



## To Beirut, With Love

After a deadly explosion rocked Beirut in August, the owners of **Lebanese Taverna** needed a day to feel what they felt—fear, sadness, shock—and to get in touch with family members in the capital city, who thankfully were not physically harmed.

The next day, the local restaurateurs set up a GoFundMe page that within days raised \$30,000 for Red Cross humanitarian aid in their native land. They also committed to donating \$1 of every hummus order to relief efforts in Lebanon orchestrated by chef José Andrés' World Central Kitchen. By the end of August, the restaurant (which has 13 eateries and markets in Virginia, D.C. and Maryland) had raised and contributed more than \$100,000.

Co-owner Dany Abi-Najm, who runs the family business with his four siblings, traveled to Beirut with Andrés to deliver supplies and food to those displaced by the explosion.

His sister, Grace Abi-Najm Shea, describes the response as a full-circle moment for their family, which fled Lebanon in 1976 and settled in Arlington. Three years later, her parents opened the first Lebanese Taverna in Westover. Shea says she and her family have always seen themselves as ambassadors of Lebanon's culture and food.

"It makes me even more grateful for my dad, who thought to bring us here for a better life because of the instability [in Lebanon]," Shea says. "We came here with nothing and we built something. Now we're very, very thankful for all the success we've had."

And they are giving back. [lebanesetaverna.com](http://lebanesetaverna.com)



## A Fruitful Venture

Fresh fruits and vegetables can be hard to come by in neighborhoods without access to grocery stores, often referred to as "food deserts." That's partly what prompted South Block founder Amir Mostafavi last fall to create **Fruitful Planet**, a nonprofit that provides fresh produce to underprivileged communities. The spinoff was, shall we say, low-hanging fruit for the entrepreneur, whose cold-pressed juice bars (now numbering 10 in Virginia and the District) already had the necessary supply channels set up.

Fruitful Planet started distributing produce last winter. When the coronavirus arrived in the D.C. area, food insecurity spiked and demand for the nonprofit's offerings accelerated. As of Sept. 1, the organization had contributed nearly 33,000 pounds of fresh fruits and veggies to food distribution efforts run by Arlington Public Schools, the Arlington Food Assistance Center and DC Central Kitchen, among others.

Customers who frequent South Block are part of the equation. The juice bar's "Juice It Forward" campaign contributes 5% of all juice sales to Fruitful Planet. By year's end, Mostafavi estimates, Fruitful Planet will have raised roughly \$100,000 (via juice sales, local grants and direct donations) in support of its vitamin-packed mission. [fruitfulplanet.org](http://fruitfulplanet.org)





Fitness trainer Eric Bolden at Black Lives Matter Plaza in D.C.

## Racing Against Racism

George Floyd's murder in late May sparked nationwide protests against systemic racism and police brutality. It also gave rise to a fitness initiative called **Run Against Racism**, in which coaches and members of MADabolic, a fitness studio with franchise locations in Clarendon and D.C., trained for a virtual half marathon and had others pledge money for their total miles run.

During the lead-up to the August race, MADabolic Arlington general manager Eric Bolden and

his team led weekly conditioning sessions, along with pre-workout group discussions about racial injustice (topics included redlining and mass incarceration) to get participants thinking about why they were running.

"We wanted to use what we know best—which is health and wellness—to create a vehicle to get people engaged," Bolden says.

Within three months, the group secured more than \$46,000 in pledges from 576 donors—more

than doubling its initial fundraising goal of \$20,000. In August, 75 runners completed their half marathons. One MADabolic coach, Tricia Thompson, ran 13.1 miles every day of race week, logging more than 90 miles.

Proceeds from the fundraiser were evenly distributed among Black Lives Matter, the American Civil Liberties Union, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America and the Equal Justice Initiative. [madabolic.com](http://madabolic.com)



## Bowed Over

**Andrew Savoia** started playing the cello at age 9. This summer, the 24-year-old Ballston resident took social media by storm, posting TikTok videos of himself (@savoiboi) performing instrumental covers of modern pop songs. His first few viral videos included covers of “Come Get Her” by the hip-hop duo Rae Sremmurd, “Roses” by rapper SAINt JHN and “Blinding Lights” by The Weeknd.

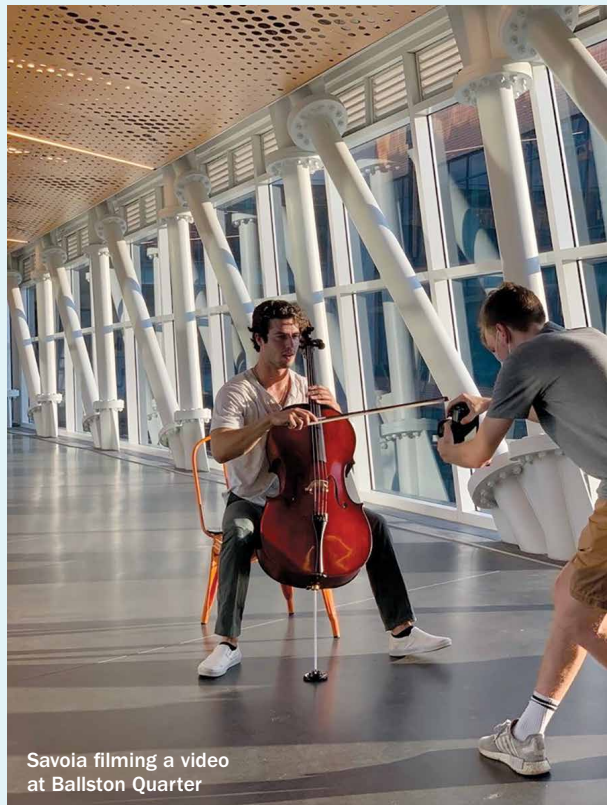
Savoia says he chooses songs with melodies he likes and then determines the cello notes by ear, using his instrument to mimic the human voice. “It’s like my way of singing,” he explains. “I feel like I can create my own voice through the instrument.”

One of his earlier TikTok debuts—a rendition of “Supalonely” by Benee—was filmed on the rooftop of an Arlington condo building with views of the Washington Monument in the distance.

D.C.’s Navy Yard and Virginia Tech (his alma



Local cellist  
Andrew Savoia



Savoia filming a video  
at Ballston Quarter

mater) have served as backdrops for other short takes.

TikTok, he says, has allowed him to share his passion for classical music with other young artists—some of whom have sought him out to collaborate on side-by-side videos with the added elements of piano, violin and dance.

“For me, playing the cello is just about having fun and I want people to have fun,” says the musician who, by day, works as a medical scribe for OrthoVirginia. (He is also considering medical school.)

Once large gatherings are deemed safe, Savoia hopes to perform a live outdoor concert. But for now, he’s sticking with recorded music for people to enjoy during the pandemic.

“I think music has a way of bringing people together,” he says, “and it’s been inspiring to see people come together, even though we’re separated right now.” ■