

the sunday break



River Road Farm is a 580-acre farm in Franklin that not only raises grass-fed beef and produce for local markets and restaurants but also holds concerts in the spring and fall. Nikki Lane performed last October. Proceeds are donated to Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters. **PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANDREW BENJACK**

A musical 'field of dreams'

Benjack family cattle farm draws hundreds to concerts benefiting children's hospital

By Alison Johnson | Correspondent

FRANKLIN — David and Claire Benjack never doubted that if they converted their back deck into a covered stage and invited bands to play, people would come.

They felt confident that outdoor music fans would drive to their 580-acre cattle farm not far from the International Paper Co. — and not just people from around Franklin but

other parts of Hampton Roads, Richmond and Petersburg, too.

They imagined spoiling musicians with homemade lunches and cookies before setting them up on an elevated, 2,200-square-foot stage made of walnut-colored hardwood, nestled amidst River Road Farm's fields, woods, and flower and vegetable gardens.

Today, David and Claire's version of "Field of Dreams" has become a reality.

The Benjacks are in their fourth year of presenting a "Music in the Country" series in the fall and spring, with each show drawing anywhere from 180 to 300 guests.

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Claire and David Benjack own the 580-acre River Road Farm.

THE SCHEDULE

Oct. 9: The Bones of J.R. Jones, with Jonah Ross

Oct. 23: Tuesday's Gone, with Doc Straw & the Scarecrows

Nov. 13: Cris Jacobs Band, with Celeste Kellogg

Nov. 20: Eric Hutchinson, with Allen Hudson and the Halfmoons

IF YOU GO

When: Oct. 9 through Nov. 20. Gates open at noon; supporting acts begin at 1, headliners at 3.

Where: River Road Farm, 213 River Road, Franklin

Tickets: \$35 for adults; free for ages 12 and younger. Food trucks on site.

Details: riverroadfarmva.com/events



River Road Farm in Franklin hosts concerts on the lawn in spring and fall. The next series runs from Oct. 9 to Nov. 20.

MEET THE TASTEMAKERS

Robert Griesmer, Virginia Air & Space Science Center

By Denise M. Watson
Staff Writer

HAMPTON — "Meet the Tastemakers" is a series that gives readers a chance to learn about the moving parts of the local arts scene — most important, the people making it all happen. They are choreographers, painters, curators and designers who have centered their life's work on learning and helping others do so as well.

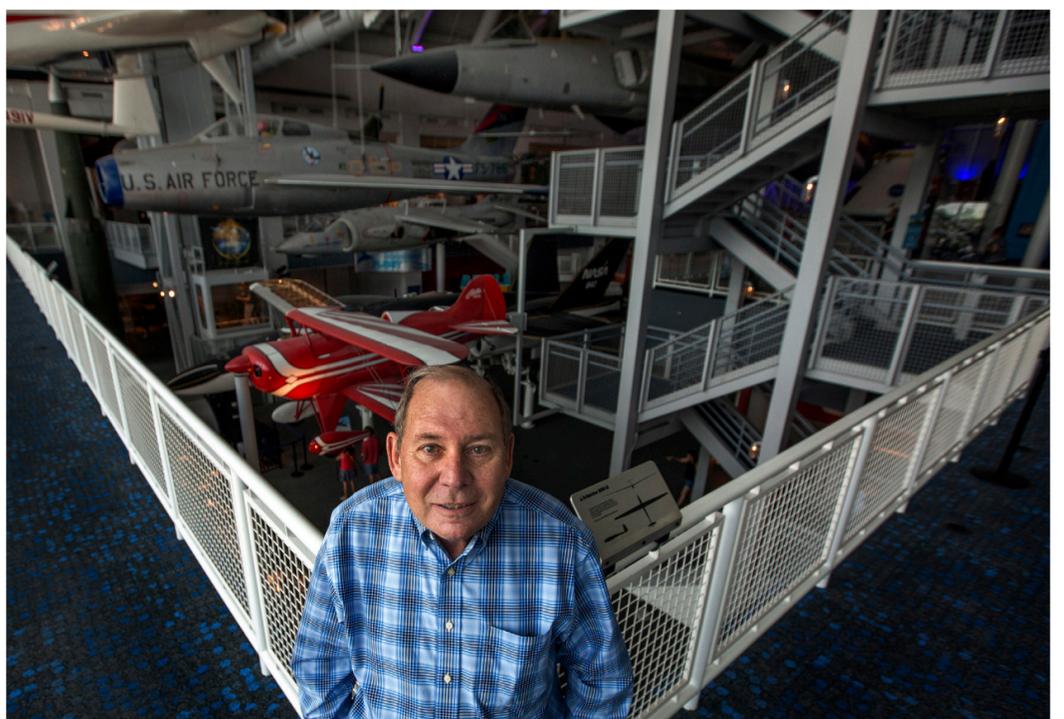
We caught up with Robert Griesmer, who is retiring as executive director and chief operating officer of the Virginia Air & Space Science Center. His job, he said, has been more hands-on than people realize.

The conversation has been edited for clarity and space.

What do you do and where do you do it?

I have had the honor of leading the Virginia Air & Space Science Center through transformational changes since arriving in November 2014. Our team rebuilt its brand as the NASA Langley Research Visitor in Center as well as a leader in STEM programming and research. We are known not just as a nice place, but as an essential place; not just a provider of STEM programs, but a leader and innovator of

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Robert Griesmer will retire as executive director and CEO of the Virginia Air & Space Science Center at the end of September.

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Seven-time Grammy winner **Gladys Knight** makes her way to the Chrysler stage. The legendary artist has recorded more than 38 albums over the years. 7 tonight at Chrysler Hall, 215 St. Paul's Blvd., Norfolk. Tickets start at \$49.50. To purchase, visit [ticketmaster.com](https://www.ticketmaster.com).

MORE FUN

Oceanfront Concert Series presents **Jefferson Starship**. In addition to original member David Freiberg, the band includes drummer Donny Baldwin, keyboardist Chris Smith, guitarist Jude Gold and singer/guitarist Cathy Richardson. 7 p.m. Wednesday at 24th Street park, Virginia Beach Oceanfront. Free. For venue info, visit [beachevents.org](https://www.beachevents.org).

Norfolk Tides take on the Durham Bulls at home: Tuesday through next Sunday. Times vary. Harbor Park, 150 Park Ave., Norfolk. Tickets start at \$12. For times, visit [milb.com/norfolk](https://www.milb.com/norfolk). To purchase, visit [ticketmaster.com](https://www.ticketmaster.com).

Events may change. Check before attending.

'Good stress' helps mind to deal with tough, chaotic times

HealthDay News

A tight deadline at work. A tough exam at school. A big vacation that requires tons of planning. A home repair that's gone awry.

These sources of stress are anything but pleasant, but a new study suggests that they might actually be good for your mental health in the long run.

Low to moderate amounts of daily stress can prepare the mind to deal with tougher and more

chaotic times, much as a vaccine protects a person against future infection, said lead researcher Assaf Oshri, an associate professor with the University of Georgia's College of Family and Consumer Sciences.

"Some low to moderate level of perceived stress is associated with increased cognitive functioning or better cognitive functioning, and this cognitive functioning was associated with significantly less emotional problems and antisocial

behavior problems," Oshri said.

Oshri and his colleagues analyzed data from more than 1,200 young adults by the Human Connectome Project, a project funded by the U.S. National Institutes of Health intended to provide insight into how the human brain functions.

The young adults reported their perceived stress levels, and also took tests designed to assess their brain function.

The researchers then

compared those findings with participants' answers to questions about their anxiety, attention, aggression and other behavioral and emotional problems.

The investigators discovered there's a U-shaped curve when it comes to stress, where low and even moderate levels appear to be psychologically beneficial.

"Your body, your brain, your psychology, your neurological system, it's adapting to the stress,

right? You're exposed to some level of stress, and that creates or initiates some preparing mechanism, if you wish, some reorganization that will prepare you for future encounters with stress," Oshri said.

Daily stressors can help a person become more organized and efficient, and have a plan going forward, Oshri said.

The study was published in the journal *Psychiatry Research*.



DREAMSTIME

Music

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The first of this year's four Saturday concerts is scheduled for Oct. 9. Tickets are on sale now.

"Where else can you enjoy the country and music with cows and chickens listening right along with you?" David said. "It's intimate; artists go down and talk to people on the lawn. We have no intention for it to ever have a big, festival-type atmosphere."

Claire added, "This is our home. All we've done is open our gates and invite people to be our guests. One year, a band sang 'Happy Birthday' to our son Alex in the kitchen."

Beyond the music, River Road Farm sells grass-fed beef, free-range eggs and vegetables at local farmer's markets and restaurants. Claire, who took over the property from her father after his passing in 2001, has 85 cows, a bull and 60-plus chickens, along with two miniature donkeys, Pixie and Coco, and two vole-hunting kittens, River and Harpo.

The Benjacks decided to add a concert series in 2019 simply because they love music. She gravitates to rock, folk, Americana and 1980s pop, while his eclectic taste includes Southern rock, blues and 1960s soul.

David and Claire have also opted to donate net proceeds to Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters' "Lighting the Way for Mental and Behav-



River Road Farm sells grass-fed beef, free-range eggs and vegetables at local farmer's markets and restaurants. Claire Benjack, left, who took over the property from her father after he died in 2001, has 85 cows, a bull and 60-plus chickens, along with two miniature donkeys, Pixie and Coco, and two vole-hunting kittens, River and Harpo. **COURTESY OF ANDREW BENJACK**

ioral Health" initiative, aimed at improving kids' access to psychological care.

"We discovered the incredible lack of pediatric mental health professionals in our region," said David, a longtime CHKD supporter. "We knew we had to be part of the conversation and the solution."

David, 58, is originally

from Elmwood Park, New Jersey; he has a zoology degree from Connecticut College and a master's in business administration from Georgetown University. Claire, a 55-year-old Norfolk native, majored in art history at Pine Manor College, outside Boston.

The two met in 1987 at The Boathouse Bar in Cambridge, where he was a part-time bartender and

bouncer and she, a college junior, was a customer. They married six years later and have raised three sons, Andrew, Alex (who got the birthday serenade) and Clay.

Claire's dad, George Kaufman, had purchased River Road Farm in 1979 and ran a 1,000-head beef cattle operation before transitioning to sod. She and David settled back in her hometown in 1993.

When the couple inherited the farm 21 years ago, they initially used it mostly as a weekend getaway. After about six years, Claire resolved to join the farm-to-table dining and regenerative agriculture movements by raising grass-fed beef. She commuted several times a week from Norfolk until four years ago when the Benjacks relocated to Franklin.

David still has a full-time job as president of Chesapeake Drywall & Acoustics, while Claire heads up the farm with help from a long-time cattle manager, several part-time employees and her family.

"It's a never-ending job, but I'm so passionate about it that it really never feels like work," she said. "I love knowing that people are eating good food because of what we do here."

River Road Farm grows its own hay for cattle — the Benjack cows also like to munch on home-grown pumpkins — and rotates its two herds among five pastures to promote healthy soil and vegetation.

Chickens are free to roam through the grass and fly up into trees.

In 2018, with the three sons largely grown, David and Claire tackled the deck and their concert dream. David tore up the old wood of the deck before hiring professionals to do the rest of the conversion and expansion.

Meanwhile, he began contacting bands of various genres that he liked. He called booking agents, told them what he was doing and asked about negotiating a price.

"I'm anything but shy," he said.

The opening bands are locals, but other groups have traveled from as far as California, New York, Tennessee and North Carolina. Fans have followed them from throughout Virginia as well as neighboring states.

The Benjacks have access to indoor facilities at Paul D. Camp Community College should the weather be very inclement, although their stage's roof blocks intense sun or drizzle and the Benjacks have a large tent for the lawn.

Traveling to their venue means winding through residential neighborhoods, entering through a black gate and heading down a paved driveway to the couple's brick Cape Cod. There, artists usually feast on redwood-smoked barbecue and snacks before and after they play; many also enjoy visiting David and Claire's animals.

"We want to spoil them

and give them a unique experience," Claire said.

The Benjacks' son Clay — a guitarist in an indie hip-hop and pop band — helps manage social media and marketing for "Music in the Country" and the farm. Andrew, a photographer, takes pictures.

For the audience, David and Claire put out cornhole boards, footballs, Frisbees and other lawn entertainment and encourage families to dance or play on the swings. They set up portable toilets and offer free parking in an upper field.

Visitors also get to visit Claire's flower and herb gardens, a colorful bonanza for butterflies, birds, bees and wasps. One of her favorite plots includes fragrant mountain mint and thyme, bright yellow coneflowers, beeblossom and a stone fountain with a gentle trickle of water.

In her organic vegetable gardens, she grows cucumbers, tomatoes, beans, corn, and jalapeno and bell peppers in the summer, and beets, kale, lettuce, carrots, sweet potatoes, spinach and string beans in the fall, although her lineup changes regularly.

When it's not a concert day, David and Claire often sit out at a picnic table on their lighted deck-stage — it's both of those things now — and just relax.

"We love our life here," David says, "and we also love sharing it through music."

Reach Alison Johnson at ajohnsondp@yahoo.com

Tastemakers

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STEM education.

We are the home of Apollo 12, Gemini, Mercury and the new Orion capsule. We have a stunning collection of historic space- and aircraft suspended from our 98-foot atrium, and a five-story, 3D IMAX theater that provides a dramatic backdrop for telling the compelling stories of America's leadership in aerospace.

You're retiring in September. Tell us about the changes to the center during your time.

We began a journey when I arrived.

First and foremost, the business model was revamped to rightsize the organization, restructure pricing mechanisms, staffing and program activities to maximize revenue. At the same time, new partnerships were cultivated with corporations and foundations to improve revenue support. Its mission, "inspiring the next generation of explorers," needed to be, once again, top of mind.

The major renovations included upgrades to the giant screen IMAX theater plus the renovation of the Space Explorer and Flight galleries and the newest addition, The SPACE, an early learners' gallery, a new children's museum experience.

We were determined to achieve the goal of long-term sustainability. We had to convert this global pandemic disruption into



Robert Griesmer, head of the Virginia Air & Space Science Center, talking to parents as they watched their kids play on the "Lucky Climber" Aug. 5. It's part of The SPACE, an area for children and one whose creation Griesmer led. **BILL TIERNAN/FREELANCE**

an opportunity and we have accomplished that.

The center recently completed its multi-million-dollar capital campaign. The campaign, which lasted longer than expected because of the pandemic, enabled the institution to accomplish its goals.

We stayed in the black even when faced with forced closings; we refused to allow stakeholder investments to slip away through operating losses due to not making the required difficult business decisions.

What would surprise

people most about what you do?

I have not given much thought to that question. Perhaps outsiders would be surprised at how many hats I wear. Internally, there is probably general agreement that I wear too many hats. I have experience in the accounting and budgeting that goes along with reinventing business models. I have a passion for marketing and branding, and at the same time, I have benefited from experiences in operations and construction. Previous positions exposed me to exhibit development that in

turn forced me to focus on 21st-century engagement while driving revenue.

I spend a lot of time negotiating contract terms and conditions but I think I have mellowed quite a bit in this regard as I have gotten older! Long-term relationships need to have balance; it is not always about saving every nickel and dime. Both sides need to be able to breathe and grow in a contractual relationship.

Whom would you love to come to the center as a guest speaker before you leave?

Well, I guess the sky is the limit on that topic. But I think Dr. John Falk should make a return visit. We have many new board members who would benefit from his return.

He co-wrote the book "The Museum Experience" in 1992 that revolutionized the way museum professionals understand their constituents. His international institute has partnered with the center with its STEM 360 Program and Research Project, which uses a multiplatform system approach to enhancing STEM learning and work-

force development. I hope whoever takes over invites him to speak. I know he will enjoy seeing the 21st-century transformation we have achieved and I know for sure that many will benefit from hearing what he has to say.

Do you have an area in the center or addition to the center that you are most proud of?

That's easy. The two new exhibit galleries, Space Explorer Gallery and The SPACE, an early learner's gallery whose acronym stands for Smile, Play, Achieve, Create, and Explore. Both redefine what a visit to the Virginia Air & Space Science Center entails. The new front entrance design provides cafeteria tables for school groups; they fold away into the wall when not in use. The expanded and renovated gift shop is a spectacular retail experience. Our per capita sales place us in the top 1% of science centers in the nation. And I should not forget to mention that upgrades to the IMAX large screen theater make the immersive experience all the more powerful.

But, most important, I am proud of the external and internal teams that made all this possible. They acted in the spirit of a Robert Frost poem, "The Road Not Taken," which concludes, "I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."

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