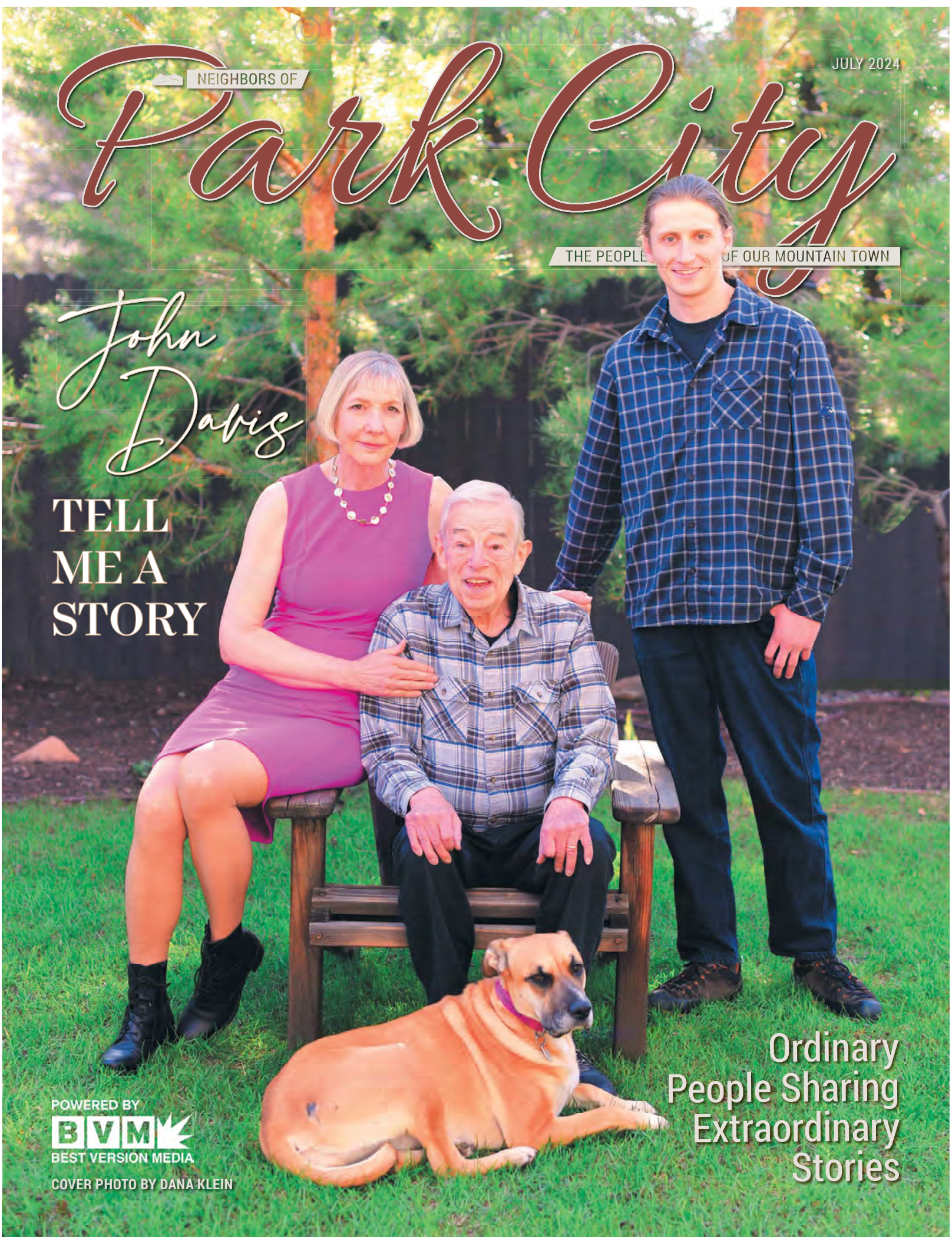
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JULY 2024

NEIGHBORS OF

Park City

THE PEOPLE [illegible] OF OUR MOUNTAIN TOWN



John Davis

TELL ME A STORY

Ordinary People Sharing Extraordinary Stories

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FEATURE STORY | BY RICHARD ELLIS
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John Davis TELL ME A STORY

ORDINARY PEOPLE SHARING EXTRAORDINARY STORIES

IN MARCH 2024, TWO DOZEN STRANGERS GATHERED IN A PARK CITY HOME FOR THE INAUGURAL EVENING OF TELL ME A STORY. THE FOUR STORYTELLERS INCLUDED A UTAHN FROM AN AUTHORITARIAN HOME, A FORMER FEDERAL EMPLOYEE, A BRAZILIAN SKI INSTRUCTOR, AND A FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENT. THE AUDIENCE WAS THEIR FRIENDS AND FAMILY. THE ORGANIZER, AND STORYTELLING COACH, WAS 87-YEAR-OLD JOHN DAVIS.

Typical 87-year-olds don't launch ambitious new nonprofits. To John's wife, Mary Gootjes, and their son, Elliot Davis, this is normal. "It sounded like another one of John's adventures," says Mary, a retired lawyer.

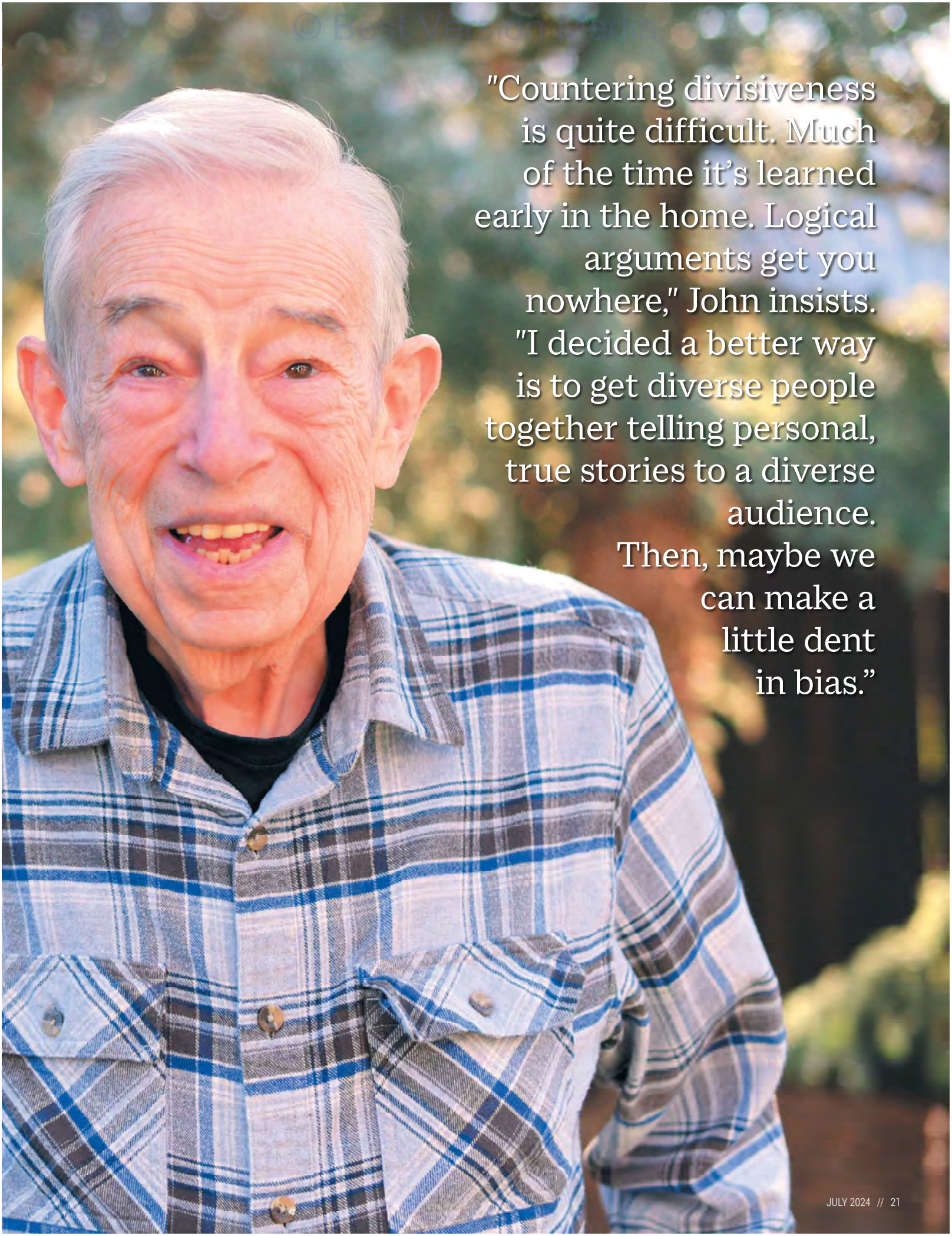
John Davis always has a story to tell, and he uses storytelling mediums we don't necessarily recognize as such – for example, wine and cheese, a romantic restaurant, and a Jewish men's group.

Tell Me a Story, a storytelling salon modeled on The Moth, is John's newest medium. It began in response to rising divisiveness in America. Storytelling, thinks John, can help heal what divides us – here in Park City, and beyond.

John's story began in 1937, two years before Nazi Germany invaded Poland. His parents divorced when he was four years old. His father was drafted to be a side-gunner on a B-17 bomber, but he never deployed. John, an only child, was eight years old when his father died in a training accident.



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"Countering divisiveness is quite difficult. Much of the time it's learned early in the home. Logical arguments get you nowhere," John insists. "I decided a better way is to get diverse people together telling personal, true stories to a diverse audience. Then, maybe we can make a little dent in bias."

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After attending the University of Chicago Lab High School and University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, John tried on different jobs – from recruiting to selling corrugated boxes. A wandering, four-month road trip through Europe with a college roommate ultimately focused him. There, John tried good wine for the first time, "It was an unmarked bottle; it was probably 80 cents," he recalls. At the time, there was no place to sip wine like that in Chicago.

In 1965, John opened Chicago's first wine and cheese café, called Geja's Café, "I didn't know anything about wine or cheese," he admits. But John learned, and, in so doing, honed the storytelling skill behind Tell Me a Story.

As Geja's Cafe became known for its wine tastings and events, John was recruited to be a wine columnist for Today's Chicago Woman, a monthly magazine. "He wrote under the pseudonym Marla Merlot," says Mary, "It's just another one of those John Davis things."

"When winemakers came to Chicago, who did they want to have lunch with?" John asks rhetorically. "Me. And the two other wine writers in Chicago who worked for the daily papers. These iconic winemakers would come to Chicago and take us out to lunch at fancy restaurants and tell us their stories.

Telling great stories became the key to his second business, Wine Insiders, one of America's first direct shippers of wine. John wrote, and later blogged, stories about wine for the company. Stories, more than tasting notes, differentiated one bottle from another. Marla Merlot's column fermented, as it were, a new way of selling wine.



In its first 50 years, Geja's Café supposedly hosted over 137,000 first dates and 16,000 engagements. Named Chicago's most romantic restaurant by numerous media outlets, it became a creator of, and setting for, stories of love. To this day, it's rare that a Chicagoan hasn't heard of Geja's, but in 1988, John met the (seemingly) only person in Chicago who knew nothing about his restaurant.

Mary Gootjes, raised in Waukesha, Wisconsin, quit her job in technical engineering sales at age 29 and went off to Spain "to have an adventure," she says. Upon returning to the U.S., she moved to Chicago and began serving at a Spanish tapas restaurant where John Davis was her customer.

"We had a funny little interchange about his restaurant," Mary remembers, "John was somewhat surprised that I had never heard of it."

The next night, John went to the tapas restaurant to see if Mary was there. She wasn't. The night after that, he called the restaurant, got her on the phone, and asked her to dinner. "She remembered me, and the first thing she said to me is, 'Are you married?'"

John was not, and Mary agreed to go out with him.

"It was the perfect first date," he claims. They started at a French restaurant on Michigan Avenue, where John spilled wine on himself. They carried on to a smoky blues bar, followed by a stop at Geja's Café, and a nightcap at the Ritz-Carlton.

John and Mary tied the knot in 1992 and their son, Elliot, was born in 1995. If not for Elliot, there'd be no Davis-Gootjes family in Park City.

Elliot Davis grew up on stories and adventures instead of devices. "The best thing we ever did was not pay the cable [bill]," says John. Elliot went out into the world, riding scooters and skateboards near their home alongside Chicago's Lincoln Park. "That was really cool to live unplugged, intentionally," says Elliot.

Dinners were device free and remain so. "We listen to each other," says Elliot, a full-time college student, "And I think we're open to each other's ideas."

At age five, after Elliot had his first experience skiing in Crested Butte, Colorado, he was hooked. He joined a ski club called Blizzard. Every Saturday, a bus picked up the kids in Chicago and drove them to a different ski hill. There was Wisconsin's Wilmot Mountain, where jumps didn't have landings (in this writer's personal experience). The best was arguably Cascade Mountain, a



resort where visitors park at the top and ski down to a tributary of the Mississippi River.

"I was always looking to see what sparked Elliot, and then would try and make that happen," says Mary. By eighth grade, Elliot's passion for skiing convinced the family to leave Chicago. "We thought, let's go somewhere where Elliot might really be able to fulfill his passions and be successful," adds Mary. "It turned out to be the best decision we ever made."

In 2010, the Davis-Gootjes family planned to spend one year in Park City, but "we never discussed going back," John says. Elliot honed his skills as a big mountain skier, and Mary, too, hit the slopes hard. Elliot went on to become a freeride competitor, a guide on Alaskan glaciers,Yellowstone, and Yosemite National Parks, and a ski patroller at Solitude.

Although not retired, John wasn't especially busy. He had learned to delegate and had great managers in place at Geja's Cafe and Wine Insiders in Chicago. John doesn't do well with idleness, however, and when he decides to do something, he commits fully.

John interviewed with Peace House Park City, a shelter for survivors of domestic abuse, and pitched the executive director as only John Davis can: "I said there's plenty of stuff you don't like to do, and there's probably stuff sitting on your desk that you're not going to do. Maybe I can do some of that stuff."

John got the volunteer gig. He also joined the Jewish Federation of Utah. He is legendary for creating Men's Night Out – an idea, he jokes, "They'd been talking about for 50 years." Men's Night Out gathers monthly in a private home for dinner and a speaker.

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Throughout John has played a secret, but important role: screening and coaching the speakers.

Similar to his alter ego, Marla Merlot, Parkite John Davis likes to screen potential speakers and their stories over lunch. “I really want to know if they can tell a story. Some people lead interesting lives but struggle to verbalize it,” John notes. At lunch with speakers, John helps to craft and polish their stories (“if they need it”).

During the Davis-Gootjes family’s first decade in Park City, the annual number of hate crimes in the United States increased by 10 percent. “There was this rise in bias and bigotry of all kinds,” John says, wanting to do something about it. But what? John began to research hate and bigotry. “It starts in the home,” he explains. “It's pretty hard to undo.”

He investigated what, if anything, had ever countered bigotry successfully. It turned out during the era of racial integration in the 1960s, researchers found that if they gave diverse groups of people a common project to work on, they learned to recognize decency in one another.

"Countering divisiveness is quite difficult. Much of the time it’s learned early in the home. Logical arguments get you nowhere," John insists. "I decided a better way is to get diverse people together telling personal, true stories to a diverse audience. Then, maybe we can make a little dent in bias.”

This was the culmination of everything John had learned and accomplished. He had honed his storytelling craft as a restaurateur, columnist, wine marketer, and men’s group host. The Moth, the famous storytelling facilitator, became the model for his next adventure.

At first, John offered to teach storytelling classes for adults through The Compass, the Park City School District’s lifelong learning program. No one signed up. So, John asked neighbors and friends if they would participate, and four did – as a favor.

“We worked together to craft their raw stories into a tight seven minutes. It was a wonderful, collaborative process,” John recalls. For three months, starting in January 2024, he drilled the group. “The whole trick about coaching is don't put words in their mouth,” John explains, “Let them learn. And make them do it over and over, standing up, with no notes.”

“The difference between when we started, and when we finished a couple months later, was like night and day,” he adds, “Some stories were turned upside down. And sometimes it was a different story – a story inside of the story.”





For the inaugural Tell Me a Story, each speaker shared a seven-minute tale of personal transformation. The Utahn raised in an authoritarian home told of how his mother abandoned the family when he was a child – only it turned out she was forced away by his father, who intercepted her letters to her son for five years.

The former federal employee spoke about the time he was arrested in Kenya by the local equivalent of the FBI while working for the US government abroad. The government did not have his back, and he learned that he could only count on himself in certain situations.

The young ski instructor from Brazil told her story of becoming a certified and celebrated ski instructor against all odds. The college student told a story nicknamed “Pizzagate,” the time he rebelled against the arbitrary authority of middle school administrators who didn’t want him ordering in pizza for lunch.

“They made themselves vulnerable, and the vulnerability spilled over into the audience. There was magic in the room,” John says. The speakers were grateful they had done John Davis a favor.

Tell Me a Story, soon to launch its website, TellMeAStoryUtah.com, will take place once a quarter. John is looking for more speakers, and more storytelling coaches.

During our interview, John hints at further pieces of his own story. How he became a national champion in gymnastics at college. The fact that he was in the Air Force Reserve. The story of the family dog, Sugar, who may or may not be a big game hunting dog (it depends on whether you ask Mary or John). As he walks me to the door, he asks, “Did I ever tell you about the time I spent New Year’s Eve with the Ringling Brothers Circus?”

No, he hadn’t. John Davis always has a story to tell.