

THE MAGAZINE OF CHARLOTTE HARBOR AND THE GULF ISLANDS

# HARBOR

## -STYLE-

January 2021 | \$4.95

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Judi Jenkins and Bill Lundgren

# Living your Best Life

**BILL LUNDGREN AND JUDI JENKINS' ENGLEWOOD NONPROFIT, LIFE REALIZED, HAS A SIMPLE, BEAUTIFUL MISSION: HELP EVERYONE ACHIEVE THEIR LIFE'S PASSION, IN MUSIC, ART, LIFE OR CAREER.**

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY SUE WADE



"We have more new vendors every week," said Judi Jenkins.

**T**exan Bob Riner was strolling West Dearborn Street one day when, he says, Bill Lundgren discovered him.

Riner knew how to play the guitar and happened to have one in his car, but he'd neither played much in 25 years nor learned the finer points of tuning.

"I'd got busy with other things and let music go by the wayside," he said. "But in retirement I had the chance to resurrect something I had a talent for but never pursued. There are a lot of people like me, I think."

Outside Mango Bistro, he asked Lundgren, "Hey, what's going on here?"

Lundgren replied, "It's an open mic. Anyone can come up and play."

"I used to do that," Riner mused.

"Well, you're next!"

"I'm next?!"

Lundgren put the Texan's name on the board and got him up on stage.

The self-deprecating Riner has written his

own songs but allows as how nobody would want to hear them because there are so many other "good" songs out there. He'd never played in front of a group before.

"I was just awful," he groaned. "But people like me, they don't think they're ever ready, until somebody like Bill tells them, 'You're ready! Now get up there!'"

"And I got better after that. Now I'm playing twice a week at the Blue Pineapple."

A rapidly growing self-improvement movement—now based at The Dearborn

Center, 501 West Dearborn Street—embraced Riner and many others like him who've learned, "You're ready! Now get up there!"

All of these formerly underachieving but radiant souls will tell you much the same thing: "I kind of fell into this, and I love it."

They talk of discovering what they were always meant to do. And their innate talents get a boost from an Englewood couple and their all-volunteer, donation-supported 501(c)3, 509(a)2 public charity for self-actualizers—Life Realized.

### **IT STARTED WITH FIREWORKS**

Judi Jenkins and Bill Lundgren know all about turning life around.

On September 11, 2001, Jenkins was in her 14th year as a Verizon manager. Somehow, Verizon's 32-story headquarters remained standing, though gravely wounded, after its next-door neighbor, 7 World Trade Center, collapsed. ►



No one in the Verizon Building was injured. But Jenkins lost her job, along with all her clients from World Trade Center tenants Morgan Stanley and Fuji Bank.

She managed to live off savings until 2005. By then completely broke, she went on welfare and lived with friends for a while. Shortly after a six-year career as a Department of Welfare caseworker, a rear-ender mashed her into another car, destroying her work life.

Years later, while challenging herself to travel on her own for the first time since the accident, she met recent widower and former 20-year adman Lundgren while he, too, was braving something new—staging his first professional fireworks show for Martha's Vineyard's big Fourth of July celebration.

It was a total romcom.

Jenkins recalled, "I couldn't get a hotel room, so I'd rented a docked sailboat. Bill was setting up and explained the fireworks to me. He said, 'You want to have a soda?' I said, 'You want to come back to my sailboat?'

"For a minute he thought I actually owned a sailboat. Then I 'fessed up.'"

And life became realized for both of them.

After moving to Englewood four years ago, they volunteered at The Open Studio, a creative cooperative on Old Englewood Road where they applied their corporate skills to special programs.

Jenkins helped artists and fledgling art instructors share their craft. She promoted workshops in fermentation and indigenous edible plants; organized Edible Landscaping Tours of local properties; and set up a weekly craft fair that helped seed their current farmers markets.

Lundgren, who'd finally found a town where his own and others' music could flourish, honed musicians' confidence at Englewood-wide open mic events.

"We reorganized independently when we formed Life Realized last year," Lundgren explained.

"After we came to Englewood, we quickly realized that everything here is geared toward season. The rest of us wanted things to do all year long."

So, Lundgren and Jenkins now make sure that, rain or shine, every Sunday all year long and on seasonal Thursdays, Englewood has



Jeff Cowherd plays background music at Life Realized open mics and crafts stringed instruments.

a farmers market, and that all their programs fall on days and times accessible to working residents, young people and the retired.

Renting The Dearborn Center at 501 West Dearborn gave them more freedom and flexibility than ever.

During the week, the center hosts classes in watercolor, mixed media, art journaling, fermentation, personal wellness for caregivers and more. Because it's a 2,000-square-foot, open-air warehouse, the center has a COVID-compliant seating capacity of 45.

And now, if it rains, they can move the twice-weekly market indoors.

### **TO MARKET, TO MARKET**

Life Realized's first event, in early 2020, was a Sunday farmers market and open mic, spread out on the lawn beside the 501 West Dearborn warehouse.

Vendors now gather there twice a week for a patchouli-scented alternative market selling barbecue, hot dogs, funnel cake and lemonade and purveying jewelry, crafts, tie dye, wind chimes, mushrooms, kombucha,



Wellness coach Amelia Jones, MHS, sells kombucha at the farmers market and teaches a six-session course, "Transformative Wellness for YOU, the Caretaker."

gourmet popcorn, fresh seafood, native veggies, free-range eggs and good cheer.

Everyone there has a story.

Pitmaster Shay Vercher lost his home to Hurricane Katrina, but salvaged floating debris from New Orleans Charity Hospital to make the smoker from which he now sells barbecued pork, brisket and chicken.

His waft of apple and cherrywood smoke lures customers all the way down Dearborn—the same way that Englewood's magic drew him in, years ago.

Soft-spoken woodcrafter Shanon Smart of North Port started bringing his Smart Custom Worx to the market in February. Jenkins said, "He's self-taught and has been woodworking for only two years. That's amazing given the quality of his work."

"Incubating small business entrepreneurs is part of our mission," she continued. "We mentor several vendors, helping grow their businesses beyond the basic opportunity that the market provides."

Claude Overly's Mr. C's Produce explodes with such colorful abandon that it almost doesn't look real. Overly emerged from retirement to rescue the nascent farmers market, which couldn't at first find a produce vendor.

He said, "I'm very particular in what I buy, and whatever isn't sold goes to the needy."

Of course he, too, has a life-realization story.

"I'm a General Motors retiree. They took away our benefits, so I had to go back to work at Walmart. They put me in produce, and I loved it." ▶

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Jane Armstrong, 70, of CloudMountain Earthworks, made her very first stoneware sale at a Life Realized farmers market. A respiratory therapist for 45 years, Judi Jenkins and Life Realized helped Armstrong find her calling in art.

## A COMMUNITY OF MUSICIANS

No matter what he takes on—advertising, fireworks or open mics—Lundgren wraps what he calls his “engineer brain” around it to make it happen. From the start, the Sunday farmers market included his open mic, which now also has its own night at The Dearborn Center.

Monday nights, things might be jumping at the Englewood Moose Lodge and Zeke’s on the east end of West Dearborn, but the west end is usually black as pitch.

Now that Life Realized has spruced up 501 Dearborn’s steel-frame warehouse, things are different. Monday nights, it spills light and music out onto a front yard lined with string lights.

“We want those lights on seven days a week, starting with Monday night’s open mic,” Lundgren said.

Close your eyes, and a smooth gent

in a John Deere cap and glossy blue windbreaker—Ray Marbury of Venice—could be Willie Nelson. Back behind him, Jeff Cowherd (his real name) noodles along on a bizarre hybrid five-string beneath “Help Me Make It Through the Night.”

Himself a poster boy for life’s realization, Cowherd retired to Englewood from Kentucky and runs a company crafting high-quality, affordable mandolins and ukuleles.

Englewood guitarist/vocalist Everard “Ev” Dodge sat taking it all in at his first Life Realized open mic.

Dodge organizes two bands—The Sidemen and The Gulf Breeze Bluegrass Band—which comprise Englewood Opry. For a decade they’ve been playing classic country and bluegrass throughout the area to an audience of nearly 100 loyal followers.

“When The Dearborn Center opened up,” he said, “we thought this would be

# About the business

## The Dearborn Center

501 W. Dearborn Street, Englewood  
(across from Comadres)

## Open mic night

Mondays 6:30 to 9:30 p.m.

## Thursday farmers market

Thursdays for an extended season,  
9 a.m. to 2 p.m., rain or shine  
Fresh produce, food and craft vendors

## Englewood Opry

Thursdays 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. through  
April; Free show by The Sidemen classic  
country and The Gulf Breeze Bluegrass  
Band

## Sunday farmers market

Sundays year round, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.,  
rain or shine; Fresh produce, food trucks,  
food and craft vendors, open mic

## Weekly classes

For a fast-growing schedule of weekly  
classes, go to [liferealized.org/events](http://liferealized.org/events).

the perfect place to call home, allowing our free show to go on Thursdays, rain or shine. We’re hoping to draw attention to the Dearborn Street downtown.”

“Open mic is just fun,” drawled singer/guitarist Don Bush. “Bill Lundgren creates a community of friendship among musicians. The thing about Bill’s open mics is that he makes sure you sound good. He has this whole sound system and can adjust the sound on the fly.”

Lundgren said, “I try to make sure they sound like they’re in my living room, not a stadium. We want it to feel comfortable, like family. Everyone has such a good time, enjoys each other and helps each other out.”

“Everybody has improved,” Bush added. “You can practice all you want in your living room, but get out in front of people and it’s different. And a lot of the audience is musicians, so we have fun with it.”



Zeke Freitas guards product for Paul and Lori Freitas' Beachcombers Originals.

Self-taught singer/guitarists like 14-year-old Dalton Truit and 15-year-old Laura Hedderman—whose guitar is half as big as she is—have been coming to Life Realized open mics for years and gone from shaky, nervous kids who'd never played in public to poised performers who play all over town.

Lundgren confessed, "I've never before been involved in any community I lived in. But this feels like how things are supposed to be. I'm not really a people person, but this whole thing has made me one."

"Many people don't recognize that the thing that comes easiest to them might be of great value to others," Jenkins said.

For her and Lundgren, that thing is helping other people find their own greatest value. ◀

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