

ANNUAL REPORT

River District Association

2023



MESSAGE FROM THE CEO

Diana Schwartz, MSARP, HREDFP



Friends of the River District,

It's hard to believe that almost a year has passed since the River District Association was awarded the Great American Main Street Award (GAMSA) in Boston, Massachusetts during the 2023 Main Street Now Conference.

GAMSA is the highest recognition an organization can receive from Main Street America, the national organization that has been leading historic downtown revitalization work across the country for almost 45 years. It is hard to understand the significance of an award of this nature. We join the roster of only 109 communities in the country that have been honored with this distinction.

Once again, we must share credit where credit is due - to all that have been part of the 25-year history of the River District Association (formerly the Downtown Danville Association). Thanks to the early visionaries in the community, the DDA/RDA Board and Staff, the forward-thinking leadership both public and private, all the business and property owners that have invested in downtown Danville for over 100 years, and most importantly, thank you to the community. Your continued support of our downtown - Shop Small, Shop Local - makes all the difference. We can only succeed with the entire community embracing and being part of the change.

And to reflect our appreciation of all the many partners that make the River District so vibrant, you may notice our Annual Report this year looks a bit different. In the past, we have put the focus on the data - the numbers served, the grants given, the programs and services we offer - and all of those things are very important. But at the heart of the work are the community members helping to make it happen, so in this year's report we wanted to talk more about the people and the stories of the River District. You will still be able to find all of the traditional data related to impacts on our website (we are very proud of the work we do!) but we know it is essential to give a broader view of not just what we do, but the how - the people that help us do it.

We are excited to take a look back at the work downtown over the past year with our RDA Annual Report - and to once more share our sincere gratitude for the opportunity to serve our community.

Sincerely,

Diana Schwartz, MSARP, HREDFP, RDA CEO

River District Association Staff



Kirsten Aherron
Director of Promotions



Will Mackaman
Director of Economic
Vitality



Alyssa Turner
Director of Business
Services



Lashawn Farmer
Director of Design and
Expansion



MESSAGE FROM THE BOARD PRESIDENT

It has been an exciting year in the Dan River Region!

Several new businesses have opened in the River District, major economic development projects have been realized, development on the Dan River Falls (former White Mill) project has begun, and our vision of achieving a vibrant downtown has come to fruition!

In March of last year, board members, staff, and partners of the River District Association (RDA) travelled to Boston to accept the Great American Main Street (GAMSA) Award. The GAMSA Award recognizes communities for their excellence in the revitalization of Main Streets and downtown districts. This designation means that Danville, VA is a model for downtown revitalization across the entire nation.

We are grateful for our partners in this work, because without their support and collaboration, we would not have been able to bring this award HOME to our community.

While there is still more work to do, I want to pause to celebrate the RDA team for their contributions in transforming our community's vision into a reality. Our staff and board are a diverse group of exceptional and dedicated leaders, and I am proud to serve alongside of them.

In this new year, I invite you to explore one of the greatest Main Streets in the country in your very own River District!

Sincerely,

Rachel Covington, RDA 2023/2024 Board President

Mission

The River District Association will continue moving forward in the transformation of Danville's River District as a welcoming and lively place for all, while inspiring and influencing social and economic development for the greater Dan River Region.

Vision

The River District Association's innovative approach strengthens the regional economy, allowing all to experience Danville's high quality of life.



Board Officers

Rachel Covington, President
Epstein Clark Consulting

Emma Sellers, Vice-President
Averett University

Kunal Patel, Treasurer
Ceasar's Virginia

William Crumpton, Secretary
Compassion Healthcare

Board Members

Kelvin Perry
Danville Office of Economic
Development and Tourism

Steven Osborne
International Mission Board

Christy Harper
Danville Pittsylvania Chamber
of Commerce

Drew Herring
West Main Baptist Church

Dr. Andrew Hessler
Danville Dental Associates

Irving Perez
First Citizen's Bank

Rachel Timm
Ruby B. Archie Public Library

Sandra Chinn-Gilstrap
Chinn - Gilstrap Law

Autin Bunn
Aoss Ventures

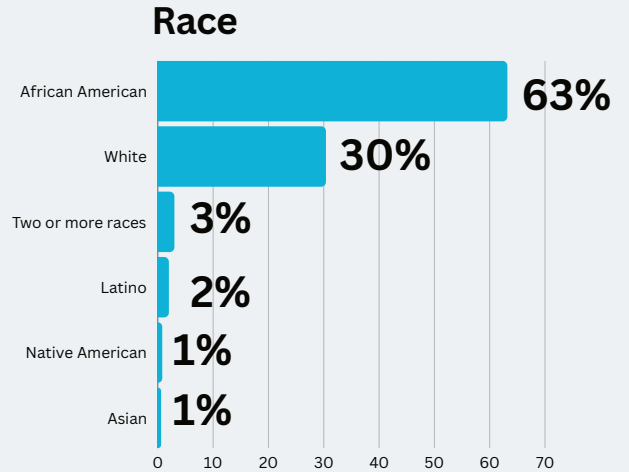
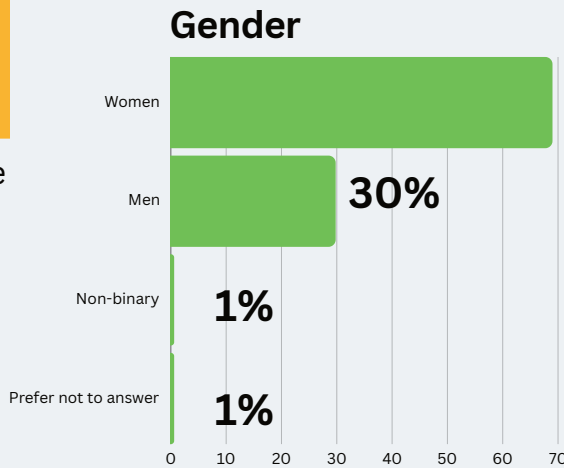
CELEBRATING A DIVERSE ECONOMY



In 2023, **117** people completed one or more Dream Launch Bootcamp Classes.



Our Programs Reflect Our Community: RDA Dream Launch Bootcamp: 2023



Over the life of the **IGNITE Pitch Competition** RDA has awarded **\$427k** in gap funding to **21** businesses. They were **62% Woman-Owned**, and **38% Black-Owned**.



On June 6th, 2023 RDA, the Danville Pittsylvania County Chamber of

Commerce and The Danville Office of Economic Development and Tourism hosted an event with internationally known author and speaker Clifton Taulbert. A diverse audience of over **300 local residents and business owners** spent the evening being inspired by his message of possibility and success for anyone, no matter their background or circumstances. The next day local leaders gathered for a hands-on workshop, and RDA later hosted two well attended book discussions about his book: *Who Owns the Ice House?*

Volunteer Spotlight: Kelvin Perry

Kelvin Perry is the Assistant Director of Economic Development for the City of Danville and has served on the board of RDA for 9 years. He has spent countless hours mentoring new businesses through the Dream Launch Program and sharing his economic development expertise and passion for community with RDA.

In 2023 The RDA GET Boosted Grant Program provided \$50k in grants to **11 existing businesses** to support expansion.



GET Boosted Grant Recipient: Tanya Hilliard, Zinc Total Salon and Oh Wellness!

Owner of Zinc Total Salon and Oh Wellness! (308 Craghead Street), Tanya Hilliard, used a \$5k GET Boosted grant to expand the salon business to include a natural holistic health practice named Oh Wellness! that offers consultations, supplemental and nutritional recommendations, and community classes.

RDA Organizational Value: Inclusivity

Commit to being the model of equitable treatment for all by eliminating bias and embracing the transcultural diversity of our board, employees, and community.

Learn about RDA's Economic Vitality Programs



CREATING A SENSE OF PLACE



Vibrant Windows Program

Artist Spotlight: Tyisha Hicks

Tyisha Hicks is a young, local artist who has contributed paintings to the Vibrant Windows project, and whose paintings have been featured in several True North Speaker Series Productions.

RDA's Vibrant Windows program seeks to empower and showcase local artisans while activating vacant storefronts in the River District. Studies show that filling vacant windows with art or decoration can show the community and developers what is possible, thus leading to revitalization efforts.

21 Local Artists
Featured

6 Vacant
Storefronts
Decorated



Community Shine-up

In 2023 RDA hosted 4 Community Shine-up Events. 40 volunteers from Caesars Virginia, The Boys and Girls Club of the Danville Area, and the Dan River Nonprofit Network joined in the effort.

Holiday Décor

In 2023 RDA provided \$4k in holiday décor for the River District. One such purchase was the giant ornaments seen gracing the downtown plaza, as well as a tree and wreath for the North Main Business District.



Façade Improvement GRANT PROGRAM

RIVER DISTRICT ASSOCIATION
To date RDA has distributed over **\$136k** to improve **37 façades** in the River District. The Façade Improvement Program is funded by the City of Danville and administered by RDA.

Partner Spotlight: Danville Public Works, Traffic Department and Building Maintenance Department

The Traffic and Building Maintenance divisions of the City of Danville Public Works Department are integral to making the River District feel cared for. RDA works closely with them to monitor and purchase new holiday decorations. Every fall these crews spend a significant amount of time installing decorations so that all of us can feel the holiday spirit. They are responsive and always follow through. We are lucky to have them as partners!



Volunteer Spotlight: Felice McWilliams

Felice McWilliams, local arts advocate and founder of Make Danville Smile, and member of the Danville Art League, and frequent actor in Smokestack Theatre Company productions, has dedicated many hours to curating displays for RDA's Vibrant Window Program. Her impact on the program's success is immeasurable. Thank you for your time and expertise!

Learn about RDA's Design Programs



SHOWCASING OUR COMMUNITY



Holiday Decor Spotlight: Commonwealth Silver and Goldsmiths

In 2023 Commonwealth Silver and Goldsmiths won the Judge's Choice River District Merchant Holiday Window Decorating Contest! Owner, Robert Bragg has been doing spectacular window decorations for years, even when he was one of the only thriving businesses in the River District. He also presented at RDA Mornings on Main to inspire and guide other local businesses to use their windows for effective marketing.

In 2023 over **20 businesses** participated in the contest. The Peoples Choice Award went to Link's Coffeehouse Café!

Mornings on Main

RDA's Mornings on Main meets monthly on the 4th Monday at 10 am. Meetings can be attended in person or on zoom, to make it accessible. **In 2023 each meeting averaged 19 attendees.**



Community Partner Spotlight: Karice Luck Brimmer, Our History Matters

"I am an independent public historian and genealogist based in Southside Virginia. I started Our History Matters as a way to bridge the gap between historic preservation and marginalized communities that are often left out of the narrative."

Karice has been an integral part of many RDA projects. She was on the team that help RDA win 150k to go towards restoring 206 and 208 N. Union Street in "Vote You Main Street" in 2018. She regularly organizes history walking tours of the River District's Historic Black business districts, and Civil Rights landmarks. She also wrote and recorded a Civil Rights Walking Tour for RDA's Distrx App.

www.ourhistorymatters434.com

River District Spotlight: Monthly Video

I got chills!!! Seeing people and places so nicely highlighted made me so proud to be a transplanted Danvillian! ~ Spotlight Viewer



River District Holiday Gift Guide

The River District Holiday Gift Guide is a service provided for **FREE** by RDA to River District Merchants. In 2023 the guide featured **90** River District retail, restaurant, and beauty businesses. The Guide was distributed to over **23k** households in the region as a feature of the River City Area Magazine.

RDA Organizational Value: Intentionality

Focusing on what is most important through maintaining a positive mindset, reaching goals, seeking more clarity, and being more present.



RDA Monthly Newsletter

1,565 Subscribers
5% increase

50 % Open Rate
(Industry Average is 25.2%)

#RDASocialMedia



6600 Followers
13% Increase



1,952 Followers
13% Increase

Sign up for the
RDA Newsletter!



#NorthMainStreet



458 Followers
@NorthMainDistrict

Sign up for the
North Main
Newsletter!



NORTH MAIN BUSINESS DISTRICT



RDA Organizational Value: Courage

Take personal and persistent ownership for the ongoing success of our team and community.

Celebrating the District with Holiday Décor

For the 2023 Holiday Season the River District Association and the City of Danville purchased holiday flags, a wreath and a Christmas Tree to liven up the North Main Business District for the Holiday Season! It may seem small, but simple things like holiday decorations can make the community feel cared for.

I grew up walking the streets of North Main with my grandmother. She taught me to see the beauty in everything and everyone. If we all lived our lives by this principle, life would be beautiful. Being a voice for North Main last year brought banners throughout all of North Main Hill for Christmas. Eyes were opened to see the beauty of all of North Main. We tend to focus only on what's beautiful to the eye versus what could be beautiful because we forget, everything broken can be fixed. ~Ashlyn Wheeler - North Main Resident and Property Owner



Learn more about the NMBD



The True North Speaker Series celebrates the powerful voices of Black women shaping our region's future by sharing their knowledge and experiences to empower others. View their inspiring interviews on the North Main Street Facebook page, and on RGM TV Channel 16.



"Recently, I had the privilege of watching the True North Speaker Series, where local black women shared their powerful narratives of overcoming obstacles and transforming adversity into opportunity. What struck me most was how their experiences shaped them into not only formidable individuals, but also compassionate mentors dedicated to uplifting the next generation. But what truly resonated was their commitment to giving back to their communities, particularly by nurturing and guiding the youth. These remarkable women are not just breaking barriers; they are building bridges. They bridge the gap between aspiration and achievement, between struggle and success, and between generations. They truly inspired me to also use my past experiences to help encourage the youth in my community with my mentoring business that I started called VENT which stands for Verbally Erase Negative Thoughts." - Takita Walker, Community Member

Imagining the Possibilities on North Main

In September 2023, The Urban Land Institute (ULI) brought in a Technical Assistant Panel (TAP) to offer suggestions for the North Main Business District. ULI is an institute that has harnessed the multidisciplinary expertise of its members to help communities solve challenging land use, development, and redevelopment issues on behalf of government agencies and community-based nonprofits.



Business Profile: LOV3 Clothing Line 636 North Main Street

Three cousins, Shea Douglas, Eric Glaze, and Euvette Glaze started the Lov3 Clothing Line in June of 2019 because they are all passionate about fashion and creativity. At first the trio created each piece of clothing from design to printing, at home. Each design sold in the store continues to be hand sketched and designed by one of the three business owners.

lov3clothing.shop

CELEBRATING A STRONG ORGANIZATION



Danville's River District: Winner of the 2023 Great American Main Street Award

Each year Main Street America recognizes exceptional Main Street communities whose successes serve as a model for comprehensive preservation-based commercial district revitalization with the Great American Main Street Award (GAMSA). Since the award's inception in 1995, over 100 Main Street programs have been honored. In 2023 RDA was one of **3 winners**.

River District Association Celebrates 25 Years of Revitalization Work

Thank you to our main funders!



RDA Organizational Value: Collaboration

Balancing the needs of ourselves and others with kindness, respect, and empathy toward healing action.

RDA Organizational Value: Excellence

The collaborative power to deliver the highest performance by deliberately pursuing success and refusing to tolerate less than one's best.

- **1999:** Downtown Danville Association formed to organize efforts to revitalize Downtown Danville.
- **2011:** Representatives from the City and community visited Greenville SC to learn about downtown revitalization.
- **2012:** River District Master Plan and Design Guidelines were adopted.
- **2016:** RDA was re-accredited as a Main Street Organization.
- **2017:** RDA hired a new Executive Director - Diana Schwartz.
- **2018:** A collaborative effort secured a win in the Vote your Main Street competition, providing \$150k towards the renovation of 206 and 208 North Union Street.
- **2019:** RDA secured a CBL Grant and was supported by the City to implement the Dream Launch program.
- **2022:** The River District was a GAMSA Semifinalist.
- **2023:** The River District was a GAMSA Winner!

A spotlight on RDA's most dedicated VOLUNTEERS: The Board of Directors!



The River District Association would not be able to function without its extremely dedicated volunteer board. In addition to regular board meetings, board members serve on committees, volunteer at events, assist on special projects, and regularly provide their skills and expertise. In 2023 RDA board members volunteered for our community over **300 hours**.

Learn more about RDA



2023 Total Volunteer Hours:

572