

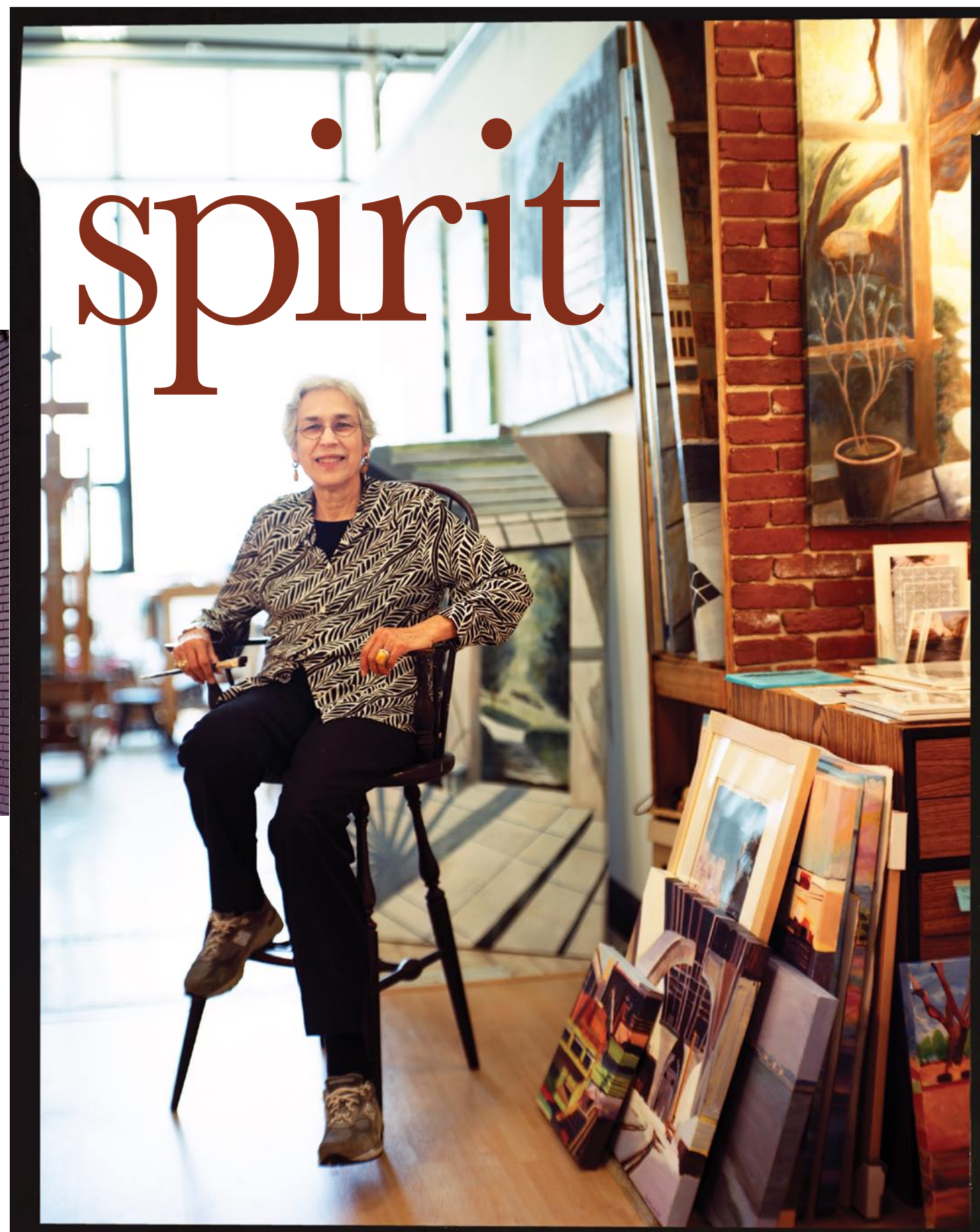
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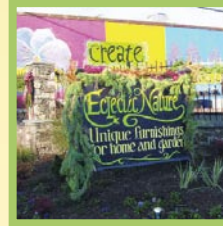
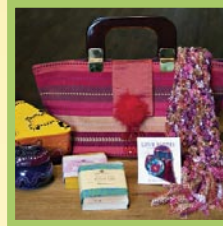
The electric current that
makes Alexandria so
lively is homegrown.



Faces of commercial Alexandria (clockwise from left): the Birchmere music hall; Cheesetique; Evening Star Cafe; Torpedo Factory Arts Center; and Burke & Herbert Bank. Opposite page: Marian Van Landingham was one of the driving forces behind the creation of the Torpedo Factory.

spirit





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Small independent shops, artists, and businesses give Alexandria much of the charm that attracts residents and visitors—from the eclectic boutiques that line the streets of Old Town to the unique mom-and-pop stores of Del Ray and Arlandria to the Torpedo Factory Arts Center, where visitors can watch painters, jewelry makers, sculptors, printmakers, and other artists at work.

“Tourism is a large part of our economy,” says Laura Overstreet, vice president for communications at the Alexandria Convention & Visitors Association. “Our small boutiques and shops and galleries are one of the strongest draws to the city.”

Artists are also a major contributor to the local economy, says Pat Miller, co-owner of retail store A Show of Hands and chairwoman of the Alexandria Commission for the Arts.

According to a recent report by Americans for the Arts, arts and culture in Alexandria contribute \$80 million to

the economy—far more than the median of \$27.9 million in similar study regions.

Take the Torpedo Factory, which started life in the first half of the 20th century as, well, a torpedo factory. Now an arts center where visitors can also buy art and take classes, the Torpedo Factory is a magnet for tourists, says Miller. And that benefits the city. “When people come from outside the city to the Torpedo Factory, you can count on them having lunch and paying for parking,” she says.

The creation of the Torpedo Factory is a perfect illustration of the creative thinking and independent spirit characteristic of Alexandrians. Marian Van Landingham, an artist and then-president of the Art League, a membership group of artists, saw the dilapidated, abandoned factory as a solution to the shortage of studio space in the city.

Many area residents wanted the eyesore torn down for a park, but Van Landingham persuaded the city in the mid-1970s to let artists paint and repair the building and turn it into temporary studios. The facility was so well received

Birchmere: Music and More



The Birchmere music hall, in the northern part of the city on Mount Vernon Avenue, has hosted a long list of legendary entertainers in its 41 years and has launched many a career. But the Birchmere itself is a legend in Alexandria, where it's been located since 1981.

Unlike many clubs where people stand while listening to performances, the Birchmere is a small venue where the audience is seated (except for

“Band Stand shows,” where some tables are cleared to make space for a dance floor). Top artists who usually play larger venues on weekends often come to this smaller stage during the week, performing country, folk, jazz, rock, blues, bluegrass, R&B, and more.

Besides the likes of Mary Chapin Carpenter, Suzanne Vega, Dave Matthews, and Sweet Honey in the Rock, talented but lesser-known artists with devoted followings also play here: Antigone Rising, Jonny Lang, Oleta Adams, and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, to name a few. Performances take place most nights, and most shows are in the \$30 range. Order dinner, drinks, and dessert from your table.

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“We’re giving what the people want, what they can’t get anymore in the big malls,” says Nora Partlow, who owns a coffee shop in Del Ray.

that it became permanent. Now the center hosts nearly 160 resident artists and more than 80 associate artists as well as six galleries and three Art League School classrooms.

It isn’t just artists who thrive in Alexandria. The Burke & Herbert Bank & Trust Company, which opened its doors in 1852, and whose president, E. Hunt Burke, is the great-great-grandson of one of its co-founders, has its headquarters in Alexandria. As it has grown and thrived, the bank has maintained its original charm, as well as historical artifacts: Trunks belonging to Robert E. Lee’s daughter were recently found in the bank’s vault.

Business is alive and well in other parts of town, too. Del Ray, an ethnically diverse neighborhood that was built near a railroad yard in 1894, exudes a friendly kind of charm, with single-family homes, many of them bungalows, and mom-and-pop businesses and restaurants lining the main road, Mount Vernon Avenue.

One popular hangout in Del Ray is St. Elmo’s Coffee Pub, owned by Cuban-born Nora Partlow, who has built her business into a cozy gathering place. St. Elmo’s features live music—jazz, urban acoustic, rock, folk, world music, and more—and serves light fare.

Other shops in the area: Cheesetique, which sells specialty cheeses; home furnishings store Eight Hands Round; and Bodywave, a hydrotherapy studio.

The secret to their success, notes Partlow: “Most businesses here are operated by their owners,” so they are knowledgeable about their merchandise, a quality that’s hard to find these days.

“We’re giving what the people want, what they can’t get anymore in the big malls.”

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