



Oakmont educator sits in a Russian prison for crime that parallels Brittney Griner's, but he's not part of any negotiations



MALIYA ELLIS
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One of the last times Sarah Grubbs saw her uncle was at his 60th birthday party. Hosted at his Oakmont home last summer, the event was complete with a taco truck, plenty of friends and family, and “merriment” all around.

July 28 is Marc Fogel’s 61st birthday, but there’s not much to celebrate.

The long-time international educator has been detained in Russia for 11 months following his arrest at the Sheremetyevo airport in Moscow in August for possession of about 20 grams of medical marijuana.

Fogel was en route to the Anglo-American School in Moscow, where he had taught high school history for close to a decade. He planned to retire the following year and return to Oakmont.

In June, he was found guilty of “large-scale drugs smuggling” and sentenced to 14 years in a high-security penal colony.

Russia’s Interior Ministry has said that Fogel could have used his diplomatic status as a way to smuggle drugs into the country; his family has disputed the claim and said his sentence is overly harsh and likely politically motivated.

“For him, that’s almost a death sentence,” said Ms. Grubbs, a lifelong Butler resident.

Her uncle has struggled with chronic pain for a long time and has had multiple surgeries, including three back surgeries, a spinal fusion, a hip replacement and two knee surgeries, she said.

“He wasn’t smuggling marijuana with the intent to distribute it,” said Ms. Grubbs. “He just wanted to control chronic pain so he can continue doing what he loves.”

Fogel’s family and friends have drawn parallels between his case and those of WNBA basketball star Brittney Griner and police officer Paul Whelan. The U.S. State Department has classified both Ms. Griner and Whelan as having been “wrongfully detained,” a designation that allows their cases to be handled by the Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs.

The Biden administration offered to exchange Viktor Bout, a Russian arms trafficker, for Ms. Griner and Whelan Thursday. No agreement has been reached yet, a Kremlin spokesperson said Thursday.

The State Department has not classified Fogel as having been “wrongfully detained,” excluding him from consideration in hostage negotiations.

“It is crushing that they wouldn’t try to bring them all home,” said Ben Johnson, a California resident who is one of Fogel’s former students. “Now we are negotiating for hostages, so why selectively? What is it about adding Marc to that list that is prohibitive?”

In response to a request for comment, the State Department referred to comments made during a press briefing Tuesday. A spokesperson said the department is aware of Fogel’s case and is “monitoring the situation,” but

did not elaborate on why he has not been granted wrongful detention status, citing privacy considerations.

Before the sentencing, Ms. Grubbs and other family members kept quiet, hoping Fogel's lack of criminal record and the relatively small amount of marijuana he had on hand would result in a merciful sentence. "Everyone was advised to keep a low profile and let the due process take its course," she said.

But when the magnitude of the sentence sunk in, they decided to take more direct action. One friend started a Facebook group called "Friends of Marc Fogel" to coordinate a letter-writing campaign, particularly targeting Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Kelly Leguineche, another of Fogel's nieces, started a Change.org petition which has amassed nearly 2,000 signatures.

Mr. Johnson said he has been "shotgunning" letters and has written three rounds so far. The prospect of his long-time role model spending a dozen years in prison is "unfathomable," he said. "He's going to die in a labor camp if they don't take this seriously."

"We just want to do anything we can in our power to bring him home where we know he belongs," said Ms. Grubbs.

A citizen of the world with Pittsburgh roots

Fogel always had an adventurous spirit, his family and friends say. Though he started his teaching career domestically, at Winchester-Thurston in Pittsburgh and in Washington, his desire to see the world eventually drove him to teach high school history internationally.

Alongside his wife, Jane, Fogel taught across the globe for 35 years, including in Malaysia, Mexico, Colombia, Oman and Venezuela.

But in every corner of the world, the Butler native never forgot his Steel City roots.

While teaching at the International School of Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia in the early 1990s, Fogel used to pore over the sports page of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, which he would have mailed to him.

“He loved his Pirates, his Steelers, his Penguins,” said Mike Larios, a former colleague of Fogel’s in Malaysia. “He was constantly talking about his Pittsburgh days.”

Mr. Johnson, one of Fogel’s students at the time, said the two bonded over their shared Pittsburgh heritage — Mr. Johnson had spent much of his childhood in Moon before moving to Malaysia when his stepfather took a job abroad.

During breaks between classes, Mr. Johnson would stop by Fogel’s classroom, a ritual that became a reprieve from his homesickness.

“We’d talk about sports and talk about home and put on really funny Pittsburgh accents,” he said. “He really did save me. For someone to take that kind of interest in a kid is special.”

Mr. Larios, a physical education teacher at the school, often played pickup basketball with Fogel in the mornings. He said Fogel had a charismatic, magnetic personality and was a dynamic presence in the classroom. “Kids loved him. Absolutely loved him,” he said. “When he talked about history, it was a story. And who doesn’t love to be read stories and told stories?”

Kamakshi Balasubramanian, who taught with Fogel in Muscat, Oman, in the early 2000s and now lives in India, praised his commitment to instilling good values in his students. “His lively teaching method has been fundamental to developing human beings who understand what human rights are,” she said.

In Muscat, Fogel founded his school’s first Model United Nations program. He also led students on an annual field trip to Vietnam to study the legacy of the Vietnam War.

Fatima Zaidi was one of Fogel’s students in Muscat, and credits him with sparking her interest in history, which she eventually studied as a minor in college.

“A great teacher can have such a profound and formative impact on your long-term sense of self-worth. And that’s what he instilled in me,” she said.

Mr. Johnson kept in touch with Fogel well past graduation. The two had planned to finally watch a Pirates game together, but had never been in Pittsburgh at the same time.

He last heard from his former teacher in June 2021, when he texted Fogel a picture of his young son atop Mount Washington, with a panoramic view of Pittsburgh's skyline in the background.

Fogel complimented the picture and texted back: "The plan is the retirement gig after next year. Carpe diem!" Mr. Johnson hasn't heard from him since.

A mismatched sentence

In addition to his infectious energy, many of Fogel's former students recall his funny walk: pitched a little forward, with his back arched.

The teacher had lived with chronic pain for decades, and received back surgery starting in his 30s.

He had been prescribed medical marijuana as a "safer alternative" to opioids, which he was opposed to taking, said Ms. Grubbs. The cannabis was packaged in a contact lens container, as well as in e-cigarette cartridges, according to the Russian Interior Ministry.

The roughly half an ounce of cannabis that caused his detainment was likely his "personal supply to get him through the year," said Mr. Johnson. It is unclear whether Fogel had brought medical marijuana to Moscow in years prior.

When Mr. Johnson first heard about the arrest through a chat room with former high school classmates, his first reaction was: "What were you thinking?" But his reaction quickly turned more forgiving. "But then I think about it and it's like, 'You know what? When I was younger, I traveled with marijuana products. I did stupid stuff,'" he said.

"It's obviously breaking the law. It's not a death sentence. Fourteen years of hard labor does not match the crime that was committed," he said.

Mr. Larios was "heartbroken" when he found out about Fogel's arrest, a feeling that only worsened when Russia declared war on Ukraine. "When the war started it was like, 'Oh my God.' From bad to worse."

The sentence Fogel received was "ridiculously, way harsher than anything he did," said Mr. Larios.

Since last August, Fogel's family has only been able to communicate with him via letters, an imperfect communication channel at best, subject to translation errors and, the family fears, censorship.

In the meantime, all family and friends can do is try to put pressure on the State Department and hope.

If Ms. Grubbs were able to talk to her uncle directly, she said she would assure him "that he is not forgotten about. We're trying everything. And I know that at times, it may feel hopeless, but he's one of the most optimistic people that I know.

"I want him to know that he needs to keep fighting because we want to bring him home."

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Pittsburgh-area climate initiatives to receive a boost when long-awaited federal funds flow



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From Swissvale to Forest Hills, small-scale climate initiatives could get a boost if local governments receive a cut of the \$369 billion in funding for climate action included in the Inflation Reduction Act, which President Joe Biden signed into law in mid-August.

More than a few local officials are optimistic about the impact the long-awaited funding could have on their local climate targets.

“When I was looking at the legislation passing, I was very excited to think there’s going to be grant money,” said Shawn Alfonso-Wells, a member of the Swissvale Borough Council. “This is going to make a huge difference.”

In Swissvale, that grant money could go toward purchasing electric vehicle charging stations or incentivizing residents to buy solar panels, she said.

Patricia DeMarco, a member of the Forest Hills Borough Council, said the IRA's passage "marks the beginning of the energy policy U-turn we need to make in America."

She pointed to the bill's incentives for renewable energy installations and electric vehicles as provisions that best support her borough's internal climate goals.

The Inflation Reduction Act contains several significant funding sources for local climate initiatives.

The EPA Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund frees up \$7 billion in competitive grants for emissions reduction activities which benefit low-income and disadvantaged communities.

The legislation also earmarks \$250 million in grant money for municipalities to develop greenhouse gas emission reduction plans, and an additional \$4.75 billion to implement those plans. Another \$2.8 billion will be available as environmental and climate justice block grants for tribes and local governments.

The act also contains over \$8 billion in rebates for energy efficient homes, funds that will be distributed through the state government. Those incentives could help reduce emissions from the residential sector — which make up the lion's share of many municipalities' emissions, and over which local governments do not have direct control.

The federal government has yet to announce the specifics of how and when funds will be distributed.

"The scope, scale, and timing of those opportunities won't be known until federal guidance is provided," said Dave Althoff, director of the energy programs office at the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection.

But when funding does start to flow, local governments will be ready to receive it — especially those that have crafted localized climate action plans over the past few years, when the possibility of federal climate action was less certain.

Keeping it local

Swissvale and Forest Hills are two of the 11 municipalities in Allegheny County that have participated in the DEP's Local Climate Action Program since its inception in 2019. In total, 53 local governments and regional organizations, representing about 380 municipalities across Pennsylvania, have completed the program, with 11 more slated to join this year's cohort.

The program was created after the 2018 Pennsylvania Climate Action Plan found that though many municipalities were interested in undertaking local climate planning, they lacked the time, staff, and expertise to do so. To bridge that gap, LCAP connects local governments with free technical assistance and a student intern.

Over the course of a year, each municipality learns how climate change impacts their community, takes inventory of greenhouse gas emissions within their borders, and begins formulating a plan to mitigate and adapt.

Even though climate action on a hyper-local scale might seem like a drop in the bucket, advocates say it is a powerful tool to combat climate change — and hopelessness.

“It's really hard to not just throw all the papers off my desk and say, ‘forget it, it doesn't matter what I do,’” said Brandi Robinson, a Penn State professor who will be co-leading the Local Climate Action Program starting with this cohort. “But I put all that in a little box, put the lid on the box, and then I look at the work that we do locally.”

Just feeling like you're doing something, especially alongside community members, can have psychological benefits, she added, especially in the face of a crisis that can seem overwhelming.

Plus, though climate change is a global crisis, most people experience its impacts most concretely in their towns and cities, or even in their backyard.

“They're worried about this great, big, gigantic, lumbering, invisible demon called climate change,” said Peter Buck, a Penn State researcher who is co-leading LCAP with Ms. Robinson. “But they don't experience it as a change in the global average temperature. They experience it as the dying of the hemlock trees.”

Drawing on people's connection to their hometowns can be a powerful motivator for climate action, and one that can transcend party lines.

“We all want to serve the places we love,” Mr. Buck said. “At the end of the day, this local climate action planning stuff is about doing your part to make sure that where you live is a great place to live.”

‘Practical and aspirational’

Swissvale recently put the finishing touches on its climate action plan, which is poised to pass the borough council by the end of the year.

Like many local climate plans, Swissvale’s is meant to act as both a policy blueprint and as a vision board — it’s “practical and aspirational,” said Ms. Alfonso-Wells.

Some of the policies therein, like placing solar panels on the roof of the municipal building, are well within the borough’s jurisdiction to implement. Others are a bigger reach — such as greenhouse gas reduction targets that can’t be achieved without policy action at the state or federal levels.

Though climate action that falls within local governments’ immediate purview — like choosing how to spend municipal funds — is the most actionable, advocates say aspirational policies are important, too.

“Being proactive at the local level is important because you first of all, incentivize your citizens to be active participants,” said Ms. DeMarco. “Giving people a vision and an example is important.”

Ms. DeMarco herself helped spearhead plans to make her borough’s municipal building a LEED Gold-performing, net-zero facility in 2017. With a solar roof and a geothermal heating system, the building generates as much energy as it uses — and on particularly sunny days, even more.

Local governments are also the lever of power closest to the people, she added. “We are where the buck stops,” she said. “When the landslides happen, when we have heat waves, when we have the power go out, we are where people come.”

Aspirational local planning can let residents know that their jurisdiction cares about climate change, said Brian Wolovich, who served as the vice president of the Millvale Borough Council when it participated in LCAP in 2019.

“Government often sends signals to people operating there about what is important,” he said. “It makes a statement.”

Local and federal climate action are not mutually exclusive, but can instead complement each other, said Mr. Wolovich. “I’m a big believer in all the tools, all the time.”

Laying the groundwork

Local governments had taken up the mantle of climate planning at least in part in response to a years-long stretch of federal inaction on the crisis.

Now that federal funding is finally poised to flow, that pre-planning may prove to be an asset.

“If we have a plan at the hyperlocal level, at the borough level, we will be better positioned to receive those funds when they come in,” said Seth Bush, a Swissvale resident and member of the borough’s Climate Action Committee.

“We’re trying really hard to focus early on building partnerships and doing things that help make people’s lives better,” said Ms. Robinson. “Our hope is that we can get a big part of the way there doing those things.”

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How 62 acres slated for development in Reserve and Shaler became a conservation success story



MALIYA ELLIS
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When Mike Pavkovic put 62 acres of his family’s farm in Reserve and Shaler on the market a couple of years ago, he was quickly approached by multiple developers — and they were ready to pay him “a whole lot of money.”

“It sounded like a very good deal,” he said, “until I started really sitting down and thinking about it.”

His connection to the land ran deep. He had spent most of his life farming it, as had his father, and his father’s father before that.

Over the years, his grandfather’s original purchase of 7 acres in the 1930s had blossomed into a 70-

'doing a good thing'

acre farm, on which the Pavkovics grew “just about everything,” he recalled. Bounties of zucchini, yellow squash, eggplant, Swiss chard, rhubarb and carrots. And in the spring, fields of flowers — pansies and carnations and sweet William — that they sold to Giant Eagle.

The land itself was secluded and peaceful, with a panoramic view of the city, from the U.S. Steel Tower to the Cathedral of Learning, all the way up the Allegheny River along Route 28. “It’s beautiful,” Pavkovic said. “It’s a piece of property that nobody knows it’s really there.”



A view from the new trails in Girty's Woods on Saturday, July 30, 2022, in Reserve.
(Emily Matthews/Post-Gazette)

But when COVID-19 hit and the flower industry wilted, the farm was no longer bringing in enough revenue to keep up with the Shaler taxes. Pavkovic acquiesced and made the tough decision to sell the three-generation farm — everything but the original 7 acres.

He entered into a contract with construction company Ryan Homes. But then he started having misgivings.

“It just didn’t feel right to me to sell the property and [for] homes to be built there,” he said. “I just didn’t feel good inside.”

Looking for land

As Pavkovic was getting ready to retire from the farming business, Miles Hegedus was looking to break in. After a 10-year stint in ecology research, Hegedus, who was born in Pittsburgh but grew up in Massachusetts, wanted to work with the environment in a more “direct” way.

He had the will. All he needed was a piece of arable land. And the first places he looked were Reserve and Shaler.

Hegedus had always felt a connection to the area’s verdant, rolling hills, which many members of his extended family called home. During family trips, his grandfather, who worked as a school bus driver, used to take him on the “scenic route” up Mount Troy Road to see the city from 1,200 feet above. He never forgot that view.

“It kind of felt like the countryside right there in the city,” he said. “That stuck with me for a long time.”

Perusing satellite imagery, he stumbled upon a 15-acre plot just north of Mount Troy Road that looked as if it had been farmed in the past. It was perfect.

There were just a couple of problems: It was part of a larger 62-acre parcel, more land than Hegedus could afford. And the whole lot was under contract to be developed.

To troubleshoot the funding issue, he approached the Allegheny Land Trust, a nonprofit that helps purchase land for conservation purposes. Hegedus thought the partnership would be a good fit: His plans to sustainably farm the land went “hand in hand” with the land trust’s conservation values, and ALT had recently helped protect Girty’s Woods, a 155-acre parcel in neighboring Millvale.

ALT, which has protected over 3,600 acres in the Pittsburgh region since its inception in 1993, was immediately enthusiastic about the proposal, recognizing its environmental importance.



An open field on a 62-acre parcel of land in Reserve and Shaler townships.
(Courtesy of Tom Dougherty)

Protecting 62 acres might not sound like much — Allegheny County lost 11,000 acres of tree canopy between 2010 and 2015, according to Tree Pittsburgh — but it’s a start, and it comes with a plethora of climate co-benefits, according to Lindsay Dill, ALT’s marketing and communications director.

The land is home to wildlife, acts as a natural buffer against erosion and sequesters heat-trapping carbon dioxide — on the order of 250,000 pounds annually.

It also soaks up 51 million gallons of rainwater each year that would otherwise drain into Girty’s Run, increasing the risk of flooding and sewage overflow. The Allegheny tributary’s notorious floods have devastated low-lying communities such as Millvale in the past, a risk that will only increase as climate change causes more frequent heavy rain events.

“To us, it is a prime candidate for conservation purposes,” Dill said. Plus, Hegedus’ plans to farm his portion using sustainable farming techniques were “compatible” with ALT’s conservation values, she added.

Hegedus and the ALT settled on an agreement: Hegedus would buy 15 of the acres for his farm while the land trust would purchase the other 46, financed through state grants, foundation funding, and contributions from local businesses and residents.

There was just the landowner to convince.

‘Win-win situation’

When Hegedus and ALT approached Pavkovic with an alternate offer, he didn't need much convincing.

“I started thinking: Do I want all these cars and all these people riding past my house?”

He pondered for a few months then asked to be released from his contract with developer Ryan Homes.

The land trust's offer was less than Ryan Homes' — probably half of what the property was worth, he figured — but even then, the decision was “a no-brainer.”

His land would stay quiet and tranquil, and once the land trust told him about the environmental benefits, he was eager to help.

“When they told me how they were trying to preserve the land and save the people of Millvale, I thought that I was doing a good thing,” Pavkovic said. “It was a win-win situation.”

Ultimately, the decision was really a matter of gut feeling.

“For my grandparents and my parents, I feel that they'll be happier, too,” Pavkovic said.

Filling the gap

There's just one piece of the puzzle left.

Although ALT has the land under exclusive contract, it needs \$50,000 from the community to demonstrate buy-in and unlock matching contributions for state grants — all by the end of December, when the deal is set to close.

So far, ALT has only received about \$2,000 in donations. But the Millvale Community Development Corp., which is informally leading the funding

push, is no stranger to fundraising challenges.

The MCDC raised \$90,000 for the Girty's Woods campaign and is planning to use many of the same strategies this time around, including soliciting direct donations, selling T-shirts and holding events. On Aug. 25, it will hold a [benefit concert](#) at Whisper Nest in Millvale featuring Norside Organ Trio and Shelf Life String Band. Tickets for \$10 will be available at the door.



People hike on new trails in Girty's Woods.
(Emily Matthews/Post-Gazette)

Melissa Mason, an MCDC member who is organizing the concert, said she is optimistic Millvale residents will contribute to the cause, especially because many of them have experienced flooding firsthand. "If you explain to them that keeping an area green will reduce the impact of stormwater, everyone in Millvale is onboard."

Abbey Nilson, a science teacher at Shaler Area High School, is also gearing up to kick off a fundraising effort with students in her sustainability class. "I'm really looking forward to getting kids involved in this new conservation project," she said.

For the Girty's Woods project, her students helped raise \$10,000 through their tree planting fundraiser. This fall, they're planning to sell milkweed

seeds — pollinator-friendly plants that support the endangered monarch butterfly population — and hope to bring in \$5,000 for the cause.

“It’s definitely going to happen,” Dee Schlotter, a member of MCDC, said during a fundraising hike through Girty’s Woods in late July. “This little bit, we will absolutely raise it by then.”

A wild, green space

If the project goes through, the parcel will be protected forever, securing its environmental benefits for future generations. ALT has “very high” confidence that it will, Dill said.

Unlike Girty’s Woods, which functions as a public recreational space and through which volunteers are building out a trail network, the Reserve-Shaler land will stay as wild green space.



Summer the golden retriever sniffs a fire hydrant at the Millvale Frederick Street Trailhead Access before a hike on new trails in Girty’s Woods.

(Emily Matthews/Post-Gazette)

As for the farm portion, Hegedus hasn’t decided on specific crops yet, but when he does, he plans to cultivate them in a way that “strengthens the surrounding ecosystem rather than polluting it as farms often can.”

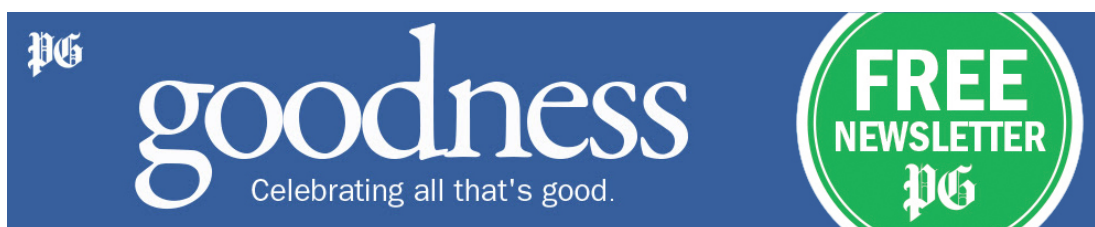
Eventually, he envisions establishing partnerships between his farm and local organizations such as the Gardens of Millvale or New Sun Rising. He

wants to make at least part of his land “more of a common space that the whole community can enjoy,” whether that’s through leasing space for community gardens or creating shared grazing pastures for livestock.

Pavkovic will continue to live on his remaining 7 acres with his wife and sons.

“It’s definitely the best thing for me,” he said. “It ain’t always building a building. It’s preserving things, too.”

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Wigle Whiskey to pay \$39K in back wages to 41 workers after violating Fair Labor Standards Act



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Wigle Whiskey will be required to pay nearly \$39,000 in back wages to 41 workers after a federal investigation found that the business had violated the Fair Labor Standards Act by requiring employees to share tips with managers and supervisors.

The ruling against the Strip District distillery and restaurant was announced Wednesday in a news release from the Department of Labor.

When it launched in 2012, [Wigle was the first distillery to open in Pittsburgh](#) since Prohibition. Its owners helped lobby the state Legislature to allow distilleries to sell spirits directly to the public, paving the way for a flurry of new craft distilleries in the region.

A decade later, the award-winning spirits maker is under scrutiny. The Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division found the business allowed managers to retain tips received by tipped workers, in violation of FLSA regulations, which prohibit employers, managers and supervisors from sharing in tip pools.

The investigation also found Wigle had not paid tipped employees adequate overtime wages, by calculating the employee overtime rate based on their cash wage of \$4 per hour rather than the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour. The company also underpaid managers for overtime work by failing to include wages managers received via the improper tip pool in overtime calculations.

The FLSA mandates that employers pay workers overtime pay for any hours worked in excess of 40 in a work week, at a rate of no less than one and a half times the normal hourly wage.

"Food service workers rely on their hard-earned tips to make ends meet. Restaurant employers must understand that keeping workers' tips or diverting a portion of these tips to managers or supervisors in a tip pool is illegal," said John DuMont, district director of the Wage and Hour Division in Pittsburgh, per the news release.

According to Wigle co-owner Meredith Meyer Grelli, the business did not intentionally violate FLSA regulations, but rather had a "good faith dispute" with the Department of Labor over its rules about manager tipping. Ms. Grelli said Wigle Whiskey shortchanged employees' overtime pay due to a payroll processing error.

The Department of Labor prohibits managers and supervisors from taking tips from employees under their supervision or participating in tip pools under any circumstances, but, until 2021, did not define which duties classified employees as managers. According to Ms. Grelli, Wigle classified workers who were managers in name as tipped employees because they sometimes served customers.

"We believe that employees who spend the majority of their time serving customers should share in tips, to the extent those tips were earned while serving customers. Regardless of title, our employees, throughout COVID, were often servers, many times carrying the weight of others who were not able to work throughout the pandemic," Ms. Grelli said in an email.

“We believed we were properly and fairly allocating tips to employees that were actively serving customers. When we learned the Department of Labor had a different interpretation, we immediately changed our method of allocating tips,” she said.

In October 2021, the Department of Labor issued a new rule determining that managers and supervisors can keep tips in very specific circumstances: If they receive them straight from customers for services they “directly” and “solely” provide. The rule went into effect in November 2021. Managers and supervisors still cannot participate in tip pools.

“The rules regarding the tip credit provisions are very specific,” said J. Daniel Doherty, assistant district director with the Wage and Hour Division’s Pittsburgh office. “If employers have tipped employees, they need to be aware of how that works.” Mr. Doherty added that employers can reach out to the Wage and Hour Division to receive information regarding tipping laws.

“We are proud of our legacy as a business that is on the progressive end of pay and benefits,” Ms. Grelli said, adding that Wigle’s front-of-house team members earn more than the statewide average for similar positions. “We hope that the DOL will work with small businesses to help them understand their goals with this new rule.”

The investigation comes at a time when food service establishments are struggling to find employees. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were more than 1.3 million job openings in the accommodation and food services industry in April 2022, after around 740,000 industry workers quit their jobs.

“As restaurants struggle to fill the positions they need to keep their doors open, those who deny workers their rightful wages are likely to find it more difficult to retain and recruit workers than those employers who abide by the law,” Mr. DuMont said.

In fiscal year 2021, the Wage and Hour Division investigated over 4,200 food service establishments, and recovered over \$34 million in back wages for more than 29,000 workers in the country.

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Shrinkflation is real. What is it, and how can you combat it?

"A 10% product size shrinkage is equivalent to an 11% price increase, but most people wouldn't really think of it that way," a Pitt marketing professor notes.



MALIYA ELLIS
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A mini bottle of Dawn dishwashing liquid, with its signature blue color and cute duck imagery, doesn't raise many eyebrows. To notice its secret, you'd have to squint: the bottle contains 6.5 fluid ounces, down half an ounce from its 7-ounce predecessor. But the price point is the same.

It's just one of many recent examples of "shrinkflation," the phenomenon by which companies covertly downsize the volume of their products without changing the price tag, effectively raising prices without setting off consumers' alarm bells.

Coping with Inflation

Though shrinkflation is not new, it's proliferated in response to high inflation, as brands try to retain profits despite higher costs for ingredients, labor and shipping. Inflation climbed to 9.1% in June, its highest rate in 40 years.

“It’s legal to cut package sizes — just buyer beware.”

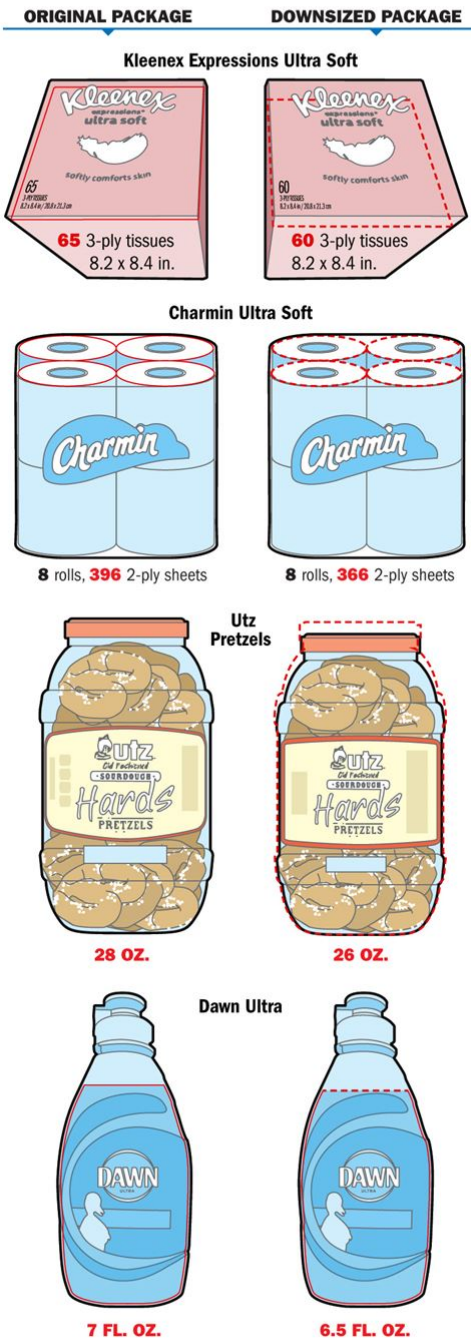
Over the past few months, [shrinkage has been documented](#) in products from shampoo to toilet paper and breakfast cereal to dog food, according to Consumer World, a consumer advocacy site. A box of “family size” Cocoa Pebbles contracted from 20.5 ounces to 19.5 ounces. Charmin Ultra Soft’s “super mega” rolls shrank by 30 sheets each. Chobani scaled down its flip yogurts, once 5.3 ounces, to just 4.5 ounces.

The bottom line: if your weekly grocery haul isn’t lasting as long as it used to, you’re not imagining it. Shrinkflation could be to blame.

“It’s legal to cut package sizes — just buyer beware,” says Jeff Inman, a professor of marketing at the University of Pittsburgh, pointing out that companies don’t publicize their price increases, either. But Inman acknowledged that shrinkflation can come across as “a little sneaky” to consumers.

Higher inflation brings more 'shrinkflation'

"Shrinkflation" is the phenomenon by which companies covertly downsize the volume of their products without changing the price tag, effectively raising prices without setting off consumers' alarm bells. The trend has proliferated in response to high inflation, including in the following downsized products, documented by consumer advocacy site ConsumerWorld.org.



Note: Scale and size comparisons are approximate

Source: ConsumerWorld.org reports

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“It’s mainly the fact that it’s less noticeable, is the reason they do it,” says Inman. All else equal, he says, “a 10% product size shrinkage is equivalent to an 11% price increase, but most people wouldn’t really think of it that way.”

Consumers are far more likely to notice a price hike than a volume decrease, especially for products they buy often, says Inman. Though both actions result in lower sales, a price increase has four times the negative impact on consumer behavior than the comparable volume decrease would. “That’s huge, right? I really think it comes down to people just not noticing.”

Inman himself has been noticing shrinkflation since the 1980s, when he started spotting slimmed-down candy bars and air-filled potato chip bags. Lately, he’s seen shrinkage across a “broad array” of products due to high inflation.

The downsizing is most common in canned and dry goods, as well as non-food items like paper products, he says. It’s harder to pull off with frequently purchased products or products that come in recognizable sizes, like a gallon of milk or a carton of eggs, for which volume changes are unlikely to go unnoticed. Items sold by the pound, like most produce, are also immune; you can’t exactly shrink the size of an apple, fruits and veggies, so they are prone to price increases instead.

Some eagle-eyed consumers have begun to notice the shrinkage. On [r/shrinkflation](#), a Reddit forum with more than 36,000 members, disgruntled shoppers regularly post pictures of an original product alongside its new, miniature version.

The term popped up for the first time on Yelp in the past few months, according to data from the restaurant review site. Shrinkflation can strike when you’re out to eat, too: Users noticed trimmer portion sizes, especially at lower-cost restaurants serving fast food-like fare.

But if you haven’t noticed the shrinkage in your own grocery cart, you’re not alone; you’d be forgiven for not scrutinizing the net weight of the breakfast cereal you purchase every other week, especially if you’re in a rush. It’s easy to be “on autopilot” while checking items off your list, Inman acknowledged, and the grocery store can be noisy and visually overwhelming.

To cut through that noise, a consumer’s best friend is the per-unit price, says Inman — the smaller number underneath or beside the total price, usually expressed in dollars per pound or ounce. There’s no room to hide with a unit price. If a package has shrunk, the per-unit price will rise even if

its total price stays constant, making it a reliable metric for tracking changes over time.

Unit prices can help you make more informed decisions about how to stretch your dollar, Inman advises. For example, if you notice the price per pound has gotten “out of whack,” you’ll know to look for alternatives, like store brands or substitute products, or forego the purchase altogether — but only if you realize the price is out of the ordinary in the first place.

To maximize your dollar, Inman recommends being vigilant about unplanned purchases, which make up about half of most consumers’ grocery items, according to his research. Some of these are what he calls “unrecognized needs,” the items you forgot to put on the grocery list but actually need. It’s the “unplanned wants,” the novelty purchases or indulgences, that can be scaled back to save money, he says.

In short, Inman recommends you “take the blinders off” at the grocery store and be more thoughtful about your purchases. So next time you shop, consider taking note of those per-unit prices, and perhaps think twice before making an impulse buy.

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Take a peek at the house where playwright August Wilson grew up

Actors Denzel Washington, Russell Hornsby to attend grand opening of August Wilson House



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Denise Turner always “wells up” when she walks into the living room and kitchen where Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson grew up.

The house on Bedford Avenue in the Hill District provoked a visceral reaction even when it was derelict and “down to the studs,” the way it was the first time the acting chief executive and board president of August Wilson House saw it in 2018.

“It’s just the hallowed aspect, the sacred aspect of the place, to know that we were standing in a home where he actually lived,” she said. “If these walls could talk.”



Denise Turner, acting chief executive and president of the board of August Wilson House, inside the kitchen where Daisy Wilson prepared meals for her six children.
(Pittsburgh Post-Gazette)

Lately, Turner has been tearing up for another reason: After years of painstaking restoration, the house is about to open to the public.

[August Wilson House](#), a project of Daisy Wilson Artist Community, Inc., will have its grand opening celebration Aug. 13.

The ribbon-cutting ceremony, which is open only to VIP ticket holders, begins at 1:30 p.m. that Saturday. Among the speakers will be Denzel Washington, who has performed in Wilson's plays on Broadway, directed and starred in the 2016 movie adaptation of "Fences" and was an early supporter of the house's restoration. [Constanza Romero](#), the playwright's widow, will also speak.

The VIP program (\$500) also includes house tours and a dinner and gala from 5-8 p.m. that evening, with appearances by actors Russell Hornsby and Stephen McKinley Henderson. Tickets are \$100 for a celebration at the house with food, music and dancing to music by UNION from 8-11 p.m. All tickets must be purchased in advance at www.eventbrite.com. Information: augustwilsonhouse.org.

Long time coming

August Wilson, who was born Frederick August Kittel Jr., grew up in a small apartment at the back of the Bedford Avenue property, with his parents and five siblings. He lived there from 1945 to 1958, immersed in the vibrant culture of the Hill District, which was then home to around 55,000 Jewish, Italian and African-American residents.



Playwright August Wilson stands next to his childhood home on Bedford Avenue in the Hill District in November 1999.
(Post-Gazette)

By the turn of the century, the building was boarded up and crumbling, like many properties in the blighted neighborhood.

Paul Ellis, Wilson's nephew, purchased the property shortly before his uncle died in 2005 with the intention to restore it. Ellis and architect Rob Pfaffmann founded Daisy Wilson Artist Community, a nonprofit that has overseen the restoration project.

So began an uphill battle. In 2008, the building was named a Pittsburgh historic landmark, saving it from potential demolition. In 2010, [emergency stabilization efforts](#) began and continued through 2016. In 2013, the house was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

A [\\$5 million fundraising campaign led by Denzel Washington](#) in 2018 enabled restoration to begin, with plans to transform the building into a multi-use arts center to preserve Wilson's legacy and support the arts community in the Hill District. The project was [initially slated to wrap up in August 2020](#), but was stymied by COVID-related delays. Nearly two years later, the process is finally complete.

The 6,000-square-foot building includes the original 1840s house, an 1880s upstairs expansion and a modern addition complete with elevators so all visitors can access the property.

Make it 'useful'

August Wilson House is not a museum, but an arts center, as the playwright intended. Aware that his childhood home might be preserved, Wilson told his nephew that he had one stipulation: He wanted it to be "useful."

"Supporting artists is what he was about," Turner said. "He didn't want this to be a memorialization just for him."

The building contains four studios that will be used for artistic programming such as a reading roundtable, panel discussions and art classes. Two indoor galleries with large windows and colorful walls will feature rotating displays of local artwork. On the rooftop terrace, patrons will be able to enjoy live music while overlooking the city skyline.

Behind the house is a landscaped garden and outdoor theater where annual productions of Wilson's famed American Century Cycle of plays will be staged. This summer, Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre Company will produce "[Jitney](#)" from Aug. 12-Sept. 18.



Source: Esri

Post-Gazette

August Wilson House

Eventually, August Wilson House hopes to renovate an additional property to house artists-in-residence participating in a [newly-established Visiting Playwright Fellowship](#), Turner said, pointing to a building visible from the second-floor window. She said that project's timeline is not yet clear.

It's all part of the plan to revitalize arts in the neighborhood. "We are basically a cultural destination, something to rebuild the legacy of the Hill District," she said.

Wilson house's 'heart'

The "heart of the building" is the second-floor apartment where Wilson grew up, Turner said. A restored staircase, complete with original spindles, leads up to the small living room where Daisy Wilson raised her children.

“Imagine a woman and six children living in here, sleeping in here,” Turner said.

One wall is covered in a replica of the original wallpaper, based on the recollections of Wilson’s sister, Freda.

Window scrims feature images of the Hill District by Pittsburgh Courier photographer Charles “Teenie” Harris, including The Crawford Grill, a nod to what the young poet might have seen outside his window. A cabinet contains artifacts uncovered during the restoration process, including shoes found in the walls, likely placed there for good luck.

Around the corner is the kitchen, with a vintage refrigerator, stove and sink like the ones Daisy Wilson would have used preparing meals for her six children.

The kitchen is as much a tribute to a mother’s love as to her son’s legacy. Daisy taught her son to read at the age of 4, kickstarting his lifelong love of literature. The playwright honored his mother by changing his name to August Wilson after his father’s death in 1965.

A set of stairs winds up to the second-floor bedrooms, which the family began renting after upstairs neighbors moved out. August was around 8. The expanded footprint was likely a welcome upgrade from their cramped living conditions downstairs.

“You can imagine it was like Christmas!” Turner said. “These are really small rooms, but imagine how excited they were to be able to be in this space.”

Combining old, new

Though the four-room apartment is the only fully preserved section of the original building, other spaces retain traces of the original footprint, or recall their historical use.

Throughout the house, exposed brick delineates original parts of the building, unapologetically juxtaposed with the white walls and floor-to-ceiling glass of the modern addition.

The new rooftop terrace is called the Butera Terrace, a nod to the Italian family who lived in the building next door, which has since been

demolished.



A view down Bedford Avenue from the new rooftop terrace of August Wilson House in the Hill District.

(Pittsburgh Post-Gazette)

The first-floor lobby is called the Bella's Market Gallery, a tribute to the mom-and-pop store that once occupied the space. For the grand opening, the gallery will display artwork commissioned as part of the “[Art for August](#)” program, which funded 10 artists to create works inspired by the playwright.

To the right of the building's facade, a set of footprint-shaped plaques called “Freddie's footsteps” will commemorate the narrow path young August would have taken home, through an alleyway bordered by another now-demolished building.



Landscapers install sod in the landscaped yard next to August Wilson House on Monday.
(Pittsburgh Post-Gazette)

Like no other space in the world

Wilson's 10-play American Century Cycle is also known as the Pittsburgh Cycle. But it could be termed the Hill District cycle since 9 of the 10 plays are set in the neighborhood.

August Wilson House is also an homage to the neighborhood that shaped him and his work, Turner said.

"Everyone else is honoring him for his works, but we have the pleasure of honoring him in the space where he grew up," she said.

"There's no other space in the entire world that can honor him like that."

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