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THE ROANOKE TIMES

Sunday, May 19, 2024

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HEATHER ROUSSEAU, THE ROANOKE TIMES

From left: Jared Rose, Robert Lamour, Dr. Catherine Koebel and Rev. Amy Hodge are the newest commissioners with the Roanoke City Gun Violence Commission. They are pictured in downtown Roanoke on May 9.

Wonju dancers wow in Roanoke

Delegation is from city that started Roanoke's extensive international relationship

MIKE GANGLOFF
The Roanoke Times

Two South Korean dance groups wowed audiences at the Taubman Museum of Art and the Local Colors Festival Saturday as part of a celebration of the 60th anniversary of the sister city relationship between Roanoke and Wonju, South Korea.

One dance team synced its moves to K-pop and other contemporary sounds – Saweetie and Doja Cat was part of the team's soundtrack Saturday – while the other focused on the percussion-heavy sounds of traditional Korean music.

The performances were part of an exchange between Roanoke and Wonju that began with medical students from each city carrying out internships in the

Please see **WONJU**, Page A8

VIEW: For a video of the Wonju dancers, point your smartphone camera at the QR code, then tap the link. **NEWSVU**

'Recipe for success'

New commissioners attack Roanoke gun violence with hope, diverse experience

EMMA COLEMAN
The Roanoke Times

Last year, the Gun Violence Prevention Commission faced skepticism from city council members as Roanoke's homicide count rose

to an all-time high.

The tension ultimately led three commissioners to resign and the council to amend the group's membership rules.

But now, the dust is settling. Four new faces have joined the commission, and they're not letting last year's tension dampen their enthusiasm.

"It was somewhat inevitable," Catherine Koebel, one of the new commissioners, said in a recent

interview. "Public criticism of a body that calls itself the Gun Violence Prevention Commission in a season of unbearable gun violence is sort of understandable."

Koebel has lived in south Roanoke since 2013. She coordinates the city's annual gun buyback event, Groceries Not Guns, and works as a grant writer and advocate for gun safety at the local and state levels.

Koebel said she started push-

ing for more gun locks in Roanoke about 10 years ago. In March, the city launched its first city-wide gun lock distribution campaign, "Lock in Safety. Unlock Hope."

"I've spent a lot of time planting the gun lock seed out here in Roanoke," Koebel said. "I think the Roanoke City Public Schools system may have been one of the very first school systems to have locks."

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Israeli official draws line

War cabinet member says he'll quit the government unless there's a new plan

WAFAA SHURAFU, JOE KRAUSS
AND JACK JEFFERY
Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip – Benny Gantz, a popular centrist member of Israel's three-member War Cabinet, threatened Saturday to resign from the government if it doesn't adopt a new plan in three weeks' time for the war in Gaza, a decision that would leave Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu more reliant on far-right allies.

The announcement deepens a divide in Israel's leadership more than seven months into a war in which Israel has yet to



JACQUELYN MARTIN, ASSOCIATED PRESS

A 7-year-old from Springfield, Va., wearing a traditional outfit while being held by her grandfather, who is Palestinian, raises her fist Saturday during a chant at a pro-Palestinian rally on the National Mall in Washington.

accomplish its stated goals of dismantling Hamas and returning scores of hostages abducted in the militant group's Oct. 7

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Heartburn for Cox internet customers

Lately, Bruce Jacobson has been feeling fit to be tied. You could say the same of Jerry McBride and Bill Webster.

All are residents of the Roanoke Valley, and besides that they share something

else in common: For years, they've been internet-service subscribers of Cox Communications. As part of that service, they've maintained email addresses that end with the @cox.net suffix.

But Cox, which bills itself as "the largest private broadband

provider in the United States," recently left the email-handling business. Instead, Cox handed over support of @cox.net email addresses to web services provider Yahoo.

"Please note that Cox no longer offers or supports email services," Cox Communications says on its website. "If you're having trouble logging in to your new Yahoo account, reach out directly at Help.Yahoo.com or call their Premium Phone support line at 866-562-7250 as soon as possible."

As a result of the transition, email suffixes didn't change for Cox subscribers' – those

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Man drove hours with body in backseat

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HEATHER ROUSSEAU, THE ROANOKE TIMES

A Roanoke City Gun Violence Commission Meeting takes place at Belmont Branch Library on April 16.

GVPC

From A1

Koebel grew up in Blacksburg, and after receiving a graduate degree in immunology from Washington University in St. Louis, she said she and her husband moved to Richmond, where she met and worked with victims of the 2007 Virginia Tech mass shooting.

“That’s sort of where my advocacy story begins,” she said. “But it’s not where my story begins.”

When Koebel was a child, she said, her uncle died by gun suicide. And when she was a teen, her friend and her friend’s siblings were taken hostage by their father after he shot and killed their mother.

“Eventually, he did let them go. The children all survived. But, needless to say, that’s a pretty searing set of 18-year-old memories,” Koebel said. “Prom, and graduation, and every single of those formative memories that are supposed to be a certain way, for me they all still are somewhat wrapped up in that.”

Years later, Koebel felt the impacts of gun violence again. She said her father had a classroom in one of the buildings targeted during the Virginia Tech shooting.

“His classroom was one of the classes that was attacked, but it was the professor right before him who was shot and killed,” Koebel said. “So, a lot of gun violence in my life, for someone who does not fit the demographic.”

The Rev. Amy Hodge, another new commissioner, has also experienced gun violence firsthand.

“I had a brother that had a drug issue one time, and he pulled a gun on me, and I figured it was the end. So, I just turned my back, so he could shoot me in the back,” Hodge said in a recent interview. “But something changed in his head, and he put the gun down. So, I know what gun violence is.”

Hodge grew up in Koehler, a small community outside Martinsville. She has received a master’s degree in divinity from the Samuel Dewitt Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union University and an honorary doctorate degree from Eastern Theological Seminary.

Since 2007, Hodge said she has lived in northwest Roanoke, where she has also worked for 17 years as pastor at Mount Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church. Between Jan. 1 and April 12, four of Roanoke’s five of gun-fire incidents in which someone was struck by a bullet were reported in the northwest zone.

“My church sits on Melrose Avenue, slam in the middle of

northwest,” Hodge said. “I am wishful, and wanting, for there to be less violence in northwest.”

Hodge said she also serves on the Advisory Council of Health Disparity and Health Equity, a Virginia Department of Health committee. She said she gets information from the advisory council that can help those in Roanoke. So, when Roanoke’s commission had an open seat, she saw another opportunity to learn.

“Information is power,” Hodge said. “The more information that we have about a situation, the more powerful we are. Because the information is the solution. That’s my philosophy.”

Hodge said she’s aware that there has been tension between the Roanoke city council and the commission, because she observed it during a meeting. But she said tension can be a good thing, “because it wakes people up.”

“There’s always a way to work things out,” she said. “I live in a real world. I pastor real people. But I do believe that things can be worked out, that truths can be told in such a way that it has a positive influence.”

Jared Rose, a third new commissioner, said he also lives in northwest Roanoke. He’s been a city resident since June and has worked since August as a reentry program case manager with local nonprofit Total Action for Progress, or TAP.

“The people that we’re trying to affect, I know where they’re coming from,” Rose said in a recent interview. “I know where they’re coming from when they don’t have anything to eat, when all they have is a gun. I get that point of view. Not only do I work with these people every day, I have been that person.”

Rose said that he grew up in the foster care system and was adopted while he was in elementary school. At age 19, he joined the military, but left a short time later due to an injury and became addicted to opiates.

“I’ve lived in some pretty rundown communities in this country,” Rose said. “I was doing all the wrong things in those communities. I went to prison for carrying a gun. I’ve never committed violence myself, but I have I have experienced it, and I’ve worked with clients that have experienced it.”

Rose said he’s a convicted felon and was incarcerated until last June.

“While I was in prison, I worked on myself a lot,” Rose said. “I got clean and really started focusing on trying to better myself and helping people around me.”



Rose



Hodge



Lamour



Koebel

After his release, Rose said he found himself at a halfway house in Roanoke and went to TAP for help. After people there got to know him, they encouraged him to apply for an open position — the job he has now.

“TAP really gave me a chance. They’re all about giving people opportunities, and they put their money where their mouth was,” Rose said. “And now I pay it back.”

Through TAP’s reentry program, Virginia CARES, Rose helps people who have recently been released from prison find their footing. He said that, a lot of the time, folks enter his office with nothing more than some paperwork and some cash. But with a little help, they can find their way to renting homes, buying cars and retaining employment.

“And that just started with them reaching out a hand, and a hand being there to help them up,” Rose said. “I’ve seen countless lives change.”

Rose said he met Roanoke Councilwoman Stephanie Moon Reynolds through a mutual friend, and she told him about the open seat on the commission. He said he wasn’t aware of any tensions that might have existed between the two groups.

“I think if there’s any animosity, that just takes away from what the aim of the commission is. If people aren’t working together, that’s not productive,” he said. “I’m not coming into this with an ego or an agenda other than trying to make this community better than what it is. Anything besides that, it’s really in one ear, out the other.”

Like Rose, the commission’s fourth new member Robert Lamour had a less than perfect childhood. He said he was born in Port au Prince, Haiti, but moved to the city of New York when he was about 13 years old.

“I’ve witnessed gun violence in the inner city neighborhoods that I lived in,” Lamour said in a

recent interview. “As a young kid, I remember watching somebody get shot as I was helping my father change a tire. That was not a normal thing for a child to experience. There’s no reason for now children to be doing it, which is even more traumatic, to each other.”

Lamour has experienced gun violence professionally, too. He said he worked 25 years for the United States Secret Service. His last assignment was in Washington, D.C., where he served as special agent in charge of the Dignitary Protective Division.

“In that position, I was in charge of all the national special security events, which included the State of the Union, the United Nations General Assembly, campaign preparations and all the heads of state and dignitaries traveling to the United States,” Lamour said.

After retiring at the end of 2020, Lamour said he moved to the Roanoke Valley to be with his family. About a year ago, he opened a private security service agency, Protector Scope Security Solutions.

Lamour said he has joined the commission because he “felt compelled to be part of the solution and not just sit back and watch issues grow.” He resides in Roanoke County, but he said he has family living in the city and visits the locality daily.

Lamour said last year’s tension between council and the commission doesn’t make him feel any less inclined to serve the community.

“I think there’s always room for disagreement,” he said. “If there’s a disagreement, people are talking, and there’s room for some growth and change.”

Lamour believes, based on his professional experience, that Roanoke residents who are prone to being impacted by gun violence may need easier access to mental health counseling.

“My experience involves a lot of education and planning based on targeted violence,” Lamour said. “Risk management doesn’t necessarily involve a law enforcement strategy.”

Lamour said that prosecuting someone who uses a gun to resolve conflict doesn’t get to the root cause of the problem, especially if mental health challenges slow a defendant’s progress through the court system.

Hodge believes poverty is one of Roanoke’s greatest challenges, and so area African Methodist Episcopal churches have provided care packages to Melrose Branch Library visitors.

“It looks like a little lunch bag. It has washcloths, soap, toothpaste, toothbrush,” Hodge said.

“And on the outside of it, we write, ‘We care.’ On purpose. We write in on purpose.”

Rose also believes that, at its root, gun violence is an economic problem.

“Giving people equitable access to jobs, housing that’s affordable, it’s those things right there, those simple things, that I think will have such a ripple effect in the community,” Rose said.

Lamour thinks that Roanoke is an emerging city with lots of opportunities for economic growth. He said the city needs to continue to offer activities and employment to its youth.

“They need to be able to have role models to take them on during the hours where the parents are not actively involved,” he said. “My mom and dad worked. I remember very vividly. I was a caregiver for my brother and sister. In those hours, I was there for them. But I don’t know if the same exists for other families.”

Koebel said she wants to help the commission effectively communicate its work, plus public health facts about guns, to the Roanoke community.

“I want people in our community making decisions about all kinds of things with the facts at hand, not misinformation, first and foremost,” Koebel said. “I think we’d be a healthier community right there, if we had that as our basis.”

But, Koebel added, the commission alone can’t fix Roanoke’s gun violence problem.

“Everyone has a little part of this, and some people have bigger parts of it than others, but everyone does actually have a little part,” Koebel said. “If you are coming with a criticism, I welcome you to the work.”

“Most people don’t think anybody cares. That’s my religion talking,” Hodge said. “But I just really do think that the church is a sleeping giant, and when the church wakes up to its full capacity, I think it will be influential in the decreasing of violence.”

“I believe I have something to offer to this commission,” Rose said, “and until I have nothing left to offer, I’m going to do everything in my power to make this a very successful commission, so we can eliminate gun violence in the Roanoke Valley.”

“I’m very, very optimistic,” Lamour said. “This is a great group, and my first impression is that people care. And when you have caring folks and committed folks, it’s a good recipe for success.”

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