The Virginian-Pilot

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Nickie Wheeler and Mark Gleason sit inside their Virginia Beach home on Friday. Wheeler and Gleason's son, Ben Gleason, died of an opioid overdose in 2019. Today, Virginia marks its first Overdose Awareness Day. KAITLIN MCKEOWN/STAFF

Mother works to build overdose awareness

Va. Beach woman helped create state commemoration day after losing son to opioid addiction

By Katherine Hafner
Staff Writer

Nickie Wheeler and Mark Gleason moved to Virginia Beach last year to escape painful memories.

It seemed everywhere they looked around their home in the Shenandoah Valley, there was something that reminded them of their deceased son, Ben.

There were the mountains where he loved to play as a kid, sliding down the rocks in a move he called "butte butt." There were the medical facilities where he was first prescribed painkillers and later sought treatment for his addiction, and the street corner where he last locked eyes with his parents.

So they moved to their condo in Virginia Beach.

They had received the dreaded phone call on March 3, 2019.

Following more than a decade of opioid addiction, Ben Gleason died at 31 after taking a drug cocktail unknowingly laced with highly potent fentanyl.

He's one of thousands of Virginians who have fallen victim to the combination of molecules that can rewire your brain with deadly results.

Now, Ben's parents — Wheeler in particular — work to break the stigma around opioid addiction and get grieving families the help they need.

Alongside fellow advocates, her efforts helped lead to today being the first Overdose Awareness Day in the commonwealth.

It comes after nearly 2,300 people died of overdoses in the commonwealth last year, the state's worst year on record. About three-quarters of those

Turn to Overdose, Page 2

Exit of last GIs ends longest US war

Final airlift closes grim 20-year era in American history

By Robert Burns and Lolita C. Baldor
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The United States completed its withdrawal from Afghanistan late Monday, ending America's longest war and closing a chapter in military history likely to be remembered for colossal failures, unfulfilled promises and a frantic final exit that cost the lives of more than 180 Afghans and 13 U.S. service members, some barely older than the war.

Hours ahead of President Joe Biden's Tuesday deadline for shutting down a final airlift, and thus ending the U.S. war, Air Force transport planes carried a remaining contingent of troops from Kabul airport. Thousands of troops had spent a harrowing two weeks protecting a hurried and risky airlift of tens of thousands of Afghans, Americans and others seeking to escape a country once again ruled by Taliban militants.

In announcing the completion of the evacuation and war effort, Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command, said the last planes took off from Kabul airport at 3:29 p.m. Washington time, or one minute before midnight in Kabul. He said a number of American citizens, likely numbering in "the very low hundreds," were left behind, and that he believes they will still be able to leave the country.

The airport had become a U.S.-controlled island, a last stand in a 20-year war that claimed more than 2,400 American lives.

The closing hours of the evacuation were marked by extraordinary drama. American troops faced the daunting task of getting final evacuees onto planes while also getting themselves and some of their equipment out, even as they monitored repeated threats — and at least two actual attacks — by the Islamic State group's Afghanistan affiliate. A suicide bombing on Aug. 26 killed 13 American service members and some 169 Afghans.

The final pullout fulfilled Biden's pledge to end what he called a "forever war" that began in response to the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, that killed nearly 3,000 people in New York, Washington and rural Pennsylvania. His decision, announced in April, reflected a national weariness of

Turn to War, Page 4

Va. Beach man gets 20 years for 2019 slaying

Pleads guilty to killing father who was trying to protect his daughter

By Jane Harper
Staff Writer

As they stood outside a courtroom Monday, several members of Sherman Lane's family smiled as they described the father of seven.

Lane was a jokester, and a Chicago Bears fan, they said, who enjoyed cooking, watching sports on TV, and spending time with his family.

"He was a very loving father," said Queesha Lane, one of Lane's cousins. "He took care of all his kids."

Lane was trying to protect one of them — a then-16-year-old daughter — when he was shot and killed nearly two years ago.

On Monday, Ditron Thigpen, the man who fired the fatal bullet, pleaded guilty to second-degree murder, illegal use of a handgun and violating the terms of a previous probation. As part of an agreement with prosecutors, the 29-year-old was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

Thigpen

"We are happy we got some type of justice," Queesha Lane said after the hearing. "(Lane's daughter) misses her dad dearly and is glad to have some closure."

Lane, 40, was raising the girl by himself after her mother died of cancer, according to the family. Now 18, she's been living with relatives since his death.

"If you knew him, you loved

Turn to Slaying, Page 4

The Atlantis Apartments off South Birdneck Road, shown in December 2020. L. TODD SPENCER/STAFF

Va. Native Americans rolling up sleeves

Tribes overcome skepticism, report high vaccination rates among eligible

By Gaya Gupta
Staff Writer

Standing in the two-room schoolhouse in King William County where she and her siblings once went to school, Connie Lovelace feels at home.

She's standing on the land where her Upper Mattaponi ancestors once lived and thrived. Where she grew her own produce, learned how to hunt, and where elders disciplined her.

And like her ancestors, Lovelace has endured a virus that threatened her culture, her community.

But Lovelace says her ancestors were survivors. And the tribe today is no different.

"We've been here a long time," she said. "And we want to stay here."

With the goal of continued survival during the pandemic, Virginia's seven federally recognized tribes, including the Upper Mattaponi, have been quick to convince their members to get vaccinated.

COVID has severely impacted tribal nations around the country. As of Friday, the Virginia Department of Health reports 28 Native Americans died of COVID-19 statewide. Locally, the Three Rivers Health District and Chickahominy Health District, which serve tribal areas in Eastern Virginia, recorded 95 Native Americans who tested positive and one Native American who died from COVID-19.

Statewide, about 90% of eligible Native Americans have received at least one vaccine dose through the state's health department, according to Virginia Department of Health data — a higher percentage than any other racial or ethnic group in the state. Since this does not include 409 first doses federally administered by the Indian Health Services, the percentage of vaccinated Native Americans is likely even higher.

The IHS does not release data on how many tribal members within specific tribes have been vaccinated. The Upper Mattaponi tribe, based in King William, and the Chickahominy tribe, based in Charles City, did not officially record their vacci-

Turn to Vaccine, Page 12

Rescue dog helped Cavaliers star heal

Mac the pit bull terrier got ailing U.Va. defender Joey Blount through tough times last year. His return to the field gives the Virginia pass defense a big boost. **Sports**

Ida shreds the Louisiana coast

The powerful hurricane strands residents in flooded homes and mangles the power grid. Now the weakened system is heading toward Virginia. **Nation & World**

Songs under the stars

A free Virginia Symphony Orchestra concert Thursday night by picturesque Lake Matoaka, on the campus of William & Mary, is a special tradition in a town full of them. **Daily Break, behind Sports**

Humid; a t-storm
High: 92 Low: 74

Details on back page of News

Connie Adams Lovelace, a member of the Upper Mattaponi tribe, says she got her COVID-19 vaccine to keep her culture and tribal members safe. "We are survivors," she said.
GAYA GUPTA/STAFF

Vaccine

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nation numbers but estimate that around 70%-75% and about 80% of their members have received a dose respectively.

The VDH has inoculated 20,873 Virginians who identify as Native American with at least one dose. In the Tidewater region, which includes King William, King and Queen, and New Kent counties, 316 Native Americans have been vaccinated through local VDH health departments. In the Greater Hampton Roads area, which includes the Historic Triangle, Peninsula and South Hampton Roads, the VDH has vaccinated 3,681 Native Americans.

COVID-19 has ripped through Native communities around the country, leading to the death of almost 7,000 American Indians and Alaska Natives, according to CDC data. The CDC also recorded that Native Americans are hospitalized due to COVID-19 at more than three times the rate of white people. They've died 2.4 times more.

Once vaccines became available, local tribes worked quickly with federal and area health organizations to inoculate themselves and their communities. To Lovelace, getting vaccinated was not only a matter of protecting herself but of preserving her and her family's legacy and culture.

With so few Native Americans left in the United States, tribal chiefs say they can't afford to lose any more lives. Vaccinating their members, they've concluded, is the only way to prevent that.

Overcoming generations of mistrust

Eastern Virginia's Chickahominy and Upper Mattaponi members were eager to get vaccinated once doses became available, according to their chiefs. For Lovelace and other tribal members, hearing their chiefs affirm the vaccines' efficacy and take the shot themselves made it clear that it was the right thing to do. But they have not forgotten the violence, coercion and mistreatment their ancestors suffered from the U.S. federal government, especially when it came to receiving health care.

COVID-19 isn't the first virus Native Americans have faced. When white settlers first arrived in Virginia in the 17th century, they also brought smallpox. The disease, in combination with violence, killed 75% of Native people in Virginia according to the National Library of Medicine.

"When the settlers arrived, their initial goal was to annihilate the tribes," said Stephen Adkins, chief of Eastern Virginia's Chickahominy Tribe. "Even in this small community, we saw early on how settlers invited Natives to events and gave them poison drinks. And we all know the smallpox blankets were distributed."

Whether white settlers actually distributed blankets infected with smallpox is up for debate —— but that misses the point, said Paul Kelton, professor of American history at Stony Brook University in New York and author of "Cherokee Medicine, Colonial Germs: An Indigenous Nation's Fight against Smallpox."

"The point is that it's a story that reflects generations of mistrust," said Kelton.

The smallpox vaccine campaigns in the 1890s and early 20th century, according to Kelton, were designed to exert power over Native people.

"(The vaccines) were delivered in a context in which the federal government was trying to erase indigenous cultures," explained Kelton, adding that U.S. policymakers would use the vaccine as an incentive for Native people to sign treaties, give up land, and stop speaking their language.

In the 1950s, Native American activism played a large role in changing federal policies to start establishing trust in indigenous communities, Kelton said. In 1975, President Richard Nixon's administration enacted the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, empowering them to act more like sovereign nations.

In 2018, the Upper Mattaponi was one of six tribes in Virginia to gain federal recognition.

"There were a few government officials that just took interest in us and kept being there with us every time," said Lovelace, recalling the decades of effort toward federal recognition. "I think that helped to build trust."

Adkins recalled working closely with U.S. Senators Tim Kaine and Mark Warner to gain federal recognition for the Chickahominy tribe, and later with U.S. Representatives Rob Wittman and Donald McEachin, helping him to trust political entities much more than he had in the past.

"I was willing to take this vaccine, same one the dominant culture was taking, with a trust that they weren't giving us the 'bad stuff,' " Adkins said.

"It's one thing for a government leader to say, 'go get vaccinated,' " said Kelton. "But it's the tribal governments and tribal leaders that are playing the essential role in getting people excited. And that's the key."

'A service specifically for them'

Once the vaccine became available, the Chickahominy and Upper Mattaponi tribes spared no time organizing vaccination clinics for their members, hosting four vaccination clinics in total.

While some tribes collaborated with their local health districts to vaccinate their members, many, including the Chickahominy and Upper Mattaponi, also partnered with IHS to host clinics on tribal land.

The Mid-Atlantic Services Unit of IHS, located in Richmond, typically doesn't provide direct care services, but when COVID hit, Kara Kearns, CEO of MASU, knew they'd have to shift gears to vaccinate Native American populations.

The MASU, which serves Virginia's seven federally recognized tribes, has so far administered a total of 723 doses.

The IHS distributed vaccines to tribal members or members of their households in what Kearns called "pack and go" drive-thru clinics within tribal sites. She added that this allowed family members to be present while people got vaccinated, to make tribal members feel as safe and comfortable as possible.

"We're honored to be there, and we're there to provide a service specifically to them," she said. "And that's the most important thing for us."

Adams has found that while most people quickly and willingly got the vaccine, the few who have not are unlikely to change their mind. Upper Mattaponi tribal members who have not gotten vaccinated indicate their personal beliefs, rather than their cultural values or fear, prevent them from getting the vaccine.

Meanwhile, Adkins has found success in convincing his older members and is now working to vaccinate children and young adults. He's excited to empower the younger generation of tribal leadership to implement novel and innovative ways to "energize folks and mobilize the non-vaccinators."

Mia Eubank was brought on as the Chickahominy's Tribal Health Services liaison during the pandemic and found that by attempting to reach out to each tribal member, she and fellow tribal outreach worker Bobbie Stewart were able to convince many to overcome their hesitancy.

"It must be fear. Maybe they're just seeing what's really happening in the world with these cases rising, fast," Eubank said. "I've made calls in the morning and gotten calls back in the afternoon or the next morning, saying 'I've changed my mind.' "

'Protect our culture, protect our community'

Adkins proudly shows yard signs posted around their tribal community which read: "Protect our culture, protect our community." For him, the safer the community is at large, the safer his tribal members will be.

"We don't want any of mankind to be lost. But when you have such a low population in the United States, as opposed to the dominant culture, we really want to protect our people," Adkins said.

Protecting not only their members, but everyone who comes in close contact with their members, was vital in preserving the health of the community, said Morgan Faulkner, an Upper Mattaponi tribal member and councilwoman. Her sister-in-law, who is non-Native, was vaccinated through the Upper Mattaponi's vaccination clinics since she is the wife and mother to citizens of the tribe.

"Our Native culture is about kinship ties," Faulkner said. "We see it as protecting the greater family unit, which in turn protects the health of the tribe. So we wanted to make sure that anyone who is a part of the Greater Upper Mattaponi community was also getting protected.

Adkins also acknowledged that Native Americans have a higher risk of serious illnesses and death from COVID due to systematic health, economic and social inequalities that tribal members often face. Native Americans are twice as likely as white people to have diabetes and have a greater prevalence of obesity, according to the CDC.

Keeping his tribal members healthy now would protect their tribe for generations to come.

For the Upper Mattaponi and Chickahominy tribes, the fight continues.

With the surging delta variant, they have turned their efforts to making sure everyone, not just tribe members, can get vaccinated. The weeks before the Chickahominy held their most recent clinic in early August, Adkins stationed himself at their neighborhood store asking unvaccinated community members to come to their local church to receive a dose.

"We want to make sure that the general public is vaccinated to the highest level — that not only protects them, but it protects us. And if that sounds selfish, I'm sorry," he said. "We just want to inoculate ourselves against this insidious virus."

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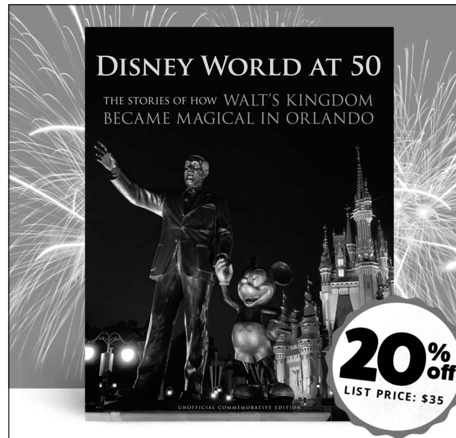

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