

OCTOBER 2026

SALISBURY

the magazine

BACK TO LIFE

*Michelle and Ronny
Camilo restore the
Gaskill-Blackmer House*

Mac Tabby Cat Café
provides a calm respite
with feline friends

New Dog Adoption Center
aids in finding forever
homes for canines

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On the cover: Michelle and Ronny Camilo's Gaskill-Blackmer house (c. 1898) will be featured in this year's October Tour. (Sean Meyers photo)

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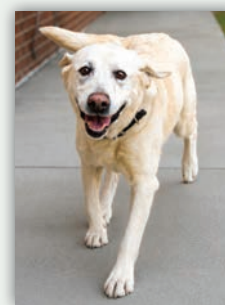
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This issue is packed with zz

When I was little, I loved hearing about obsolete words like:

Shackbaggerly: disorderly or messy.

Copper-clawing: a girl fight.

Taradiddle: pretentious nonsense.

Apricity: Glorious warm sun on a snowy day.

Excogitate: To have new ideas while thinking about another idea.

Gorgonize: To have a mesmerizing effect on someone.

But little did I realize a whole new dictionary of words would be created during my lifetime. Streaming services, I would have guessed would be some sort of canoe tour guide. Web server, of course, would be Charlotte by E.B. White. Meme, micro-plastics, vegan leather all normal terms today, were unheard of even 30 years ago. And if you'd told me that one day I'd be typing on keys smaller than a Chiclet on a keyboard that doesn't even exist, it would have totally blown my mind. And whatever happened to Chiclets, anyway? And Fizzies?

Fizzies were tablets you could drop into a glass of tap water — they fizzed — et voila! you had a soda! There were all sorts of flavors but my favorite was root beer. Mother would let me have one at Sunday dinner. I've googled them a few times over the years but they're no longer available.

Your October issue is jam-packed with good stuff, not as good as a root beer fizzie maybe, but close.

Every October, we feature one of the houses you can tour at OctoberTour. This year, the tour is Oct. 10, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Oct. 11, noon to 5 p.m. The home we've featured is the delightful Gaskill-Blackmer house, an 1898 Queen Anne Revival. She's painted in a distinctive four-color palette and the room size! Wait until you see her! Brenda Zimmerman spoke with the new owners, Ronny and Michelle Camilo, who had experience in building new homes in Florida. This is their first restoration.

Say it ain't so. Ester Marsh, THE exercise guru in Salisbury, is

leaving us. Jenny Hubbard brings us the story of Ester's arrival from The Netherlands and now, her departure for a new home in Virginia where she and husband Kevin can raise horses and be near grandchildren.

Dogs, not cats: This was Pete Prunkl's working title for the article about two new organizations that help people find their perfect support dogs. Both organizations were the brainchildren of the incomparable Nina Dix.



Rowan Original this month had to be Nina Dix! The issue is largely about animals and Nina is certainly a Dog Whisperer.

Cats, not Dogs. Kris Mueller returns to us after a years-long break from the magazine. She visited MacTabby Cat Café and brings us the scoop on this original place, one of three locations in the area. Did you know you can purchase a membership to allow you unlimited visits to see the feline darlings? The café rehomes all the cats they have and have racked up quite a few placed kitties. Read the article for more.

Theo of Golden is surely the most talked-about book this year! It's a simple book about a man committing simple acts of kindness but his generosity spawns kindness in return. Lovetta Ealy Moore brings us the review.

If you were counting, yes! We are bringing you four features this month as an extra treat. We don't do it often and yes, the page count is the same so we "squoze" in an extra this month. Hey, maybe "squoze" needs to be a new word...

Maggie

— Maggie Blackwell
Editor, Salisbury the Magazine

THROUGH THE LENS by David Powell

David Powell captured a female northern cardinal.

To submit a photo for Through the Lens,
send a high-resolution photo to andy.mooney@salisburythemagazine.com.
Vertical orientation is required.

A golden story

There's no doubt "Theo of Golden," authored by Allen Levi, is the most talked about, the most reviewed and the most purchased book of 2026. If you have not heard about this book, you are not on social media, not talking to your neighbors nor watching any talk shows on television.

"Theo of Golden" centers around an elderly, well-to-do and generous gentleman who moves to the fictitious town of Golden. In Golden, Theo begins the unusual practice of buying portraits displayed in a local coffee shop. The portraits are drawn by a local artist, Asher, who initially thought the portraits would be purchased. The citizens don't purchase the portraits, however, so they remain on the wall until Theo arrives.

Most reviews focus on Theo and his practice of buying the portraits and giving them to their owners. This practice is considered eerie, which causes eyebrows to raise among the townspeople but makes Theo a celebrity. As Theo purchases the portraits, he wraps each in common brown paper and personally present them to the subjects. The brown paper represents simplicity, silent strength and durability. Those are the qualities Theo sees in each individual and in their portraits.

The recipients of the portraits are as different individually as they are similar collectively. The first seven recipients are the foundation of the events in the book. The shared similarities between Theo, Kendrick and Minnette cannot be discounted. The love for the written word shared by Theo, Tony and Ellen is indescribable. The compassion Asher, Simon and Lamisha exhibit is emotionally touching.

The recipients range from a well-paid CPA to a disgruntled teacher turned street musician, to a homeless, mentally unbalanced bicycle-riding intellect.

One recipient is a mixologist and refers to himself as a therapist. Another is a college custodian balancing a job, a hospitalized

daughter and an ailing grandmother. Known to each other only as a face in the community, Theo brings them together much like a "Golden Family Reunion." Their differences as well as their likenesses are a critical aspect to the conclusion of the novel.

Levi gives Theo the magical quality of drawing in people to himself. These people share their innermost secrets with him without hesitation. They reveal their good, their not-so-good, their hopes, dreams and grudges without fearing Theo will make their private lives public.

It is difficult to convey all the factors the reader will find interesting, comical and even tragic without spoiling the entire book. It's even more difficult to explain the effect Theo has on the community, as well as how the community affects Theo. There is a character with whom each reader will be able to identify and connect. There are moments of happiness, moments of sadness and even moments of pure outrage and anger. Fortunately, there are also moments of human goodness, mercy and grace.

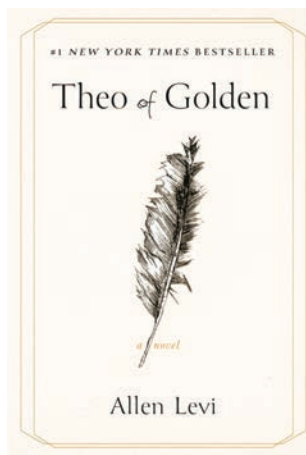
At one point around chapter 45, the overwhelming number of details of the recipients' lives became dull and dreary to me. Thankfully, I did not skip to chapter 62, which is probably the most significant chapter. Without the previous chapters, the essence of the meeting between Asher and Mr. Ponder, Theo's attorney, would have been lost.

The epilogue was a touching summary of the lives impacted by Theo. It was no surprise each person realized his or her true calling and chose to fulfill their dreams and aspirations.

There is so much that could be shared but you really need to experience "Theo of Golden" personally. After reading Levi's New York Times Bestseller, with over 2.5 million copies sold, you will wish your community had a Theo, or you may be motivated to become Theo yourself. What a golden community that would be. Happy reading! **[S]**



by
LOVETTA
EALY
MOORE



"Theo of Golden," by Allen Levi
Published October 2025,
400 pages

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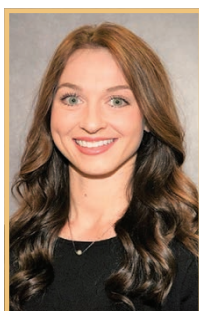
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ROWAN ORIGINAL

CANINE COMPASSION

Nina Dix has devoted her life to dogs

STORY : MAGGIE BLACKWELL

PHOTOGRAPHY : SEAN MEYERS



“Dogs have brought me the best people in my life, the best of everything. God used dogs. Sometimes I thought it was luck but it was God.”

It's an understatement to say Nina Dix loves dogs. She's been working with them all her life: as one of seven children, she had one dog. Today, she has 10.

When she dragged kitchen chairs into the yard and put a broom across them to teach her dog to jump, her mom encouraged her. She encouraged everything Nina ever did.

Nina and Dale married in 1994, 32 years ago and she says they have grown together as the years have gone by.

“Dale is the best backup person you could wish for. When I say I want to do this or that, his response is always, ‘How can I help?’ Some people would say that's a crazy idea but never Dale.

Nina took machining at Rowan-Cabarrus Community College and was the first woman to graduate in the program. Her dad and five brothers were machinists before her. She and Dale had a successful machining shop. When her mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, she had to find work that allowed her to be home with her. So, she and Dale started Doggie Holiday and they've never looked back.

The first night Doggie Holiday was open, they had five dogs. From that night, it continued to grow. The Dixes have 20 acres of

open land. Two sections, three acres each, are reserved for dog play. Dotted throughout the playgrounds are small concrete pads with a roof and a spigot. The dogs get two play sessions totaling four to five hours a day, depending on the weather. When it's too hot, they go outside early in the morning or the evening. Doggie Holiday is licensed by the Department of Agriculture.

“You should see them in the mornings when I open the gate,” Nina says. “They're lined up like kindergartners, waiting to go out and play.”

At the facility, Nina provides private dog training, group lessons, boards and trains dogs, provides dog therapy classes and service dog training and behavior modification. She also trains dogs and owners in the owners' homes



*Nina Dix with her
8 dogs.*

when necessary. Nina says some behaviors can't be resolved without addressing the home situation. She's been training dogs for over 25 years and trained with celebrated dog handler Cesar Milán in California in 2008.

Outside of Doggie Holiday, Nina has started three dog-related organizations whose purposes are to make life better for dogs and people.

Canine Caregivers, started in 2010, is registered with the American Kennel Club and insured. People train the dogs to serve as therapy dogs and Nina certifies them. Each therapy dog must be recertified annually. Nina ensures each dog has a good temperament and can work well with others. She required that she sees each dog several times a year to recertify.

Shelter Guardians, started in 2014, ex-

ists to help the Rowan Animal Shelter. One result of Shelter Guardians' work is the new, improved animal shelter on Julian Road. It's aptly named to honor Nina. Kennels are larger, brighter and there are more kennels overall. Today, the group funds medication for those dogs that are heartworm positive.

Shelter to Service, started in March 2025, may be nearest to Nina's heart. The program rescues dogs and trains them to serve as service dogs for veterans. The training program is nothing to sneeze at: it's six-to-seven-month program. The dogs are one to three years old and weigh from 40 to 90 pounds. To date, 15 dogs have successfully been paired with veterans.

"The veteran doesn't understand how much

a dog can do for them until they start going into crowded places. As the dog develops in protecting the veteran, their relationship starts to grow," Dix says.

For more on these programs, see the related article in this issue written by Pete Prunkl.

Nina trained the therapy dog Murphy at the Terri Hess House. She also trained the dog Semper Fi who lived at the Liberty Lane Hospice House at the Bill Hefner VA Medical Center for more than 10 years. He lived at the Hospice House during the week; on weekends, she brought him home with her "to be a dog."

To date, Nina has rescued more than 400 dogs. She's proud of that.

"I don't know where this came from," she says. "I think from God." **S**

HORSIN' AROUND

YMCA's Ester Marsh looks forward to retirement

STORY : JENNY HUBBARD | SUBMITTED PHOTOS

If you've ever been to the J.F. Hurley YMCA, then you know Ester Marsh. Even if you haven't taken her Estercize or Estelatte class, you can't miss her. She laughs loudly, smiles widely and pronounces everything with a rollicking Dutch accent. Her official title is director of healthy living. But come Dec. 31, YMCA members and readers of the Salisbury Post might be living a little less healthily because Ester, who never stops moving, is moving on.

She and husband Kevin are retiring to 38 acres in southern Virginia so that she can return to her first love: horses. Ester has been fascinated by them her whole life. "Even as a baby I was, my mom told me, and I was born in the Year of the Fire Horse, 1966," she says, "so maybe that has something to do with my passion for horses."

In the Netherlands where Ester was born, she was bound for equestrian college. When she graduated from high school at 16, she was already a groomer for a national jumper. She considers herself "super fortunate" to have been able to ride and learn and care for such quality horses. But because the equestrian college didn't admit students until they were 18, her brother suggested she try sports college until she was old enough to apply.

It wasn't a suggestion that Ester was averse to. "My brother went there," she tells me. "It's the top sports college in our country. So I went,



Ester on Takoda. (Submitted photo)

too. And I loved it. I blossomed. I was shy until college. It's funny: my high-school class predicted that I'd end up in theater." She dabbled in it, and if you've ever stepped a foot into one of her fitness classes, you can see why her classmates expected her to take to the stage.

Sports college was a natural fit. "I was good at judo," Ester says. "My mom was the fitness queen of Valkenswaard." Ester's hometown, translated, means Falcon Keeper. Her very active mom and dad ran a bakery, and in the summer, they closed it for three weeks, the usual vacation period for the Dutch, and traveled in Europe. In the winter, Ester and her younger sister would go skiing in Austria with their parents.

In Europe, Ester says, "people work to live, but in 'Murrica (how she jokingly pronounces America), people live to work. I miss the European mindset." Her parents instilled the importance of a balanced life. "After dinner, we always had a small dessert," she reports. "But we had to eat the rest of the meal first." I asked her if, as the daughter of a baker, she has a sweet tooth. She smiles and tells me about the time she once ate four eclairs in a row. She still loves desserts, loves them with a capital L, but nowadays, she eats them only in moderation.

It was a broad education, sports college. "What I do at the Y now is exactly what I studied to do," Ester says. "I learned how to run a whole fitness center: teach classes, manage the budget and the pool and the sauna, train volunteers, educate people about wellness. I learned what drugs and alcohol can do to your brain by working with teens who were addicted." She is still passing that knowledge on. "Once you've seen it in action," she adds, "it's not something you forget."

After college, Ester aimed to travel the world. She is fluent in four languages — Dutch, German, English and French — and traveling, like fitness, is also in her blood. In 1959, her father got a contract with the Holland America cruise line going to New York City. "He made all of their beautiful breads and pastries," she says. "When Dad worked, he did great, but when he wasn't in the kitchen baking, he would get very seasick, and when they asked him to extend



Ester with sister Christell. (Submitted photo)

his contract, he declined because of it. He had some regrets about it, though, as he wanted to see more of the world."

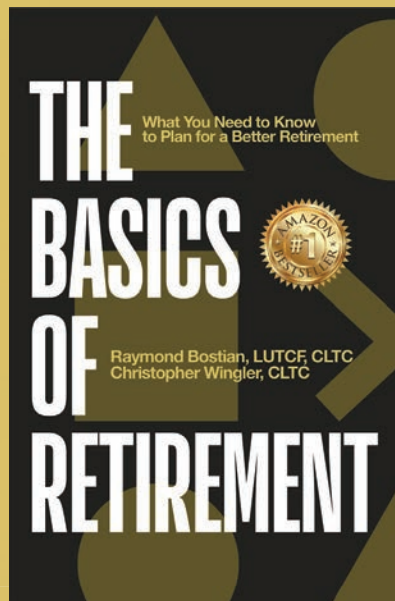
Ester's three siblings have traveled widely, but all of them returned to the Netherlands. It was Ester's plan when she came to United States in 1988 to be here for only one year. But then she fell in love — "multiple times," she says with a hearty laugh — and it was one of the loves that kept her here. "It was very hard at first, being an immigrant," she notes, "but I have built a

beautiful life here and have amazing people surrounding me." The 4,215 miles between here and Valkenswaard does not deter her immediate family. This past August, her sister and older brother made a surprise visit to Salisbury to celebrate Ester's 60th birthday.

Ester flashes me back to August of 1997, when she moved from Florida to Salisbury, where her husband had taken a job. "Gold's Gym was looking for a trainer," she says, "but the gym was still being built, so someone suggested the Y." She



Makayla Dillon (left) watches Ester Marsh (middle) demonstrate a defensive move on Caroline Parrott (right). Marsh led a self-defense class geared for young women in 2016. (Jon C. Lakey file photo)



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has told this story before, in one of her weekly columns for the Salisbury Post, so I'll just summarize it for you here. Susan Musselman was the one who gave Ester her first glimpse of the old Y, the one on North Fulton. As Susan walked Ester through it, she thought, I can't work here. This building is so depressing. But then Susan said the magic words: "And when you work here, childcare is free."

Ester laughs. "I had two toddlers! As you know, YMCAs are very family-oriented. The Y was the answer, even if its halls were dark and as smelly as dirty socks. But guess what? After a week of working there, I saw it as Susan saw it: the Taj Mahal."

Ester has now logged 29 years at Salisbury's Taj Mahal, where she has inspired hundreds of us. I asked her who at the Y had inspired her. "Oh, this is hard," she says. "I have, and have had, so many people who do and have done that. My No. 1 inspiration has to be Kenno Shoaf. He was my colleague for 25 years, and this man didn't let anything stop him. His positive attitude was contagious. Any time I would feel down, I would think about how Kenno handled his adversities."

Ester finds it heartening to witness people, "no matter their age or ailments, living their lives to the fullest — people who move forward, keep working hard, trying to be the best they can be with the body and mind they currently have." She emphasizes how fortunate she has been, to have had so many amazing people in her life. She knows it will be very, very hard to leave. In the half-hour I spent sitting down with Ester in her office, YMCA members kept poking their heads to say, "I just heard you're retiring!" It was clear they aren't thrilled with the news.

But surely, the people who know her are thrilled for her. Not many of us are able to make our childhood dreams a reality. Ester has known all her life that she belongs with the horses. "I truly love everything about them," she says, "their looks, their smell, their strength, their agility, their acceptance of letting us work with them and ride them. Grooming them, cleaning stalls, feeding, you name it, I love it! Whenever Kevin and I are in the car and I see horses, I must look.



Kevin and Ester Marsh after completing one of their races in 2013. (Submitted photo)

When a horse trailer passes by, I have to find out if there are horses in it. I truly love all animals, but horses are definitely my No. 1."

Right now, Ester and Kevin have two. She never owned her own horse until she moved to North Carolina. Her current horse, Takoda, is a five-year-old Morgan, and she is, of course, "absolutely in love with him." She chose his name because it means "friend to all" in Sioux. Takoda "loves people," she says, "and he loves to please." Kevin got his horse about four months ago, a four-year-old Saddlebred named Zeus, and the horses get along great. Ester laughs her rich laugh and says "They are like two teenage boys!

They rough-house and play hard."

For now, Ester reports, they'll limit the number of horses to two. But she imagines that she'll end up teaching horseback riding on her farm. One thing for certain is that she'll hold Camp Jaja there, her one-week annual camp for her three granddaughters, currently aged 7, 4 ½, and 4. I'll go out on a limb here and predict that they, too, will become horse girls.

Ester pointed out that 2026 also happens to be the Year of the Fire Horse. She didn't have to say what I was thinking: that it makes perfect sense — a cyclical, spiritual kind of sense — for this to be the year she keeps moving on. **[S]**



CATS & CAFFEINE

Mac Tabby Cat Café provides a calm respite with feline friends

STORY : KRIS MUELLER | PHOTOGRAPHY : SEAN MEYERS

It's another high-energy morning at the Mac Tabby Cat Café in downtown Salisbury as patrons enjoy the antics of its adoptable cats. Advertised as a hybrid business — half coffeehouse, half cathouse — Mac Tabby seeks to connect homeless felines with humans wanting to give them forever homes. But it really accomplishes so much more.

In the cat room, a brown tabby kitten named Turkey Tail (after a type of mushroom) is hiding on the floor in a long cat tunnel with a hole in the side. When he sees the shadow of another cat approaching the tunnel, he lunges through the hole to paw-pop the passerby on the head.

Nearby, a young girl is flipping a feather wand toward three black cats who jump, tumble and land in a heap as they vie to snag the feather. Just steps away from all the chaos, Turkey Tail's sibling — Lion's Mane (yes, another variety of mushroom) — has fallen into a deep sleep with his face nestled into the fluffy cat bed and one leg draped over its edge.

It's then that Botswana (named after the African country) exits the litter box room. A large, beautiful white cat with black and orange tabby markings on her head and neck, Botswana wiggles through the cathole in the door, strikes a regal pose, then surveys the room. Her pageant-worthy walk takes her across the room where a ceiling lamp has cast a warm circle of light on the floor. She lies down, stretching her long body to its full length, and promptly falls asleep.

"Botswana is very pretty and she knows it," comments Shannon Wright, the cat café manager. "She likes to stand under the spotlight and show off. But she also is snuggly and sweet and has a maternal instinct that shows with children. She doesn't really have a lot of attitude — we call it more an air of confidence."

Lori Konawalik opened Mac Tabby Cat Café in Salisbury two years ago, creating her third location in the region. Her first cat café opened in



Employee Shannon Wright makes drinks for customers.



Marc poses for the photographer.

Charlotte nine years ago, followed two years later by the Concord location. Opening the third café gave Mac Tabby the distinction of having the most locations in the country, according to the website ThatCatLife.com. Together, the three locations have helped 2,495 furry felines find their forever homes.

After working as a photographer for 10 years, Konawalik decided a decade ago that she needed a new direction for her professional life.

"I wanted change, but wasn't sure what that was," she recalls. "I knew cats were going to be involved — I have loved them since I was a child. I also wanted to create a space where

people felt happy and could leave their worries outside, could have coffee and community and animals and everyone could benefit from the reciprocal relationships. That's always been my driving force.

"Our team, our space, our animals and those coming in created our culture as it is now, and everyone who walks in feels that energy," she continues. "If someone comes in in a bad mood, they don't leave in a bad mood. And those good feelings shift to the next people walking in.

"Some people spend a lot of their time with us. That is such a huge testament to the team we have built and the way that we love people and cats," Konawalik adds. "There are so many people who have told me our team has helped them with so much in their lives. We treat them with the same kindness, respect and patience we give our cats and I think people feel that and feel appreciated here and cared for and it makes them happy."

Her patrons agree.

"It is important to me personally to get out of the office at lunch... to have a moment that is not about the work routine," says John Rummage, who works downtown and visits the cat café at lunchtime most days. "There is a lot of joy in cat play. It is so much fun to sit and watch them go crazy after a toy and have one sit with me and play. It's really hard to beat caffeine and cats!"

Like Rummage, many regular customers purchase \$50 monthly memberships to get unlimited visits for two people at all locations and 15% discounts on café items — coffee, smoothies, baked goods — and store merchandise, including T-shirts, jewelry and artwork.

Other Mac Tabby customers say the cats not only create joy but are very therapeutic for humans.

"Part of what drew me to Mac Tabby was the atmosphere," says Jet Taylor of Concord, who visits all three locations regularly. "I have a lot of stress with what is going on in the world today, whether it's the politics on TV or the rude drivers on the road. Coming here is a way to escape all the noise going on out there today. I



Explorado takes a leap for a cat toy.



Lions-Mane lies down for a nap.



John Rummage is a daily visitor to the cafe for coffee and often visits the cats.

can come in here for a while and my blood pressure and heart rate drop. It helps calm and center me.”

Mac Tabby’s three locations, each located in historic buildings, are tailored to each city’s unique environment.

“When creating the spaces, it’s more of a gut feeling,” Konawalik says. “It happens organically from the energy each space has. They all have the same vibe and energy and loving feeling, but the design and pieces in each location have been chosen to fit that city.”

Jenn Elum Board, a native of the Salisbury area, helped open each of the cat cafes and remains active with the businesses.

“All of the Mac Tabby locations have a beautiful history and Lori is very dedicated to their history,” Board says.

For the Salisbury cat café, Konawalik obtained antique church pews from the Salisbury Historic Foundation to use in the seating and conversation areas on the café side of the building. She also created a time capsule wall in that area, featured exposed sheetrock on the walls and used old wood found in the attic to accent other walls.



Cat-themed items are for sale as well.

And, of course, feline décor — including cat wallpaper, artwork, and merchandise (jewelry, T-shirts, etc.) add to the visual appeal and theme of the business.

“There is this sociological concept called third place — the place outside home and work you want to be during the extra time you have in your schedule,” Board continues. “It’s here for me. And it’s the place I want to bring my friends when they come to town. Shannon knows my order at the café counter, always gives me a big hug. It’s this warm place where you feel at home.”

“And this also is a really gorgeous redemption story,” she says about the Mac Tabby business model. “The cats and the building locations have been rescued, and in the case of many customers, they have been changed by their involvement with the cats.”

As Taylor listens to the conversation, he offers a final observation.

“The bottom line is, YOU care,” he says to Konawalik. “You are not just saving cats, you are saving people, too.”

...

This story would not be complete without a report on the cats we featured.

Botswana and Hemlock, one of the black cats, developed a strong bond at Mac Tabby and were adopted together.

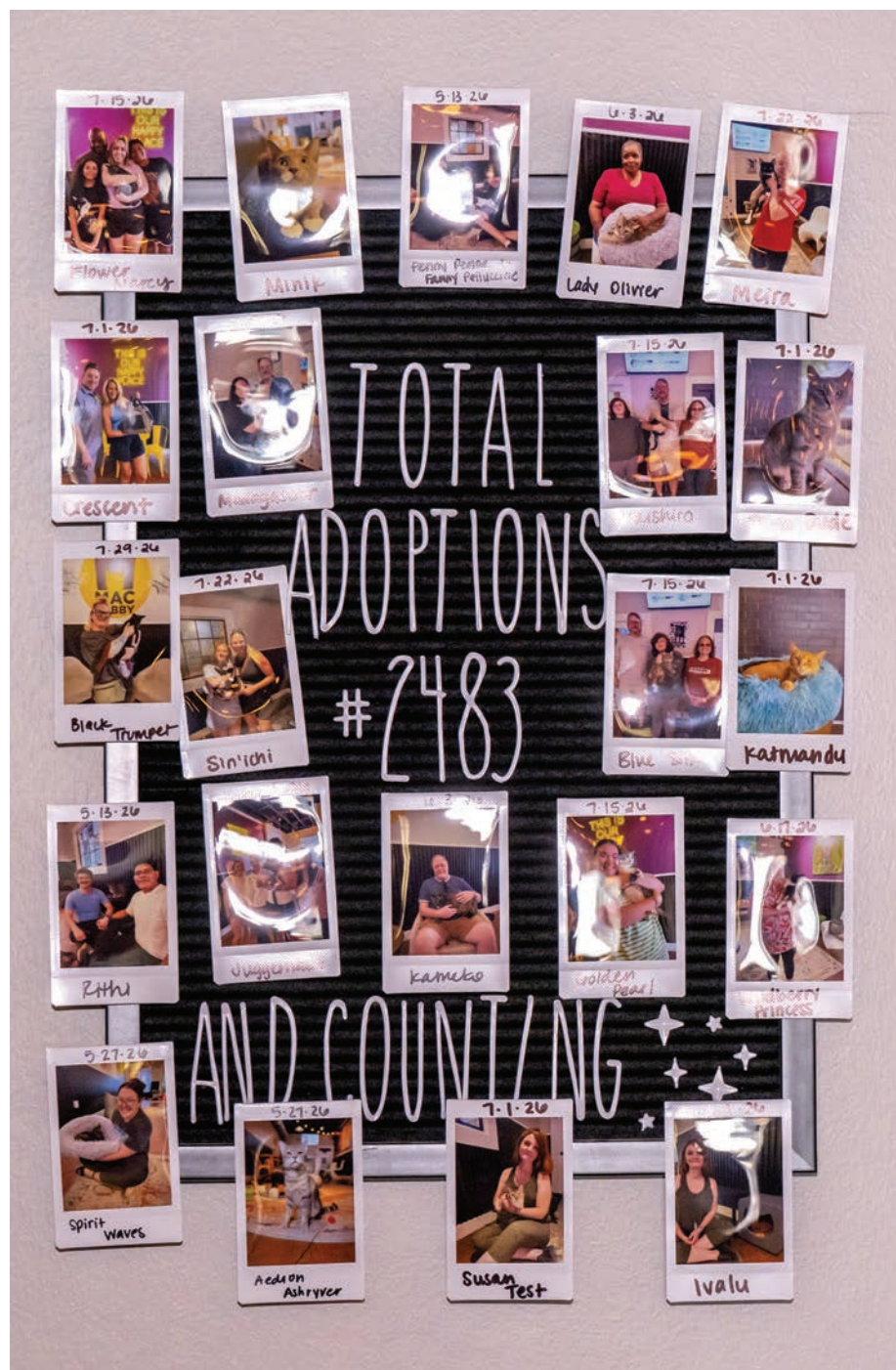
The 4-month-old brown tabby kittens named after mushrooms all found permanent homes. One stayed with his temporary foster mom who decided she could not part with him. Shingle Tooth was adopted shortly after arriving at Mac Tabby and missed the magazine photo session. Lion’s Main and Turkey Tail were adopted together after participating in the magazine interview and photo session.

Bo-Berry Biscuits, a 3-year-old male Tuxedo cat (black and white), was still at Mac Tabby waiting to be adopted. He was rescued outside Bojangles (hence his name) with a feral colony of cats. Very shy and loving, “Biscuit” likes to stick right next to people he is comfortable with — like Velcro, Wright said. Hopefully he has found his forever family.

Visit the Mac Tabby website at www.mactabby.com to learn about fees charged to visit the cat room or to adopt cats through Mac Tabby’s partnership with local rescue organizations. Due to the way Mac Tabby is permitted, it is not able to take in stray cats from the public. It is required to work through rescue organizations to obtain adoptable cats to feature in its cat cafes.

The website also has links to local rescue organizations and to information on the Trap, Neuter, Vaccinate and Return (TNVR) process that is helping control the growth of the feral cat population in our area. **[S]**

Kris Mueller lives in Salisbury and is a long-time journalist and writer.





Lori Konawalik gives the cats some loving at the Mac Tabby Cat Cafe on East Innes Street.



Faith Forrester plays with Shingle-Tooth in the cat room.





Maria Pannell, animal services director for the shelter, works with Meadow, a German Shepherd stray that awaits adoption.

It's a DOG'S LIFE

New Dog Adoption Center aids in finding forever homes for canines

STORY : PETE PRUNKL | PHOTOGRAPHY : SEAN MEYERS



A lot has changed for the better in the lives of stray, unwanted or stay-at-home dogs in the past 30 years. For homeless pups, the changes have been a complete turnaround. For Rovers living at home, many have found new purpose in their carefree lives.

Between 400 and 500 stray and unwanted dogs show up at the Rowan County Animal Shelter each month. In 1995, when the shelter first opened, those dogs had a two-week life expectancy. If not adopted in that time, they were euthanized. Their brief stay at the shelter was no holiday. Cages were cramped, cats were down the hall and the place was hot in the summer and cold in the winter.

Times, policies and opinions have changed since the '90s. That old building, now closed to the public, is used for storage. The gas chamber has been gone for over a decade and the furnace where animal carcasses were once cremated has been repurposed. Today, the government uses it to burn unwanted prescription drugs and discarded criminal evidence.

In 2023, with funding from multiple donors including the late Nancy Stanback and with inspiration from shelter staff and the non-profit Shelter Guardians, the new Dog Adoption Center opened its doors. The 11,600-square-foot fully air-conditioned

and heated building with 46 large, bright, windowed and clean kennel cages cost \$2.5 million. In addition to the kennels, which are on the outer walls of the building, there are interior rooms for intake, food storage, laundry, grooming, surgery preparation, surgery, recovery, offices, restrooms and a break room. There is even a shower room for animal control staff who encounter a skunk or a sick animal. No tax dollars were used to design and build the Adoption Center, which was named in honor of Shelter Guardian Founder Nina Dix.

Outside the lobby window are two outdoor artificial turf play enclosures paid for by Shelter Guardians. Here adopters can play with their potential pet to gauge its activity level, which may be too high, too low or just right.

Thanks to Nina Dix, some shelter dogs are finding jobs as well as a new home. In the early 2020s, Dix started Shelter to Service, a program that matches honorably discharged combat-injured veterans with a dog rescued from the shelter. "We look for dogs between 40-90 pounds, ages from one to three, a very balanced temperament and not aggressive," said Nina. "It could be any breed."

Veterans with PTSD, traumatic brain injury or other disabilities are candidates for Shelter to Service. The six-to-seven-month training program teaches the dog to protect the vet in social sit-



The Nina Dix Dog Adoption Center at the Rowan County Animal Shelter has helped place numerous dogs in loving homes.



The lobby staff, from left: Diana Ortiz, Sacha Rabon, Olivia Nichols and Maria Pannell.



Staff member Missy Kirkland plays with Jersey, a new puppy up for adoption.



A group from Shelter to Service at the bowling alley. (Submitted photo)



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Casey awaits an adoption and new family.

uations. "The dog creates a personal space for the vet, so they don't feel stressed about being in public," said Dix. "The dog learns to block people and warns the vet about someone behind them." A lot of veterans isolate from others, said Dix and a service dog helps them get back to feeling comfortable in society and with their family. "Out of all the things I've ever done, this is probably the most fulfilling," said Dix.

Dix, a professional dog trainer and dog behaviorist, first came into public prominence in 2014 with the founding of Shelter Guardians. The non-profit's first campaign was to kickstart a consistent intake vaccine program at the Animal Shelter. Dix and the Guardians purchased all intake vaccines for over 5,000 dogs and cats that year. Thanks to her initiative, Rowan County began funding the program in 2015.



Kimberly Zeledon of Charlotte holds Baby, a blind and deaf dog up for adoption.



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Sea, a border collie mix awaits adoption.

Shelter Guardians followed the vaccine program by funding a much-needed surgery and intake room in the old shelter building. The room was used for spaying, neutering and life-saving medical procedures for both cats and dogs. The new surgery suite in the Dog Adoption Center replaced that first room and like its predecessor, cats are admitted too.

Shelter staff's role in saving homeless dogs should not be overlooked. "Our euthanasia rate was low before Shelter Guardians," said Director of Animal Services Maria Pannell. "Adoptions increased when we put photos on our Facebook page and when staff cold-called rescue organizations for adoption." That effort began in 2014. By 2022, the shelter was given its first No Kill Award by the Best Friends Animal Society. No one, added Pannell, not staff, volunteers, animal advocates or the public, wants to be associated with euthanizing healthy, adoptable dogs and cats.

Besides rescuing dogs and putting them to work, Dix has also focused on giving home-based dogs a job as therapy dogs. Extensive evaluation and half-year training precede a dog's entry into Canine Caregivers. "A

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service dog is all about the handler,” said Dix. “A therapy dog is trained to help other people.” Those people include veterans hospitalized at the VA, patients at Novant, the elderly at nursing homes and children at Terry Hess Child Advocacy Center. The 10 dogs who graduated are certified by Dix; owners share the expense of insurance. “The whole point of therapy is to make other people feel happy,” Dix.

In August 2024, Shelter Guardians started a new program that provides heartworm treatment for every affected dog in the shelter. The treatment prevents heartworm for about a year and increases a dog’s chances of adoption. “Our staff now does the heartworm testing and Shelter Guardians pays for the treatment,” Pannell said.

If you are interested in adopting a four-footed friend, the Rowan County Animal Shelter is located at 160 Adoption Way, off Julian Road across from the county fairgrounds. Hours are weekdays 11-4 and Saturdays 9:30-3:00.

Interested in the other programs? Search for Rowan County Animal Shelter or contact shelterguardians.org to volunteer at the animal shelter. To start the evaluation process for Canine Caregivers, visit caninecaregiversnc.com. If you are a combat-injured veteran and want to be matched with a service dog, click the “Visit Shelter to Serve” tab at shelterguardians.org. [S]

Pete Prunkl is a freelance writer and resides in Salisbury with his wife Donna.



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Left: A large dog-themed mobile hangs in the lobby.

Right: A portrait of Nina Dix, painted by artist Cara Reische, hangs in the lobby.





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Original fireplace and oak floors adorn the front parlor.



BACK to LIFE

Michelle and Ronny Camilo restore the Gaskill-Blackmer House

STORY : **BRENDA ZIMMERMAN**

PHOTOGRAPHY : **SEAN MEYERS**



“When we took on the restoration of the Gaskill-Blackmer House, we had no idea how profoundly it would change us.” Michelle and Ronny Camilo bought their home in March of 2025.

With Italian heritage, Michelle was raised Brazil. At 17, life in the United States began when her family moved to Florida. Ronny and his family had moved to the U.S. from Brazil when he was 9. They met through extended family and have been married for 27 years.

For most of their careers, the couple worked as a team with high-end construction of condos and large homes. Ronny was a general contractor, Michelle an interior designer. They were well-known for their work in Florida.

Over the years, the couple enjoyed the N.C. mountains in the winter because they reminded them of Brazil. Family holiday traditions were built around N.C. winters. While most people go TO Florida in the winter, they did just the opposite.

In May of 2025, they became empty nesters and were looking for a change. Son Bruno had joined the United States Navy. Daughter Melissa was starting her life as a newlywed. In October of 2025, they sold their business and began house-hunting in earnest. In considering where to move, they were deliberate about choices in N.C., S.C. and Virginia. The intent was to take a year off from their careers to build their own home. By February, they had their home.

Looking online at new construction in N.C. slowly drifted into looking at the challenge of historical restoration, which was something they had never done. A beautiful home on Zillow got their attention immediately. The Gaskill-Blackmer house was for sale in a small town in central N.C. They were referred to local real estate agent Brittany McKnight. They did look at other properties but for some reason they could not fully explain, they “kept coming back to this house” even after exploring options in other locations. Extensive conversations went on for some time. They took a leap of faith and purchased it based on photos it before seeing it in person! By the time



A hallway was repositioned to include a new bathroom.



A remodeled upstairs bedroom.

they physically saw the house, they were in town for the closing.

Michelle said the biggest shock to her about working on an older home protected by historical covenants was the 127-page to-do list! Having always worked with new construction, they had a huge learning curve. Instead of pristine new construction. Michelle and Ronny began learning about the details that made an older home special. The patina of old brass hardware, the smoothness of old wood finishes, the creaks of floorboards, the mystery of little nooks and crannies, the beauty shown in imperfections. Michelle noted that “all of those interesting details that came exclusively with this house, were the things that made the work special every day.”

Ronny commented, “My experience in restoring this house is like when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. It’s bringing something that was considered gone, back to life. That brings us so much joy and reminds us how perfect God is and everything he does.”

The goal was to make the house a warm and inviting home while maintaining the 19th century integrity of its structure and history. The finished home should tell their personal story as well as the story of the life of the house without appearing to be a museum. “The house is a living story of history, architecture, design, craftsmanship and style for a specific period but we also want it to be story of who we are in today’s world.” They only made minor changes to the floorplan but did choose to change the use of certain



The remodeled kitchen still retains the original fireplace.



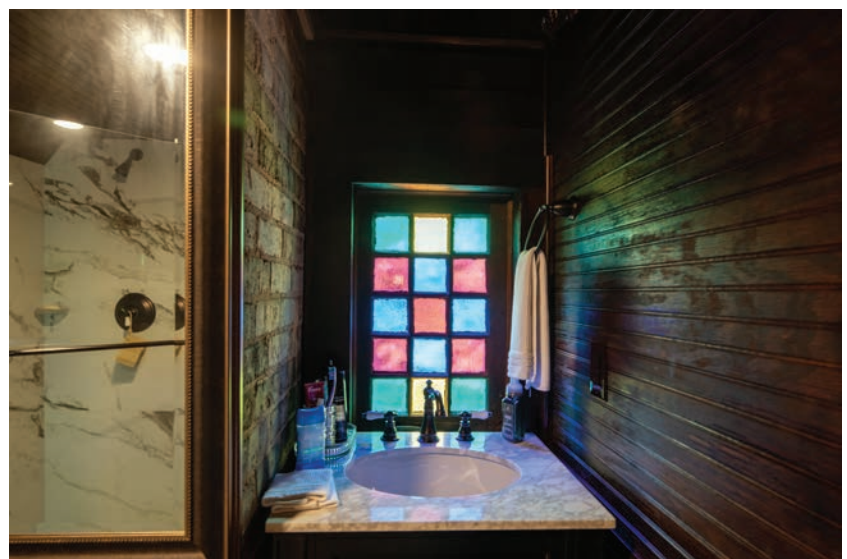
spaces. For consistency throughout the house, most of the hardware for doors was replaced with period-appropriate pieces. Light fixtures often changed location within the house but were used whenever possible.

They pulled the Victorian concepts into contemporary terms. For example, the parlor of the late 1800s greeted guests with an eclectic presentation of furnishings and accessories that reflected something about the family. The Camilos have done just that. Family treasures accent the room. Charcoal portraits of the couple are displayed. A cabinet displays keepsakes from their travels and family heritage. A Portuguese family Bible that belonged to Michelle's great-grandmother sits on a table. As you enter the home, this space pulls you in.

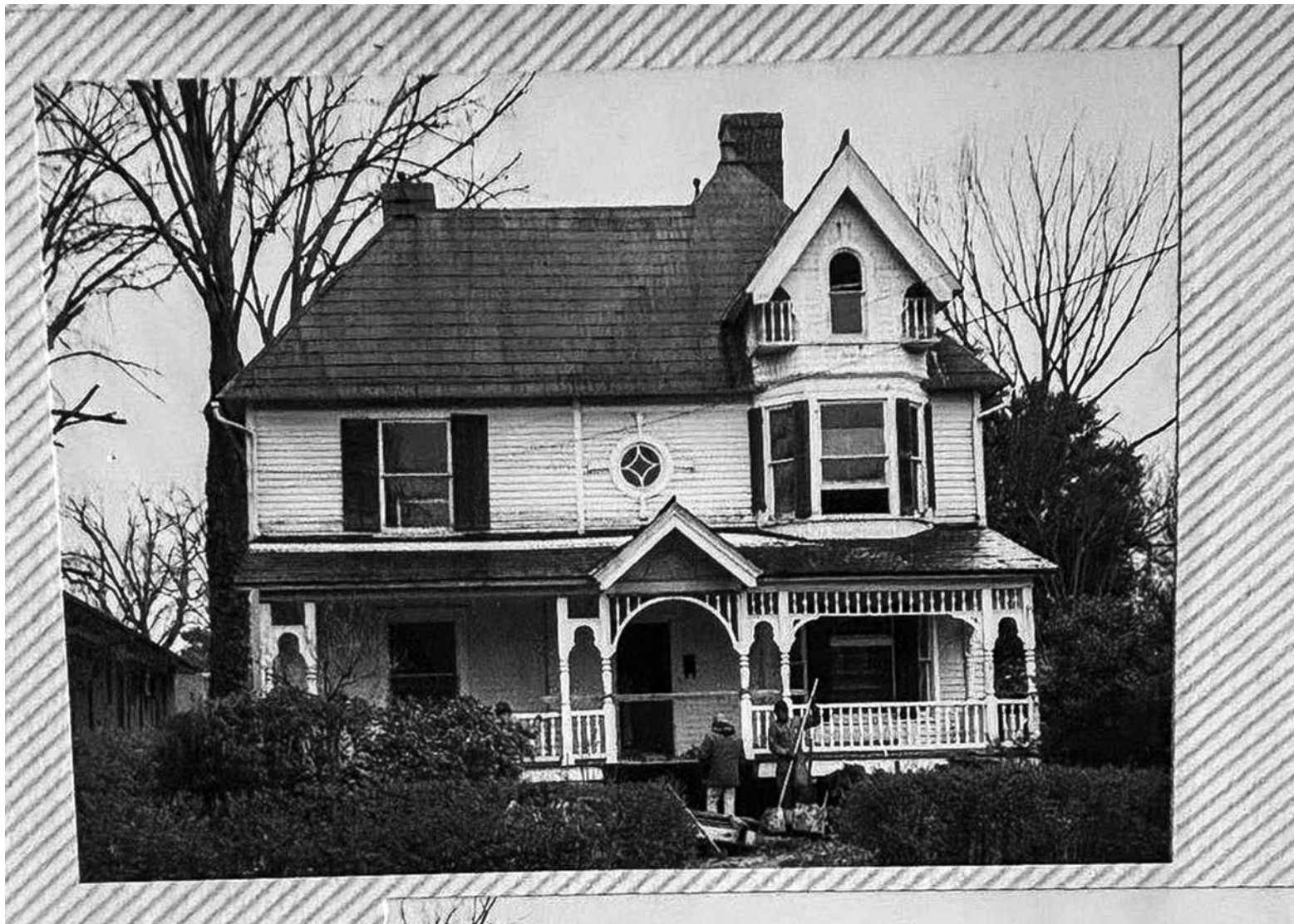
A luxurious upstairs bathroom has a freestanding shower built on top of marble floors. Michelle explained that when showers became popular in European homes in the Victorian era, many homeowners did not want to disturb the intricate mosaics and stone floors that already existed. This is the concept the Camilos chose. They drove all the way to Florida to get the custom glass and brass fittings.



Michelle and Ronny Camilo in front of their charcoal portraits.



An attic bathroom was added upstairs.



Above: An original fireplace in the parlor. Right: The front porch during the restoration process. (Submitted photo)





A wood-burning parlor stove will eventually heat the kitchen.



The bottle of wine that Ronny found hidden in the wall, produced the same year he was born.



Ronny works on replacing the floor during the restoration process. (Submitted photo)



A freestanding shower was built by the homeowners.

The Camilos commented early on that they wanted to be a part of a community. Michelle loves the changing seasons. "In Florida, it is about the same all the time, but here you see the leaves change in the fall and the beautiful colors of the spring. I walk down the street taking pictures of all the lovely flowers. And our very first year, we had a beautiful snow!" The couple found the true sense of community early. "I had heard the phrase southern hospitality, but I thought it was something in Hallmark movies. As soon as we moved in, people welcomed us with homemade bread and cakes. Everyone out walking stopped to comment on what we were doing. They invited us into their homes and to neighborhood gatherings. It was amazing." In the year they have been in Salisbury they have become active in the community at large as well as the West Square neighborhood.



*Above: A remodeled upstairs bedroom.
Below: Stained glass windows adorn the attic area.*



Most floors in the house were refinished to capture the patina of the old wood instead of having new replacement floors. In the kitchen, however, long years of leaky pipes had caused irreparable damage. Tearing out the floor revealed strong lateral cross bracing, evidence of good construction. Not only were floors completely rotten but the moisture had gone up into load-bearing walls as well. This major repair was essential to preservation of the entire structure. Another wall in the kitchen showcases original brickwork.

"The kitchen is the heart of our home," states Michelle. The bright open space is appointed with beautiful brass and glass shelving. An antique center island they found on Facebook Marketplace with a custom butcherblock top is the central feature. At first glance, the beautiful wood and brass hinges of the vintage-inspired refrigerator make you think it is an oversized icebox that might have been in the house in an earlier life. The welcoming breakfast nook is nestled in a corner overlooking the new deck.

Throughout the process of searching for a home and taking on the challenge to do this restoration, the couple said they prayed for a sign that would tell them they had made the right decision. One day while pulling out rotten boards behind a corner cabinet in the kitchen area, Ronny found a wine box with a bottle of Duplin County Scuppernon Wine. The family who completed the original restoration of the house



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The attic was redone to make it a living space.

in the 1970s had no idea how it came to be hidden in the wall. The year was 1978. Was it a sign? Could be. Ronny Camilo was born in 1978. The artifact now has a central spot in a display case in the parlor.

Perhaps one of the most interesting things in the parlor is a large art glass bowl filled with hand-forged square nails. For reasons they can't explain, the couple saved the nails they were pulling from walls throughout the restoration. The roughly 20 pounds of iron nails are interesting just as they are, but Michelle hasn't passed on the idea of turning them into art at a future date.

One significant change was creating a third floor by updating the attic. The unusual space presented a challenge in adding a full bath. The sitting area and bedroom are accented with original colored glass windows. Custom tongue-and-groove lath boards were used to match the existing walls. Area rugs and comfortable seating create a quiet retreat for reading.

The Camilos wanted to maximize their space

outside and gave it detailed attention. A beautiful 500-square-foot deck is accessed from the kitchen door. Carefully appointed with furniture and plantings, it is ready for outdoor entertaining. The entirety of the remaining backyard and driveway are finished with brick. Old Carolina Brick Company was chosen to create the brick. Not only could they duplicate brick that perfectly fit the need, but the couple wanted to support local businesses whenever possible as they made choices for materials. At the end of driveway, you'll notice a customized utility shed designed to match the house.

Stepping back offers a full view of the second level of the roof to see one of the most remarkable renovations of the home. At some point, the massive chimney was repaired with cement. Cement was put on the weakening chimney in much the same way that a cast would be put on an arm. Michelle and Ronny could not abide the unfinished look of it. After adding steel reinforcement bars, fresh cement was applied.

Ronny then scored it to look like brick and mortar. Michelle hand painted the incised surface to look exactly like the original brick, creating three-dimensional trompe l'oeil at its finest!

There is minimal outdoor space for planting. Every available inch, however, is planted for beauty and harvest. A fence along the driveway has alternating raspberry and blackberry vines with a pear tree standing guard at one end. The front entrance is framed with blueberry bushes. The deck is surrounded with raised beds for herbs. A peach tree creates a little oasis just outside the back door. The Camilos were careful to select plants native to the area. The small front yard has a formal boxwood hedge marking the perimeter.

"The Gaskill-Blacker house is not a museum. It's a living home where history and new memories exist together, honoring the families who came before us while celebrating the life our own family is building within these walls," says Michelle. **[S]**

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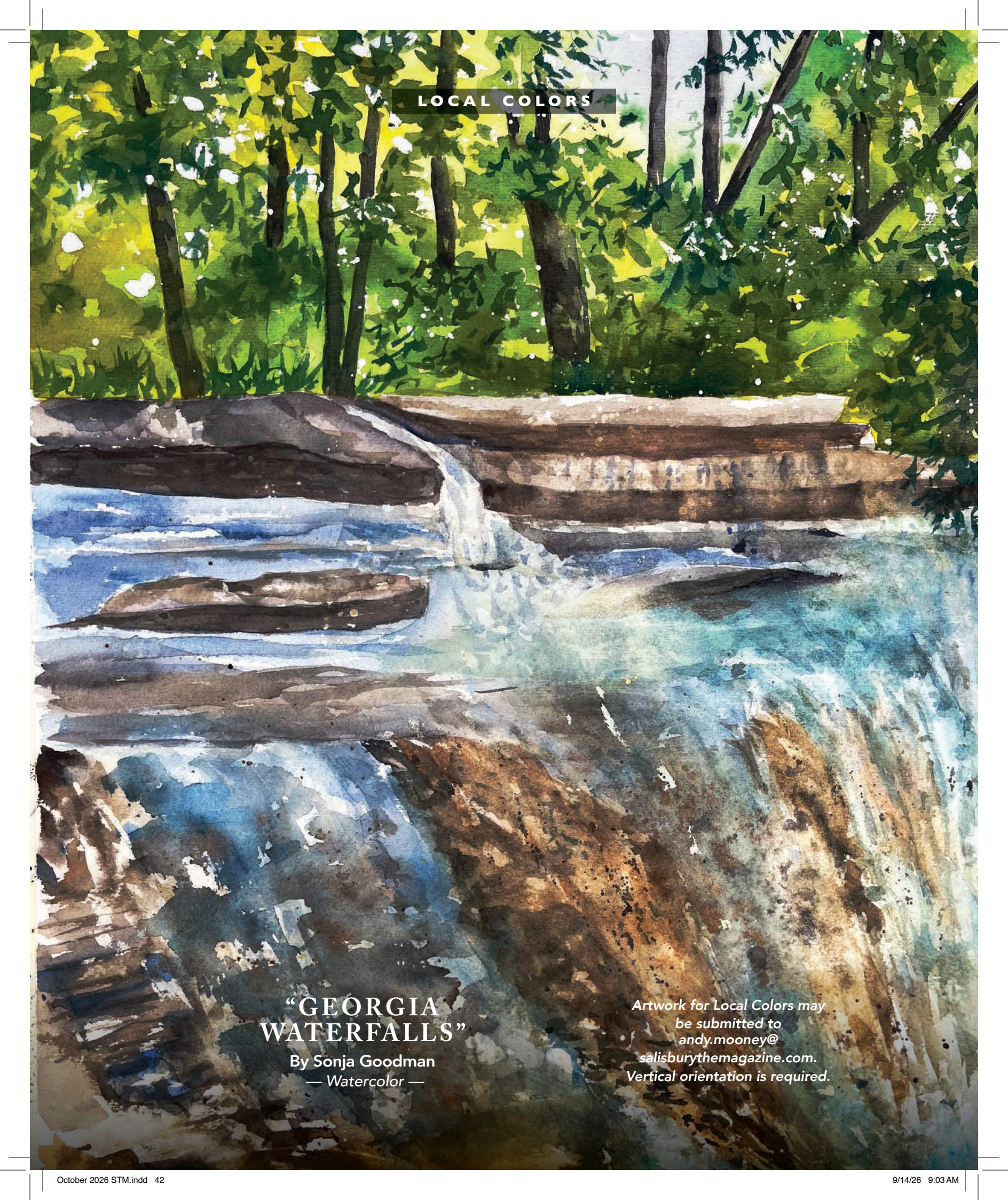
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