

CAMBRIDGE DAY

THE WEEK OF JUNE 18 – JUNE 25, 2026

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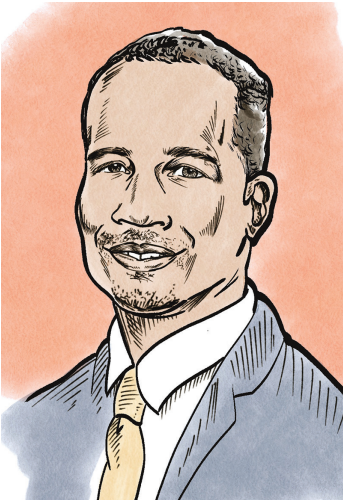
Grabbing a bite with: Taha Jennings

By SUSANNE BECK

A rough count of the menu items at Donut Villa in Central Square tallies somewhere close to 200 — and that's before add-ons, modifications, and combo options. The numbers notwithstanding, the bill of fare is pretty basic, an array of traditional diner foods with a few DV specials mixed in (have you ever had a pizza donut?). The vibe is the same: think a lived-in Happy Days look.

The unpretentious eatery was a fitting backdrop for grabbing a bite recently with Taha Jennings, the deceptively young-looking 52-year-old budget director for the City of Cambridge. No trendy Kendall Square coffee shops for him. No pricey lattes. No souped up matchas. A multifaceted mix of customers and staff, a reflection of the city where Jennings grew up.

As we settle onto our high-top stools precisely at our appointed hour, I thank the budget master for his time, acknowledging that spring is one of the busiest times of year in his shop. He graciously affirms with a 'yes,' explaining that they are having multiple check-ins with all 40+ city departments as they finalize the coming fiscal year's budget. [Editor's note: this conversation took place before the budget was presented.] "We're at the stage where we're rushing to put everything together" to make



Sophia Day

Taha Jennings, City of Cambridge budget director.

a late April printer's deadline, Jennings says, without a harried note in his delivery.

Jennings, the eldest of four, was born in Brooklyn, but his parents soon moved to Cambridge's Briston Arms, in the shadow of Danehy fields. He is a proud graduate of the city's public schools and still speaks fondly of his years at Rindge and Latin. "I literally grew up with kids from all walks of life, from very, very poor to very, very wealthy, and we were all in the same classrooms." He particularly relished the freedom of being a small city dweller, something he wishes he could have afforded to give his own four kids who only knew suburban living when they were young.

See JENNINGS, page 10

Union rally demands wage increase at School Committee meeting



Julia Carpi

Members of the Cambridge Education Association hand out postcards to School Committee members as other union members watch.

By JULIA CARPI

Around 60 people with the school district's largest labor union gathered before Tuesday's meeting of the Cambridge School Committee for higher wages amid ongoing contract negotiations.

Members of the Cambridge Education Association (CEA) rallied outside of the Dr. Henrietta Attles Meeting Room before the School Committee meeting, then

formed a standing-room only presence at the meeting. During public comment, eight people made statements in support of higher wages. At one point, more than a dozen union members walked around the committee table and delivered over 1,000 postcards to committee members, over the objections of the School Committee chair David Weinstein.

"Those postcards represent the people who could not be here,

because they need to make sure their bills are paid, so today we are walking into the school committee room to make a demand," Banke Oluwole, the CEA's vice president of community relations, had said at the rally. Weinstein asked that postcards be delivered to the committee's secretary, but union members continued to distribute stacks of postcards.

See UNION RALLIES, page 10

CRLS ultimate enjoys national tournament experience

By GREG LEVINSKY

Amélie Valenzuela-Melzer graduated from Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School nearly two weeks ago, but the new Falcons alum enjoyed a final — and major — athletic endeavor to close out her high school experience. Also, her first time on a plane.

The senior cutter on the CLRS girls ultimate team and the rest of the Falcons rewrote program history this past weekend across the country. Seeded last of the 16 teams at the Ultiworld High School National Invite, the team secured

a victory against Colorado state champion Lakewood ultimate at the tournament in Salem, Ore.

"The entire team, we became much closer together," Valenzuela-Melzer said. "The team is very important to me ... and they didn't have to cry on my senior night."

Already the first team in program history to make the tournament, any win during the two-day, six-game slate would further cement the 2026 group's legacy. The Falcons (26-4) did win against Lakewood and got another win via forfeit, which

bumped them up to a 13th-place finish. Per coach Erik Sebesta, the Falcons "excelled" on the big stage.

"On the field, we played our best ultimate of the season and way above what I expected," Sebesta said. "We had certain players where the best tournament they played was at nationals ... The extra three weeks of having our season extended just did wonders."

CRLS ultimate began in 2022 with the girls program. They later added boys and a mixed-gender team.

See TOURNAMENT, page 11



Rich Younger and Sue Swalley

A photo taken after the team took 3rd place finish at PVI.

METRO

In 2nd Middlesex, a political prog-fest

By SYDNEY WISE

Since state Senator Patricia Jehlen announced in December she won't seek re-election after 20 years representing the 2nd Middlesex District, candidates have stepped forward from state and municipal bodies and from all three cities in the district. The field includes State Representatives Erika Uyterhoeven and Christine Barber, Cambridge Vice Mayor Burhan Azeem, Somerville City Councilor Matt McLaughlin and Winchester School Committee member Tom Hopcroft.

All of the candidates hold liberal political views. "We're all progressive, and we share a lot of the same goals," said Barber. For instance, every candidate told Cambridge Day that housing or broad affordability is one of their key issues.

McLaughlin agreed, saying "every candidate will rightfully claim to be progressive, and I think everyone's going to try to out-progress each other in this race."

Meet the field vying to win the Democratic primary on Sept. 1:

McLaughlin: "the working-class candidate"

McLaughlin said his working-class background makes him stand out. "I am from the working class and from this community. I've been serving people from the bottom up for decades," he said. He also cited a history of blue-collar jobs — including in janitorial and food service — and military experience prior to his election to City Council in 2013.

McLaughlin called affordability a decades-long "guiding mission." "I feel like other candidates, it is a plank in their platform, whereas for me, it is my platform," he said. That includes looking for policy approaches to create more affordable housing, education, utilities and childcare.

As State Senator, he wants to pull from Somerville's playbook. For example, the city passed an ordinance in 2024 legalizing triple-decker homes across Somerville; a similar amendment to state code could increase three-family housing across Massachusetts, he said.

For McLaughlin, part of the draw of the Senate is filling in the gaps he's experienced from the state while on City Council. Somerville's representatives in the state legislature have filed a number of home rule petitions — bills that, if passed, would grant new powers to the municipality — that have yet to be voted on. Most recently, Jehlen, Barber, Uyterhoeven and Rep. Mike Connolly in January introduced a home rule petition that would give Somerville the ability to pass rent stabilization rules. The bill was referred to the Senate Housing committee in March.



Erika Uyterhoeven



Burhan Azeem

Uyterhoeven aims for "bold" policy

Uyterhoeven was elected to represent the 27th Middlesex District in the House in 2020. Before that, she cofounded Act on Mass, a nonprofit for legislative accountability. She has continued to advocate for legislative transparency, which she called a politically "toxic topic" on Beacon Hill.

She has experience building coalitions to push her priorities, she said, sometimes through resistance, such as when she filed to amend legislative rules to publicize committee votes.

This session's rules make joint committee votes public and include other measures aimed at heightening transparency, like setting deadlines for joint committees to make recommendations on bills. Uyterhoeven also cosponsored a bill to make those measures law.

But, despite the new rules, hundreds of bills this session failed to meet a vote after the clock on those deadlines ran out, the Boston Globe reported last month.

In the Senate, she wants to push for a "more bold, visionary way of legislating," which she positioned as Jehlen's legacy. "I had union endorsements out the gate, and I think I'm very clearly the most progressive in terms of my positions on policy issues across the board," said Uyterhoeven. For example, she said she is the most vocal of the candidates on AI regulation.

In addition to tackling affordability, she wants to prioritize legislation protecting immigrant communities from ICE and setting guidelines around AI, including disclosure requirements. On her website, Uyterhoeven also said that she wants an open bidding process for government contracts related to artificial intelligence and community councils in which citizens can advocate for preferences on AI.

Barber cites track record on lawmaking

Barber was elected to represent the 34th Middlesex District in 2014. Barber feels that the Sen-



Bryce Vickmark Photography
Christine Barber



Courtesy of Tom Hopcroft
Tom Hopcroft

ate's smaller size — 40 members as opposed to the House's 160 — will enable her to do more.

"What sets me apart is that I have written laws and negotiated them through the House and actually got them signed into law. I've done that with the driver's licenses for immigrants, to cap prescription drug costs and on pay equity," Barber said, referring to the Work and Family Mobility Act, a 2025 pharmaceutical law, and the Frances Perkins Workplace Equity Act.

Barber said that safety and immigrants' rights are her top priority. Rümeyza Öztürk, then a Tufts doctoral student, was a resident of Barber's district when she was detained by ICE for six weeks last Spring. (Öztürk returned to Turkey, where she is from, in April of this year.)

Barber pointed to the PROTECT Act, a bill under deliberation that limits Massachusetts law enforcement's cooperation with ICE, among other provisions, as an example of her work on the issue. Barber was one of almost 100 co-sponsors, including Uyterhoeven and Jehlen, and authored Dignity Not Deportations, which has been largely incorporated into the PROTECT Act. Cambridge, Somerville and neighboring towns passed executive orders with similar provisions this spring.

Barber also cited affordability and healthcare costs as key issues. On housing, she wants "to push communities across the state to continue building housing to make sure that we have the housing that we need and that it is more affordable."

Azeem seeks housing, T expansion

Azeem was 24 in 2021 when he made history as the youngest person elected to the Cambridge City Council (Ayah al-Zubi was a few months younger at the time of her election last year). In January, he was elected Vice Mayor.

Despite quickly declaring for the Senate race, he said "I think that no one in Cambridge is upset at me because they feel like I've not done enough in my time in office... if anyone is upset with me, there's



Marc Levy / file
Matt McLaughlin

because I feel like I've done too much," Azeem said.

When he first ran for Council, he had a list of things he wanted to accomplish, including creating an affordable housing overlay and implementing universal pre-k. "We've done more or less everything that was on my list," he said. (Reporting by Cambridge Day and the Crimson shows that the universal pre-k program is still finding its footing.)

"I think that a lot of the stuff I've been doing locally has been to make sure that Cambridge is doing its part. But it's also time, I think, that ... the rest of the state does their part," he said.

His new list includes passing a bill to allow housing by right near transit, expanding starter homes and triple-deckers statewide, and expanding the MBTA to Arlington and West Medford by implementing congestion pricing.

Hopcroft wants "innovation economy"

Hopcroft, educated as an attorney, was elected to the Winchester School Committee in 2021. He also founded the Net Zero Institute, a decarbonization nonprofit.

Hopcroft said his campaign's focus on the "innovation economy" brings "fresh perspectives" to a legislature with many long-serving members, not unlike Jehlen's 20 years in office.

His number one priority would be solidifying the DRIVE Initiative—Discovery, Research, and Innovation for a Vibrant Economy — which would counter federal research cuts by funding university and independent research. Originally proposed at \$400 million, the legislature has since proposed reductions that remain under deliberation.

His position on this question is informed by lived experience. Hopcroft's family members have experienced autoimmune disorders, dyslexia and dysgraphia, he said.

"People are waiting for medical advances. And we are in the best place in the world for those things to happen, especially right now, where we have our leadership in MRA therapeutics and AI drug discovery and quantum computing. We're on the verge of an acceleration," Hopcroft said. Hopcroft wants to concurrently address housing, affordability, childcare, healthcare and energy costs, which he says are interrelated. He wants to do this through transit-oriented housing production, streamlining permitting and expanding financial aid, his website says.

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Cambridge Community Foundation

Fifty years ago, recombination debate ushered in biotech in Cambridge

By RUTH TAM

This month marks 50 years since Cambridge city councillors, scientists, and residents debated the safety of DNA recombination. The fiery deliberations at city hall elevated the role of the public in scientific research, which resulted in the nation's first local ordinance regulating genetic experimentation, and led to the biotech boom in Kendall Square.

Looking back on history, the Cambridge recombination debate wasn't just a news story, says Sam Lipson, Cambridge's director of Environmental Health. It was also a parable about the public's tipping point.

'No recombination without representation'

In 1976, Harvard University planned to renovate a research lab to conduct viral and genetic research at an elevated biosafety level. But when members of its biology faculty and the public raised concerns, the city of Cambridge held public hearings in June on whether the lab should be built. The question it asked: Would recombination research endanger the public?

Then-Cambridge Mayor Al Vellucci loathed Harvard and played up his revulsion during the hearing.

"Anything could come out," he said of a possible lab leak. "It could be anything. It could be contamination, infections, something that could crawl out of the laboratory, such as a Frankenstein."

Little was yet known about recombination, which blends DNA from different sources to create new DNA sequences. When testifying scientists were grilled with questions like, "Is there zero risk of danger?" they relied on the language of probability, which didn't play well with laypeople.

The nation was still reeling from a number of scandals, from the Vietnam War and Watergate to the Tuskegee and Willowbrook experiments. So although scientific experimentation had not been interfered with before, trust in institutions had fallen precipitously and now the public demanded transparency.

Residents picketed outside city hall with signs reading 'No Recombination Without Representation.' Some councillors assumed the research was fraught for it to become a matter of public debate.

"There must be a great division that now the political world — us who are known to make crazy decisions — now has to settle an issue in the scientific world," said then-Councillor Sandra Graham during the hearings.

Graham was right; there was concern among scientists whether recombination was safe or not, with Nobel prize winners on both sides of the issue. The hearings lasted two days and resulted in a six-month moratorium on recombination research while an advisory



Central Square Theater
Actors portray local activists in the 1976 debate about recombinant DNA research.

sory board of citizens formed to assess the threat of danger.

Looking back, Cambridge resident Bob Neer, who later helped create local regulation for private recombination research, admires the scientists who drew back on research.

It was "noble," he says, for them to voluntarily pause their work while the city worked through its concerns. But putting their pipettes down had an unintended consequence. Neer says citizens interpreted it as an admission of guilt.

"People thought, 'Where there's smoke, there's fire. Otherwise [scientists] wouldn't accept limitations.'"

This caught some in the scientific community off-guard, Neer says. He says it never occurred to them that their work would be suspected as dangerous. This assumption could cost them. It would be up to the newly appointed Cambridge Experimentation Review Board to decide.

Over four months, these seven Cambridge residents met twice a week. The group included a nun who worked as a nurse at a local Catholic hospital. A clerk at a typewriter ribbon company. An urban development scholar. A physician. None had biology research experience.

The group ran themselves like a jury, hearing arguments from both sides. In the end, scientists who favored recombination research had the more polished argument. And, existing data was on their side.

Despite the rancor of the initial debate, the members of the review board were united when it made its recommendation in December. Recombinant DNA research should move forward, they said, but only if scientists followed safety guidelines adapted from the National Institutes of Health. City Council — Vellucci included — encoded this guardrail into law in 1977. Additionally, the Cambridge Biohazards Safety Committee was created to enforce it and it still exists today as the Cambridge Biosafety Committee.

A biotech boom

Biogen breaks ground with

MA Governor Maura Healey on its new global headquarters and innovation hub in Cambridge in September 2025.

What happened here sparked a movement, says Lipson, who chairs the Cambridge Biosafety Committee today. The way Cambridge handled recombination regulation launched similar debates in city halls from Princeton to Berkeley.

These conversations were "anticipatory," says Lipson. "It was a matter of principle." Ultimately, eight other cities and two states passed their own laws about DNA research.

By the 1980s, when private companies wanted to open labs in East Cambridge for the same purpose, tempers had cooled and

there was a framework for making big decisions about research. Cambridge resident Neer was a part of creating a system of oversight for private companies, which was stricter than the original guidelines for universities. Once it was in place, the permitting and inspection process Cambridge placed on companies didn't discourage recombination research; it seemed to encourage it.

In 1983, when the genetic engineering company Biogen opened its first U.S. facility in Kendall, Lipson says Cambridge's knowledge of the field and its community-created oversight were part of the city's appeal.

Many more firms followed. Now, Lipson says, 130 biotech companies hold permits for biological research in Cambridge.

"By the time recombination became more routine, Cambridge had already established traditional oversight. It was seen as very valuable. It's fascinating how Cambridge rules became accepted as good practice in the industry," says Lipson. Despite the economic downturn the biotech industry is currently facing, Cambridge is still a destination for the field. Last year, Biogen broke ground on its new global headquarters in Kendall Square, consolidating its Massachusetts locations.

The debate's enduring legacy

Since recombination research expanded, there have been no known public health crises linked

to it — here, or anywhere else.

"People realized recombination events were happening all the time. What scientists were doing experimentally had been going on since creation," says Neer. "And, I'm sure people found it a nuisance, but the rules turned out to be pretty easy to follow."

In recalling the 1976 debate, Cantabrigians primarily remember it as fractious. And it might have been this intensity that drew Neer to public service in the first place. As a father to two children in Cambridge Public Schools in the '70s, he once attended a meeting about the search for a new superintendent that ended in a fistfight.

"That's how steamed up people were in those days," he recalls.

But rather than deter him, Neer says the fight motivated him. "I was so horrified that I decided that I needed to get involved in Cambridge politics. I felt that responsible people needed to get involved."

If Cambridge faced a debate today involving the public health consequences of new and complex technology, could residents have a civil conversation about it?

"I don't see why not," said Neer. "We just have to start."

For more on biotech history Cambridge, scan the QR code.



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Two Generations of Cambridge

Source: MLS PIN statistics for "Market Pulse"



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LOCAL

Cambridge robotics team makes the podium in Greece

By ALEX DEGTEREV

Like many a modern success story, the Juicebox Robotics team began this season in a Cambridge basement and ended it earning recognition on an international stage.

The team capped off a season of four top four finishes with a trip to Greece for the FIRST Lego League (FLL) World Championship. FLL is a global youth robotics competition in which players build and program autonomous robots for a timed robot game while simultaneously developing an innovation project tied to a real-world theme. This year, the competition’s theme was ‘Unearthed’, challenging teams to explore ideas connected to archeology.

While at FLL, the team placed third in the ‘Alliance Cup,’ which sees teams partner with randomly-selected companion teams and run collaborative missions.

The Juicebox team is a small but formidable grouping of three middle-schoolers — Quinlan Blankinship, Jordon Li and Miro Vinck — coached and mentored by Erik and Sen Blankinship, Quinlan’s parents, and Patrick Vinck, Miro’s father. They operate independently of any school or organization and has appeared under different aliases since it came together in 2019. The team was started by Quinlan’s older brother, Forrester, now a sophomore at CRLS.

They put together a winning showing in Massachusetts competitions this year, earning first place finishes in two different categories in the Red Hawk Rumble 2025 Qualifier, followed by a third-place Champions Award finish at the 2025 FLL Massachusetts East



Bruno Muñoz-Oropeza

The Juicebox Robotics team and their coaches (from left): Jordon Li, Erik and Sen Blankinship, Miro Vinck, Patrick Vinck and Quinlan Blankinship.

Championship.

Erik Blankinship said that the team had expected to do “okay” this season, and that everyone was wary of the work required if the team did manage to move on in the competition. “The moment we got the [MA East] award everyone cheered, and then I think it took about five seconds and we went, ‘Oh my gosh, there is a lot more work ahead of us.’”

Since August, the team has met twice a week for two hours each session to help build and refine their robots. “Really, at its core, it’s not about robots, it’s about teamwork, dedication, follow-through and solving hard problems,” Erik Blankinship said.

Recently, Juicebox showed Cambridge Day its robot, a platform which the team has reconfigured with different mounts over the years. At first glance, it

looks like a mishmash of Lego bricks and parts such as wheels and flat ramps. But a closer look at the robot as it glided around a play mat revealed different tools around its frame. Among those is a ‘French fry grabber,’ made with thin, mostly yellow Lego bricks that extend out accordion-style to push and maneuver objects on the ground.

Quinlan Blankinship explained that the robot’s autonomy was coded through Pybricks, a Python-based coding language tailored specifically to Lego robotics. “We used that because the default coding language which Lego provides ... gets very messy when you code [as much as we did].”

Beyond coding the competition robot, Miro Vinck spoke about the teamwork which went in to making their concept a reality. “We all had a part in designing this. I

originally came up with the idea to make the robot arm and Jordon helped me build it, and then Quinlan found some design flaws and he helped finalize it.”

The Juicebox team’s robot.

The team’s innovation project this year was creating a ‘mosaic’ robot capable of scanning and digitally rendering tile mosaics. Inspired by a trip Miro’s was able to make to Pompeii last summer, the team set about researching the idea and developing their robot with help from several local mentors and supporters.

They met with and received feedback from the Kendall Square-based Robotics and AI Institute, for instance, and Quinlan and Li, both part of Scouting America, separately presented their concept before a group of Scouting peers gathered at the Harvard Peabody Archeology Museum.

To further test their concept, the team also reached out to ARTAIC, a Boston-based company that uses robots to create custom tile mosaics, which suggested several engineering fixes to focus their project. Then came several visits to MIT’s Koch Center, where ARTAIC had installed a mosaic, to plan and carry out their ‘proof-of-concept’ test and managed to complete an automated scan.

The team said throughout the season it received an outpouring of support from the community. A fundraiser set up by the squad helped them raise a little under \$7,000, providing them with travel to and accommodations in Greece. There was also a community concert, held at the Union Tavern, to rally support for the team’s trip. “It was really great to see everyone come together and support us,” said Miro Vinck.

Spyros Fotopoulos, a senior vice president at the Saloniki Greek Restaurants, one of which sits right off of Harvard Square, made sure that his business was a sponsor for the team’s efforts this year. He was excited that they would be able to visit and compete in his home country of Greece, and also praised the team’s ingenuity. “I would like to think that every business should ... invest in and sponsor anything that is innovative, especially when its coming from young kids.”

Miro Vinck said that the team is uncertain about what exactly they will do next year, but he made it clear that the road was not ending here. “Next year we could do FLL again, or we could move onto some bigger competitions like FRC, and that’s a big part of what we are thinking about right now.

Norton Award winner Ken Urban on bringing tough topics to the stage

By LYNNE WEISS

Cambridge theater companies Central Square Theater and Moonbox Productions were recognized by the Boston Theater Critics Association (BTCA) at the 43rd Elliot Norton Awards June 1. Moonbox received the award for Outstanding Music Direction for “Crowns,” a musical celebrating the women of the traditional Black church, and Central Square Theater’s “The Moderate” received awards for Outstanding Scenic Design, Midsize or Small (Sibyl Wickersheimer and Jared Mezzocchi), Outstanding Sound Design, Midsize or Small (MIT instructor Christian Frederickson), and Outstanding New Script by playwright Ken Urban.

Cambridge Day spoke with Urban about writing a play mired in the internet’s darkest recesses. “The Moderate” tells the story of Frank Bonner, a content moderator whose job requires him to look at sexually explicit, racist and violent posts so he can keep them off social media.

During the play, three walls of giant screens display images that Bonner either accepts or blocks. Some audience members found these images so disturbing that they walked out during the play.

Urban, a senior lecturer in theater and director of dramatic writing at MIT, understands why some people walked out of the show. In the early stages of development, he said, “We talked about blurring out a lot of the footage.” But he and the other members of the creative team ultimately decided against it. Showing people in the audience the graphic images puts them in Frank’s shoes, “walking with him on that journey.”

Urban first learned about content moderators in 2019. “I became really fascinated,” he told Cambridge Day, saying he found it “heartbreaking and fascinating and disturbing” that people would subject themselves to such images, “particularly people who worked in the child porn and terrorism divisions of content moderation.”

For research, Urban talked to content moderators for Facebook



Peter Bellamy

Ken Urban on the set of “A Guide for the Homesick” off-Broadway at the DR2 Theatre.

and Microsoft, including some who broke their non-disclosure agreements to help Urban understand their work. During the pandemic, he realized that the play should reflect the experience of working from home.

Urban worked with Mezzocchi, the play’s director and multimedia designer, and Wickersheimer, scenic designer, to develop the idea of isolating the actors from each other, rather than bringing them together on stage. Bonner, played by Nael Nacer, is physically alone on stage for most of the play. The other characters appear only on

large screens, giving the audience the same experience Bonner is having.

Urban is drawn to the hard stuff. His play “A Guide for the Homesick” is about international aid workers. One critic who saw the Huntington Theatre’s production in 2017 wrote that it “burns with outrage for the way real-life American religious meddling incited homophobic violence ... in African nations like Uganda.”

Another of Urban’s plays, “Sense of an Ending,” grapples with questions of guilt and complicity in its portrayal of an American journalist interviewing Hutu nuns accused of war crimes during the Rwandan genocide. (Cantabrigians can see a staged reading of “Sense of an Ending,” co-presented by MIT Theater Arts and Front Porch Arts Collective, on Sept. 16.)

What draws Urban to these difficult subjects? Writing a play, Urban said, is his way of making sense of the world. “I need to understand how someone could do this to their neighbor.” His definition of “neighbor” is broad.

“What does it mean that there’s a genocide happening just a plane ride away? We act as if that’s another world, but it’s not.”

In the same way that actors immerse themselves in their roles, Urban conducts interviews and watches videos that let him disappear inside his characters. Such immersion comes at a cost. While he wrote “Sense of an Ending,” Urban had nightmares in which his apartment was broken into, and he was murdered with a machete.

Like Bonner in “The Moderate,” Urban exposes himself to material most of us would be unable to stomach. The willingness to take on hard topics can yield profound results. During the run of “The Moderate” at Central Square Theater, he said, “we got this amazing letter that someone left at the box office, unsigned, just saying that as a victim of abuse as a child by her father, watching that play really helped her heal and feel a sense of closure.”

“That,” Urban said, “is why I make art.”

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BUSINESS

Cambridge social innovators honored



Leaders of Cambridge Community Foundation (CCF) and the projects that received the 2026 Imagined in Cambridge! Social Innovation Awards. From left: Kessen Green, CCF president Geeta Pradhan, CCF vice president of programs and grantmaking Christina Turner, Mohammad Nooraee, Vie Ciné, Erin Dullea and Elmer Martinez.

By ALEX DEGTEREV

The Cambridge Community Foundation on Wednesday held its seventh annual Making Good Together celebration honoring nonprofit social innovators. Five local projects received the Imagined in Cambridge! Social Innovation Awards, and \$5,000 each, for their grassroots efforts to address pressing social challenges in Cambridge. It also named the Cambridge Economic Opportunity Committee (CEOC) as its inaugural Making Good Award winner for civic leadership. The award came with a prize of \$10,000.

CEOC, an anti-poverty group, started in the 1960s. In 2022, CEOC helped run the Rise Up Cambridge scaled cash assistance program, which supported nearly 2,000 families and was the first such non-lottery citywide program of its kind in the United States. Tina Alu, executive director of the CEOC, accepting the Making Good Award for the organization. Credit: Margaret Lampert

Tina Alu, executive director of CEOC, told Cambridge Day a substantial number of Cambridge residents struggle to make ends meet. “People assume [Cambridge] is a wealthy city, and that’s challenging for people, because I do think the community would want to [help] more if they knew [about those struggling].”

The awards event was held in Central Square at Street Theory Collective.

Geeta Pradhan, president of CCF, said in the face of federal



Tina Alu, executive director of the Cambridge Economic Opportunity Committee (CEOC), accepting the Making Good Award for the organization.

funding cuts, local nonprofits have done more than just pick up the slack. “It lands on these nonprofits to step forward and meet the needs of the community, so how they have responded is phenomenal.”

Imagined in Cambridge winners

We Got Next hosts basketball and volleyball events year-round, including two co-ed youth basketball leagues during the fall. It was started by Kessen Green, Cambridge Police director of Outreach and Community Programs. Green is a lifelong Cantabrigian who grew up in The Port, said he launched it to pull kids away from their screens. “We have to find a way to ground our young people and throw them back into the real world,” he said.

Sufi Boutique offers free clothing, including interview and job-ready outfits. Mohammad Nooraee turns his business, Noor Oriental Rugs, into a free clothing store every Saturday. One of the volunteers who staff the shop, Waseem Afzaal, shared how one woman

who wore clothes from the shop to an interview “told me that the respect she had gotten was something she had never experienced before. “That just gives us inspiration to further expand this,” he said.

The **Rebirth festival** was started by Elmer Martinez when he was a junior at Emerson College, after the school’s response to a 2017 protest by students of color created tensions. Martinez took a production management class project to conceive an event and created a hip-hop dance jam that drew students from across the country. It’s grown into a two-day festival of live music performed by local artists, spoken word performances, the dance jam and other events, hosted at The Foundry for the last three years.

“I was already break dancing and going to events all over Boston, so I saw Rebirth as an opportunity to revitalize the black culture on campus,” said Martinez. This scope has now expanded to an entire city.

Mpowerment Labs will start up this fall and will provide

local middle schools with in-depth, interactive programming on menstrual health. It is an expansion of Cambridge mom Erin Dullea’s Mpower nonprofit, which organizes “Period Parties” at elementary schools across Cambridge, Boston and Somerville to educate young people as they go through some of their biggest physical and mental changes. She co-founded the nonprofit with fellow Cambridge mom Liz Stott. Mpower also provides schools with menstrual health supplies and services.

Dullea started Mpower because of her own personal experiences of “growing up without a lot of knowledge around my body.” As a mom, she has recognized that, “there’s still very limited [puberty] education in schools for youth, as their bodies are starting to change.”

Paint Your Truth was started a decade ago by Vie Ciné to provide a space where people who have suffered trauma or abuse could paint their pain onto a canvas.

Ciné holds mobile workshops offering both one-on-one and group sessions.

“Some people may not feel comfortable about their trauma that they’ve experienced, but [when creating this] I thought anybody could put paint to a canvas and let that picture speak for them,” said Ciné. She said Paint Your Truth will use its award to offer the workshops for Cambridge mothers of color and caregivers, in partnership with Cambridge Families of Color Coalition and the Cambridge Public Library.

Brattle Theatre will take a seat (all of them)



Tom Meek

The Brattle Theatre’s auditorium will get new seating and sight lines in July.

By TOM MEEK

Toward the end of next month, the Brattle Theatre will go dark for 10 days so the venerable repertory house can complete its latest round of capital improvements. The primary focus of the renovation will be replacing the seats, and it will also put in new carpeting, refurbish the flooring and install new aisle lights.

The seats were last replaced 25 years ago, when Ned Hinkle became the Brattle’s creative director, Ivy Moylan its executive director and the institution was repositioned as a nonprofit, the Brattle Film Foundation. Hinkle said the company that made the current seats went out of business, making it increasingly difficult to get replacement parts.

The new seats will be relatively similar, Hinkle said, though more snug and firmer, with backs that are slightly higher and peaked.

The Brattle will also try to fix one of its foibles: its sight lines. Because its seats are roughly on the same level and aligned one directly behind another, a shorter person could find their view obstructed by a taller person in front of them.

The new seating will be staggered to create better natural sight lines, which will reduce capacity slightly, from 214 seats to 210 seats. Hinkle said some technical tweaks will be made to allow certain films to have subtitles display higher on the screen.

The renovations are expected to cost about \$100,000. As with its previous seat replacement process, part of the funding will be raised through seat dedication plaques. For \$750, people can have their name — or any name — engraved on a small metal tag affixed to a chair. However, those who currently have dedicated chairs will lose those tags. “It was for the life of the seat,” Hinkle said. He said the Brattle is actively reaching out to those who dedicated seats in the past to inform them about the replacement and give them the chance to re-up. Notable names on the back of chairs include the late author Andre Dubus, whose novel “Killings” was adapted into Todd Field’s debut film, “In the Bedroom” (2001) and two novellas were turned into “We Don’t Live Here Anymore” (2004), David Lynch and Boston broadcaster David Brudnoy. There’s also a seat in honor of Dungeons & Dragons inventor Gary Gygax and some jokey plaques too, such as “I’m with Stupid -->” and “<--- I’m with psycho.”

The Brattle will close July 20 and re-open on July 31 with a 3 p.m. showing of the 1961 version of “West Side Story.”

EVENTS

Sunday, June 28, 6 p.m.
The Rockwell, 255 Elm St., Davis Square.

QA&P Presents: 48-Hour Play Festival

\$15 to \$20. Across a single weekend, LGBTQ+ artists dream up, write down and fully conjure a collection of original one-act plays then perform them live on stage.

Saturday, June 27, 7 to 8 p.m.
First Parish Cambridge Unitarian Universalist, 3 Church St./1446 Massachusetts Ave., Harvard Square.

Maggie O'Farrell, with Celeste Ng, discusses "Land"

\$42, includes ticket and book. O'Farrell, author of "Hamnet" and "The Marriage Portrait," discusses her new historical novel set in Ireland in the years before and after the Great Hunger. Ng, a New York Times bestselling author, joins.

Wednesday, June 24, 6 p.m.
Geological Lecture Hall, 24 Oxford St., Baldwin neighborhood.

Astonished By Beauty: The Essential Practice of Natural History

Free. Join naturalist Thomas Fleischner on his new book, "Astonished by Beauty," a guide to reconnecting with nature through natural history.

Tuesday, June 30, 7:30 to 9:30 p.m.
Arts at the Armory, 191 Highland Ave., Spring Hill.

Boston Moth StorySLAM: Holiday Gone Wrong

\$20. This community-focused, open-mic storytelling competition is open to anyone who can share a story on the night's theme (changes every month).



Saturday, June 20, 7 to 9 p.m.
Lou's, 13 Brattle St.

Saturday Salsa night: La Diáspora Combo

\$30 to \$50. Led by lead vocalist and multi-instrumentalist Angel Javier Camilo, La Diáspora Combo is an intergenerational collective of musicians from Latin America and the United States. Rooted in diasporic identity and community, the ensemble brings high-energy, dance-forward performances of salsa, merengue, and bachata.

Harvard Art Museums, 32 Quincy St., near Harvard Square.

Thursday, June 25, 5 to 9 p.m.

Harvard Art Museums at Night

Free. Gather with friends and mingle inside an Italian-inspired courtyard while taking in the smooth sounds from DJ C-Zone. Stop by the Materials Lab for a fun art-making activity and then drop in on one of the museum's Spotlight Tours.

Wednesday, July 1, 12:30 to 1 p.m.

Gallery Talk: American Works of Art at the 250th

Free. Curator of American art Horace D. Ballard leads this series of gallery talks to coincide with the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Each talk will closely examine a work of art that speaks to the historical, social and political contexts that continue to shape the events and ideas of the United States.

Sunday, June 21, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Mount Auburn Cemetery, 580 Mount Auburn St., West Cambridge.

Mount Auburn Summer Solstice 2026

Free but RSVP. Offerings of free and paid activities including mindfulness walks, yoga, a cyanotype making workshop, meditation, a poetry reading and community concert.

Monday, June 22, 6 to 7:30 p.m.
Cambridge Main Library, Community Room, 449 Broadway, Mid-Cambridge.

Cambridge Cooks: Caribbean Heritage Month Edition with Chef Gaitskell

Free but register. Join Chef Gaitskell Cleghorn Jr. as he prepares jerk chicken and mango salsa in celebration of Caribbean-American Heritage Month.

Friday, June 26, Starting at 4 p.m.
Cambridge City Hall, 795 Massachusetts Ave., Central Square

2026 Cambridge Dance Party

Free. At 4 p.m., the Dance Party kicks off at City Hall with a high energy jam session and conga line ready set led by local favorite DJ P.A.C. that is specifically designed for older adults and young families. At 6 p.m., internationally known DJ Gee Spin, a Boston-born radio legend whose career is deeply woven into the fabric of New England's music scene. Then comes DJ D-Nice, the globally celebrated creator of Club Quarantine, who began his career with the hip hop group Boogie Down Productions, closes out the night from 8 to 10 p.m.

Thursday, June 25, 6:30 p.m.
Cambridge Public Library's Central Square Branch, 45 Pearl St.

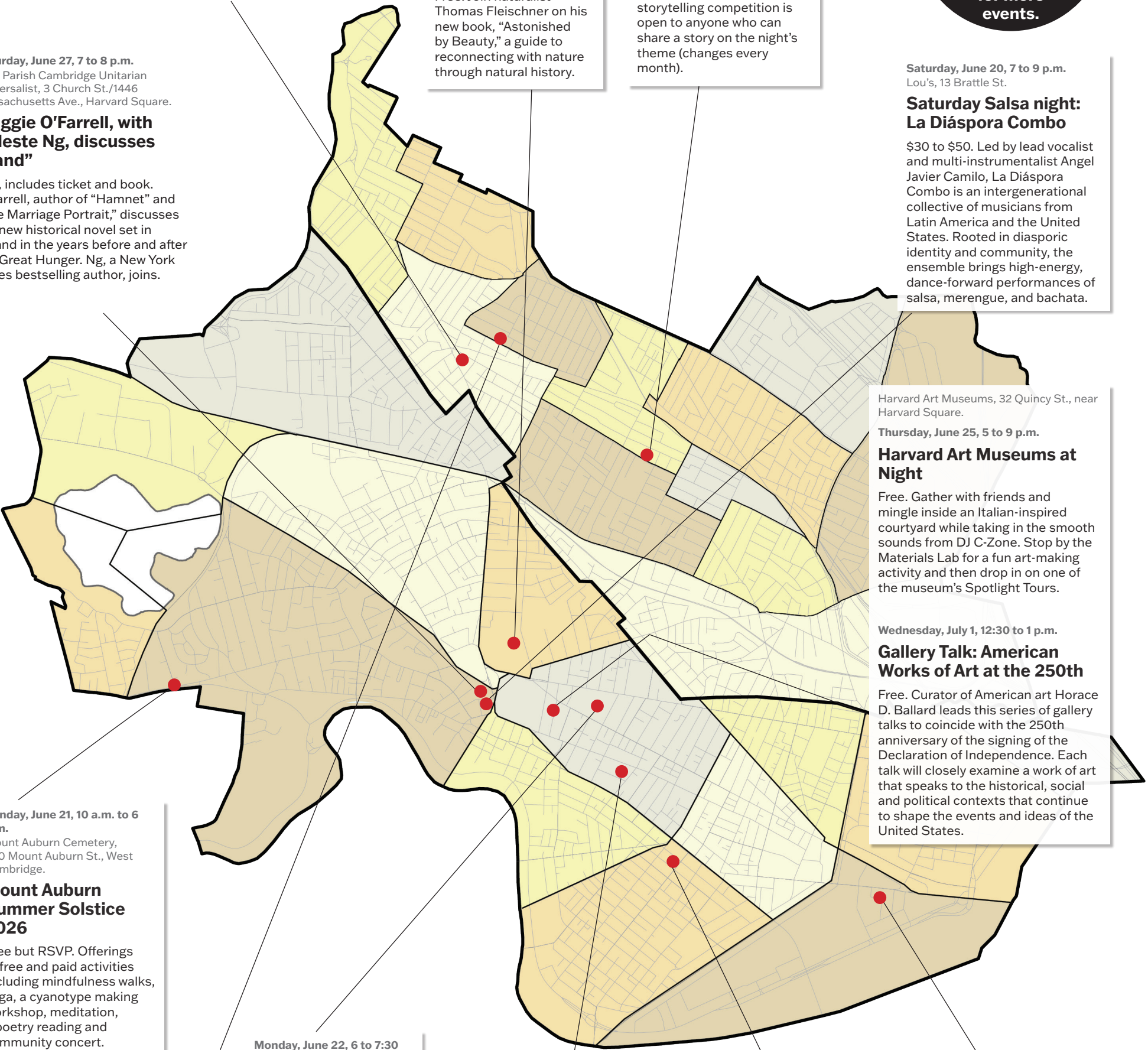
Cookbook Club and Community Potluck

Free. This month, we're cooking from "In Bibi's Kitchen: The Recipes and Stories of Grandmothers from the Eight African Countries that Touch the Indian Ocean" by Hawa Hassan. Bring a dish to share or just come to talk about your experience with this cookbook.

Tuesday, June 23, 3:30 to 5 p.m.
Kendall/MIT Open Space at 292 Main St., Kendall Square.

Soccer Watch Party: England vs. Ghana

Free. Enjoy free food, face painting, soccer activities and live entertainment. This event is part of "Cambridge United: Where the World Comes Together," a citywide series of free, outdoor soccer screenings and community celebrations throughout summer 2026.



■ Send your high-resolution images of urban wild things with location, date, photographer's name and other useful information for possible use online to photography@cambridgeday.com.

WILD THINGS

Don't fear the garter snake



Tom Murray

A garter snake in Groton flicks its tongue to pick up scent particles.

By JEANINE FARLEY

Snakes have a bad reputation. Calling someone a snake or a snake in the grass is an insult. Declaring that someone speaks with a forked tongue means the person says one thing but does another. A cold-blooded person, alluding to snakes' cold-blooded nature, is someone who lacks compassion.

But not all snakes deserve a bad rap. The little garter snakes (*hammophis sirtalis sirtalis*) we encounter in our daily lives are chief among them. Our eastern garter snakes are easy to recognize, with three yellow stripes that run along their otherwise dark body. Because they are cold-blooded, you might see them sunning on a rock on a warm day.

One reason to let garter snakes off the hook: They are harmless to humans. Garter snakes' first line of defense when they see a human is to leave as quickly and silently as possible, as noted by James Whitcomb Riley in his poem "A Country Pathway."

*A garter-snake across the dusty trail
Glances and — is not there.*

People once thought garter snakes did not have venom, but by the 1980s, scientists discovered that this is not true. Their venom is just not strong enough to harm people (frogs or earthworms are not that lucky, however).

Many snakes lay eggs, but garter snake females, which grow larger than males, give birth to live young. Inside the female's body, the snakes hatch out of their egg sacs into five-inch babies just before they are born. They will

grow for as long as they live, up to three feet in length, though they'll grow only a couple of inches in their first year.

So, how do these snakes capture prey? They do not have legs or claws to hold prey. They do not have teeth and jaws that can rip or tear. Garter snakes use tiny amounts of venom. Because garter snakes do not usually eat insects, much of their diet in Massachusetts is earthworms. If they happen to capture a larger amphibian such as a frog, they need just enough venom to stun or slow it down. These snakes do not have fangs for injecting venom. Instead, they produce toxin near the back of the upper jaw. The toxin mixes with saliva in the mouth and reaches prey slowly through bite wounds as the snake hangs on and chews.

In the spring, garter snakes end their period of winter inactivity (called brumation). When ready to mate, a female garter gives off chemical scents called phero-

mones to attract males. And does this ever work! The competition is so intense that there are such things as mating balls — writhing mass of snakes where many males compete to mate with one female.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, snake lungs are not like human lungs. Snake lungs are long skinny tubes that stretch the length of the snake's body. The ribs and the rib muscles expand to pull in air and contract to push out air. When a male snake attempts to mate with a female, his muscle contractions may push air out of the female's body, leaving only oxygen-poor air in her lungs. The stress response to lack of oxygen is to open the cloaca (the exit chamber for fecal waste, urine, and the reproductive tract). This makes it easier for the male to mate, which he does using one of his hemipenes. Garter snakes, like other snakes, have paired reproductive organs. Male garter snakes alternate between the right and left organ if they mate mul-



Chris Friesen

A mating ball of garter snakes.



Louis Burns

A garter snake in leaves along the Fitchburg Cutoff Path in Cambridge in June.

tle times. You can look for the reproductive organs to determine the sex of a garter snake.

But garter snakes may redeem themselves through the many unique features they possess that makes them different from other snakes. For instance, unlike many other snakes, garter snakes are social and are even known to form friendships. They might warm themselves in a large group, and if you happen upon them, they will take off at once in all directions. (This has happened to me as I rounded a bend in the Fells. I'd like to say I was unfazed, but, no. Sound escaped my lips.)

Garter snakes gather in groups for safety, to stay warm, to retain moisture and to communicate. But these groups are not random. Garter snakes group intentionally with specific snakes. In one study, scientists placed garter snakes into four groups of 10 and let them rearrange themselves into smaller groups. Snakes were identified by colored dots on their heads. Twice per day, researchers removed the snakes, cleaned the enclosure to erase odors, and then shuffled the snakes around. The snakes returned to their preferred groupings of three to eight snakes each time they were shuffled.

Their sociability also seems to give them other abilities. A 2024 study showed that garter snakes can recognize themselves. You have probably seen videos in which a researcher places a mirror in front of a chimp or an elephant, and the animal recognizes itself in the mirror.] For animals that are not primarily visual, such as dogs and reptiles, scientists use another



Richard George

A garter snake in Topsfield devours a toad.



Tom Murray

A spring garter snake peers out from leaves.



Tom Murray

Garter snakes probably get their name from their resemblance to garters that held up old-fashioned socks, which did not stay up on their own.

method to gauge self-recognition: They present the test animal with its own odor (for example, a urine sample) and an odor from another animal of the same species. If the test animal sniffs its odor longer than the stranger's odor, it passes the test, demonstrating recognition of its own odor, and by extension, itself.

Scientists conducted this experiment with garter snakes and ball pythons, which are tree-dwelling ambush predators who live alone. Garter snakes passed the self-recognition test, but ball pythons did not, and scientists speculate that recognizing themselves may help garter snakes navigate their complex social relationships.

With such profound abilities, should we perhaps reconsider the slew of snake-related insults? Their physical features are much different than ours, but like us, garter snakes choose their companions, recognize themselves, and have a complex social life.

FILM

LOCAL FOCUS



A scene from 1992’s “Malcolm X” featuring Denzel Washington.

Warner Bros.

A must-see movie for Juneteenth

By OSCAR GOFF

Friday is Juneteenth, and the **Brattle Theatre** celebrates with one of cinema’s great African American epics. Spike Lee’s “**Malcolm X**” (1992) casts Denzel Washington as the legendary civil rights activist, following his life from his birth in Nebraska to his emergence as one of the most influential and outspoken figures in 20th century America. “Malcolm X” is arguably the greatest film to come from the decades-long collaboration between Lee and Washington, and certainly ranks among each man’s finest work individually. It also represents the best-case scenario of the Hollywood biopic as a medium, a sweeping masterpiece that portrays both its subject’s considerable achievements and his warts-and-all humanity. “Malcolm X” screens Friday and Saturday on a print on loan from RISD’s Joel Freedman and Michael Fink 35mm collection and is absolutely not to be missed on the big screen.

Also opening Friday at the Brattle and screening through Monday is a new 4k restoration of Giuseppe De Santis’s “**Bitter Rice**” (1949), a true gem of classic Italian cinema. American actress Doris Dowling plays Francesca, the girlfriend and unwilling accomplice of a two-bit jewel thief, who seeks cover among the women toiling in the rice fields of the Province of Vercelli. “Rice” is something of a genre hybrid, combining the class consciousness of Italian neorealism (with a particular eye toward the rivalry between the unionized contract workers and the so-called “illegals” desperate to join them) and the pulp thrills of film noir. Sitting at the crossroads is Silvana Mangano, who all but steals the film as the vampy queen bee of the camp. Perhaps because of this, “Rice” is occasionally overlooked in studies of either field, but it has lost none of its punch in the decades since its release.

On Saturday, the **Somerville Theatre’s** Midnight Special celebrates the 30th anniversary of the debut film from one of our greatest working filmmakers. Wes Anderson’s “**Bottle Rocket**” (1996) casts Luke and Owen Wilson (both making their screen debuts, the latter sharing screenwriting credit with Anderson) as a pair of slacker best friends doing their damndest to break into a life of crime. “Bottle Rocket” is a far looser film than Anderson’s later work, its dingy apartments and fleabag motels a far cry from

the “Grand Budapest.” Still, even at this stage in his career, the director’s flair for quirky characters, loopy dialogue, and unexpected belts of pathos is unmistakable. Anderson’s filmography would go on to span the globe, but it was never more intimate than when he was simply shooting on the side streets of Texas with his friends.

From Tuesday through Thursday, the good folk at **Wicked Queer** take residence at the Brattle with a bevy of repertory selections for Pride. Tuesday features a double feature of classic lesbian romances, celebrating the 40th anniversary of the United States release of Donna Deitch’s “**Desert Hearts**” (1985) and the 30th of Lana and Lilly Wachowski’s “**Bound**” (1996). Wednesday brings a 30th anniversary 35mm screening of Hettie Macdonald’s “**Beautiful Thing**” (1996), as well as the series’ centerpiece: the premiere of a brand new 4k restoration of Lino Brocka’s groundbreaking “**Macho Dancer**” (1988), long censored in its native Philippines and presented here in its full, uncut glory. The series closes Thursday with a 25th-anniversary screening of John Cameron Mitchell’s cult classic “**Hedwig and the Angry Inch**” (2001), a dazzling postmodern musical about a gender-fluid glam-rock superstar. As is to be expected from the minds behind one of the country’s longest-running queer film festivals, it’s an expertly curated trove of much-loved classics, and truly worthy of the word Pride.

The **Somerville’s Thirsty Thursdays** repertory series closes out this week with one of the screen’s all-time great English pubs. In Edgar Wright’s “**Shaun of the Dead**” (2004), Simon Pegg’s eponymous slacker hero is dumped by his long-suffering girlfriend because all he wants to do is hang out with his mates at the Winchester Pub. When London society is upended by a zombie apocalypse, Shaun gathers his friends and loved ones to hole up in the safest and most familiar place he knows — which, of course, just so happens to have unlimited pints on tap. Wright’s film is a true marvel of genre filmmaking, a laugh-a-second comedy which is also perfectly functional as an unironic horror thriller. Its central location is the icing on the cake, as fully realized and lived-in as any bar portrayed in movie history. You know what you have to do: Go to the Somerville, have a nice cold pint (or at least a large popcorn), and wait for all of this to blow over.

REVIEWS

‘Disclosure Day’ opens a new universe

When Steven Spielberg makes a movie about aliens, it’s a good idea to pay attention. His latest, “Disclosure Day,” brings the Spielbergian pop mystique, while also being one of the most singularly weird original blockbusters in ages. Josh O’Connor plays Daniel Keller, an operative who goes rogue after learning his employer, a shadowy government organization called Wardex, has been both suppressing the existence of UFOs for decades and committing atrocities against alien captives. Keller, along with fellow Wardex dissident Hugo (Colman Domingo), plans to flood the airwaves with troves of top-secret alien autopsy footage, something his boss, the ruthless Noah Scanlon (Colin Firth), will stop at nothing to prevent. Meanwhile, after a strange encounter with a cardinal in her apartment, Kansas City weather forecaster Margaret Fairchild (Emily Blunt) finds herself able to read people’s minds and speak countless languages — including those not of this earth.

In his career, Spielberg has been synonymous with widescreen Hollywood spectacle for so long that it’s easy to forget he’s of the same New Hollywood generation as Scorsese and Coppola. Here, as in “Close Encounters of the Third Kind” (1977), he has one foot in both worlds. “Disclosure Day” has no shortage of thrilling set pieces, including two white-knuckle car chases and some eerie extra-terrestrial goings-on. But what makes the film so special is its interest in the strange intersection between science fiction and spirituality. The film is shot through with a peculiar new-age sensibility, drawing parallels between the ETs and a higher power. Blunt is excellent, capturing the



Emily Blunt (left) and Josh O’Connor in “Disclosure Day,” directed by Steven Spielberg.

manic energy of Richard Dreyfuss in “Close Encounters” while coming to terms with the fact that she’s suddenly become something of a living god. So heady are the concerns that you might at first miss a subplot about a potential World War III brewing overseas. Compared to the mysteries of the universe, such concerns become trivial.

There are so many ideas packed into “Disclosure Day” that it’s tough to wrap one’s head around it all in one sitting, and those looking for a straightforward alien adventure film might find themselves baffled. Nevertheless, this is vintage Spielberg, as personal as “The Fabelmans” (2022) and as thrilling and inventive as his best popcorn epics, with a hopeful message that humanity may not be beyond saving. To quote another UFO investigator: I want to believe.

— OSCAR GOFF



At **Somerville Theatre, Kendall Square Cinema, Apple Cinemas Cambridge, and AMC Assembly Row 12.**

‘Masters of the Universe’ goes on and on

’80s vibes are in the air — and in your ear — in this overly long return of He-Man, a Mattel action figure set turned franchise. The 1987 take on “Masters” starred Dolph Lundgren and was cheesy, brash and dull with lo-fi effects (unlike “Flash Gordon” (1980), which brazenly reveled in its kitsch). The current version is directed by Travis Knight (“Kubo and the Two Strings” (2016), “Bumblebee” (2018)). It shows some ingenuity early on but by the end redounds with subpar crash-bang mindlessness. At a nearly two-and-a-half hour running time, the film could have used some paring in the editing room, or a bit more spice in the script department (five writers are credited).

Because as He-Man/Adam, Nicholas Galitzine (“Red, White & Royal Blue”) strikes a nice balance of hunky and goof — think Chris Pratt’s Star-Lord or Chris Hemsworth as Thor in the Marvel Universe. After the evil Skeletor (Jared Leto, who seems minted for these parts) overthrows the kingdom of Eternia, the young Prince Adam is sent to Earth via a time/space portal. In tow is the Sword of Power (you gotta love these witty, high-brow labels). Naturally, Skeletor needs the sword to rule the — well, you know, universe. Adam loses the sword and gets a job as a corporate wonk, which he spends on the internet searching for the hefty, double-edge sword. Cheekily, his pronouns are He-Him, and he’s also on the HR watch list (Sasheer Zamata hits it out of the park as Adam’s passive-aggressive higher up) for using company resources



A scene from “Masters of the Universe”

for his “weird,” role-play obsession. He’s not too candid about his origins (Superman knew better); when he tells a date about Eternia and the sword they head to the bathroom and never come back.

The banal life on Earth is the kitschy, fun part of “Masters of the Universe.” When Adam does find the sword and he’s back on Eternia trying the save the decimated planet from Skeletor, who Leto projects as a Snidely Whiplash with a tang of Jeremy Irons, interest wanes despite Knight’s efforts to crank it up. In the mix is the ever-regal Idris Elba as Duncan, a former Sergeant-at-Arms turned booze hound, and Camila Mendes as his daughter — and able avenger. Lots to like but it all goes on too long. Nice touches are a cameo by the still-jacked Lundgren and the reuse of Queen’s “Princes of the Universe” from the original “Highlander” film (1986).

— TOM MEEK



Playing at **Kendall Square Cinema, Apple Cinemas Cambridge and AMC Assembly Row 12.**

■ Do you know of a restaurant opening or closing in Cambridge or Somerville, or do you have other food news tips? Send them to business@cambridgeday.com.

FOOD

WHAT WE'RE HAVING

Back to Sumiao for spicy seasonal fare and fun



The silk squash at Sumiao is Sumiao noodles.

Photos: Tom Meek

By TOM MEEK

We didn't need much of a reason to wander back to Sumiao Hunan Kitchen. There's always the prospect of something exotic, like pork kidney, lava fish or the sizzling crystal vermicelli. And of course, Sumiao made culinary news last year by being one of the few area eateries to make the Northeast Cities edition of the Michelin Guide as a Bib Gourmand selection.

Another reason to return: new dishes in the changing seasonal and monthly special menus. The newest seasonal menu features kidney, gizzards, and a silk squash — and we tried most of them for you.

The absolute standout is the silk squash with baby shrimp, light and flavorful with a savory succulence. The silk squash, known as "luffa," has nothing to

do with exfoliating your skin. It's a sweet and delicate edible gourd that looks like a cucumber cross-bred with a ripe green melon. The young prawns are also tender and silky, and the dish comes with a light accent of minced garlic and wok oil. It's a melt-in-your-mouth sensual experience.

We also sampled the pork kidney with garden cucumber: tender slivers of kidney flower, or zhūyāo, tossed with cuke, and sautéed scallions and bell peppers with peppercorns and a light garlic and ginger seasoned soy sauce. This is not the chicken liver and onions your mom served; the texture is more homogenous, soft and succulent, with a subtle wurst taste. The five-spiced, double-cooked duck comes with juicy and slightly smoky meat that's been braised so that it's almost pulled in texture, and served in a broad pan with a piquant mixture of red dried pep-

pers, sautéed bell peppers, and onion, topped with fresh cilantro and the house mala and dark soy sauces.

The mala sauce —also known as Chinese numbing sauce — is essentially Sumiao's house-made chili oil (the mala duck appetizer, lean breast medallions served rare-ish, is a fantastic kickoff) and while the portion in the vast pan seems huge, it's not — shareable for sure, but I was able to get to the bottom, driven by savory succor of the heat and the well-rendered fat that lent its richness to the dark, gamey goodness.

If you like spicy food, Sumiao is for you, since fire hot is the calling card of Hunan cuisine, and the chili is king, queen, prince and princess. You can regulate your heat level — hot, medium, and mild — but know that some dishes are marinated in a chili base, so

there isn't a non-spicy option.

Off the monthly menu, Shao's cooling noodles are the thing to have. The name is intriguing, but these are the essential, cold ses-

ame noodle classic with some heat thrown in to make that "cooling" elusive, and the noodles are thinner and more pliable than typical. Like the mala duck and the twisted scallion buns — think light, airy bao as a roll with super-fresh scallion mixed in — Shao's noodles are a great starter and easily shared.

Most of the dishes at Sumiao are de facto sharing plates and come without sides or frills. If you want rice, you must order one of three kinds separately: white, brown, and black (or purple "forbidden rice" that packs more fiber and protein than white rice).

Sumiao is also open for lunch, and the lunch specials come with your choice of soup: classic sweet and sour or melted gold. The silk squash and baby shrimp dish is on the menu, along with lava fish and beef on fire. The melted gold soup is a must-try — a squash and pumpkin puree served hot, and both savory and sweet.

Sumiao isn't only about food. The restaurant hosts live music in its large, winding dining room on Wednesday and Thursday nights, and is holding watch parties during some World Cup matches this summer.



The cooling noodles at Sumiao.



A flight of different types of sake at Sumiao.

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1369

COFFEE HOUSE

good coffee, good people

serving inman and central square since 1993

LOCAL

Jennings

From Page 1

“I could ride my bike anywhere. I used to go to soccer practice on my own. I used to go to hang out with my friends. I didn't need a ride or have to get set up. And that makes a big difference... I think, is a special kind of perspective to have.”

After completing college and a master's degree in urban planning at Rutgers University, he landed a job at the city's Community Development department as a Neighborhood Planner. Among many projects in the works was the revitalizing of Kendall Square. Our conversation pauses just long enough to place a breakfast order with our good-natured — read, patient — waitress. Jennings hesitates. “Can I just get a plain bagel toasted with butter?” he says. “Oh, and a coffee, I guess.” I counter with a simple, “two eggs would be great.” I think our waitress must be a little disappointed so I add, “and a chocolate chip cruller would be great.”

He returns to those early years as a city worker. “Working in community development and as a planner there was such a great experience,” he says. “Because even for something as simple as a park renovation, the opinions and feelings about different things — people abutting the property and people wanting to use it for different uses — you get to hear a lot of different perspectives.” He learned how to listen and try to build consensus around a shared vision. “If you focus on the points that people agree on, and where you want to be, there is usually a lot more agreement than we realize.”

Jennings stayed in community development for more than a decade until he was tapped in 2014 to become Assistant to the City Manager, first under Richard Rossi and soon after, Louis DePasquale. Four years later, he took the helm at the Budget Department, overseeing a municipal purse of over \$635 million. Running the budget is not as different from community development as one might think, Jennings says with quiet confidence. “It's a lot of understanding different stakeholders, balancing different priorities, a lot of communication, and a lot of times translating more technical information to a wider audience. Planning is a lot of the built environment; the budget is allocated resources. But overall, it's the same type of work. You're kind of trying to find that balance.”

Our meal — such as it is — arrives. Jennings slowly begins to dab small pats of butter on his toasted bagel as he continues, returning to this year's budget discussions. “It's been more collaborative than people might think,” he says. “It's not like, 'Oh, you can't do this.' It's a discussion that happens really throughout the year. We shouldn't be surprised at budget time.”

Perhaps the most significant change this year has been the call for savings. Anticipating a possible downturn in property tax revenues— a recent survey by real estate firm Hunneman suggested

the Greater Boston lab market faces a vacancy rate of over 25%, a spillover likely to affect the city's number one tax payer, MIT — all city departments were asked to cut spending at least 2%. Jennings is quick to applaud his colleagues for the seriousness with which they tackled the request. “Departments did a really good job looking closely and coming up with proposals to actually find those reductions so that the overall budget increase isn't more than what we feel is sustainable.”

He explains that in every cycle, the city must cover a range of so-called fixed costs that will rise due to inflation: line items such as salary, wages and benefits, especially health care; energy; and debt service, among others. Keeping a close eye on how much leeway the city might have beyond the basics is a critical part of Jennings job, as he, like his superiors, strive for a balanced budget and another year of Cambridge's long-standing record of triple A bond ratings.

“Do you balance your own proverbial check book?” I ask as he finishes off the first half of his bagel. He laughs. “Well, I don't use a checkbook anymore, but...” He trails off with the answer being so obvious. A fiscal watchdog at home, too. He quickly returns to the subject at hand.

For the 12th year in its history, the upcoming city budget also includes a roughly million-dollar allocation to enable participatory budgeting,

“I literally grew up with kids from all walks of life, from very, very poor to very, very wealthy, and we were all in the same classrooms.”

which allows city residents over the age of 12 to propose civically beneficial projects. Suggestions are vetted and culled by a voluntary committee of locals and then voted on by all those who are eligible. This year, nine projects were selected, ranging from upgrading city basketball courts to improving sidewalk safety and installing concrete bike lane barriers.

Jennings notes that In the early years of the program, the same projects kept winning, “because I think people learned how to advocate amongst their interest groups.” To counter this, the department expanded its outreach, even encouraging local teachers to incorporate participatory budgeting into lesson plans on civics and government. “We want to make sure we're getting ideas from as wide a group as possible,” Jennings said.

There were thousands of suggestions this year, likely the result of more intentional and directed outreach. It also led the director to expand his efforts to spread the budget word generally, bringing information sessions on the full package to those who might other-

wise feel shut out or intimidated or just disconnected from the process, groups like seniors, non-English speakers and others. Inclusion is and has always been important to Jennings. He remembers back to his planning days as he says, “it was always important for us to speak for people who couldn't make it to a meeting or were not there or don't always show up.”

Jennings graciously glances at his watch and notes that he will have to get going soon. He almost seems apologetic for cutting me short; I assure him otherwise. I look around for our waitress to grab the check and carry on with a few more personal questions about his relationship with his hometown.

Does he have a go-to destination for a night out? He chuckles, confessing he doesn't remember the last time he had a night out. Well then, if he has any free time out of the office and before he commutes home to Sharon, where does he go and what does he do? Still a city kid at heart, he doesn't hesitate. “I like being in Cambridge areas with a lot of people, so I love walking down Mass Ave, down towards Kendall and MIT, just seeing people and watching them. Or up towards Harvard.”

He also marvels at the city's parks and gives a shout out to some of his former colleagues from city planning, including long-time landscape architect, city planner Rob Steck and old boss, Stewart Dash. “They were really, really thoughtful about how the community uses public spaces and it shows in the parks. You can see exactly how they envisioned it. Like, this should be a park for old and young, abled and disabled, for all members of the community. You see it's still happening, and that's really, really cool to see.”

What keeps him up at night? His four mostly adult kids. “I thought it would [get easier] as they transition into adulthood. But it doesn't,” he says quietly. “The needs are different, and the worry stays up here,” he gestures above his head. “I feel like, you know, it was the same level of anxiety sometimes like when I first dropped them off at kindergarten or something It doesn't go away.”

Jennings takes one more sip of what is now probably cold coffee and places his napkin on the bagel half still left on his plate. He puts out his hand to thank me and apologizes again for having to get back to work. The pleasure has been all mine, I tell him, no apologies necessary. He slips out the door and down the street, and I think of something he said earlier: “I like the hands-on-ness of being in the city. The city I grew up in, that I love and still, you know, feels like home.”

Susanne Beck is a freelance journalist and long-time contributor to Cambridge Day. This interview was conducted April 6, 2026. It has been edited and condensed.



Julia Carpi

Chris Montero, president of the Cambridge Education Association, speaks during public comment.

Union rallies

From Page 1

The CEA, which represents around 1,500 employees of the district, has been in active contract negotiations with the School Committee across five bargaining units, or groups of employees, since early this year. Those bargaining sessions are private, but contracts will become public when finalized.

The union's previous three-year contracts with the district are set to expire before the beginning of the next school year. The union protested with similar concerns at the start of previous contract negotiations in 2023.

Many union members at the rally spoke to “sub-living wages” and “poverty wages” across the district for Education Support Professionals, or ESPs, a category that includes paraprofessionals and clerks among other non-teaching school staff.

The annual starting salary for a paraprofessional in the district is \$31,640.25 for a

seven-hour workday, according to information provided by Sarah Rosenberg, CEA's vice president of community relations.

“The school committee is proposing 2 percent cost-of-living adjustments for all 1,500 CEA members, which would leave hundreds of educators still earning less than \$40,000 for full-time positions by 2029,” the union wrote in a press release for the rally.

The committee approved a \$293 million school district budget for the new fiscal year in April, the largest category of which is personnel investment.

Some union members criticized the timeline of negotiations at the rally, arguing that bargaining sessions with the committee were delayed and expressing a desire to complete negotiations before the summer.

The union said its final bargaining session with the committee will be on June 24, and it hopes contracts will be finalized before the end of the summer.

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SPORTS

Ultimate From Page 1

The girls earned a bid to nationals after beating top-tier teams around New England and placing second in Division 1 states and third at the regional tournament. That bid only came because another team backed out. But clearly, the Falcons belonged.

The team flew to Portland, Ore. Thursday morning and traveled to the tournament at Pioneer Sports Park in capital city Salem that afternoon. The west coast yielded near-perfect weather during Friday's pool play, but temperatures hovered into the low 90s Saturday on the second day of competition. Their full results:

- Friday, June 12
- 12-9 loss vs. Lincoln, Washington
 - 13-2 loss vs. Holy Family Catholic (Omega) of Cincinnati, Ohio
 - 13-2 win vs. Lakewood, Colorado

- Saturday, June 13
- 11-6 loss vs. Roosevelt of Seattle, Washington
 - 9-8 loss vs. Ingraham-Lakeside of Seattle, Washington
 - Forfeit (win) vs. Strath Haven, Pennsylvania due to opponent injuries

"We were being very patient," said Valenzuela-Melzer, who is taking a gap year before going to college and wants to coach. "For me personally, since I did score a lot in that game, it was my teammates helping out and coaches telling me where to cut."

The West coast yielded near-perfect weather during Friday's pool play, but temperatures hovered into the low 90s Saturday on the second day of competition. Each game lasted 100 minutes, and the 12 athletes on the field ran an average of four miles per game. Depth is a priority for future seasons. Most opponents carried ros-



Courtesy of CRLS Ultimate

The Cambridge Rindge and Latin School girls' ultimate team at the 2026 Ultiworld High School National Invite.

ters of more than 20 players. The teams built relationships with others, especially Four Rivers from Deerfield.

Second-seeded Washburn High School of Minneapolis topped No. 1 South Eugene, Ore. in the final.

The Falcons returned to Cambridge Sunday night, but first stopped to celebrate junior Helena Demissie's 17th birthday with a full-group brunch Sunday at the International Rose Test Garden in Portland.

"Off the field, this team is just a joy," Sebesta said. "Everyone on the team likes each other, which is rare in sports, and everybody just supports each other."

Back in April nobody expected to make a cross-country flight to compete in the national tournament. The players that had founded CRLS's team graduated in 2025. "We weren't exactly

recovering," said Frida Greene, a junior, "but it was definitely a new era."

Ultimate is not yet recognized as a varsity sport by the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association (MIAA), the state's governing body for high school sports. Instead, New England Ultimate and the Boston Ultimate Disc Alliance (BUDA) both organize competitions. Traditionally, western Massachusetts teams such as Four Rivers, Amherst-Pelham Regional High School and Northampton High School rule the state's ultimate roost.

At the start of the year, the CRLS girls' team hoped to finish top three in the state. They set their sights higher after beating all three western Massachusetts powerhouses during regular season play — twice — the Falcons (26-4) received notice of their "strength

bid" to the national tournament. They placed second at the Division 1 states and third at the New England regional tournament.

"Our first few games we were a little shaky, but as the season progressed we got exponentially better and found our groove," junior Dori Coplon-Newfield said. "A big thing about our team is our spirit and how we interact with each other, and we're all super close."

Coplon-Newfield was one of six players to earn state all-star status, a feat in a sport where seven players make up a side. This is the rundown:

- Amélie Valenzuela-Melzer, senior, cutter
- Cece Lubetsky, junior, hybrid
- Helena Demissie, junior, handler
- Frida Greene, junior, handler
- Lauren Sebesta, junior, hybrid

➤ Dori Coplon-Newfield, junior, handler

The team had to fund its participation in the national tournament, although CRLS did approve the trip. Sebesta said a number of people chipped in to support the team so no players had to pay their way. A substantial donation from Friends of Cambridge Athletics (FOCA) covered tournament fees and half of player lodging.

The tournament appearance also meant two more weeks of practice, which Greene counted as a positive, since extending the season in any way meant something to the close-knit group. Now, they were excited to show their skills and camaraderie on a bigger stage.

"It's kind of crazy that we pulled it off," Greene said. "We were super excited to be playing some top teams."

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Cambridge Housing Authority, in its capacity as managing member, acting on behalf of Newtowne Court LLC, the Owner and Awarding Authority, invites sealed bids for the Newtowne Court Selective Roof Replacement Project at 637 Main St, Cambridge, MA 02139.

The project consists of a full roof replacement for (4) four, three-story residential apartment buildings with flat membrane roofs. The work shall include the replacement of edge metal flashing and all roof accessories.

The work is estimated to cost

\$1,000,000.

All bids are subject to state prevailing wage rates as required by the Mass. Dept. of Labor Standards and included in the project specifications.

General bids shall be accompanied by a bid deposit not less than five (5%) of the greatest possible bid amount and made payable to Newtowne Court LLC. A 100% payment bond and a 100% performance bond will be required for the awarded contract.

General bids will be received until Thursday, July 2, 2026, at 2:00 PM and publicly opened

on-line, forthwith.

A site visit for all interested general bidders will begin at Newtowne Court, 637 Main St, Cambridge, MA 02139. on Tuesday, June 23, 2026, at 10:00 AM. All bidders are invited and encouraged to attend. Attendees of the site visit should RSVP to Newtowne CourtRoof@Cambridge-Housing.org.

Deadline for General Bidder questions shall be submitted by Friday June 26, 2026, by 12:00 Noon. Questions received after the above deadlines may not be considered by the Awarding Authority. No interpretations of the meaning of the plans, specifications or other pre-bid documents shall be made to any bidder orally. Every request for such interpretation must be in writing. Questions concerning this project must be submitted via Email to Newtowne Court-Roof@Cambridge-Housing.org

Bid forms and contract documents will be available at WWW.PROCORE.COM on Thursday,

June 18, 2026, after 10:00 AM (may be downloaded and viewed electronically).

THIS PROJECT IS BEING ELECTRONICALLY BID, HARD COPY BIDS AND EMAILED BIDS WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED BY THE AWARDING AUTHORITY. ALL BIDS shall be electronically submitted through WWW.PROCORE.COM. At any time during the bidding process, you may download and

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print the various bid documents for your company's records. Additional instructions to complete the other bid forms are accessible on the Procure website.

The Awarding Authority reserves the right to reject any and all bids and to waive any informalities in the bidding process if it is in the public interest to do so. The Awarding Authority

also reserves the right to reject the bids if less than three bids are received.

Bids shall remain in effect for 60 days, Saturdays, Sundays and legal holidays excluded after opening. Successful bidders shall agree to commence work and complete the Work in accordance with the dates set forth in the Bidding Documents and Contract Documents.

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