



**Berkshire
Landscapes**

Tiny enough to perch on your finger, this owl is packed with attitude.

BILL DANIELSON, C4



Berkshires

CUSTODIAN MADE BOOK COMPLAINT

An independent report shed light on the “disgruntled” employee — now no longer working at the school — who complained about “Gender Queer” at W.E.B. Du Bois Regional Middle School. The custodian had previously been suspended and had engaged in conversations “that made others uncomfortable,” the report found. **B1**



Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny died at a prison camp in the Arctic Circle, Moscow says. **A3**

IN OPINION: The Alexei Navalny I met was smart, articulate, passionate and, until Friday, unstoppable.



JAMES BROOKE, A10

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A ‘full circle’ view of the arts

Program sees Pittsfield students experience county cultural orgs

By MATT MARTINEZ
The Berkshire Eagle

PITTSFIELD — It’s a Tuesday afternoon at Egremont Elementary School, and students are about to turn into a grove of trees.

At the head of the school’s gym, Antoinette Simms greets the class, a group of students in grades 3 through 5, with a bow. Simms, a yoga instructor at Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health, has led classes countless times before — but adapting the practice to be easily grasped by children is an art in and of itself.

She moves through the poses effortlessly, teaching her pupils to be lotuses, trees, frogs and sunbirds.

“I feel like I can connect with yoga,” said Weston, a fifth grader. “I just feel like when I do the poses, I am the poses.”

Weston’s not alone. Addison, also a fifth grader, likes to picture herself as a cherry tree when doing the tree pose. She also enjoys the cobra pose, because it makes her feel like a mermaid.

This afternoon yoga session is part of the arts integration program for the Pittsfield Public Schools that’s finally in full swing — 38 community partners in the arts work with the schools to bring the cultural and educational expertise of their institutions into the classroom.

The program is working, Pittsfield educators say, but the sunset of federal emergency funding in June will impact its after-school programming for the upcoming year.

Superintendent Joseph Curtis said because some of the district’s after-school programs were funded using Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funding, they are likely to be set aside as the district belt-tightens ahead of the upcoming budget season. If funding from other sources becomes available, the programs may return.

But while the district loses after-school options, it will shift the program’s focus to getting arts into the classrooms during the regular school day.

Curtis said ensuring that students gain exposure to the arts in the district is crucial.

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Above: Author Jana Laiz, writer-in-residence at Herman Melville’s Arrowhead, leads a workshop in Laura Spence’s homeroom at Williams Elementary School in Pittsfield. The workshop is part of the arts integration program. **Left:** Antoinette Simms, a Kripalu yoga teacher, teaches a class to a group of students at Egremont Elementary School in Pittsfield.

PHOTOS BY
BEN GARVER
THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

3RD BERKSHIRE HOUSE DISTRICT

Leigh Davis enters race to succeed Pignatelli



STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

Leigh Davis announces her candidacy to represent the 3rd Berkshire District in the Massachusetts House of Representatives outside Great Barrington Town Hall on Friday.

By GREG SUKIENNIK
The Berkshire Eagle

GREAT BARRINGTON — Saying she intends to “show up” and advocate for the Berkshires on Beacon Hill, Leigh Davis has joined the race for the 3rd Berkshire District in the Massachusetts House of Representatives.

Davis, the vice chair of the Great Barrington Select Board, announced her candidacy Friday before a crowd of about 40 supporters in front of Great Barrington Town Hall. Many held signs supporting her candidacy.

After her announcement,

the crowd gathered on the front steps as Davis took a selfie with her phone. Many came up to her afterward for a word of encouragement or a hug from the candidate, and she expressed her gratitude to those who turned out.

In her brief remarks, Davis said she’s running to make things better — and that she’s willing to put the work to make that happen.

“Together, we can make our beautiful Berkshires the affordable, equitable and sustainable place it deserves to be — the place where our kids can learn a trade, attend

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PHOTOS BY BEN GARVER — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

Top, above: Egremont Elementary School students were encouraged to think of what tree they were while trying to master the tree pose in their yoga class after school.

Arts

FROM PAGE 1

“I am very committed to it, because not even all our families know what this county has to offer,” he said of the program. “We have so much more in our county to experience, and each one of these offerings make it a fantastic place to live.”

A WEALTH OF RESOURCES

Shakespeare and Company, Barrington Stage Company, the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art and Berkshire Pulse are just a few partners on the roster, but even organizations that are not explicitly arts-related get involved. The NAACP’s Berkshire County branch, for instance, sponsored a screening of the movie “Till” last year for sophomores. Members of the NAACP gave a talk-back after the showing, and will sponsor another screening this year.

“We have visual art, we have dance, we have theater, we have yoga and mindful movement,” said Yvette “Jamuna” Sirker, coordinator of arts integration and community partnerships for the Pittsfield Public Schools.

Sirker is the architect of the program, which she said grew naturally from the embarrassment of artistic riches that the county boasts, including its major regional theaters and dance companies.

“The only reason that I’ve been able to develop such an expansive and effective program in such a short amount of time is because of the unprecedented wealth we have in cultural resources,” Sirker said. “And they all come to us — these are master-level cultural institutions with master-level education departments and development departments that raise funds so we can do this.”

Sirker said the program has been in development for years, with a proposal drafted in early 2020, but was derailed because of the pandemic. The proposal was renewed a few years later, with support from federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funding.

The program helps connect students — and in some cases, faculty — with experiences at the institutions themselves, which can be enriching. Many of the semester-long programs culminate with a field trip at the end of the school year.

“One teacher said, ‘My students went to Mass MoCA in October and it was all they could talk about for the next year,’” Sirker said.

But the “pot of gold at the end of the rainbow,” she said, was embedding the arts program into classroom learning.



Above, left: Students in Laura Spence’s fourth grade class at Williams Elementary School in Pittsfield were given writing prompts, or asked to write a story based on historical items that Jana Laiz, writer-in-residence at Herman Melville’s Arrowhead, brought with her.

program. She’s now hoping to solicit community support. The Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation is chipping in with the Education Enrichment Fund, she said, which has started the district off with \$200,000 to sustain the arts integration.

Curtis is confident the district will be able to maintain funding for the program in its upcoming budget, but will have to trim where it can. Transportation to various sites is one of the key issues, he said, and will be a hard ask in the upcoming reviews.

Some after-school programs, which were funded by ESSER, will end for now, he said, but could return later if more funding becomes available.

“We really feel strongly that our focus needs to be during the school day for now,” Curtis said. “Then providing consistent after-school experiences in the future.”

The district’s upcoming budget is not finalized yet, and may still be subject to change.

Beyond just site visits, partners from the programs give educators material to “pre-teach” concepts to students.

Sirker said next school year, she intends to grow the program by engaging with school principals to identify areas where they want students to develop, then partner them with the right institutions.

BUDGET TALKS

Most of the district’s programming comes fully funded from the partners themselves, who write their own grants to provide their services. Sirker said about 60 percent of the programs offered are funded by the partners.

As for what isn’t covered — Sirker writes grants herself to sustain the

“I think when you see the finished product, you appreciate what it is. But when you see the process, you understand the educational value of what the kids are getting out of it. The process really gives them a lot of skills and builds a lot with them. It’s not just creating something to create something.”

RYAN FULLER, *Eagle Educational Academy program director*

Arts

FROM PAGE 4

WRITING NEW CHAPTERS

In some Pittsfield classrooms, communi- ty partners are already visiting — to some- what whimsical effect.

It’s late afternoon, with dismissal fast ap- proaching.

The only audible sound in Laura Spence’s fourth grade classroom at Williams Elementary School is pencils scribbling furiously with unbridled crea- tivity.

The students sit focused, letting their imaginations run wild after being given a writing prompt. Some of them are expand- ing on a sentence, or a fragment of one: “I have a secret, too.”

Kathryn wrote a story about trying to hide a baby dragon in her bedroom from her father, incorporating the “I have a se- cret, too,” fragment as she tried to snuff out flames from the dragon under a blan- ket.

“I wrote about a baby dragon because I really like those,” Kathryn said. “I really like dragons and mythical creatures. And I also wrote about my dad because he’s really important to me and I really love him.”

Others were developing stories based on historical items that Jana Laiz, writ- er-in-residence at Herman Melville’s Ar- rowhead, brought with her. They included a pair of shoes and a parasol, which offered no shortage of inspiration to the aspiring writers.

The exercises were led by Laiz, adapt- ed from excerpts of her own book, “Billy Budd in the Breadbox,” which follows the journey of Herman Melville’s manuscript on its way to publication.

It’s critical to give students time to



BEN GARVER — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

Some of the students at Egremont Elementary School said yoga helped them sleep better and feel more calm and focused.

engage in creative writing, Laiz said; they often don’t get enough time to do so.

The students regaled each other with stories of younger siblings, spoiled 5-year-olds using parasols improper- ly and dizzying cases of mistaken identity.

“What’s fun about this class is that we learn how to write from an actual author,” said Lorenzo, a student in the class. “Our imagination doesn’t have boundaries and we just get to know what it would be like.”

‘FULL CIRCLE’ LOOK AT THE ARTS

Last April, the district’s Eagle Educa- tional Academy hosted its first “Arts In- tegration Night” — a showcase of all of the projects that students at the academy par- ticipated in.

As families meandered through the halls, there was no shortage of examples of the students’ work — from footage of a drum recital led by Berkshire Pulse and a music performance by Community Access to the Arts to framed pictures taken by as- piring photographers.

As part of a partnership with Barrington Stage Company, students learned to com- pose and perform their own play.

Ryan Fuller, program director at the Ea- gle Educational Academy, said the show- case was also meant to highlight the pro- cess that students went through and the skills they developed as a result.

“I think when you see the finished prod- uct, you appreciate what it is,” Fuller said. “But when you see the process, you under- stand the educational value of what the kids are getting out of it. The process real- ly gives them a lot of skills and builds a lot with them. It’s not just creating something to create something.”

Fuller used the school’s partnership with Shakespeare and Company as an example. Students were able to get an in- side look at every aspect of production. It allowed students to get a “full circle” view of the arts.

“It’s one thing to see the play happen,” Fuller said. “It’s another thing to see every aspect of it happen and really have them gravitate toward something that they may be interested in. While they might not be interested in the acting part of it, maybe it’s the carpentry side that they were inter- ested in. Maybe there was someone build- ing props — maybe that’s what gets them interested in it.”

Once students have that thing that hooks them in, that enthusiasm can be nurtured by faculty and families, Fuller said.

For some students, that can make all the difference.

“It’s definitely something that gets an ex- tra bit of buy-in from parents,” Fuller said. “When they get to see their kids do some- thing a little bit different — something that they’re successful at — I think that means a lot.”

Matt Martinez can be reached at mmartinez@ berkshireeagle.com.

Davis

FROM PAGE 1

good schools and thrive. The place where our families can be healthy and secure,” she said. “The place where our farmers are profitable, our businesses supported, our seniors and veterans valued, our environment protected. A place where everyone mat- ters and everyone belongs.”

Davis, a Democrat, joins Stockbridge Select Board member Patrick White in the race. They’re running to succeed longtime state Rep. William “Smitty” Pignatelli, who announced Feb. 6 he won’t seek reelection.

At 18 towns, the 3rd Berk- shire is the largest district in the House. It includes all of the Southern Berkshires and, since 2023, the town of Dalton.

Davis praised Pignatelli for his service to the district over the past 22 years.

“He has stepped up and served us with integrity and with grace. He focused on the problems that made a differ- ence to residents while tak- ing a stand on some tough is- sues at the Statehouse,” she said.

“We all owe Representa- tive Pignatelli a debt of grati- tude,” she said. “His com- mitment to our community inspired me to run. ... He’s left some big shoes to fill ... and I hope I’m fortunate enough to fill them.”

Davis said she consulted with Pignatelli before mak- ing the decision.

“I hope to carry on Smi- ty’s hands-on approach to serving his constituents and be able to fight in Boston for working families, small busi- nesses and farms, housing, and to protect the environ- ment,” she said.

Davis pledged her efforts to addressing the housing crisis, making sure the Berk- shires get their fair share of state funds, and promote re- gional cooperation between the region’s rural towns.

“I plan to do a lot of listen- ing these next six months,” she said. “I look forward to meeting the residents in Dal- ton and learning more about the police detail fund they’ve been discussing for more than 20 years. And support- ing the residents in Lee to help keep GE’s toxic waste materials off their streets. And sitting down with Mount Washington leaders to learn what it took to get broadband in their town without a mu- nicipal light plan.”

“Now I’m going to tell you



STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

After announcing her candidacy Friday for representative for the 3rd Berkshire District in the Massachusetts House of Representatives, Leigh Davis takes a selfie with supporters outside of the Great Barrington Town Hall.

right now, that I don’t know everything. And I’m sure there will be times during the campaign when I might not have all the answers. But I’m OK with that,” she said. “Because I’m going to work hard, so I know those answers. Because I’m here for the right reason: because I care. Because I know I can do the job.”

Davis said her natural cu- riosity, growing investment in her community and her late parents’ legacy of public service led her to the deci- sion.

“As I get more involved in the Select Board differ- ent people suggested I look elsewhere and continue this journey,” Davis told The Eagle ahead of the announce- ment. “I was thinking I really enjoy working on legisla- tion and going to the Statehouse — which I did three times. It was a natural fit for me.”

Davis’ father, Lloyd Davis, was instrumental in making Martin Luther King Jr. Day a national holiday and worked in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Devel- opment to broaden fair and equitable access to housing. Her mother, Mary Kay Da- vis, was an assistant to Sar- gent Shriver, the founding director of the Peace Corps and husband of Special Olympics founder Eunice Kennedy Shriver.

“Growing up in a home with two parents so active in public service ... it made its way into my soul,” Davis said. “It’s naturally coming out.”

Davis currently works as communications and com- munity engagement director for Construct, a Southern Berkshire housing nonprof- it. She serves on 1Berkshire’s board of directors and chairs a joint housing subcommit- tee of the Select and Plan- ning boards in Great Barrington.

While Davis’ platform also includes support for lo- cal farmers, mental health

access and advocacy for the Berkshires on Beacon Hill, she’s best known as a hous- ing advocate. She has testi- fied at the Statehouse in fa- vor of legislation that would allow Great Barrington to assess a 1 percent transfer fee on transactions over \$1 million, and authored a bylaw regulating short- term rentals. She was also a leading voice on a home rule petition giving Great

Leigh Davis, a Democrat, joins Stockbridge Select Board member Patrick White in the race. They’re running to succeed longtime state Rep. William “Smitty” Pignatelli, who announced Feb. 6 he won’t seek reelection.

Barrington more control over the fairgrounds prop- erty when that site was be- ing considered for a return of horse racing.

Davis said she’s heard from all sides on the immediate need for more housing at all price levels in the Berkshires. That includes employers who can’t expand without em- ployee housing, workers who must make long commutes, and people forced to sleep in their cars because housing is out of reach.

“When you talk about housing you’re talking about the impact on opportunity,” Davis said. It impacts our se- niors who can no longer re- main in home or community. It impacts our schools and school-age population, so it has a knock-down effect on workforce development and Chapter 70 [state education] funding. And it dispropor- tionately impacts people of color and those with disabil- ities.”

“It’s not going away ... it’s an all-hands-on-deck prob- lem,” she added.

Davis acknowledges the size and diversity of the dis-

trict is a challenge. She plans to meet that challenge by speaking with leaders, hold- ing town hall-type meetings where she can hear voters’ concerns, and town-by-town grassroots organizing.

“The world is run by those who show up,” she said. “It’s important to show up. I’ve always shown up and I’m go- ing to continue to stand up and take a stand on issues.”

Davis’ professional work in housing has included pro- fessional work for the Eagle Mill project in Lee, in which the historic paper mill is be- ing converted into 128 units. Previously, she was a univer- sity instructor in Ireland, a film editor, and a marketing manager for the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center and New England Newspapers Inc., which publishes The Eagle.

Davis is a graduate of Itha- ca College and holds a mas- ter’s degree from the Nation- al University of Ireland in Galway.

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