

GRTC is working to increase bus amenities – right now, only 5% of stops have covers – but riders are frustrated with the current process to get them

David.Tran
Aug 13, 2021



Maurice Jones sits on an abandoned shopping cart as he waits for a bus at GRTC Bus Stop #3464 on Brook Rd. in Richmond, VA Friday, August 13, 2021. A number of bus stops around the city lack amenities such as benches or shelters.

BOB BROWN

David.Tran

At a curb on Brook Road next to the Walmart Neighborhood Market in Henrico County last Monday, there was a disarray of three shopping carts, flipped on their side, lying under trees sparingly planted.

Besides the trees, the concrete curb — which acts as a bus stop — is virtually bare.

Sitting on one of the carts is Michelle Agosto, who has just finished grocery shopping with her husband, Sean Johnson, waiting for the bus to take them home. The Henrico residents said they usually drag a cart to the bus stop to have a place to sit as they wait.

This bus stop is one of many within the regional transit system that lacks bus amenities such as a trash can, bench or shelter — stop No. 3464 — the one at Brook Road — has none.

In fact, only 5% of the 1,650 bus stops across the GRTC transit system have shelters — that is, a covered bench — and about 20% have just benches, according to GRTC. But up to 80% of the stops where Richmonders wait to catch a ride on the region's only public transportation service have no cover or seat, just a pole in the ground alerting

riders and drivers to the spot.

Many elderly people who frequent the store rely on the bus, Agosto said. With the lack of a sitting area, some riders resort to standing outside the store — one of the few nearby places with cover — which is several feet away from the stop.

“There’s not even anywhere to sit [at the storefront],” Agosto said. “They stand [there] because of the shade.”

Sometimes they miss the bus, she said, because of the distance between the storefront and bus stop. A bus arrives every 30 minutes to an hour.

Between July 1, 2020, and July 20, 2021, 63 requests were submitted to GRTC by riders to add an amenity, such as a trash can or bench, to an existing bus stop or to report a problem with an existing amenity, according to data from GRTC obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request.

Twenty of the requests were approved, and 21 were denied. The remaining are under review. Of those denied was a bench request for the bus stop at Brook Road next to the Walmart Neighborhood Market. The bench request was denied, GRTC said, because a shelter is planned to be installed this fiscal year.

Fifty-two of the requests were for bus stops located in Richmond, mostly concentrated in the North Side and South Side. There were just eight and three requests, respectively, for stops in Henrico and Chesterfield counties. Just over 75% of the stops are in Richmond.

For many riders, the process to install and upgrade amenities at bus stops is lengthy and complex, which differs in Richmond and the counties of Henrico and Chesterfield, according to GRTC.

In Richmond, if GRTC decides to move forward with a request, it goes to the city’s consultative group, which includes officials from the Department of Planning and Development Review, for approval before the transit company can proceed further.

A 15-day public comment period is then open for nearby private property owners and civic organizations to weigh in on the proposed amenities. The city needs to approve the request a second time before work can commence.

During the public comment period, letters are sent to property owners and civic organizations within 150 feet of the affected bus stop in addition to a notice posted at the bus stop sign.

A request for a bench and a trash can at a southbound bus stop on North Avenue and West Meredith Street was approved, according to the data.

However, a request for the same bus amenities at a stop going northbound right across the street was denied. The request was denied because installing a landing pad — which is required for a bench or trash can — would not be ADA compliant as the sidewalk has a slope, GRTC said.

Bus stops that meet requirements, such as being in a “geographical area of priority need” — areas GRTC said have been historically under-invested in, such as South Side or East End — are qualified for amenities. But physical factors, such as anything that interferes with utilities or sidewalk widths, can affect amenities’ approval.

“Even if a lot of people want an amenity, if we can’t safely install something, if the sidewalk is too narrow and it can’t fit a bench, as much as we would like to, we just can’t,” said Raquel Aguire, GRTC’s bus stop and amenities program manager.

Sidewalks and curb ramps must be in compliance with standards set by the Americans with Disabilities Act for sidewalk mobility space.

A change also can be contingent on ridership levels, which Aguire said may have led to one request being approved and another being denied despite the bus stops being a few feet away from each other.

“I would guess that there were just different ridership thresholds,” Aguire said. “That’s a really kind of a big knee-jerk thing that will either make stops eligible or ineligible.”

Bus stops with an average of 50 daily boardings are automatically qualified for a shelter, while bus stops in areas of “priority need” require an average of 33 daily boardings.

A stop with about 30 daily boardings is qualified for a shelter if it meets two of the following requirements: It is adjacent to a hospital or social service agency, a school, an apartment with 250 or more units or senior housing, a major employment or activity center or route intersection; or if the stop has a 30-minute or greater lapse between the bus arrivals on that route.

The requests within the past year overwhelmingly took issue with the lack of benches and trash cans; 55 of the requests were concerned with either a bench, trash can or both.

One approved request for a bench and trash can is for a bus stop a few feet from the Neighborhood Resource Center of Greater Fulton, an educational and cultural center in the East End.

Breanne Armbrust, executive director of the Neighborhood Resource Center, said the staff have requested a bench and a trash can repeatedly for 10 years. She said these amenities are needed as people regularly use the stop. The absence of a trash can means that garbage usually ends up on the ground.

“The area there is fully concrete,” Armbrust said. “So it’s very hot and not comfortable for people to stand on.”

GRTC does receive numerous requests for a single bus stop, which can be denied for various reasons. But Emily DelRoss, acting director of planning and scheduling, said a request can be approved if it is submitted at a time when it finally meets eligibility.

Armbrust last put in a formal request in December 2019 or January 2020. She said she emailed GRTC for a follow-up in October 2020 after months of not receiving a response.

That was when Armbrust said the installation process seemed to have commenced, but she said she was never notified of any updates throughout the process.

GRTC tries to notify requesters when it receives an initial request, Aguire said, and will also notify the person about the final decision. She said the entire process typically lasts a minimum of two to three months but can last longer if there's additional construction work.

Armbrust said she learned a trash can was being installed after hearing two workers outside the building drilling at the bus stop, who confirmed to her they were installing a trash can for GRTC. And she found out a bench request was approved only after speaking with the Richmond Times-Dispatch.

She said the request process is not widely accessible to riders, noting some riders may not have the technology to enter a formal request and that the public comment procedure is not engaging the community.

“It really was just the fact that they put a piece of paper up on the sign for the bus stop to take public comment, and I feel like that really doesn't notify the community of what's going on,” Armbrust said.

According to a 2019 passenger study conducted by GRTC, 21% of riders report their first priority is having bus essentials, such as shelters, benches and trash cans at their bus stops.

While more than half of GRTC riders surveyed agreed bus stops are “adequately sheltered/accessible,” just under one-third of riders disagreed.

There are currently 85 bus stops with shelters, according to a **board report for this Tuesday's GRTC board of directors meeting**.

Thirty shelter installations are in progress, with plans for 26 shelter installations annually for the next five fiscal years.

By the end of fiscal year 2027, the goal is that 50% of GRTC bus stops have a shelter or bench.

RVA Rapid Transit, a transportation advocacy organization with initiatives to improve Richmond's public transportation, **launched a Better Bus Stop program in July** with the goal of improving such infrastructure by curbing litter or helping to add amenities.

“We're creating a continual, dignified place for people to wait,” said Faith Walker, director of community engagement.

Once riders “adopt” a stop as part of the program, they help maintain the stops' cleanliness. Since July, about 20 bus stops have been adopted, Walker said. Fourteen of them were adopted by Keep Virginia Cozy, an environmental conservation organization.

RVA Rapid Transit also received a grant from Bon Secours for the yearlong program, Walker said.

Data, which will be collected to determine when trash is at its heaviest and how often a bus shelter needs to be cleaned, will be used to determine the program's expansion and how often the bus stops should be maintained.

The nonprofit is also partnering with Glean LLC, a local commercial cleaning service, to help with the initiative. The cleaning service is looking to hire two to three employees within the East End community.

Both Walker and Nicole Mason, CEO and founder of Glean LLC, said they are excited to create jobs in the East End, where most of the shelters being cleaned are located.

RVA Rapid Transit wants to help GRTC improve infrastructure, Walker said, which is what the Better Bus Stop program strives to do.

“What we want to do at RVA Rapid Transit is speed up the process,” she said. “If the challenge is funding, then we want to provide a solution. ‘OK, here’s the money that we raised and collected, so you can add more [amenities].’”

She adds that community engagement is critical in increasing the accessibility of the bus stops and their amenities.

“When people start to speak up, then the issue becomes wider and broader,” Walker said. “And it’ll be all hands on deck. That’s what we need.”

dtran@timesdispatch.com

(804) 649-6572

David.Tran

Ruby Scoops' owner to appear on Food Network ice cream competition show with Ben & Jerry's co-founders - and celebs like Kevin Bacon and Ludacris

David.Tran
Aug 12, 2021



Rabia Kamara, owner of Ruby Scoops, was a contestant on Food Network's "Ben & Jerry's: Clash of the Cones."

courtesy of food network

David.Tran

When customers pay a visit to Ruby Scoops Ice Cream & Sweets in North Richmond, they can expect to be greeted by Rabia Kamara's bubbly personality and smile.

Soon, the rest of the country will be able to experience that in the comfort of their home.

Kamara is one of the six contestants on "Ben & Jerry's: Clash of the Cones," a Food Network competition show that challenges ice cream makers to tap into their creativity and concoct an original Ben & Jerry's ice cream flavor of their own. The show premieres Monday.

This is not the first time that Kamara, founder and owner of Ruby Scoops, appeared on Food Network. She participated in "Guy's Grocery Games" in 2016 as well as Discover Family's "Bake It Like Buddy" in 2017 and 2018.

What makes "Ben & Jerry's: Clash of the Cones" special for Kamara is that the entire premise focuses on the specialty of ice cream and being surrounded by people passionate about the dessert.

“Being able to do what I think I’m most comfortable doing, that’s really exciting,” she said, “because then I get to really let my true self shine.”

Ruby Scoops is a Black and queer-owned ice cream shop, something that Kamara said she is proud of and doesn’t shy away from on the show. She said she hopes she can be an inspiration for kids watching.

“I was in my 20s before I saw anybody that looked like me on television cooking,” she said. “So being able to do this and show people that are younger than me or even older than me that ‘hey, you can do whatever you want to do and be good at it and people will see and appreciate that in you,’ I think that’s important.”

Over the course of four episodes — which were taped in May — the competitors created an ice cream flavor that captured the essence of a celebrity guest star, such as Chris “Ludacris” Bridges and Kevin Bacon, giving the competitors their challenges.

Ruby Scoops is known for its unique, inventive flavors, such as Guava Daiquiri Sorbet or Sweet Corn Basil, as well as for its twists on classics like Butter Pecan and vegan “Mylk and Oreos.”

“I like to use ice cream to introduce people to certain flavors that they may not be used to or combinations,” Kamara said.

While it was a challenge to incorporate some of the signature of Ruby Scoops, given the premise of the show, she said she was able to tap into that creativity of fusing ingredients together.

Not only was it exciting for Kamara to showcase her creativity, she said she enjoyed watching the creative processes and personal styles and tastes of other ice cream makers come to life.

“That goes to show that ice cream is really a genuinely creative medium, which is what I love about it,” Kamara said.

Their creations will be judged not only by well-known chefs Jet and Ali Tila and Ben & Jerry’s flavor guru Chris Rivard, but also by the public.

At the end of the show, the ice cream makers also have to impress Ben & Jerry’s co-founders Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield with an innovative ice cream flavor.

If Kamara is successful in winning over Ben & Jerry’s with her creation, she can walk home with \$20,000 and have the opportunity to sample the winning flavor at an event in Richmond.

While Kamara kept hush on whether she won the grand prize, she said that if she won, she would put the money into her savings.

“It would go towards my future and my future family,” she said. “And it would make me feel a little bit more comfortable about where I am age-wise in my life.”

dtran@timesdispatch.com

(804) 649-6572

https://richmond.com/news/state-and-regional/we-are-invisible-asian-americans-seek-to-fill-in-gaps-in-virginias-history-curriculum/article_5d438a94-9809-5be0-a496-9136471e5567.html

'We are invisible': Asian Americans seek to fill in gaps in Virginia's history curriculum

David.Tran
Aug 6, 2021



Ting-Yi Oei, curriculum and education director at the 1882 Foundation, said the organization is producing a toolkit for teachers that weaves Asian American history in with the current curricula. An example is pointing concentrations of Asian populations when teaching immigration.

DANIEL SANGJIB MIN/TIMES-DISPATCH

David.Tran

Diana Kim explains her hopes and goals for her petition

Diana Kim explains her hopes and goals for her petition

Diana Kim moved around a lot during her childhood and adolescent years.

She spent her elementary school years in Missouri and then middle school in North Carolina. Her family settled in Albemarle County in Virginia as she began high school.

Having lived in several localities with various history curricula, the 18-year-old high school graduate feels there is a lack of Asian American history taught. That was reflected in the Korean American's interactions with peers at school who, Kim said, would ask her if she is from North or South Korea. She was born in Portland, Maine.

Even when there was coverage of Asian American history, the lesson often focused on a single historical event and stopped short of expanding upon that.

When learning about the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, which Chinese laborers helped build, Kim said it stopped there, leaving her to wonder: "Where did they go? What type of communities did they start? ... I think it's really important to kind of follow those communities and those groups and see how they grew."

Fed up, Kim started a **petition** last month to push the Virginia General Assembly to pass legislation requiring the state's public schools to teach Asian American history. More than 750 people have signed.

“I was tired of complaining,” she said in an interview in July. “Basically, I was tired of being frustrated of wanting to do something but not knowing what to do.”

Kim, of Crozet, is a part of the statewide initiative advocating for the inclusion of Asian American history in Virginia’s K-12 curriculum.

In July, Illinois became the first state to mandate Asian American history be taught as part of its public school curriculum. Other states, such as California and Oregon, require an ethnic studies class as a college graduation requirement.

In addition to legislative changes, there are grassroots efforts throughout the country and Virginia to provide educators and school districts with the necessary resources to teach Asian American history.

The 1882 Foundation, a D.C.-based educational advocacy organization, was founded in 2010 with the goal of receiving an apology from Congress for the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 — legislation that barred Chinese immigrants from entering the U.S.; the group has shifted to education outreach.

Ting-Yi Oei, the curriculum and education director of the 1882 Foundation, said that while legislation can help create change, educators need the proper tools and teaching materials in order to teach to the fullest extent.

With a grant from Virginia Humanities, a council that supports local humanities programs, the 1882 Foundation is producing a toolkit of teaching materials with a focus on digital media content.

The toolkit will include materials on local events and figures, tying them into current curricula. When teaching about the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 or about immigration patterns, teachers can point to the pockets of concentrated Asian populations across Virginia, such as the large Vietnamese presence in Northern Virginia and the Filipino community in the Tidewater region.

“It’s really an attempt to begin to look at Virginia, the demographics, the history and the role that Asian Americans have played in that growth,” Oei said.

Asian Americans are the fastest-growing racial or ethnic group in the U.S., according to a 2021 Pew Research Center **report**. Nationally, the Asian population grew 81% from 2000 to 2019. Asian Americans make up approximately 7% of Virginia's population, according to **recent estimates** from the U.S. Census Bureau, but increased nearly 1½ times from 2000 to 2019.

The 1882 Foundation is collaborating with the Virginia Department of Education to bring the toolkits to educators through workshops and training. Oei said it aims to incorporate Virginia's Asian American and Pacific Islander community's contributions and experiences into the current social studies curriculum.

Stewart Kwoh, co-founder and co-executive director of the Asian American Education Project, echoes Oei's sentiments. He said that if teachers fully understand the Asian American experience, they can accurately incorporate it into their lessons.

The Asian American Education Project is a national initiative founded in 2021 to develop lesson plans on Asian American history for educators to use in their classrooms. The project emerged out of Kwoh's long efforts in showcasing the achievements and struggles of Asian Americans.

That effort kicked up amid the rise of anti-Asian violence during the past year, said Kwoh, adding that short-term solutions, such as bystander intervention, are necessary, "but long term, we have to educate ... about our true history, struggles and contributions."

The organization has been reaching out to school districts and private schools across the country, from New York to Chicago and Los Angeles, to help incorporate Asian American history into their curricula. It has also received requests from bullied Asian American educators and students for assistance, Kwoh said.

But the violence against Asian Americans is not a new phenomenon. Kwoh said the violence goes back centuries, noting the 1989 Stockton schoolyard shooting, the 1885 Rock Springs massacre and the Chinese massacre of 1871.

Kwoh said his great-grandfather, who was a miner, disappeared in the late 1880s on one of his journeys between the U.S. and China. Although Kwoh is unsure whether his great-grandfather was killed in a massacre targeting Chinese miners, his great-grandfather's story is just one of many Asian American stories left untold.

“The current state is that we are invisible,” Kwoh said. “And we need to change that so that we are visible, so that Asian American history is part of American history.”

The efforts to diversify public school curricula is taking place amid debates over critical race theory — an academic concept that aims to examine the U.S. laws and systems through a critical lens of racial inequity. Critical race theory is taught in college and law school, not in K-12 schools, Kwoh said.

But critical race theory has become a catch-all term for those who oppose equity efforts and the teaching of racism in schools.

Kwoh said it is critical to fight efforts nationwide to curb curricula requirements that opponents have linked to critical race theory because “everything is being thrown against ethnic studies.”

In Virginia, there have been efforts to incorporate the history of marginalized groups into the public school curriculum. During the 2020-21 academic year, 16 school districts offered a high school-level African American elective history course. The VDOE developed a curriculum for the elective class after Gov. Ralph Northam established a commission to review statewide standards and resources used to teach Black history.

Virginia state lawmakers formed a caucus in March to advocate legislation for the Asian American and Pacific Islander community and recently held virtual listening sessions with constituents.

The caucus is working on legislation proposals based on the feedback it received, said Del. Suhas Subramanyam, D-Loudoun. He said he is supportive of legislation that would push for incorporating more Asian American history into Virginia's K-12 curriculum.

“This is so critical to building empathy and understanding for different backgrounds and cultures,” Subramanyam said. “And as someone who is Asian American, growing up I felt that my background and culture was not accurately or fairly portrayed or represented in textbooks.”

Kim embarked on an independent project during her junior year of high school where she dug deeper into the history and contributions of Asian Americans. She said she was surprised at the number of Asian female advocates and politicians, such as Patsy Takemoto Mink and Helen Zia, who previously had been unknown to her.

That discovery sparked her passion for advocacy. It led Kim and other students to create a series of student-led anti-racism workshops at their high school where students discuss various topics centering on racism.

Kim hopes her petition can spark conversation about diversifying curricula. She said she was inspired by Zyahna Bryant's petition to remove the Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville in 2016. The statue came down last month.

This fall, Kim will attend the College of William & Mary and, while she is currently undecided about her career path, one thing Kim knows she will continue to do is advocate for making sure the history of minorities is finally told.

“This country prides itself in its diversity. And I think that diversity should be reflected upon our history education,” she said. “Then we would have a more holistic approach in solving our nation's issues and ensuring that we're including everyone.”

dtran@timesdispatch.com

(804) 649-6572

https://richmond.com/news/state-and-regional/barriers-exist-for-lgbtq-people-as-both-foster-parents-and-foster-children/article_e7a3b280-0f80-5a87-82a7-4a8c46635b5a.html

ALERT

Barriers exist for LGBTQ people as both foster parents and foster children

David.Tran
Jul 19, 2021



Jessica (left) and Patrice Ismael-Gantt began fostering son Zane in 2016 and adopted him two years later.

ALEXA WELCH EDLUND/TIMES-DISPATCH

David.Tran

Patrice Ismael-Gantt knew she always wanted to foster kids. When she was a special education teacher and intensive in-home therapist, she spent a lot of time with children in dire home situations.

“You see so many cases where you’re in these situations where you can’t help because you’re not their legal guardian,” Ismael-Gantt said. “And that you wish that ... you can make a difference. Or even if it’s just in your head, you’re thinking, ‘Oh wow, I can really help this person,’ but you can’t because you can’t take them home.”

Young people in child welfare systems have long faced challenges: a sense of housing and job instability. Emotional trauma. Uncertainty about the future. The COVID-19 pandemic has added further unpredictability to their lives.

For LGBTQ youths, those challenges may be further exacerbated. The pandemic has negatively impacted the mental health of millions of Americans, but has overwhelmingly affected LGBTQ children and young adults.

Roughly 70% of LGBTQ youths said the pandemic has negatively affected their mental health, according to a **study** conducted by the Trevor Project. That number jumped to 85% when focusing on transgender and nonbinary youth.

LGBTQ children and young adults in foster care were experiencing unique challenges even before the pandemic. Oftentimes, LGBTQ youths are placed in foster care after their families of origin reject them because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, according to a **report** from Children’s Rights, a children advocacy organization.

It then becomes a cycle of young people struggling to find permanency, which Alex Wagaman, associate professor at the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Social Work, attributes partly to barriers in local policies.

Equality Virginia, an organization that advocates for LGBTQ equality in Virginia, has worked to reduce barriers faced by the LGBTQ community within child welfare agencies.

“What we’ve tried to do legislatively is increase the pool of qualified prospective parents so that more LGBTQ families are able to foster and adopt,” said Vee Lamneck, executive director of Equality Virginia.

A **law** went into effect July 1 that expanded stepparent adoption to people who are not married to a parent of a child, establishing a legal pathway to parenthood for unmarried LGBTQ couples.

Virginia’s adoption laws contain a “**conscience clause**” that allows religious adoption and foster care agencies the right to refuse placement that would “violate the agency’s written religious or moral convictions or policies.”

“We have barriers for LGBTQ adults to become foster parents and adoptive parents in the commonwealth, and then there’s also stigma” about LGBTQ people’s ability to parent, Wagaman said.

That stigma, she said, may be internalized by the LGBTQ community, which creates hesitancy for many to adopt. Roughly **26%** of Virginians raising children identified as LGBTQ, according to Movement Advancement Project, an equality-oriented independent think tank.

Child welfare agencies can help break that stigma, Wagaman said, by creating safe, affirming spaces for LGBTQ parents and young people by doing small, yet impactful, things like respecting one’s preferred name and pronouns. But she said it shouldn’t end there.

“This for me is about more than just turning on a light switch — ‘OK, now we will accept all parents and families,’” she said. “I think in institutions where there has been systematically consistent experiences of discrimination and exclusion, agencies have to go over and above to actively reach out to communities.”

Agencies should have fully trained staff with a level of cultural humility around the LGBTQ community, Wagaman said, and establish support networks with LGBTQ organizations to help children foster connections with the LGBTQ community and have a space for kids to explore their identities.

Referrals to Child Protective Services in Virginia have gone down during the pandemic, said Allison Gilbreath, policy and programs director of Voices for Virginia's Children, a children's policy research and advocacy organization. But the decrease could be for a number of complex reasons, she said.

Experts say that as children have fewer options to get out of their homes during the pandemic, there are fewer eyes on children, including from counselors and teachers. Reunifications or permanent placements became more challenging as well, Gilbreath said.

In the past year, the pandemic has led to a halt to in-person activities, including visitations. Older teenagers and young adults in the foster care system have a harder time reaching permanency, but **studies** show it's even more difficult for young LGBTQ people of color.

"Simply being in foster care is traumatic in itself," said Gilbreath, noting that LGBTQ youths also are less likely to return home or be adopted. "All of those things become compounding factors that make their trauma even greater than when they first enter the foster care system."

There are nearly 5,400 children in Virginia's foster care system, according to the state Department of Social Services' **website**. According to a spokesperson, the department does not keep data on the number of young LGBTQ people in the foster care system, but experts say statewide numbers are reflective of national data.

Research shows that LGBTQ youths are over-represented in foster care and unstable housing; 30% of young people in foster care identified as LGBTQ, yet only 11% of youths in the U.S. identified as LGBTQ, according to a 2019 **study**.

Virginia law permits either a single unmarried individual or a married couple to adopt. When same-sex marriage became federally recognized in 2014, Ismael-Gantt and her wife, Jessica Ismael-Gantt, began to explore fostering options. The Hampton couple settled with **United Methodist Family Services**.

“We really wanted to get to a place where we had our own little person that we could take home and be there for and help out,” Patrice Ismael-Gantt said.

In August 2016, about a month after their wedding, the Ismael-Gantts were placed with then-8-year-old Zane Ismael-Gantt. Two years later, they were able to adopt him.

Patrice Ismael-Gantt said that time in their life was a “transitional period” for Zane as well as for her and Jessica. Zane was trying to process his new environment as the couple tried to have him understand the love and attention they have for him.

“A lot of kids, they don’t realize permanency, they don’t understand forever because their life has been non-permanent,” Patrice Ismael-Gantt said. “And so I think after adoption, everything changed for us because he really realized, ‘Wow, these people love me and they care about me.’”

It was a learning process for the couple that they say was made easier with the resources and tools UMFS provided them, including trauma-based training.

“I don’t even think we could have done it without that backbone support,” said Patrice Ismael-Gantt.

UMFS, a nonprofit family service organization, offers more than 20 programs, including foster care and adoption.

Emily Clark, regional director of the central region for UMFS, said the agency is dedicated to providing resources and assistance not only for LGBTQ foster parents but also for LGBTQ foster children.

“They are at higher risk for abuse and neglect, but also for things like substance abuse, depression and a whole host of extra challenges,” Clark said, “and so having an affirming foster home can be extremely healing.”

UMFS works alongside Side by Side, an LGBTQ youth organization, to provide support groups and other resources for LGBTQ foster kids in the agency.

Clark said there are many LGBTQ parents who foster through UMFS and that the organization does its best “to make sure that they are feeling really affirmed and supported in their journey” through information sessions, training and other programs.

Patrice Ismael-Gantt remembers the moment when she could see that Zane, who is now 12, fully embraced his foster parents.

“It was that small moment that I realized that, wow, this kid is just taking pieces of us and actually making it a part of his life,” Patrice Ismael-Gantt said. “And it was a freedom for me, for him, to be able to just be that comfortable with us to be able to just be a part of us.”

Desmond and Stacey Pagan had always wanted a family of their own. Having been together for 16 years and married for 11, the Henrico County couple were exploring options to extend their family and landed on fostering through UMFS in 2018.

Right off the bat, Desmond said, the couple felt comfortable at the agency and, as a gay couple, they were not treated any differently from the other foster couples. They adopted then-16-year-old Michael in 2019 and are currently fostering a child.

“We are human beings as well, and if we want a family, then that’s perfectly fine,” Desmond Pagan said. “There shouldn’t be a reason as to why we shouldn’t be able to have that family.”

dtran@timesdispatch.com

(804) 649-6572

https://richmond.com/news/local/queer-church-a-richmond-pop-up-market-offers-safe-space-to-marginalized-communities/article_37ab5dd4-43f1-51d7-a577-04c47ad5a647.html

ALERT

'Queer church': A Richmond pop-up market offers safe space to marginalized communities

David.Tran
Jun 29, 2021



The Safe Space Market features vendors, live entertainment and performances, and a sense of community, the site of the Lakeside Farmers Market. Welcome mats featuring the rainbow colors greet guests at the entrance.

JAMES H WALLACE/TIMES-DISPATCH

David.Tran

This Day in History: , The Stonewall Riots Begin. June 28, 1969. The riots are considered the first major protest of the LGBTQ community for equal rights. They began after midnight at the Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village. Police raided the popular gay club for operating without a liquor license. After decades of being targeted by the NYPD, the patrons began to fight back by throwing bottles at police. Several days of protests followed, mobilizing into the Gay Liberation Front and other gay civil rights organizations. The NYPD made a formal apology for its role in the riots — and for the laws that led to them — in 2019

A “queer church.” That’s how Safe Space Market is known to some of its organizers, vendors and regular attendees.

“That’s how some people have described it — as a constant place that’s regular — where they can see their chosen family,” said Klaus Ryan, Safe Space Market’s co-organizer and owner of Enrich Compost, a composting service.

Safe Space Market — a pop-up market that strives to “support, celebrate and promote the visibility of Richmond Virginia’s LGBTQ+/BIPOC makers, artists, small-business owners” — celebrated Pride Month with special pop-up events.

The past year, from politics to the pandemic, was rough, especially for queer people of color, said Ryan, who emphasized the importance of having an affirming space, not only for businesses, but for community members to gather.

Andy Waller, founder of Safe Space Market, said an affirming space is one where everyone shares the same values and experiences. They said the market uplifts marginalized businesses that don't shy away from supporting LGBTQ, Black and brown liberation.

"These are values that are important to me; these are values that attracted me to Klaus' business and their values, and we're aligned there," Waller said.

The pop-up market hosted two "June Pride Market" events at Lakeside Farmers' Market — featuring live music, local eateries and performances by local drag artists, in addition to makers and businesses showcasing their crafts and products.

Waller said the market grew out of the success of last year's RVA Virtual Pride Market, an online shopping and awareness event highlighting local LGBTQ businesses.

After the Virtual Pride Market wrapped up, there was still a desire and need for a more permanent affirming space, Waller said.

"There was a lot about [the Virtual Pride Market] that made people feel safer than some other events around," Waller said. "The feedback that we got was just really overall positive, and I think people were really craving a continuation of it."

And so in February, the Safe Space Market was born.

Safe Space Market aims to be a safe space in two ways: It's a welcoming environment for underrepresented communities, as well as a COVID-friendly place to gather. Since its inception, the market has enforced a mask policy for its vendors and attendees.

"We have a mask mandate that's still in place — very important to us," Ryan said.

"Because marginalized folks, folks with disabilities, they sometimes still can't get the vaccine. And so we need to just make sure that everyone feels safe."

Safe Space Market, held every other Friday each month, has seen a steady uptick in attendance at every event, Waller said. Its first Pride event saw the biggest sales yet.

Waller, who owns a jam, salsa and pickle company called **Dayum This is My Jam**, emphasized the importance of supporting local LGBTQ small businesses, especially during Pride Month.

Instead of buying Pride-related products from any business — sometimes called “rainbow capitalism,” that is, the commercialization of LGBTQ culture — Waller calls on people to support smaller LGBTQ-owned businesses that have shown support of LGBTQ rights and values.

“[You’re] supporting not only a product or business that you really love — you love what they’re making, you love what they’re doing, but why not support them because of those values as well,” Waller said. “It’s sort of like this double support system.”

The championing of small, underrepresented local businesses is critical amid the pandemic, when many are struggling to make a profit, Waller said.

“We’ve ... watched friends have to close their doors because of the downtick in sales with COVID,” Waller said.

Bianca Turner started her homemade candle business in March 2020, right at the start of the pandemic. Her business, **Beez Wax & Co**, sells environmentally friendly home care products, from soy candles to shea butters. She said the first few months were tough.

Turner discovered the market on Instagram. Ever since she started selling in the spring, she said the response from the community has been a “blessing,” describing the vendors and attendees as a “second family.” Now she gets bulk orders.

Andréa Johnson has had a love for baking since middle school. She always wanted to open a bakery, but wanted it to be of something her daughter — Karma, who has a nut allergy — can eat. After some research and experimenting, she created **Karmalita’s Marshmallows and Confections**, an artisan dessert stand specializing in marshmallow treats.

Safe Space Market invited Johnson to be a vendor, and she said she was blown away by the community's feedback. She said word of mouth is vital for a small business, especially since many vendors at Safe Space Market, including hers, do not have a storefront or physical location. It has become a tightknit community where vendors are constantly supporting one another, Johnson said.

“Just to have somebody or one person or group of people to say that ‘I’m here for you, I’m on your side’ is monumental,” she said.

Having a space geared toward Black- and minority-owned businesses is important for Johnson; she said she sometimes has to be careful in how she presents herself in other markets. She said she does not have to worry about that at Safe Space Market.

“Being a Black and queer business owner, obviously my skin tone represents itself,” she said. “And people see that.”

Turner said that for a Black- and female-owned business, it is crucial to have a safe, welcoming space, when too often there are places “we’re not always welcome in.”

Safe Space Market has become a space that gives vendors some sort of financial security. It also has become a safe, welcoming haven for attendees, especially trans youth, Waller said.

“This is legit the only place that they can go to or have gone to where they feel or they see people like them; they’re around people who accept them and love them,” Waller said.

Johnson said it’s admirable seeing confident LGBTQ youth at the market when she and others felt like they had to grow up hiding their identity in the shadows.

“We can kind of look at younger generations and take notes from them and be like, ‘You know what, we’re gonna stick together and we’re gonna be proud about who we are and in any space, any capacity,’ ” Johnson said.

Safe Space Market not only provides a place for marginalized communities to safely gather, but also devotes itself to giving back to these communities. Each month, the market's organizers feature a local organization or individual to financially support.

Past organizations included **Mutual Aid Distribution Richmond**, a grassroots relief network; **RVA Community Fridges**, an organization that provides free food in fridges throughout Richmond; and **Peter's Place**, a recovery organization dedicated to LGBTQ and BIPOC people.

This month, Waller said the market is raising money for "**August's Fund**," a campaign to raise money for gender-affirming surgery for August, a Black trans woman and regular vendor who provides gender-affirming haircuts to clients.

People can shop for certain products donated by local businesses online through the end of June. All proceeds will go directly to the fundraising campaign for August, with the goal of raising \$5,000.

Turner said she has received a lot of support from the community and wants to give back through her business. In the past, she had sold specialty donation candles to support Black Lives Matter organizations and candles to help with operating costs of running Safe Space Market. This time, she is selling candles for August's Fund.

The market hosted a supply drive for RVA Community Fridges in April to collect food donations. Since then, the organization has been invited back consistently, collecting different items for the fridges during each event, from healthy drinks to baby food.

Taylor Scott, founder of RVA Community Fridges, said the market has felt like a community. People not only overwhelmingly donated to the fridge, but also offered suggestions and their expertise.

"Being a community is supporting one another, being there for each other, and that's really what you get from being at Safe Space [Market]," Taylor said.

The next market dates are scheduled for July 9 and 23. For more information about Safe Space Market and to apply to be a vendor, visit **safespacerva.com**.

[Menu](#)

For the past 14 years, RVA Magazine has been reporting on the most relevant arts, music, culture, and politics throughout Virginia. Before anything else, we are a Richmond institution: supporting and working alongside our diverse communities will always be our driving passion. We believe in journalism driven by local voices, and we curate the open -- and sometimes challenging -- conversations that we believe are critical for growing cities to thrive.

We pride ourselves on keeping RVA Magazine's content free and accessible, but as one of the last outposts of independent media in the state, we operate in a time when corporate media paywalls charge their readers for content.

We've chosen to go a different route. To our readers, we ensure that our magazine remains free from interference, and from the agendas of out-of-state conglomerates which drive their content. We're looking to our community for support.

With a small contribution from you, RVA Mag will remain an independent publication capable of reporting on the things which are important to our communities. Thank you for all of your support over the years -- it means everything to us.

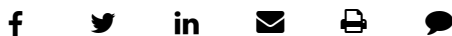
-The RVA Team





THE ART OF STOOPING IN RICHMOND

DAVID TRAN | OCTOBER 13, 2020



TOPICS: [COMMUNITY](#), [RICHMOND VA FURNITURE](#), [RICHMOND VA THRIFT FINDS](#), [RICHMOND VA UPCYCLED FURNITURE](#), [RVA FURNITURE](#), [RVA THRIFTING](#), [STOOPING](#), [STOOPING RVA](#), [STOOPIGRVA](#), [USED FURNITURE RICHMOND VA](#)

One person's trash is another person's treasure, and this Instagram account is making it easier for locals to give unwanted furniture a new home.

From accent chairs draped with floral prints to dark mahogany wooden desks, undesired furniture pieces are scattered throughout Richmond's sidewalks and hidden alleyways — but usually not for long.

Trash becomes treasure for Richmond residents as they scour the city for abandoned curbside items to bring into humble homes, an activity otherwise known as “stoooping.” Now, furniture scavenging is made easier with the local Instagram account [@StooopingRVA](#) (<https://www.instagram.com/stooopingrva/>).

The alleys in the Fan district have always been hidden gems for functional ottomans and dressers, as well as quirky items such as craft materials. Fan resident Sydni Lopez frequently stumbles upon free items in alleys, but at first didn't realize there was a term for it.

“I didn't know there was this whole culture starting to build up, called stoooping,” Lopez said, “of people going out and actively looking for things, versus something I stumbled upon.”

Olivia Colom has been in the stoooping game for quite some time. She said she's always been on the hunt for cheap finds ever since she first explored Goodwill. Colom took the opportunity to create StooopingRVA in late July, when she noticed an abundance of items thrown to the curb in the midst of move-ins and move-outs. Colom was inspired by [StooopingNYC](#) (<https://www.instagram.com/stooopingnyc>), which currently has more than 88,000 Instagram followers.

“The streets were just flooded with people leaving their stuff out,” Colom said. “And I thought, ‘Well, I have too much [furniture] right now... I’m just going to make [an Instagram account]’ because there Menu wasn’t one at the time.”



PHOTO: Stooed furniture in Richmond featured on @StooingRVA.

Stooing Instagram accounts have been on a rise in recent years, including accounts dedicated to Philadelphia (<https://www.instagram.com/stooingphl/>) and Los Angeles (<https://www.instagram.com/stooingla/>). Since its creation, StooingRVA has garnered nearly 1,000 followers. Colom said the account reached 200 followers the day she created it.

Living room pieces like couches, loveseats, and coffee tables dominate the account's feed, but idiosyncratic items — bowling balls, a pool table, and a DIY cold-brew coffee maker — occasionally Menu pop up.

"There's an army of lonely chairs out in Richmond," Colom said. "There's a million of them in little alleys all by themselves." This strange trend has been documented since 2017 by an account called [@rva_sadchairs](https://www.instagram.com/rva_sadchairs/) (https://www.instagram.com/rva_sadchairs/), but StooingRVA highlights the chairs still in good condition for new homes to adopt.

Running the stooing account is a collaborative effort by the community. Richmonders are encouraged to direct-message a photo and location of street finds to the account, or items they themselves are throwing out for Colom to share to her followers.

That is how college student Eliza Boone and her girlfriend scored a mint green dining chair for their apartment. The couple ventured through the alley in the Fan district searching for the furniture piece posted by StooingRVA.



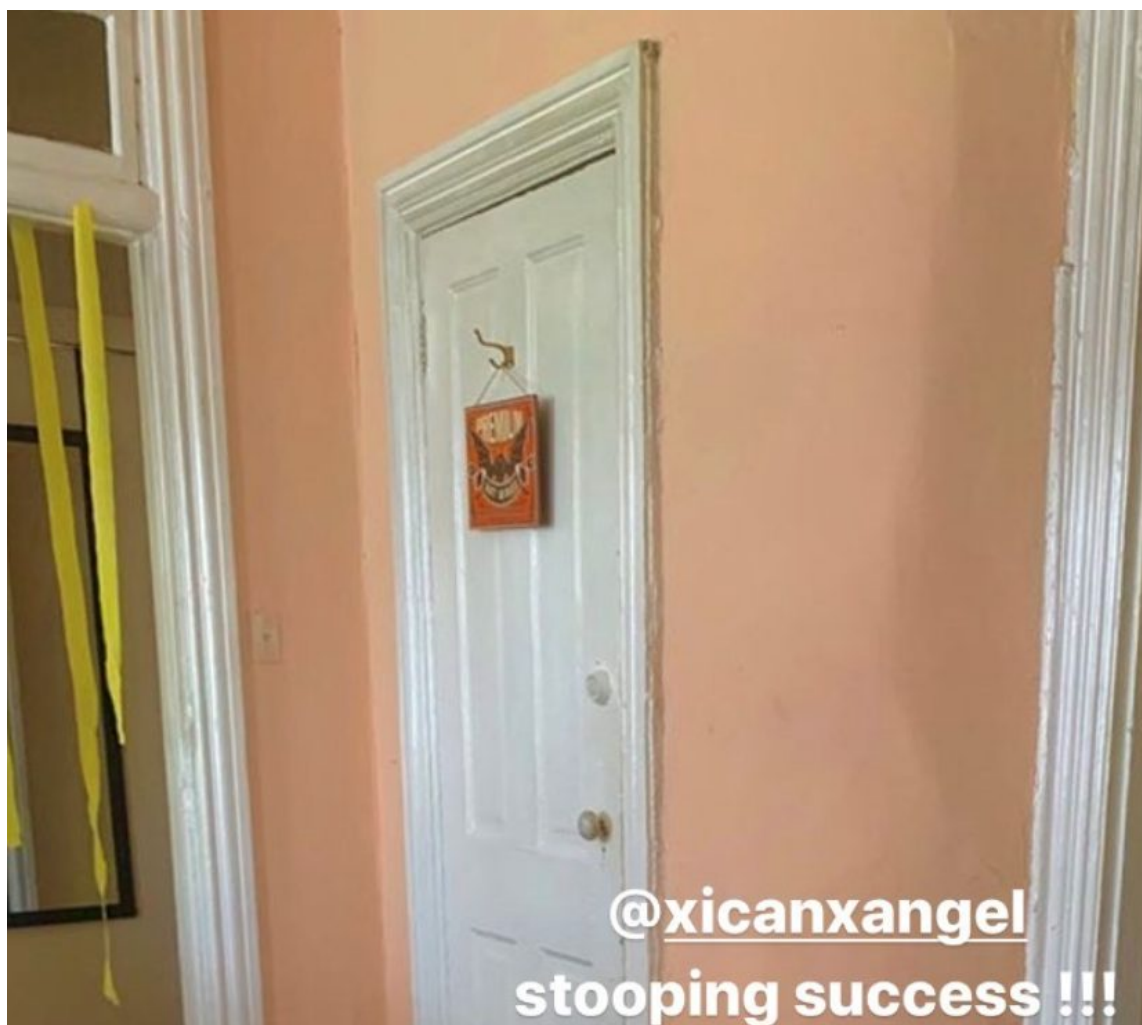
PHOTO: Eliza Boone retrieving her stooed chair / its design in her home.

Booke is a keen stooper, and often finds abandoned items by chance, like kitchen pots and a wine glass set. She said the account is perfect for both those getting rid of items and those who want to Menu add something new to their home.

Since following the account, Booke said she has been sending it photos of discarded curbside pieces. “I know people want their stuff gone, and people like stooping,” she said. “I feel like they’re not walking around all the time looking for items. They need people to send in tips.”

Abandoned furniture may also pose potential risks of unwanted germs and critters — like Richmond’s bedbug residents — gaining a new home. Lopez said furniture upcycling outweighs those risks, and she made sure to properly sanitize her floral print-embroidered accent chair before using it.

Colom has an Instagram highlight dedicated to proper furniture cleaning procedure. It is also home to community resource information, such as donation requests from Richmond Mutual Aid Distribution (https://www.instagram.com/mad_rva/), which she believes is an important way to use the account’s platform.



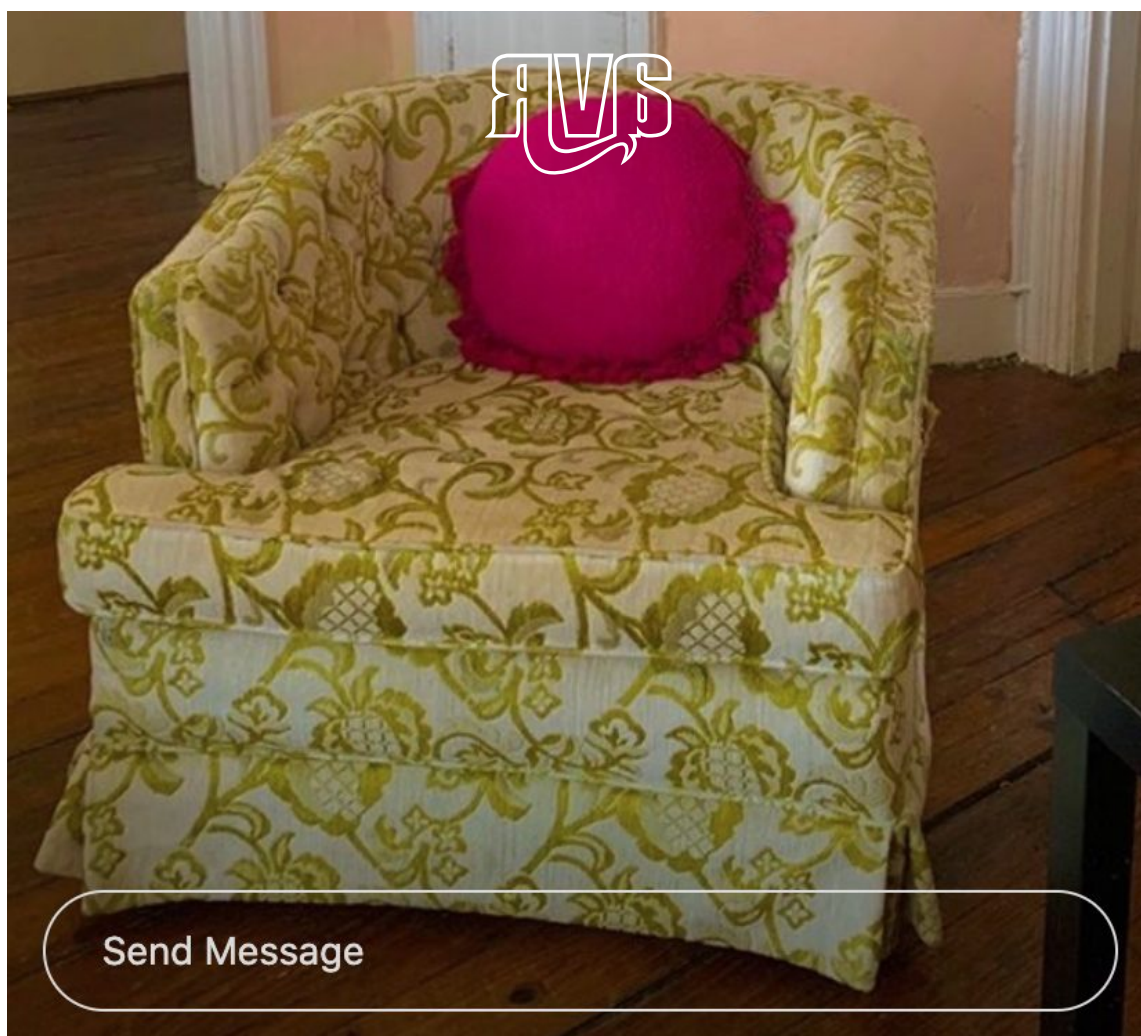
[Menu](#)

PHOTO: Syndi Lopez's Stopping Success chair on the StoppingRVA highlight.

"The best way to be supportive is through the excess that you already have," Colom said. "But if you don't have that, then you can use other people's excess and prevent things from going to the landfill and give them to people who need them."

The popularity and necessity of stopping has become more apparent in the midst of the global climate crisis. Not only is stopping essential for those who can't afford to buy new furniture pieces, but for the environmentally conscious, it prevents these items from heading to the landfill.

Colom said stopping also can create a more personal sentiment to household items. "With IKEA and big manufactured furniture companies, we've lost this connection to a furniture piece that you've had to fix up yourself," she said.

One of Colom's most successful stopped pieces is a red Persian rug that decorates her kitchen floor. She wants followers to share their "Stopping Successes" with the account. In an Instagram highlight, she documents success stories as followers send in their prized alley finds revived in a new environment.

[Menu](#)

PHOTO: Olivia Colom's stooped Persian rug.

Stopping can sometimes be competitive, especially when a highly sought after item is up for grabs. Often, stoppers arrive at the location to discover the item has disappeared. Stopping success stories help resolve that piece of mystery, which itself can be a community collaboration.

A stooped item's whereabouts can be chronicled from its days in the trash to its new home. Someone may witness a stooped furniture piece on top of a car, then send a photo to Colom to share on the highlight. If that makes its way to the furniture's new owner, it can prompt them to send in a photo of its finished design.

"Anytime followers send me a picture, I put it up on the highlight," Colom said. "That's my favorite part, because you get to see the progression."

To find your own alley treasure and join Richmond in the stopping movement, check out [StoppingRVA on Instagram \(https://www.instagram.com/stoppingrva/\)](https://www.instagram.com/stoppingrva/) and send in your favorite finds.