

# Fitness After 50

**C**ongratulations! You've made it to the age of 50-plus and are living the dream in a home near the beach. Ideally, you've balanced career stress with daily exercise to help ensure you look and feel great with the approach of those "golden years."

But what if you didn't ... and are now dealing with too little

energy and too much trepidation at the thought of mixing it up with those 20-somethings at a gym?

Either way, you might be surprised at the wide array of local exercise options, thanks to a bevy of experts who are making it easier and a lot more fun to get into the best shape of your life. >





Thanks to varied and abundant local options,  
staying in shape is easier and more fun than ever

BY CHRIS BEAKEY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCOTT NATHAN



A 24-mile bike ride along back roads is a popular way for members of the Sussex Cyclists to enjoy rural scenery at a steady but not-too-strenuous pace.





Kathy Aldridge prepares to deliver a forehand return on the pickleball court at Dave Marshall Tennis & Fitness at The Plantations near Lewes. Fans of the sport enjoy the easy-to-learn game that keeps them physically active.

### Start smart with a personal trainer

You might think of personal trainers as the minor celebs who get actors into shape for superhero roles. While those physical transformations certainly look great on camera, retired local trainer Dave Kergaard believes true fitness has less to do with appearance and more with flexibility, strength and resilience against age-related injuries.

“When I took on clients, I sat them down and asked them to fill me in on their medical history, whether or not they’d had specific back or shoulder problems or other injuries that we needed to consider,” he says. “Then I asked what their goals were. Some people wanted to get rid of flabby stomachs, but others wanted to have more energy to play with grandkids or improve their tennis games. Once we figured out what exercises were best, I demonstrated them and watched to make sure their form was right and that they knew exactly how to use all of the equipment.”

Kergaard believes personalized guidance is especially important for anyone unfamiliar with modern gyms. “I used to ask people, ‘If you’d never skied, snorkeled, or played golf, wouldn’t you want to take some lessons first?’ You need to

think the same way about working out, and make sure you get a trainer when you join a gym.”

Sharon Padbury, who co-owns Anytime Fitness in the Five Points area near Lewes, seconds that thought — and also spotlights an option for people who enjoy working out alongside others. “A byproduct of exercising with a group is the camaraderie that forms and sticks as an internal motivator to keep showing up,” she says when describing the gym’s Ageless Fitness initiative, which is specially designed for those 50 and over and

incorporates exercises that reflect the reaching, bending and lifting movements practiced in daily life.

Participants begin with an assessment that checks balance and agility; they are then given the opportunity to join a class with two to four others for training that’s personalized to their abilities and needs. The classes focus on

physical capabilities ranging from coordination and reaction time to cognitive brain function, all of which is especially important to older adults. Beyond those benefits, Padbury is pleased that participants have fostered a sense of fun and companionship that extends beyond her gym. “Our 9 o’clock group, for instance, has been exercising together for over two years now,” she notes. “And

**A good trainer will make it exciting, so people think, ‘I like working out with this guy or gal — IT’S FUN!’”**



not only that, they've joined a water aerobics class together elsewhere. It's a social circle built around healthy habits."

That approach makes great sense to Kergaard, who has also worked with clients whose motivation is enhanced by having workout partners. In either case, he adds, "a good trainer will make it exciting, so people think, 'I like working out with this guy or gal — it's fun.'"

### Rediscover the joy of bicycling

Speaking of fun, remember the first time you rode a bike? Whether one is 6 or 60, it feels great to be perfectly balanced and gliding along on two wheels. That's a big reason for the popularity of Sussex Cyclists, a club that's been dedicated to safe and enjoyable bike riding for 20 years.

Many members ride fast and for long distances on state-of-the-art bikes. Yet there are many others who prefer a leisurely pace that fosters both friendship and fitness. "Bicycling is certainly about movement but it's also social," says Sussex Cyclists President John Kurpjuweit "... Sometimes it feels like we're just a bunch of kids out having a good time, except the kids are over 50."

Some of the most popular rides are taken at a moderate 12-to-14-mph pace, and almost all organized rides capitalize on the spectacular views of nature along the area's diverse array of biking trails. The rides are open to members and non-members, with a variety of different routes posted every month. And frequent riders shouldn't be surprised to see how fast they get into shape without injury.

"When I'm running, I think of it as exercise," Kurpjuweit says. "But biking is a lot more pleasant because I'm not pounding the pavement and because I'm setting my own speed and exploring new places every chance I get."

### Get back in the swim

Swimming at the Sussex Family YMCA near Rehoboth (which also offers personal and group fitness training) is another low-impact way to get into shape. That's where you'll find Melissa Aufmuth in a lap lane several days a week. ▶

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“Several years ago, I dislocated my knee in a high-impact exercise program ... so running, jumping jacks [and other demanding exercises] are no longer options,” she says. “Swimming is an overall body workout that protects my joints and keeps my muscles toned.”

Aufmuth, who enjoys a rewarding but demanding career as a federal contracts officer, also emphasizes that “swimming reduces my anxiety, keeping me calm during the day and improving sleep at night.”

Recognizing that others might not currently share the dedication that gets her to the “Y” by 5 a.m. several mornings a week, she offers some tips for creating a swim schedule and sticking to it:

“If you’ve taken a hiatus and want to get back into the water, you should first buy a new swimsuit and goggles so you’re starting fresh. Then, be realistic. For the

first three weeks, maybe swim three days a week for 15 or 20 minutes so you don’t overexert yourself or get frustrated. Once you’ve established a goal, turn it into a routine. You might find other swimmers doing the same and form friendships that’ll keep you motivated.”

## Stride into fitness and friendship

Walking is another way to improve cardio-fitness and muscle tone, and many find no better place for it than the Rehoboth and Bethany boardwalks, with the vast ocean on one side and colorful local life on the other. For Janet Meenehan Point, quiet mornings on the Rehoboth boards are cherished “for the quiet, meditative feel.” And Gail Seligson, who began walking that same boardwalk as a way to relieve stress dur-

## An Rx for Parkinson’s Symptoms

If you or someone you know is dealing with Parkinson’s disease, any gym activity might seem like a thing of the past — at least until you meet the instructors of Rock Steady Boxing and the PWR Power Moves classes at Rise Fitness & Adventure.

During a typical Rock Steady Boxing session, attendees don cushioned gloves and take aim at punching bags and instructors’ mitts, but also do stretches using extension bands, with vigorous footwork and rope drills blended in. It’s an intense workout for anyone, and studies have demonstrated it significantly improves cognitive functioning and motor and balance skills.

The PWR Power Moves class focuses on those same outcomes with a gentler regimen. On a recent Friday morning there are a dozen attendees in the class, each seated in a chair with exercise balls and light hand weights within reach. During a peaceful one-hour session, Kelley Harp and Cathleen Lutz lead folks through a balance, strength and brain exercise program to maintain and

restore everyday movements that diminish as a result of Parkinson’s.

Beginning with a background soundtrack of soft country-rock music, the group goes through a peaceful yet energetic stream of shoulder rolls and ball rolling and biceps curls before a series of exercises mimicking boxing and skiing. Near the end, the beat intensifies with “Stayin’ Alive” by the Bee Gees, then transitions to ambient music under low lights and Harp’s voice encouraging thoughts of kindness and healing as the participants rest.

It is an extraordinary experience for all of the attendees, who end up smiling and appear to be moving better as they head home. It is also, as Harp sees it, a testament to the connection between physical activity and a healthier, happier life.

“You don’t have to come into a gym and pump mad iron and run to exhaustion,” she says. “But the simple truth is that exercise is the best medicine. If you want to grow old gracefully, you can do it. You gotta do it. You have to move.” ■



ing the early stages of the COVID crisis, can't imagine changing the routine now.

"The boardwalk is one of my favorite spots in the entire world — and I've traveled to many places," she says after a long, invigorating trek. "It's 1 mile long so it's helpful to have a measured distance for those who keep track. In the summer, it's festive, with so many vacationers, and during the winter it's serene."

Alison White also appreciates the scenery and therapeutic benefits when she walks alongside her 78-year-old father. "These walks keep us both physically and socially active ... with a cast of characters we've gotten to know over the years," she says. "It also kept us connected and healthy as our mother suffered from dementia."

If you'd like some company and the chance to explore other scenic routes, Kathy Aldridge recommends visiting the Delaware Easy Striders group on Facebook. "Easy Striders is a great organization for people who want simple exercise and good company," she explains. "They usually meet at a state park or some other ecologically appealing location and walk



A walk through Cape Henlopen State Park is a relaxing way for members of the Easy Striders group to enjoy nature and stay fit.

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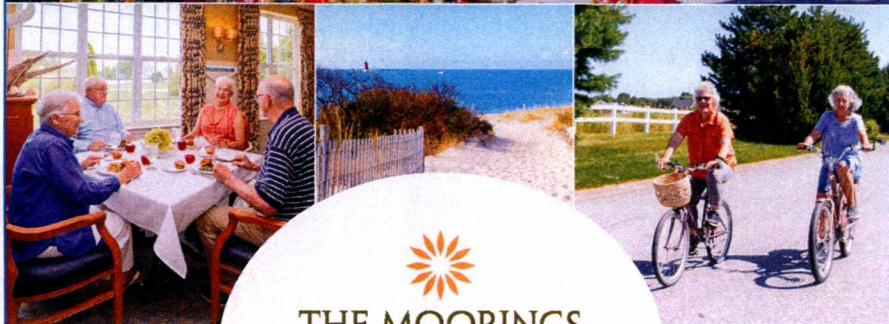
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about 3 miles. I walked with the group on Sunday afternoons ... and made friends with a small group that I walked with on different days.”

Walking with the Striders also introduced her to some of Delaware’s most beautiful places. “If I hadn’t met up with this group, I might have never had the wonderful feeling of chilly fall air on my face as I walked through places like Killens Pond and the James Farm Preserve. It was a wonderful way to get into better shape.”

### **Pickleball = Net fitness gains**

The growing fitness trend has also been a boon for Aldridge’s true passion — pickleball — which she plays several times a week at Dave Marshall Tennis & Fitness at The Plantations near Lewes. Players use a hollow plastic ball and hard paddles instead of racquets, and play on a court that’s less than half the size of a tennis court, which reduces running. While it’s much easier on knees and other joints than tennis, it’s still a fun, challenging game.

“Our median age is 60ish, and people of all physical abilities can play,” Aldridge says. “There’s always lots of laughter, and people appreciate it when you make a great shot.”

First State Pickleball Club Ambassador Kathy Casey has similar experiences playing on courts throughout Sussex County, and she encourages those who’ve never held a paddle to follow in her footsteps: “I had my knees replaced at 57 and didn’t even consider the game until a friend invited me to play with an organized group. ... I was petrified, but then all of a sudden I was hitting these balls, getting that rhythm and thinking, ‘Oh my God, I can be an athlete again.’”

Casey estimates that 40 percent of club members have never played another sport, and that the vast majority feel a similar sense of joy as they



### **A FITNESS RESOURCE LIST**

- Learn about bike tours and membership with Sussex Cyclists at [sussexcyclists.org](http://sussexcyclists.org).
- Plan your next scenic walk by visiting Delaware Easy Striders on Facebook.
- Check out pickleball possibilities by visiting [firststatepickleball.org](http://firststatepickleball.org).





Newcomers and longtime members of Sussex Cyclists work out all kinds of muscles on all kinds of bikes, in rides tailored to their desired level of effort.

make friends among fellow players. “We all know an aging brain does so much better with exercise, the right diet and a feeling of community,” she says after a long morning of play. “And when you’re retired you still feel better when you’re problem-solving, which is what you’re doing when these balls are coming at you. This is exercise disguised as fun — I live to play and play to live.”

While playing at Dave Marshall’s is a good option for those who live within an easy drive of Plantation Road, the First State Pickleball Club fosters play at 10 Sussex County locations via Play-Time Scheduler (an online tool) for social and competitive matches.

### Work out by working in

Sometimes exercise is less about exertion and more about flexibility and emotional and mental health. As longtime instructor Terri Surabian at Dimitra Yoga sees it:

“I refer to yoga as more of a work-in than a work-out because we’re focusing on body awareness, giving you more space in your head and helping you understand your emotions so you can handle stressful things that come up. We always begin with breathing and relaxation and might start out by lying on the floor so our spines are stretching and getting prepared for the more physical aspects.”

From there, Surabian says, “you’re looking at four primary things — flexibility, strength, agility and balance. A lot of people come in with ‘tech neck’ after sitting at a desk for so long, or alignment problems that wear cartilage down. Yoga is therapeutic because the poses we’re

doing engage the muscles and get the joints where they need to be.”

That perspective resonates with Terry Gardner of Rehoboth Beach Yoga.

“Our bodies change with aging, and even though we may have been athletes when we were younger, our joints and muscles can’t withstand the same impact. Modern science agrees that the ancient practice of yoga deepens awareness and expands consciousness. We can all age gracefully by practicing it, so think of it as a lifestyle and a lifesaver.”

The practice of Pilates also emphasizes stretching, body alignment, and strengthening the part of the body between the pelvic floor and diaphragm, commonly known as the “core.” According to Right Balance Pilates co-owner Carin Langen, a former gymnast, it’s a smart way to transition from a sedentary lifestyle.

Although many Pilates participants are very active athletes dedicated to increasing core strength and flexibility, “we sometimes refer to it as ‘fitness meets rehab,’ with a big focus on balance control,” Langen notes. “We have people aged 50 to 80 in some of our classes along with a 96-year-old woman in a wheelchair, someone with a brain injury and another who’s dealing with Parkinson’s.” (See “An Rx for Parkinson’s Symptoms” on page 66.)

If you need yet another option for getting stronger with minimal stress on your joints, you should meet Ellen Spell at Sea Barre Fitness. Don’t be surprised, however, when she speaks forthrightly of her own physical challenges during a lifetime of intense physical activity from high school onward.

“I had a back injury ... and discovered that ‘barre’ gave me a lot of pain relief,” she says as equally fit women and men step into her Route 1 studio. “What really hooked me, though, was getting stronger all over, with clearly defined muscles. It almost became addictive, but in a good way.”

That’s a common sentiment among others drawn to barre, which is a low-impact workout that uses isometric movements combining elements of Pilates, yoga and ballet. Although it’s a workout tailor-made for seasoned athletes, Spell assures newcomers that the practice “is accessible for every

shape, size and age range, with moves that are super simple.”

And, she adds, men are welcome. “There’s a misconception that barre is only for women, but we have several men who love it because they can’t believe how challenging our classes are and how good they feel.”

Spell shares a sentiment echoed by other fitness experts: Whatever type of activity you choose, “research shows exercise is better for you as you age because it changes you on a cellular level. Getting into a good fitness routine is good for your body and your brain, and gets you in shape for all of the other things you love in life.” ■

**We can all age gracefully  
by practicing it, so think  
of it as a lifestyle and a  
LIFESAVER.”**

*Chris Beakey is a frequent contributor to Delaware Beach Life and the author of “Fatal Option,” an Amazon bestseller distributed by Simon & Schuster.*



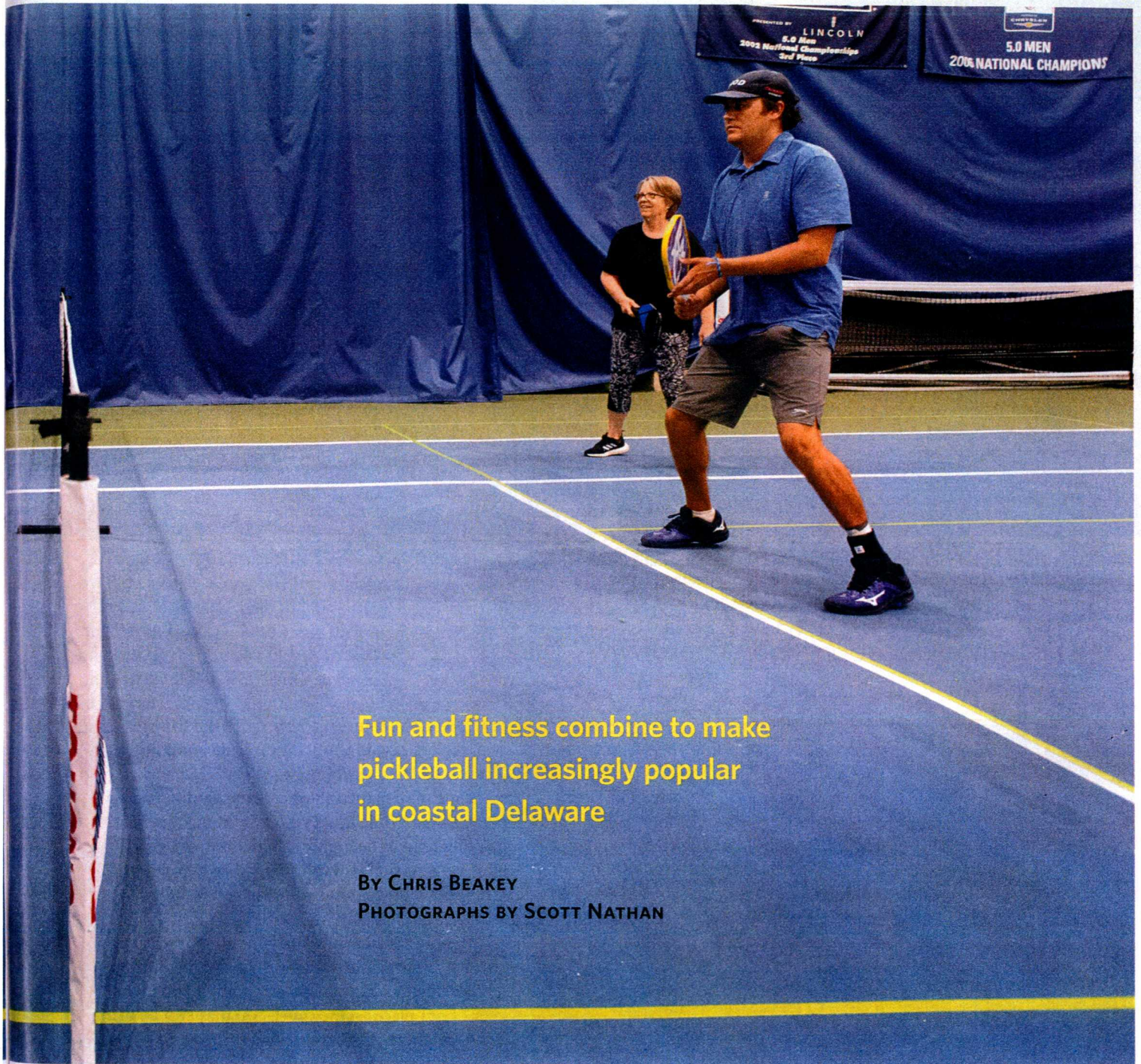


Pickleball players, from left, Polly Smale, Sue Baker and Kathy Aldridge stay clear of "the kitchen," a 7-foot space on each side of the net, while picking up a few tips from teaching pro Jackson Bailey at Dave Marshall Tennis & Fitness, which hosts large groups of pickleball players for social and competitive games several days a week.

**O**ver the past several years, Ginny Rickards and her teenage grandson, Jason, have learned to surf together, spent long days on the Rehoboth boardwalk together, and shared too many wonderful family meals to count. But then, just when she thought life couldn't get any better, they both discovered pickleball, one of the nation's fastest growing sports and now her family's favorite way to stay in shape.

"Jason started first, in May of last year," she recalls. "I watched him play with my daughter, Katie, over at the courts at Redden





## Fun and fitness combine to make pickleball increasingly popular in coastal Delaware

BY CHRIS BEAKEY  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCOTT NATHAN

Ridge near Rehoboth. I was somewhat reluctant to try it because I was never a real tennis player — I'd hit the ball around just to have something to do. But I was surprised at how different pickleball is — the ball is lightweight but moves fast, and once you start playing you realize how much better you get with practice.”

That point of view is enthusiastically shared by Jason, who at 14 is one of the youngest players competing in tournaments around Sussex County. It's also a key reason why the game, which has typically been enjoyed by retirees who want to play a sport that's easy

on joints and muscles, is becoming popular with people of all ages.

According to the USA Pickleball Association, there are about 4.8 million players nationwide. That includes many in the Cape Henlopen region, some of whom are encouraging the public and private sectors to create more places to play.

That's great news to Rickards, who now hits several times a week with Jason, Katie and friends she's met through the game. “Once you start playing, you just want to play more and more,” she says. “I'm pretty sure it's going to be a lifetime thing.” >





Pickleball is a family affair for Ginny Rickards, left, and her daughter Katie Rickards and grandson Jason Harpel-Rickards, all of whom appreciate the game's fun and fitness benefits for both social and highly competitive players.

**I**

**Simple rules for a challenging game**

f you've watched a pickleball match in action, chances are it was on a tennis court that's been temporarily altered, with a portable net dividing a playing space that's 20 feet wide and 44 feet deep, which is about the size of a badminton court. In some ways it looks like tennis, with players hitting forehands, backhands, volleys and overhead smash shots — but with a paddle instead of a racquet. And, because the hollow ball is made of plastic, you can't mistake the distinguishing *bonk* sound it makes on impact.

It's a joyful noise for avid players that's amplified immensely during matches at Dave Marshall Tennis & Fitness outside Lewes, Sea Colony in Bethany Beach, and Sports at the Beach in Georgetown. All three facilities host hitting sessions with large numbers of players several days a week and cater to players at various levels with lessons and clinics. Local devotees of the sport can also find courts at various locations in Rehoboth, Lewes, Georgetown, Millsboro, Millville and Dagsboro. (See "Places to Play," page 64.)

There are many reasons why the game has become popular. Players generally find it easy to develop basic skills and many become competent competitors after a few weeks of practice. It's also gentler on the body than tennis and racquetball because the movements are smaller and because players don't have to run as fast or far given the smaller size of the court.

**T**

**The path to improvement**

hat said, many come to realize that even though pickleball is easy to learn, it's difficult to master. Jackson Bailey, a teaching pro at Dave Marshall, is someone players turn to when they want to reach a higher level. While those who take home the most trophies tend to be highly experienced and gifted athletes, he coaches many others with average athletic abilities who go on to compete successfully in local tournaments.

"Winning is all about positioning, shot selection and decisiveness," he explains. "Positioning is important because it's hard to win any point if you're not in the right place on the court. You master it by being able to adapt to the situation you're in."

As an example, he describes a doubles match with himself and his partner back at the baseline and their opponents much closer to the net.

"The worst thing I can do when I'm way back there is to try to hit a power shot because they'll have lots of time to react and just knock it down. What you want to hit in that situation is either a low 'dinking' shot at their feet, which is hard to get back, or a ball that goes high over their heads and forces them to run back for a ball that's harder to return."

He adds, "You can't really select the right shot until you master all kinds of shots — forehands, backhands and volleys." Bailey also notes that volleys in pickleball might initially be more complicated for players transitioning from tennis because



balls can't be hit out of the air if you're within 7 feet of the net — a territory known as "the kitchen." In that case you have to wait for the ball to bounce before you can hit it.

The third winning skill — decisiveness — tends to evolve only after many hours of practice.

"Sometimes you mess up when you have too much time to get to a ball — meaning too much time to think about too many different ways to hit it," he says. "You want to set your mind to the shot that's going to put you in the best position to win the point, whether that's a volley, a penetrating forehand or a lob that's going to force those opponents at the net into an uncomfortable defensive position."

"Don't be wishy-washy," he says with a laugh. "Just commit to the right shot and hit that ball for a winner!"

Those strategies are put to good use by Todd Muller, a longtime tennis player who also plays pickleball, and his partner, Jaaron Graham. Both are in their 40s and among the younger players in peak physical condition who have gravitated to the game. They've also found ways to tailor their play to their own fitness goals by playing against each other instead of the round-robin doubles matches that are more common at large facilities.

**/// Don't be wishy-washy. Just commit to the right shot and hit that ball for a winner!"**

.....

"We enjoy singles because it's healthy competition," Muller says. "We also like the workout aspect of our hour-and-a-half-long singles matches."

Both have become skilled players, yet Muller emphasizes that they're in it first and foremost for fun.

"We learned pickleball organically — just bought the paddles and started playing. We've never taken lessons but have watched some competitive matches on TV and picked up pointers. ... But I know we can make subtle adjustments to improve our game. Our advice is to just get out there and do it. Enjoy the movement. Enjoy the competition. And enjoy the process of getting better." >



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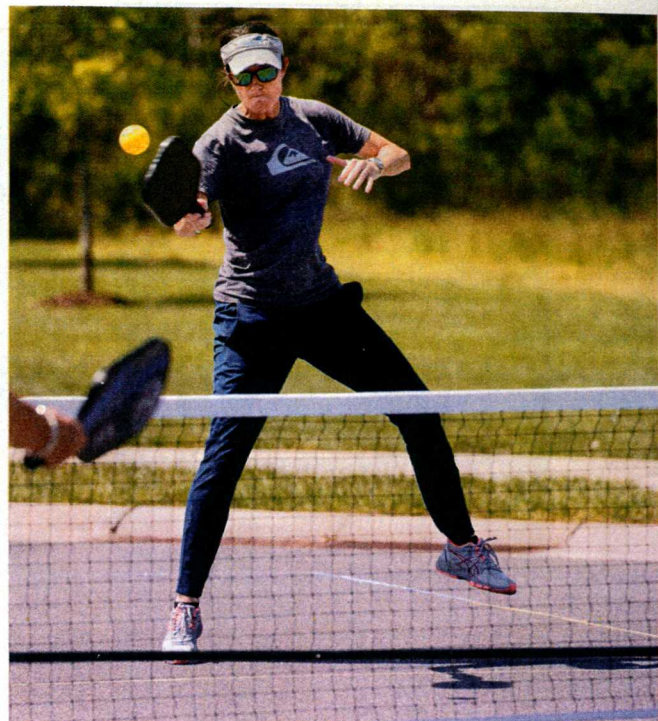


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**LEFT:** Lewis LeBrun expertly punches back when his opponent hits a wide and low ball right at his knees. **RIGHT:** Katie Rickards gets some air hitting an aggressive shot across the net at Redden Ridge near Rehoboth, one of many local communities where residents have banded together to create pickleball courts, in this case with tape, chalk, and a portable net.

**W**

**ISO ... more courts!**

hile First State Pickleball Club President Andy Staton has noticed a large number of players aiming to be more competitive, he says many just want to have a good time and play as often as possible, even if it means driving a ways to find an available court.

“There’s so much camaraderie in this game, and it’s a great way to be more social while you’re getting fit,” he says. “I’ve met people who might have tried to stay in shape by walking their dogs for half an hour but are now playing pickleball for two hours for a great cardio workout. Unfortunately, there just aren’t enough public courts, but we’re hoping that’ll change.”

Staton estimates there are more than 2,000 frequent players in Sussex County, with membership in his club up more than 30 percent from this time last year. He’s excited about the further development of Sandhill Fields near Georgetown, where a public-private partnership is paving the way for a new fieldhouse that will feature a sports court for field hockey and indoor pickleball courts in addition to the six outdoor courts already in place.

As a real estate agent, he also believes it’s a smart move for developers of new communities to install pickleball courts. That’s based on more than intuition: *Architectural Digest* declared in March that pickleball courts have replaced golf

courses as “the hottest sports amenity in high-end developments.” Equally telling is the Sports & Fitness Industry Association’s “2021 Topline Participation Report,” which showed a 21.3 percent increase in the number of pickleball players nationwide in 2019.

Jeff Evans, the director of sales and marketing for Carl M. Freeman Companies, represents one of many local developers responding to both market research and rave reviews for the game.

“We just added two new pickleball courts at Bayside at Fenwick Island because our residents asked for them, and are building courts at Tower Hill off New Road in Lewes because we know they’ll be a great incentive for buyers and something the residents will really enjoy,” he says.

Evans bases that opinion on the company’s deep experience creating communities built around active lifestyles, where amenities such as pools, tennis and pickleball courts, along with organized activities, are all included. He’s also reacting to what he heard at the recent Ideal Living Expo in McLean, Va., which spotlights communities that are especially desirable to folks who will soon retire and those seeking vacation homes.

“No one who was there to learn about new developments asked about tennis. They wanted to know about designated pickleball courts because

“There’s so much camaraderie; it’s a great way to be more social while getting fit.”

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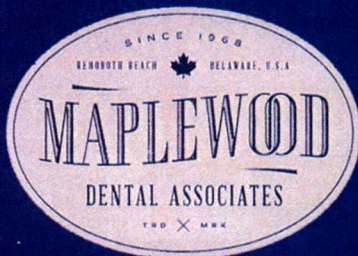
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Cynthia Changuris and Ed Connelly put up a united front to ensure the ball doesn't get past either of them during a game at Redden Ridge near Rehoboth. **BELOW:** Jason Harpel-Rickards is all smiles as he warms up before a match at Redden Ridge.

they all thought it's much more fun, and because they weren't as sore after playing pickleball as with other sports."

Longtime First State Pickleball Club member Kathy Casey seconds the notion that the game is a smart amenity for active adult communities because it's had a life-changing impact on her own health.

"I blew out my knees at the age of 30 and could hardly do anything physically demanding for a long time," she says. "But then a few years ago I went down to visit a friend in Florida who lives at

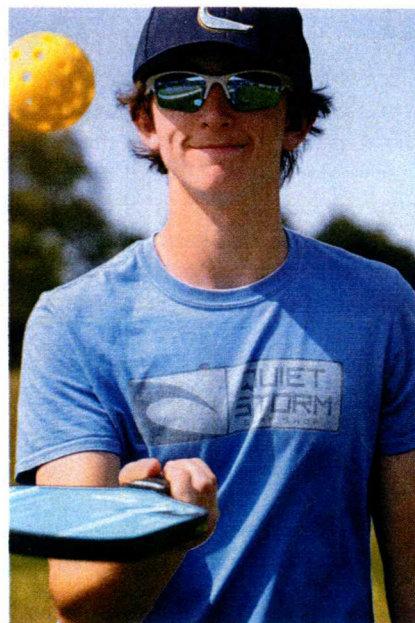
The Villages. She kept talking about pickleball and talked me into trying. I had to rotate in with people I didn't know and was terrified. But then, all of a sudden, I was hitting all these balls! Once I got my rhythm it was so exciting. ... I realized: Oh my God, I can be an athlete again!"

Although she's also noticed many younger players showing up for round-robin play, including "uncles with nephews, people 25 to 30 years old and a guy I met at Casapulla's who told me he loved it in high school," she's become a true ambassador for a sport tailor-made for retirees who want vigorous exercise that drives longevity and a happy state of mind.

"My knees feel fabulous — I no longer have any problems with them at all. It's almost like this little athlete wakes up and just wants to play."

And for anyone who's still on the sidelines because they're worried they won't hold their own with experienced players, she offers simple advice:

"You can do this even if you don't have great hand-eye coordination. Just start, and follow the ball and pretty soon you'll be like me, playing for three hours and always ready for just one more game!"



Chris Beakey writes from his home in Lewes. His most recent novel, "Fatal Option," was published by Simon & Schuster in February 2017.



# PLACES TO PLAY

From Milford to Fenwick there are many places where you can play pickleball as part of an organized group or on your own, and if you're looking for a new home, know that many new communities feature pickleball courts as developers respond to the demand. Below is a sampler of what's available.

- ▶ **Dave Marshall Tennis & Fitness** at 18464 Plantations Blvd. near Lewes offers pickleball seven days a week to members and guests, with organized social play for all levels, lessons, clinics and occasional tournaments. Visit [davemarshalltennis.com/pickleball](http://davemarshalltennis.com/pickleball) to learn more.
- ▶ **Sea Colony** at 39359 Racquet Lane in Bethany offers pickleball court rentals seven days a week to Sea Colony homeowners and renters along with lessons by a certified teaching pro. Visit [seacolony.com/pickleball](http://seacolony.com/pickleball) for details.
- ▶ **Canalfront Park in Lewes** welcomes pickleball players to use its tennis courts, with pickleball players having priority use at various times of the day. You can find a schedule at the Canalfront Park link at [ci.lewes.de.us/155/Parks-Marina](http://ci.lewes.de.us/155/Parks-Marina).
- ▶ **Rehoboth Elementary School** at 500 Stockley St. has four dedicated pickleball courts that are available to the general public after 4:30 p.m. during the school year and all day on weekends

and in the summer. Play is on a first-come basis. To see when players plan to use these courts, as well as others in the coastal area, visit [playtimescheduler.com](http://playtimescheduler.com).

- ▶ **J.M. Clayton Elementary School** at 252 Clayton Ave. in Frankford has 10 dedicated pickleball courts available to the general public after 4 p.m. when school is in session and all day on weekends and during the summer. Play is on a first-come basis and the courts are lighted for evening play.
- ▶ **Evans Park** at 32517 Dukes Drive in Millville offers three lighted pickleball courts that are open to the general public. Play is on a first-come basis.
- ▶ **Sandhill Fields** at 20330 Sandhill Road in Georgetown currently offers six outdoor courts for the general public. Visit [sandhillfields.org](http://sandhillfields.org) to learn more.
- ▶ **Sports at the Beach** at 22518 Lewes-Georgetown Highway (Route 9) offers four indoor courts. Call 302-856-7400 or visit [sportsatthebeach.com/pickleball](http://sportsatthebeach.com/pickleball) for additional information.
- ▶ **The Factory Sports Complex** at 17543 Nassau Commons Blvd. near Lewes offers courts for rent and clinics for various levels of play. Call 302-703-6964 or visit [factorysportsde.com/adult-programs/pickleball](http://factorysportsde.com/adult-programs/pickleball) for details. ●

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# The Power of Place

At home on stage or at an easel, Andrew Criss draws inspiration from a nurturing community

BY CHRIS BEAKEY | PHOTOGRAPH BY CAROLYN WATSON

Inspired by his walks through nature, artist and actor Andrew Criss enjoys serene wooded views as he works from the back porch of his craftsman-style home.



**When asked to describe** the unique influences that have shaped his personal and professional life in coastal Delaware, artist and actor Andrew Criss returns to the back porch of the Rehoboth-area home where he was last interviewed by *Delaware Beach Life* in 2006.

That house, like his life, has significantly changed in the years since. What was once a simple modular structure on a quarter-acre

of bare grass is now a charming cedar-shingled cottage that would fit well in a book on arts-and-crafts architecture.

On one porch wall are French doors wide open to interior rooms offering cool respite from the midday sun. Opposite the doors is a low wall with a view to a backyard sanctuary that has more than 40 native-species trees, vibrant blooming gardens, and nesting boxes for countless generations of birds. ▶

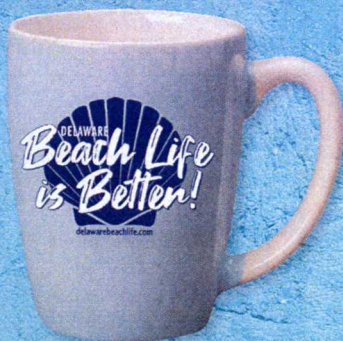


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It's a magical setting that inspires extra awe when you learn that the home has been transformed, without help from gardeners or skilled construction crews, by Criss and his husband, photographer and educator Chad States.

"My grandfather was my role model, and he built his own house from the ground up," Criss recalls. "He told me you can learn everything you need if you have the right books."

That's a creed Criss has lived by, learning through self-determination and experience to create a body of work that reflects the same sturdy craftsman sensibility and classic lines found in his beautiful yet unpretentious home.

Over the past few years, landscapes have taken center stage in his art, with bold, muscular compositions of Delaware's beaches, marshes, farms and fields rendered in surreal plays of light that capture the feeling of a long walk through nature. Yet he also delights in crafting portraits that tend to convey people in happy moments, including those in his "People With Dogs" series — inspired he says, by his desire "to bring a little joy to the world."

Which is easy to do, Criss adds, in a seaside town that relishes creativity and the entrepreneurial spirit.

"Rehoboth has always felt like a small town full of people who wanted to get to know me, which probably wouldn't have happened if I lived and worked in a big city," he explains. "Whether you make art, music, beer or any other interesting thing, we can always find people who are interested in what we do."

### Happiness and support

If you gather a large group of artists into a room, you're apt to find some who draw, paint, photograph, write or craft in an effort to overcome mental or physical challenges or simply find calm in response to the everyday stresses of life.

While Andrew Criss would probably enjoy their company, he emphasizes that his own work is fueled more by the joy he experienced as a "strange

little boy but a very happy kid" who grew up surrounded by people who nurtured his talents and curiosity.

"In third grade I spent my Saturdays in a ceramics class at a strip mall with 10 ladies smoking cigarettes," he recalls with a hearty laugh. "At home, my dad gave me his engineering tools from college to help me learn how to draft. When I didn't feel challenged by my high school art program, a teacher put me in with some more advanced kids. And at one point I put on a puppet show after writing the play, building the set, and creating the invitations."

Simply put, he adds, "we made do with what we had."



I knew I was interested in everything creative but still didn't know what to do with my weird flaky brain."

### From the canvas to the stage

While he tends to be known locally more for his paintings, Criss earned his undergraduate degree in theater with an emphasis on set design at the University of Texas at Austin. Yet he knew he had to develop new skills to make a living.

"I thought graphic design would be a good job, so I made a book of illustrations based on logos I'd done for friends and mailed it off to an agency in Washington, D.C.," he says. "It was run by a cool, beautiful, stylish woman named Donna Lomangino. She said, 'You're not ready yet, but you have potential so we want you to be the face of the office. ... Talk to the clients and deal with scheduling while we train you.'"

It was a smart proposition for both Criss and the agency, because it took little time for him to master Photoshop, Illustrator and other graphic design



software that enabled him to do successful client work at the agency before moving on to become the art director for a popular magazine.

"It was a great experience because it made me scramble and hustle and think about what I really wanted to do."

It also fueled his restless spirit in a very good way, he believes.

"I knew I was interested in everything creative. ... I could draw, design, and act but still didn't know what to do with my weird flaky brain. It was like I suffered from the distraction of too many opportunities."

Just after turning 30, he moved to Delaware, where he began to paint in earnest, earning his way to shows at the Rehoboth Art League, Peninsula Gallery, and Gallery 50 along with a loyal following of fans. Edging close to 40, he then began to vividly reminisce about his education in the theater, and decided to make a move.

#### Long walks, endless inspiration

"There wasn't a lightning-bolt moment that made me suddenly realize I missed acting — it happened more gradually as I watched my partner [States] interact with his students. As a painter, you're not really collaborating with anyone. I didn't want to work in a vacuum anymore."

He began auditioning, and landed his first part on a major stage — The Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington — playing Goetz in a new adaptation of Friedrich Schiller's "Wallenstein." Two more roles at that prestigious company followed, along with parts at the Folger Theatre and eight other well-regarded stages.

When asked about his favorite roles, he cites the production of "The Gospel According to Thomas Jefferson, Charles Dickens and Count Leo Tolstoy" at the Lantern Theatre Company in Philadelphia. "I got to play Tolstoy, who's trapped in a room with the other two. ... They have a two-hour debate about what it means to be a good person. Eventually he realizes that money and power are not what life is all about."

That perspective isn't foreign to Criss, given his feelings about materialism.

"I'm not impressed by cars or other expensive things. That kind of stuff doesn't make you interesting. The things I enjoy are situation-based. Like talking about art and listening to the rain beat down on the porch that I built with my own hands, or taking long walks with my faithful dog."

He also speaks eloquently of how he intentionally directed the earnings from his paintings and his work in commercials — and a lead role in the CBS hit "Person of Interest" — to create the life he has now as a full-time artist.

"I sacrificed to make double and even triple payments on my mortgage because I wanted to have this place of my own ... knowing what people spend to go on vacation in Rehoboth and being able to have a trickle of that experience year-round."

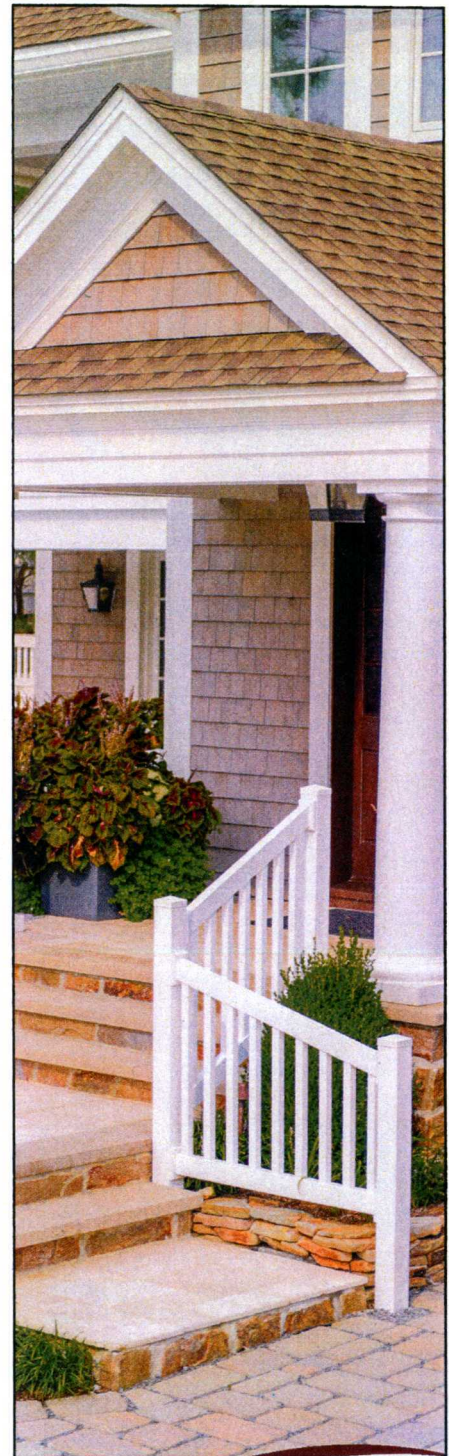
That sentiment inevitably brings him back to what he loves most about his life near the beach.

"Rehoboth is about the size of the town I grew up in ... a small community where you know your neighbors. People can do beautiful things for each other in towns like that."

Even better, he says, is his proximity to the ocean and other natural settings that keep him inspired and engaged in his unique approach to his work.

"We've lucked out to live in this crazily beautiful area, and every time they build a new trail, I'm there. Whether it's the beach or the woods, the same place is a new subject based on the time of day, the cloud pattern or whether the moon is out. I want to remind people to pay attention to these places and celebrate them; it's a way of expressing gratitude. A way of saying thank you for this magic that is all around us." ■

*Chris Beakey writes from his home in Lewes. His most recent novel, "Fatal Option," was published by Simon & Schuster in February 2017.*



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# The Color of Happiness

Rod Cook treasured the joy of beach vacations. He hopes his paintings share that delight with others.

BY CHRIS BEAKEY | PHOTOGRAPH BY CAROLYN WATSON

Rod Cook has to travel only a few blocks from the sand and surf to his home and workspace near Rehoboth Avenue, where natural sunlight keeps the beach vibe going.



If you've come across Rod Cook's paintings of Rehoboth Beach over the past few decades, you've probably been pleased with his artful depictions of colorfully striped beach chairs and umbrellas, bright blue skies, and views of the ocean glistening in the sunlight.

If you're an especially ardent fan, however, it's likely because you've gazed at the work long enough to *feel* the coarse sand beneath your bare feet, the warm sun on your face and, perhaps, the promise of a summer romance with one of the young suntanned men often featured at the forefront of his work.

In other words, you love it because it connects you to the sensations of a perfect day at the beach.

"I think a lot of people like these paintings because they come from suburban environments with great memories of vacations when they were growing up," Cook says. "You always went in the summer because your parents could only afford a little time at the beach. And what you remember are the happy times when everyone was at ease. You prayed for good weather so you could go on the amusement rides and walk on the boardwalk and luxuriate with the kind of fresh fish dinners and ice cream cones you'd never get at home." >



### Building friendships (and artistic support)

The credibility Cook earned in those early days paid off during three decades of teaching in the Baltimore area, including at the Maryland Institute College of Art, Catonsville Community College, the nearby Jewish Community Center, and Stevenson University. He has also been an active member of the Baltimore Watercolor Society, the Pennsylvania Watercolor Society and the Rehoboth Art League, an especially fitting venue for an artist who greatly appreciates the support he's received from local business people over the years.

"I started coming to Rehoboth when I was in my 30s, which coincided with the forming of my gay identity. It's where I met my husband, Charles Browne III. We rented a house at 125 Hickman and had eight or nine large parties every summer. There were two unique things about our parties, though — we didn't play loud music because we didn't want to bother our neighbors, who were always invited, and they were the only parties that fed people, with big tables of ham and turkey and cole slaw and baked beans. We called them Sea Breeze parties because that's the only drink we served."

In addition to "setting us up in the gay community," those parties also fostered friendships that nurtured his local success.

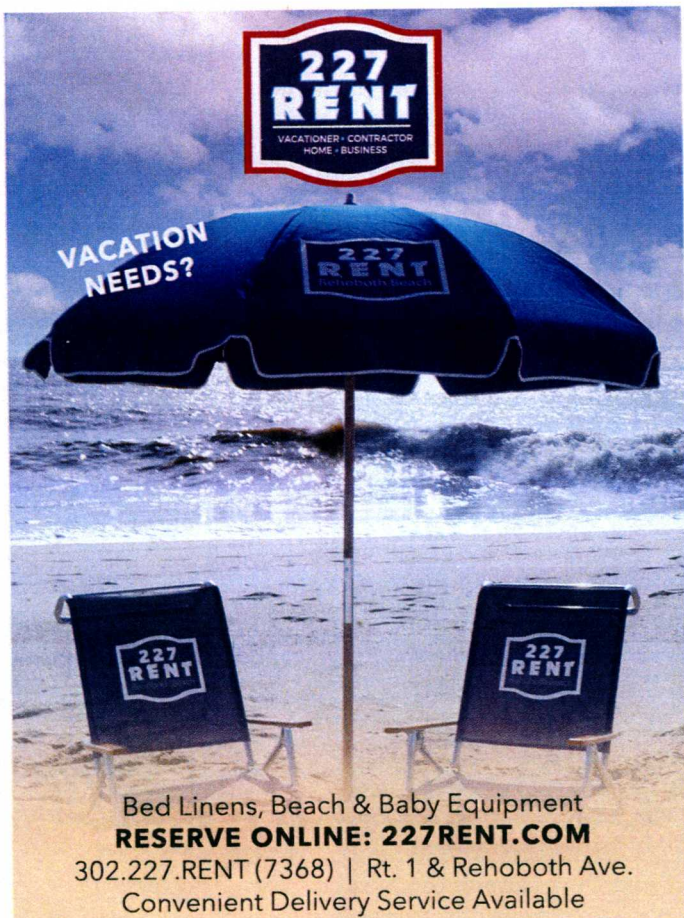
"We started going to the Blue Moon. At the time it was owned by Joyce Felton. She had been allowing artist friends to have one-person shows there. Somehow I got one, which was very successful, so I started doing one there every year. This was important because the Moon had a huge gay following of people who could afford to buy art, and it's in a resort community that pulls from the whole Mid-Atlantic area. And people who have second homes have a lot of empty walls."

“**People like these paintings because they come from suburban environments with great memories of vacations when they were growing up.**”

### Storytelling through shades of light

In recent years Cook has traveled extensively for enjoyment and for a never-ending stream of artistic inspiration. As a result, his portfolio includes compelling scenes of Philadelphia, Washington, Palm Springs, Calif., Los Angeles and Puerto Vallarta, a seaside town on Mexico's Pacific coast.

Many of these paintings convey the same vacation vibes exemplified in his locally focused works, along with the impressionistic sensibility that makes you feel as if you've landed there with him. One especially remarkable painting, which was sold long ago,



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PHOTOGRAPH BY CAROLYN WATSON

Art Department

Today you might say this artist’s mind is in a different place. He’s semi-retired, with a year-round residence just a few blocks away from Rehoboth Avenue, where he’s able to paint at leisure without having to pack up and head back to a less interesting home. Yet his work will always be infused with recollections of his early days in town and the carefree sensations so many people feel when they vacation in Rehoboth today.

**A meandering path (but with milestones)**

The happiness conveyed through much of Cook’s work is mirrored by how he feels about his own artistic journey, which gained some vital traction during his U.S. Army service near the end of the Vietnam War.

“I’ve always had good luck,” he says. “After doing some arithmetic on how long the war would last, I signed up for another year. That’s when I scored high on a language aptitude test and got sent to Monterey to learn Vietnamese.” That assignment, at the Defense Language Institute near the California coast, became doubly beneficial. While learning the new language, Cook found enormous artistic inspiration in the beautiful seaside setting and the freedom to develop as a painter.

Yet he also had a practical mindset. Recognizing the difficulties of trying to support himself solely on the sales of artworks, he earned a master of fine arts in painting after his military service in addition to the bachelor’s degree in English he was awarded prior to enlisting. Those degrees laid the groundwork for a long career as a teacher and set him up for his next great opportunity in Baltimore.

“The city had a program for the overeducated and underemployed,” he recalls with a laugh. “I won a contest that enabled me to paint a mural on the Bromo Seltzer Tower. I worked with my friend Neal Gallico. We did a 35-foot ballerina’s leg that was up there for a long time. It set me up as a legitimate art person because when you go to find work and have a mural on a 15-story building in your portfolio, people take notice.”



is of a desk in front of a window filled with a brilliant yet calming golden glow. Titled "Morning Light, Cotuit," it was painted during a New England vacation in a rambling beach house with longtime friends. Aside from its pleasing composition, Cook's storytelling artistry also makes the image feel like the room of a writer inspired by the promise of a fresh new day by the sea.

The treatment of light is also the driving force of his beach paintings, virtually all of which depict the hot, bright sun of long midsummer days. In most cases the light is literal — it's meant to convey little more than a sense of perfect-weather happiness. Yet in two remarkable works titled "Hot Sun Lavender Skies" and "Lavender Skies at the Beach," the colors and light are magnified and rendered with a dreamlike quality.

"In both paintings the sun has become a ball and it's radiating heat," Cook explains. But there's a blueness in the images that is "saturated with a cer-



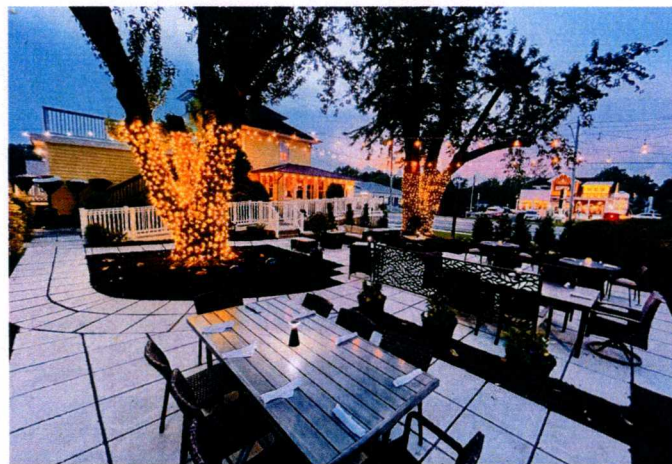
Titled "Bold Stripes and Relaxation," this watercolor embodies Rod Cook's love of bright, sunny days, with a hint of surreal heat in the cooler shades of the sky.

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tain kind of heat but in a cool color that makes the sun look hotter with the contrast of the blue and the yellow.”

Light and emotion also work together in his paintings of Poodle Beach, many of which capture fetching images of lifeguards looking down from white wooden stands and men lounging in the sand. One amusing work, titled “Stars and Stripes Forever,” features no fewer than four American flags flapping in a gentle breeze. At the foreground is a reclining young man with his face turned toward the ocean, looking as if he might be dozing in the hot sun. Standing just behind him is another man, gazing at the viewer of the painting with an “I caught you looking” smile.

Cook based the painting on a photograph he took. “It was about being at the right place at the right time,” he says, just as the standing man glanced at the lens.

“The whole American flag thing is something I get a kick out of,” he adds. “The boys are sexy but the tongue-in-cheekiness is part of that because ‘we’re Americans too, thank you very much.’”

While this particular painting is still available, most of the others in Cook’s online portfolio have found homes. Yet anyone drawn to his work will be pleased to know he doesn’t see himself running out of material any time soon: “Rehoboth affords me an enormous spectrum of subjects, whether you’re dealing with the beach and the cascade of colors from the umbrellas, or wonderful inflated plastic dolphins, or the amusement rides or someone doing handstands. There’s a constant source of inspiration because there’s always somebody having a good time and doing something that’s worth painting.” ■

Chris Beakey writes from his home in Lewes. His most recent novel, “Fatal Option,” was published by Simon & Schuster in February 2017.



**HAVE A LOOK** To view Rod Cook’s online portfolio, visit [rodcook.us](http://rodcook.us).

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