



Olivia Dillian and Ben Balzer are the marketing and creative forces, respectively, behind Talking Wood Studios in Waleska, Georgia. COURTESY OF TALKING WOOD STUDIOS

BABY BOOM BUSINESSES

Bowls crafted by hand now Ga.-made

Ben Balzer brings his wooden bowls to a new audience.

By Elizabeth Crumbly
For the AJC

A two-decade relationship with woodworking and a move to Georgia from California have brought Ben Balzer the visibility he needed to bring his hand-turned bowls to new audiences. “The mission of the whole company is to be the centerpiece of the world’s finest tables,” he told the AJC.

In the media
Positive media remains an undeniable boost for ambitious entrepreneurs. Balzer saw that type of exposure pay off recently when his Talking Wood Studio came out as the winner in the home category of the Garden & Gun Mad in the South contest. A full-page story and photo of his work in a recent edition of the magazine’s nationally distributed print product topped things off. Being recognized among a group of talented artisans came as a bit of a surprise Balzer said. “They did really good work, so it was good competition,” he said. “I was glad to win.”

‘Ready to do this’
This isn’t Balzer’s first foray into woodworking he began crafting walking sticks about 20 years ago. His wife, Olivia Dillan, helps with marketing his current products. It’s not the couple’s first entrepreneurial endeavor, either. They owned Spice Ace, a San Francisco-based, internationally renowned spice shop, which they closed in 2019. Balzer began the bowl business in 2017 when they bought property here. It was a natural shift. “I wanted to do things that were only one piece of wood, so I chose to make bowls as the business,” he said. “I’ve been collecting wood for years. Probably, I have wood that I haven’t turned that’s 25 years old. I’ve been ready to do this for a long time.” The bowls often originate from wood native to Georgia. Black walnut, magno-

Business continued on S2



AgeWell hosts its annual Senior Day at the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta (MJCCA). COURTESY OF PAULETTE BOONE

HEALTH

Peace of mind

By Elizabeth Crumbly
For the AJC

Depression, anxiety, grief – these are some of the stress manifestations that can wreak havoc on older adults’ mental health. If left unchecked, that stress can often show up in physical ways, according to a local expert on aging.

“I think it’s important to know what stress means,” Cristina Pritchett, a geriatric psychiatrist with the Emory Brain Health Center’s Fuqua Center for Late-Life Depression, told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. “It is a state of worry or mental tension that is caused by a difficult or challenging situation. We understand that low levels of stress are normal. In fact, stress has some survival values that prompt us to respond to threats. Higher levels of stress and negative ways to cope or respond can be pathologic and can lead to negative consequences.” Addressing stress, whether it’s from minor things or life’s weightier pressures, has its challenges, but putting in the

Stress continued on S3

Offsetting stress is a process worth the investment



Meditation practitioners at the Georgia Meditation Center in Dunwoody. COURTESY OF GEORGIA MEDITATION CENTER

TRAVEL

Discover unexpected getaways in Ga. and Ky.



Great Wolf Lodge in LaGrange, Georgia, also offers a water park, bar/lounge, game room, a ropes course, mini golf and bowling. COURTESY OF GREAT WOLF LODGE

Metro Atlanta residents offer tips on best times to visit.

By Severo Avila
For the AJC

Janine and Walt Prescott weren’t thrilled at the prospect of staying the weekend at a water park in LaGrange. Last fall their daughter, who lives in Carrollton, asked the retired Atlanta couple to meet her and their two grandkids at Great Wolf Lodge on Tom Parkway in LaGrange for a weekend stay. They were skeptical.

“We thought a water park would have tons of kids running around making a lot of noise and it just didn’t see like it would be enjoyable for us,” Janine said. “But we didn’t want to pass up a chance to spend time with our daughter and grandchildren so of course we said we’d go.” The Prescotts said it turned out to be a thoroughly enjoyable weekend. Not only was it not as crowded as they expected, but were surprised that in addition to the indoor water park, Great Wolf Lodge also offered a bar/lounge, game room, a ropes course,

mini golf and bowling. “This was definitely an unexpected getaway for us,” Janine said. “We wouldn’t have chosen this destination if our grandkids weren’t so excited to go but we really did have an enjoyable time. We got to spend time with our daughter and grandchildren who we don’t see as often as we’d like and we actually had a nice time sitting by the pool while the kids had a blast. We bowled and played putt-putt.” The Prescotts say that the park might not suit those

Travel continued on S2



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AGING IN ATLANTA



An exhibition is on display at Heaven Hill Distilleries Bourbon Heritage Center, one of the sites along the Kentucky Bourbon Trail in Louisville, Kentucky. KATHY WITT/SPECIAL TO THE AJC

Travel

continued from S1

hoping for absolute quiet and tranquility as it is a family-friendly destination. But for metro Atlanta residents seeking something a little out of the ordinary, it could be just what they need to get out of a rut with the indoor water park kept warm at 84 degrees year-round.

“I’d say check and see if there’s a time that’s not as busy,” Janine said. “I think if it’s a time of the year you can’t normally be outdoors in the water, but you enjoy getting in the pool or even on a slide or two, then it could make for a fun getaway.”

Marietta resident Ray Fuller, 63, was hoping he’d get to spend a few days in beautiful Kentucky with his brother Allen, 58, this winter. Both men are bourbon enthusiasts but have never been on Kentucky’s famed Bourbon Trail. They figured now was as good a time as any.

The Bourbon Trail is essentially a tour of several Bourbon distilleries in the area around Louisville, Kentucky, allowing visitors to sign up for guided tours through many of the famous Bourbon makers in the area including Jim Beam, Maker’s Mark, Woodford Reserve, Four Roses, Wild Turkey and Angel’s Envy, just to name a few.

It offers visitors the chance to tour each distillery, learn about the bourbon-making process, and sample some



Besides a mega water park, Great Wolf Lodge in LaGrange offers a toddler pool, a full-service eatery and three-bedroom villas designed for multi-generational families or friends traveling together. DAVID TONELSON/DREAMSTIME/TNS

of the products.

“In all our years of liking bourbon we never thought to actually go on the bourbon trail till now,” Fuller said. “It was something my brother and I could do together since we both enjoy bourbon. And it was a little bit of a road trip from Atlanta so we’d get to see a little bit of Tennessee and Kentucky on the way there.”

The brothers stayed in Louisville and over three days, visited nine distilleries. There are 18 distilleries listed and advertised on the official Kentucky Bourbon Trail website, but travelers can visit as few or as many as they’d like and can visit other distilleries not on the list if those distilleries offer tours.

“I never realized all the steps and ingredients and processes that went into distilling bourbon,” Fuller said. “I just knew I liked drinking it. It was an eye-opener for

sure to learn about the history of the families and the distilleries and to see what makes each bourbon unique.”

His favorite stops: Maker’s Mark, Woodford Reserve, Buffalo Trace and Stitzel-Weller.

Fuller had a couple of suggestions for those hoping to enjoy a bourbon trail experience for the first time: Go during the spring or fall, he suggested. Since some of the tours take visitors outside the distilleries, it would be more enjoyable if the weather was nicer. And most importantly he said to call ahead or look up the days and times each distillery is open when planning your stops. They’re not open every day, all day long. He and his brother had to make a few adjustments when they realized a particular distillery was closed on a particular day but thankfully there were plenty to choose from.

Business

continued from S1

lia, tulip poplar, London plane: These woods yield the irregularities and interesting grain patterns that make the bowls part art as they fulfill their function as tableware.

And it seems they’re especially appealing to buyers in this region.

“I think, in many ways, Southerners, unlike the West Coast, they’re really into beautiful crafts and things that are of nature and are native to the area,” Dillan said.

The process

When the couple built their house in Waleska, they installed a studio underneath. It’s fully outfitted for Balzer to practice his craft with tools like jet lathes, polishers and buffers. He works with the grain to sculpt the outside of the bowls and then finds a corresponding shape for the inside before flattening the bottom so the creations can sit flush with a supporting surface.

“The challenges are when you find surprises from nature, like holes in the wood or knots. Sometimes you get tearout or things that you don’t expect,” he said, referencing wood that breaks away instead of conforming to a woodworker’s manipulations. “I can usually fix them. I just modify the design a bit and keep going.”

The couple travels a lot, so production takes place around those trips.

“When I’m home for a whole month, I produce about 20 bowls,” Balzer said. “We love to travel throughout the country ... We’re gone a significant part of the year.”

A brisk business

Keeping that production moving is likely in his best interests: Business has been brisk.

The Garden & Gun story has “probably been the most



This flame maple bowl was made to showcase its natural patterns.



This hand-turned wooden bowl made from bitter cherry. PHOTOS COURTESY OF TALKING WOOD STUDIOS

successful outside force that we’ve ever had,” Dillan said. “It really brought people to our website – people that really appreciate quality and art and things that are made in the South.”

The story was posted online, but its appearance in print brought the most attention, she said.

“We had an incredible amount of sales and visibility – more than we’ve ever had before,” she said. “We had one customer who bought, I think, 13 bowls and gave them away at Christmas.”

Before the story, the couple had done some posting on social platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest.

“We also just had a lot of word of mouth – people that knew the work of Ben who are friends of ours throughout the U.S.,” Dillan said. “But then, I think that social media in some

ways has faded.”

She’s still actively marketing, but her next move for fulfilling the plan to get the bowls into those fine homes includes simple networking.

“It’s more opportunistic marketing than a big strategic plan, but I want to go out and look for interior designers and send them proactive mail,” she said.

And, of course, the bowls, with their rustic beauty, hold their own magnetic attraction.

“What we’re after is that the bowl becomes the conversation starter,” Balzer said. “Have you ever been in a place where people are gathering around, like maybe a business meeting, and you’re gathering around a table or something? You’re having drinks, and it’s a little awkward, and then you see that cool thing sitting in the middle of the table you could talk about.”



Downtown Louisville offers 10 bourbon distillery experiences, including Kentucky Peerless Distilling Co, in Bourbon City. COURTESY OF KENTUCKY PEERLESS DISTILLING CO.



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AGING IN ATLANTA

Stress

continued from S1

effort can offset more serious health challenges later.

Understanding stress

That process begins with understanding types of stress and how they arise.

“Minor things are challenges that are short-lived or transient, like maybe somebody runs out of gas, or they’re stuck in traffic or in the middle of a crowd or running late to an appointment,” Pritchett said.

Major stressors are the more persistent issues older adults must learn to navigate, like chronic illnesses.

“Dealing with these illnesses can be, per se, a stress-inducing factor,” Pritchett said.

An inability to live independently, drive safely, or manage one’s own routine and finances, she pointed out, can make a person’s everyday life less recognizable. This loss of autonomy can also cause ongoing tension.

Other contributing factors, she said, can be loneliness, which is common among seniors, and caregiving responsibilities, which often increase as couples grow older together. Transition points like death of loved ones, divorce or moving into a new living situation can be overwhelming, too.

“Retirement can be a stressing factor as well for a lot of our patients,” Pritchett said. “I think, especially, for those who don’t really have a hobby where they can dispose time.”

Offsetting factors

Rapid heart rate, muscle tension, cortisol production, inflammation – these are all physical signs of stress in the moment, Pritchett said. But over time, according to the Mayo Clinic, the compound result of stress responses can be longer-lasting health risks like anxiety and depression, sleep problems, high blood pressure, heart attack and stroke.

So, what’s the best way to head off these more serious issues?

Pritchett has some recommendations:

■ **Talk therapy:** Approaches like cognitive behavioral therapy can allow patients to better understand their own thoughts and use adaptive thinking to lower their own stress levels. This option depends on a person’s cognitive status; memory problems will hamper engagement, she said.

■ **Socializing:** Keeping in touch with family and friends can reduce stress and increase resilience.

■ **Exercise:** Seniors need to tailor activities around any physical limitations, but moving around can stimulate production of endorphins, which Pritchett said have painkilling and mood-lifting properties.

“The American Heart Association recommends at least 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity aerobic activity,” Pritchett said. “Depending on the patient, they can add muscle strengthening activities at least two times per week.”

■ **Diet:** Keeping food intake healthy and balanced is key. The Mediterranean diet – lean meats, whole grain cereals, and fruits and vegetables – is a helpful guide, Pritchett said, and it can reduce stress-inducing inflammation.

■ **Sleep:** Adequate rest can bring down hormones related to cortisol, Pritchett said, and it can reduce anxiety and stress.

■ **Support groups:** Participants can join others facing similar circumstances, like caregiving, grief, or physical and mental health conditions.

■ **Meditation:** Mindfulness meditation can reduce stress levels by teaching practitioners to calm racing thoughts, relax muscles and reduce negative feelings.

Finding local resources

Finding local resources can be the first step for older adults looking to offset stress.



Meditation practitioners at the Georgia Meditation Center in Dunwoody. CONTRIBUTED



Senior Day is an annual mini-conference designed to introduce participants to AgeWell’s resources and activities. CONTRIBUTED

That support can look like social groups, health-related services or simply assistance with navigating everyday challenges. The search for fulfillment of basic needs can be distressing in and of itself, though. It’s a circumstance AgeWell Atlanta manager Jennifer Curry understands well.

“The people who call us,” she said, “99% of them are stressed.”

AgeWell is a four-agency collaborative, which, via its 1-866-243-9355 telephone line, connects seniors with local resources from recreational activities to social services to longterm care options and caregiver support groups.

“We provide what’s called warm hand-offs. So, if we have an hourlong conversation with someone, and then, they are looking for assistance, we maybe identify

three or four things that they could possibly take advantage of,” Curry said. “If we can’t fulfill their needs within our network, we have a lot of trusted community partners that we also refer them to.”

Transportation resources can restore some degree of independence and a reduction in daily stress, she added.

And for a longer-term approach to calm and enrichment, there’s the Agewell Atlanta Neighborhood Program administered through the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta in Dunwoody.

Neighborhood programs run the gamut of social outings, educational classes and physical activities, including local museum trips, support groups, nutrition counseling, pickleball and chair yoga. There’s even Yiddish language instruction, with participants coming from

AGEWELL ATLANTA SENIOR DAY

Where: Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta, 5342 Tilly Mill Rd., Atlanta.
When: Thursday, April 11, 9:30 a.m. – 2 p.m.
Cost: \$15 per person
Sign-up: atlantajcc.org/seniorday. Or call 678-812-4010 and mention you saw this story in the AJC for AgeWell \$10 rate.

Georgia Meditation Center meditation sessions:
Where: Georgia Meditation Center, 4522 Tilly Mill Rd., Atlanta
When: Wednesdays, 7 p.m.–8:30 p.m.
Contact: 770-452-1111

all faiths and backgrounds, Curry said.

Neighborhoods classes, such as the language course, went virtual during the pandemic and have remained that way. Curry said it’s a great option for older adults looking to meet people before moving to the area.

“What we’ve had people tell us is that these events are invaluable for them because of the social connection,” she said.

Each year, AgeWell holds its annual Senior Day, a mini-conference that provides attendees with lunch and AgeWell resources. This year, the event will take place Thursday, April 11, at MJCCA, Curry said, and there will be a bus transportation option for those who need it.

Calming the mind

Coming to terms with aging and its inevitable transitions can affect a person’s state of mind, but regular meditation can help with perspective, according to Bee Intakanok, president of the the Georgia Meditation Center in Dunwoody. She’s seen firsthand the benefits of meditation, both at the center and while teaching the practice at Altria Senior Living in Milton.

Regular meditation, she explained, can allow practitioners to face life’s hecticness with response instead of reaction.

“When you meditate, you’re learning to calm and still your mind and be patient with yourself and listen to yourself and find out who you are by not doing anything,” she said. “When you actually make an effort to quiet your mind and stay in place and breathe or close your eyes, you start to learn to allow yourself that space that you need.”

The center holds nonreligious meditation sessions each week. A “community of spiritual friends” meditates, cultivates mindfulness and encourages one in good deeds, Intakanok said.

Meditation participation later in life is sometimes the result of a more flexible mindset. Intakanok has seen a distinct receptiveness in the seniors she’s taught.

“They’re more open a lot of times because they’ve had more wisdom and more experience in life. They’re just a lot more willing to try different things and look at things in a different perspective. I think younger people aren’t always there yet,” she said. “Seniors are looking for more substance and more depth and more peace of mind.”

LIFESTYLES

One woman’s loss leads to finding connections

‘Let Your Heart Beat Again’ brings widows together.

By Yolanda Harris
for the AJC

After losing her husband of 47 years in 2013, Sarah Hurd-Williams wondered what other widows did to celebrate Valentine’s Day. “I did not want to just sit around and mope. So I reached out to other women like me who had experienced loss and were approaching their first Valentine’s Day alone,” she said.

As it turned out, there weren’t any viable options that sparked her interest. Not satisfied with the idea of sitting at home and letting the day go by, Hurd-Williams spoke with several women to see if they would be interested in spending time celebrating and encouraging one another. From that moment, word spread like wildfire.

By February 2014, the idea had blossomed into a full-fledged conference, at which Hurd-Williams served as speaker. More than 60 women gathered at a community clubhouse in Decatur. It was there the “Let Your Heart Beat Again” conference was born. Now in its 11th year, the 2024 conference was held at the Atlanta Evergreen Marriott in Stone Mountain Park.

Mending the broken places

It took a lot of courage for Hurd-Williams to move on after the loss of her husband, Bobby Hurd. Whether it is grief, trauma, a foiled opportunity or any setback, she believes everyone can be restored and find hope to move forward.

“We have more in us than what we are experiencing,” she said. “And we can live again.”

Through personal experience, Hurd-Williams teaches others the practice of learning to live again. “The idea behind the conference wasn’t really about marriage, it was about life and how to keep going,” she said.

As more people began hearing about the impact the event was having, people who were not widows began inquiring whether they could also attend.

“Some shared that their husbands had cheated on them, and they were stuck in their pain,” Hurd-Williams said. “Others shared they had been on a job for years, had given it their all, only to be let go.”

“Wherever a person’s clock stopped is what we want to address,” she said. “People just go on living, but they are not reaching their fullest potential because they are not allowing their heart to beat again.”

The power of encouragement

A licensed ordained minister and talk show host, Hurd-Williams appeared as a guest on a television program where she talked about the testimonials she had received from previous attendees. Later, a man who had been in the audience was inspired to ask whether men could attend.

Today, men, women and couples use the encouragement they receive through the conference as a springboard to jump-start their dreams and relationships and boost their self-worth.

“Everybody comes now,” Hurd-Williams said. “Young folk, middle-aged and seasoned people. It has been life-changing.”

“I went to this conference thinking I would just be supportive of the other women and men who were looking to feel their heart beat again,” said Nicole Hodo,



Sarah Hurd-Williams and her husband of two years, Robert Williams, became close through her “Let Your Heart Beat Again” conferences. COURTESY SARAH HURD-WILLIAMS

who attended the 2023 conference. “I was not a widow, nor divorced. As a matter of fact, I attended the conference with my husband of 20 years. It was there I found my heartbeat.”

The shift

Several years ago, Hurd-Williams made a new friend. The two women found they had a lot in common. “We both liked clothes and we loved to dress, so we became friends,” she said.

The woman and her husband, Robert Williams, were both in ministry. Realizing Hurd-Williams hosted the television show “In the Word with Sarah Hurd,” the woman asked if her hus-

band could appear as a guest. Hurd-Williams obliged and interviewed them both. A few months later, her new friend died suddenly.

Hurd-Williams eventually asked Williams if he would be interested in being a guest on her show again. Then a widower, he could certainly relate to the topic.

Williams accepted the invitation and decided to attend the conference for the first time. Because of the pandemic, the conference was held virtually. Hurd-Williams jokingly announced, as she had done in previous years, that she was without a partner once again for Valentine’s Day. “Women, we are going to Dollar Tree to buy

ourselves some flowers and candy!” she said.

That sounded like an invitation to Williams. He purchased a card, balloons and chocolate-covered strawberries. Not knowing where Hurd-Williams lived, he secretly dropped the flowers off at the church she attended. “I thought that would be it and I would go off to the wild blue yonder,” he said.

Hurd-Williams remembers the card’s inscription, “If the ribbon fits, wear it!” When she called to thank Williams for the gesture, she said, “The ribbon fits and I’m wearing it well.”

Williams admits he was interested in getting to know

Hurd-Williams better, but assumed she had several suitors vying for her attention. “I knew I would have to be on my P’s and Q’s and would be up against stiff competition. I didn’t have much swag, but I was a Morehouse man and a man of God, so I had a lot of confidence,” he said.

Although Williams had been actively dating, the people he found were simply too far away. He planned to marry again and even prayed about it. “God, I need someone close by who I can see on a regular basis and get to know,” he said. As fate would have it, Hurd-Williams lived only two minutes away.

The two would eventually go to lunch to celebrate Williams’ 74th birthday. He was moved by the words in her card, which read, “You are a good man.”

“Although he will never admit it,” she said, “I saw a few tears in his eyes.” That day, they talked for hours.

A welcome surprise

The two said they consider Hurd-Williams’ 72nd birthday, two months after Williams’ 74th, their official first date.

From that day on, the two were nearly inseparable. A month later, Williams popped the question at dinner. Hurd-Williams asked him to repeat the question, then said, “Now write it on the ticket.” He did, and she signed, “Yes!”

It was the receipt from dinner, and she shared a photo of it with close family and friends to announce their engagement. She still has the receipt in her phone.

The couple wed Oct. 3, 2021. Today, they are reviving hope together, and Williams continues to pastor. To learn more about “Let Your Heart Beat Again,” visit www.timeinthewordwithsarahhurd.com.

AGING IN ATLANTA

RECREATION

Keeping what you’re reading the star of your book club

Chitchat is nice, but staying on topic can be more fruitful.

By Lesly Gregory
For the AJC

Book clubs have a reputation. Conversation may start in the right direction, but staying on track isn’t always easy. There are, however, ways to ensure the book you spent so much time reading will be the star of the discussion.

“I think the book club needs to have the expectation that members actually read the book. Otherwise, it’s just a social gathering,” Karen Stroup told the AJC.

Stroup found her current book club in 2019. It meets about every six weeks, typically at a bar or restaurant.

For Elisa Siegel, whose two book clubs meet in person or over video chat, a key component to keeping members engaged in book talk is to offer time to socialize.

“We usually have a 30-minute mingle time before we start so everyone can get socializing out of the way,” Siegel told the AJC.

Cobb County Public Library adult services librarian Melissa White agrees.

“I set aside time for socializing after the book discussion so people can linger and continue conversations,” White told the AJC.

Though working in time to talk casually helps, keeping a book club on track most often falls to the facilitator.

Having the same facilitator lead each meet-up at Stroup’s book club helps “keep us on track.”

“It’s nice to take the pressure off group members that may not feel comfortable leading a discussion



Having a set moderator come with prepared questions keeps the conversation going for this long-running book club. COURTESY OF LESLY GREGORY

or preparing questions in advance,” Stroup said.

Between Siegel’s two book clubs, moderating is handled differently. Her women’s book club is moderated by a paid facilitator, while her couples book club is moderated by whoever is hosting that session.

“We always go around the room to see what people thought of the book and usually take a poll to rate the book,” Siegel said.

But even with the best intentions to stay on topic, conversation isn’t always easy. When lulls appear, White uses the opportunity to bring a new voice into the mix.

“If somebody hasn’t spoken up at all, I may ask if they have anything to add and invite them into the conversation. Asking, ‘What do you think of the book?’

helps,” White said.

Cindy Getty, a member of three book clubs, finds that mutual respect is a great way to ensure conversation keeps going.

“It’s important to allow everyone to feel as if they’re being heard by allowing each participant an opportunity to share and contribute if they’d like,” Getty said.

Preparing questions in advance can also help maintain focus as long as they’re the “right type.”

“I believe that asking questions based upon situation, theme or character trait helps to personalize the questions,” Getty said.

“A list of questions is always a good start, but I think beyond understanding the theme or main characters, it’s important for people to discuss how the book made them feel,” Stroup

said.

Book selection can also help drive conversation, but don’t try to always find something that everyone will like.

“I pick books where everyone will have something to say,” White said.

She has noticed that when some people like a book, but others don’t, discussion usually increases.

No matter how your book club is set up, there is one common side effect.

“The connections and shared experiences have been unexpected and wonderful,” Getty said about her time in all of her book clubs.

So, regardless of how much you talk about the book, maybe it isn’t the actual star but, rather, the long-term friendships made possible by a love of reading.

FUN AT 55

6 ways to enjoy April

By Lesly Gregory | for the AJC

By the time April rolls around, and temperatures start to rise, the urge to get out and about hits. It’s spring, and Atlanta offers so much to do whether you’re looking for a date night, a day out with friends, or a family-friendly festival in a local park.

SCHEDULE A NIGHT ON THE TOWN Sandy Springs Lantern Parade

The combination of giant lantern puppets and live music parading around Morgan Falls Overlook Park make this a memorable event. Get up close and personal with larger-than-life lanterns as you kick off the night with food trucks and children’s activities. The parade starts after dark at the Steel Canyon Golf Club, heading to the park. The path lights up in a wide palette of colors featuring designs by artist Chantelle Ritter.

6 p.m. Saturday, April 13. Free admission. Parade starts at Steel Canyon Gold Club, 460 Morgan Falls Road, Sandy Springs. Parade ends at Morgan Falls Overlook Park, 200 Morgan Falls Road, Sandy Springs. citysprings.com/lantern



CITYSPRINGS.COM/LANTERN

Illumine

Stroll through Oakland Cemetery as the sun sets accompanied by musical performances, lighting and art installations, and interactive experiences. You can explore the cemetery itself and stop to grab a drink from any of the multiple bars. A pop-up shop makes it easy to pick up a souvenir. This event has rolling access each night, but a limited number of tickets. The VIP experience is also available for an up-charge and includes drink tickets, glow-in-the-dark accessories, and exclusive access to parts of the cemetery.

7:30-10:30 p.m. on select dates, Thursday-Sunday, April 18-April 28. Advance tickets are \$20 for adults, \$25 at the gate. Students, children and seniors 65+ are \$15 in advance, \$20 at the gate. Children 3 and under are free. Oakland Cemetery, 248 Oakland Avenue, SE, Atlanta. oaklandcemetery.com/event/illumine-at-oakland

WELCOME IN SPRING Earth Day at Atlanta Botanical Garden

10 a.m.-noon Friday, April 19. Free admission with purchase of garden admission. Atlanta Botanical Garden, 1345 Piedmont Avenue, Atlanta. 404-876-5859. atlantabg.org/calendar/earth-day

Celebrate Earth Day surrounded by plants at the Atlanta Botanical Garden. This family-friendly event includes activities that celebrate nature and focus on all the plants that live around us. Take in the sights of the Botanical Garden as everything begins to bloom while you connect with this nature-inspired holiday.

Garden Faire

Sponsored by the North Fulton Master Gardeners, this plant sale features more than 2,000 plantings to add to your garden at home. Native, ornamental, and edible plant varieties are available along with vendors selling garden accessories and tools. Sit in on a guest speaker, visit the Ask-a-Master Gardener booth, or hang out in the Children’s Corner with the grandkids. The Fleatique offers additional shopping and, of course, there’s food. While admission is free for this event, proceeds of the plant sale provide scholarships and support community education and project gardens throughout the area.

9 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday, April 20. Free admission. The Grove at Willis Park, 175 Roswell Street, Alpharetta. nfmng.net/garden-faire.html



Happy gardeners find the perfect selection of plants at the Garden Faire. NORTH FULTON MASTER GARDENERS

EXPLORE A LOCAL FESTIVAL Big Shanty Festival

More than 200 arts and crafts booths fill up downtown Kennesaw for the Big Shanty Festival. Additionally, you’ll find food stalls, a beer garden, and multiple stages with live entertainment waiting for you. The weekend kicks off with a parade at 9:30 a.m. Saturday. Floats, high school bands, and youth sports teams will march down Main Street. Grab a seat along the route before checking out the variety of artisans and crafters selling their creations. A children’s area features bounce houses while food booths offer enough menu items to satisfy anyone’s hunger.

9:30 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday, April 20, and noon-5 p.m. Sunday, April 21. Free admission. Downtown Kennesaw near the Southern Museum of Civil War and Locomotive History, 2829 Cherokee Street NW, Kennesaw. 770-423-1330. kennesaw.com/big-shanty-festival

ARTucker

Focused on showcasing Georgia artists and makers, this annual festival will entice any art-lover to spend the day walking among the booths. Free children’s activities, which include face painting and chalking, food, music, and dance performances add to the event. It’s a day for the whole family to enjoy together.

10 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday, April 27. Free admission. Church Street Green Space, 4316 Church Street, Tucker. artucker.org/index.html



ARTUCKER

ACTIVE AGING

Every step counts when trying to lower BP, elevate mental health

Even the barest minimum of walking can help.

By Yolanda Harris
For the AJC

Spring is here and with it comes milder temperatures, more daylight and budding greenery all around. It is the perfect time to lace up those sneakers, take a stroll and welcome the season.

Why walk

Walking contributes to improved health.

“Walking helps maintain healthy body weight, reduces high blood pressure and decreases the risk for type 2 diabetes,” according to “The Benefits of Walking,” published by Columbine Health Systems Center for Healthy Aging. “People who regularly walk four times per week for at least 15 minutes live longer and healthier lives compared to those who are more sedentary.”

Higher levels of walking can also enhance mood by significantly decreasing “symptoms of stress, such as anxiety, sadness, fatigue and lack of motivation,”

For people who struggle with pain, “walking actually helps decrease symptoms of chronic pain, which makes it a great activity for those with joint problems and low back pain,” the article states.

Putting walking to the test

During a visit with her primary care physician, Paulette Boone was surprised to learn that her blood pressure, which typically averaged 117/77, was significantly elevated. Her top, or sys-



Paulette Boone of Stone Mountain began making lifestyle changes by reducing her sugar and carb intake and incorporating walking into her daily regimen. COURTESY OF PAULETTE BOONE

tolic, number reached an all-time high of 152.

Boone’s A1C numbers were also concerning. “I didn’t want to be stereotyped as a person with hypertension, and I didn’t want to be considered a diabetic and have to rely on medication,” she said.

After the appointment, the Stone Mountain resident immediately began making lifestyle changes by reducing her sugar and carb intake and incorporating walking into her daily regimen.

Boone started by doing stretches and floor exercises in the morning and walking

her dogs for 1 mile after work three to five days a week. On her return appointment three months later, the 58-year-old had achieved major improvements.

“My A1C was down from 6.2 to 5.7, and my blood pressure was 123/79,” she said. “I also noticed that I was sleeping better and the pain in my knees improved as well.”

As an added bonus, she lost 12 pounds and lowered her stress levels.

One year later, Boone said she is convinced walking works. “I don’t take any blood pressure medications, and I don’t take anything

for my A1C.”

Mindfulness

Mental health has become a popular topic in recent years. Transparent conversations about how stress, anxiety and isolation affect overall wellness have led some people to adopt new approaches to daily living. Walking is a great remedy.

In the book “Walk Your Way Calm,” author Jennifer Walsh offers tips for setting achievable goals.

“Start small (even just once a week for 20 minutes is a great start!) then eventually aim to walk three days a week for 20 minutes or longer, ideally outdoors,” Walsh said.

She also suggested using mindfulness while walking by intentionally observing nature, breathing and sounds. “It’s a great way for your brain to reshuffle from thinking about to-do lists or worst-case scenarios and instead zone in on a single achievable task,” said Walsh.

To increase accountability and enjoyment, Walsh recommended recruiting a friend or family member, forming a walking group or walking virtually with someone while talking by phone at a set time and day.

Get moving

Atlanta-based physical therapist Ross Davis said the best decision is to just start.

“I think that everyone who can move should be moving. As you get stronger and as your balance improves, start increasing your distance,” he said.

Whether the goal is to reduce stress, improve wellness or simply to enjoy fresh air and sunshine, make every step count.

AGING IN ATLANTA

WOMEN'S HEALTH

How menopause can affect your bone health

Avoiding bone loss is one of biggest challenges.

By Patricia Neligan Barley for the AJC

Maintaining a healthy weight, having a balanced diet and exercising regularly are generally good habits to build, regardless of age. However, it is vital for premenopausal and menopausal women to also pay attention to additional health factors as estrogen levels drop.

As women age, this hormonal change happens naturally but can cause some unfavorable side effects, with bone loss being one of the biggest.

Decrease in bone mass

Osteoporosis, a decrease in bone mass, affects both men and women, but as women age, they are at greater risk because of the loss of estrogen in their bodies. According to a 2022 study from the National Library of Medicine, “Low levels of circulating estrogen are associated with the risk of postmenopausal osteoporosis.”

“The majority of postmenopausal women with osteoporosis have bone loss related to estrogen deficiency,” Researchers have found “the rapid bone loss results from an increase in bone turnover with an imbalance between bone resorption and bone formation.”

What can we do to help stave off osteoporosis? Maintaining a healthy weight and taking vitamin supplements aren’t the only keys to helping your current and future health. Strength training, which can increase bone density, is also essential

and can prove beneficial in the long run. It’s never too late to add weight-bearing exercises to your lifestyle.

Check with your doctor first

When starting something new or adjusting an activity to better support bone health, it’s always a good practice to check with your medical provider first. They will be able to help you choose the best options for you and your bone health.

For example, weighted vests have become a new trend for avid walkers. This simple addition to your routine can combine an aerobic walk with anaerobic strength training. Research has shown you should aim for 4% to 10% of your body weight if you try it out. If you are around 140 pounds, starting with a 5-15 pound vest would be optimal.

A common mistake people make when adding something to their workout is starting with a bang and then getting discouraged. Don’t let that be you. Just remember, a little goes a long way. Consider your level of fitness, plan to start small, and consider whether you are already struggling with aching joints in your hips and knees.

Weighted vests to build bone mass

As is common with women’s health, especially as we age, there is little research on the benefits of the weighted vest; however, the National Library of Medicine’s findings support the use of progressive exercise training using weighted vests in postmenopausal women.

Dr. Peter Young, division chief of musculoskeletal radiology at University Hospitals in Cleveland,



Some risk factors for breast and ovarian cancer, like age, reproductive history and genetics, can't be changed. However, making certain lifestyle changes may help lower your risks. DREAMSTIME/TNS

“Bone mineral density loss is part of normal aging for both men and women, but adding weight-bearing exercises can help build bone mass and increase axial loading on the bone, which helps to increase bone mineral density.”

Dr. Peter Young, division chief of musculoskeletal radiology at University Hospitals in Cleveland

Ohio, offered some insight about weighted vests. “Bone mineral density loss is part of normal aging for both men and women, but adding weight-bearing exercises can help build bone mass

and increase axial loading on the bone, which helps to increase bone mineral density,” he said. “Increasing BMD, or bone mineral density, would give a premenopausal woman a bet-

ter starting point by developing bone mineral density during her premenopausal years.”

According to Young: “The literature on weighted vests is limited, though there have been a few key studies, and the results are promising. So far, the literature primarily focused on using weighted vests and exercise programs for postmenopausal females. Studies have shown that exercise programs consistently help increase bone mineral density in postmenopausal females long-term, thus decreasing the risk of future fractures and osteoporosis.”

Resistance training

Weight exercises force bones to work harder. Resistance training is typically thought of as using bands,

dumbbells, or even your body weight with push-ups and pullups. Adding a weighted vest is also resistance training, but it is spread over your back and shoulders to make you work harder while you walk.

Anna Mavromichalis, a not-just-yet-50-year-old woman who has done yoga for years, does weights, and walks on average 10-15 miles per week, recently added a weighted vest to her routine.

“I like walking with a weighted vest as it gives my body the same feedback as cross-training. I definitely recommended starting with a light vest and build-up,” she said.

Mavromichalis said she does not wear the vest with every walk, because it tends to put pressure on her knees, but she has seen benefits.

HEALTH

Maintaining overall good nutrition as you get older

By Lesly Gregory for the AJC

It’s no secret nutritional needs can change with age. There are some tried-and-true dietary strategies to keep yourself healthy as you get older, but new information continues to emerge. Staying on top of the latest research can help you find the right way to stay healthy.

Nutritional adaptations as you age aren’t super-dramatic, but as your body changes, modifying what you eat can make a difference.

“It’s about less overall energy needs and higher quality nutrient needs,” Christina Ellenberg, MS, RD, LDN, CSCS, owner of Dietitian Dish in Atlanta, told the AJC.

This means thinking of ways to make small changes to what you eat already rather than reinventing your diet.

“You don’t have to completely change your meals,” Ellenberg said.

Ellenberg suggests avoiding “empty calorie” foods as much as possible by indulging in smaller portions of those foods and eating them after you’ve consumed the protein and/or fiber on your plate.

“All calories aren’t equal,” Ellenberg said.

Adapting your diet

There is no “one size fits all” way to eat according to Safa Nooromid, RD, LD of Nooromid Nutrition Consulting Group in Atlanta. The nutrients you need are dependent on factors like age, health and medications.

She stresses the shift from caloric needs to nutritional needs as you get older because of changes in metabolism, bone and muscle mass, and body composition.

“Go for higher nutrition and lower calorie,” Nooromid told the AJC.

What this often translates

to is watching your sodium and fat intake more closely and drinking less alcohol. Cutting down on sugar, saturated fat, processed meat, refined carbs, and fried food is also a good rule of thumb.

What should go onto your plate is calcium-rich foods like cheese and Greek yogurt, foods high in antioxidants like kale and almonds, and foods that contain polyphenols like salmon and berries. It’s also important to remember there are good fats out there like nuts and avocados. These foods can help with joint health and cellular development and even make it easier for your body to absorb certain vitamins.

Overall though, adjusting your diet is about understanding what you need to feel healthy.

“This is about tuning into what your body is feeling; what’s driving your hunger,” Ellenberg said.

Listen to what your body tells you when it’s hungry to help you decide what healthy food options to eat.

“You don’t need as many nutrients, but you shouldn’t ignore hunger cues,” Ellenberg said.

The role of supplements

Along with modifications to what you eat, many people also consider taking supplements. It’s a more recent trend to introduce them into a balanced nutritional plan, but Ellenberg and Nooromid suggest you approach taking supplements with caution.

“Know your numbers,” Nooromid said when the topic of supplements came up. This refers to the importance of getting blood work done first and consulting with a medical professional to decide what supplements you should take.

Although it’s not uncommon to see people with Vitamin D, iron, B12, and calcium deficiencies, reviewing your

metabolic health with your doctor first ensures you’re using supplements correctly.

“I take a food-first mentality over taking supplements all day,” Ellenberg said.

The results of your bloodwork can show you other areas where supplements can benefit too. For example, if lab work shows high cholesterol, you may want to talk to your doctor about adding a CQ10 supplement to your diet.

What’s new in senior nutrition

Refining your diet and exploring supplements are two tried and true ways to manage your nutritional health as you age, but research comes out all the time. It’s worth keeping up with what’s new.

“Nutrition is always evolving, but medical professionals are the best source for crafting a diet that’s safe for you,” Nooromid said.

She stresses looking at research over what’s trending on social media and avoiding any social media fads.

You should also keep in mind that nutritional health is an ever-changing science, and if you find it challenging to keep up with new information, there’s one strategy that always works.

“Think of sustainable practices you can maintain that keep your body fueled for aging,” Ellenberg said. “It’s really just about eating frequently, eating until you’re satisfied and getting the nutrients you need.”

To enhance this basic approach to eating, Nooromid often recommends that people make mealtime a pleasant experience, not something that feels robotic. She suggests cooking with colorful foods, playing music, and adding herbs and spices to dishes.

“Eat meals at regular times with friends and family,” Nooromid said.

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