30 churches and places of worship help support Supper House financially, plus send volunteers to serve alongside her.

“Those are my people,” Brenda jokes. “My buddies.”

There have been nights when as many as 200 guests have crowded around the tables at Supper House, people hungry for “Mama Brenda’s food.” All are welcome, no proof of income or need required. Just come; supper is ready.

“Some churches say all are welcome, but they’re not,” Brenda says. “Here, everyone is welcome.”

Sometimes people’s hunger is for more than meat and potatoes, fried chicken and greens, whatever is on Brenda’s menu. Sometimes it’s a need to get out of the cold, into a warm, safe place. Sometimes it’s a yearning to sit at a table with other folks instead of eating alone. And sometimes, it’s because the cupboards at home are bare.

“I humble myself and put myself in their shoes,” Brenda says. “I guess you could say this is a way of giving back ... because so many people have touched my life, so many people have blessed me.”

The only paid employee, Brenda says she is “just a simple, humble person” who loves to cook. Somehow, she fills as many plates as there are guests, even if she serves up leftovers.

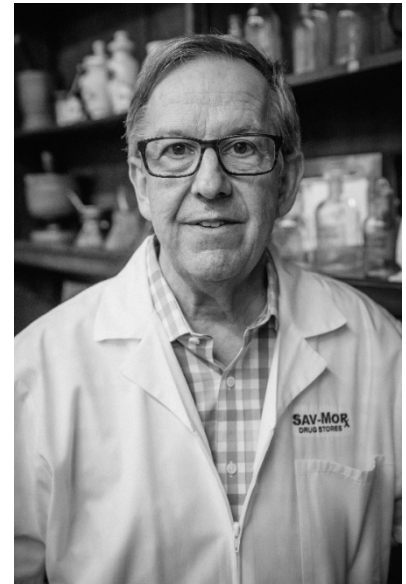
“I cook like I would at home,” she says. “Home cooking.”



## **Randy Dahlquist**

Muskegon

Pharmacist, Owner, Benson Sav-Mor Pharmacy



*“We’ve always tried to address the needs of the area.”*

Randy Dahlquist could have moved his pharmacy out of downtown Muskegon. He could have set up shop anywhere in town where there is room for a drive-up window, better visibility, easier access.

But his family’s business has been downtown since 1919, back when his grandfather first opened the pharmacy. There is family history kept and honored within these walls.

“I’ve been in the store my whole life,” he says.

Something else: Randy also has a keen sense of community. His store sits at 961 Spring Street in the midst of a food desert. It is in an urban neighborhood underserved and often passed over by those passing through. Along the way, he made the conscious decision to stay, to put down roots where it all began.

“We want to serve the community,” he says.

So Benson’s expanded beyond the usual filling of prescriptions, over-the-counter remedies, and pharmacist-administered vaccinations. Because his neighbors needed it, Randy brought in fresh vegetables and meat, milk and cheese, beverages, household staples.

In many ways, he created a general store of old in new times. “I had to ask: Who’s taking care of downtown?” he says.

The store draws a cross-section of customers: people from the neighborhood, professionals who work and live downtown, people who have been loyal to Benson’s for years because they’ve always gone there.

“We have some of the poorest and some of the wealthiest who come through our doors. We have a huge variety of people,” Randy says.

One after another, they are the answer to his earlier question: Who’s taking care of downtown? His store is.

“I think there’s respect for what we do, and that makes me happy,” Randy says.

## **Michelle Daniels**

Muskegon

Cashier, Shell Station

*“I don’t like to be bored.”*

Michelle Daniels is a woman in perpetual motion, a veritable well of energy.

One of the day clerks at the bustling Shell Station in downtown Muskegon, Michelle has plenty to do, waiting on customers, restocking shelves, getting people in and out and on their way.

Even so, she always has time for the people on the other side of her counter. As busy as she is, when her customers need someone to listen, Michelle is there. When they need consoling, a little motherly advice, a kind word, or someone to lift their spirits, they instinctively turn to Michelle.

“They call me ‘Mama’ or ‘Auntie,’ but really, I am just their friend,” she says. “I like people.”

She’s been a fixture downtown for nine years, someone counted on and trusted to be there whether you’re from the neighborhood or not. Michelle shows no favoritism. Everyone is treated the same — white collar, blue collar, no collar.

“It’s respect,” she says. “I treat people the way I want to be treated.”

She has worked since she was 14 years old in community stores, a factory, and at the gas station at Plumb’s on Apple Avenue, where she turned customers into friends. And friends into family.

“I want people to love each other,” she says.

No wonder people ask her to pray for them in times of crisis. No wonder they confide in her whether they’re buying a pack of cigarettes, lottery tickets, or a gallon of milk. It’s part of the job, she says, but it is also her nature.

She is the calm, even in the midst of a storm of activity.

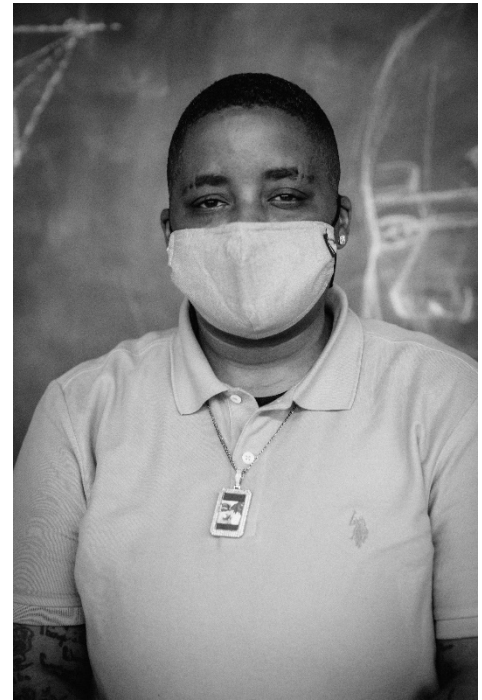
“I guess so,” she says. “That’s just who I am.”



## Gemini DaPoet

Muskegon

Spoken Word Poet, Motivational Speaker



*“I speak my pain. I use it to tell my story.”*

She was born Ebony Davis.

But she is better known as Gemini DaPoet, a woman whose unique style and art were borne out of personal pain and unimaginable tragedy.

A teen-age mother, unwed, and on a self-described path of self-destruction, Gemini DaPoet watched her daughter take her last breath, dead from the ravages of whooping cough. Her baby was just 14 months old.

“The pain, it bursts inside you,” Gemini DaPoet says.

It also ignited a creativity that lay dormant in her. First her daughter, then an aunt died of cancer, a best friend lost her life in a car crash, another in a fatal shooting. She held the sorrow, the questions, the depression for as long as she could in silence. Finally, she had to speak.

Her emotions erupted into poetry.

“My poems are raw and uncut and unapologetic,” she says.

But they have helped her to heal — and to share her story on stage, in classrooms, with community youth groups everywhere, and in one-on-one tutoring.

She calls her style a mixture of neo-soul and rap, pain and love, geared to the urban community so often ignored. Her delivery is as unique as her poetry itself. Long before COVID-19 made it mandatory, Gemini DaPoet pulled on a mask whenever she spoke publicly.

“When this mask is on, (the poet) will say what Ebony won’t,” she says.

There’s an advantage to the mask. She is extremely shy, but even more than the anonymity it provides, it sends a message of being “a voice of the voiceless ... a voice for the city.”

“I pray that God will give me words that need to be spoke,” she says.

## Christian Delgado

Muskegon

Owner, Primm & Proper Custom Tattoos & Body Piercing

*“My folks didn’t risk their lives ... for me to be a failure.”*

On the surface, this seems like a story about tattoos, the popular art form that etches ink into people’s skin — and sense of self-expression.

But it is really the story of an immigrant once here illegally, living out the American dream, one tattoo, one customer at a time.

Christian Delgado was three years old, four at the most, when his aunt smuggled him across the border to a better life in the United States.

“She carried me all the way,” he remembers.

His parents stayed behind in Mexico until they could join him, a daring but desperate decision.

“They wanted so much for us,” he says.

Once here, they faced barriers, detours, and danger. The Delgados were undocumented, in the country illegally. They didn’t speak English. They had to start over, from nothing. Their sacrifice wasn’t lost on their son.

“People born here take so much for granted,” he says. “If you’ve been where we’ve been, you know how to work. You work your ass off to make it.”

As a child, Christian dreamed of being a dentist, but an art class in high school inspired him in a new direction. He took up pen and ink drawings, then airbrushing, before discovering his love for tattoos.

Today he owns his own tattoo studio, its reputation so good people come from as far away as Chicago for his unique touch. He is known for his black and gray art, painstaking detailed, “drawn” in ink with a 27-needle rotary machine.

He has surprisingly few tattoos of his own, but two stand out. Two roses, one for his mother, the other for his father: reminders of just how far he’s come.



## **Robin Dennany**

Muskegon

Aquatics Director, Boys and Girls Club of the  
Muskegon Lakeshore



*“I think Muskegon’s future is bright. I want to make sure we bring the kids along with us.”*

Robin Dennany was scheduled to talk about her job as the aquatics director at the Boys and Girls Club of the Muskegon Lakeshore, her passion for water safety, and her undeniable love of the water.

But the pool at the club is closed, part of a huge renovation that won’t be completed before the fall of 2023. So there are no swimming classes, no lifeguard training, no kids in the pool.

Instead, Robin took us to the water’s edge, a beautiful spot at Muskegon Lake where boaters and anglers have easy access and people wander along the lakeshore. It was a scene of tranquility — but not for everyone.

So many of the people Robin meets on the job are afraid of the water, or they have never been to Lake Michigan or one of our inland lakes.

“I see generational fear around the water,” she says, “even generational trauma.”

It is her goal to help families overcome those fears, often crippling.

“Every child should be able to enjoy a sunset on a boat without being afraid,” she says.

She starts by building their confidence on land. While the main clubhouse is closed, Robin works out of one of the satellite spots with “teenagers who are trying to discover themselves.”

“Connecting with kids, seeing them come out the other side, that’s what drives me to do what I’m doing,” she says.

Relatively new to Muskegon, Robin is active in the Nims Neighborhood, where she and her family live. She came to Muskegon for a job. She’s stayed because of the people.

“It’s called community,” she says. “Our community.”



## **Jim Dewald Jr.**

Muskegon

Muskegon Area District Library Bookmobile Librarian

*“I get to be a librarian to people who don’t have one.”*

First things first.

Yes, he has a lot of tattoos and piercings. Yes, he wears funky jewelry. Yes, he has a beard that takes on a life of its own. Yes, he rides a Harley off hours and belongs to a motorcycle club.

And yes, he is a librarian.

Not just any librarian. Jim Dewald Jr. is the guy who drives the bookmobile for Muskegon Area District Library, spreading his love of reading from one end of the county to the other.

If he breaks a few stereotypes along the way, so be it. He uses who he is — non-conventional, unorthodox, oh-so-talkative — to his advantage to draw in people who might not frequent a traditional library.

“My goal is to get books into the hands of people,” he says.

His road toward library science as a career is as unique as he is. When he was in college, an English major, Jim was arrested for shoplifting. His sentence? Community service at the local library. When he’d served his time, the lead librarian called him into her office — and urged him to consider being a librarian.

“It completely changed my life,” Jim says. “I’m not proud of what I did, but I believe in second chances. I am a librarian because of second chances.”

So, the guy with the tattoos reads to kids at his stops, and they see a man who loves books. He seeks out the dads and the moms who stand back, hesitant, while their kids check out things. He suggests lesser-known authors, not just best-sellers, to newcomers and regulars alike.

“A book is a wonderful thing, but I’m also there to connect with people,” he says. “All people.”



## September Dykema

Montague

Flower Farmer

*“People have a different relationship with flowers than they do vegetables.”*

People ask September Dykema all the time what her favorite flower is.

Daffodils? Dahlias? Roses?

“My favorite flower? Whatever’s in season,” she answers without pause. And then she smiles that knowing look of a working farmer who lives with — and takes her cues from — the comings, goings, and inexplicable whims of nature and its land.

“You have to enjoy the process to enjoy the job,” she says.

Meet September, the namesake and inspiration for the aptly named September’s Flowers, a flower business that provides uniquely creative bouquets to area florists and grocery stores.

From early spring to first snowfall, September and her husband, Simon, grow thousands of flowers, greens, and decorative fruit in a series of hoop houses outside of Montague. It was a natural for September, who was active in Future Farmers of America as a kid and whose family had a vegetable farm.

“I’ve always been around growing stuff,” she says. “There’s a rhythm to it.” That means working from sunup to sundown seven days a week during the growing season because they also operate a flower stand and U-Cut flower farm.

An enormous amount of research went into the venture, both on the farming side and business end. But the emotion of growing flowers for people, most of whom she’ll never meet, isn’t lost on September.

“There’s something emotional about flowers,” she says. “It’s almost a spiritual connection.”

And that’s why, even though she can’t single out a favorite flower, there’s no question what her favorite thing is on the job. She loves to cut flowers she’s grown and give them to friends.

“They’re always so happy,” she says. “Me, too.”



## **Mozelle and A.D. Ellis**

Muskegon Heights  
Foster Parents



*“They were all ours ... all our kids.”*

When people ask how many children Mozelle and A.D. Ellis have, there’s never any distinction between the foster children they raised and their blended family of his and hers.

“They all belong to us,” she says.

For the record, the Ellises fostered 42 children, most of them neglected and abused, all of them yearning for the security, love, and comfort offered in their home. Mozelle and A.D. adopted five of the 42, plus they already had eight biological children between them — a mind-boggling commitment to many.

“We did what we were supposed to do,” Mozelle says. “We feel good, doing all we did.”

In their care, everyone went to church together. Everyone sat at the same table for meals. If there were school trips to go on, everyone went, even if it meant the Ellises paid for it out of their own pocket.

“We made sure the (foster) kids got the same thing as our biological kids,” Mozelle says.

Everyone, absolutely everyone, was family.

“Mind you, I didn’t miss no parent-teacher conferences, no,” Mozelle says. “Those were my kids, no matter how long they were with us.”

Some were there only a few weeks or months; some for years; but “some came and never went home.” Retired now, the Ellises still are seldom alone. There’s always someone at the door, coming to visit, coming for advice, coming for supper — always calling her Mom and him Dad.

“I believe this is my calling,” she says. “I didn’t have trouble taking care of them, ever. When it came time for supper, I just got me out some big boilers and started cooking. I was the mom, you know?”

## Marissa and Blake Evans

Muskegon

Owners, Water's Edge Fitness



*"We lost everything, but we came out of it stronger."*

Their story could start at work, in the fitness center where members come each and every day for their physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being.

But to understand who Marissa and Blake Evans truly are, you need to go back to Christmas Eve 2020, the night their house burned down. They lost everything but the clothes on their backs that night. But that was nothing compared to the biggest loss of all. Their two dogs, cherished members of the family, didn't make it out.

Within minutes, neighbors from the close-knit Bluffton neighborhood where they live brought clothes and food, compassion and kindness, shoulders to cry on, and words of encouragement.

The next day, the young couple held a private vigil and stared into a future they couldn't imagine.

"It was like Holy Cow, now what?" Blake asked. "That would have been a good time to quit, right?"

But quitting wasn't in their nature.

They'd opened Water's Edge Fitness three years earlier. Faced with shutdowns and restrictions because of the COVID crisis, they had to be creative, offering virtual classes and online coaching.

"We learned to roll with the punches," Marissa says.

They didn't have to go it alone. The gym's members responded as their family and neighbors had with unending support.

"They had faith in Blake and me, and we had faith in them," Marissa remembers.

Since the fire, they've rebuilt. They've adopted two dogs. They're back to in-person classes at the fitness center. Blake has taken on a real estate job at Nexes Realty. And they're living in a future they imagined.

"I'm telling you. Love does heal," Marissa says. "It healed us."

## Jacqueline Rose Fisher

Whitehall

Musician, Pianist, Organist



*“The first time I played the organ I was 13 years old, and it was like, wow.”*

Jacqueline Rose Fisher doesn’t remember life without music.

Before she could even walk, she sat on her mother’s lap and plunked out tunes — not noise, tunes — on the piano. She took lessons, and no one had to remind her to practice, because music was her first language, her true love.

By the time she was in sixth grade, Jackie could read music so easily and play so well she accompanied the high school choir. She played in churches everywhere. But to tell the truth, she was bored.

“I needed more,” she says.

So even though she was young, she took up the organ, and if she thought she loved piano, she was over the moon with this new instrument.

“I was transformed,” she says.

So were the people around her, and still are. Jackie has reached into every corner of West Michigan’s music scene — school musicals and choirs, community theater, concerts and recitals, church worship services, adult choirs.

She is most at home in church. Here, faith is music. Music is prayer. It is worship meant to be shared. As director of music at Temple United Methodist Church, she moves between piano and organ, traditionally sacred and spiritual jazz, old hymns and new — and even though she never would say it, she preaches the minute her hands touch the keyboard.

She carries a favorite piece of music with her everywhere, one that brought her peace that surpasses understanding after her husband died and still does, even as she has found new love. A choral piece, the words include: “If this is my last breath, I want to spend it praising you.”

“Yes,” she says, her hands at rest. “Yes.”

## Lee Ann Frame

Fruitport

Printmaker, Bookbinder, Educator

*“If my work can start a story or ask a question, if it can tap an emotion, then it means something.”*

First, the story; the portrait of the artist.

As early as fifth grade, Lee Ann Frame dreamed of being an artist. At the time, her dream was to design album covers. By the time she was a senior, she hadn't given up on art or pursuing a degree, but she needed a means to get to college.



So she earned her cosmetology license and did hair to finance her schooling. Then she got married, started a family, worked part-time, went to school part-time, and never lost sight of what she was meant to do with her life: art.

“I was so darn determined,” she says. “I had this absolute drive, and nobody was going to get in my way.”

She found her way, earned undergraduate and graduate degrees in the arts and theology — and found the medium that has earned her a national reputation and garnered scores of awards.

She is a printmaker, an artist inspired by nature who creates black and white images through an exacting journey of drawings, etchings, woodblocks, paper, copper plates, even fabric.

“Printmaking is just magical. It seems to feed my soul,” she says.

She looks around the studio in her home, named Norris Creek Printmaking Studio, and there is original artwork everywhere. But there are also presses, chemicals, metals, and mechanical entities that bring her work — the light, texture, color, the message — to life.

Obviously, this is no small task, this world where art collides with mechanics, and her love of the outdoors comes from within.

“I have to do what I do,” she says, “because it’s me. This is who I am.”

## Sean France

Montague

Owner/Director Studio France School of Dance, Artistic Director Michigan Youth Ballet Theater

*“If someone is making the smallest amount of progress, you don’t want to stop them.”*

He’s danced with the best of them, on the biggest stages, with ballet companies around the world. As principal, as soloist, he’s gained a reputation for his “cool charm and vast reserves of elegance.”

And no wonder.

Sean France is a third-generation dancer and teacher, his family’s roots in vaudeville, Hollywood, and on Broadway. No one pressured him to follow in their footsteps. It was his choice, his decision to make ballet his career, a move that took him around the world.

So what is he doing in Montague?

Love. Lured here to teach at Grand Valley State University and Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp, Sean fell in love, married, started a family — and away from the bright lights of stardom, opened a dance studio very much like the one from his childhood.

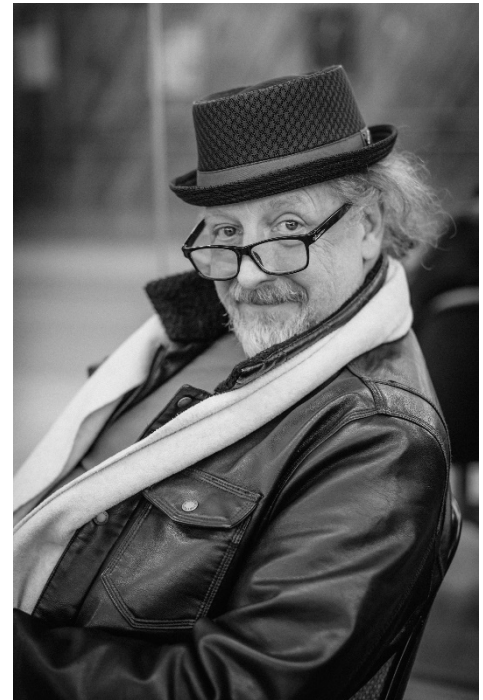
“I could have landed anywhere,” he says. He looks around as he talks. His studio is empty, quiet for the moment. Soon, his students will arrive with all their youthful energy and enthusiasm. The teacher smiles, a spontaneous act of joy.

“This,” he says. “This is where I want to be.”

He is a traditionalist, a strict believer in the decorum and rules of classical ballet, even if the dancers are young, even if their dance careers never go beyond the studio and annual recitals.

Always the teacher, Sean believes in them, no matter their skill level, urging them to do their very best, wherever that takes them.

“Our world is very strange and different right now,” he says, “but our kids can come in here and it’s like it always was. They can count on us.”



## **Birdell Frye**

Muskegon

Fisherman

*“If you have a problem, go to the water. God tells you to put your problems out there ... onto the waves and let them go.”*

When he was seven, Birdell Frye’s mother took him fishing for the first time. He was underwhelmed. They sat there for hours “and nothing.” No fish, no action.

But there was something about being on the water that sustained him, even as a little guy, and it drew him back — to this very day.

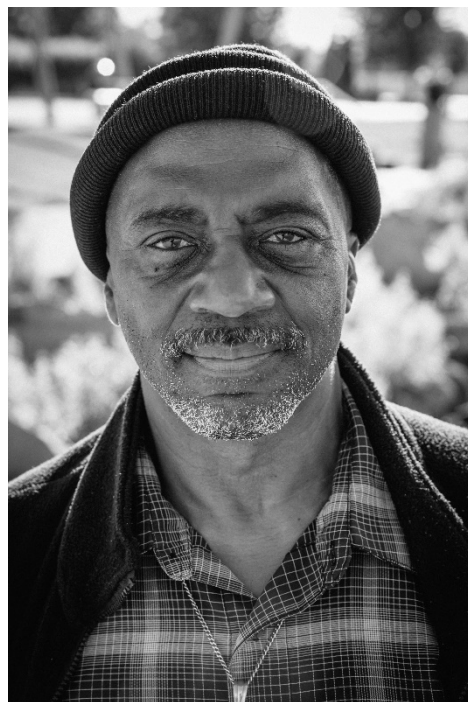
“They call me the Fish Whisperer,” he says. “Even when the fish aren’t biting for others, they are for me.”

To say Birdell is a dedicated angler is an understatement. Almost every day of the year he is out in the elements, catching fish at his favorite — but never revealed — fishing holes. He has more time to fish now that he’s retired from Blodgett Hospital – and his after-hours job as producer of the long-standing “Gospel Time,” a local show now off the air. For 15 years, Birdell was the man behind the camera, interviewing pastors, attending prayer meetings and Sunday services, delivering gospel music and messages to the masses until the program went off the air.

“But you can’t retire from God,” Birdell says.

Today he is a fisher of men — and women. Fishing is his ministry. He shares everything he catches, usually bluegills and other pan fish, occasionally a catfish or two. He cleans them, filets them, and then delivers them to senior citizens, many of whom are alone, all of whom welcome a chance to fry up freshly caught fish for supper.

“I suppose I could charge for them, but that’s not what He wants us do,” Birdell says. “If the Lord gives me a little bit, I can give a little too.”





## **DeAnna Vontress Gantt**

Norton Shores

Owner and Stylist, HairbyDVG Beauty Boutique



*“Doing hair gives me the ability to be as creative as I want to be.”*

She twists and turns. She curls and straightens. She calms. She colors. She cuts. She creates.

She is a cosmetologist.

When clients get in DeAnna Vontress Gantt’s chair, they are in the hands of an artist. A stylist who prefers to put down the traditional tools of her trade and work hands-on, rolling curls in the palms of her hands, patiently braiding hair, introducing the newest trend and most flattering looks.

Her boutique stands out for other distinctions. It is a minority and woman-owned business, catering for the most part to African-American customers. She is quick to say the challenges of working with her clients’ hair isn’t “a color thing,” adding it is “a texture thing.”

“You just have to understand hair,” she says.

DeAnna, who has a master’s degree in organizational leadership and an undergraduate degree in business, fell in love with doing hair starting in middle school. She was the friend other girls in Muskegon, where she grew up, turned to for the latest styles, their very best look. Even as a kid, DeAnna realized her gift was about more than hair.

“Self-esteem is a huge thing,” she says. “It’s all about confidence.”

In the last few years, DeAnna has seen the effect that COVID-19 has had on hair — the physical damage caused by the disease, as well as the result of clients being isolated and not going to the salon regularly. To combat the damage, she has developed her own line of products — Hair Love by DVG — that “pamper your hair with love.”

“Hair has been my life for the last 20 years,” she says. “I just want to help.”

## **Kimi George**

Muskegon

Rehabilitation Specialist

*“I need to be part of something that matters.”*

Where others see rundown houses, Kimi George sees immense potential.

She looks past the visible wear and tear of the years and sees what once was. She takes stock of the situation and, rather than give up before even trying, she gets out her toolbox and gets to work.

“I think about all these houses that the rest of the world wants to tear down. I think about the history of the community, all the families who lived there, and I want to save them,” she says.

So she does, one house, one family at a time.

“This is never about building anything other than community. It’s about regaining neighborhoods ... creating a sense of belonging for others,” she says.

Kimi’s calling in life is to rehabilitate houses, especially houses that have seen better days, houses that can become good homes at affordable prices. In the past, she has worked for Community Encompass, which rebuilds neighborhoods in Muskegon’s core city. She has taught Muskegon High School students how to rehabilitate houses in home construction classes.

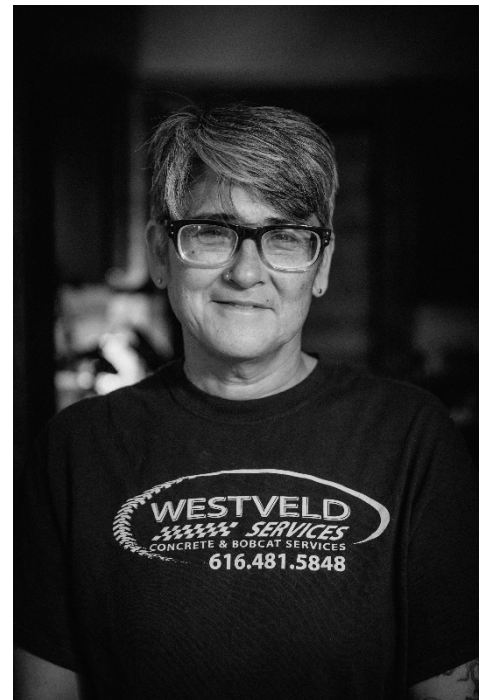
But recently, she’s gone out on her own, calling herself “just a neighbor” who helps others, especially untraditional homeowners. She is driven by the radical notion that all people deserve affordable housing — and the way to stabilize neighborhoods is to get people into their own homes.

“I believe in fairness,” she says. “Everyone should be able to live in a good space.”

Some people wear their good intentions on their proverbial shirt sleeves, but Kimi wears hers in a tattoo on the inside of her arm: tools of her trade, an inscription of what she offers.

“I bring my head, my heart, and my hands,” she says.

And her toolbox of vision and possibilities.



## **Leah Graham**

North Muskegon

Reiki master, Owner, Reiki, Healing and Divination

*“Everything is energy.”*

Leah Graham spends considerable energy explaining what she does — and why.

Not everyone is versed in the benefits of Reiki therapy, a Japanese form of energy healing. Based on the Eastern belief that energy flows through your body, a trained and certified Reiki healer — like Leah — uses a gentle touch to guide energy to promote both balance and healing.



“The whole point (of Reiki) is to help people,” Leah says. “It’s to help all humanity.”

Leah came to Muskegon by way of her hometown of Cleveland. She studied the sciences in college, with thoughts of going into medicine. But she was drawn to other healing powers, other avenues to good health.

“The more I see, the more I figure out, the more I realize there is so much more to know,” she says.

She found herself studying Reiki and what others might call alternative practices: meditation, crystals and pendulums, psychic readings. To Leah, they are what make the most sense. They are where science and spirit meet; where personal energy connects with the universe.

“We really are one spirit,” she says.

Reiki was developed in the 1920s. The name comes from two Japanese words: “Rei,” which means universal, and “ki,” which loosely translates to a life force of energy.

Even as a child, Leah was fascinated by the untraditional. She was brought up in a home that combined Jewish and Creole heritages. She remembers her elders telling her she had “a vivid imagination” when she told them she had angels around her and psychic guides that comforted her and kept her safe.

As an adult, she uses those gifts from childhood to help others.

“Obviously I’m this way for a reason,” she says.

## Jennifer Green

Whitehall

Photographer, Ballet Dancer and Teacher

From a young age, Jennifer was a part of the world of photography and at the center of her father's artwork. A fine-art photographer specializing in black and white, he often used Jennifer as his subject and she accompanied him on photo-shoots and was his darkroom assistant.

Jennifer followed him through her childhood with a 35mm camera in hand and then into her adult world. It wasn't until a pivotal moment in life about 9 years ago that she stopped shrugging it off as merely a hobby and devoted herself to the craft full-time.



Primarily a portrait photographer, Jennifer covers a variety of session styles from families to high school seniors. Headshots, event photography, dancers, and more; however, all are infused with aspects of the most important work she does – personal projects to explore and bring to light creativity and authenticity in both herself and subjects. Using natural and artificial light, she enjoys working in the field and in her studio.

A wife, mother of four, and grandmother “Ama” to two perfect grandchildren, Jennifer is a Ballet Teacher and Ballet Mistress for Michigan Youth Ballet Theatre and also enjoys creating artwork in charcoal, graphite, and is an aspiring writer.

- Jennifer was featured in several exhibitions at the Muskegon Museum of Art: 2020 – Shaping the Future, Celebrating the Past; 2018 – The Art of the Motorcycle; 2014, 2015, 2021 – Michigan Contemporary Exhibition, 2014 Honorable Mention.
- Two works of photography in the Muskegon Museum of Art's permanent collection.
- October 2016 + December 2020 – Featured in Click photography magazine. Click Pro Elite Member and finalist in several of their sister company's Voice competitions.
- 2019 + 2020 – Silver and Bronze distinction awards categories in the Portrait Master's competitions.
- 2017 – Portfolio Excellence award and 6-image feature in Black & White magazine.
- Official Photographer for the Michigan Youth Ballet Theatre.
- Photography for marketing for Muskegon Museum of Art and Harbor Hospice of Muskegon, as well as countless homes of beloved people and families she feels honored to capture through her lens.

## **Susan Harrison-Wolffis**

Muskegon  
Journalist

For 40 years, Susan Harrison was a columnist and staff writer for *The Muskegon Chronicle*. Although she covered a variety of beats through the years, she was best known for her special projects, feature stories, and her weekly columns, which often were contemplative or reflective in nature – or gave voice to those who were unheard through the years.

In retirement, Susan continued to write for area newspapers, as well as several regional magazines, and taught a memoir writing workshop. She most recently was the interviewer for the Muskegon Area District Library "Humans of Muskegon" initiative. Susan makes her home in Muskegon and is active in the community and her church, Temple United Methodist Church. Her late husband, Art Wolffis, was regional editor at *The Chronicle*.

She earned more than 75 national, state, and regional writing awards, including Columnist of the Year, Best Feature Writing, Best Picture Story, and Sports Feature Writing, as well as several Sweepstakes Awards. She also earned several national writing awards, including the prestigious Better Newspaper Contest (considered the Pulitzer Prize of newspaper awards) Enterprise Feature, The Association for Women in Communications Clarion Award, the National Journalism Writing Award, and the first annual James Neubacher National Writing Award.

She received the Sisterhood Award from the Muskegon-Ottawa Chapter of the National Organization for Women, the Kleaveland Award for service to women, Career Woman of the Year from Quadrangle Business and Professional Women's Club, the Martin Luther King King Award from the African-American Institute for Racial Harmony, the Diversity Service Award from Muskegon County Cooperating Churches, agriculture writer of the year from Michigan State Farm Bureau, and a special honor from Latinos working for the Future. She was named the 2000 MCC Distinguished Alumna for Muskegon Community College. She graduated with high honors in 1972 from The University of Michigan.



## Ed Hendrickson

Muskegon

Luthier



*“There are a lot of people who never try anything.”*

In Ed Hendrickson’s hands, wood turns into music.

A solid piece of pine — ordinary, flat, inanimate — transforms into a vehicle of sound, strings, and almost inexpressible beauty.

Once a chemical engineer, once a repairer of broken and discarded clocks, in his most recent version of retirement, Ed is a luthier. He is a violinmaker, a persistent creator at heart.

Since 2013, he has made 75 violins from scratch, from start to finish. It was a new pursuit. He’d never made one, didn’t exactly play the violin, although he took a few lessons, inspired as a boy after sitting at his grandfather’s knee watching his elder play the violin, fiddle style.

Music is powerful, Ed says. The vibrations. The artistry. The lasting effect on the listener’s soul.

Never mind that he didn’t know the first thing about making violins.

A man who views all things as problems to be solved, he read books. He experimented, picking up saws and drill presses, trying out varnishes and various woods, and then, because he is who he is, he donated 35 of his violins to Muskegon Public Schools.

He shrugs off praise at his generosity, saying he is just “the tool.”

All creative people have to have something going, he contends, sometimes more than one interest.

“My love of creating overcomes the fear of failing,” he says.

Away from his woodworking shop, Ed writes poetry, paints watercolors, and plays the piano, self-taught and by ear.

“When I start a project,” he says, “I feel something moving, something directing me, something bigger than I am.”

Something taking hold of his hands and not letting go.

## Carlos Hernandez-Sias

Muskegon

Muskegon Heights Firefighter

*“You’re telling me I can run into a burning building and rescue and protect people? That’s what I want to do.”*

Carlos Hernandez is probably the only kid in America who didn’t grow up wanting to be a firefighter.

He set his sights on being a professional soccer player and he had a good shot at it. He was talented enough to get a look from the Olympics committee when he was still a teenager. Later, he helped his team at Muskegon Community College go to nationals.



“I don’t know, after a while, my fire for sports was going out,” he says. So guess where he is now.

Carlos is a Probationary Firefighter — a rookie — on the Muskegon Heights Fire Department. And he can’t imagine any other career.

“I get to treat people on their worst days and make them feel comfortable,” he says. “I have found my niche. I’ve found my calling.”

It took a while. He went to college, then started Los Details, his own car detailing business, but he wanted more. An uncle suggested firefighting as a future, even though it wasn’t in Carlos’ sights.

“I had no idea what the fire service really was,” he confesses.

What he discovered is a brother and sisterhood within the department, “a phenomenal group of people,” who have each other’s backs no matter how dangerous or run-of-the-mill the call. Again, he uses a burning building as an explanation.

“When you’re running into a burning building with each other, it’s something special,” he says.

It creates a special trust, a bond not easily broken. He points at his badge, a visible sign of who he is and what he’s discovered about himself on the job.

“I take pride in this,” he says. “I carry it on my chest all the time.”



## **Mike Hiner**

Muskegon

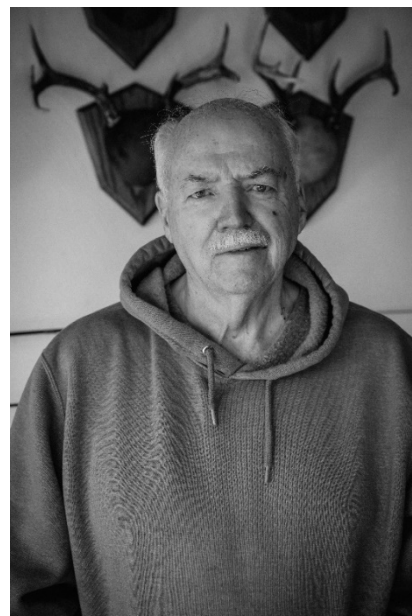
Taxidermist

*“I enjoy bringing the animals back to life, so to speak.”*

Mike Hiner got into the taxidermy business for purely practical reasons.

He didn't like the quality of other taxidermists' work.

An avid hunter and an equally enthusiastic angler, Hiner was disappointed in the looks of the animals he wanted to remember, the prizes he wanted to showcase in his home. They simply didn't meet his standards. So sometime in the late 1970s or early '80s — he doesn't exactly remember when — he decided to try his hand at taxidermy.



Taxidermy: The art of preparing, stuffing, and mounting the skins of animals with lifelike effect.

From the start, he approached it as an art form, as well as a way to learn more about wildlife and nature.

He studied wildlife habitats, specific animals and their muscular structure. Saying he wanted to “reproduce” the beauty and dignity of the animal killed, he paid particular attention to details — the way the fur lay, the tilt of the head, the stance in the wild. His work set him apart and soon his fellow hunters took notice. What started as a hobby took on a life of its own.

“It grew and grew and grew,” he says.

He had other responsibilities. He worked 49 years at Howmet, retiring as a supervisor. He served as a Dalton Township trustee. And when he could, he tried to get a little hunting and fishing in himself, not just work on other people's trophies: a youngster's first kill, the biggest fish caught, memories of a favorite hunting trip.

His house and garage are a testament to his craft. Everywhere you look, there are deer, turkeys, a bobcat, moose, mountain goats, bear, lynx, and various hides, beautifully tanned.

“Each one comes with a story,” he says.

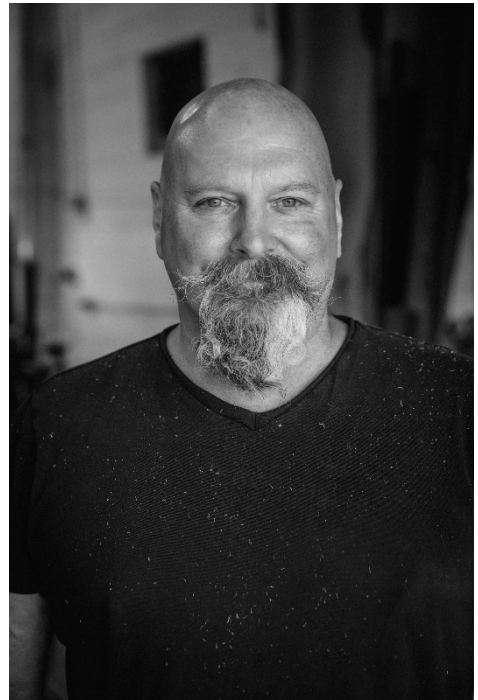


**John Hopson**  
Muskegon Heights  
John Hopson Designs

*“My delight is in making something that’s one of a kind and then letting it go.”*

Don’t let the sawdust fool you. Or let the chisels, the saws, or the welding equipment give you the wrong idea.

This may look like a workshop, or even a small machine shop, but it is an art studio, an incubator of original art and design. Within these walls, John Hopson creates one-of-a-kind furniture, doors, mantel pieces, carvings, and sculptures made of wood.



“I always have stuff going,” he says.

There was a time when he wanted to be an architect, then a time he built houses, back before he studied furniture making. In a sense, it is a natural progression. First he wanted to design houses, then he built them from the ground up.

“Now I build bold elements for inside homes,” he says.

On any given day, you can find him “building” a tree inside someone’s house or making a chair out of wood he’s collected, or turning an unwanted beam into something of beauty.

“I tinker a lot,” he says. “It’s so much fun.”

There is another component. Every day, he gets to work with his hands.

“I like working with my hands,” he says. “That’s the thing.”

An artist in wood, John never makes the same piece twice, always coming up with new ideas, rejecting what he calls “copying.” Sometimes it takes awhile for the piece of art to reveal itself: all part of the process.

“As the work goes on,” he says, “I keep learning. I start seeing things, the wood itself evokes different ideas.”

That is where he finds joy, he says, adding, “For me, the (satisfaction) is in making it ... not keeping it for myself, but making it for others.”

## Carl Jenkins

Muskegon

Graphic Designer, Entrepreneur



*“I want this for my wife and kids. It’s about making sure your family is prosperous.”*

By day, he makes signs.

A graphic designer at Port City Architectural Signage, he creates everything from “No Trespassing” signs to more complicated works — a steady job with good hours that puts food on the table and pays the bills.

But at night and on the weekends, Carl Jenkins pursues his true passion: shaved ice.

He and his business partner are the owner-operators of Frost Bite Shaved Ice, a frozen delicacy that’s getting a lot of attention these days. They won first place in the “new desserts” category at the Taste of Muskegon in 2022. Their plan for the new year is to offer the shaved ice year-round — at parties, picnics, and community events.

Carl’s business goals don’t stop there. In the spring 2023, he is going into an online pizza business he’s already named “Wut Up Dough?” He tested out the product during the COVID-19 shut-down, cooking from home, and is convinced his homemade pizza provides a path to a good future.

“I’m going to kick into overdrive and prepare for a prosperous retirement,” he says.

He’s dreamed of his own food business for a long time but put his plans on “the back burner” when he and his wife started a family.

“I’ve been working since I was 14, doing various jobs. Now it’s time to make this happen,” he says.

He doesn’t want success just for himself or those he loves. He wants to be an inspiration, a role model for the youth of the community — and to be part of the good news around town.

“You can work as hard as you want to,” he says, “and I intend to work hard.”

## **Barb Johnson**

Norton Shores

Sign Language Interpreter

*“I want people to know the deaf community can do any and everything. The only thing they can’t do is hear.”*

Barb Johnson speaks with her hands.

It is her first language, her native tongue.

She is the daughter of two deaf parents, the oldest of five children, all hearing. Even as a toddler, she was bilingual — learning American Sign Language from her mom and dad and English from her grandparents, friends and teachers, television, and the radio.

Like so many Children of Deaf Adults (CODA, for short), she found herself at an early age in the middle of conversations between her parents and the hearing world, translating, interpreting, talking, listening. And advocating.

“People are not very educated about the deaf community,” she says.

By the time she was 20, she was interpreting for deaf and hearing impaired students in Muskegon Public Schools. She loved it, especially the variety of classes. One hour she’d be in welding, the next automotive mechanics, the next literature or science.

“It was pretty cool,” she says.

It isn’t enough that she’d grown up speaking sign language, Barb is required to be certified by the state to be a professional interpreter. She worked for the schools from 1974 to 2011. Since then, she has started her own business — Barb Johnson Interpreting — and specializes in interpreting at medical appointments and procedures.

As one of only two certified interpreters in Muskegon, Ottawa, and Oceana Counties, she is always on call.

“I was born of this culture, how can I say no?” she asks.

As she speaks, she often signs, bilingual to this day. For those not fluent in American Sign Language, she is spelling out the word “hands” in her photograph for this project.

And she says it so beautifully.



## Carl Johnson

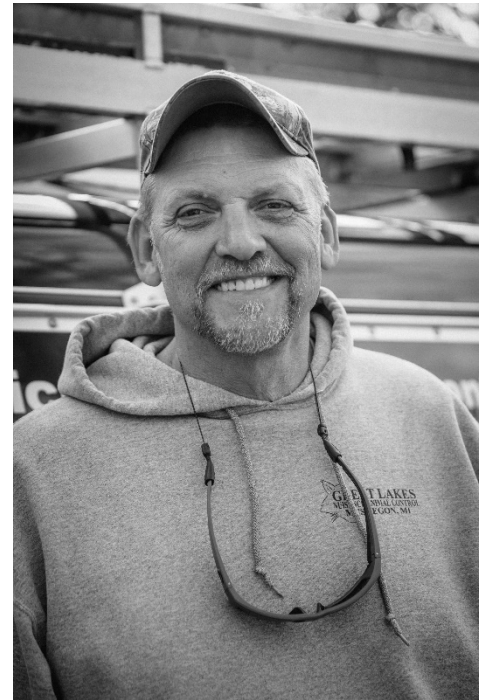
Muskegon

Great Lakes Nuisance Animal Control

*“It sounds corny, but you’ve got to become the critter you’re trying to find.”*

He’s the guy you call if you have bats in the house, raccoons in the attic, woodchucks in the garden — and even mice, if they’ve invaded your garage or basement.

From the time he was a kid, people have turned to Carl Johnson for help. He has a way about him, a sixth sense, a quality he describes as “respect” for whatever “critter” he is pursuing. He is so good at it what started as a hobby turned into a business.



As crucial as his work is, Great Lakes Nuisance Animal Control is not the whole story, not this time.

When we met up with Carl, whose friends call him “Cully,” he was home with one of his three rescue dogs — a beautiful yellow Lab, Tanna, who was in hospice care. Carl had taken a few days off, a rarity in his line of work, so he could spend time with his pooch before he had to say goodbye.

“Ain’t gonna have these days again,” he says.

He caressed her ears, held her paw, called her “sweetheart” and told her what a good girl she was. A man heartbroken at the eventual loss of his dog: this is the guy people call all hours of the day and night for help.

“I love animals,” Carl says, so softly it is a whisper.

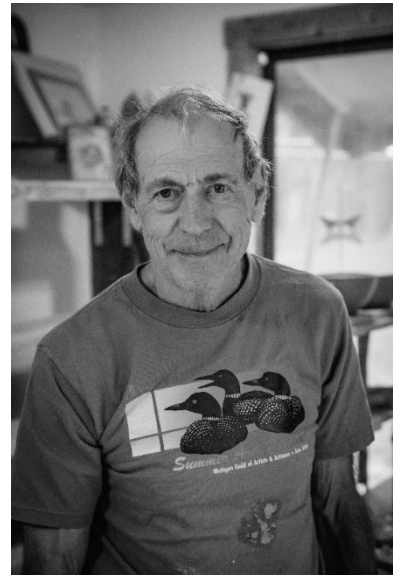
The public got a glimpse of his heart last year during a highly publicized search for a lost dog named Harley, on the run for eight weeks. Finally, they called Carl, who found him within a few hours.

“It was getting cold,” Carl says, still holding his own dog’s paw. “I knew I had to get him in. He had to get home.”

## **Peter Johnson**

Whitehall

Potter, Terrestrial Forming Pottery Studio



*“All things I do are just dance.”*

People know him by reputation, if not in person.

He’s the guy who throws pots in his studio in the woods, who mixes artistry with physical activity — and who seldom makes a distinction between functional pottery and pots thrown as art.

Then there’s his nickname, known even by those who have never met him or seen his work. Peter the Potter.

It was “inevitable,” he says. “Peter ‘the Potter’ Johnson.” And he shrugs his shoulders because he’s stuck with it.

Peter has been part of West Michigan’s artistic landscape, integral to the creative scene, since moving here from the East Coast in the early 1970s. He made an immediate impact, an influence that continues today.

A coffee cup isn’t just a mug in his hands. A bowl is never a mere vessel. When he throws pots — working, molding clay on his potter’s wheel — he likens it to practicing Tai Chi. He uses his whole body as part of the creative force.

“It’s poetry,” he says. “It’s an expression.”

He built his studio as a natural part of the grounds he lived on, as a statement about cherishing nature and being environmentally responsible. He built his own kilns. He studied glazes, the chemistry of his art and its place in history. And always, he marvels at the wonder of the clay he uses, his medium of choice that is so close to the earth we walk upon.

“What is this clay all about?” he asks rhetorically. “It is the earth’s crust. It is planet Earth.”

He calls himself semi-retired these days but is still drawn to the potter’s wheel, an artist not quite done.

“Being a potter,” he says, “I’m going to do this until I can’t.”

## Wally Klaus

Whitehall  
Mechanic

*“I like to go in, not knowing what’s wrong, and figure it out. That’s the fun of it.”*

One look, one handshake, one conversation, and you know Wally Klaus is a man who works with his hands.

Beat up, scarred, toughened from years of being a mechanic, his hands tell a story of hard work — and determination to get the job done.

“I like being a problem solver,” he says.

He’s been around cars, machines, and mechanics his whole life. As a kid, he hung around his dad’s excavating business, always curious, always at home there in the garage. It was a welcome respite from the challenges of school, where he struggled in class because of a severe learning disability.

Despite his love of cars, Wally wasn’t sure what he wanted to do for a living until he went to Muskegon Community College. There he earned an associate’s degree in applied science, plus a certificate in automotive mechanics. His grades were so good he was on the dean’s list.

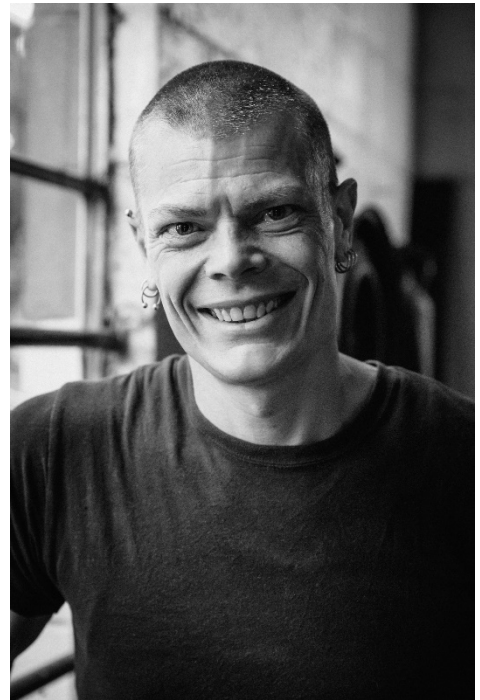
He went to work at Twin Cities Parts and Service, where he’s earned a reputation for figuring out problems that stump other mechanics, his work ethic, and respect for his customers.

And his sense of modesty.

“I’m a pretty shy person,” he says. “I don’t normally seek out attention.”

He does seek out hard work, and it’s taken its toll. He carries a piece of a hammer in his chest. His back and neck aren’t what they used to be after all the years of getting into places not easily accessible. He’s had hundreds of stitches — so many he’s lost count. And those hands of his: they are a tribute to the tenacity of getting the job done.

“Well,” he says, “that’s what I do. I’m usually working.”



## **Nga Nguyễn (Swan)**

Muskegon

Owner, Valy Vietnamese Oriental Food Gift & Market



*“I am so happy in my life. No negativity.”*

Step inside these doors and you are transported.

You are introduced to an exotic array of foods and condiments, teas and treasures, clothes and rituals — all imported from Asian countries by the store’s owner, Nga Nguyễn.

A refugee from Vietnam, Nga fills her shelves with delicacies for those yearning for ingredients from her home country, Korea, Philippines, Japan, and China.

Nga is as much host as she is businesswoman. She seems to be everywhere at once, pointing out a favorite tea, the best rice, a beautiful pot. She shares recipes, gives expert advice to the uninitiated on how to cook something new, steers everyone toward healthier eating. She even stocks the freezers in her store with homemade egg rolls and other authentic Asian meals.

And then, because her talents know no bounds, she unveils a rack of clothes she’s sewn of silk, made for those homesick for traditional wear.

“I love my customers,” she says. “I work hard for them.”

Most of her customers in Muskegon are originally from the Philippines, searching for foods not found elsewhere. And of course, there are the Americans, eager to learn.

Conversation can be tough sometimes. Nga acknowledges her struggle with the English language, even though she’s been here 42 years, but there is no mistaking the intent. In a day’s visit, you can talk about the benefits of meditation, her Buddhist faith, and her store’s recent move from downtown Muskegon to 939 E. Laketon.

Suddenly, you are in the midst of an impromptu tea party. Nga brings out a favorite teapot and cups, prepares brown rice tea — and you are transported to a different world.

“There,” she says. “Enjoy, please.”

## **Eric Petersen**

Muskegon

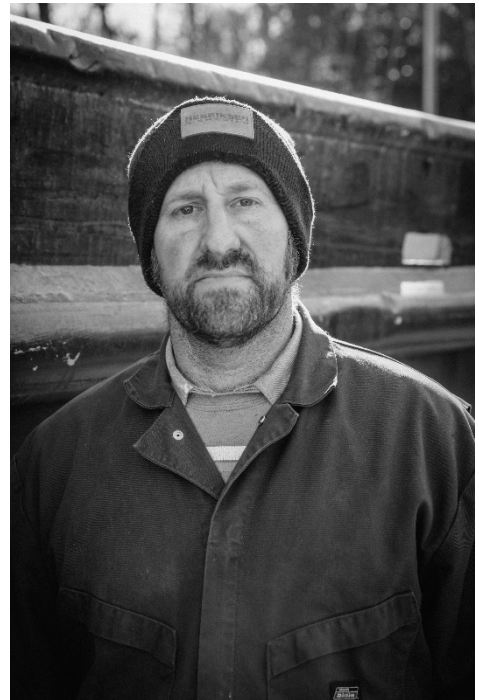
Petersen Fisheries

*“If you grow up around here, you spend your time on the water.”*

Eric Petersen was born to be a fisherman.

Like three generations before him, starting with his great-grandfather in 1927, he fishes the waters of Lake Michigan, pursuing the elusive whitefish.

He is one of the last active commercial fishermen in Muskegon, a legacy he doesn't take lightly. Yes, he says, it is his livelihood, but it is also his heritage.



“I’ve always been around the water,” he says. “It’s what we do.”

There’s something about being out on the big lake, away from the rest of the world, that gets into your blood, he says. And even though he doesn’t use these exact words, all that water, all that space, all that nature, is also good for the spirit.

“Every day is a different day. You see different things all the time,” he says.

This has been a season of change for the Petersens. Earlier this year, he and his wife, Amber Mae, closed their fish shop, The Fishmonger’s Wife, after a 10-year run. Immensely popular, the store fell victim to the pandemic.

As tough a business decision as it was, Eric takes solace in being back on the lake, watching the weather and all its wonders, witnessing its every change. Fishing season ends November 1 and doesn’t start back up until April, so he spends the winter mending nets, repairing his boat, biding time until he gets back out on the water, more at home there than he is on land.

The father of two daughters, he gets asked all the time if he — and a cousin he fishes with — are the end of the Petersen line on the lake.

“It’s hard to say,” he says. “We can always be hopeful.”



## **Mimi Rankin**

Muskegon Heights

Healthcare worker, Community Activist

*“We could have moved out of here anytime, but this is where I belong.”*

All it takes is one conversation with Mimi Rankin and immediately you see she has the whole world in her hands.

The diabetes coordinator and outreach manager for the Health Project, Mimi gets calls from her patients day and night. They even call during Sunday dinner, a time reserved for family — and still, Mimi answers because hers are the tough cases. The “non-compliant patients,” meaning they don’t always follow doctor’s orders, meaning it’s time to administer “a little tough love.”

Mimi takes her no-nonsense style onto radio station 100.1 FM every Wednesday from noon to 1 p.m. when she moderates “Journey to Better Health.” No topic is too personal, too embarrassing; nothing is off-limits.

“I say let’s talk about it. Let’s get it out in the open. Then we can get answers,” she says.

For some, the job would be enough — but it just scratches the surface of Mimi’s influence. Off hours, she is a member of the Muskegon Heights School Board, sits on the Muskegon Heights Planning Commission, helps organize the Festival in the Park. And she is one of those neighbors people rely on, not just because she’s a member of the neighborhood association, but because she loves where she lives.

A couple years ago, her block — usually quiet, always family-friendly — was suddenly populated by prostitutes. Mimi confronted them and their pimp. And that was the end of that.

If it seems there is an urgency to her life, there is. In 2018, her granddaughter, Aniya Mack, was brutally murdered, the victim of domestic violence.

“That’s why I do what I do,” Mimi says. “I have to. I can’t just sit around and do nothing.”



**Dr. Donna Rick, D.D.S.**

Fruitport  
Fruitport Family Dentistry



*“There are people behind the teeth.”*

Dr. Donna Rick never forgets how much she hated going to the dentist as a kid.

“I had a bad experience,” she says. “It was never positive.”

So she takes extra care with patients who are scared, or who were once in her shoes — or dental chair, to be more precise. And she never, ever forgets, as she puts it, that “dentistry isn’t about the procedure.”

“It’s the person behind the procedure,” she says.

She relies on “bad jokes and bad singing” to get through the tense times — and a gentle touch learned from personal experience.

“My goal is to help those people, especially people having a tough time,” she says. She takes that same philosophy into her second calling as a lay pastor for New Creations in Christ Church.

“I am a strong woman of faith,” she says.

She’s been in dental practice since 1989, when she and her husband, Dr. Peter Rick, also a dentist, graduated from The University of Michigan School of Dentistry. At first, they considered practicing together but had second thoughts about being together 24 hours a day.

“I love you, but ...” she jokes.

She founded Fruitport Family Dentistry, while he established Grand Haven Family Dentistry. Today, their daughter, Dr. Chelsea Klipfel, practices with her mom. Their son, Dr. Peter Rick Jr., works with his dad.

Dr. Donna was in school, majoring in dental hygiene, when a professor urged her to consider getting her Doctor of Dental Surgery (DDS). At the time, very few women were in the program, but that didn’t stop her.

“I love what I do,” she says. “People think it’s about teeth, but it’s about relationships, getting to know your patients, the conversations you have with them.”

## Jubenal “Jube” Rodriguez

Muskegon  
Mural Artist

*“Why limit art to a small piece of paper?”*

There’s a reason Jube Rodriguez’s murals are larger than life, painted in bright colors with bold strokes on the sides of buildings and office walls.

He secretly dreams that maybe, just maybe, his deceased father will look down from heaven and see his creations.

“If they’re big enough,” Jube says, his voice almost a whisper, “maybe he’ll be able to see.”

Jube was nine years old when his father died, a tragedy that changed the trajectory of Jube’s life and unintentionally propelled him into art, his chosen means of expression. Jube’s mother, widowed with a family to raise, moved from a harsh neighborhood in Chicago to be near family in Muskegon.

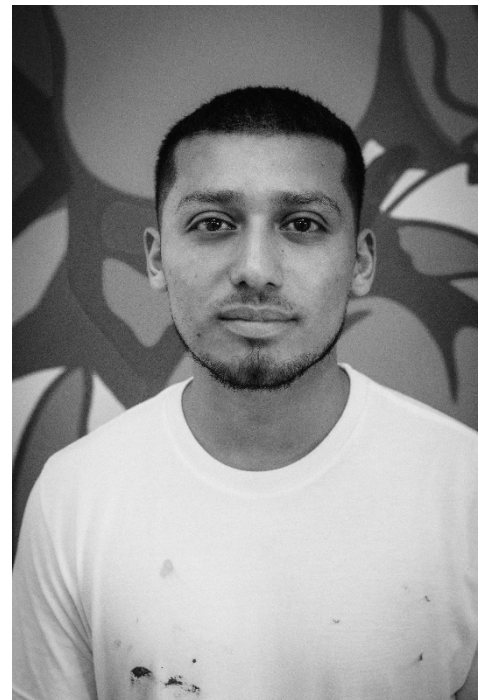
At first, Jube took solace in soccer, both the competition and the camaraderie. But it was in high school art class that he found his calling. His life’s work. He studied at the Chicago Institute of Art, then Kendall College - the first in his family with a college degree. At first, he worked in graphic design, but being in an office wasn’t for him.

But painting walls was. They were the perfect medium for his murals, painted in an illustrative style, full of an unmistakable energy captured in acrylics and detail. The challenge, he says, is channeling what he sees in his head to his hands that do the work.

“People tell me they didn’t notice the buildings until I painted a mural,” he says.

He has 11 murals to his credit, the most visible on Third Street in downtown Muskegon — and The Deck at Pere Marquette Park.

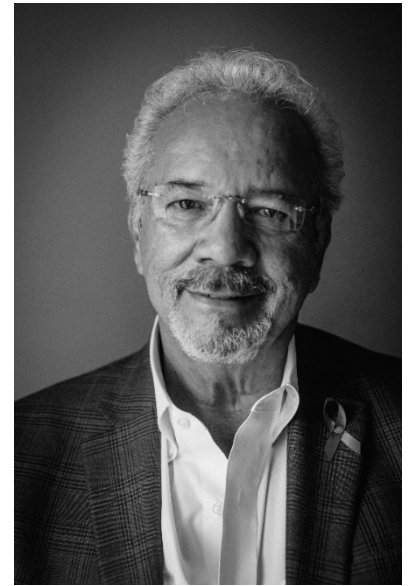
“I hope I make my dad proud,” he says. “That’s why I do this.”



## Larry “Little Thunder” Romanelli

Muskegon

Tribal Ogema, Little River Band of Ottawa Indians



*“I am often the only Native American at the table.”*

His whole life, Larry Romanelli has bridged two worlds, two cultures, two distinct identities.

As a child, he went back and forth between his Native American and Italian families, equally strong influences on the man he would become.

“I didn’t just grow up in two worlds,” he says. “I embraced them.”

His upbringing prepared him well.

Since 2007, he has served as the Tribal Ogema — CEO, leader, chief — of the 4,000-member Little River Band of Ottawa Indians. He is the face of his people in public and in private, the person quoted in the news, and the son who follows the time-honored tradition of listening to his elders before making decisions.

“I’m right where I belong,” he says.

His father was full-blood Ottawa Indian, sent to an Indian boarding school as a child, a veteran of World War II. Larry says his dad rarely spoke of either experience but thought it was confusing that he would be punished in the boarding school for speaking his native language and less than a decade later that very language would be used in World War II for “code-talking.” Larry’s mother was of Italian-American descent.

When questions arise of his Italian last name, he points to his heart and says, “here is where I’m Indian, folks.”

Named Little Thunder (“Niimkiins”) by his Indian grandmother, and a Thunder Clan member, it was only natural that Larry might enter what he calls “Indian politics,” fighting for equal rights.

His father, Douglas Pierson, encouraged him, saying, “Son, work for your people.” And so he does, whether it’s fighting for a casino in Muskegon or looking into the brutalities of the Indian boarding schools.

“It’s humbling work,” he says. “Very, very humbling.”

## Jackie Rone

Muskegon

Foster Grandparent, AmeriCorps Seniors, and Catholic Charities of West Michigan

*“You take the family God gives you, then you choose the family you want.”*

They call her “Grandma Jackie.”

It doesn’t matter if you’re blood relation or not, upon first meeting, Jackie Rone immediately claims you as her own.

“I just love people,” she says. “Love is what it’s all about.”

But as big as her heart is for all of humanity, she especially loves children.

For 10 years, Grandma Jackie has been a foster grandparent to a series of classrooms, most recently to a bunch of four-year-olds in the Great Start program at Oakview Elementary School.

She is seemingly everywhere, a bundle of positivity, buttoning up jackets, soothing an upset child, praising another’s act of kindness, playing and talking and always reassuring the little ones in her midst.

“Everyone needs a grandma or someone like me, especially if you’re four years old,” she says.

Jessica Hoch, the classroom’s lead teacher, says Grandma Jackie helps her students feel safe and loved — and provides an invaluable “sense of family.”

“Life is frightening if you don’t have someone to love you,” Grandma Jackie says.

Mother to two, grandmother of four, Grandma Jackie comes from a big family herself, raised up by parents who gave her stability and a sense of community — which is why she volunteers wherever, whenever needed.

But four days a week, Grandma Jackie can be found in the classroom, the perfect grandmother figure in the midst of school lessons and learning. She tells “her kids” how smart they are, how proud she is of them, and always, always that she loves them. And they respond.

“Once you know Grandma Jackie, you know you’re loved,” Hoch says. “What a gift.”



## Stu Scholl

Montague  
Organic Farmer

*“Because it’s the right thing to do.”*

Stu Scholl is not your typical farmer.

Dressed in tie-dye shirts and shorts even in the fields, sporting a long gray ponytail that’s as much his trademark as the potatoes and pumpkins he grows organically, he doesn’t look the part of someone who works the land for a living.

Or at least the stereotype.

But Stu knew he wanted to be a farmer as early as third grade. He wanted to follow in his dad and granddad’s footsteps, farmers both of them. But he wanted to do it his way — minus chemicals, rotating crops so the soil wouldn’t be depleted, both acts of conscience and stewardship.

“You do what you can to save the land,” he says.

He took a roundabout way back to the 240-acre farm outside Montague where he grew up. First he taught school for 35 years — biology and physical education — in California, then in Muskegon Public Schools.

When he took on his family’s farm full-time, he invited others to join him in his pursuit of healthy growing. Every summer, he leases out 20 plots to people who share his passion for organic farming. He grows “U-pick” plots, goes to farmers markets, raises free-range chickens for their eggs, digs up new ground.

“Every year there’s something that surprises me,” he says.

It might be powdery mildew or an errant herd of destructive deer. It could be too much rain or too little, a cold snap, a heat wave. Whatever the challenges, Stu is out there every day, all day, his hands in the earth he calls home.

“There’s something about turning up the soil every year, something that gets to me,” he says.



## **Damien Schultz**

Muskegon

Hearthstone Bistro Manager, Server,  
Bartender, Host

*“If I can help people have a good time when they’re out, that’s what I do. It’s what I love.”*

Damien Schultz is so much more than the server who takes your order at Hearthstone Bistro. Or shows you to your seat, menus in hand.

He brings more to the table than the uncanny ability to remember — without notes or prompting — that night’s list of specials. Or to call you by name, even after a long absence, and remember your favorite item on the menu or what you last ordered.

For 23 years, he has been part of the dining experience at the restaurants once owned by Frank and Gina Lister — City Cafe, Brownstone, and Hearthstone.

He has a way about him, showing up with the coffee pot or water pitcher at just the right time, knowing when diners want time to talk and when they’re ready to order, always there and yet unobtrusive at the same time.

“People come here to have an experience,” he says. “If I can do that for them, I will.”

Life in the restaurant business has changed, and drastically, since pre-COVID days. Several years ago, people were “living life and having a good time ... and then it stopped.”

Restaurants closed. People stayed home.

“But they’re starting to come back,” Damien says. “You know what it is? People are laughing again. That’s what I missed the most: people having a good time.”

By definition, Damien is a “people person,” someone who says he loves his job, the people around the tables, the people with whom he works. He was young when he started in the business. He thought about college, “but I already knew what I wanted to do.”

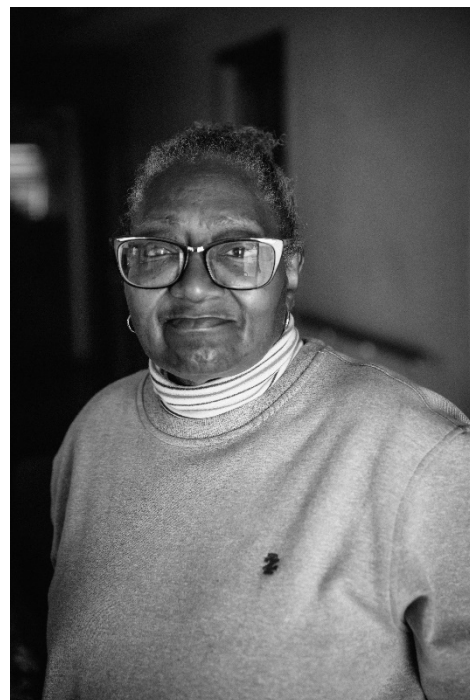
“And I stayed because I love it,” he says.



## **Peggy Selmon**

Muskegon Heights

Owner, Morning Glory Adult Foster Care Home



*“I don’t know how I do it. It has to be God, the Lord’s doing.”*

Peggy Selmon has her hands full as owner of a licensed Adult Foster Care home in Muskegon Heights, caring as she does for people who need a little extra TLC. People who have nowhere else to go. People often overlooked or ignored.

“It’s a calling,” she says, “and it’s stuck in my heart like a nail.”

The call didn’t stop with the five folks in foster care. So many others needed a place to call home. So Peggy bought up six houses in the neighborhood and opened them as residential homes for the disabled — another 25 or so in her care.

“These are my people,” she says. “I live here with them. I know them, and they know me.”

At 69, she could easily retire, enjoy a quieter life with her husband, James, and their family.

“I could be home alone, but that’s not the way to live,” Peggy insists. “The Lord wants me to be with people.”

She’s always been busy, always involved. She was church administrator at Christ Temple Apostolic Church, head of the food ministry. She served for seven years as the Muskegon Heights City Treasurer. She is a school board member for Muskegon Heights Public Schools — and proud resident of Muskegon Heights, the place she’s called home since childhood.

“I am a Muskegon Heights Tiger. I love this city,” she says.

At the heart of every venture, everything she decides to do, is her deep and abiding faith.

“Whatever I do in life, I think: How do I want to be treated,” she says. “That’s how I treat people.”



## Marisela Sierra & Connie Navarro

Muskegon Heights

Owner, Navarro's Mexican Take-Out

*"To be honest, I didn't want this. It wasn't in my plan."*

Growing up, Marisela Sierra couldn't see herself taking over the family business, known far and wide for its stone-ground tamales and other Tex-Mex dishes true to their origins.

But sometimes fate takes you back to the beginning.

Sometimes your future is in your roots.

In 2020, Marisela's mother — Francisca Navarro — died of leukemia, her death leaving a huge gap in the mom-and-pop restaurant that had been in the family for generations.

Grieving for her mother, bereft at the thought of closing Navarro's, Marisela decided to leave behind the corporate world. She came home to follow not only in her mother's footsteps, but also to carry on the legacy of her grandparents: Connie and Angel Navarro.

"I am trying to do the best I can with this beautiful gift," Marisela says.

They still grind the corn in house, a step that "honors the ingredients ... but hardly anyone does anymore." They still cook with recipes (not to mention a secret sauce) known only to family.

But Marisela and her husband, Felix, are dreamers, looking past the present. They want to introduce their tamales into the world of retail, into the frozen food section of grocery stores, a first step toward expanding Navarro's reach. Others believe in them. Marisela was recently awarded one of the 2022 Start Garden prizes to help finance the dream. She calls it a "unique challenge" as a young entrepreneur whose business is only open Wednesdays through Saturdays, only for takeout.

When Marisela was a child, her family lived in an apartment above the restaurant where her past, present, and future meet.

"I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing," she says. "I hope my mom is proud."



## **Daniel Stewart**

Muskegon

Musician, Scottville Clown Band Member

*“Music is my sanity.”*

For Dan Stewart, music is more than notes on a page.

It is more than melodies or harmony, more than performances on stage, even more than marching in parades while playing an alto horn and wearing a kilt.

Music brings him into the present moment and keeps him there. It grounds him in a world increasingly frenzied and demanding. It centers him like nothing else.



“Music helps me calm myself,” he says. “It’s like yoga without having to be a pretzel.”

Music is also a way of life socially. He has been a member of the famous and much beloved Scottville Clown Band since 2003. You can spot him in the horn section, wearing something plaid and often a kilt. You can hear him as a soloist for Masonic events throughout the state. And, if a community band is handy, count him in.

“I was raised on music,” he says. “I can’t remember life without music.”

Dan was just three years old when his father died of lung cancer. His death had a profound impact on the family of course, but especially on Dan. His mother made sure the boy took music lessons: piano, violin, trumpet, drums, voice. It filled a void; still does. It also prompted Dan to go into respiratory therapy at Trinity Health Muskegon, helping patients like his dad. And him. As a child, Dan was asthmatic.

“It was music that helped,” he says. “It was my therapy. Music is very healing.”

He wishes he had more time for music, but life is life. He has a family. He works as many as 60 hours a week.

“I don’t think I could ever stop music,” he says. “It’s the way I connect with people.”

## Donald and John Swanson

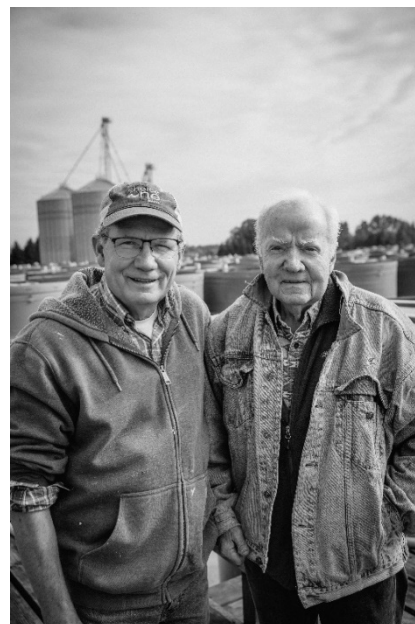
Ravenna

Swanson Pickle Factory

*“I’ve never found anything more satisfying, more fun, than coming to work.”* — Donald Swanson

There’s a lot to say, and even more to learn, about Swanson Pickle Farm.

Like they’re the number one source of pickles made into relish and hamburger chips at Kraft-Heinz Holland. And their vast tank yard — more than 1,300 fiberglass tanks strong, each holding 905 bushels of pickles — is one of the three biggest in the world. Not in Michigan, in the world.



But John Swanson — president of this family owned, nationally known business — doesn’t seek the spotlight.

“It isn’t in our nature,” he simply says. Modest, quiet spoken, he doesn’t boast or talk up the farm’s success. He lets the facts speak for him.

“There’s no real advantage to sticking out,” he says.

And yet, it is impossible to ignore the influence the farm has had on the community at large and Ravenna in particular.

The Swansons farm about 3,000 acres of land, some in corn, some in beans, the rest in pickles. They grow pickles on about 1,600 acres. Each acre yields about 200 bushels. That’s only one-third of the pickles they “brine” — a mixture of salt and water in which the pickles ferment. The rest of the crop they buy from other farmers, most in the West Michigan area.

The business started out small when Donald’s father founded it after World War II. Under Donald’s leadership, it expanded and changed to meet industry needs. It did the same under his son John’s watch, and now the fourth generation of Swansons — John’s three adult children — run the business.

It is their job to take it into the future, wherever that leads.

“This is more than a business. It’s our house,” John says. “It’s what ties us together.”

## Angelita Valdez

Muskegon  
CEO and Therapist  
Servicios de Esperanza (Services of Hope), Author

*“I want to be in a community that looks like home. If I don’t see it, I will help build it.”*

A place at the table. A voice for those who go unheard.

A community that mirrors its people, everyone seen,  
everyone recognized.

This is the life work, the heritage, and the future of  
Angelita Navarro Valdez, a second-generation advocate  
for the Latino community she calls home.



“The work isn’t ever done,” she says. “There is always something to do.”

From the time she was a child, Angelita wanted to be a social worker, providing services for those traditionally underserved, those who speak Spanish, not just English. She didn’t necessarily think of it as advocacy work — that she left up to her parents, Connie and Angel Navarro — but in college, she says, she found her voice.

“Now it is my turn to give back,” Angelita says.

Always in the minority wherever she studied, wherever she worked or lived, Angelita says she felt “other.” Not exactly left out, but not always included. With that, the advocacy in her — the notion that all people should be valued — was unleashed.

She wears her heritage the way she wears her faith “because this is who I am.” Most days, she wears a medallion of Santa Barbara, a saint of immense power. So do her parents, a connection that needs no explanation.

But what is faith without action?

In 2013, Angelita founded Servios de Esperanza, staffed by culturally diverse therapists. This year, she added author to her accomplishments. She wrote and published, “En La Casa, En La Escuela,” a bilingual and bicultural children’s book.

“We wanted our ‘littles’ to see people who look like them ... to be included,” she explains.

## Jeff VanDyke

Muskegon

Peer Mentor, Disability Network West Michigan



*“The earlier you can be around somebody with a disability, the more comfortable you are.”*

Jeff VanDyke could start the conversation anywhere — his job, his awards, his volunteer work.

But he chooses to start at the beginning.

“It is important for people to know I was born with cerebral palsy,” he says.

That’s why he relies on a wheelchair for mobility, why his speech is mildly compromised, why some of the world — not all, but some — see him as different.

Again, he steers the conversation to personal experience. It is the best way he knows to dispel misconceptions, by letting people see him not as a label, but as the man he is.

“I find if I can just talk with people, they see me, not the (wheel)chair,” he says.

That’s why he loves talking with people, disarming them with his sense of humor and honesty.

“Kids especially are curious,” he says. “They can ask me anything. It’s OK. I want to expose them to people like me.”

A 2006 graduate of Muskegon High School, Jeff was in the minority, navigating the hallways and classrooms in a wheelchair. He often shared a health care aide with other students. Rather than complain he didn’t get enough attention, he says it was “a good thing because it made me more independent.”

After attending Muskegon Community College, he started volunteering at Disability Network West Michigan, even winning the Volunteer of the Year Award. His dedication earned him a job as a peer mentor and graphic designer.

His work is being noticed. Among other honors, he was named one of the 2022 Future 15 young professionals by the Muskegon Lakeshore Chamber of Commerce.

“I want to draw on my experiences to help others,” he says.

## Wendy VanWoerkom

Norton Shores  
Spinner

*“I like making things from nothing.”*

She is a spinner.

She weaves. She knits. She tats, which essentially is making lace. She dabbles in needle felting.

There are days Wendy VanWoerkom even dyes her own yarn.

“Being creative is how I re-charge,” she says.

A program assistant at Lakeshore Museum Center, Wendy knew she wanted to get into museum work early in her education. She found her future in history when she went to work for George Washington’s Mount Vernon, the legendary estate of America’s first president.

It was on Washington’s farm that she was introduced to spinning, the fine art of twisting wool — or silk, linen, and cotton, even some synthetics — to form yarn. She loved the rhythm of the spinning wheel, controlling the speed with her feet, and the feel of the yarn as it passed through her hands. She loved knitting with the yarn that was once raw wool, yarn that couldn’t be found anywhere else because it was made by her own hands.

And she loved the sense of history when she was behind the wheel. In the days of old, women packed up their spinning wheels — their quilts, their knitting, their handiwork — and got together in sewing circles, quilting bees, and beyond.

“This is very social,” Wendy says, talking as she twists wool into yarn that could become socks or a sweater or find its way into something she weaves. She has several wheels, each with its own distinct personality, some more portable than others, one even electric. And like most spinners and knitters, she always has a big supply of yarn on hand.

“It really is fun,” she says, “and it is like magic, if you look at what you start with and what you end up with.”



## **Monica Watts**

Norton Shores

Phlebotomist, Lab Assistant Trinity Health Muskegon



*“I love phlebotomy.”*

Monica Watts knows lots of people dread getting their blood drawn.

And she gets it.

But she has a secret weapon, one that almost always puts her patients at ease. She greets each person like an old friend, grateful they’re there.

“I want to be that person who makes sure people are taken care of and comfortable,” she says. “I love the interaction.”

Often, all her patients need is a kind word, “somebody to cheer them up,” and although Monica doesn’t say it, someone to calm them down while she gets out her needles and tubes.

She’s so good at her job, she has a following. People call to see if Monica is working that day; they only want to be in her hands. They request her, ask for her by name.

“It’s the patients who keep me going,” she says.

She comes to her job acutely aware of life’s sorrows and the need to heal. The mother of two living children, she lost a nine-day-old baby. She shares that information because she knows so many of her patients are there for diagnoses and test results, not always good.

“They need to see a friendly face and a smile,” she says.

A team leader, Monica does more than “poke” people. She and her co-workers do everything from taking and testing urine and stool samples to spinning blood to get test results.

This wasn’t her first goal in life. Growing up, Monica wanted to be a teacher, a flight attendant, or fashion designer. Her grandfather was a dialysis patient. She helped him to and from appointments and found what she wanted to do for a living.

“I made a promise I would do this until retirement,” she says.

## **Kim Marie Wood**

North Muskegon  
Beekeeper

*“My husband says I don’t always talk about bees.  
Sometimes I sleep.”*

Kim Wood always wanted to be a beekeeper.

It was tops on her bucket list, once she retired from Western Michigan University, where she taught German and English as a Second Language. She’s always been a woman of many interests - Master Gardener, dog trainer, rescuer of abandoned animals, birder, pollinator educator, protector of wild spaces — and that’s just for starters.

But beekeeping intrigued her.

“There’s just so much to know,” she says.

Typical Kim, she ended up a walking encyclopedia. Did you know the beloved honeybee isn’t native to the United States? (It was brought over by Western European immigrants.) Or there are 15 kinds of bumblebees in Michigan? That bees native to Michigan don’t go farther than 200 yards from their hives, but honeybees travel two to three miles seeking food? Or that it takes 12 bees to produce one teaspoon of honey?

“Those are the worker bees,” Kim says. “That’s their whole life. They only live four to six weeks and they fly their little wings off.”

She can go on: She has at least 20 hives at home; tends as many as 75,000 bees per colony; spins her own honey every August.

But there is more to her story. Kim took up beekeeping only after helping care for her granddaughter, diagnosed with leukemia when she was three years old. When the little girl was declared cancer-free after three grueling years of treatment, Kim suddenly had unclaimed time on her hands. Time she gave to bees.

“Believe it or not, there is so much peace to this,” she says, even though the bees were buzzing everywhere. “I just love my bees.”

