

but 'hesitancy' to some of his ideas. "Once you show folks what can be done, boy, those hesitant folks, you can usually win them over right away. And some you can't and some we won't. And I don't have the time for that. By now, if you're not going to help out...get out of the way; let us get something done for you."

The good ol' days of Mayberry are gone for good. "Main Street America... we've been hit real bad the last 20 years, first by shopping centers, shopping malls and now the mass proliferation of Walmarts everywhere. So, main streets are always looking for their little niche," says Curtis. "That's the nature of economics in America right now, at least retail economics. And what Main Streets are doing, and we do it with a very structured approach through promotions and design work, you have to use that to your advantage. We will never have what we had in the 1950s, and to wish that and think about that is just dragging you down from where you should be...So, what you do, you make your Main Streets, if nothing else, like a micro vacation for folks. When they're going to Walmart or the super centers or whatever, you give them a reason to



ODA's partnership with area garden clubs has resulted in numerous shrub and flower planting beautification projects around town.

come to downtown. We're getting those reasons to come to town."

He comes up for air; launches back in. "Make it work for you. But it takes energy and a different way of viewing things to bring that about. Big boxes don't kill downtowns unless the downtowns themselves let it happen, if you're organized, ener-

gized and you act as a group." He points to the peaceful co-existence of big box and mom and pops in towns like Kilmarnock and Culpeper.

Not long ago at one of the ODA's Thursday morning, anybody-can-join-in coffee klatches at the Light Well, Jeff was overheard to say, "Orange is tough. Orange is a tough

nut to crack." What did he mean by that?

"The tough nut to crack is to keep the brighter picture in mind all the time," he says of the comment. "To stay focused, to keep your energy level up, to keep cheerleading and embracing that knowing that there are challenges that you can't control." He quotes a friend who advised, "Keep your goal in mind. Don't get involved in all the he-said, she-said, all the politics; don't get dragged down by all that negativity...Keep your vision in mind and keep moving forward." Sounds like riding a motorcycle.

"Orange is juxtaposed perfectly. We're right in the middle of such a beautiful area waiting to be rediscovered." He envisions retirees and families coming here to live, lured by our many attractions, such as Montpelier, the wineries, the beautiful scenery, the friendly small-town feel. "I think what the town is doing very wisely is, and with the ODA complementing it, is making sure that growth is the type we want and kind of steering it where we want it to go. I think Orange is going to be an enviable town in a few years. And the ODA will be part of that."

## Letter from Eileen

July 1, outgoing Orange Downtown Alliance President, Dan Gregg (Jeff Curtis calls him "a hero, a champion,"), hands over the ODA leadership reins to Eileen Whelan of Orange Chiropractic. Eileen is ready to build on what Curtis calls Gregg's "making-mole-hills-out-of-mountains" style.

She writes enthusiastically, "I don't believe there's been an organization doing so much, with so little and with so much volunteer support for Orange and the surrounding area as the ODA is doing."

"Just think," she continues, "our farmers market, various retail and service workshops, business grand openings, Easter and Halloween events, and now a full three-day Christmas celebration, extensive landscaping and plantings, an annual litter clean up, an annual blues festival, a

newsletter distributed to over 800 people and businesses, sidewalk planter projects, a scarecrow competition, the secret shopper study, free facade design assistance and administering the Enterprise Zone applications and more all comes from the Orange Downtown Alliance."

Thanking and crediting ODA's various partners such as the garden clubs, the Boys and Girls Club, local churches, the Tri-county Master Gardeners, the Inns of Montpelier and the event sponsors, she adds, "There has been a sea-change of community cooperation because the ODA has found reason and opportunity to bring these groups together. I truly believe Orange would be much less of a place without the ODA."

"Proud of this organization? You bet. I think all of Orange should be," she concludes.



Out with the old and in with the new. ODA President Dan Gregg hands over the reins of the organization to Eileen Whelan tomorrow.



In the two and a half years that Jeff Curtis has been executive director of the Orange Downtown Alliance, he has revitalized the organization by team building and focusing on the future.

## THE POET AND THE MOTORCYCLE

### GRANDPA DIED

By Jeff Curtis

He left me with his roses  
And his black dirt garden with his  
tomatoes and lettuce  
But he forgot to take our evenings in the kitchen together  
And he forgot to take the smell of his jacket  
And the sound of my name, the way he said it.

He left me with his catfishing and his care of tools  
And a set of deer antlers on the wall  
But he forgot to take his glass of wine and ginger ale  
And his big hands around mine.

He left a grey tackle box  
A handmade knife and some homemade sinkers  
He left his hat on the rack  
And his glasses by the bed  
But he forgot to take his name  
And he forgot to take his smile.

He left his crucifix on the wall  
The statue of the Virgin on his dresser  
And the braid of garlic that we loved so well.

**B**et you didn't know this about Orange Downtown Alliance (ODA) Executive Director, Jeff Curtis. He is a published award-winning poet.

He also rides a motorcycle to work.

Now anyone who has read ODA's electronic newsletter knows that Jeff has a way with words; he's written some nice feature stories about local businesses. But a poet? Not this ebullient, damn-the-torpedoes-full-speed-ahead biker; this guy with the midwest accent; this cheerleader who pilots our town's energized economic stimulus program like it was a motorcycle. He couldn't be a poet could he?

Red warning flags go up. Poetry can be maddeningly baffling and too erudite for its own good. On the other end, it can be simple-minded in a roses-are-red-violets-are-blue kind of way, from schmaltzy to ribald. But a casual thumb-through Jeff Curtis' two, yes two, published booklets of verse are as refreshing as opening a window after a thunderstorm has blown through. This guy, cowboy hat, motorcycle and all, is good.

The International Society of Poets agrees. In 2001, the organization selected Jeff Curtis from a field of 2,000 poets from 36 countries and named him American Poet of the Year. Let's listen in on his winning entry:

Jeff Curtis recited that poem in a "palatial" hall in Budapest, Hungary in front of an assembly of dignitaries including the U.S., German, Austrian and Italian ambassadors, "and these guys had tears coming down out of their eyes," he says softly.

The grandpa in question "looked like something right out of a mafia movie, right out of the 'Godfather,' pencil-thin moustache, slicked-back hair," smiles Jeff. His grandparents on both sides, Italian and Hungarian "spoke broken English." Grandpa's name was Valentino Cupaiolo.

And now, here's something else you didn't know about Jeff Curtis: he was named after his grandfather, answered to the name 'Val,' until he and his parents moved back to Cleveland from Crescent City, CA,



Jeff Curtis as a teenager on the Great Lakes with a freshly caught Northern Pike.

where he was born. At some point his parents decided to Americanize his name. "I was renamed Jeffrey Curtis; why they chose Curtis, I have no idea," he shrugs.

Jeff Curtis, nee Valentino Cupaiolo, grew up an all-American kid in Cleveland, OH, took up hunting and fishing, attended Ohio State University where he earned degrees in Natural Resources and Environmental Science. "My background was in wildlife and wildlife management and all that comes

with it." So it was only natural that he landed a job with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries.

Although he was never a game warden, his first assignment with DGIF was "cover mapping" in George Washington National Forest, filling in locations of the stands of various tree species. He became senior training and development

coordinator for the department. It is here that he created the prototype for the first National Hunting and Fishing Day event in the country. He also created the Women Outdoors Program and coordinated numerous other programs in hunting, boating and non-game wildlife education.

Then he met Brenda. And the next thing you know, they've moved to her native Texas, where Jeff became executive director of the Rockwall Chamber of Commerce in the Dallas area. These were exciting times in the fastest growing county in the state three years running. "Texas was pretty brutal on my constitution," winces Jeff. "It was hot and then it got hotter, but I loved my job. Texans have such a can-do attitude." He got a ten-gallon hat and became a cowboy poet.

It was while he was in Budapest, through the US Ambassador's office, that he made a connection to the Knoxville Chamber of Commerce. The Texas heat was getting to him, so he moved back east, eventually settling down in West Virginia where he became executive director for Martinsburg's Main Street program. A few years later, he directed a similar program in Shepherdstown. In his spare time, he jumped off cliffs and soared to the valleys below on a hang glider, a hobby he had to give up with the birth of his son.

That was followed by a divorce from Brenda, which is still painful. A cloud scuds across his face whenever he mentions it. Jeff Curtis moved to the Northern Neck where he became director of development at a private school in Irvington. He loved where he lived, but hated the job. "I did not like that at all. I was not suited for that job," he shudders. "Leaving the Northern Neck was maybe one of the hardest things I've ever done in my



Jeff Curtis with one of his beloved chickens.

ourselves and I saw it really as a time for team building." He saw "lots of individual efforts by different organizations, but it really wasn't focused anywhere...I saw the ODA as being a catalyst for that."

Their first opportunity was Bike Virginia. Something like 2,000 cyclists were pedaling to Orange and would spend the night in a tent city at the high school. "That's a captive audience," exclaimed Jeff to the ODA Board. "Let's entertain those folks and turn it into a festival celebrating that." The board bought it, and the event "put us back on everybody's radar, which is exactly what we needed at the time. It was the team building effort."

That one event morphed into the signature 'Jeff Curtis happening,' the Trashy Ribs and Blues Festival. Never mind that nobody else would have thought to marry a community litter clean up effort with a blues fest here in the heart of bluegrass country. But Jeff's larger-than-life style is hard to resist. The poet in him envisions something like that; the motorcycle in him pushes it through.

What's next? Expanding the Trashy Ribs event to an all-day blues fest is on his radar. How about a Grow Local-Eat Local statewide event slated for July of 2012 in partnership with *Edible* magazine? That could bring between 10,000 and 20,000 visitors to Orange. "The town loves festivals," he says enthusiastically. "The town loves that chance to come together and do something as a group."

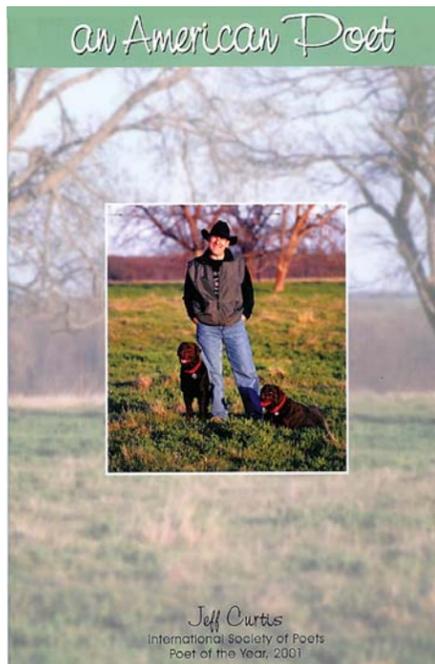
Where's Jeff's motorcycle heading next? Not anywhere away from here. "This is home," he says emphatically. He lives just outside Gordonsville with his beloved chickens and his garden. For fun, he hikes, hunts and tries to get some fishing in. And on

life." He applied for the executive director's position with the ODA. That was two and a half years ago.

At that point ODA was hanging on mostly because of Page Sullenberger, who he reverently refers to as "the Godmother of Orange." He envisioned a two-fold task: "to reinvent

Sundays he sings and plays harmonica in the men's choir at Shady Grove Baptist Church, where he is pretty much the only white face in the congregation. They good naturedly kid him. "I'm known as the white candle on the chocolate cake," he asides, adding, "I really thank that church for the way they embraced me."

And he thanks ODA for embracing him too. "I have a board that just grasps ideas. They are very energizing...I love the ODA...I believe in Orange. I believe in the ODA, and I owe it to the people who live here, to the people who have hired me, to the town that's supporting us to help lead, to help follow, or get out of the way, because we've got things to do," he says, quoting Ted Turner's famous line. "Time is short. Time is short for all of us. The clock is ticking. And I believe this is



Jeff Curtis won American Poet of the Year from the International Society of Poets, which published this booklet of his work. Since then, he has self published another book of his poetry entitled "A Place to Sit."

going to be a different town in two years."

Jeff Curtis the poet likens the ODA to riding a motorcycle. "You certainly don't want to look backwards where you've been. You can't look where you are because it's changing by the second. You gotta keep your focus straight ahead. And that's how you get to where you're going."

## Orange Downtown Alliance— “How You Get to Where You're Going”

"I think that growth is coming. I think that residential growth is coming, whether we like it or are prepared for it or not." Jeff Curtis is sitting in his second-story Main Street office. A fan out in the hall, its cord stretched tight to the lone outlet, pushes air through the door in a feeble attempt to help out the weary air conditioning on this blistering hot summer day. The phone rings.

Jeff answers and talks to 'Ginger' about her and her sister's plans to start Hamilton's "a nice day spa here in downtown." The grand opening is happening too close to the Blues Festival for him to participate, "but I'll do a nice follow up. I'll get them in our newsletter. I'll do a separate constant contact blast for them, welcoming them. I'll do my Jeff thing." He sets up a lunch date with the ladies. "We'll get three or four good paragraphs. We'll go down to the shop and take photographs, and you'll be off and running," he tells her.

"New business coming to town," he explains as he hangs up the phone. "They're hearing from whomever that 'give the ODA a call; we'll help them get their business known here.' A lot of business success in Orange is going to be word of mouth and referrals and repeat business."

It's another typical day for the executive director of the Orange Downtown Alliance (ODA). Jeff Curtis will start off answering a flurry of e-mails. Then, he'll run down to the radio station to record a spot, write a press release, drop in at the visitor's bureau, interview a featured business owner for the newsletter, design a poster for the blues fest; and he'll do all that before lunch. It's never boring around here.

"Most of it is promotion," continues Curtis. "Every aspect that you can think of: promoting individuals, businesses, the ODA itself or the Town of Orange, because I've got 4,000 bosses. Really that's how I see it."

The ODA is part of the Virginia Main Street Program. It is a non-profit organization. Jeff directly answers to two bosses: his board and the Orange



The Trashy Ribs and Blues Festival enjoyed its second annual appearance a couple of weeks ago, thanks to the efforts of ODA Director, Jeff Curtis.

Town Council. "I think the town sees us as almost an ad-hoc department of the town," he notes. But sometimes, answering to two different play-callers can be a tightrope walk.

Operating on a \$110,000 budget with \$75,000 of that coming from the town's taxpayers, Jeff points out, "We're probably delivering a half a million dollars in services and publicity for the Town of Orange...I hope that didn't come off as arrogant, but I'm just so proud of that. I'm proud of the support that we've gotten."

Membership in ODA has grown from a handful to 130, and those members raised \$23,000 just this year, almost double from a year prior. And then there are the sponsors for the events like the blues fest, which breaks even at best. "We wouldn't be having a blues festival without our sponsors."

Getting to this point has not been easy. Jeff admits that his motorcycle style has ruffled some feathers. "It's very easy to upset people, and I have upset people, and you ask for forgiveness and it's part of getting things done and you move on." He points out that despite some errors in tact, "I really do operate under the golden rule. You treat people like you want to be treated."

He has encountered not what he calls 'resistance,'

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