



Whiskey tastings with Scott Sklar

SKIP BROWN



## The Neatest Hour

Over the years, Ashton Heights resident **Scott Sklar** has built up an impressively large collection of whiskeys, including some choice, 20-year-old single-malt Scotches. An adjunct professor at George Washington University (where he teaches two interdisciplinary courses on sustainable energy) and founder of The Stella Group, a clean energy consultancy, Sklar has traveled the world, sampling all manner of his favorite brown liquor. Before Covid, he and several neighborhood friends often gathered for “bourbon club,” in which each person would bring a bottle and share a few drams.

When the pandemic began, the gregarious Sklar saw an opportunity to widen his circle—by more than six feet. He purchased several large buckets from Cherrydale Hardware, which he flipped into seats; invested in some plastic shot glasses; and set up a makeshift bar outside his solar home on North Ivy Street, where he’s lived for 37 years.

Intrigued, people started coming by for free whiskey happy hours, which Sklar hosts most weekdays—barring wind or rain—for anyone 21 or older who wishes to partake. He says he’s welcomed lawyers, construction workers, teachers, taxicab drivers, retirees, bartenders, government contractors and many others to join him and his dog, Elvis, on his front lawn.

“These people are from all different backgrounds and all different places and they want the same thing,” Sklar says. “They want camaraderie and they want it in a safe way.” Plus, a little nip to warm the insides.



## Yards and Yards

Kristen Johnson (in the pink mask) at a free yard sale event

Last August, Lauren Kneussle started an initiative called the Drew Distribution—a free, biweekly “yard sale” during which families near Arlington’s Charles Drew Community Center could peruse donated offerings (clothing, toys, household supplies) and take whatever they needed. She recognized that some of her neighbors were cleaning out their closets while others were struggling through financial hardship. Soon she was joined by fellow organizer Alex Russell.

Less than 2 miles away and a month later, Kristen Johnson hosted the very first Fairlington Women’s and Kids’ Free Clothing Swap, after hearing a few neighborhood moms expressing concerns about where to find seasonal attire during the pandemic. The swap was a success, and concluded with three carloads of unclaimed items—which Johnson and her friend Heather Lilly promptly drove over to contribute to a Drew Distribution that was underway.

What they saw was sobering. “I was blown away by how incredible it was and how much need there is in our community,” Johnson recalls. “I was shocked to see that all of the clothing, diapers, toiletries and household items were all scooped up within a matter of minutes. I got sucked in.”

Johnson and Lilly offered to lead the next Drew Distribution. Before long, the effort was renamed the **Green Valley FREE Community Yard Sale** and grew exponentially. As word got around, donations continued to pour in, taking over Johnson’s Fairlington home—so much so that neighbors chipped in to fund a storage shed next to her house. By the end of last fall, the yard sale was serving 200 to 300 families every other week.

The organizers have been nimble in responding to community needs. When one mother cried after arriving late to an event, only to find all of the diapers gone, Johnson posted a notice on Facebook. Within two days, she’d raised almost \$1,000 for diapers.

Cold temperatures and an uptick in Covid cases put the yard sales on pause over the winter, but they started back up in April and are now offered monthly.





Eva Gary

## A Magical Gap Year

Eva Gary was a sophomore in the thick of musical theater rehearsals at Yorktown High School when she decided to become a princess.

Hearing about Ever Laughter, a small outfit that trained young actors to portray fictional characters for kids' parties, she signed on and fell in love with delivering magic to children. The company disbanded in early 2020, just as Gary was immersed in college applications her senior year. She thought her princess days were over.

Then the pandemic arrived, and Gary agreed to do one last princess gig—helping a similar company stage a socially distanced mermaid party. Remembering how much she loved seeing kids' faces light up (and not particularly keen on starting college during Covid), she decided to take a gap year.

Soon, she had formed her own party business, **Princess Wish Parties**, offering a suite of services that are mindful of the times. Among them: video cameos (starting at \$15), video calls (starting at \$40) and socially distanced, in-person

gatherings (starting at \$90). The company offers bookings with more than a dozen characters, including princesses, pop stars and superheroes who engage kids in sing-alongs, arts and crafts, and games like charades.

Gary, 19, now spends hours crafting accessories, styling wigs and browsing the internet for the nicest (affordable) gowns. Characters wear masks—because “masks are very popular in our kingdom,” she says—and are accompanied by an assistant who drives, coordinates on-site logistics and takes photos.

For kids feeling the strain of isolation, the fantastic sightings have helped to keep the magic alive. Gary recounts one recent birthday party for a local elementary schooler: “The girls were screaming when [the princesses] walked up, and one of them said, ‘You know, I used to not know if the princesses were real, but now I *know* they’re real.’”

In the last year, Princess Wish Parties has had about 70 bookings in the D.C. area. Gary heads to college this fall, but it seems the company will still live happily ever after. She plans to manage the business from the Shenandoah Conservatory at Shenandoah University in Winchester. [princesswishparties.com](http://princesswishparties.com)



Princess actors Hannah Smith, Stella Bunch, Kathryn Wevley, Carrie Walker, Anna Freeman and Tori Miller





From left: Book lovers Sam Chen and Brooks Deal with Jennifer Sauter-Price

## Pages on the Bus

Jennifer Sauter-Price spent the latter half of 2020 driving around in a big purple bus, delivering books to Arlington kids. Known as the “Pajama Mama”—a nod to the pj’s she often wears while making rounds—the founder of **Read Early and Daily (READ)** is on a mission to spread the joy of reading to all.

An Arlington mom who previously worked part-time for The Reading Connection (a local nonprofit that closed in 2017), Sauter-Price founded READ in 2018, using a buy-a-book/give-a-book business

model. Families can buy children’s books from the nonprofit’s website, and those purchases, in turn, fund donations. READ works with partners such as the Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing (APAH) and Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) to get free books into the hands of kids who are eligible for free or reduced lunches.

In 2019, Sauter-Price applied for and won a \$50,000 grant from the Gannett Foundation to fund a mobile bookstore. She tracked down a used school bus in South Carolina,

equipped with an operational wheelchair lift, and commissioned local artist Rodrigo Pradel to paint a colorful mural on its side.

The bus was finally ready to hit the road when the pandemic arrived. It sat parked in front of Sauter-Price’s Arlington Forest home until June of 2020, when she started using it for contactless deliveries. By the end of the year, she had made 659 book bus deliveries to more than 1,900 children, gifting nearly 5,500 books to low-income kids.

[readearlyanddaily.org](http://readearlyanddaily.org)