The Christian Science Monitor Weekly

"The object of the Monitor is to injure no man, but to bless all mankind."

– MARY BAKER EDDY

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CONTENTS

Cultivating self-reliance and cooperation

I grew up in the Upper Valley, a region of towns along the Connecticut River that straddles Vermont and New Hampshire. There, the river winds through the heart of New England, splitting Vermont and New Hampshire like an apple, before flowing across Massachusetts and Connecticut and emptying into the sea at the Long Island Sound.

My river-town high school was a convergence of residents from both states. Although stereotypes insist that Vermont is full of progressives and New Hampshire brims with conservatives, the truth lies somewhere in between. To the people who cross river bridges daily in the Upper Valley, everyone is a little bit of everything.

Long before "local food" became a fashionable term, New Englanders simply said, "I grew these tomatoes," or "We hunted pheasant this morning," or "I found a whole patch of wild raspberries at the edge of the pasture."

BY KENDRA NORDIN BEATO
STAFF WRITER

Among my high school friends, many Vermonters harvested from large, bountiful summer gardens. Others grazed sheep and raised chickens in their backyards. My friend Sarah's mom named their sheep Shish Kabob and Mint Jelly so they would think of them as food and not pets. My friend Zephyr regularly participated in transitioning chickens from the henhouse to the kitchen pot, saying the work earned her the privilege to eat them.

In the 1980s, brands that became nationally recognized were local to us. We smeared Cabot butter on our toast. For summer jobs, we scooped Ben & Jerry's ice cream. On Friday nights, we made pizza dough from scratch at the home of the people who owned what was then called King Arthur Flour because their son ran on our track team.

Although it's a Vermont company, King Arthur sources its wheat from the Midwest. And that's what makes a new wave of Vermont farmers growing heritage wheat, one of the developments in this week's cover story on the state's local food economy, so exciting.

As Stephanie Hanes' story illustrates, northern New England is a region made up of rugged individuals who value the cohesiveness of a community church supper, the kind of folks who will help drag a neighbor's car out of a muddy ditch without a second thought. This push-pull of independence and interdependence lays the foundation for an emerging local food system that aims to be free from distant corporate conglomerates. If anywhere is fertile soil for such an experiment, Vermont is the place. ■

DAMASCUS, SYRIA; AND AMMAN, JORDAN

Across Arab Mideast, a new alignment rises: An axis of cooperation

By Taylor Luck / Special correspondent

Banner portraits of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman hang from buildings and overpasses in Damascus. In the Syrian capital's hotels, Kuwaiti, Qatari, and Emirati investors fill the lobbies.

In Baghdad, at a successful Arab League summit, the Iraqi government declared its support for a united Arab world and its rejection of foreign interference.

And in Lebanon, with Hezbollah militarily diminished and on the back foot politically, a strengthened government is making diplomatic overtures to Gulf Arab states.

That's all in stark contrast to a year ago. After a decade and a half of turmoil and division, the Arab world is emerging united – with a Gulf-led bloc of Arab states on the rise.

In place of Iran's waning "Axis of Resistance," which once stretched from Iraq to Lebanon, a new moderate alliance is burgeoning in the Middle East: an axis of cooperation.

WHY WE WROTE THIS
COOPERATION

A new regional alignment is rising in the Middle East signaling a shift in power away from Iran's weakened "Axis of Resistance." Moderate Sunnis seeking stability and prosperity now have friendly governments in Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad.

Rather than militias, this new axis – anchored by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Jordan, and Egypt – is run by government technocrats and pragmatists who put stability, cross-border economic cooperation, and prosperity first.

Sectarianism is out. Deal-making for their countries' future is in.

"Iran has more or less lost its proxies in Syria, Lebanon, and even Iraq. Syria is looking to join the Arab axis of moderation. ... This is a geopolitical game changer in the region," says Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, a nonresident senior fellow at Harvard University's Belfer Center. "This is a good time for the moderate capitals in the Arab region," says Dr. Abdulla, a UAE national and retired professor of political science. "This is an Arab renaissance in the making."

Opportunity of a new Syria

The catalyst for this regional realignment was the fall of the Assad regime in Syria.

With Bashar al-Assad's eviction and the exodus of Iran and its proxies, Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia have rushed to engage Syria's new rulers to bring the country back into the Arab fold. In mid-May, Saudi Arabia successfully lobbied U.S. President Donald Trump to lift the United States' sanctions on Syria to prevent its further economic collapse – a foreign policy win for Riyadh and the moderate bloc.

In a viral social media response, Syrians mimicked the Crown Prince – who placed two hands over his chest in gratitude while Mr. Trump announced the lifting of sanctions – to express their own gratitude to the Saudi leader.

"The fall of Assad has enabled Saudi Arabia to counter both Iranian influence and Israeli military actions in Syria by supporting a new government open to Arab reintegration," says Dr. Hesham Alghannam, a nonresident scholar at the Malcolm H. Kerr Carn-

egie Middle East Center, in an email interview. "Saudi Arabia's diplomacy fosters this Arab-centric alliance focused on stability and reconstruction."

Meanwhile, in Iraq, a government led by Mohammed Shia al-Sudani is focusing on services and developments at home and promoting regional peace.

This turnaround follows a decade-plus of war, revolution, and terrorism that saddled the Arab world with several failed states, where non-Arab powers such as Turkey, Russia, and Iran intervened. The new axis acts as a first line of defense for moderate Arab states, protecting stability at home and ending foreign intervention in neighboring states.

"Despite the sectarian rifts, a new axis of Arab cooperation is emerging in Damascus, Baghdad, and Beirut," writes Dr. Alghannam, head of the national security program at Naif Arab University in Riyadh. These "pragmatic governments prioritize economic ties and sovereignty, reducing reliance on Iran's axis and resisting Israeli interventions. This axis strengthens Arab resilience against external disruptions" presented by Iran and Israel.

Gulf states are also using this nascent cooperation to export a vision for the region: stable states headed by pragmatic, moderate governments that look for cross-border cooperation and economic prosperity.

"For years the region was hijacked by extremists on both sides of the aisle, Shiite and Sunni. A main pillar of this vision is bringing not only stability, but moderation to the region; moderate, pragmatic governments," says Dr. Abdulla.

Another milestone for the rise of the moderate axis is President Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar in May. Mr. Trump praised Saudi Arabia's approach as "commerce, not chaos" and applauded moderate Arab states' vision. One Gulf Arab diplomat describes the Trump visit as the "crowning moment" of this Arab renaissance. "This is a new era for the region, one driven not by ideology or sectarianism, but by progress and cooperation," says the diplomat, who was unauthorized to speak to the press. "This is an Arab-led, Arab-driven realignment that brings sovereignty and self-determination back to Arab states. And it is being recognized by Washington."

Investment commitments

Only months old, this realignment is already bearing fruit, including investment in Syrian infrastructure and agriculture.

A Jordanian government delegation and Damascus agreed on a "cooperation road map" for irrigation, industry, trade, energy, and transportation.

A Gulf-Iraq electricity grid connection is expected by the end of 2025; it will see Gulf states provide electricity to Iraq to ease the country's energy crunch.

Meanwhile, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are moving to lift travel restrictions to Lebanon, a step toward rebuilding ties and the eventual return of Gulf tourists, previously a key driver of Lebanon's economy.

Yet moderate Arab states have struggled to make headway on the Palestinian issue, despite advocating for Gaza on the world stage. "The Palestinian issue remains a challenge for Saudi Arabia and Gulf states, with limited wins due to Israeli aggression in Gaza and U.S. policy constraints," says Dr. Alghannam. "Saudi Arabia's diplomatic efforts are stalled by Israel's actions, frustrating progress."

The unnamed Gulf diplomat says there's a sense of hope in Arab capitals that this bulwark of cooperation, which promotes a peaceful path to Palestinian statehood, will one day achieve results in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "There may be barriers to progress on the Palestinian issue, but for the first time in the 21st century the Arab world is united and is working as one with one voice," the diplomat says. "Across the region, progress and cooperation are on the rise." ■

The geography of Trump deportations: DOJ is seeking friendly courtrooms

By Henry Gass / Staff writer

A home security camera captured a defining image of President Donald Trump's mass deportation efforts.

On March 25, masked and plainclothes immigration officers stopped Rümeysa Öztürk on the street in Somerville, Massachusetts; handcuffed her; and placed her in an unmarked vehicle. A roughly one-minute-long video captured it all.

What happened next, out of the public eye, also exemplifies the government's aggressive approach to immigration enforcement. Less than 24 hours after her arrest, the Tufts University doctoral student had been whisked 1,500 miles across the United States to a detention center in Louisiana. In between, she had been held at three facilities in three different states.

Rapid relocation of immigrant detainees has been common in recent months. International students like Ms. Öztürk, in the country lawfully but deemed deportable by the secretary of state, have struggled to contest their detention. The government has taken a similar approach with migrants it says are Venezuelan gang members. The White House is trying to use an 18th-century wartime law to deport them without trial.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

To enact President Donald Trump's deportation goals, the Department of Justice is rapidly transferring detainees to areas seen as friendly jurisdictions. A growing number of courts are urging more restraint.

The Trump administration has said these quick-fire transfers are necessary for security reasons. In immigration cases, the practice is neither unlawful nor unprecedented, but it has raised due process concerns, particularly in federal courts.

The U.S. Supreme Court recently debated whether lone federal judges have the power to pause White House policy around the country. Yet some of those judges have been dealing with the reality of a more decentralized, justice-by-geography system. The Trump administration has been relocating immigrant detainees at a greater rate than past administrations, experts say, and White House officials have also questioned fundamental rights to challenge these actions.

Supreme Court ruling for habeas corpus

Litigation concerning the Alien Enemies Act of 1798 has been the most active stage for this legal debate. The Trump administration has been using the law to try and deport alleged members of Tren de Aragua – a Venezuelan gang it declared a foreign terrorist organization – to a prison in El Salvador.

On April 7, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously that challenges to the removals must be brought via habeas corpus, a longstanding right to challenge one's detention, in "the district of confinement."

Trump administration officials have suggested they might suspend habeas corpus, which is enshrined in the U.S. Constitution to protect people from being unlawfully detained. Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem erroneously described the right as "a constitutional right that the president has to be able to remove people from this country."

In April and May, federal courts across the U.S. temporarily barred the Trump administration from removing unauthorized immigrants under the act. As a result, the government has been flying detainees into one jurisdiction that hasn't: the Northern District of Texas. From there, immigration agents initiated expedited removal proceedings. These actions prompted a rebuke from the Supreme

Court as the justices paused Alien Enemies Act deportations in that district.

The government has broad discretion to transfer detainees in removal proceedings. Rapid transfers are more necessary when dealing with alleged members of Tren de Aragua, which began as a prison gang, the government says.

Immigration advocates are unsure exactly how many Venezuelans have been transferred to detention centers in the district. According to a Monitor review of court records, dozens were moved to the Bluebonnet Detention Center in Anson, Texas, in mid-April before being told they would be removed within a day.

When asked by the Monitor about transfers to Bluebonnet, an ICE spokesperson replied by email that "U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement does not provide population or capacity numbers due to operational and security concerns. ... The numbers fluctuate quite often as detainees are being processed, transferred to other detention centers, or being removed from the country."

In one case, the government transferred a 22-year-old Venezuelan from California to Bluebonnet on April 14, a week after the initial Supreme Court ruling. A day later, the government moved a Venezuelan from western Pennsylvania to Bluebonnet while a federal judge issued an order temporarily pausing such transfers from her district.

Statistics show that judges in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, which covers Texas and Louisiana, more reliably favor those seeking to deny habeas claims and deport immigrants.

"Attorneys see a statistical correlation between the circuit where a case is tried and the outcome," says Seth Chandler, a professor at the University of Houston Law Center.

That said, a federal judge in southern Texas has temporarily paused deportations from his district under the Alien Enemies Act. The judge in western Pennsylvania, meanwhile, is allowing them to proceed with strict due process requirements.

Government's explanations

International students like Ms. Öztürk experienced even more of a whirlwind tour of immigrant detention facilities. In the 12 hours after her arrest, the government moved her from Massachusetts to New Hampshire, and then to Vermont before her flight to Louisiana. Mahmoud Khalil, Mohsen Mahdawi, and Badar Khan Suri were all also deemed deportable by the secretary of state. They all had similar experiences after their arrests, according to court records.

While family members and attorneys tried to locate them, immigration officials shuttled the students between two or three local detention facilities before flying two of them to Louisiana. In the case of Mr. Mahdawi, a flight out of state left before he arrived at the airport. In the case of Mr. Suri, the government drove him to north Texas after three days in Louisiana.

The government gave various reasons for the relocations, according to court records, including a lack of bed space and bedbugs.

Three of the students have since been released pending a final ruling in their cases. Their lawyers successfully claimed they had filed habeas petitions in the hours between their arrest and their arrival in Louisiana. In the cases of Ms. Öztürk and Mr. Mahdawi, judges said they had significant constitutional concerns about their treatment.

Federal judges in Vermont and Virginia will continue hearing the three students' habeas claims. Immigration court proceedings are likely to continue simultaneously in those states. Mr. Khalil is still detained in Louisiana while a federal judge in New Jersey determines if he has jurisdiction over the Columbia graduate and green-card holder's habeas claim. An immigration judge has ruled that he can be deported.

The other students' releases and continued court fights would not have been possible without good legal representation, however. Most individuals subject to deportation have no lawyer. ■

DHAMRAI, BANGLADESH

Bangladeshis drove a people-power movement. Not all people won.

By Simon Montlake / Staff writer

When massive protests erupted last summer against Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, third-year information technology student Sukanto Barman was all in.

The student-led demonstrations toppled Ms. Hasina and ended 15 years of increasingly autocratic rule in Bangladesh. The uprising has set the country on a new path, with an interim government, led by Nobel Peace laureate Muhammad Yunus, preparing to hold elections by early next year.

But a clear victory for democracy in Bangladesh, a country of 170 million people, carried a sting in its tail. And that has led Mr. Barman, who is Hindu, to take up another type of activism: standing up for minority rights in a new political era.

Hindus make up around 8% of Bangladesh's population. Most had supported Ms. Hasina's secular government. In the chaotic aftermath of her ouster, hundreds of people died in reprisal attacks across the country. Hindus were among the victims: Their homes, temples, and businesses were attacked by mobs; thousands of Hindus living near the Indian border crossed over to seek refuge.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

People-power movements can break the grip of authoritarianism. But as is clear in Bangladesh, not everyone in society wins amid the sweeping change.

Now Mr. Barman and a group of fellow activists are documenting anti-Hindu attacks and threats, often at great risk to their own safety. But they complain that Bangladesh's interim government has failed to protect them. And their plight is receiving scant attention inside Bangladesh, in large part because of the country's fraught relationship with its dominant neighbor, India, where Ms. Hasina fled. There, the attacks on Bangladeshi Hindus are receiving a frenzy of media attention.

Mr. Barman has tried to get local authorities and police to punish the perpetrators, but with limited success, he says. "Our people are suffering."

Rise in violence

One national minority rights organization said it had recorded more than 2,000 acts of violence against Hindus and other minority groups last August alone.

Swapon Chandra Das was at home in his village on the outskirts of Dhamrai when the government fell last summer. Inside the walled compound where he lives with other Hindu families, abutting a Muslim village, craftsmen were sculpting an idol for a festival. A group of 60 to 70 men armed with bamboo sticks forced its way through the front gate and began breaking windows and smashing the idol. Residents sheltered in their houses.

"The people who attacked us were from the neighboring village," says Mr. Das. Some locals also came out to urge the attackers to leave, which they eventually did when police showed up.

Now the community lives in trepidation, unsure how quickly police would respond to a future attack.

The Yunus government insists that the vast majority of attacks on Hindus aren't religiously motivated and noted that overall public safety hasn't fully recovered since the collapse of the former regime. Of the more than 2,000 acts reported to police in August, only a handful were classified as communal as opposed to political or criminal.

Mr. Barman says police are too quick to blame attacks on politics simply because Hindus supported Ms. Hasina. He has tried to get Bangladeshi news media to report on these attacks but says they ignore or downplay them.

In neighboring India, however, it's a different story: The plight of Hindus in Bangladesh is front and center in broadcast and online media. Indian social media influencers decry what they call a genocide of Hindus and allege that Islamists have taken over Bangladesh.

This media frenzy is proving a double-edged sword for Mr. Barman. Mixed with reports of actual violence and robbery targeting Hindus is a swirl of false and misleading claims, including doctored images. Disinformation has made Bangladeshis cynical about India's defense of Hindu rights and wary of its meddling in their politics.

"The actions of India are not helping our campaign. When they spread false news, then the actual news isn't noticed," says Mr. Barman.

The role of politics

Accusations that human rights advocacy is tainted by domestic politics aren't new. China's government has long viewed Western concerns over Tibetan and Uyghur rights as efforts to undermine its legitimacy. On May 12, a group of white South Africans arrived in the United States after the Trump administration said it would grant them refugee status, claiming they were victims of racial discrimination. Resettlements of all other refugees have been suspended since President Donald Trump took office in January.

In Bangladesh's case, India's focus on Hindu rights is seen as part of a broader history of political tension between the two countries – a relationship complicated by India's geopolitical dominance in the region and the Hindu nationalist politics of Delhi. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to bilateral relations is Ms. Hasina, whom India refuses to hand over to Bangladesh to stand trial on charges of corruption and human rights abuses.

India's longtime support for Ms. Hasina has prevented it from seeing Bangladesh's new political reality and chilled bilateral ties, argues retired Gen. A.N.M. Muniruzzaman, who heads the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies. "They're making the same mistake that they did by putting all their eggs in one basket with [Sheikh] Hasina," he says.

Mr. Yunus recently met with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at a regional summit in Bangkok, their first meeting since the uprising. Mr. Modi raised India's concerns about Hindu rights at the meeting. Mr. Yunus has said that authorities were committed to upholding the rights of all Bangladeshis, including Hindus and other minority groups.

Some of the alleged perpetrators of attacks on Hindus belonged to opposition parties, including Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamist party that was banned by Sheikh Hasina. Some individuals sought to seize Hindu properties last August, taking advantage of the power vacuum, according to U.N. human rights investigators. (The U.N. investigators focused primarily on the killings of more than 1,000 students and other protesters during the uprising.)

Syed Abdullah Taher, a senior member of Jamaat-e-Islami, insists the party has worked hard to tamp down communal tensions. Some supporters may have broken the law last August but not at the behest of the party, which is preparing to contest the upcoming democratic elections.

A former member of Parliament, Mr. Taher says Hindus in his constituency supported him and had good relations with the party. "We live together, Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims, very peacefully."

The villagers in Dhamrai aspire to that multicultural harmony. In some respects, they are fortunate: Mr. Das' cousin, the community's leader, is a prominent educator. Their compound is near the capital, Dhaka, along a highway of brickyards and rice paddies, and not in the countryside where violent seizures of land often go unheralded.

But the community's political ties to Ms. Hasina's Awami League make it vulnerable. Politicians used to visit at election time, knowing that Hindus identify with their party. "Whenever an MP gets elected, they come to this community," says Mr. Das.

On a recent day, however, the village is quiet. Behind a tiled temple, goats graze in a courtyard. Firewood is stacked beside a long pit dug for a communal kitchen. The community is preparing to welcome visitors to another festival, to offer Hindu prayers in multifaith Bangladesh. ▪

NUMBERS IN THE NEWS

26,000

Square miles of the world's tropical forests estimated to have been destroyed in 2024, the most in a year in at least two decades. Nearly half of the forests were lost to fires. In Southeast Asia, however, some nations decreased total forest loss by strengthening burn bans and forest protections.

65

Percentage of researchers polled around the world who say they've never used artificial intelligence in any way related to writing a paper. However, 29% said they would be willing to have AI write a first draft, while 8% have already done so.

471

Defense firms present at Japan's largest-ever arms show. The May 21 event was double the size of the 2023 exhibition and was described by the country's defense minister as a sign of the pacifist nation's push to increase defense cooperation and weapons exports.

25

Percentage of American men ages 15 to 34 who said they felt lonely "a lot of the previous day," according to a Gallup analysis of data from 2023 and 2024. That's higher than the national average of 18%, and second-highest for this cohort in a ranking of countries of similar economic development.

32

Emergency hotel shelters for migrants in Massachusetts as of April 30, down from 100 in the summer of 2023. Gov. Maura Healey pledged to close them by this summer, as the flow of migrants to the state has ebbed.

1,300

Tons, the weight of a boulder perched on a 120-foot cliff on a Tongan island in the South Pacific. The rock was likely lifted there thousands of years ago by tsunami waves.

– Jacob Posner / Staff writer

Sources: BBC, Nature, Reuters, Gallup, Axios, The New York Times

OSOGBO, NIGERIA

Forest conservation has an unlikely ally: Faith

By Ogar Monday / Contributor

It's late afternoon on a Thursday, and Remi Adenike stands barefoot on the bank of the Osun River in southwest Nigeria.

Slowly, she lifts a calabash into the air, and begins to pray in Yoruba, first in a whisper, and then rising into a shout. "God, please hear the cry of your daughter," she says. "Bless the work of our hands, and let those around us see that we worship a god who answers."

As her voice travels across the water and deep into the forest, a troop of monkeys swings through a nearby tree, their calls serving as a chorus to her words.

She is praying to Osun, the Yoruba goddess of wealth, fertility, and love, whose shrine lies within this forest, known as the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove.

From India to rural Ghana, forests with spiritual significance like this one have long drawn worshippers and tourists. Now, however, they are also gaining global recognition for their role in forest conservation.

WHY WE WROTE THIS
COMMUNITY

There are many motives for protecting the natural world. One that's often overlooked in conservation circles is faith. A sacred forest in Nigeria demonstrates faith's power.

Faith, it turns out, is more powerful than a fence. "These places are succeeding where government policies often fall short," says Bas Verschuuren, an assistant professor of forest and nature conservation policy at Wageningen University in the Netherlands.

Rooted in belief

Around the world, sacred forests are protected by their connection to the spiritual world. The Yoruba people believe that the Osun-Osogbo grove, which sprawls across 185 acres of dense forest, is the goddess Osun's earthly home.

"This grove holds the soul of the Yoruba people," says Grace Folashade Ayodele, a guide with the National Commission for Museums and Monuments who shows visitors around the forest. "It's a reminder of our culture and identity, and our connection to our ancestors."

Scattered throughout the grove are about 45 shrines, along with sculptures and altars in homage to Osun and other Yoruba deities. The grove also houses two ancient palaces and nine riverside worship points, each maintained by priests or priestesses who inherit their roles through their family lineage.

Officially, the grove has three sets of guardians. The Nigerian federal government manages it as a tourist site. The local government provides and maintains the infrastructure. And local chiefs oversee traditional rites.

But outside this structure, the grove's true guardians are an unwritten set of taboos and spiritual obligations that forbid logging, hunting, or harming any living thing within its boundaries, explains Alao Eniafe, a local chief in the community, in a text message to The Christian Science Monitor.

"We are custodians of this land not because the government said so, but because our ancestors chose us," he writes. "If we break these laws, we offend both the spirits and the community."

Every August, this sacred bond between people and land is celebrated during the Osun-Osogbo Festival. For two weeks, the grove plays host to worshippers and tourists from near and far, who fill the air with music and dance as they proceed to the Osun River with offerings like kola nuts and palm oil for the goddess.

A line of defense

Recognition of sacred groves' protection of nature is growing. These sites can be just as effective at preserving biodiversity as formal protected areas, according to a 2023 study in the journal Conservation Biology. Just like national parks, sacred groves offer an environment where animals can reproduce and thrive, while also helping to absorb carbon, says Megan Sullivan, an ecologist and postdoctoral researcher at Princeton University, and co-author of that study.

This effectiveness has enormous implications for conservation, especially in regions where government oversight is weak or inconsistent. In Nigeria alone, more than 3.2 million acres of tree cover have disappeared since 2000 in a global deforestation crisis that has wiped out nearly 1.2 billion acres in two decades.

Yet, the Osun-Osogbo grove remains remarkably intact, providing sanctuary for more than 400 plant species and serving as a refuge for wildlife, including the endangered red-capped mangabey, a shy, tree-dwelling monkey with a rust-colored crown, puffy white cheeks, and expressive eyes.

Growing pressure

Still, this spiritual shield is not impenetrable. Roads, farms, and poverty threaten sacred groves worldwide. "It might start with someone gathering firewood or clearing a small plot for farming, but over time, those small intrusions add up," says Dr. Verschuuren, who also co-chairs the International Union for Conservation of Nature's specialist group on the cultural and spiritual values of protected areas.

In some communities, newer faiths, especially those that view traditional practices as heretical have weakened ties to sacred forests.

Even education can unintentionally erode sacred conservation. In northern Ghana, for instance, "culture" used to be a subject in school, and students were taught about sacred groves in their own languages, Dr. Verschuuren says. "When that curriculum disappeared, that space for passing on traditional knowledge disappeared."

In many ways, sacred groves offer a conservation model that is personal and rooted in community, qualities often missing from top-down government efforts. "What makes sacred groves powerful isn't just the biodiversity they protect," Ms. Sullivan says. "It's the idea that conservation can be led by local communities and not imposed on them."

That's also why the loss of these forests has more than an ecological impact. "These are places of peace and reflection," Ms. Sullivan says. "When they vanish, people lose part of themselves."

▪ *Okanlawon AbdulAzeez contributed reporting for this story.*

PEOPLE MAKING A DIFFERENCE

CHICAGO

‘Bless that corner’: Eugenia Phillips marks 50 years as a Chicago crossing guard

By Jackie Valley / Staff writer

Eugenia Phillips’ warning pierces the crisp morning air at the corner of West 103rd and South Morgan streets in this South Side neighborhood.

“Watch this car! Watch this car!” she shouts, arms pointing and waving.

Ms. Phillips had seen what others had not: children farther down South Morgan Street who were about to haphazardly cross the road and into the path of an oncoming vehicle. The dark-colored SUV slammed its brakes. The two girls jumped back toward the curb.

Another tragedy averted on Ms. Phillips’ watch, and her shift as a crossing guard outside Marcus Garvey Elementary School is barely halfway over. She shakes her head and breathes a sigh of relief.

For half a century, Ms. Phillips has been ushering schoolchildren to safety at intersections across the Windy City. That’s 50 years of morning and afternoon shifts. Fifty years of Chicago winters. Fifty years of new student faces. And 50 years of unpredictable motorists in her quest to shield little ones from harm.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

SAFETY

Eugenia Phillips started minding Chicago school crosswalks in 1975. After five decades, she has found that pedestrians need more protection than ever – and that safety and love go hand in hand.

And it all started when Ms. Phillips’ brother, a police officer who had encouraged her to become a school crossing guard, died in the line of duty.

“This is something I can do for him,” she recalls thinking back in 1975.

Now, she is one of 714 crossing guards employed by Chicago Public Schools, the fourth-largest district in the United States. It’s a role that is increasingly vital as law enforcement officials continue to sound the alarm about pedestrian safety. Despite a modest 2.6% decline in pedestrian fatalities during the first half of last year, they remain 48% above levels from 2014, according to the Governors Highway Safety Association.

Public education leaders echoed those concerns in a federal survey last year, with more than a third expressing concern about traffic patterns around their schools. Forty-one percent of public schools in the U.S. have crossing guards stationed at nearby intersections.

At the same time, there is growing interest in walking and biking to school around the country, says Nancy Pullen-Seufert, director of the National Center for Safe Routes to School. Every year, schools celebrate National Walk to School Day and National Bike & Roll to School Day, the latter of which was May 7. Some communities, she says, have launched “bike buses” led by an adult who brings cycling students to school.

“Crossing guards serve a really important role in creating visibility, particularly within school zones, for the presence of students … [while] also serving as an educational provider for students in teaching them about traffic safety rules and proper ways to cross the street,” Ms. Pullen-Seufert says. “Research tells us that students and caregivers report feeling safer in places that have crossing guards.”

Ms. Phillips starts each morning with a prayer inside her car. “Bless that corner,” she asks.

Then she hops out, dons a chartreuse coat, and grabs a handheld stop sign. Behind her sunglasses, her eyes do the heavy lifting. They’re darting back and forth, watching for a combination of approaching children, cars, and buses.

Ms. Phillips knows the cadence of the morning. Certain students hop off a city bus near her intersection. Others trudge up the sidewalks alone or with siblings, parents, or trusted adults by their side.

One of those regulars is Donald McQuay. His wife runs a day care, so he helps walk children to school. Mr. McQuay says he appreciates Ms. Phillips’ devotion to keeping all students safe, even the stragglers.

“Even after her time is up, she hangs around a bit longer because some of the kids come later,” he says. “I’ll see them all the way down the block, and she’ll just stand here and wait for them to get here so she can cross them.”

On this April morning, the person behind the wheel of a gray SUV flies down West 103rd Street, seemingly oblivious or indifferent to the nearby school and speed limit. Ms. Phillips says this type of careless driving has worsened over the decades. Impatient drivers whip around slower vehicles or run red lights. She ponders whether a lack of love or something else is to blame.

“I don’t know,” she says. “The world is just in chaos.”

Her presence provides an antidote of sorts. She offers warm greetings and sometimes a hug or a coat to a student in need.

“Maybe that’ll help them come in school with a little better love,” she says.

Soon it’s 8:23 a.m., and the school day is already underway inside the brick building.

“All right, slowpokes,” Ms. Phillips hollers to a handful of students meandering down the sidewalk. “Come on, let’s go!” ▪

THE EXPLAINER

As the FAA faces strains, are US control towers ready for the summer travel season?

A fatal air crash outside Washington, D.C., in January and a serious telecommunications outage involving the Newark, New Jersey, airport in May have focused the United States on a long-known problem: The nation’s old and understaffed air traffic control system is showing cracks.

On May 8, a day before a serious 90-second loss of communications delayed Newark air traffic, Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy announced a sweeping air traffic modernization plan to address “decades of neglect.” If successful, it could ease airline delays, especially weather-related ones during the summer months.

Air safety experts generally applaud the new effort, but the aggressive timetable carries risks, they add. Congress still needs to approve the funding.

Q: Is it safe to fly in the U.S.?

The nation operates the world’s largest and most complex air traffic control system with a very high degree of safety. Between 2014 and 2023 (the latest federal data available), scheduled U.S. commercial carriers experienced four fatal incidents resulting in six deaths total in the U.S. But some of the equipment used by controllers is so old that manufacturers don’t sell parts anymore. So officials at the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) have bought parts on eBay or built their own using 3D printers, according to Secretary Duffy.

Q: What is the Trump administration's plan?

On the equipment side, the plan would switch out old systems with new fiber, wireless, and satellite technologies at more than 4,600 sites, replace 618 radars, build six new air traffic control centers, expand the number of airports with runway safety systems, and install new hardware and software in all air traffic facilities.

On the labor side, it would streamline the hiring process and offer financial incentives to those who complete initial training, to graduates of the Air Traffic Controller Academy, and to retirement-age controllers to help retain them. Secretary Duffy says smoother hiring will help the FAA reduce a current shortfall of about 3,000 controllers.

Q: Will it work?

Many safety experts say the Trump administration is addressing the right issues. For example, it is prioritizing the New York-area airports – busy hubs where delays can ripple throughout the nation. During the busiest hours, pilots flying into John F. Kennedy or LaGuardia airports would be required to have on board software that makes it possible to increase the capacity of airspace shared by two airports.

But the administration has tripped over conflicting priorities. The day before January's midair collision outside Washington between a commercial flight and a military helicopter, with 67 deaths, employees at the FAA received a buyout offer urging them to take "higher productivity jobs in the private sector." The Trump administration quickly clarified that controllers were not eligible.

But the loss of experienced FAA managers will complicate the task of modernizing air traffic control while running it. "It's hard to be running a system and changing it at the same time," says John-Paul Clarke, a professor and expert in airspace design and safety modeling at the University of Texas at Austin.

Another challenge is making sure that FAA management modernizes procedures, not just technology, he adds. "My big worry is that we will digitize or upgrade technology doing the same things as we do now without figuring out how to change the system to make it more efficient."

Some critics say emerging "NextGen" systems for traffic controllers should pivot toward satellite-based flight tracking more quickly. Secretary Duffy's plan includes this, but the system's ability to quickly incorporate change remains in question.

Q: How long will this modernization take?

If history is any guide, it will take more time than the four years that the administration has allotted. At a minimum, people hired today will require two years' training before they become qualified controllers. And bureaucratic slowdowns, congressional meddling, and other factors have hampered past modernization plans.

Q: How much will this modernization cost?

The administration hasn't provided estimates, but a House committee calculates the cost at $12.5 billion. Outside analysts say it will cost more. Hassan Shahidi, president and CEO of the Flight Safety Foundation, a nonprofit advocacy group, pegs the cost at around $30 billion.

Q: What does it mean for summer travelers?

Mandatory slowdowns at airports and shortages of controllers could make weather-related delays worse. Travelers should "plan ahead, check with their airlines, [and] look at weather forecasts in terms of planning their journey," says Dr. Shahidi.

– Laurent Belsie / Staff writer

PROGRESS WATCH

Combating the opioid crisis: 48 states recorded a decline in overdose deaths

By Troy Aidan Sambajon / Staff writer
and Jacob Turcotte / Graphics editor

The United States is seeing a sudden drop in overdose deaths. Drug overdose deaths in the year prior to December 2024 dropped 25.6% compared with the previous year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It was the lowest number of overdose deaths in a 12-month period since 2020.

Some 48 states reported a decline from 2023 to 2024. West Virginia observed the most drastic reduction in deaths – a 42.4% decline. (Virginia followed with a 37.4% decrease, and Wisconsin reported a 36.1% decline.) California, which is the largest state by population, saw a 23.3% year-to-year decline.

But public health experts are pausing before sounding any victory bells.

"This is a really important moment to pay attention to the trends. Not to declare victory, but to increase our commitment to working together on this," says Howard Koh, professor of public health leadership at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. "We need the current administration to step up and accelerate the momentum and not cut back its commitment through funding cuts and laying off public health workers at the state and federal level."

WHY WE WROTE THIS
SAFETY

After years of epidemic, the good news on overdose deaths is both pronounced and widespread. Not only did 48 states report a decline, but also the total number of deaths dropped by more than 27,000 in one year.

There are many concurrent factors that contributed to the drop in overdose deaths.

Some prevailing theories include the increased accessibility of naloxone, which can reverse the effects of an overdose; increased access to evidence-based treatment for substance use disorders; and resumption of services after pandemic-related disruptions. Shifts in the illegal drug supply may also have played a role.

"Overall, there's more attention to public health and public safety to work together to address the crisis," says Dr. Koh, who served as a senior public health adviser during the Obama administration. "We've learned we can't arrest our way out of this problem."

In 2017, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services declared the opioid crisis a public health emergency. During the pandemic, there was a surge in overdose deaths due to isolation and increased fentanyl use. At its peak in 2022, nearly 108,000 people died from overdose, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

"It is unprecedented to see predicted overdose deaths drop by more than 27,000 over a single year," said Allison Arwady, director of the CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, in a press release. "That's more than 70 lives saved every day."

However, public health experts like Dr. Koh remain "cautious but hopeful" that the downward trend continues.

"This is not the time to take the foot off the pedal," he says. ■

Local, Organic – and bipartisan

Farmers in Vermont are trying to build a sustainable local economy for agricultural products. Americans on the left and right want it to work.

By Stephanie Hanes / Staff writer

HARDWICK, VT.

KAYLEIGH BOYLE AND DOUG WOLCIK knew all the reasons not to farm in Vermont: the short growing season, the hilly terrain, the dirt roads that make it hard to get products to market.

Even the size of most farms here is a problem. For decades, farms across the United States have gotten larger as agricultural policies pushed growers to consolidate and scale up their operations. Vermont's farms, however, have stayed relatively small. According to conventional wisdom, that means unprofitable.

But small was what the couple wanted. Ms. Boyle is from Vermont, and while studying at Emerson College in Boston, she worked an office job connected to the local food movement. But she quickly realized she wanted to be outside with her hands in the earth.

Mr. Wolcik graduated from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he studied sustainable agriculture and community food systems. He, too, realized he wanted a life close to the soil.

They met while working at a nonprofit farm outside Boston and soon discovered they shared a dream about buying their own acreage to grow food and flowers. They weren't interested in a massive operation. Instead, their vision included no-till growing methods, hand tools, and a desire to build a "human scale" production system.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

PROSPERITY

People on both the left and right are becoming wary of the global and increasingly corporate food system. In Vermont, small farms are finding ways to thrive in a localized food economy.

They also wanted to make their living entirely from their farm – something increasingly difficult to do in New England. Over the past 60 years, the region has lost 80% of its farmland.

"We really wanted to believe that farming could be a financially viable business," Ms. Boyle says.

They spent years saving money and scouring Zillow listings and USDA soil surveys online. They eventually found a 16-acre property at the edge of Vermont's rural Northeast Kingdom, complete with a house and a flat, 2-acre plot that got a lot of sun. In September 2020, they decided to take the plunge.

And they've thrived.

"We've just far exceeded any expectations that we set for ourselves," says Mr. Wolcik. "We're selling everything we can. We can't even grow enough. There's such demand for it, from restaurants to retail to wholesale to markets," he says. "We can't produce enough product fast enough."

Some of this is because of the couple themselves: Ms. Boyle's sense of marketing, Mr. Wolcik's attention to detail and innovation, and the experience and high standards they share as growers.

But it is also because, when they bought these rare flat acres, they joined a community actively building a new storyline around farming, food, and resilience in New England.

Here, in this part of little Vermont, statewide population 648,000, a coalition of farmers, nonprofits, and residents is eschewing mainstream beliefs about what makes agriculture successful and what it means to create a prosperous economy.

Instead, they are building a system in which farmers are able to make a living and residents can eat healthy food grown nearby. They are intentionally moving away from a global supply chain vulnerable to market shocks – everything from pandemics to tariffs to natural disasters.

And while the epicenter of this movement is in Hardwick, Vermont – a town of 1,000 people that has transformed itself from a hardscrabble rural hamlet into a mecca of food and sustainability – the impacts go well beyond it.

Across the country, communities on all sides of the political spectrum are reimagining the way Americans produce and value what they eat, tapping into a simmering belief that something is amiss with how detached, both economically and nutritionally, we have become from this fundamental human sector.

"It is the narrative a lot of the time that farming isn't a way to make a living," says Ms. Boyle. "I feel like we need to shift that mindset, because I think more and more it's going to be important for communities to have access to local foods."

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THERE CAN BE, in some places, a certain connotation to that phrase, "local foods." There are the stereotypes of well-heeled patrons at weekend farmers markets, expensive artisanal cheeses, and the prices at fresh food groceries. But these mask the point that historically, most of our food was local – and there was nothing bougie about it.

For centuries, most New Englanders were farmers who grew enough crops and raised enough livestock to feed themselves and their neighbors. The region's farms weren't economic powerhouses like those in the South, but they came to symbolize something deeper: a culture of uprightness, perseverance, and productivity, says Keith Stavely, a food historian and co-author of the book "America's Founding Food."

"That became more of a paramount value in New England than almost anyplace else," he says. "Partly because they had to work so hard to make their farms good for them to live on."

That culture began to shift in the 19th century as railroads brought cheaper wheat from Virginia. At the same time, industrial facilities lured laborers into factories and mills as fewer were needed to work the land.

Subsistence farming gave way to commercial dairying and gardening for market. Refrigeration, and the resulting large-scale grocery stores, meant individuals didn't need to spend their time growing food. Urbanization and competition from out-of-region farms followed.

Still, what we think of as the modern food system is largely a phenomenon of recent decades. This includes a global supply chain, factory farming, and ultraprocessed foods, which now make up more than 50% of the calories in the American diet, according to the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

What people tend to think of as the "local food movement" is also relatively new. Although its roots are connected to the "back to the land" movement of the mid-1960s, it expanded along with the proliferation of animal factory farming and Big Agriculture in the '80s and '90s – along with growing environmental concerns about pesticides and other chemicals.

Farmers markets sprouted across American cities. Author Michael Pollan published his influential book about the industrialized food system in the U.S., "The Omnivore's Dilemma," in 2006; the New Oxford American Dictionary picked "locavore" as its word of the year in 2007.

Although this fascination with locally grown organic foods became popularly associated with progressives – and was regularly criticized as elitist – there was also an emerging libertarian and conservative desire for a different, more localized sort of food system.

"I have long believed this is a bipartisan issue," says John Klar, a Vermont farmer who in 2022 ran for a Vermont state Senate seat as a Republican, a bid that fell short. "If there's one thing that should bring Americans together, it is local, healthy food."

To him, the small farm is inherently conservative – a rejection of what he sees as dangerous globalism. It is a return to self-sufficiency, and far more environmentally and climate friendly, he says, than the traditionally liberal causes of electric vehicles and solar farms.

Mr. Klar also sees corporate malfeasance in claims made both by Republican-leaning corporations and by United Nations organizations that commoditized agriculture and genetically modified produce are the way toward global food security. He wishes more Republicans would reject the cultural premise that fast food and cheap meat equals freedom.

There are some signs that this wish is coming true. The MAHA movement – Make America Healthy Again – has brought anti-industrial agriculture activists into the Trump administration, including Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and the new nominee for surgeon general, Casey Means. Even Ivanka Trump has gotten into the movement, co-founding a "profit-for-purpose" company called Planet Harvest, which pledges to cut food waste and expand access to fresh food.

In other words, the partisan lines around America's food systems are increasingly scrambled.

"Both sides have been lulled by modernization of agriculture and the technological sirens," says Mr. Klar. "But both sides are coming back and coming together. These things don't lend themselves to the red-blue dichotomy."

And few places, he points out, are better for this reunion than Vermont. Although the popular perception might be that this little state is crunchy granola through and through – this is, after all, home both to Sen. Bernie Sanders and to Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield of progressive ice cream fame – there are many districts that voted for President Donald Trump. The rural parts of the state are particularly red.

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WHEN JON RAMSAY drives to meet farmers, making his circumference around Hardwick, he tries not to talk politics or climate change or anything else that might bring in the nation's partisan divisiveness.

He wants to talk about what farmers need. And he wants to hear about how his nonprofit organization, the Center for an Agricultural Economy, can help.

Mr. Ramsay spent his younger years in northwest Connecticut, where he saw firsthand how development pressure can take over farmland, before he moved with his family to a dairy farm in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom. Here, he learned the economic challenges of New England agriculture, particularly in Vermont's dominant dairy industry.

For generations, Vermont has been the dairy capital of the Northeast, and it still supplies two-thirds of the milk in New England. But dairy farmers here, and across the country, have struggled.

Most milk in the U.S., including in Vermont, is sold as a commodity to cooperatives or directly to processors. Its price is determined by a combination of federal regulations, market forces, and regional agreements.

Dairy farmers might not even know what they will get for their milk until after it leaves the farm. In recent years, these payments have not covered costs.

"We've been seeing the active number of dairy farms in New England, Vermont, decrease over decades," Mr. Ramsay says. "When you have milk coming in across the country, everything is global or national. And those macro markets have shifted over time.

"So, we've been shifting our focus to 'OK, what else can we grow and produce here?'" he says. "'What else can we grow and produce that folks can buy directly from farms?'"

It's not an easy transition. Most dairy farms have debt, whether because of land costs, large capital investments, or other reasons. Even if the commodity pricing system doesn't provide a livable wage, it generally pays enough that farmers can make their loan payments.

These farmers can't easily cut costs – cows, after all, need food regardless of the milk price. But selling those animals and trying something new means income loss in the short term, and failure to make loan payments could, literally, risk the farm.

Mr. Ramsay's organization, the Center for an Agricultural Economy, was founded in 2004 by a fellow Vermont farmer and businessman named Andrew Meyer. Mr. Meyer had spent years working in federal agricultural policy in Washington, but he returned to his home state, convinced that national policies wouldn't help Vermont farmers.

What was needed, he believed, was a "whole-of-economy" local approach, one that understood the unique challenges facing his region.

Over the next few years, the Center for an Agricultural Economy started trying to fill the gaps that farmers and residents saw in the local food system. It purchased a downtown green space for community gardens and a farmers market; it built incubator kitchens where food entrepreneurs could develop new products, from hot sauces and kombucha to packaged heritage grains; it contracted with local food pantries and schools to give farmers a place to sell their produce.

It also began the Vermont Farm Fund, which has $1.6 million in revolving funds to provide loans to local Vermont farmers and producers. It has provided more than $4 million in loans since the program started in 2001. Ms. Boyle and Mr. Wolcik, for instance, received money to help build a new barn with a cleaning station for their produce.

Others have received no-interest emergency loans after fires or after the flooding that devastated Vermont farms in the summers of both 2023 and 2024.

These days, the Center for an Agricultural Economy continues those programs. It also hosts community meals and teaches "grow your own" courses. It has a program called Farm Connex, which runs a freight pickup and delivery service for farmers and other food producers in the area, helping them collect and aggregate product and then redistribute it to larger markets.

"We have a lot of agricultural capacity here in terms of farms and resources and land and so many things, but we're also critically lacking markets for viability," says Mr. Ramsay. "Some of the unique challenges are where we are situated in New England: our growing season, lack of critical infrastructure. We're attempting to fill that gap."

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ON A RECENT WEEKDAY, in a warehouse off one of Hardwick's two main roads, a team of food workers is busy shredding carrots. There are bags and bags of them, bright orange, ready to be brought to schools, hospitals, and other institutions.

They are part of the Just Cut program, yet another of the organization's initiatives. Farmers from across the region sell shelf-stable produce to the center, which then does the first-step food processing necessary for institutional kitchens. Then the nonprofit contracts with the buyers.

Connecting farmers with nearby schools and food pantries has also been a goal of federal policy in recent years. In 2024, the U.S. Department of Agriculture awarded $14.3 million in Farm to School

grants to 154 projects nationwide, reaching an estimated 1.9 million students.

But the Trump administration recently cut more than $1 billion from two pandemic-era initiatives, the Local Food Purchase Assistance and Local Food for Schools programs, which had helped schools and food pantries buy directly from small farms. Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins called the programs "nonessential."

These cuts will trickle down to the Hardwick program, since the state cannot distribute the money to institutions, which in turn may not have funds to pay Just Cut for the produce.

But those involved with the food economy here say there are other programs and initiatives that could help fill the resulting gap – a sort of diversified approach that many farmers are trying to employ in their own businesses.

This is especially important for Vermont's struggling dairy industry. Indeed, on the other side of the warehouse, across from the Just Cut workers, the staff of the Vermont Food Venture Center is helping farmers and other food entrepreneurs with business plans. And many of these plans, says Daniel Keeney, the center's farm and food business specialist, have to do with diversifying existing dairy farms.

Over the past two decades, nearly 1,000 Vermont dairy farms have shifted to producing beef, heritage wheat, or other value-added products like yogurt and cheese. It's a move that requires assistance, Mr. Keeney says, as well as a supportive local economy.

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BLAIR MARVIN GREW UP in Johnson, Vermont, about 30 minutes northwest of Hardwick. She traveled across the country to attend a culinary school in Washington state, where she met Andrew Heyn, her husband.

When she and Mr. Heyn moved back to her home region, Ms. Marvin started running a café in the town of Morrisville. Baking, she says, was never the plan.

But when the local hobby bread-maker who supplied her café announced he was retiring, he asked her if she might take over his wood-fired oven – which also happened to come with 10 acres and a house.

As soon as she saw the property, she remembers, she knew it was home. So, in 2004, Ms. Marvin and Mr. Heyn decided to expand, launching a business called Elmore Mountain Bread.

As Ms. Marvin settled into her new production routines, she realized that bread and gluten were becoming out of fashion among some seeking to optimize their health. And she noticed, too, that while the community around her was newly focused on where its meat, eggs, and cheeses originated, it didn't seem to think much about what went into the bread.

Flour, it seemed to her, was the final frontier of the local food movement. She started exploring where her primary ingredient, wheat, was grown, and how.

She learned of the national commodity wheat system, and how monocrops are grown in the Great Plains, stored in grain bins, and then milled elsewhere. That flour gets shipped across the country, is warehoused, and finally ends up on grocery store shelves.

"Vermont being an agricultural state, I was like, 'How come bakeries and restaurants aren't using local grains in their bread, pastries, pizza?'" she says. "There is so much farmland and so, so many farms here."

She decided that she wanted to use 100% organic, Vermont-grown wheat, sourced directly from farmers within 50 miles of her bakery.

Mr. Heyn built a mill so they could process this local wheat into flour – a project that ended up blossoming into its own business, New American Stone Mills, which sells mills to other bakers and processors around the world.

But finding a grain supplier proved challenging.

"We had this goal," she says. "But all of a sudden, we were like, 'Oh, we've got this mill. We've got the desire. But almost nobody is growing wheat.'"

Eventually, she says, a mutual friend connected her with a young couple who were hoping to diversify their dairy by planting organic wheat on some of their acreage.

"They had 20 acres of wheat but didn't have a mill and didn't know what to do with it," Ms. Marvin says. "So, it was a match made in heaven. I agreed to buy everything they had for twice as much as what they'd get on the commodity market. And we started telling each other's story."

Other farmers took notice. So did other bakers. And consumers. Eventually, an organic wheat market grew up in Vermont, with farmers – often those who had been involved in dairying – planting more acreage of the grain. More local bakeries began milling.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when neither bread nor flour was on grocery store shelves, Ms. Marvin was milling "hundreds of pounds of flour every day."

"It's the goal to simplify the food chain," she says. "That's building so much resiliency into the local food system."

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THE ISSUE OF FOOD SECURITY has been in the forefront for many agricultural policymakers and advocates in New England. This includes the concept of food sovereignty, or the amount of self-sufficiency a region has in its food supply chain.

"Farms in New England, family farms, are losing their economic viability for a whole host of reasons and therefore are having to go out of business," says Sarah Gardner an environmental studies scholar at Williams College in Massachusetts. "As we lose farmland, we lose our ability to be food secure. We are not even close to [being] food secure."

At most, she and other analysts say, about 11% of New England food comes from New England. Some policymakers have set a goal to increase local food consumption to 30% by 2030, and to at least 50% by 2060.

But those numbers can mask the complexities of what a "resilient local food economy" means, say many who work in the Hardwick area.

Does it mean the local peanut butter producer using the Center for an Agricultural Economy's test kitchen, but who sources her peanuts from another state? Or how about Jasper Hill Farm cheese, with its local milk and operations, but which sells to high-end markets across the country?

"Are we imagining people stopping by the farm stand that's quaintly there on the side of the road on the way home from work?" says Martha Caswell, who is part of the Institute for Agroecology at the University of Vermont and who works with growers in central Vermont. "Or are we talking about having the food grown in a certain radius be affordable, with a dignified price to farmers?"

For a local economy to be resilient, she says, it needs to keep dollars circulating within the area. The modern food system, she says, with its global commodity supply chain, is made to be cheap at the point of sale.

But it has costs elsewhere – in environmental degradation, dollars leaving the region, and, according to many, the nutrition of the food itself.

Creating an alternative is complicated, Ms. Caswell acknowledges. That's in part because it requires both mindset and behavior shifts.

"The root of these problems, yes, they're economic," says Kathleen Fitzgerald, co-author with Mr. Stavely of "America's Founding Food."

"But it's people's thinking that drives the market," she says. "If you desire something different, like learning to grow your own

food, that becomes a value."

It also depends on human connections.

At the Craftsbury General Store, known in these parts as The Genny, co-owner Kit Basom points out the prepared food section, where an array of sandwiches and salads uses Just Cut produce. Ms. Basom is another Vermont-born food enthusiast who moved across the country but eventually returned to her home region.

She ponders the question of why a local food economy might work here, in rural Hardwick. Vermont, she guesses, is a small enough state, with enough of a culture of neighborliness that it's possible to attempt this new approach to prosperity and food security.

Indeed, in a short radius around her store, there are larger dairies, family orchards, homestead farm stands, and larger operations growing organic greens. Among these are world-renowned cheesemakers and direct-to-consumer yogurt-makers. Restaurants and test kitchens and a farmers market each have regular patrons.

"There is a community of people who are trying to make sure that food produced here can be enjoyed here," Ms. Basom says. "There is attention being paid to it. There are people making it a priority."

▪ *Staff writers Troy Aidan Sambajon and Kendra Nordin Beato contributed reporting to this story.*

PERSPECTIVES ON THE WORLD

THE MONITOR'S VIEW

Montana's red-blue values in housing

State lawmakers in Big Sky Country are once again demonstrating big-time bipartisanship, perhaps setting a model in governance. This time, they have tackled an issue vexing communities around the United States: how to lower the price of housing.

For the second consecutive legislative session, Republicans and Democrats in Montana's Legislature have worked with a broad coalition of interest groups to pass changes in zoning and other reforms. The bills aim to reduce paperwork and the price of new housing by removing parking-space mandates, allowing taller buildings, and expanding permissions for backyard cottages.

This year's changes build on a package passed in 2023 dubbed the "Montana Miracle" for its speed and scope. Part of that "miracle" was finding common ground between typically urban, blue-state priorities for housing densification and rural red-state preferences for limited government reach.

Worst home affordability in U.S.

With pandemic-related in-migration and population growth, Montana has experienced a spike in home prices. In 2024, its housing market had the largest gap between the average home price and the state's average income – higher than California's gap – according to the National Association of Realtors.

Rents also increased, squeezing residents and "gutting the core of our communities," Gov. Greg Gianforte, a Republican, told the American Planning Association in 2023. "We knew that if we didn't get our arms around affordable housing, we wouldn't have communities."

The spark for these reforms was lit in mid-2022, when Mr. Gianforte established a Housing Task Force "to cast a really broad net and bring me your best ideas." It included lawmakers and government officials as well as community-focused nonprofits and free-market think tanks. Task force members played to their strengths, according to Kendall Cotton, president of the conservative Frontier Institute.

Deliberating left and right

"We were able to go to mostly Republicans," Mr. Cotton told Bloomberg CityLab, "and talk about free markets [and] property rights," emphasizing freedoms to build additional housing. Other members, he said, went to "folks on the left [to] talk about climate and social impacts" of easing zoning restrictions to allow densification and reduce sprawl.

Similar alliances have since emerged in Arizona, Texas, Minnesota, and North Carolina, though with varying success.

"Not everything is so hyper-partisan," Democratic state Sen. Ellie Boldman, who sponsored the building height bill, told the news site Governing.

"There's always room to try to find the common thread of what our values are and bring everybody together." ▪

THE MONITOR'S VIEW

A win for peace in Turkey

In a decisive shift toward peaceful change, Turkey's long-outlawed major separatist group is disbanding. The announcement in May by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) brings a welcome end to four decades of armed conflict and the loss of nearly 40,000 lives.

Not only Turkey will feel the repercussions. Some 25 million to 35 million ethnic Kurds live in mountainous areas that share porous borders between Iraq, Syria, and Iran, as well as Turkey. Turkish forces have pursued Kurdish separatists in cross-border raids in Iraq and Syria over the years. The president of Iraq's Kurdistan region immediately hailed the PKK's move as signaling "political maturity" and strengthening regional stability.

Despite having 15 million Kurds – 20% of its population – Turkey did not recognize their distinct identity for most of the 20th century. Aiming to establish a Kurdish homeland, the PKK took up arms in 1984, attacking civilian and military targets. In recent years, the Turkish military has forcefully limited the PKK's reach and abilities.

With founder Abdullah Öcalan in prison since 1999, the PKK has transitioned from seeking independence toward seeking greater rights within Turkey. It now says it had "broken the policy of denial and annihilation ... and brought the Kurdish issue to a point of solving it through democratic politics."

The conflict's end provides Turkey's leaders with the opportunity to craft a transparent and fair agreement that enables progress and addresses legitimate Kurdish demands. The population is tired of simmering conflict and is ready for peace. But it is also tired of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's autocratic rule, as street protests in March indicated.

Officially recognizing Kurdish rights will require amending Turkey's Constitution. An official rapprochement should allow needed resources to flow to Turkey's impoverished southeast. Calm there would also help neighboring Syria, which has experienced recent outbreaks of sectarian violence. ▪

ANALYSIS

LONDON

Why US allies are reconsidering nuclear arms

The American atomic bombs that ended World War II 80 summers ago snuffed out tens of thousands of lives in an instant. They blighted countless others. But they also left behind a more hopeful legacy: a collective determination by world powers to avoid the use of nuclear weapons forever, and to tightly limit their possession.

Today, that achievement is coming under strain as never before. While that is largely due to threats from America's nuclear-armed rivals, especially Russian President Vladimir Putin in Ukraine, there is another catalyst.

It is the dramatic shift in America's relations with its closest allies that President Donald Trump has effected since his return to the White House.

The stakes are more than theoretical. In May, cross-border attacks by India and Pakistan alarmed governments worldwide by drawing perilously close to the nuclear brink. That served as a reminder of the reason the main nuclear powers have long acted to limit these weapons' spread. Once countries get nuclear arms, there's always the danger that they will use them.

GLOBAL PATTERNS
BY NED TEMKO
Connecting key themes in the world's news.

So far, the "club" of nuclear-armed nations has remained small: only nine of the world's nearly 200 countries. Yet others may soon be knocking on the door, and not only U.S. rivals like Iran.

U.S. allies in Europe and Asia have long been capable of producing nuclear arms. But under America's nuclear umbrella, they haven't felt the need to do so. Now, international political turbulence is prompting some of them to reconsider.

Mr. Putin's unprovoked attack on Ukraine in 2022 was the first shock, particularly as Mr. Putin has periodically threatened to use nuclear weapons there.

Until recently, Europeans have trusted in the bedrock support of the United States. Since President Trump's second term began, that trust has been eroding.

Mr. Trump has ordered tariffs on the 27 countries of the European Union, describing them as "nastier than China." And he initially cut out European NATO partners – and Ukraine – from his bid for a peace deal with Mr. Putin.

Among Russia's closest neighbors, there are fresh doubts that Washington would stand by their side against an attack by Mr. Putin. Citing a "profound change of American geopolitics," Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said recently, "It is time for us to look boldly" at "opportunities related to nuclear weapons."

France and Britain, Europe's only nuclear powers, have suggested extending their protective nuclear umbrella to the rest of the continent. The new German chancellor, Friedrich Merz, has described "serious" talks on nuclear security with French President Emmanuel Macron.

Similar political winds seem to be blowing in Asia. Allies there have relied on the U.S. as the ultimate guarantor of their security. They, too, have been unsettled by Mr. Trump's tariff offensive, his dismissal of allies as freeloaders, and his reluctance to support Ukraine.

South Korea's Minister of Foreign Affairs Cho Tae-yul said earlier this year that the idea of acquiring nuclear weapons was "not off the table." Polling suggests a sizable majority of South Koreans agree.

President Trump has yet to signal the sort of reinforced security commitment that might restore allies' confidence. Still, he does favor a reduction in superpower nuclear arsenals, saying recently that their unabated modernization was a colossal waste of money. He has also launched a high-profile effort to prevent Iran from building a nuclear weapon.

And the India-Pakistan clashes have left little doubt his administration recognizes the danger that nuclear weapons pose. At first, Washington seemed content to let the fighting play itself out. But when India struck near the headquarters of the Pakistani unit responsible for safeguarding the country's nuclear arms, the U.S. administration suddenly changed tack. Both Vice President JD Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio contacted the warring sides. It was they who persuaded them to agree on a ceasefire. ▪

GLOBAL NEWSSTAND

THE GUARDIAN / LONDON

America's focus is shifting from Europe to the Gulf states

"[U.S. President Donald Trump's] call for recognising the new role of Gulf states both as political and economic powerhouses ... is excruciating," writes columnist Nesrine Malik. "Because it reveals how painfully sclerotic and inconsistent previous administrations were. Joe Biden promised to take a hard line with the Saudi government for its role in the murder of [journalist] Jamal Khashoggi and in the Yemen war, and then seemed to forget about it. ... From Trump, there is no such mixed signalling: you are rich, we need you. You do you. ... The centre of gravity is shifting for the US away from European capitals and transatlantic alliances, towards a region that, as far as Trump is concerned, is not bothering him with any moral condemnations on Ukraine, doesn't have the pesky matter of a voting public to worry about, and has spare billions to invest and flamboyantly flatter."

ARAB NEWS / JEDDAH, SAUDI ARABIA

Trump's lifting of sanctions on Syria was the right thing

"During his visit to Saudi Arabia on [May 13], Donald Trump ... announced the lifting of American sanctions on Syria," writes Dania Koleilat Khatib, a lobbyist and co-founder of the Lebanese organization Research Center for Cooperation and Peace Building. "... The American president summarized what experts have been saying since the fall of Bashar Assad last December. The sanctions were for the Assad regime and, now that he is gone, they are irrelevant. Sanctions have crippled the Syrian economy, leading to instability. ... If the US sanctions had remained, Syria would have no choice but to ask for help from America's rivals, namely Iran, Russia and China. ... With the sanctions removed, reconstruction of the devastated country can begin."

LE MONDE / PARIS

Will the US learn from the failed Istanbul talks?

"It took less than two hours in Istanbul, on Friday, May 16, to come to the conclusion that the direct negotiations between Ukrainians and Russians, the first since unsuccessful talks in April 2022, were a failure," states an editorial. "This outcome ... was anticipated. ... [Russian President Vladimir Putin] had no interest in discussions aimed at ending the war he started, a war in which he believes ... that he is in a position of strength. This was precisely what the Ukrainian president had explained in ... the White House on February 28, during a tumultuous reception. ... [For President Trump,] unreservedly aligning with the aggressor's positions at the victim's expense has, so far, yielded no results."

BALKAN INSIGHT / BELGRADE, SERBIA

Young people must envision themselves in politics

"Albania's 2025 parliamentary elections [last month] were technically sound," writes Austin Akers, an international election observer. "... But beneath that procedural success lies a quiet emergency: young Albanians are abandoning the ballot box. ... They don't see themselves in the system. ... [But] even a small shift – more young candidates, higher turnout ... – could break the cycle. ... Without youth voices demanding reform, transparency and a better future, Albania risks sliding further into a state of managed stagnation where corruption is tolerated, opportunities are exported, and Europe remains a distant dream rather than a shared goal. Make no mistake: the European Union is watching. So is Russia. So is China. ... But Albania's youth are not powerless. ... They hold the numbers."

DAILY MAVERICK / CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA

Forget tariffs. The US debt crisis is the real worry.

"Perhaps it is all too easy to see with hindsight, but the tariff hullaballoo was only ever a distraction," writes Natale Labia, a partner at the global investment firm Lionhead. "... The eyes of the world's investors have moved to the topic that was always going to be of more material importance for the global economy: the increasingly shaky outlook for US government debt. ... Ratings agency Moody's has stripped the world's largest economy of its vaunted triple-A credit rating. ... For South Africa and other emerging markets, this is a moment of extreme caution. ... History shows that when US rates surge, emerging markets suffer the most."

– Compiled by Nate Iglehart / Staff writer

HOME FORUM

The fathers of all wisdom

Pivoting, adapting, and learning through life's curveballs. Turning inward to grapple with the daily challenges of adulthood. Wrestling with preconceived notions. Showing love, quietly but surely. In this special Father's Day collection, six writers share what their fathers and father figures taught them – by setting shining examples to follow.

MR. STREET SMARTS

THERE'S A WORD IN FILIPINO that doesn't quite translate into English: *diskarte*.

It's used to describe someone with street smarts – resourceful and quick-thinking. Faced with a challenge, they adapt. Someone with *diskarte* might not have money or connections, but they'll find a way.

My dad lived this word. As a child, I had a front-row seat to a master class in *diskarte*.

My grandparents, who never finished elementary school, worked themselves to the bone to provide for their family of seven. My dad understood that education was his best shot at a better future. He earned a degree in chemical engineering and landed a job with Kodak in Hong Kong, where my sisters and I were born.

Years later, he made a bold move, returning to the Philippines during the tail end of the Marcos dictatorship, while others who could were fleeing. He left Kodak as digital technology was taking off, years before it would transform the company completely.

Knowing nothing about real estate or construction, he started his own construction company. He learned everything – plumbing, windows, flooring, roofing – simply by asking questions and making mistakes. His business thrived – and so did we.

In today's unpredictable world, where a degree no longer guarantees stability and political tides shift overnight, my dad's *diskarte* has served me well.

Lose a job? Pivot.

Have to start over? That's life.

Keep learning. Keep moving. Keep trying.

Just as he did.

– Sherilyn Siy

SCHOOLED BY A SCHOLAR

IN MY CHILDHOOD HOME the shelves burst with books: scholarly volumes of foreign policy and history, mysteries, tomes in Latin and Japanese, biographies, and fiction. On the floor, waist-high piles of books tottered like miniature leaning towers of Pisa.

My father has always been an avid learner and reader. As a boy, I recall him reading every night on the couch. Whenever he came across a word he didn't know, he would write it down on an index card to look up later, and encouraged me to do the same. To this day, he chews through books like a goat eating grass: steady, consistent, unrelenting.

Born in a blue-collar Polish neighborhood in Detroit, the son of a homemaker and a factory worker, Dad was the first in his family to graduate from high school. He attended seminary school, then college, and then got his Ph.D. in East Asian history. He studied in Japan and met my mom there.

He bequeathed to me a genuine love of learning. Not learning in order to get something, but learning for its own sake.

He has always encouraged me to wrestle with ideas and uncomfortable truths, to challenge my worldview, even if it makes me change my mind. In a world where we all too often pick out our team jersey, super-

glue it to our bodies, and flee to our preferred echo chamber, my dad's freethinking spirit is one I cherish.

– Zachary Przystup

A SURPRISE IN THE GLOVE BOX

MY DAD WAS A QUIET MAN and, like many of his generation, more a critic than a cheerleader. He didn't like it when I slept late, he grumbled about my book-buying habit ("They're free at the library"), and on the rare report card loaded with A's, he'd zero in on the solitary B.

I craved encouragement and praise, but he didn't speak that language. The best compliment I got from him was after he'd spent two days teaching me to drive a stick shift. "You drive too fast," he said. "But you're a good driver." I filed that away like a gem.

A few years later, after several rejections, I finally landed my dream job at a newspaper. He sighed, disappointed it wasn't full time.

No matter, I was thrilled to be there, delighted to see my name in print. If I mentioned my latest piece, he'd change the subject and ask instead when I'd have benefits or work normal hours.

A few months later, he passed away unexpectedly. I offered to help clean out his truck. In the glove box was a small stack of newspaper clippings. My stories. The edges were worn, the paper soft at the creases – handled often, kept like treasures.

My father taught me that people show love in different ways, a lesson that has served me well as the mother of two sons. Love doesn't always appear the way we expect or want it to. Sometimes, it lives in the folds.

– Courtenay Rudzinski

TALKING MAN-TO-MAN

MY FATHER WAS VERY HANDY, and when I was growing up, he did most of the work on our cars. Passing our garage Saturday mornings, I'd often hear Daddy in spirited conversation, though I could see only one set of legs jutting out from beneath our old Ford.

Whom was my father talking to while he drained the oil or checked a leaky radiator? Daddy was talking to himself.

In a household that included a wife, six kids, and a couple of grandparents, my father didn't lack conversation partners. But talking to himself was a favorite pastime.

Despite his many responsibilities, Daddy's calm assurance grew from his power to talk himself through whatever each day brought.

Like my father I also talk to myself, while cooking dinner, mowing the lawn, or rounding the block on an afternoon walk. These one-sided colloquies have become a welcome source of reflection, helping me to be a better husband, father, and friend.

I have my dad to thank for showing me that when you need someone to talk to, it's OK to start with you.

– Danny Heitman

THE MEN WHO MOLDED ME

WHEN I THINK ABOUT MANHOOD, I think of gumbo, a dish that requires many ingredients to make it delicious. That is the best way to describe the tribe of men who nurtured me.

I didn't have a father growing up, but I had a village of men who cared about me.

My grandfather was one of only three adults in my life whom I never heard curse. He was patient and always encouraged me to work hard and not to take the easy way out. My Uncle Charlie showed me the importance of self-confidence and told me that he loved me, and that he believed I could do anything in life that I wanted.

I graduated from college because Uncle Charlie, the first in the family to attend college, laid the groundwork for me. He taught me how to knot a tie and to look another man in the eye when I spoke to him.

My Uncle Bernard showed me how to take care of my responsibilities by always taking care of his, and by consistently showing up in my life.

I cherish the jewels that these men gave me over the years.

– Ira Porter

FLOATING ON FAITH

IT TOOK ME A LONG TIME to learn to swim. I had an understandable fear of sinking. My father did his best to allay this concern. When I was 10 years old, he began taking me to the pool at the local YMCA, where I would lie on my back across his outstretched arms as he gently repeated, "The water wants you to float. Your body wants to float."

But no matter how hard I tried to believe this, when he removed his arms, I sank like a stone.

However, the instruction continued, week after week. My dad's persistence was a product of experience; mine was born of not wanting to let him down. The triumph came after two months of patient attempts to simply float. My father withdrew his arms, and there I lay, upon the water, serene and capable in this first step toward actually swimming.

When I think back, I wonder: Was it the water that held me up? Was it my father's supportive arms? Or maybe it was something more challenging for a child to grasp: my dad's unfaltering faith in me.

– Robert Klose

A CHRISTIAN SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

Prayer for unity during times of conflict

I was a little girl during a previous war between India and Pakistan, a region fraught with a history of division. I helped my grandparents darken our windows with brown paper so that the candlelight from inside the home couldn't be seen from the outside when the sirens sounded. We'd sit in the dark – Nana, Papa, and I huddled together on a cushioned swing on our veranda, praying in our own sweet ways. Sitting close between them, I felt safe.

When I came across Christian Science and began practicing its healing teachings, I learned about what I'd glimpsed in my grandparents' warm embrace – that lasting harmony isn't dependent on physical circumstances. It is found in God, divine Love. Christian Science, the universal and impartial law of God, teaches that we are all one people: God's spiritual offspring, safe in harmony. There is no division, separation, or brokenness in God, infinite good.

Mary Baker Eddy, the discoverer of Christian Science, writes, "One infinite God, good, unifies men and nations; constitutes the brotherhood of man; ends wars; fulfils the Scripture, 'Love thy neighbor as thyself;'" ("Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures," p. 340). Demonstrating this starts with living meek and mighty Christian love, yielding to divine Love. Holding to God's message of love, Christ, counteracts willfulness, frustration, and anger. The Hebrew Scriptures refer to this tender presence as a "still small voice." Christ is speaking to every heart, even in the thick of war and terror.

It spoke to the prophet Elijah when he was at his wits' end (see I Kings 19:9-12). The divine message he received was one of courage. He was asked to "go forth, and stand upon the mount" through terror – symbolized as earthquake, wind, and fire. He saw that God, good, couldn't be in disasters. Divine Truth brought him peace, and his circumstances changed, too.

Some years ago, I badly wounded my hand. I prayed to yield to divine Truth and Love. After a while, I received this inspiration: God's truth and love were not just for me, but for every

single individual the world over, blessing all at every moment! No one could be left out of God's love. With that, comfort and healing of the wound came right away.

When we're willing to stifle fear and listen to God's messages of grace, we come to know Truth as a palpable presence and power embracing us today, bringing to humanity the gift of healing. Anger and conflict cannot stand in the allness of God. Rather, we have a God-given ability to express Christly affection, integrity, and forgiveness. Christ Jesus was the ultimate example of this. He loved his enemies with perfect love.

We can strive to be reformers through our prayers for the world, seeing through seeming division to everyone's true, spiritual nature, and waking up to our unity with God and each other – beyond any borders. In this way, we can contribute to the world more fully realizing our true brotherhood.

– Dilshad Khambatta Eames

ARTS AND CULTURE

FLORENCE, ITALY

Could US students help solve Florence's tourist problem?

By John Last / Contributor

On the streets outside the American University of Florence, no one is speaking Italian. Everywhere, there are strong, clear American accents, debating the merits of Ibiza or the weight-loss benefits of the Mediterranean diet.

This year, though, students might detect an undercurrent of veiled resentment in the air. On signposts and scaffolding here around the university, you can still see the remains of bright yellow stickers that appeared last September, bearing a baleful message in blocky black font: "YANKEE GO HOME."

The stickers are the remnants of a campaign to curb the growing American presence in the city of Michelangelo.

Hordes of American visitors have been a feature of Florentine life for decades, and exchange students like those at the American University have studied here for half a century. But in recent years, the number of programs bringing American college kids to Florence has exploded – just when native inhabitants are facing an unprecedented cost-of-living crisis.

Now, it would seem that the residents of one of Europe's most eager host cities are running out of graciousness. Protests against overtourism, short-term rentals, and foreign investment are on the rise.

"This is the mother of all problems," says Francesco Torrigiani, an organizer for Salvi-Amo Firenze, a housing and livability advocacy group. "But it didn't start yesterday."

Foreign students a mixed blessing?

According to the Association of American College and University Programs in Italy, each year Florence attracts more than 18,000 American exchange students, who attend one of more than 45 study-abroad programs. They account for nearly half of all American exchange students in Italy.

These programs have only increased in importance as city leaders come under growing pressure to develop an alternative economic engine to mass tourism. Among some advocates here, longer-staying students are seen as a preferred alternative to tourists, nearly 15 million of whom visited the city in 2024 alone.

All these visitors need somewhere to stay, and, increasingly, they have chosen Airbnbs and other short-term rentals that have colonized the city center and robbed it of its precious housing supply. About 30,000 apartments come on the market in Florence each year, Mr. Torrigiani explains, and at least 17,000 of them are short-term rentals. Long-term residents find it ever harder to house themselves.

The result has been massive rent increases. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, rents have gone up by 50% in Florence, according to data from Italian real estate site Idealista. "The rental market is in crisis," said Vincenzo De Tommaso, head of Idealista's research department, in a release on the company's website. Finding affordable housing, he says, "has become almost impossible."

It's less impossible, though, for foreign students, who can generally pay far more than the average Italian can afford. One controversial development, a hotel, coworking space, and student residence called The Social Hub, has drawn protests for pricing single rooms at €1,300 ($1,470) a month – 75% of the average Italian's monthly wage.

U.S. universities look after their own

To make sure that their students find housing, American universities are going into the lodging business – and charging a princely sum. New York University, Florida State University, and Kent State University have all recently purchased grand palazzi to convert into residences, social premises, or teaching facilities. NYU's off-campus residences in Florence can cost more than $10,000 per semester – more than double the average cost for a similar apartment in the city.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

Several cities in Europe are finding increasingly large numbers of foreign tourists hard to manage. But none has such difficulties as the medieval Italian jewel that is Florence. Could students offer a solution?

Still, the authorities maintain that exchange students are better for the city than tourists. Tourists "take, and they don't give back that much," says Carlotta Ferrari, general manager of Fondazione Destination Florence, the city's tourism marketing board. "With students ... it's totally different: They're looking for university, but they are also looking for our way of living. They love to be Italian for a while."

"The American community that lives in Florence is totally integrated," insists Sara Funaro, the city's mayor since June 2024. "This applies both to those who live and work in the city and ... to the students who arrive here."

Critics, though, say that the exchange programs, some of which last just a few weeks, offer little opportunity for Americans to integrate with the city and its residents, making their participants largely indistinguishable from tourists.

"The American students come here to have a Disneyland experience," says Marella Amorini, a native of the city and vice president of an international students' group. "And they are having it."

Trouble abroad

Certainly the American presence is having a visible impact on the cityscape: more English on signage, more coffee shops serving "American-style" lattes and breakfasts, more restaurants and bars geared to American students' discount appetites.

Over the years, the growing American community has developed a reputation for public rowdiness, which grates in the context of Italy's reserved drinking culture. Local resentments have spilled out in unexpected ways.

In 2017, after two American students said they were raped by police officers on their way home from a Florence nightclub, then-Mayor Dario Nardella chose to respond by chastising the student population. "Florence is not the city of *sballo*," or intoxication, he said. "From the point of view of rules and good behavior, it is no different from many American cities."

Ms. Funaro, Mr. Nardella's successor, takes a decidedly different tack. "I think that we are the ones who have to build a relationship

in order to explain what the rules are," she says.

Ms. Funaro has also made reducing short-term rentals a priority of her administration. In November, her government outlawed lockboxes and megaphones in the city center. An attempted ban on short-term rentals was overturned by a Florentine court; further restrictions would require buy-in from Italy's far-right national government, an opponent of Ms. Funaro's progressive party.

But it might all be too little, too late. Consultants are now reportedly advising universities that the city has become too crowded, too expensive, and too Americanized. They say new programs should find new Italian cities to occupy, where their students might enjoy a more "authentic" experience.

"It's too late; a lot of Florence has already been sold," says Mr. Torrigiani, the advocacy group organizer. "As we say in Italy, the cattle have already escaped from the barn." ■

BOOKS FOR GLOBAL READERS

The deep-cover spies who lived next door

Journalist Shaun Walker's research included interviews with former Soviet agents.

By Barbara Spindel / Contributor

Don Heathfield and Ann Foley appeared to be an ordinary Canadian couple raising their children in Cambridge, Massachusetts. But that was a fiction. Their real names were Andrei Bezrukov and Elena Vavilova, and they were Russian spies who'd been living under false identities for more than 20 years.

Shaun Walker opens his nonfiction "The Illegals: Russia's Most Audacious Spies and Their Century-Long Mission To Infiltrate the West" with an electrifying account of their arrests in 2010. If the setup sounds straight out of the "The Americans," that's because the couple's story helped inspire the show's creation.

Walker's book – consistently fascinating and at times thrilling – covers highlights from the 100-year-old program that sent Russians to live abroad as deep-cover spies. The author traces the program from its roots under Vladimir Lenin, continuing through the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, and up to its revival under Vladimir Putin. Walker, a correspondent for The Guardian, makes good use of archival sources; he also conducted hundreds of interviews, including with former spies who had, until now, revealed little about their experiences.

Operatives had to undergo years of arduous training in order to pass themselves off as natives of foreign countries. Walker explains the process, which began with Russian intelligence agents scouting schools for promising recruits. (The country's intelligence agency has gone through various changes in name and structure over the past 100 years; the most well-known, the KGB, existed from 1954 to 1991.) Strong candidates were rare because they had to embody the paradox of being, in Walker's words, "intelligent, flexible, and worldly enough to slip into the guise of a Westerner," while also remaining loyal to the Soviet state.

Once selected, trainees were immersed in intensive instruction in the language and culture of the country they were to infiltrate. Many, like Bezrukov and Vavilova, became what were called "dead doubles": Soviet diplomats abroad ("legals") would comb through old records and even cemeteries to identify people who had died in childhood and who had no living relatives. The operatives would assume their identities by requesting duplicate birth certificates, which they would then use to acquire passports. With the help of their handlers, they invented detailed backstories to account for the intervening years.

Many agents had advanced degrees from Russian institutions, but once abroad, they typically had to find blue-collar work since they weren't able to reveal their Russian credentials. Their espionage activities might involve cultivating contacts to spy for the Russians (using financial incentives or blackmail) or merely compiling detailed observations of the society they'd infiltrated, receiving and sending reports via coded radio transmissions.

As interesting as the program's nuts and bolts are its psychological dimensions, which Walker explores throughout the book. In the early years, the spies operated alone; they were separated from their families and their homeland for long stretches and lied to everyone they knew. Depression, paranoia, and alcoholism were common. Ironically, because of their facility at lying, they were often viewed with suspicion upon their return. Many of the early operatives didn't survive Josef Stalin's Great Purge of 1936-1938.

During the Cold War, when it became clear that the isolation was too difficult for some to bear, the KGB began pairing agents to work as couples. New complications arose when those couples had children who grew up in the West unaware of their parents' real identities. Bezrukov and Vavilova were sent back to Russia in a prisoner swap; their young-adult sons didn't fully accept the truth until they arrived in Moscow and were shown decades-old photographs of their father and mother in KGB garb.

In its early years, the program pulled off some striking operations. The spies were responsible for the assassinations of a number of high-ranking Nazis during World War II. In addition, Walker reports that because of intelligence from operatives, Stalin knew about the Manhattan Project – the Americans' top-secret push to build the first nuclear bombs – before President Harry Truman did. But the author concludes that there haven't been enough wins to justify the investment in time and money. (The United States attempted its own illegals-style program, which began and ended during the 1950s; Soviet surveillance of its citizenry was so intense that it was "much harder for CIA illegals to infiltrate a rigid police state without detection," Walker explains.)

Walker understands why Russia remained committed to the program during the Soviet era. He observes that in the Cold War period, given that so few Soviet citizens received permission to leave the country (and that those who did were accompanied by KGB minders), out of a population of 290 million, only 100 people – operatives – were able to move freely throughout the West. As a result, even their banal analyses of American society were valued by the leadership.

Today's agents don't have to move freely under deep cover to do damage. In the wake of the 2010 arrests, Walker writes, "Moscow pivoted to a new kind of illegal, adapted for the digital world." In the run-up to the 2016 election, these "virtual illegals" posed as Americans online, in the author's words, "fanning partisan divides." But Putin, a former KGB officer, is known to hold the old-style operatives in high regard. According to Walker, it's conceivable that under the Russian leader's direction, they continue to live among us. ■

Kidnapped bachelors, would-be brides, and a road trip with Lefty the snail

The debut novel "Endling" manages to strike a balance between big messages and small (gastropod) moments.

By Erin Douglass / Contributor

The bold and blistering debut novel "Endling," by Canadian Ukrainian writer Maria Reva, is a shape-shifting, snail-hugging, war-weary, fist-shaking blast of a book. Publishing at the start of summer reading season, it has a lot on its mind. Pack sunscreen.

It's early 2022, and 30-something malacologist Yeva has been on a tear, crisscrossing Ukraine to rescue rare snails with her jerry-rigged mobile lab. Currently in her care are 276 munching, sliming gastropods, a handful of which hold the dismal status of "endling" – their species' final hurrah on the planet.

To fund her endeavor, Yeva works for Kyiv-based "boutique matchmaker" Romeo Meets Yulia. The agency, a down-at-the-heels outfit despite its aspirational marketing, serves a clientele of international men – dubbed "bachelors" – looking to woo and wed a Ukrainian woman ("brides" in the agency's parlance). "May you find the One," participants hear at the start of every event. Yeva has zero interest in being anyone's One, but shows up as "the shining golden hay, just there to populate the parties ... [and] keep the bride-to-bachelor ratio high."

Nastia, a recent high school graduate and fellow bride, approaches Yeva with a proposition: Be my driver in a bachelor kidnapping plan that will force the media to take notice of – and thus take down – Ukraine's "bridal industry machine." Yeva is horrified. Her camper-van lab is not a getaway vehicle, her science not a whim. But Nastia persists.

It gives nothing away to say that Yeva agrees to the plan with a pile of caveats and conditions. Four days and 275 restituted snails later, she and Nastia convince 12 bachelors to hand over their phones and pile into her newly emptied recreational vehicle under the pretense of an escape-room adventure. Two hours into the trip, Russia launches its first attacks on Ukraine – and narrative explosions ensue.

With a page turn and a "Part II" flourish, the story's third person shifts to first, and fiction becomes metafiction. A writer in British Columbia is on the phone with her displeased agent. Glued to photos of Russia-bombed buildings, she worries about her grandfather in Kherson. One of two promised endings unfolds; there's even the requisite acknowledgments and author bio.

The writing in this middle section winks, stretches, and all but tap-dances, but there's anguish, too. How does one respond to war in a faraway homeland? What can – and should – art do in the face of violence?

And then the story resumes. Or, rather, it rewinds and unfurls anew as Yeva, Nastia, and their RV full of snookered bachelors weave around the country first in search of safety – and then, following a tip, in the hopes of finding a mate for Yeva's favorite remaining snail, a looker with a left-spiraling shell named Lefty.

The story gets increasingly tense and, no surprise, tough. Actual war is underway with trigger-happy soldiers, propaganda-fed Russian transplants, and rubble-blocked roads. Yeva's determination to locate Lefty's potential One, regardless of the risks, sends her RV full of humans into dangerous territory and a burst of finales.

"Endling" is a work of real-time reckoning. The novel what-ifs and why-nots its way through issues as enormous as invasion and exploitation, and as intimate as missing a long-absent parent – or helping a lowly gastropod avoid extinction.

"Snails weren't pandas – those oversize bumbling toddlers that sucked up national conservation budgets," Yeva admits early in the story. "Snails were just that – snails."

And certainly they, like any life and any country, are worth saving. ▪

IN PICTURES

For the world's children, play is serious business

Story by Troy Aidan Sambajon / Staff writer

Remember your first pillow fort – a kingdom of couch cushions with wobbly walls and a roof that collapsed again and again? I do. And I remember the joy of trying, the thrill of failing until I triumphed.

As National Children's Day (June 8 in the United States) approached, I spoke with Robin Meisner, senior director of exhibits and research at Boston Children's Museum, to better understand why children play. "Play isn't just about having fun," she says. "It's also about learning to cope, understand differences, solve problems, and think flexibly."

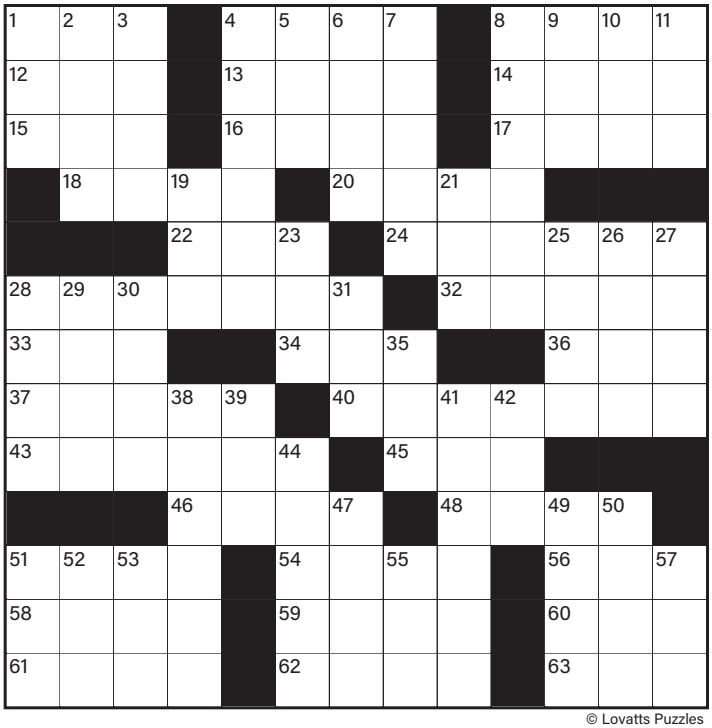
Play isn't always joyful. It's messy, frustrating, full of small failures. That's the point. "If it doesn't work, you just keep trying," Dr. Meisner says. "That's determination."

Play is a rehearsal for the real world. In play, children test boundaries, swap roles, invent rules, and learn empathy. They explore what it means to belong, to lose, and to keep at it.

Yet too often, play is pushed aside – squeezed out by screen time and schoolwork. And most adults have forgotten its value. Only 30% of adults know that the United Nations recognizes play as a basic right, according to the Lego Foundation.

With every cardboard-box-turned-rocket-ship and every stick-turned-fishing-pole, children are not escaping the world. They're preparing to meet it. ▪

Crossword



© Lovatts Puzzles

Across

1. Barnyard bleat

4. Elbows rudely

8. Greenish gem

12. Rainbow curve

13. Meter or mile

14. "Auth. unknown"

15. Shadowy

16. Lead player

17. Finished off a cake

18. Quick and skillful in movement

20. Mast attachment

22. O.T. part

24. ___ of Allegiance

28. Sweet

32. It's spent in Stockholm

33. Alter ___ (second self)

34. Glad offering

36. "___ de deux"

37. "Red" tree

40. Jungle clearer

43. Held

45. Dust jacket feature

46. Australian mineraloid

48. Hourglass part

51. Be tangent to

54. Instrumental piece

56. Classic barbecue item

58. Finish last

59. Kind of recorder

60. Expected landing moment, briefly

61. Pigeon follower

62. Debate (with)

63. Watered down

Down

1. Disagreeable

2. Like the Badlands

3. Crowning point

4. In fairness

5. Unwelcome picnicker

6. Leaning

7. Guitarist's aid

8. Warden

9. Far from mod.

10. Female fawn

11. "To what ___?"

19. Nemesis

21. Classification

23. Girl having a ball?

25. Birdbrain

26. Sandfly

27. Stress-free living

28. Boss

29. Lecher's look

30. Botanical junction

31. Beavers' barrier

35. Hog the phone

38. Wept wildly, maybe

39. Iron-pumper's lift

41. Grill bit

42. Whack weeds

44. Game with aim

47. Vault (over)

49. Work gang

50. Paper-and-string flier

51. Space bar's neighbor

52. Frightening sound

53. Occupy

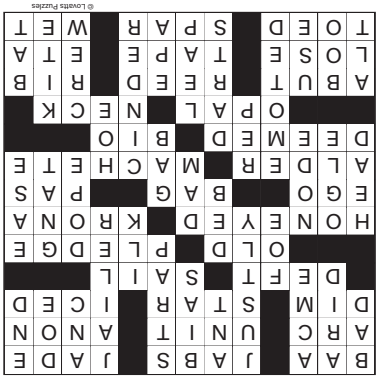
55. They want to clear the air

57. Bruce Wayne's disguise

Sudoku difficulty: ★★★★

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

Crossword and Sudoku solutions



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

How to do Sudoku

Fill in the grid so the numbers 1 through 9 appear just once in each column, row, and three-by-three block.