



Hapeville Depot Museum Director Samantha Singleton highlights the town's hidden history in exhibits paying homage to many unsung heroes from its industrial, blue collar past. COURTESY OF HAPEVILLE DEPOT MUSEUM

Hapeville's past comes alive at Depot Museum

Director strives for sense of empathy with exhibits that make town's history more accessible, relatable.

By Felicia Feaster
For the AJC

Propose a trip to a history museum and you might inspire a yawn or even some eye rolls. Small-town history displays, especially in the South, can often conjure up visions of tone-deaf institutions still trafficking in stories of ole plantation days and melanin-free fundraisers. Despite its quaint downtown, which features a 104-year-old family-owned drugstore and a peaked white-clad church straight out of a Norman Rockwell illustration, Hapeville — just 8 miles south of downtown Atlanta — is taking another tack when it comes to history. For one, there is a noticeable absence of the Confederate monuments that define so many Southern towns.

IF YOU GO

Hapeville Depot Museum. Exhibits on view include "Civil Rights and Workers Rights: An Exhibit of Hapeville's Atlanta Assembly Plant," "Of Men and Mules: Convict Leasing in Quarries of the New South" and "Plunkett Town History." Free, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday, 620 S. Central Ave., Hapeville, 404-669-2175. hapevilledepot.org

And the vision of the town's past offered up at its history museum is different, too. The Hapeville Depot Museum, in a former train depot built in 1890, is a definitive break from tradition. Events, lectures and openings at the museum

Depot continued on E8



Candace Weslosky (left), Evan Brandonisio, Nur Chernnet and Nic Hoffmann — four of the five core Cineprov performers — attend the "Star Trek IV" screening May 10 at the Tara. They'll be back Saturday to riff on "Rocky IV." RODNEY HO/AJC

CINEPROV BOLDLY RIFFS WHERE NO ONE HAS RIFFED BEFORE

Live-mocking old films is an art form in and of itself.

By Rodney Ho
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About 20 minutes into a screening of "Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home" at Atlanta's Tara Theatre, Captain Kirk's crew is nearing home but receives a surprise distress signal and a warning: "Do not approach Earth!" A voice emanating from the crowd interjects: "Earth sucks! One star. Would not recommend!" That wasn't Kirk or Sulu and certainly not Spock. It was Candace Weslosky, part of five-person Atlanta comedy troupe Cineprov. Their mission going back 20 years: to explore strange movies, to seek out new jokes and snarky

IF YOU GO

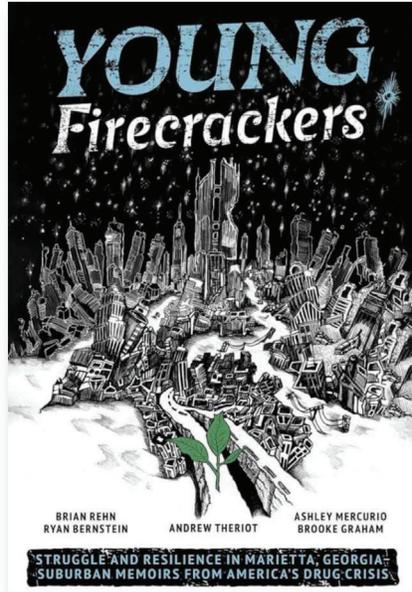
"Rocky IV" 8 p.m. Saturday, \$16-49. Tara Theatre, 2345 Cheshire Bridge Road NE, Atlanta. 470-567-1968. taraatlanta.com.

observations, to boldly riff where no one has riffed before. The group has gathered monthly since 2005 at different locations around Atlanta to screen a film and do their own live version of "Mystery Science Theater 3000," the classic TV show hosted by Joel Hodgson

Cineprov continued on E8

'There's enough dynamite to blast the false narrative. Moving to the suburbs doesn't mean your child will be safe ... We squandered our privilege, access and opportunities.'

Brian Rehn, in 'Young Firecrackers,' a five-part memoir written by him and four high school friends



More funerals than weddings in Marietta addiction memoir

Five friends reflect on how growing up in nascent years of opioid epidemic wreaked havoc on their lives.

By Danielle Charbonneau
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Funerals have become too common for Brian Rehn and the friends he grew up with in Marietta. The now 42-year-old director of global store design for L'Oréal and Kiehl's has worn a suit to at least one a year for 20 years. It's become ritual. His group of friends organizes a carpool now and plans which Starbucks they will visit on the way to the cemetery.

None have been easy, but Cove's funeral hit harder.

Brian Cove had been sober for 13 years before he started taking prescription pain medication for injuries he sustained working as a craftsman remodeling homes.

He had been one among their tight-knit group of friends who had seemingly recovered from addiction after years spent battling dependence on drugs.

His addiction, like so many in their friend group, could be traced back to their Pope High School years, growing up in Marietta in the late

"Firecrackers" continued on E9



Brian Rehn now lives in Florida with his daughter. "How do I not squander the opportunity that they lost?" he writes of the 30 friends who have died. COURTESY OF BRIAN REHN 2024.

Book cover: The apocalyptic skyline created by co-author Brian Rehn for "Young Firecrackers" depicts the devastation of the opioid crisis in Atlanta. The leaf represents the glimmer of hope the authors wish to extend to individuals struggling with addiction. COURTESY OF BRIAN REHN

WHAT'S INSIDE

FOOD & DINING

How to select, cook and enjoy a Southern summer favorite

Whether it's on the cob, fried into fritters or slucked into a succotash, fresh corn is a versatile ingredient with a sweet flavor and crunchy texture. **E11**

Carrying on his dad's business with a treat everyone loves

Ever since working in his dad's shop in the 1970s, Mark Berens was destined to be a frozen custard celebrity. **E11**



BOOKS A witty, sexy new novel

Winning an award before it was even published, "Midnight at the Cinema Palace" is a love letter to queerness, friendship, movies and San Francisco in the '90s. **E3**

TRAVEL



A trip to the other side

Venture over the 24-mile-long bridge in New Orleans to find out what's on the other side. **E18**

LIVING & ARTS



Four of the five authors of "Young Firecrackers": Ryan Bernstein (from left), Brian Rehn, Brooke Graham and Ashley Mercurio. The authors all graduated from Pope High School in Marietta in the late '90s and early 2000s during the opioid crisis, with devastating effects. COURTESY OF BRIAN REHN

'Firecrackers'

continued from E1

1990s and early 2000s in the nascent years of what is now a well-documented national drug epidemic.

By their late 30s, though, Cove seemed to be on solid ground. He had a wife and children he loved, a baker's dozen years of sobriety, and was successful.

But then Rehn got the tragic news: A co-worker had found Cove unconscious in his car in the parking lot of a job site on his lunch break. He had overdosed on a bag of heroin laced with fentanyl and died alone.

Cove's death was striking. Not just because he was a close friend or previously sober, but because Cove's death marked number 30.

"Three, zero," Rehn writes. "Thirty close friends ... We were not raised in an inner city where drugs and death are a humbling part of existence. Yet, the number of funerals has been more than triple the number of weddings among us."

Even before Cove's death, Rehn had floated the idea of writing a book with his friends about how their lives had been derailed by drugs at a young age.

While several friends had expressed interest (coincidentally during a conversation at Cove's bachelor party), the project never gained traction. Then Cove died.

"(Cove's) death was the spark of motivation," Rehn said.

Beneath the facade

Six years later, the result is "Young Firecrackers," a five-part memoir written by Rehn and four of his high school friends who survived addiction: Ashley Mercurio, Ryan Bernstein, Andrew Theriot and Brooke Graham.

The authors worked with a professional editor, pitched the book to agents and publishers, and ultimately self-published the book on Amazon in April. Last month, the book ranked No. 7 in the Teen and YA Nonfiction on Drugs and Alcohol Abuse category.

It includes an introduction by Rehn, followed by five personal stories. Each author shares how they began experimenting with drugs, how those experiments spiraled into full blown addictions, and how they've since managed to live while so many of their friends didn't.

In stark and often disturbing detail, the stories reveal the dark and desperate depths of addiction: the overdoses, collapsed veins, abscesses, needle-spread illnesses, arrests, jails, rehabs, custody battles, lost relationships, estranged families and dead friends.

The book opens in a seemingly unlikely place: an upper-class, suburban Pleasantville, as described by Rehn.

"Neighborhoods look charming from the outside. Monolithic red brick entrance signs with cheesy names like 'Grand Oaks' make the houses sound more expensive, complete with luscious, manicured lawns," Rehn writes. "... Kids flourish in a world of backyard barbecues and picnics in the park... Families feel safely situated on the outskirts, with a convenient commute to Atlanta but far enough from the inner-city."

The schools in the east Cobb County are among the best in the state. In 2024, three east Cobb high schools ranked in the top 25 public high schools in Georgia, according to U.S. News & World Report. The environment lends itself to a certain "air of invincibility," Rehn said. Good families offer "codependent parachutes" and bailouts that made rock bottom harder to hit.

Parents, and society at large, weren't yet knowledgeable about the potency and addictive quality of prescription pills, specifically OxyContin, which came on the market in 1996.

"People don't think that this ide-



Ashley Mercurio, shown with her two sons, celebrated 18 years of sobriety in May. She is one of the authors who shares her story of addiction and recovery in "Young Firecrackers." COURTESY OF ASHLEY MERCURIO

alistic area is somewhere things like this can happen. Wrong. It can happen anywhere," said Rehn's father, Ralph Rehn, who watched his son spiral in addiction for 15 years after high school.

"Either the school and local government didn't understand what was happening underneath the suburban safety net — or they were turning a blind eye to (put it lightly)," Rehn writes. "There's enough dynamite to blast the false narrative. Moving to the suburbs doesn't mean your child will be safe ... We squandered our privilege, access and opportunities."

The gateway drug

Like most in "Young Firecrackers," Rehn's story begins with teen angst and a desire to fit in. In early high school he was a natural athlete and "soccer prodigy." But by 16, his priorities shifted.

"I threw it all away to skateboard and party," he wrote. "Having a social life that I so desperately craved became more important than following my talents."

He maintained excellent grades but began acting recklessly. The day he got his driver's license, he drank and drove. He drank tequila before class and was part of "The Beam Team" — a group of friends who would drink Jim Beam together after school. He got pulled over when he was 17 while rolling on ecstasy.

"I was let go because I was a white kid from Marietta who could lie well," he writes. "My luck eventually ran out."

Before his senior year, few people he knew used opioids. But then one night a friend brought over his mom's large bottle of OxyContin she was prescribed for back pain.

"He gave a brief tutorial on how to peel and crush the pill correctly. ... By the next night, our body had gained tolerance, and we began the daily search for Oxy," Rehn writes. "Oxy exploded within our circle, and the supply and demand became astronomical ... Friends started to drive to Florida once 'pill mill' doctor's offices popped up."

Pills somehow didn't seem that bad, Rehn recalls.

"They must be clean if sold in a sealed bottle," he said. "Boy were we wrong."

Rehn grew dependent on OxyContin, and when it wasn't available, he turned to the drug's closest street cousin: heroin. To buy it, he would

drive to The Bluff, an area comprising English Avenue and Vine City neighborhoods known for its illegal drug trade.

"(On times of need and desperation, Marietta's relationship with downtown Atlanta was critical for convenience," Rehn recounts.

Rehn continued his self-destructive spiral while attending the University of Georgia. He got two DUIs and missed his dad's 50th birthday party when he was arrested and temporarily expelled for defacing his girlfriend's car while on drugs.

He started selling and transporting drugs, driving back and forth between USA and The Bluff. He started shooting up while driving, precariously steering with his knee. He nearly overdosed once while driving.

Soon he was arrested and landed in jail. His parents bailed him out and sent him to his first treatment center at the age of 21.

The next decade of Rehn's life was a revolving door of arrests, toxic relationships, treatment centers, custody battles and geographical moves to try and rehab. There are a few periods of sobriety, first with 12-step recovery, then an intense, religious 10-month treatment program — but crushing relapses followed both.

OxyContin was also Ashley Mercurio's gateway to heroin.

The 42-year-old mother of two boys admits in "Young Firecrackers" that she wasn't innocent in high school. She drank and tried ecstasy. But her addiction catapulted when she tried OxyContin.

Home on school break from the Academy of Dramatic Arts in Los Angeles, she visited her hometown boyfriend, who had started injecting OxyContin regularly, and he offered to let her try it. She was curious and wanted to gain his approval.

"This experience brought a new demon twisting inside me. This night was the force that sucked everything in my life into oblivion," she writes.

When they couldn't get OxyContin, she and her boyfriend turned to heroin. Then her boyfriend died of an overdose, and so did a close friend. She was devastated.

A suburban explosion

Stories like Rehn's and Mercurio's weren't isolated. In fact, they mirrored an alarming trend across Georgia's suburbs. From 2010 to 2015, heroin-related deaths in Georgia's

suburban communities increased by nearly 4,000%, according to an investigative report on IALIVE.

During a 2015 summit to address the numbers, Jack Killorin, director of the Atlanta-Carolinas High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area Task Force, said the drug's move to suburban areas was surging and alarming.

"We're seeing a growing user population, moving out of traditional market areas for heroin, moving throughout the state and into the suburbs, into the high schools," he said at the summit. "As we have moved to shut down the pill mills — addicts have filled that void with heroin."

Thanks to investigative journalism, multimillion-dollar lawsuits, and multiple books and movies on the topic, the depth and breadth of the opioid epidemic is now well documented.

What's not always deeply acknowledged is the long tail effects that still silently ripple through communities, as illustrated by "Young Firecrackers." The book doesn't dive in to any research; it merely tells the personal stories of the aftermath.

"The damage done to our communities by pharmaceutical companies is a wicked crime against humanity," Rehn writes. "... the wreckage is not visible like a nuclear explosion."

Rather, the wreckage is found in the private cascade of consequences felt by those caught in its grip and their loved ones.

Recovery is continual

Around age 32, after more than two decades, Rehn began to find his stride in repairing his life. He started focusing on a career he is passionate about, as an architectural designer and artist. (He designed the cover image for "Young Firecrackers.") He became an avid runner and a fanatic for healthy nutrition.

He said he does not believe in the complete abstinence model of sobriety. He drinks and smokes prescribed, legal medical marijuana in Florida where he now lives with his youngest daughter.

Mercurio celebrated 18 years of sobriety in May and credits her success to the 12-step community.

"I owe my life to that fellowship and those women and my sponsor who have dragged me through all these years," she said. "Recovery is what saved my life. So, I feel an immense debt of gratitude to that."

In her section of the book, Mercurio explores not just sobriety, but also the healing that happens afterward. "My story is not solely some sordid drug tale," she writes. "At this point, I have spent many more years clean than using. My life and drug use have always been entangled in my desperate search for meaningful, genuine relationships. ... In writing this, I went way more into this cathartic, spiritual shedding of skin."

Rehn echoes her sentiment on the need for continual repair.

"One question hangs over me in remembrance of my 30 friends who have passed away: How do I not squander the opportunity that they lost?" he writes. "To live a full life with family and friends, repair the relationships that matter most and nurture new ones. The pressure to resolve this question in my lifetime is motivating and all-consuming."

None of the stories in the book are wrapped up in a pretty bow. The book is not a redemption story.

"There are no Hallmark endings," Rehn said.

Instead, the book shows through firsthand experience that recovery is not a straight line. It is sometimes two steps forward and three steps back. Addiction isn't cured; it merely goes into remission. It waits, like a "firecracker," for a spark to reignite its fury. This is the concept behind the book's title.

"A dormant firecracker still burns within each of us, and it's our job to ensure it doesn't accidentally detonate," Rehn writes. "The only shred of advice we offer: If you're not dead, pick yourself up. The show's not over."