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LIFESTYLE + FASHION

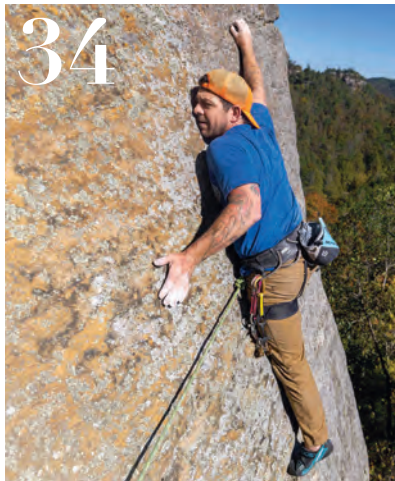


VOLUME 7 | ISSUE 1 | FALL 2024



22 IN FULL BLOOM

Embrace the overlap between fashion and nature with KRNL's blossoming seniors.



34 REACHING NEW HEIGHTS WITH KENTUCKY CLIMBERS

Rock climbers talk about what the sport means to them right here in the Bluegrass.



42 ROCKIN' REVIVAL

Travel back in time to the golden age of rock 'n' roll and jam out with Lexington band Topsoil.

KRNL + FASHION INSIDE LOOK



**A BREAK FROM THE SILENCE:
SISTERS HONOR THEIR LOST
SONS WITH BROTHERS' RUN**

Sisters Angela Wiese and Erin Hawley share their stories as they honor their sons and daughter and raise suicide prevention awareness through an annual 3K run called Brothers' Run.



**TAILORED FOR SUCCESS:
BUILDING THE FIRST
KENTUCKY FASHION HOUSE**

Albert Lukonga reveals his journey from challenging beginnings in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to establishing a luxury fashion house in Lexington.



DAWN

Saddle up for a western awakening at Three Crowns Farm.

8

**BREWED WITH AUTONOMY:
MCLEOD'S COFFEE HOUSE
CREATES OPPORTUNITIES FOR
LEXINGTON'S SPECIAL NEEDS
COMMUNITY**

McLeod's Coffee House in Lexington, a non-profit establishment that employs individuals with special needs, aims to create an inclusive environment that goes beyond the typical coffee shop experience.

14

**TIME WARP TRADITION:
LEXINGTON'S ROCKY HORROR
PICTURE SHOW CULTIVATES
CONNECTION AND EXPRESSION**

The Kentucky Theatre's monthly showing of the Rocky Horror Picture Show fosters a welcoming space for self-expression and queer culture through the dedication of its shadow cast and community.

19

**TURNING TRASH INTO TREASURE:
HOW TWO KENTUCKY ARTISTS
CHAMPION ENVIRONMENTAL
AWARENESS THROUGH ART**

Kentucky artists John Andrew Dixon and Carrie Johnson use their creative talents to promote environmental awareness by transforming discarded materials into art and functional objects.

28

**WILDCATS 'STIRRUP' PASSION
WITH UK RODEO TEAM**

From barrel racing to bull riding, the University of Kentucky's rodeo team has made a deep commitment to the sport beyond just competition.

52

HEALING THROUGH HORSES

Central Kentucky Riding for Hope is a non-profit organization that offers therapeutic equine activities for people with disabilities, including Julian Clark, a 27-year-old with autism and cerebral palsy.

63

**A STAGE FOR EVERY STORY: THE
LEXINGTON THEATRE COMPANY'S
IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY**

The Lexington Theatre Company, founded by a husband and wife duo, transforms lives through its commitment to high-quality theatre and education.

66

**OLD KEYS DON'T OPEN
MODERN DOORS**

Houses in northern Kentucky's river towns are being revived as new owners embrace the history of the homes, breathing new life into them.

74

**TURNING DREAMS INTO
REALITY AT THE LEXINGTON
DREAM FACTORY**

10-year-old Grayson Piatt got his dream vacation to Disney World after being diagnosed with epilepsy at the age of three. After multiple hospital visits and piling medical bills, his family got a break, all thanks to the Lexington Dream Factory.

Turning Trash into Treasure:

How Two Kentucky Artists Champion Environmental Awareness Through Art

WRITTEN BY LILLY KEITH | PHOTOS BY HOLLY NETZLEY & ALEXIS BAKER



When designer and self-taught illustrator John Andrew Dixon sits down to paint, it's not at a desk or in a workshop. He said he prefers to work exposed to the outdoor elements, whether painting the scenery of the Kentucky Palisades or using discarded materials to make a collage.

He must consider everything around him, how the slightest breeze could move the paint on his canvas, or how his materials could be blown away if not safe in his hands.

Dixon said painting "en plein air," French for "in the open air," was a challenge he began in 2017.

"It took longer to maybe evolve it (painting en plein air) towards more of an awareness of how I could offer it as a new way of looking at our relationship to all this cast-off material," Dixon said.

When working outside, Dixon said he must keep his work small.

"Sometimes, people, when they

see them, they're smaller than they expected, but what that does is it draws people towards the work. I found that a lot of people think my work is a conventional painting," Dixon said.

Upon first glance, Dixon's scenic collages look similar to paintings. But as his audience gets closer to

his artwork, they see layers and torn edges of paper. He cuts and pastes materials that look like paper together to create this effect, a method he feels everyone is familiar with from an early age.

"I like Norman Rockwell or all kinds of artists and things, but I couldn't understand how they could



"On the Kanta-ke" by John Andrew Dixon.



paint that way, or how different artists could paint so differently. Almost any young person can relate to cutting and pasting," Dixon said. "There's something universal about collage, and I think that extends."

Dixon's "Litter-ally Kentucky," an exhibit of 16 collage landscapes, is currently traveling across Kentucky libraries. It has been to three local spots over the past year: the Paul Sawyer Public Library, Woodford County Library in Versailles and the Lexington Public Library.

"We didn't miss a beat as far as gathering and doing art outside," he said. "That's when I started thinking more formally about proposing for a grant. So that was through the Kentucky Arts Council and with federal funds from the National Endowment for the Arts."

With the funding he received, Dixon said he aims to educate his audience on how prevalent the issue of littering is in the modern day.

"Littering is an issue rooted in

people disconnected from the land," he said. "The ideals of their rural heritage, disconnection from nature as a part of the same creation, divine creation as they are."

Artists taking the products of our wasteful society and trying

to repurpose them has become increasingly more common, Dixon said.

"It's not going to solve our worldwide environmental problems or anything like that, but it's going to maybe move us in a positive direction about our relationship with the natural world," he said.

Dixon sometimes teaches classes at libraries and galleries on creating collages to show how to repurpose materials in artistic ways.



John Andrew Dixon teaches a class on Tuesday, Aug. 20, 2024, in Lexington, Ky. Photo by Alexis Baker.

“I guess I’m trying to create a *bit of beauty from a bit of ugly or a bit of worthless material*, and maybe help people see things in a new light.”

— JOHN ANDREW DIXON
DESIGNER AND SELF-TAUGHT
ILLUSTRATOR

Dixon hopes his students will share the belief that Kentucky's landscapes need its inhabitants' care and attention to preserve the space for generations to come.

"I guess I'm trying to create a bit of beauty from a bit of ugly or a bit of worthless material, and maybe help people see things in a new light," he said.

Carrie Johnson, a current graduate student at the University of Kentucky, does something similar with her trash-to-treasure business.

Johnson is pursuing a Ph.D. in biochemistry and researching Alzheimer's disease on sex differences. She balances this with running her small business, Nerd Babes Co., which focuses on upcycling materials to keep trash out of landfills.

"I'm a giant hippie. I've been picking up trash since I could walk," Johnson said.

The idea for Nerd Babes Co., which was established in 2016, came to her after she and



Carrie Johnson holds up a freshly cut glass bottle after a demonstration on Aug. 21, 2024, in Lexington, Ky. Photo by Holly Netzley.

“I just hope people see stuff and actually think ‘Wow, maybe I shouldn’t throw away everything.’ We can **repurpose, reimagine, reuse, upcycle.**”

— CARRIE JOHNSON

DESIGNER AND OWNER OF NERD BABES CO.

her friends collected empty alcohol bottles throughout their undergraduate years at UK. While trying to figure out what to do with so many bottles, she saw a Pinterest idea about making tiki torches out of them.

That year, she made them for her friends as Christmas gifts.

Now, she creates soy candles out of materials you might not expect. She thrifts beverage bottles, cans and food containers and transforms them into items like lamps and tiki torches. Johnson's talents also include making artificial sea glass and earrings out of old pottery and matchbooks.

"I just hope people see stuff and actually think 'Wow, maybe I shouldn't throw away everything.' We can repurpose, reimagine, reuse, upcycle," she said.

Johnson said she is very

conscious of the products she's making and how they could impact the environment.

"I think more of, like, the lifestyle of a product. From where I'm getting the materials to where my product is going to end up afterward. I basically try to add as few extra pollutants, trash and waste as possible," Johnson said.

Her ambition for protecting the environment extends to those around her.

"People ask me how to make something, I just tell them so it's not another piece of trash in the landfill," she said.

Johnson said she partners with local businesses to source her materials, like wood from a local sawmill and collaborates with local stores to sell her products. The only packaging material she's ever purchased is tape.

"Getting to actually be involved in the local beer scene, the local community and just working with all these other small businesses has been awesome," she said.

Johnson sells her art through places in Kentucky such as Revelry Boutique in Louisville, Completely Kentucky in Frankfort and collaborations with breweries.

Though Johnson has faced difficulties with arthritis in both hands and a back injury she got when she was 13, she said her satisfaction after seeing the end result of a long day keeps her in motion.

I see a batch of 70 dried candles, I'm like 'Hell yeah,'" she said. "It's nice to actually see a quantifiable amount of trash I'm keeping out of the landfill, making it an object with purpose."

Her craft has taught her to use

various tools that society generally considers “manly.”

“You wouldn’t believe the amount of times I’ve had someone come up to me and be like ‘Oh does your husband cut these for you?’” she said. “It’s just kind of cool to learn. I don’t even know that many people that know how to use a tile saw, men or women.”

“ I see a batch of 70 dried candles, I’m like ‘*Hell yeah,*’”

— CARRIE JOHNSON
DESIGNER AND OWNER OF
NERD BABES CO.

Johnson also knows how to woodwork and sand her work by herself.

“I always feel very satisfied and like this is actually art,” she said. “I get to put a lot of different skills to use.”

She said her art has allowed her to work through her mental health during trying times.

“The average American graduate student, I’m obviously gonna have mental health issues,” Johnson said. “I think a lot of times it’s been nice to have something creative that I can do outside of like my actual job.”

Having her small business has forced her to get up and get it done, even when she doesn’t feel like it.

“A lot of the time it’s also working out of the house when I would have just isolated myself,” Johnson said. “I’ve never been upset about going out and seeing all my friends [at events].”

People approaching her booth at events where she sells her upcycled art and complimenting her work has done more than the average customer could imagine.

“To have people like come to my booths and be like ‘This is so cool,’ it’s nice for your mental health to hear that other people like what you’re doing and think it’s cool and of value,” Johnson said.



Carrie Johnson demonstrates how she prepares and washes glass so it can be turned into seaglass. Photo by Holly Netzley.

KRNL 2023 AWARDS

Society of Professional Journalists

2022 Mark of Excellence Awards

Best Arts/Entertainment/Fashion Journalism (Region 5)

Gray Greenwell, First Place

Best Student Magazine (Region 5)

First Place & National Runner Up

College Media Association

2023 Organizational Pinnacle Awards

Feature Magazine of the Year

First Place

2023 Individual Pinnacle Awards

Best Profile Story

Rana Alsoufi, First Place

Best Feature Story

Emma Reilly, Second Place

Best Magazine Cover

Allie Diggs & Abbey Purcell
Honorable Mention

Best Magazine News Page/Spread

Allie Diggs, First Place

Best Magazine Sports Page/Spread

Emme Schumacher, Third Place

Best Magazine Feature Page/Spread

Allie Diggs
Honorable Mention

Associated Collegiate Press

2023 Organizational Best of Show

Best Feature Magazine (Spring 2023 Issue)

Second Place

2023 Individual Best of Show

Best Advertisement: Print, Online, Video, Audio

Bree Cox, Second Place

Best Design, Magazine

Allie Diggs, Sixth Place

Southeast Journalism Conference

2023 Best of the South

Best Magazine

KRNL Lifestyle + Fashion Spring 2023 Issue, First Place

Best Feature Writer

Rana Alsoufi, First Place

Best Magazine Writer

Emma Reilly, First Place

Best Advertising Staff Member

Bree Cox, First Place

Best Magazine Designer

Hunter Grace Hayes, First Place

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