



## BY CHARLIE KOENIG

“We’re celebrating the achievements we’ve made. We’re celebrating growing up. We’re celebrating our upcoming future,” senior class president Suki Zheng said as she welcomed those

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## SEE ARTS FESTIVAL, PAGE 9A

## BY MELANY S. ALIGHTER

Lilly Riffe

Senior Haylee Hartleben  
and Junior Hannah Symonds

After each diploma is presented, Mygas will present the Class of 2025 and students and staff will march away from the field.

## BY CHEYENNE FENTON

MELANY SLAUGHTER / GAZETTE-JOURNAL

BY MELANY SLAUGHTER

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## NESTING GROUNDS: Volunteer group works to protect Diamondback Terrapins at park

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two days and we walked him around.”

Finding the terrapins ended up being a very big deal. Chambers had explained that though there had been knowledge of the terrapins being out in the marsh, the nesting spots had been unknown. “That year, early 2023, the Friends group got a permit from DCR, the Department of Conservation and Recreation, to do citizen science,” explained Dave. He and Kerry are also Master Naturalists, so Friends of Machicomoco partnered with Master Naturalists to walk the trails and do sweeps of fields looking for terrapin nests for about a two-mile stretch.

“About mid-July they’ll come up out of the water, the females,” said Dave. “They want to find a loose soil, sunny area where they can easily dig and lay eggs. More than likely the majority of the nests get predated, meaning raccoons, possums, skunks come in and eat the eggs.”

“It’s nearly impossible to find a nonpredated nest,” he said. “So, this is what we’re looking for when we look for a predated nest ... a hole that’s been dug out and then there’s some shell fragments right next to it. That’s how we know there was a turtle nest there and somebody got into it,” explained Kerry. “It’s possible that every nest has a predator come,” said Dave. “Kerry found one predated nest last year that had one viable egg in it. It had a bunch of eggs that weren’t, so maybe the predators don’t get every single egg.”

“They lay lots of eggs, but some of them don’t get to,” he said. “So, what we would do, and what we leveraged volunteers to do, was to identify predated nests and document the GPS coordinates and the date, time, what they saw—everything.”

“The first year they were nesting from just past the

campground all the way to end in the field, along the forest trail,” Dave explained. Prior to being a state park, the land was a real estate development, so the fields that are now full of early succession trees were previously kept mowed. “Not on a weekly basis, but every couple of months they would come in and mow them because they were looking to sell them as housing plots,” he said. When the land was allotted to become a state park, it stopped being mowed. “Those were fields. We believe that they were being used by terrapins to nest and when the trees started growing, they lost the nesting grounds.”

“We were finding a lot of nests right on the mowed trails,” Dave continued. “The terrapins were coming out and they couldn’t get any further, so they were laying in a straight line. It makes it easy pickings because they [predators] just walk in a straight line and get them.”

Dave recalled one field just past the campground trailhead parking that the group had pushed to get mowed, or at least have some of the trees removed to preserve for nesting, but the state didn’t take any immediate action.

“The next year, which would have been 2024, so last year, we were more organized,” Dave said. “They wanted more data,” Kerry explained. For 2024, there were 31 volunteers that worked together to perform a more comprehensive survey, added Dave.

On a map of collected data from last summer, Kerry gestured towards 18 yellow and over 100 green pin markers spanning from Trailhead Parking to the Interpretive Area. “Any yellow pin was a turtle and the green pins were all the nests that we found,” explained Kerry.

Dave motioned towards the marsh area below Machico-

moco. “This is Catlett Islands Research Reserve,” explained Dave. “I call it the Diamondback Terrapin Hotel and Resort because there’s acres and acres of the saltwater/brackish water marsh out here that have the food source that the terrapins like.” The terrapins eat snails found in the grasses of the marsh, crabs, worms, carrion and fish, if they can catch them.

“Last year Dr. Chambers started doing research because we identified this opportunity,” Dave said. “We’re coordinating. We call it citizen science because it’s volunteers coming in. Kerry worked with a lady who is a member of our group, but also works for them, who developed an app. Before, you took a picture with GPS coordinates, sent it in, and Kerry would compile all that. Now we have an app that uploads all the data.”

“Now we’re in the season of people going out and walking trails. We have various loops they can walk and pretty soon Kerry will be coordinating sweeps,” said Dave. “Jim McGinnis came out here, walking through high grass that’s tick infested, in 90-degree weather,” he added. “And people do,” said Kerry.

“We still have tons of people coming out to do it because they know that we’re gathering data that will help inform the state on what to do,” explained Dave. “So, last year this data helped get the state to realize they needed to do something and so they hired a contractor to come in. They brought in this equipment and forest mulched—basically, took all the trees to the ground in two days. Did 17 acres.”

When it comes to the mulched area, Kerry offered, “It doesn’t look pretty right now, but it’s called habitat restoration.” To keep the area accessible to the terrapins, Dave explained, the state comes in, in the winter, and will mow

the area again so there’s no loss of habitat. “That’s how the terrapins lose it, they lose habitat. They’re not losing the habitat out here [in the marsh] for their food source, their hotel and resort, but if they don’t have a place to lay their eggs, they’re not going to make more turtles.”

Kerry motioned towards two clusters of green nest indicator pins on the map, both towards the Trailhead Parking side of the park. “So, all this data that we collected, when we shared it with the state, showed them that we had a hot spot here and we had this hotspot here, which informed them,” she explained. “So, they do habitat restoration here and here. That’s why we’re continuing this research. To see that we should be doing something here and why we have a little bit,” she said, indicating two other areas with a smaller cluster of pins. “Possibly not clearing to the extent that this [larger field] was cleared,” she added. Dave agreed, explaining they are not looking to clear out everything, just the spots where the turtles tend to cluster.

“As we do this habitat restoration, as we clear some of this, it’s not only just good for the terrapins, it’s great for Bobwhite Quail and other birds—other species, and we’re also spreading seed for pollinator gardens,” said Kerry.

“In 2021, when the park opened, I was a campground host, I found a Diamondback Terrapin right on the asphalt of Site 2 and it didn’t click on me. I didn’t know what it was,” recalled Dave. “I looked it up and determined it was a Diamondback Terrapin. What I, in retrospect, realized was one year prior to that [Site 2] was a field. Because the campground had just been built, [the terrapin] was up here saying: what’s this asphalt doing here? I want to lay eggs. I can’t lay eggs on asphalt.”

Beyond riprap and habitat loss, terrapins face other challenges to their population. “They can go into crab pots,” said Dave. He explained that the turtles are curious and get inside of crab pots, especially the males as they are small, but can’t get out and end up drowning. “You can put a turtle excluder device; it just makes it like a rectangular opening. The turtles can’t, but the crabs can, go in,” said Dave. “It’s not required, but we did see last year, whoever was putting pots out here actually put them on.”

“One of the biggest issues with terrapins is what they call ghost pots, meaning pots that are lost and so that’s why there’s a big push to remove them,” Dave added. “Randy Chambers has found pots that have had like 30-40 dead turtles in them.”

Already this year, though, the couple has seen 11 adult females, and noticed they have been out about a week early compared to last year, Kerry said. Five juvenile turtles were found this year, as well, Dave added. In April, someone volunteering with the Fairfield Foundation, who had heard Kerry give talks on the terrapin census, found Dave and said they had found three baby terrapins.

“We’ve been down there, it was the morning after one of those really heavy rains, and they had an archeological pit right off the back of the house that filled up with water,” he said. “They were bucketing the water out and it was so cold that they weren’t moving, but they had three of them put to the side.” Dave had called Randy Chambers who instructed him to put them not far from the marsh and cover with leaf litter. A fourth one ended up being found in the flooded pit. “Guests found one other one,” added Kerry. “It’s wonderful because they’re smaller than a half dollar,” said Kerry.

“Diamondback Terrapins have a neat history,” explained Dave. “So, they were used by Indigenous Peoples, they were a food source. In fact, one of the tribes, the Eastern Chickahominy, I believe, have the terrapin in their logo. They used them as a food source, but they respected them, used their shells for bowls and things like that.”

“The colonists also used them. There was a terrapin soup that became the rage in the early 1900s. It’s similar to a crab bisque, they use sherry with it, and at one point people would harvest terrapins in barrels and ship them to New York. Their population was really declining. I mean, they were headed towards extinction. There’s a restaurant called Delmonico’s in New York City. It was the highest priced menu item at Delmonico’s—this Terrapin Bisque. What happened was Prohibition came around and you couldn’t have sherry to make it, and without the sherry to taste it kind of went out of favor,” he said. “It saved them,” added Kerry.

“They’ve been on a slow rebound, but you know, with the loss of habitat in the last 20 to 30 years they are on a decline right now,” Dave added. “So we’re looking at it saying: here’s a park, this will never be developed. The Catlett Islands are out there.”

“They’re in other areas in Gloucester County and Mathews, but here [Machicomoco] we’ll never have riprap go in. I think the state will come along and will allow some more clearing of the area to save for nesting grounds,” said Dave.

“Anyone can come in and walk the trails and look for turtles,” offered Kerry. “We have a protocol and explanation up in the parks,” Dave added. “Anybody can participate. It’s pretty much now through mid-July.”

## MHS GRADUATION: Mathews students begin the next chapter of their lives

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1A)

of yourself,” Zheng advised her fellow graduates. Zheng ended her comments by announcing that this year’s senior class gift will be outdoor furniture for the courtyard by the school’s gym for students and staff to enjoy.

“This accomplishment doesn’t just belong to me,” salutatorian Kat Murphy said as she began her address. “It belongs to every graduate sitting in front of me who has worked endlessly for the past four years.” Along the way, as she and her fellow graduates made their way from kindergarten to graduating seniors, “we created a community of support for each other.”

This moment, she said, also belongs to the faculty. “Teachers, administrators and staff members, we wouldn’t be here where we are without you and all of your hard work,” she said.

Murphy spoke of the support of family that she and her fellow graduates have received to get them where they are today. “Your love and support has never gone unnoticed,” she said. She singled out that of her parents: “In everything I do I strive to have your love, grace and patience that you have always showed to me and everyone else.”

“I know you will do great things,” she told her fellow graduates. “I am so proud of you ... You did it!”

“I never thought this day would arrive,” valedictorian Jaxxon McDonald told the assembled graduates and guests. “It feels like just yesterday I stepped in the halls of Mathews High School in



Vic DeForge and Riley Tripp, from left, snap one last selfie before taking part in Saturday's Mathews High School graduation ceremony.

the midst of COVID-19, full of excitement and nerves. Since then, we’ve survived a freshman year that felt like a full-time version of high school.

Sophomore year, we lost our football team and found increasingly challenging classes. Junior year was our academic gauntlet, with classes that our freshman selves would have run from on sight. And senior year was a blur of college applications, late nights, running from squirt guns and torrid senioritis.”

“Through all the chaos, the classes and the quiet moments, one thing has never changed ... The people who believed in me,” McDonald said. He singled out everyone from his parents, friends, family, teachers and delivered a short message in Spanish, which he translated: “Thank you my nanny for being my best friend for the first nine years of my life.”

Everyone has those people in their lives that got them to this point. “As your last high school assignment, thank them,” he said.

If you remember nothing else,” he said, remember this: “You only live once. Make it count. Congratulations to the Class of 2025. We did it!”

### Awards

Following the salutatorian address, and a musical perfor-

mance by the MHS band, the following senior awards were presented:

DAR Good Citizen Award: Suki Zheng  
English Award: Riley Tripp  
Journalism Award: Shane Norris and Jerrell Johnson  
The Leland B Machen Excellence in Mathematics Award: Kristin Blake  
CTE completes in Family and Consumer Sciences: Liberti Carter, Lindsay Coons, Carrie Hudgins and Alex Winters  
In Welding: Bradley Batts, Lorena Carballo, Mathew Cater, Alvin Garrett, Gavin Jarvis, Scarlet Johnson, Justin Hays, Hayden Marshall, Travis O’Leary, Mike Ray, Brady Richardson, Zeke Sawyer and Keith Taylor  
In Engineering: Jaxon McDonald and Sean Wolfe  
In Nursing: Jacklyn Ottenson, Hernan Jimenez and Emma Revell  
The Early College Scholarship Pro-



Suki Zheng's hat says “Goodbye MHS, Hello College!” The senior class president will transform from a Blue Devil into a UVA Wahoo when she attends the University of Virginia in the fall.

gram: Kristen Blake, Vic DeForge, Halley Denkinger, Grayson Griffith, Marissa Hudgins, Jaxon McDonald, Katherine Murphy, Shane Norris, Jacklyn Otterson, Kaylee Russell, John Stephen Shaw, Angel Shultz, Hannah Stillwaggon, Aundrea Wells and Suki Zheng. The MHS Band John Phillips Sousa Award: Riley Tripp.  
Female Athlete of the Year Award: Lorena Carballo.  
Male Athlete of the Year Award: Donovan Forrest.  
The final award of the program, presented by MHS principal Dr. Drew Greve, was the General Excellence Award. This award, he said, is the highest honor given at MHS. This award is given to the senior who exemplifies all of the following criteria: High academics, extracurricular involvement, leadership, citizenship and a cooperative attitude; he said. In presenting the award to Grayson Griffith.

### Scholarships

MHS recognized 49 local scholarships representing 47 different organizations and individuals associated with Mathews County, totaling \$76,700. The students also earned various other scholarships totaling over \$821,750. MHS director of counseling Katelyn Dodge presented the scholarships, along with school counselor Shannon Duff. Recipients were:  
Seth James—Bill Hudgins Student-Athlete of the Year Scholarship, \$500.  
Suki Zheng—Aloss Henderson Scholarship, \$2,000; DAR Ruth Smith Scholarship, \$1,000; Mathews Chapter of the Continental Societies Scholarship, \$1,000; Mathews Rotary Scholarship, \$2,000; Claude V. Simmons Scholarship, \$6,600; Kingston Parish Scholarship, \$3,000; Central Village Homemakers Scholarship, \$1,000; Betty and Jim Kenley Scholarship (through the Mathews Democratic Party), \$1,000; Piankank Runtan Club Scholarship, \$1,500; Virginia Owens Scholarship, \$1,000; James Memorial Scholarship (through the PEO Chapter BT), \$500; Lions Club Scholarship, \$1,000.  
Victor DeForge—Georgiana B. Laws Scholarship, \$1,000; Kingston Parish Scholarship, \$2,000; Betty and Jim Kenley Scholarship, \$500; Beldon C. Parks Scholarship, \$1,000; Pre-Students Leadership Program Scholarship, \$4,000 (payable \$1,000 annually).  
Baylee Bell—MHS Class of 1967 Scholarship, \$500.  
Hannah Stillwaggon—Servetus Scholarship (given by the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock), \$4,000; Kingston Parish Scholarship, \$2,000; Mathews Woman’s Club Scholarship, \$1,000.  
Shaleigh Conrow—Betty and Jim Kenley Scholarship, \$500; Lynchburg Excellence Scholarship (given through the University of Lynchburg), \$7,850; Hopwood Scholarship (through the University of Lynchburg), \$96,000 (payable \$24,000 for four years).  
Riley Tripp—John H. and Annie C. Miles Scholarship, \$6,000 (payable \$1,500/year for four years); Virginia Sheriff’s Institute Scholarship, \$1,000;



Grayson Griffith received the General Excellence Award, the highest honor given at MHS.

Old Dominion University Presidential Scholarship, \$28,000 (payable \$7,000 for four years).

Lorena Carballo—State of Virginia PEO Scholarship (through PEO Chapter BW, Gloucester), \$1,500; Leslie and Loretta Hinton Educational Scholarship (through RCC), \$3,000.

Shayla Kekoa—James R. Lewis Scholarship, \$250.

Katherine Murphy—PEO Chapter CA Scholarship, \$500; Gwynn’s Island and Civic League Scholarship, \$1,000; Central Village Homemakers Scholarship, \$1,000; Richard Sadler Memorial Scholarship (through the Mathews Insurance Agency), \$1,000; Lions Club Scholarship, \$1,000; Alvin Knight Memorial Scholarship, \$1,500; Thomas and Lolita Gayle Scholarship, \$14,000 (payable \$5,000 for the first year, and \$3,000 for the next three years).

Grayson Griffith—Elizabeth H. Hudgins Memorial Scholarship (given by the American Legion), \$500; Kingston Parish Scholarship, \$2,000; Lauren Owens Scholarship (given through the Mathews Insurance Agency), \$1,000; Piankank Runtan Club Scholarship, \$1,000; Captain Orrell Scholarship, \$1,000; Thomas and Lolita Gayle Scholarship, \$14,000 (payable \$5,000 for the first year, and \$3,000 for the next three years); Virginia Tech Scholarship, \$4,800; James Copeland Scholarship, \$3,000.

He is also receiving \$96,000, payable \$24,000/year for four years through the Army National Guard.

Jerrell Johnson—J. Barry and Margaret Ward Scholarship, \$750; Mathews Chapter of the Continental Societies Scholarship, \$500; Kingston Parish Scholarship, \$1,000; Scholars Award from Virginia Commonwealth University, \$2,000.  
Lindsay Coons—Bill Hudgins Student-Athlete of the Year Scholarship, \$500.

Halley Denkinger—Eli General Endowment Scholarship, \$1,000.



Lorena Carballo receives her diploma from MHS principal Dr. Drew Greve.

Marissa Hudgins—Kingston Parish Scholarship, \$2,000; Central Village Homemakers Scholarship, \$1,500; Lynne Rowe Memorial Scholarship, \$200; the Randolph Macon College Grant, \$25,600 (\$6,400 for four years); The RMC Alumni Legacy Scholarship, \$6,000 (\$1,500/year for four years); Randolph Macon College Trustees Scholarship, \$128,000 (\$32,000 for four years).  
Angel Shultz—Mathews Chapter of the Continental Societies Scholarship (offered through Rappahannock Community College), \$200; William F. and Catherine K. Owens Foundation Scholarship, \$1,000.



Shaleigh Conrow's hat is designed like the license plate in “Back to the Future,” signifying she’s “Outtime” as a high school student.