

**Feature preview**

THE MAGAZINE OF THE VIRGINIA MUNICIPAL LEAGUE

## A Pennington Gap Conversation

Meet VML's new President  
Jill Carson







One of Jill's proudest accomplishments during her time on council is support for the purchase and renovation of the historic Lee Theater in downtown Pennington Gap. Originally opened in 1947 and closed in mid-1970s, the theater was carefully restored and reopened in 2013 by the Town of Pennington Gap.



# A Pennington Gap Conversation

## Meet VML's new President Jill Carson

By VTC Editor Rob Bullington

### Begin at the beginning: Roots

Jill Carson has accomplished so much for the Appalachian region and her home of Pennington Gap that it's somewhat surprising to learn she's a New England transplant. Yet, her sense of being an "outsider" has undoubtedly fueled her passion to bring positive change to the place she has called home for nearly 40 years. Part of what makes Jill so compelling is that she has been able to channel the marginalization others might have felt as a Black woman from New England moving to Appalachia into an identity that feels representative of the highest aspirations for her adopted home. She doesn't just touch the better angels of the region's nature, she lives them and insists (sometimes quietly, sometimes loudly) that others do the same. This gift has carried her voice well beyond her hometown and earned her accolades and admirers far and wide.



Speaking of "far and wide," it's a long drive from Richmond to Pennington Gap. After a night in Bristol, VML staff members Michelle Gowdy, Manuel Timbreza and myself drove the last 80 minutes the next morning. As we neared Pennington Gap, and increased in elevation, the late November views became more dramatic, and the bare trees and chilly air served as reminder that autumn was done with this part of Virginia and winter was waiting in the wings.

First, we met with Town Manager Keith Harless at the town hall which is a repurposed warehouse the town purchased after their previous town hall was destroyed by a fire. Undaunted by their modest digs, town staff have plans for an outdoor meeting space behind the town hall overlooking the river and beautiful walking trail. Other plans include business incubators and training facilities on the property.

Keith led our two-vehicle motorcade to the Appalachian African American Cultural Center that Jill and her husband Ron Carson founded in the one room brick schoolhouse that Ron attended as a

child. The Carson's home is on the adjacent property and April, Jill's niece and neighbor, accompanied her aunt to greet us. Inside, we took time to view the diverse memorabilia on display. These included items such as historical photos and documents, recognitions from Congress and President Biden, jars of soil collected from sites of lynchings in the region, and – a recent acquisition – Alex Haley's desk from an estate sale in Tennessee. It was humbling to imagine the author writing *Roots* at this desk that had now found a proper home.

"Sometimes Ron likes to come down and lay his head on the desk," Jill told us. "He can feel the creative energy."

Keith wasn't altogether satisfied with the cold temperature in the building – the space heater was doing valiant but futile battle with the mountain air – but Jill in a lovely, warm wrap seemed unfazed. So, we dove into her life...

[This interview has been lightly condensed and edited]

**VTC:** Tell me about your childhood and your parents.

I grew up in Connecticut. My parents had a supper club where they had people like Nina Simone perform. My parents were very politically involved. I have one sister who is six years older than I am and her name is Jackie. It was my mother's idea to have a "Jack and Jill" but with two girls she did the best she could!

My mother and I moved to Boston after my father passed away. She wanted a change. I was about 15 years old at the time. My sister was engaged so she stayed in Connecticut. My mother enrolled me in the Jeremiah E. Burke High School for Girls.

**Note:** The Burke High School was first opened in 1934 and was named after a former superintendent of the Boston Public Schools. It was inaugurated as a girls only high school, and later became coeducational in 1972. To date approximately 500 students are enrolled at the Burke High School, representing some of Boston's most promising youth from the high poverty neighborhoods within the Dorchester-Roxbury Grove Hall area of Boston.

**VTC:** Did you like the school?

I was at the age where you start talking to boys and stuff but there were no boys! My mother was very strict because this was a new place for her too. But I loved the school. I actually went to school with Donna Summer! When she decided to quit school, there was a lot of scuttlebutt; everybody talked about her quitting school and we wondered why and what she would do? We thought it was terrible, but she laughed all the way to the bank!

At the school, we put on operettas all the time. The head mistress was Dr. Lyons. She carried her little dog to school every day. The only sport we had was badminton, but I really did love going to school there.





## When Jill met Ron

Jill and her husband Ron have been married 47 incredibly active years. They have two children that are (literally) spread across the state. Their son Kevin lives in Alexandria and their daughter Alexis lives in Bristol.

**VTC:** *It's a long way from Boston to Pennington Gap, how did you wind up here?*

I met Ron Carson. He lived nearby with his mother's oldest sister. I was walking my dog and – this is so corny – he said, “Would you like some peanuts?” He had a bag of peanuts. Later I said, “What kind of a line was that?” He said, “It worked I guess.”

We started dating. I remember one day in Boston he was telling me about Pennington Gap, and his aunt was embarrassed. She said, “Don't tell that girl about that place!”

At some point, after we got serious, he wanted to bring me to Pennington Gap so we drove here to meet his parents. I remember coming across the mountains on the old road and I panicked. Not just because of roads themselves but also because of all the outhouses I saw! I was so scared, and I was thinking “His parents better have an indoor bathroom, or he may as well take me home now!”

**Keith:** City slicker profiling us!

**Jill:** Well, there was a store. Remember Keith? Nancy Baker had that store

*[For the record, Keith Harless, who claims to be from the area, could not remember the store that the “City Slicker” recalled perfectly]*

Well, I remember they had fruits and vegetables outside and there was a sign on a basket that said “P-A-R-E-S”.

*[Nobody in the room knew what Jill meant, but Keith interpreted for us: “Pears”]*

**VTC:** *So, despite the plumbing and spelling issues, you decided to move to Pennington Gap?*

I worked for Prudential in Boston, and Ron and I had been married for about 13 years, and suddenly we realized we had no children. He was doing his thing, and I was doing my thing. We adopted our son Kevin and soon afterward Ron raised the possibility of moving here. That made us really think about things like how did we want to raise Kevin? At the time we didn't live in Boston proper, we lived in Framingham which is about 30+ miles west of Boston and commuted into the city on the Massachusetts Turnpike every day. It was exhausting.

So, when Ron proposed relocating to Pennington Gap, I didn't say “No” but I did want to think about it. We did a spreadsheet, “Pros and Cons” and Pennington won out. Of course, Kevin was a real big factor. On the negative side – Keith you may want to close your ears – there's so very little here to expose him to in terms of culture and education. So that that was a big concern.

**Keith:** [grumbles]

**Jill:** But then we said, “OK let's look at what's around here. Atlanta is within five hours, and we could take advantage of that. There are plenty of places closer than Richmond.”

**[VTC Note:** *This is true! Besides regional opportunities, those who want to travel do not lack for the means. In fact, Town Manager Harless has taken his daughters to Japan and Australia. It really is a small world, even if you come from a small town!*]

Celebrate Black History Month

# Our Side of Black Mountain: African Americans in Southwest Virginia

Cosponsored by the Black Cultural Center

**Dinner  
on the Grounds**

**February 21**  
11:45 - 1:00 p.m.  
Appalachian Center Gallery  
A light lunch will be served.

Ron Carson was born and raised in Lee County, Virginia, and after graduating high school moved to Boston, Massachusetts, where he met and married his wife, Jill. In 1986, the Carsons moved back to Ron's home in southwest Virginia and soon after founded what is known today as the African American Cultural Center. The Center is housed in the former one-room school building built in 1939 by Ron's great-great grandmother, Rachael Scott, to provide education to the Black children in the county. The mission of the Center is to document and to preserve the experiences of African Americans in the Central Appalachian region. Ron is currently the Director of the Black Lung Program for Stone Mountain Health Services and the Chair of the National Coalition of Black Lung Programs. Jill retired from Lee County Public Schools as the Fiscal Officer for the Head Start Program and from the Virginia Organizing Project as a Community Organizer.

APALACHIAN CENTER  
Berea College

**Jill:** I said, “OK I'll try it for five years.” We came and lived with his parents while we built a house.

**VTC:** *The house I can see out the window now?*

**Jill:** Yes, the same one.

**VTC:** *What happened at the end of those five years?*

**Jill:** We couldn't afford to move! So, that wasn't happening. We had made our bed.

**VTC:** *What did you do when you first came to Pennington Gap?*

Well, I got pregnant with our daughter! I worked for Lee County public schools. I was the finance officer for the Head Start program and I also contracted with the Department of Health and Human Services which was great, it got me out of here and I traveled to Head Start programs around the whole country.

Ron worked for the Department of Social Services and Child Protective Services. When we when we were in Boston, before we came here, he was a warden at a prison, and he said Child Protective Services was worse!

I worked for the school system for about 10 years. Then I became a community organizer. That's when the trouble began for real! I got involved in the community because when I found something wrong, I found myself pulled into things in the community. That would have been in the 1990s.

**VTC:** *Is that when you started feeling like a local?*

**Jill:** Yes. When I worked as a community organizer because I built relationships with people. When I first came here, I wouldn't just walk up to somebody and say “Hi.” That wasn't the way of a Bostonian at all.

At first, I didn't trust people when they called me “Honey” and “Sweetie.” It took me awhile, but then I realized they were genuine, and I liked it. And then when we had kids in school, I really felt local.

**VTC:** *How did you get the idea of becoming involved with the town council?*

I got mad at something! I never went to council meetings or anything like that but one of the council members, Terry Pope, had contacted me and asked me to consider getting on the board of the IDA (Industrial Development Authority).

This next part involves Keith's mother, so he'll get mad at me.



## When Jill met Keith

Despite the somewhat rocky beginning which Jill outlines below, the mutual respect and friendship between Jill Carson and Keith Harless is apparent to anyone who spends more than two minutes in their company. Though their backgrounds and demographics couldn't be different, their shared passion for their community makes them a perfect local government pairing. Also, in case you can't tell, they have fun poking fun at each other...

**Jill:** I was on the IDA. The county had closed one of the schools near here and there was someone who was interested in starting a restaurant in town, but they needed a range hood for their kitchen. So, we [the IDA] came up with the idea we should be able to get one at a good price from the closed school to help this person out. It seemed like everything was set. I went out of town for a bit but when I came back, we were told that the town council had decided we couldn't have the stove hood from the closed school. I was furious!

So, I went to a council meeting. Keith was on the council at the time. That's how we met. I said, "I have never been here before and I do not know the protocol, but I do want to speak to you. Do I have your permission to speak?" I was polite but...



Town Manager Keith Harless.

**Keith:** ...we have different versions of this story...

**Jill:** He was so mad at me! I was so mad at him. It was terrible. It got really ugly!

**Keith:** I knew it might be bad [to deny IDA the range hood], but it was personal to me because my mother who was in Stickleyville – that was the community I came from – was part of a group that took over the school to use it as a Community Center. So, they wanted to have the stove hood that would exactly fit. Those people needed help and they were going to give free meals and feed the community and have fundraisers and things like that.

And then I have someone like this coming out...

**Jill:** Someone like *this*!?

**Keith:** ...someone, and so they approached the council...

**Jill:** They? I was there by myself!

**Keith:** So, the council at the time felt like it'd be fair to let the community have the hood back so they could do something with it. We had the meeting, although the IDA didn't agree with us, and then they brought "hot shot" in there and she starts arguing...

**Jill:** [laughter]

**Keith:** ...the line that she used was "I cannot believe we're sitting here getting ready to do away with an idea to help businesses to argue over pots and pans!"

**Jill:** [laughter]

**Keith:** And when she said that I stopped talking because she and my sister were best friends and my sister was like, "Oh, I don't believe you and Jill don't get along!"

**Jill:** Oh, it was terrible!

**Keith:** And then she ran for council, and we wound up sitting beside each other.

**VTC:** *Jill, what's your greatest hope for Pennington Gap's future?*

**Jill:** My greatest hope for Pennington Gap is that it never loses Keith as Town Manager! Seriously, the guy is so valuable I can't begin to tell you. Of course, twelve years ago, I wouldn't have said that.

**Keith:** Actually, seven years ago when they hired me you voted "No."

**Jill:** I did! I did not like the process. They cheated! It had nothing to do with Keith. I just feel so strongly against the "good old boy" system, and I thought it was coming into play in that vote.

**Keith:** [Explaining to VTC] There was no protocol in place at the time, so they developed a new protocol to come up with a new position as assistant town manager. I had been on council 19 years, and we had six or seven projects that I knew all the players plus we were having issues with the current town manager. So, they were looking for someone to ease into that.

**Jill:** Yeah, I wasn't comfortable with it.

**Keith:** Sometimes those things pan out and sometimes they don't.

**Jill:** Well, in this situation I *guess* it did.

## Why Jill ran for council

When Jill Carson won a seat on the Pennington Gap town council, she became the first African-American woman to serve in that capacity. Since then, she has served as Vice Mayor and is currently serving her fourth term.

**VTC:** *What led you to run for council in 2010?*

**Jill:** I didn't like the way they did business, so I said to myself, "Well if you don't like it, and you want to change it, then you run for office."

**VTC:** *What do you remember most from the first time you ran for council?*

**Jill:** Think about this: An outsider. A Black woman. I'm supposed to be in the kitchen somewhere! The thing that helped me was being a community organizer because I had to talk to everybody in the whole town and because that's what I do, I talk. A lot.

The best was campaigning, although it was exhausting. One time my daughter Alexis was riding around with me. I was so tired. I remember going to somebody's house and laying on their couch and going to sleep because I was exhausted.

Another time, I went by a house and the husband, wife, and their son were all sitting on their porch. So, I thought, "I'll take a shot at it, I'm almost done for the day." I pulled into their driveway, and they got up and yelled "What do you want!!!"

I thought, "Oh gosh, never mind."

It turns out all three of them were on the rescue squad and they became my best friends afterward.





## Jill explains how Ron found his calling

Ron likes to brag that when he got out of high school, he worked in a coal mine. Really, he worked for like 10 minutes in that mine! If he had stuck with it, he would have been a fifth-generation coal miner. But he wasn't comfortable with the work.

During the time that Ron was working for social services, Dr. Art Van Zee approached Ron and told him that Saint Charles Community Health Clinic had received a grant for black lung benefits. He asked Ron if he would help them implement the grant.

Ron ended up taking on that challenge, but he had to start from ground zero. The whole thing just grabbed him because his grandfather and great-great grandfather had suffered from black lung disease, so he saw this as a way to help other coal miners get their benefits.

He ended up becoming the chair of the National Black Lung Coalition. He traveled all over the country to set up black lung benefits programs in every coal producing state. He helped miners get their

benefits by acting as an advocate for them in court. He was recognized by Congress for 30 years of service to coal miners. I traveled a lot with him and joined him in court many times.

When he retired from the clinic in 2018, I said "I can't imagine you walking away." But it's hard work and he had done so much.

Of course, over the past couple of months he's started getting requests to come help with some cases. So, he's getting his feet wet again but he doesn't have 10 minutes because he's so much involved with the 400 Years of African American History Commission.

**Note:** *The 400 Years of African American History Commission Act, signed into law January 8, 2018, established a 15-member commission to coordinate the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in the English colonies. The Secretary of the Interior appointed 15 Commission members based on recommendations by Members of Congress, state governors, civil rights and historical organizations, the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, and the National Park Service. Among those appointed is Ron Carson, listed on the organization's website as "2nd Vice Chair, Founder, Appalachian African-American Cultural Center; CEO and President, Carson Black Lung Centers, Pennington Gap, Virginia."*

## In the company of good troublemakers

*I met Doctor Van Zee and his wife. I met Sister Beth Davies. That's who I attached myself to. Good people fighting the system. Oftentimes we had to bail Beth out of jail. I'd get a call: "Jill I'm in New Mexico, I'm in jail!"*

*They did good trouble.*

- Jill Carson

THERE ARE SOME who are fortunate enough to simply read about the opioid epidemic or see news reports about it. They may enjoy two or even three degrees of separation from someone directly affected by it. But even for these people, the facts, the stories, and the reality are shocking, saddening and sobering.

Then there are those who are living on the front lines. Those who don't enjoy any degrees of separation. Those who come home to it every day, or don't come home at all.

Before it was an epidemic, this national crisis had its beginnings in places like Pennington Gap. We know now that Appalachia was specifically targeted by the opioid manufacturers who time and again put profit over people. We know this because, fortunately for all of us, the region had some people who recognized the crisis

early and began sounding the alarm nationally even as they tried to save lives locally. These people include...

**Dr. Art Van Zee** who questioned the commercialization of prescription drug he knew was destroying lives and didn't stay silent.

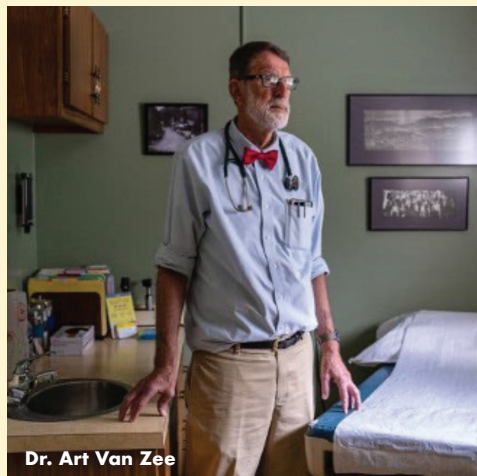
**Sue Ella Kobak**, a district attorney (and wife of Dr. Van Zee) who saw firsthand the rise in drug related crime and connected the dots to the rising abuse of prescription pain killers.

**Sister Beth Davies** who channeled years of experience fighting for Appalachia's coal miners to fight for the victims of drug addiction to care for them at their most vulnerable.

But of course, Van Zee, Kobak and Davies and their like didn't do it alone. They were supported by a cadre of fellow "troublemakers" across Appalachia. It will surprise no one that these troublemakers included Jill and Ron Carson. Their work continues to this day.

Following the increased attention that Hulu's adaptation of Beth Macy's *Dopesick* brought to the issue, Macy and show creator Danny Strong started a GoFundMe to support Sister Beth's clinic. Learn more at [www.gofundme.com/f/nf4wch-helping-the-helpers](https://www.gofundme.com/f/nf4wch-helping-the-helpers).

JOHNATHON KELSO / THE NEW YORK TIMES



Dr. Art Van Zee



Sue Ella Kobak



Sister Beth Davies





Jill and Ron Carson sit in front of a few historical artifacts collected over the years. Prominently displayed is an old photograph of Ron's great-great-grandmother Rachel Scott, below, who built the building in 1939 as a school for African Americans. Photo by Kevin Ridder (2019) for the *AppalachianVOICE*.

## Jill explains how the Appalachian African-American Culture Center came to be

When Ron started bringing me to visit his parents, we'd come up to the old school-house and he'd reminisce about the seven years he spent in primary school here. His great-great grandmother Rachel Scott built the school for the Black kids in the area. Prior to the school being built, there was a church that sat where our house sits today. It served as a church on Sundays and as a school during the week. We have the letter that one of the last teachers sent to Thurgood Marshall asking for his help because the church school was falling apart, and the kids had nowhere to go to school.

The school that Ron's great-grandmother started in this building had seven classes in one room. The teacher used cooperative learning in which the older kids taught the younger kids. After 7th grade they were bussed to James A. Bland High School in Big Stone Gap. The year that Ron was supposed to start at Bland they integrated the school. He says that at the time he was upset about it because he missed out on going to school with all the pretty Black girls!

[Note: The James A. Bland High School building later became the town hall for Big Stone Gap]

When we moved here in 1986, they were consolidating the schools in Lee County, and they were just going to tear the old school-house building down because there was no reversion clause in the deed to return it to the Carson family. I just said, "That's not acceptable!"

I picked up the phone and located the nearest branch of the NAACP. It turned out to be in Bristol. I called and I met with them. We went before the Board of Supervisors and with the plan of shaming them into doing the right thing. They held strong; they didn't feel like they had to turn it over to the community. This went on for ages! It was a long hard battle.

The NAACP came here and then we brought in TV cameras and told our story. We told about Ron's great-great grandmother and what the school had meant to the community. Initially the County agreed to give us the building but not the land. We finally got it, but it was a long battle.

We got the building and we said, "What are we going to do with it?" We had no idea. We had not given any thought to that at all. But we were fortunate enough to get a fellowship to Highlander Research and Education Center in New Market, TN. People come from all over and you sit down, and you talk about your community and the challenges you face. Somebody said to us, "You know, very little if anything's been written about the experiences of African-Americans in the Appalachian region."

So, we came back and had a meeting at Ron's parents' house and invited people in the community to come and everybody thought that would be a good idea to gather and document the stories of African-Americans in Appalachia.

It started out with people in the community who volunteered to go out and talk to people and record those conversations using those big video cameras they had at the time. I can't begin to tell you how many videos we have! That's what we've been doing for the last 30 plus years.





**VTC:** *What's the center involved in now?*

**Jill:** Lately, we've had a lot of demand for our anti-racism workshops. We address white supremacy and internalized racist oppression. We just got back a couple weeks ago from doing a workshop at a private school in Birmingham, AL.

We also go to meetings of the Appalachian Service Project that are organized by the United Methodist churches. They bring in youth from everywhere to help people work on their houses at the high school and college level.

I often say to Ron, "If we had stayed in Boston, we wouldn't have been doing any of this!"

We haven't regretted it at all. The people are great. It's the history here, not just Black history, but the history of the Appalachian region. It just grabbed me!



## Learn more

All the below resources are readily available online:

"A Nun, a Doctor and a Lawyer — and Deep Regret Over the Nation's Handling of Opioids" by Barry Meier. *New York Times*, August 18, 2019.

"Lingering Pain: Medical school alumnus helped spur a national movement against misused prescription opioids" by Dan Morrell. *THINK*, Spring 2022.

"Member Spotlight: Sister Beth Davies" by Sam Kepple. *AppalachianVoices*, April 8, 2021.

"The Appalachian African American Cultural Center: Preserving community history in Southwest Virginia" by Kevin Ridder. *AppalachianVOICE*, June 7, 2019.

"The Promotion and Marketing of OxyContin: Commercial Triumph, Public Health Tragedy" by Art Van Zee, MD. *American Journal of Public Health*, February 2009.

"What Is the Future of Black Appalachia?" by Oliver Whang. *New York Times*, September 26, 2020

*Dopesick* by Beth Macy. Little, Brown & Company. Originally published August 7, 2018

## 60 seconds with Jill Carson

**Why the VML Board?** I ran to be on the VML Board in 2012 because my buddy David Helms (former mayor of Marion and president of VML) told me to. He still calls me at least once a month. He called just the other day because his wife wanted to know if it was OK if they put my name on their church's prayer list. He checks on me all the time. I appreciate it.

**Recent Honor:** On October 22nd I served as the Grand Marshall of the Lee County Tobacco Festival. It all comes back to community organizing and relationships that I built have built here.

**Proud Accomplishment:** The restoration of the Lee Theater. So many people that were against it that have said that's the best thing that's ever happened to this town. [**Note:** *Good things keep happening as the town recently received a DHCD grant to renovate the buildings across the street from the theater.*]

**VML Presidency Theme:** Civility. It has to start somewhere, why not with us?

**Favorite Food:** Seafood but it doesn't always love me!

**Least Favorite Food:** Kale. That's my husband's favorite.

**Someone who has inspired you:** Dr. Art Van Zee and Sister Beth Davies. These are my best buddies and they've always inspired me [*see sidebar on page 14*].

