

Hello again! This is Derek Firenze with your local news and commentary for Wednesday, May 15, 2024 beamed in from *The Jefferson County Beacon* for KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend, Washington.

\*\*\*

Have you been struggling with your mental health lately? If so, an animal companion with a cozy sweater has a message of care for you at the Rhody Parade this weekend. No, not the corgis. Look for the eight-foot-tall cat puppet. This whimsical and heart-warming large-scale art project is being designed and built by local youth as part of The Benji Project's 2024 Mental Health Awareness Month. While its size certainly raises awareness, the actual act of building it has been at least as helpful to the cause.

According to Heather McRae-Woolf, executive director of The Benji Project, the process of creating and talking about the piece has been meaningful for everyone involved. Spanning over two weeks, the Benji Project has been offering a series of art creation workshops for youth held at the Jefferson County Fairgrounds Commercial Building to give young people an opportunity to reflect about their own mental health. Staff members from The Benji Project were joined by partners from the Fairgrounds and other youth-focused nonprofits like The Nest, a youth center/coffeeshop, and PT Artscape, which puts on the Wearable Art Shows.

Local puppeteer and teaching artist Thaddeus Jurczynski also leant his expertise to the workshops. Jurczynski has been teaching for over thirty years and making giant puppets for over twenty. He told me that his largest puppet was 14-feet tall. Using puppetry as their mode of expression, youth were encouraged to brainstorm images related to how they take care of their own mental health and the most consistent image was animals. Another image was that of a cozy sweater, or blanket, or sweatshirt, so they took those ideas and put them together. While the feeling of comfort comes across clearly in these images, deeper reflection brought out more metaphors. A lively discussion led to cats playing with a ball of yarn that can unravel and fall apart and also be put back together. They also talked about how holes in sweaters can be patched up to symbolize healing. Once completed, the giant puppet will make its way down Lawrence Street during the Rhody Parade carried by youth. The Benji Project then hopes it will continue to live a long life, making multiple appearances across town.

\*\*\*

Another new artistic offering making its way around town comes from Chimacum Valley Grainery, but this one is for adults only. Chimacum Valley Grainery is the newest company from Keith and Crystie Kisler, who also own Finnriver Farm & Cidery, and beer is their latest product. As far back as anyone knows, Keith Kisler's ancestors have been growing grain. He is a 4th-generation grain farmer from Eastern Washington, and his European ancestors carried the tradition back even further. They came to America from Russia, but grain had already carried them across an earlier border. They'd been brought to Russia from Germany by Catherine the Great to grow wheat. Now, you can toast that long engrained lineage with a glass of its latest creation.

Two years ago, the grainery started selling lines of bread and flour with locally grown grains. Just a few weeks ago, they shipped out their first kegs. But they have been growing one strain of grain or another on the property for twenty years in partnership with the Washington State University Bread Lab. Eventually they got a mill and began turning that grain into flour. That led to bread making, which was something of a revolution from Keith's upbringing. While he grew up on a grain farm, Keith's family never made bread from the 2,000 acres of wheat outside his window. Of course, once they'd had a bite of their fields, they wanted to see what else was possible. It was time they tried drinking their fields.

Before their grain makes it into a glass though, it goes from field to floor. Barley is the chief grain component of beer, and after Keith began growing it, it needed to get processed. That's when they turned to Sam Dressler. Dressler had brewed at home, but did not have experience with an additional step needed to get from the field to

the fermentation tank. Before barley can be brewed, it must be malted. So Dressler traveled far afield to Maine for a class specifically on malting where he learned the ancient art of floor malting, a process rarely used in modern-day brewing operations. To honor all of this work, they leave the final product unfiltered to keep as much of the essence of the grain intact as possible.

\*\*\*

KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news at noon and 5 Monday through Friday and at noon on Saturday, partnering on Wednesday to bring you stories from [jeffcobeacon.com](http://jeffcobeacon.com). You can submit ideas to The Beacon through [info@jeffcobeacon.com](mailto:info@jeffcobeacon.com). This is Derek Firenze. Thanks for listening.