

The Betsie Current

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Empathy Through Art

Artist, therapist, and philosopher

By Jordan Bates

Current Editor

Upon first meeting Chris Bigelow, he might not leave a big impression. He's unassuming, polite, humble. He listens to you more than he speaks of himself. He's the kind of guy you could sit and chat with and realize an hour later that you know very little about him. If asked to tell you something about himself, Bigelow might answer with what he does for a living: he's a counselor. Or he might answer with what he likes to do in his free time: he likes to paint. Or he might even tell you a story about one of his favorite things in the world: his dog, Blue.

But what he won't tell you — at least, not at first — is that he spent a year driving around the country in a Model A replica. Or that he spent a year working for a shoe maker constructing high-quality, artisan shoes by



Chris Bigelow at his home on the Betsie River. Photo by Aubrey Ann Parker.

hand. Bigelow even spent one long summer in a cabin in the woods of Northern Michigan, where he lived off the land by fishing, hunting, and painting. (The body needs more than just food and water for subsistence, after all.)

Since an early age, Bigelow says he had to paint.

"It builds up in you. You just have to do it," says Bigelow, whose grandmother — who fled Burma (Myanmar) — was an impressionist-style landscape painter.

And Bigelow has depth: artsy, nerdy, commercial. You can see it in his paintings and murals.

His nerdy "Superman" painting features Friedrich Nietzsche wearing Clark Kent's alter ego beneath his dress coat.

His 20-by-15 foot mural of the Frankfort arch and beach on the wall of Bayside Printing

Please see Super Nietzsche on page 5

41 Lakes and Counting

Beau Vallance's quirky mental lists

From Staff Reports

Lifelong Benzie summer resident Beau Vallance, 68, keeps some quirky mental lists — the states that her cats have visited (eight), great inventions (cheese), things not yet perfected (bike racks). A few years ago, she counted up her life list of lakes that she has kayaked since acquiring her own boat, an anniversary gift from her husband, not long before. At that point, it was about 10, including many times Crystal from her family's beach and the unavoidable Loon on the Lower Platte River.

Then, curious about some public-access points that she'd noticed, Vallance added a few more lakes, including Otter, Benzie's Bass (one of many Basses in Northern Michigan),



Beau Vallance, 68, kayaks on a glassy Lake Michigan. Courtesy photo.

both Plattes, others beyond our borders (Bear, Portage, Arcadia, the Glens, Empire's South Bar). Then she discovered Jim Stamm's *A Guide to Benzie County Michigan Rivers, Lakes, and Creeks*.

"It changed my summers!" she says, with its "cool information, such as lake size in acres, depth, shoreline length, connecting creeks, and how to get there."

Stamm's book helped Vallance to get more systematic in her lake quest. And by the end of summer 2013, she'd kayaked 31 lakes, mostly in Benzie County. Vallance has now explored almost all of the 32 Benzie lakes that are listed in the book. (Lacking a four-wheel-drive vehicle, she admits there are a few that she may never visit.) Lately, Vallance has been

Please see Kayaking on page 3

Oldies and Goodies Part II: Frankfort & Elberta

Antique trail in Benzie County

By Susan Koenig

Current Contributor

Last edition, we visited antique shops in Beulah and Benzonia. Now our tour continues west toward the lakeshore, as we grace Frankfort and Elberta.

Our first stop is 735 Main Street, Frankfort, across from the park, overlooking Betsie Bay to E-'klek-tik-a, an aptly named store owned for 18 years by Mary Deur and Randy Gideon. As Mary says, "We have the best spot in Frankfort and we'll never lose the view." This is a vintage and collectibles shop, but one that also provides services, notably appraisals and estate sales as well as eBay commerce. With some antiques and original paintings, they specialize in vintage clothing and jewelry (five cases), but have a diverse inventory; kewpies and skis, stools and linens, Halloween decor



A mannequin shopper at E-'klek-tik-a in Frankfort. Photo by Aubrey Ann Parker.

and furniture too. Sometimes a truck will pull up front and unload. "Take everything," they say, and Mary and Randy do just that.

Raised in Zeeland, Mich., Mary has been in the business for 40 years. Her dad used to take her to auctions, and at five years old she bid on and acquired her first painting. "Sold to that little girl," said the auctioneer, "for one dollar."

E-'klek-tik-a is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday-Saturday and 11-2 on Sundays, and closes in mid-October when the couple heads to Florida where they search, browse and shop




An array of vintage and antiques glass at E-'klek-tik-a. Photo by Aubrey Ann Parker.

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Next we drive north on M-22 for the short ride to Crystal Gardens. Tucked among the

Please see Antiques on page 2

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Antiques

Continued from page 1

greenhouses and outbuildings, you will find the **Barn Swallow Antique and Gift Shop**, a charming two-story barnlike building that houses a plethora of, according to owner Kelly Putney, “a unique blend of old and new.” Like a mid-Eastern bazaar, the space is separated



The Barn Swallow at Crystal Gardens. Photo by Susan Koenig.

into nooks with colorful novelties hanging on the walls and from the ceiling. The Putney family conceived of Crystal Gardens 38 years ago, and built the Barn Swallow in 2001. Over 60 percent of the inventory is antiques, and 25 percent of these are on consignment. Kelly showed me her dad’s charming collection of “flowerfrogs” — ceramic plant holders depicting different creatures in varying sizes dating from the early 20th century.

There are gifts, conversation pieces, paintings, toys, furniture and more. Kelly says they started the vintage clothing three years ago, and it’s been “really fun.” Her daughter Lauren, 18 and also born and bred in Benzie County (and to the business), agrees.

The Barn Swallow is open every day from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. until they close at the end of October.

The grand finale of your antique exploration will be in Elberta, to a “step back in time to Victorian Splendor and a porch-sitting tradition since 1890.” This is the slogan of Jan and Bill Buck’s imposing **LaRue House B&B** at 809 Frankfort Avenue, but it is only a hint of the treasures you will find there and at the couple’s home next door, where they live amidst “quality antiques from around the world.”

Jan LaRue Buck has a long history in Benzie County. Her great-grandparents were Dr. and Mrs. (“Nurse Ellen”) Frank J. LaRue who established the county’s first hospital located in the present Bed and Breakfast. Jan has a “museum” of antique medical supplies and equipment from that time, including a photo of her father and other students, in hats and coats, performing an autopsy outside at the University of Virginia (taken in 1895).

The Baver farm, where Jan was raised, belonged to her great-grandparents in 1888. Jan’s real interest in antiques, however, began as a college student during her summers working at Chimney Corners under the tutelage of

Mollie Rogers. She loved how Mollie named all the guest tables, and the old furniture the Rogers chose to array the resort. Her first purchase was an 1885 high chair for which she paid \$10 at a rummage sale.

Jan met her future husband Bill, a naval officer who originated from a well-established Iowan family, in San Diego. The two recognized their mutual interest in antiques and history, and vowed to realize their collective dreams — to travel and to buy and decorate an old house. (Houses, as it happened, and lots

of decorating.) They bought an 1803 home in Saratoga, NY. Later they lived in a Belle Epoque house in Auteuil (Paris), ultimately settling at their present location, the house in which Jan was born. Then they bought the house next door. In the meantime, they travelled the world, from France, to Morocco, Taiwan, Nigeria, the United Arab Emirates and Switzerland, to name a few of the many countries they have called home. They both speak several languages.

While you are chatting with this friendly and interesting duo, you might see: a Koran holder and a 360 million year old fossil (Morocco); bronzes from Benin; an 18th century Beijing cabinet constructed with pegs (no nails); antique books; an ancient Indonesian instrument called a gamolin (resembling a xylophone) or a pump organ, circa 1870. Moreover, you might be sitting on a Victorian Lady or Gentleman’s chair, or trodding upon the Bucks’ fabulous Persian and oriental carpets in every room while studying dazzling Arana Melendez paintings.

The Bucks won’t bat an eye, because they live surrounded by this lifetime accumulation of beautiful relics. They have a story for every item, and you will be amazed to hear extraordinary tales, not only of exotic locales, but also of right here in Benzie County, or of Bill’s early 19th century family history in Iowa.

Happy hunting! If all this isn’t enough for you, remember to visit **Jerry’s Resale and Good Stuff** for an assortment of items at great prices. They are located on US 31 in South Benzonia, just north of M-115 and right across the highway from each other.

You can email the Bucks at crystalpal153@msn.com or call 231-352-7893. Their home is at 809 Frankfort Avenue in Elberta, next door to the LaRue house at #855.

B Moving

Benzie Bus gets new logo

From Staff Reports

Benzie Bus enters its eighth year with an exciting new look: a motion ‘B’ logo. Surveys of residents suggested that the original sun-set logo wasn’t a clear image of community transportation that is available for everyone: students, visitors, workers, and seniors.

“The new logo is more edgy, and the ‘B’ denotes bus for our bus stops, so we think it’s a better fit,” states Bill Kennis, executive director.

Residents in Benzonia, Beulah, Frankfort, Honor, Lake Ann, and Thompsonville will soon see new bus-stop signs bearing the ‘B’ logo. Also underway are plans for a new website that incorporates QR codes — those funky barcode-like boxes which allow smart-phone users to scan and view specific information on their mobile devices.

Customers want information about specific routes, and these new programs keep it simple and more user-friendly. Since the days of talking directly to dispatchers are being replaced with advanced texting, customers can already text “Benziebus” to 55000, an active system that allows riders to book rides directly. This is just one way that Benzie Bus is hoping to continue to lead the industry in technology, according to Kennis.

One of the board’s goals is to grow ridership and to design services that appeal to everyone. Currently, more than 3,500 Benzie residents commute outside the county daily.

“If we can help folks on their long commute — even a couple of times monthly — we can reduce traffic, fuel consumption, and pollution,” Kennis says. For example, the T.C. Express route currently stops directly at Munson and Meijer, where immediate connections to other T.C. locations can be made for a \$0.75 transfer fee (via BATA Bus).

In addition, about 1,300 residents commute daily into Benzie County to major employers like Crystal Mountain, Magna International, and Graceland Fruit, which are hoping for Benzie Bus to continue better cost-effective options for their employees.

These and other survey results will be discussed on September 24th during the County Transit Summit, to be held at the Government Center at 8 a.m. as part of the Benzie Bus County-Wide Needs Assessment Plan.

Finally, the new ‘B’ look transcends even the route cards, specifically designed for geographic areas, like the QR-coded website. Thompsonville, Honor, Frankfort, Beulah, and Lake Ann have regional times for Benzie Bus services, such as: Flex-Routes, T.C. Express, and Dial-a-ride. The new cards simplify the information by segregating routes by locations.

For more information about the September 24 Transit Summit, contact Karin Miner at 231-325-3000.



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Kayaking

Continued from page 1

in touch with Stamm, who has been great with extra tips and clues and Google Maps for finding elusive unmarked access roads (such as to Sanford and its connecting Mud). By the end of this summer, shooting for 40 lakes, she had reached 41! Milestone!

On these jaunts, Vallance straps her 12-foot, lime green kayak into her tiny Honda and heads out to get to know a lake or two before noon. She carries a net for snaring trash (“What is it about Bud Light drinkers?” she asks herself). She prefers the smaller lakes, ones that she can kayak around and back again — Crystal, though gorgeous, is just “too big” for this approach. She loves outrageously small lakes with few or no cottages, such as Deer and Cook (4 acres!), Mary’s (7), Round (15), Benzie’s Bass (20), Herendeene and its connecting Fuller. Otter, Stevens, Brooks, Turtle, and others offer an interesting mix of wild shoreline and funky cottages.

Any big surprises? Vallance describes a day last summer when she headed to Grand Traverse County’s Silver Lake to explore its sandy islands.

“It was like a 1950s cartoon of Vacationland; speedboats in all directions. I almost needed turn signals,” she says. “I gave up after 10 minutes.” Vallance nearly didn’t count it but decided she’d earned it for the shock value. She left Silver Lake and headed to the Bass Lake, just west of it. She felt it was “enchanted, filled with tall-tree islands, and a gentle rain just starting.” She now sees that the islands— a total surprise to her — are visible in Google Maps and Google Earth, as are the ones in Pearl Lake, this year’s treasure.

Adventures? “Definitely my Mary’s Lake trip! This tiny beautiful lake has a black muck bottom. The parking lot is hidden off Reynolds Road, and no one knew where I was. I’d launched OK, paddled around several times and, finally getting out, was suddenly hip-deep in mud, hanging onto a broken dock, not quite panicked. Out of the woods, in the nick of time, appeared two fishermen, who seemed amazed to see a small grey-haired

woman mired in mud. They pulled me out, declared me ‘pretty spry’ and hauled my kayak to my car. And they liked my bumper stickers, which included my so-relevant favorite, ‘We All Live Downstream’ — a great outcome to a definitely iffy moment.”

Any lakes she would not recommend? “Mud Lake connecting to the Lower Platte River is a weird one. It’s pretty to look at but tricky to kayak even if the creek is passable — a couple of inches of water and then deep black mud. Not a good place to drop your camera. Jim has an amusing description of it in his book; my first note to him was to say I agreed. But I know people who love it.”

Vallance has some favorite repeat rides. She does the Lower Platte about once a week early in the morning before the flotillas get on the water. Cruising the shores of Benzie’s Long Lake is great, she says — it’s handy and a good solid hour of paddling; a nice mix of woody shores and cottages. She discovered last year that crossing Crystal on a calm day takes exactly half an hour, so it’s a good round trip, with the old boathouse foundations on the south shore as a marker.

She especially likes the ride from the south shore of Little Platte Lake at Spruce Road, down

Deadstream (portaging over the road), into the Upper Platte River to Big Platte Lake — where twice she’s found notes in bottles. She thought she’d invented that route, but it’s in Stamm’s book, along with another recent find: Upper Herring’s beautiful, slow, meandering outlet creek, navigable to M-22. (Stamm confirms that you can’t get all the way to Lower Herring.)

Vallance doesn’t kayak every day; often uses her repeat routes, adding new lakes to her list only occasionally. But kayaking is what she misses when she returns to real life in September. The lake near her home in Indiana is as big as Crystal (about 10,000 acres), but it’s a muddy reservoir. “Not at all the same!” In real life, she’s a retired museum-studies professor, a hospice volunteer, and a tour guide who introduces astonished visitors to tigers and lions at the Exotic Feline Rescue Center. None of these requires a boat, so she leaves her kayak in Benzie.

A friend suggested a new goal for Vallance and the lime green kayak: 50 by 70. Maybe that can happen in 2015 — she should be able to reach nine more lakes next summer, and she’ll still be only 69 — plenty of time!

Pick up your copy of Jim Stamm’s *A Guide to Benzie County Michigan Rivers, Lakes, and Creeks* at The Bookstore in Frankfort.



Beau Vallance’s lime green kayak. Courtesy photo.

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CALENDAR OF EVENTS

CONSTANTLY FLOWING

Mondays

Circle Time for infants and toddlers at the Benzie Shores District Library at 630 Main Street in Frankfort. There will be fun rhyming and moving with Miss Char, as well as a focus on repetition. Each week, children build their repertoire of rhymes, both old and new. Every Monday in August from 10-11am.

Grow Benzie Farmers’ Market, 5885 Frankfort Highway (M-115), Benzonia. 3-7pm.

Open sewing studio at Grow Benzie. 6-9pm.

Tuesdays

Benzie Shores District Library offers assistance with technology. Learn how to download ebooks, audiobooks, and magazines to your personal devices. 10am-12pm.

Pick-up soccer for all skill levels at the fields behind Watson car dealership in Benzonia. 7pm.

Dance Benzie: Improvisational partner dancing at the Mills Community House in

Benzonia. Free, donations welcome. 8-10pm.

Thursdays

Elberta Farmers’ Market at the Elberta Pavilion Park. 8am-12:30pm.

Story hour with Miss Julie at Benzie Shores District Library in Frankfort. 10-11am.

Open Mic Night at The Cabbage Shed in Elberta. 231-352-9843. 8pm.

Steve Fernand will be singing songs from the last century on Thursdays and Saturdays from 6-9pm throughout the summer at the Cold Creek Inn in Beulah.

Saturdays

Frankfort Farmers’ Market at Open Space Park on Main Street, between 7th & 9th streets, along the beautiful Waterfront. 9am-1pm.

Join a Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore ranger for a different walk or talk or hike every Saturday — there’s always something happening at 1pm. To find out what’s happening, visit <http://goo.gl/aLUdAG> or call 231-326-5134 for details.

ON THE DOCK

Friday, September 12

Friday night potluck, jam session, and dancing at the Platte River Association Hall at 12990 Honor Highway, just to the east of Honor. Call Howard or Mabel Foust at 231-325-3252 or 231-651-9764 or Oscar Jaquish 231-275-7381 for more information. Public welcome. 5-9pm.

Fri-Sat, September 12-13

Glass-blowing demonstration with Albert Young at Sleeping Bear Gallery, 10085 W. Front Street in Empire. Call 231-326-2278 or visit <http://bit.ly/1tyrgEI> for more information.

Saturday, September 13

Fall Birding at Arcadia Dunes Grassland Preserve on Keillor Road with the Benzie Audubon Club. Brian Allen will lead us on a birding trip to look for migrating sparrows, confusing fall warblers, and possible rarities of grassland birds & migrants. All field trips and programs are open to the public without charge; everyone is welcome! Call 231-871-0503 or 231-723-7956 or visit benzieaudubon.org for more information. 8am.

Saturday, September 15

Movie Mondays @Darcy Library: Any Day Now [R]. IMDB: In the 1970s, a gay couple fights a biased legal system to keep custody of the abandoned mentally handicapped teenager that comes to live under their roof.

Tuesday, September 16

The Benzie Conservation District will be taking local youth out in canoes to learn about “leave no trace” and about the salmon. Trips will be on the Platte River, starting at Riverside Canoes. This event is for local youth in local schools. Call 231-882-4391 or visit www.benziecd.org for more information.

Thursday, September 18

Benzie County Chamber of Commerce’s September Business After Hours. 5-7pm at Take Action Photo Studio, M115, Frankfort. Hors-d’oeuvres, 50/50 Raffle, Door Prizes, \$ Member Raffle.

Saturday, September 20

Noon Birding by Bike on the BVT. Benzie Audubon Club - Bryce and Paula Dreeszen (275-7199) will lead a leisurely paced bike ride for 10-15 miles along the BVT. Along the way we will be looking for bluebirds and inspecting and cleaning out bluebird trail birdhouses. Meet at the BVT Trailhead in Beulah. All field trips and programs are open to the public without charge; everyone is welcome! 871-0503 benzieaudubon.org 10am.

Wednesday, September 24

Plant it Wild - “Wild Food Foraging & Feast.” Celebrate the end of the summer season with a potluck dinner and brief annual meeting. Bring a dish to share, place settings, family and friends. 7:15 p.m. — Kirk Waterstripe, NMC Science Lab Manager and Plant Biology adjunct professor, will explain that there really IS such a thing as a “free lunch. Learn to identify edible wild plants and how to forage like our ancestors. Foraged foods will be available for tasting. All Programs and Field Trips are free and open to the public. Programs are held at Trinity Lutheran Church, 955 James St. Contact Lynise Hensel (231)889- 7020. 6:30 pm.

Monday, September 29

Movie Mondays @Darcy Library: Dirty Wars [NR]. IMDB: Investigative journalist Jeremy Scahill is pulled into an unexpected journey as he chases down the hidden truth behind America’s expanding covert wars.

Tuesday, September 30

Benzie Shores District Library: Spanish Conversation Group. 7 pm.

Mon - Sat, October 6 - 11

The new Frankfort Craft Beer Week will be held in Frankfort. The event bridges between two Fall Festival Weekends in Benzie County when there will be additional activities (etc.) Among the highlights during Frankfort Beer Week include beer dinners at Frankfort restaurants, beer tastings, special brews at StormCloud Brewing Company, a beer movie at The Garden Theater, and fun foods made with beer such as ice cream and baked goods. Special lodging packages are available at visitbenzie.com. Info: stormcloudbrewing.com.

Saturday, October 11

Frankfort Fall Festival. Fall Festival Parade features The Scottville Clown Band and entertaining Mutt March, GIANT pumpkins and local built floats. Starting at noon, the Masters of Mayhem will be back with their incredible metal trebuchet to launch pumpkins into Betsie Bay, Face Painting, Free Wagon Rides through downtown Frankfort. Pie Eating Contest (Register at 1:00pm – contest begins at 1:30pm) 231-352-7251. 11am -5pm.

Thurs - Sun, October 16 – 19

Frankfort Film Festival. The Garden Theater in Frankfort is the place to be on the third weekend of October to experience the Frankfort Film Festival. This film-lovers festival features leading edge independent films Visits by film directors and screenwriters and other surprises. For more information see www.frankfortgardenheater.com or call 231-352-7561.

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- Across
- Engraves
 - There are often 12 of them
 - Evil spirits
 - Many, many
 - “My precious” speaker
 - Embellished
 - German supermarket chain
 - Get from here to there on the Benzie _____
 - Where Canadians watch sports
 - Land’s _____
 - Cabrera’s bag
 - Rocker Stewart
 - Unique example?
 - “Island” to Pierre
 - Eggs
 - Eight, to a Roman (occasionally)
 - They who take out loans
 - After taxes
 - English county
 - 1 atm, 0° C
 - Used in tandem with HTML
 - It keeps the bugs away
 - Hank, for one
 - Most dangerous animals in Africa
 - Cal Ripkin Jr. was one
 - Monica Lewinski made this position famous
 - Complete ranges or extents
 - R.E.M. hit
 - Paralympic hockey equipment

- Down
- Try one of these over-easy at the Lighthouse Café
 - Informal conjunction
 - These can be used to wash berries
 - Former Red Wing Brett
 - Evades
 - Gilligan’s ship
 - Canine McGruff’s nephew
 - Lump in your throat?
 - Laundry detergent brand
 - Off-duty service animal
 - Direction from Leland to Traverse City
 - Bawl
 - A _____ Called Quest
 - Jimi Hendrix trademarks
 - “When _____ Cry”
 - Pooh pretended to be one
 - Spielberg cable drama “Falling _____”
 - Don’t read or write these while you drive
 - Pumba’s kin
 - What a detective might do to a cold case
 - Prestigious university
 - Like some staircases
 - Where Americans watch sports
 - Green fruit
 - Possessive pronoun
 - QB statistic
 - Harper Valley org.
 - Army rank immediately below Gen.
 - Language suffix

Answers on page 7. Crossword by Eliza Prager and Dan Flanagan

The Betsie Current

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Super Nietzsche

Continued from page 1

in Frankfort has a more commercial appeal, as does “The Shed Pirate,” which is painted on the outside deck wall at The Cabbage Shed in Elberta.

The art lover might prefer “Figure,” which



“Superman” by Chris Bigelow. 2’ x 3’ acrylic.

is abstract and reminiscent of Picasso.

Painting is a passion, but it is something that he does in his free time — his main career is helping children. Bigelow’s full-time job is as a child and family therapist for Centra Wellness Network (formerly known as Benzie Community Mental Health). It is a job, presumably, with some interesting stories. None of which Bigelow can share. Child and family therapists help children and their families to deal with a range of issues, including autism, depression, and trauma.

If he got painting from his grandmother, Bigelow’s need to help children came from his parents.

Bigelow grew up in Grosse Pointe Woods, a suburb of Detroit. His parents were both teachers — his mother taught first grade in Eastern Detroit and his father taught building trades in Warren, in addition to running a construction company.

After high school, Bigelow attended Western Michigan University, where he studied philosophy and fine arts, earning a Bachelor’s degree in both. He continued his education at Western, where he eventually earned a Master’s degree in Community Counseling.

Bigelow, with his unassuming nature, innate empathy, and non-judgmental attitude, seems perfectly suited for his “day job”.

“I love helping children,” Bigelow says. “And the staff at Centra Wellness Network is incredible; hard working, intelligent, and dedicated to helping the community.”

His art training helps him to identify complex patterns, and his philosophy aids him in understanding the bigger picture and the human condition.

“Observing patterns is imperative in therapy,” Bigelow says. “It allows us to gain insight to the way we think about ourselves and the roles we play within our family and friendships. It seems that a lot of suffering comes from the labels that we place on ourselves and the associations we make.”

Oh, his dog Blue? He’s a pitbull that is as soft and sweet as a newborn kitten, who — if given the chance — will gladly take up all the attention that he is offered.

Chris Bigelow’s artwork is mainly on commission. He can be contacted at chris@virtualeye-productions.com.



“Figure” by Chris Bigelow. 2’ x 6’ acrylic.

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Blake Brooks: Frankfort's Finance Man

Questions and answers with community faces

From Staff Reports

If you've caught a movie at The Garden Theater, drank a pint at Stormcloud, or deposited a check at State Savings Bank (or Central State Bank) within the past month, then Blake Brooks has impacted your life. Brooks, who is CEO of the financial institution that now has branches in four locations throughout Benzie and Leelanau, spoke with *The Current* about what's changed during his quarter-century at State Savings Bank, his role as co-investor of both the theater and the brewpub, what he loves most about living in Frankfort, and what the area needs most.

BETSIE CURRENT: You've been at State Savings Bank in Frankfort for 25 years, correct? How has SSB changed during that time? How has Frankfort changed?

BLAKE BROOKS: Technology has been the biggest change at State Savings Bank. When I first began, the Internet and email were just becoming commercially available. Now mobile and Internet banking are very important products that we offer our customers. Candidly, if you were looking to establish a new relationship with a bank, the availability and quality of these products are one of the first things that a consumer considers. Also being able to leverage technology has had a significant impact on how we operate. The bank has grown over five times — including opening our first branch in Empire — since September 1989 and yet the number of full-time employees has remained the same. The most recent change was the announcement that Central State Bank [in Beulah and Benzonia] and State Savings Bank were going to consolidate operations. This will allow State Savings Bank to continue to leverage our technology and offer more as well as enhanced products and services for the residents of Benzie County. What should not be overlooked, however, are the employees who truly make the difference. While State Savings Bank has been able to utilize technology, it is the service our staff provides that allows us to maintain our small-town feel, to operate as a community bank. I have been very fortunate to work with a number of quality people over the last 25 years.

In terms of how Frankfort has changed, the growth in popularity has just been amazing. How many communities the size of Frankfort can boast a wine bar, brewpub, and a classic movie theater showing first-run movies? Charter fishing is as popular as ever, and you now have biking trails and surfing. I

believe our restaurants and bars rival [those of] many larger communities around the state. The summer season is as strong as ever, but increasingly Frankfort has become its own unique destination, stretching the season out. Local government, business people, and the chamber have worked very hard to create a very positive vibe about Frankfort.

CURRENT: State Savings Bank wears pretty big shoes in the community. Could you talk about the roles it plays? How does it embolden the community? What causes does it support, etc.?

BROOKS: State Savings Bank serves a very basic but important role: that of a financial



Blake Brooks, CEO of State Savings Bank. Photo by Aubrey Ann Parker.

intermediary. We take local deposits, and we make local loans. It's an important fact that State Savings Bank is community owned and operated. Our former President and CEO, Paul Patterson, always stressed the importance for meeting our community's needs, and I like to think we have continued in that tradition. We do take pride in helping our local businesses get started and grow, as well as assisting our customers with buying their first home (and second, as their needs change). Providing quality customer service has always been State Savings Bank's goal. SSB has done its best to support not only our local businesses but also our local schools, chambers, and local government whenever possible.

CURRENT: You're also part-owner of both The Garden Theater and Stormcloud Brewery, along with Rick Schmitt, right? How did your collaboration with Rick develop? And why does he get to have fun at the bar (and at the cinema) while you're stuck behind a desk?

BROOKS: You are correct. My wife Marci and I did partner with Rick and Jennie Schmitt to purchase and renovate The Frankfort Garden Theater. How the collaboration came about was that we were at the right place at the right time — or the wrong place at the wrong time! Seriously, the idea was hatched at the Schmitts' dinner table in the middle of winter when the questions was raised, 'Wouldn't it be nice to not have to drive to Traverse City to see a movie?' It has been a very rewarding experience. We would like to think we have brought vitality to town, especially in the off season. It's pretty cool to see a great number of cars in town for the Sunday matinee in the middle of January! The theater was made possible not only by the support of a small group of investors who placed their trust in us but a LARGE number of volunteers who donated countless hours and helped us refurbish the theater. This October 16-19, we will hold our sixth annual Frankfort Film Festival. The film festival has grown in popularity and attendance every year.

CURRENT: Any favorite film you've seen at The Garden?

BROOKS: It is too difficult to single out any movie as a favorite, although with the Film Festival around the corner, I would recommend *Of Gods and Men*, which we played at the festival two or three years ago. The movie is a foreign language film that takes place in 1996 and is about a group of Christian monks who decide to stay in Algeria, thus risking their personal safety, rather than returning to France as a civil war intensifies.

CURRENT: What else does Frankfort need? What does Benzie County need?

BROOKS: Frankfort could use more parking in the summer time! All kidding aside, I think most would agree what Frankfort and Benzie County really need is more year-round employment opportunities. It's difficult to watch the number of local high school graduates who leave the area to earn college degrees and typically don't return because of the lack of job prospects. Benzie County residents are very fortunate for the opportunities that do exist, but the bigger challenge is to grow that pie. To create additional job opportunities for our best and brightest to return to Benzie County would yield significant dividends down the road.

CURRENT: What's your perfect autumn day in Benzie County? How would you spend it?

BROOKS: Blue skies, sunny, mid-70, and I'm not stuck at the office! I'm guessing I would take advantage of one of our numerous outdoor activities. I'd be outside enjoying the natural beauty that can only be found in Benzie County.

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Relinking the Food Chain

Thoughts on the local harvest

By Karen Roberts

Current Contributor

Today for breakfast I ate fruit salad, consisting of blueberries from the Grow Benzie farmers market, apples and peaches from Brown’s Orchard, topped with goat’s milk yogurt from a local farm, and washed it down with several cups of Higher Grounds coffee. Why can’t I — why can’t we all — eat like this every meal? That is the bedrock question addressed in “Farm and Food System Assessment”, a thorough report that’s currently in draft form, generated under the auspices of the Lakes to Land Regional Initiative (L2L). The endeavor frames the project more broadly in terms of the nuts and bolts of food production, processing, distribution, and consumption in the western portions of Benzie and Manistee County.

A Michigan State University intern, Cassi Meitl, guided by Sharron May (Beyond Salon and May Farm) and Betsie Evans (Alliance for Economic Success), worked hard this summer and interviewed representatives from every link that makes up our local food chain. Armed with a set of carefully designed questions, she scoured farmers markets, knocked on barn doors, consulted food processors, spoke with restaurant managers and chefs, tracked down local agricultural supporting organizations and agencies, and talked with emergency kitchen and food bank managers to learn what our local food chain has and what it lacks.

As it turns out, the local food movement is thriving. I love local food but was surprised that I can name only a handful of the 181 farms in Benzie County. Of the more than 7,500 acres in harvested cropland, over 3,000 acres are orchards, explaining why we have so many apples, cherries, and peaches at our markets and in some of our grocery stores. That only nine acres grow berries is amazing since there are so many to pick or buy locally when in season. That’s a good reason to cherish and freeze them. One hundred and four acres produce other food for people; the rest is mostly for feed. There are several well-known large family farms in Benzie County that sell to wholesalers to export nationally and internationally, but 70 percent of the region’s farms are described as “Small Family Farms” (defined by the USDA Economic Research Service as having less than \$100,000 in gross annual sales) and primarily sell directly to local consumers.

Besides we eaters who don’t grow our own food, who else is part of the Benzie County food chain? To name a few, Benzie County has five farmers markets; at least five grocery stores that carry local food; two large food

processors plus numerous small ones, some classified as cottage industries; at least six restaurants that source locally; an incubator kitchen; six food pantries, and a community garden. A lot.

But this food chain has weak links. People from small, medium (grossing \$100,000-\$250,000) and large farms all want to increase production. Not surprisingly, the barriers to greater production differ for different sized farms, but some commonalities exist. They ALL want better cell phone coverage and Internet service (a tie that apparently binds us all). All cite better access to utilities,

strategies that are touched on here. When the report is ready for final release, look for it to give an excellent picture of the local food chain.

Now back to the consumer who wants healthy local food on the table every day. Hopefully some day, access to locally produced food will be commonplace. Until then, how do we do our part? One thing is to continue doing what we are doing: going to farmers markets, looking for the “local” sign in front of produce at grocery stores, participating in Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), and eating at restaurants that buy local. We

can preserve food to eat in the offseason. For those of us who didn’t learn how to can at our mother’s knee, Grow Benzie offers lots of classes on cooking and preserving. Tim Young, owner of Food for Thought, swears by Greene, Hertzberg, and Vaughan’s Putting Food By, and pretty much all of us have freezers.



Sharron May in her garden. Photo by Aubrey Ann Parker.

with the mid- and large-size farms stressing three-phase wiring and natural gas. They all want more labor, though in different forms. The largest farmers want a full-fledged guest worker program; the small farms want interns; and the mid-sized want skilled help. They all want access to Individually Quick Frozen (IQF) facilities. They all want government to ease up on time-consuming regulations. They all want help with marketing and advertising.

And they would all like us to eat more. Local food, that is. While the interest in, and capacity to supply, food on a larger scale differs across the different sized farms, the mid- and small-sized farms would like to be less dependent on selling one piece of fruit or bunch of carrots at a time and scale up to be able to provide more to restaurants, grocery stores, and institutions such as schools and food banks. For those operating small and mid-sized farms, being able to supply more institutions (hospitals, schools, daycare facilities,) and restaurants would be a great boost. There are several substantial barriers. First, these farmers are busy farming and have little time to form necessary relationships within this portion of the market except on an ad hoc basis. Second, many in that consumer group struggle to cope with an uneven availability and quality. Even using consistent farming techniques, growing conditions are changeable and not within the farmer’s control. Also there can be substantial transportation costs that limit market scope.

The L2L report provides rich descriptive information and a far more comprehensive analysis of the needs, barriers, and solution

The Betsie Current wants to help. We are issuing the “Local Food Holiday Challenge”, because Thanksgiving is sooner than we think (followed quickly by Christmas). Local products make good gifts, and why not get your holiday shopping done early). The Betsie Current seeks locally sourced Thanksgiving recipes and menus. Please email them to editor@betsiecurrent.com or mail to: The Betsie Current, P.O. Box 90, Frankfort, MI 49635. We’ll include at least some of them in our Nov. 13 “Holidays” issue (and more on our website, BetsieCurrent.com). Including the food source would be helpful. “Taste the Local Difference”, a directory of local producers, is available at the Michigan Land Use Institute website (Mlui.org) to help identify farmers and other sources. A local food dish at your Thanksgiving dinner would give you and everyone along the Benzie County food chain one more thing to be thankful for.

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