Welcome to WARDENSVILLE?

Paul Yandura and Donald Hitchcock blew up their careers, decamped to a sleepy town near West Virginia’s Lost River Valley, and began remaking the place. The turnaround from forgotten relic to destination for weekend Washingtonians is a great story—except for the fact that some locals haven’t taken so kindly to having their town reimagined by a gay DC power couple inserting themselves into their politics.

By Marisa M. Kashino  Photographs by Josh Copan
Yandura is describing only sunshine here—booming laugh.

Paul Yandura and I are cruising through Appalachian farmland on his ATV, mud splattering, twigs smashing the windshield of the camouflage four-wheeler. Over the roar of the engine, he’s talking up his latest business venture. The motor is no match for his full-throttle voice or sonic-booming laugh.

Even though today is gloomy and damp, Yandura describes only sunshine here amid the West Virginia pastures. He envision an “eco-resort” on the banks of the Cacapon River, with sweeping views of the Great North Mountain ridge. Someday soon, people from Washington—people like him and the other business owners who have flocked to the town of Wardensville since he and his partner, Donald Hitchcock, opened a boutique in 2013, will be kayaking on the clear water.

Yandura describes the eight modern, glass-box cabins he’s going to build, “like what you’d see in Jewell,” plus a lodge with a restaurant, maybe a spa. Road-trippers from DC, just two hours away, could stay for about $300 a night—ATV included. “Not one of them, but an electric one,” he yells. “They’ll probably still be camo because I think city folks will be like, ‘I got a camo cart!’ ”

It might sound rather formidable, here in a sleepy farm town with a church for every 50 residents and an office of West Virginia life insurance. But now the Trading Post, with its prime spot at the entrance to town—plus the fire-orange cow statue the couple parked out front—and a lodge with a fireplace, will be open for business.

At the time, Wardensville, population 250, was a place Washington types mostly passed through. The next stop over is Lost River, a mountain enclave that’s long been popular with gay DC weekenders. But now the Trading Post, with its prime spot at the entrance to town—plus the fire-orange cow statue the couple parked out front—beckoned those travelers to stop.

Many who did so came away more than just coffee shops and artisanal soy candles. They also got a pitch from Wardensville’s unofficial evangelists. And if Yandura’s boisterous approach wasn’t their thing, maybe Hitchcock’s low-key drawl would hook them.

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Yandura and Hitchcock have been screaming at, had their property vandalized, and, well, worse. “I mean, we got our gay pride flag out front, which the locals put up, much less two guys or two girls.”

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They’d explain how their organization was started in order to lure other investors. They’d explain how their organization was started in order to lure other investors. Thanks to his political past life, Yandura has a knack for finding grant money and connections within the federal government to help rural businesses get off the ground. He and Hitchcock also became real-estate agents. Which means potential transplants need only hop into their Land Rover to get zipped around to the mountain houses with the best views and the shuttered 1800s storefronts with the most potential.

It has worked. Marine turned FBI agent turned security consultant Patty Haley stopped by the Trading Post in coffee in 2015 and left convinced that she should trade Alexandria for a fixer-upper on Main Street. She started out renting two Mongolian yurts in her yard on Airbnb and has since become the town’s female-empowerment coach, teaching self-defense and belly dancing at a local barn.

Another FBI veteran, Dave Allenburg, bought a building he rents to a company that specializes in transcribing congressional and federal-agency hearings—remote work that can be done much more cheaply from West Virginia than from DC. Elizabeth Pennell, who runs the business, says she’d often stop by the Trading Post, and at every visit—four years running—“Donald and Paul were always like, ‘When are you going to open up an office?’ ”

Sally Weaver, an analyst at SpaceX who lives in Springfield, bought a rundown motel a few years ago after getting to know the couple while passing through on her motorcycle. “It was kind of kismet, really,” Weaver says. “I always wanted to buy an old motel and transform it into something modern–rustic, so that’s what the new Firefly Inn will become.”

Vicki Johnson, a former government lawyer who met Yandura when they both worked in politics, watched him post on Facebook about his new life in the county. After she inquired, he wound up finding her a log cabin in the mountains and showing her a vacant Main Street building. She promptly “fell in love,” opened a vintage store called Lucky Johnson’s, and hung the town’s second gay-pride flag. The list goes on—nearly two dozen businesses and nonprofits have opened in Wardensville since 2013.

“Change can be scary for anybody,” Johnson says. But “Paul and Donald were already here, and they were great mentors.”

In one of the most depressed states in the Union, you might think that the economic jolt would be welcomed as great news. But as city folk turned country gentlemen learned long before the rise of Donald Trump—who, by the way, got 76 percent of the vote in Wardensville’s county—fitting in with the locals is rarely simple.

Yandura and Hitchcock have been screamed at, had their property vandalized, and, well, worse. “I mean, we got our gay pride flag out front, but they’re not panning it out in your face,” says lifelong resident Josh Frye, whose family settled in the area in the 1700s. Frye runs a 600-acre farm and cutting-edge agricultural operation that turns chicken dung into fertilizer. “I don’t wanna see two guys holdin’ hands. I don’t wanna see a guy and a girl makin’ out, much less two guys or two girls.”

These days, Main Street might be brightening up. But turn onto the dirt back roads and you’ll still past trailers hoisted on cinder blocks and Confederate flags planted in.
It’s their way or the highway,” Sayers claims. “You can’t run a town like you’re Baby Doc, like you’re Putin—you can’t do it.”

With their allycast as a dictator, Yandura and Hitchcock got the land for their eco-resort on the Cacapon River, Good News Wardensville trolls made threats. “I can’t wait to see how many people come if they keep one another, because they are trespassing on people’s property,” wrote one of the page’s regular contributors. “Obviously they’ve never seen the movie ‘Deliverance.’”

As Yandura says, the officer was nice that Yandura and Hitchcock kept child porn online. The obvious reason was the community-college kid surrounded by the like of US senator Joe Manchin.

Sayers says he knew the credit line was “outside the realm of appropriate government.” Mary Ratcliff wanted to go to the hills and forget the rest. She was used to this kind of thing. She didn’t even want to hear about it. She knew what was at stake. She knew the call was bogus. But still.

Yandura’s e-mail quickly leaked. Within days, Hitchcock and Yandura found to know the lights on the cemetery fence unplugged. Then it happened again—and again. Annoying but not too big a deal. But there was a time a woman bared a knife and Yandura says the officer was nice.

The ordeal devolved into a high-school staring contest. “You want to come outside?” Sayers asked Hitchcock, who ignored him. Sayers moved to the front row and sat beside him. Hitchcock did him one better—he leaned in toward Sayers and snapped a selfie. The disillusioned natives balled the news on social media in a Facebook group run by an anonymous administrator and sarcastically named Good News Wardensville.

In the merry loneliness of its users, Ratcliff was nicknamed Good Old Mayor; Yandura was the community-college kid surrounded by the like of US senator Joe Manchin.

“It’s my first f—ing day!” says Yandura, his eyes as wide as tractor tires. “I thought he’d be kicked out. It turned out the President wanted to form a gay-and-bisexual outreach arm and needed someone who was actually gay to help.

This is my first — I say it! Sayers, his eyes as wide as tractor tires. “I remember calling my mom and going, ‘Here’s what happened. I met Bill Clinton. Because I’m gay!’ It was the craziest.”

Hitchcock was MainActivity says he never got the President to stop by. The more entrenched he got in the party, the sicker he felt about “covering the ass” of candidates who took money from gay rights groups. But still, he felt the President wanted to stop by. The more entrenched he got in the party, the sicker he felt about “covering the ass” of candidates who took money from gay rights groups. But still, he felt the President wanted to stop by. The more entrenched he got in the party, the sicker he felt about “covering the ass” of candidates who took money from gay rights groups. But still, he felt the President wanted to stop by.
weeks, Hitchcock was fired. He sued for defamation and claimed that he dismissed was retaliation. What followed became an embarrassing spectacle for the party. Then—DNC chairman Howard Dean was deposed during the 2008 primaries, and discovery yielded unflattering internal e-mails. Hitchcock became a political pariah and started selling medical devices. (His lawsuit was eventually settled.) But Yandura continued agitating, becoming a ringleader for a group called GetEqual to put pressure on President Obama. Its activists chained themselves to the White House fence and crushed Obama's speeches.

One of their most memorable stunts took place in October 2010, when the fight to repeal Don't Ask, Don't Tell was at full bore and Obama wasn't, in their view, acting quick enough to get rid of it. They caught word that retired basketball player Alonzo Mourning was planning a fundraiser for the President at his waterfront compound in Miami. Yandura, Hitchcock, and fellow activists motored two boats to a spot facing the house. “You can’t run a town like you’re Baby Doc, like you’re Putin you can’t do it.”

But given what the farm’s backers are—successful men with cosmopolitan views—it’s also a hearts-and-minds campaign. “It goes beyond ‘let’s grow vegetables,’” says Lewis. “These are life-inspiring experiences.”

In fact, Yandura and Hitchcock say much of Wardensville has already been welcoming. When Tricia Scott’s late husband got sick and decided to sell their home on Main Street, “he wanted them to have it,” Scott says. “He knew that if Donald and Paul got the house, it’s not just going to deteriorate like the rest of this town.” Lorraine Link, a waitress at the Kac-Ka-Pon Restaurant, a Wardensville institution dating to the ’60s, says business has “gone through the roof,” since Yandura and Hitchcock arrived. She’s not bothered one bit by the fact that they’re gay, she says. “Because I have a daughter who’s married to another girl. Already, the farm has drawn visits from officials including US senator Joe Manchin. It’s also become a favorite stop for the Lost River weekend crowd, no doubt enticed as much by its made-for-an-Anthropologie-catalog aesthetics as by its pristine, pesticide-free veggies.

But as always, it’s complicated. Kids who work there say a lot of people remain suspicious of the place. “Just because Paul and Donald are gay, so many people are against this,” says Combs. “We had churches pull down our fliers.”

“It makes me so mad,” says one of his female coworkers. She volunteers that her dad doesn’t like gay people but that her own thinking will never match his. “I’ve met them, I’ve given them a chance.”

Though the town’s younger denizens have come around, Yandura and Hitchcock likely haven’t seen the last of the old-versus-new culture clash that has followed them these last four years—especially if they plan to build out the full “agrarian community” come through. As Joshua Frye points out, the farm has a prime spot on the Capacoton River, a public waterway that locals nonetheless like to think of as their own. “I don’t like people building up along the river,” Frye says as we talk in his 100-year-old kitchen, where a hand-crank phone hangs next to a cast-iron, wood-burning stove. (Elsewhere on the property, there’s a slave graveyard.) “I just know the more people you put on the river, it’s not a good thing.”

There’s an environmental toll to consider, he says. But worse, there’s the prospect of out-of-towners coming onto locals’ property. “I’ll get pretty ugly over that,” he says. “There’s gonna be a lot of farmers down here.”

THESE DAYS, YANDURA AND HITCHCOCK ARE NO longer limiting their agenda just to building up the town’s business base. The couple’s latest project is all about do-gooding—already the kind that may not thrill some of Wardensville’s old-timers. They want to turn the place into an “agrarian community” and foodie destination that would put local kids to work.

In 2015, Jonathan Lewis—heir to the Progressive Insurance fortune, a major donor to gay-rights causes, and a longtime friend of Yandura’s who funded GetEqual—bought land for the project. Last year, Yandura and Hitchcock opened the Wardensville Garden Market, a farm and bakery where 20-some local youth have jobs learning how to grow and sell organic produce, as well as life-skills such as how to manage their $9-an-hour paychecks. Lewis has put more than $1 million into the program.

The next step: hashing out a deal that could transform the farm from a heart-warmer with small-scale impact into a high-wattage attraction with the potential to lure more people and money to town. They’re working on a possible partnership with DC restaurateurs Paul Cohn, co-owner of Boss Shepherd’s downtown, and Rob Wilder, business partner to Washington’s most famous chef, José Andrés.

Yandura, Hitchcock, and Lewis envision opportunities for the Wardensville teens to work in high-end Washington eateries and, on the flipside, a chance to bring city kids to Appalachia. “This farm is our education space,” Hitchcock says, “and we talk in his 100-year-old kitchen, where a hand-crank phone hangs next to a cast-iron, wood-burning stove. (Elsewhere on the property, there’s a slave graveyard.) "I just know the more people you put on the river, it’s not a good thing." There’s an environmental toll to consider, he says. But worse, there’s the prospect of out-of-towners coming onto locals’ property. “I’ll get pretty ugly over that,” he says. “There’s gonna be a lot of farmers down here.”

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Next on the couple’s docket: a possible partnership with DC restaurateurs that could bring even more weekending Washingtonians to town.