

A great place to live and work



The Orange Downtown Alliance team: Jay Harrison and Page Sullenberger in their office above the Main Street they helped revitalize. Working together since 1999, they joke that they sometimes act like an old familiar married couple.

Photo by Phil Audibert

In 1999, Page Sullenberger was recruited to answer the phone and help newly hired Director Jay Harrison at the fledgling Orange Downtown Alliance. The timing was perfect. "I wanted to do something right in the Town of Orange," she says, "doing something that would make a contribution but was flexible enough for me to do all the other things I'm interested in, and a job where I didn't have to be the one who lies awake all night. And it's perfect." Besides, she adds, "Jay gets to lie awake all night."

Good things have happened to Main Street, Orange as a direct and indirect result of this team. Thirteen years ago, when ODA was first organized by concerned business people, Main Street was "more than 50 percent empty storefronts, ugly signs, just a dying town." Since then, Orange has been accepted into Virginia's Main Street Program, which is "all about bringing the economy back to downtown." Page says the vacancy rate now is 3 percent.

"A lot has been accomplished." She points to the "more than \$15 million in public and private money that has been invested in Orange over the past 13 years." It started with a federal grant to improve and convert the railroad station into the Visitor's Center... "the centerpiece of all of this to start with."

Main Street was spiffed up with brick-look crosswalks, new lamppost banners, sidewalk planters. ODA started the Farmers' Market. The Halloween Trick or Treat afternoon became so popular that now town police shut down Main Street for two hours as 1,400 costumed children roam at will.

ODA, in conjunction with The Arts Center, will expand the summer concert and movie-in-the-park series to every Friday night from June to August. Jay and Page are working on a new initiative called Second Saturdays, where businesses would stay open longer to serve tourists and visitors... "all aimed at bringing people downtown so they can see what your town has to offer."

Who pays for all of this? The county helps out, but "The majority of our funding comes from the town. They are very nice to invest in this kind of a program. We're fighting for our funding like everyone else is, but we think they're getting a tremendous return for the relatively small investment that they make."

And what of the future? Page has no crystal ball but does have plenty of questions. "Do we want to be a small town? What is the definition of a small town? And what do you do to ensure that that's what you end up with 10 years, 15 years, 20 years from now?" Her hands punctuate her words. "We're in the crosshairs of every development pressure on the East Coast. I am hoping that as a county that we're going to manage the growth and not let it manage us, that we're going to do the things legislatively that will be sure that we have the infrastructure in place that will support the growth. The growth pressure in Orange is not coming from within. It's coming from outside." She pauses a long beat to make a point. "We're the town that ran out of water, lest we forget."

As far as the future of the county is concerned, Page feels, "It's not going to be manufacturing. It's not going to be the industry that we have relied on all this time. It's not going to be brick plants. It's going to be different," she predicts. "It's really exciting that they've got this new technology group coming in. I think that's where we are perfectly situated. There's that technology boom in northern Virginia and the traffic is so terrible nobody can deal with it." Orange is the perfect escape. "There's going to be a place for us, but we need not to let it run over us."

She likes the tone of the revised comprehensive plan, but cautions that the county's leadership must follow up with "the political will to do what the plan calls for. That's where the real struggle is going to be."

Page is often seen huddling with various county leaders, both political and economic. Yet, she has no interest in running for office herself, preferring to make things happen behind the scenes. "Working for the Downtown Alliance has been an incredible education for me in politics, business, and all kinds of things. It presents an individual with opportunities to get things done when you've had the kind of life experiences I've had. It's very rewarding to know that because of the things you learned about working with people, with how organizations work, with having had some leadership opportunities, that you can put that to use for the public good. That's very rewarding for an old lady."

Old lady, my foot!



"I am passionate about education," says Page Sullenberger, who worked in various capacities at Grymes Memorial School for 18 years. She has also served on the Executive Boards of Stuart Hall and the Blue Ridge School.

Photo by Phil Audibert

Bluegrass and Baroque Ballet and the Bench

Page Sullenberger finally got through to the ticket agent at Wolf Trap. Taking a deep breath she said, "You're going to think this is really strange, but I need four tickets for the Monkees and four tickets for the Kirov ballet."

She winces at the memory of the Monkees concert. She and her two daughters faced a bank of speakers from the third row. "I could not hear anything for a week," she exclaims, adding "Of course they (her daughters) loved it." The

Kirov was more to her and husband Lloyd's liking.

The point is Page Sullenberger went to both concerts. And that says something about her because she seems equally at ease with both paupers and princes, the low-brow and the high-brow. Her musical tastes say it all: Bluegrass and Baroque.

Born the daughter of an orchardist in Mount Jackson in the Shenandoah Valley, Page grew up "in a tutu until I was 14" (hence her fondness for ballet). After she

graduated from Stuart Hall in Staunton, she went on to major in English at Randolph-Macon Woman's College. The summer of her junior year, she served as a hostess at Colonial Williamsburg. "I thought it would be fun to do, so I did, and lo and behold I met Lloyd; he was finishing law school and studying for the bar. We met on a blind date in June or July and were engaged in November."

Ask her what was the best day of her life, she will unhesitatingly answer "three:" the day she married Lloyd and

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PHIL AUDIBERT
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Page Sullenberger at age three at her grandmother's house in the Mount Jackson area of the Shenandoah Valley.



Page Sullenberger's wedding photo from 1966.

the days her two daughters were born. "I know that sounds corny," she says unabashedly, "but it's true."

She offers this glimpse into her private life from an armchair in the living room of her modest home in Orange. The surrounding clutter of children's toys testifies that grandchildren are nearby. Her cologne is like her musical tastes...fresh and floral but also refined and dignified.

Page uses her hands to act out her words. "I am passionate about education and quality education for young people." She remembers her first year in Orange, she taught English. The OCHS principal at the time, Lewis Close, apologized for the large class size...25 students. "I breathed a sigh of relief. I thought I was in heaven." She had come from teaching 35 kids at a time in Tazewell County.

That was the beginning of a long career in education. She served seven years as Board Chairman of Stuart Hall. She replaced her mentor and close friend Elizabeth Norfleet on the Board of The Blue Ridge School near Dyke. And she worked for 18 years at Grymes Memorial School doing everything from being Director of Development to serving as Assistant Principal to teaching Latin.

Grymes is particularly close to Page's heart. "I've always believed that a place like Grymes was probably the most critical time in the educational life of a student. If you get that kind of start, high-quality teaching, demanding teaching at that age, you're set for life. You know how to do it, how to time it, what to do," she ticks off her points on her fingers. "Once those skills are imparted to a child, then it doesn't matter as much what happens later."

On the public versus private education debate, Page makes the point that private schools have to compete for funds whereas public schools don't. But she readily admits, "It's a great luxury in this country when you can make a choice to provide your students with a small setting with lots of attention and lots of demand and a place that can choose its students."

She pauses and considers the challenge public schools face. "The public school is obligated to educate every child that comes there. A private school has a great luxury. If somebody is going to be totally disruptive all the time, then you're not going to be there. They (the public schools) don't have that choice. In some degrees, what they accomplish is amazing."

But it saddens her that public education often must settle for the lowest common denominator. "I don't blame the schools for that," she continues. "Twenty-five years ago, when you were in trouble at school, you were in twice as much trouble when you went home." Nowadays, she adds, "Public schools are badgered and battered by parents and lawyers that their student is always in the right. In some systems you can't ask as much of a student as you would like because there's so much fallout. Whoever teaches in urban public schools has my undying admiration."



Page Sullenberger uses her organizational skills to help make things happen through the Orange Downtown Alliance. She has worked there since 1999.

Photo by Phil Audibert

The Tazewell County Public School System wasn't exactly urban when newlyweds Lloyd and Page Sullenberger moved there from Williamsburg. As Lloyd clerked for a Virginia Supreme Court Justice, Page taught English to as many as 156 students per day. "English was a foreign language," she says in mock horror. "I was the youngest person in the school system, and I was just out of college and it was 1970, our skirts were here," she points to a spot just above her knee, "and our boots were here," she points to a spot just below her knee. "It was a very interesting experience."

It was on a football weekend at UVA that Lloyd sauntered over to the Law School and spied a 3" x 5" card on a bulletin board. The law firm of Shackelford and Robertson in a little town named Orange, was looking for a lawyer to replace the retiring A. Stuart Robertson.

"Lloyd had decided he wanted to practice small-

town law," confirms Page, so he answered the ad. She remembers the weekend they came up for an interview. While Vee Shackelford and Robbie Robinson grilled Lloyd, she was shown around the county by the formidable Carol Shackelford. Later, they all gathered for tea at the Shackelford home. "She would always put the interviewee sitting next to nothing that you could put anything down on. So you had to juggle the tea cup and the little plate with the cake and I was sure it was part of the test," she laughs. "So anyway, we passed and they hired him."

And so, the Sullenbergers came to Orange.

Lloyd built himself a distinguished career in law that culminated with him becoming a Circuit Court judge for two four-year terms. "Lloyd loved it," says Page, happily. "He loved the law and the intellectual challenge of applying the law equally to all." She pauses a beat. "He's a shy person and it suited him very well. Being a judge can be a lonely thing."

And how lonely was it for Mrs. Judge Sullenberger, who is anything but shy? "That was a little bit frustrating at times," she admits. "I am never loathe to give my opinion. It required some circumspection on my part. You're in the public eye. I tried to be careful not to express any kind of political opinion. I didn't get involved in activities that would have political connotations. I didn't sign petitions."

During his tenure, Judge Sullenberger presided over several major drug bust trials. During those tense times, town police would drive by their house to check up on them... "telling you not to pick up packages you don't recognize on the front porch, and things like that." In the early days, court was located in the basement of the old Main Street Firehouse, while the old courthouse underwent its first major renovation in decades. "So every time there was a fire alarm they stopped court till the trucks got out of the building," she laughs.

Page herself never went into the courtroom while Lloyd was presiding. She felt it would be inappropriate. "Lloyd never spoke from the bench except to speak in the name of the law. He made no editorial comments. He never spoke to a media person the entire time he was on the bench. He was just very conscious of the integrity it requires."

And so she learned of her husband's administration of justice second hand. "Even now, so many of the lawyers and the probation officers just go out of their way to tell me what a great experience it was to be in his court, how much they liked him and what a good judge he was." Lloyd retired from the bench in 2000. Currently, he is doing well despite the wracking tremors of Parkinson's. "It's a progressive disease," says Page with a little shrug.

Just about then, two little faces peer in from the front hall. Page brightens visibly. Her daughter, Sarah has dropped by for a visit with her children. Grandmother, Page scoops up the youngest, Avery, as her brother, Rhew, tears around the room as only four-year-olds can. A graduate of the New England Culinary Institute, Sarah now works mornings as breakfast and pastry chef at the Inn at Meander Plantation. Her husband Paul, is chef at the same upscale Madison County inn and restaurant. They live just two blocks away. Page looks relieved and says, "Being a grandmother is so much easier than having children."

The other Sullenberger daughter, Dorothy, lives in Brooklyn and works as Production Editor for *Modern Bride* magazine in New York City. Every chance

Page gets, she'll jump on a train to visit her urbane daughter to kick up her heels in the most vibrant city on earth. Her most recent whirlwind visit featured visits to numerous art galleries, having a drink at the famous Carlisle Hotel bar, eating Vietnamese food, and going to see the Lion King.

From the "Baroque" of New York, coming home to the "Bluegrass" of Orange is no let-down; in fact, it is something of a relief.

Page still has "a lot of irons in the fire." She is considering helping out again with fundraising at Grymes School, particularly now that her grandson will enter the school this fall. She's on The Art Center's Board of Directors, the alumni council of Stuart Hall, and she serves as Parliamentarian for the Garden Club of Virginia. An active member with the local Dolley Madison Garden Club, Page adds self-deprecatingly, "They have me for my executive abilities not my gardening abilities." Oh, and did we mention the Orange Downtown Alliance? More on that later.

Page settles back in the winged armchair in her living room and says with deep sincerity, "We're just really happy that we chose to come to Orange. It's been a great place to live and work."



Page Sullenberger bounces one-year-old Avery on her knee while her grandson Rhew, age 4, plays with a toy on the couch. Page's daughter, Sarah and son-in-law, Paul live just two blocks away.

Photo by Phil Audibert