Greater Rochester is filled with talented people working to make the region a better place to work, live, and play. But it often seems like the same names grab the headlines, while other no-less-deserving people go unnoticed. The Rochester 10 — an annual project by CITY — is designed to bring some of the community’s hard-working background players to the forefront.

We’re not saying that these are the 10 most important people in Rochester. But every person on the list stands out as someone who contributes to the area in interesting, varied ways, and we believe that you should know about them.

From politics and social justice to arts, music, and business, the 10 people featured here could be considered activists — they’re all working to improve their communities in their own ways. And it’s often difficult to pin them down to one area of interest; you’ll find that many passions intersect.

You can learn more about these interesting Rochester residents below. Is there someone you know who deserves to be profiled? Leave a comment on this article at rochestercitynewspaper.com for future consideration.

**IMAN ABID**

Iman Abid is all over the place.

One day, she’s on the panel of a local radio program discussing how we can heal, as a county and as a people, from the divisive presidential election. On another day, she’s part of a demonstration to support people with disabilities. Many days, she’s on Facebook and Twitter sharing her experiences as a Muslim in America and pushing back on the abundant and false attacks on her faith and its followers.

Abid, a community organizer for the New York Civil Liberties Union’s Genesee Valley chapter, has a goal in all of this: she wants to bring underrepresented voices into big conversations.
“I feel like there’s so many people who are trying so hard to kind of just go about living their lives and they can’t because of the way everything around them is organized, in a way that is sometimes suppressing their voices,” she says.

Abid is working on several campaigns through NYCLU, including a statewide push for New York State to take over indigent defense, as well as the local chapter’s efforts to improve police-community relations.

The latter includes putting together a proposal for a community advisory council for the Rochester Police Department that the chapter can present to Mayor Lovely Warren; the chapter wants civilian involvement in police matters, including discipline.

“We’re looking at why the community may feel so disengaged with law enforcement and what law enforcement can do through policy and through systemic changes, whether it’s at the city level or the suburban level,” Abid says.

The job has also opened up a chance for Abid to work within her faith community. She’s a member of the Islamic Center of Rochester’s Civic Engagement Committee, which helps local Muslims define their identities and shape conversations in the broader community. Increasingly, those efforts include linking with, and standing alongside, representatives from marginalized groups, including the black and LGBTQ communities.

Abid is of Palestinian descent and is often frustrated by attitudes and conversations around Palestine and Israel, she says. She’s intrigued by Middle East politics, keeps a global world view, and aspires to someday work as an ambassador, or at least for the State Department, she says. In part, that interest is driven by the family she still has in Palestine.

“I’ve traveled out there, I’ve seen what they’ve seen, but I haven’t lived what they’ve lived,” Abid says. “And so every day I’m trying to figure out what I can do to help.”

KATHERINE DENISON

BY REBECCA RAFFERTY

Artist and activist Katherine Denison puts her energy into both local and global communities. But she remains humble about it, describing herself as a “handmaiden of the geniuses” who are trying to do right in an ailing world.

Denison earned a ceramics degree from RIT in 1975, and after working with clay for many years, she drifted into graphic design, doing communications work for nonprofits, and designing books, particularly for artists. She’s also published a book of her own collages and poems that reflect ecological concerns and a compassionate understanding of human complexities.

In addition to her creative career, Denison works tirelessly as an activist, giving support to local, national, and international causes that speak to her. Locally, she works with Take Back the Land, which provides legal support in cases of wrongful eviction and a buffer from homelessness for others so that they are better positioned for success when an eviction occurs.

As a member of the group Enough is Enough, Denison attends court proceedings for local cases of police brutality. Through their work, the group is forming a citizen study of local police (including specific individuals’ repeat brutality offenses), tracking the behavior of the courts handling these cases from beginning to end, and providing transportation and support to victims. They also work toward overturning legislation that makes dirty cops untouchable by the law.

Denison says she prefers direct-action “street politics” to “clubs of people who get together and talk about issues.”

Years ago, Denison was active in second-wave feminism and belonged to a group called Rochester Women Against Violence Against Women. Long before social media, they put rapists on blast by posting their pictures around town, and disrupted the efforts of local educational institutions placating their students’ experiences of sexual assault.

Today, she’s not slowing down. On a global level, Denison is a voice for wildlife conservation, particularly in Africa, and particularly regarding elephants.

“The wildlife’s ecological role keeps the land what it is,” she says. “An elephant’s footprint is a giant thing. And that one footprint will be flooded later, and provide water for dozens of animals. Elephants also pull down old trees, and their dung is incredibly fructifying — they’re called the gardeners of Africa. When they’re gone, all of those areas will become deserts, and the animals that depend on them will die.”

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Denison became interested in groups of wildlife-protecting rangers, and in 2014, she came across information about a “Walk with Rangers.” The 200-mile trek took participants from Arusha, Tanzania, to Nairobi, Kenya, and aimed to educate people about the rangers’ work. With fewer than three weeks to apply, she hustled to get the necessary paperwork and shots, and arranged for her pets to be cared for. “But I did it, and flew to Tanzania, where I knew not one soul.”

One lesson from her trip was “quite brutal,” she says. “Individual rangers — in the last few years, something like 1,400 of them have been killed — are working against their brothers more than against the cartels. The cartels hire very impoverished people to work as poachers; the poorer the better, because one tusk can support a family for an entire year.”

Denison also learned that as living space gets more cramped in Africa, elephants have become a problem for already impoverished communities by trampling gardens and disrupting villages.

“So there’s a percentage of the population that doesn’t give a damn about the elephants,” Denison says. But some involved in the conservation movement have been devising ways to transform the communities with poaching-alternative economies.

Friends of friends connected Denison with Moses Arineitwe, an ex-ranger in Uganda who has built a “prestige club” that exchanges poachers’ tools for his hand-built beehives.

Because elephants are wary of bees, hives safeguard gardens from trampling, Denison says, and the community now has honey to sell. She funded one of the first beehives and encouraged friends to support the effort as well.

When an earthquake in September struck the region where Arineitwe lives and damaged the home of his friend, Joseph Niwagaba, Denison rallied her network and asked them to donate funds for his repair efforts. Niwagaba’s wife decided to name one of their newborn twins “Katherine.”

PAMELA JACKSON-YELDER
NEIGHBORHOODS/CHILDREN’S ADVOCACY

BY TIM LOUIS MACALUSO

In almost every community, there’s someone who everyone knows either by name, face, or deed. Pamela Jackson-Yelder is a cherished matriarch to generations of families in the neighborhoods surrounding Baden Street Settlement, where she’s worked for 48 years.

Jackson-Yelder felt the influence of Baden Street Settlement well before she worked there. Being part of a large family meant money was scarce, even though her father worked every day of the week and her mother worked part time.

“Baden Street has always been about extended family,” she says. “If it hadn’t been for Baden Street, none of us would have ever even thought of going to college. It was out of reach.”

The staff at Baden Street helped her find financial aid to attend Monroe Community College, which got her on a career path. Otherwise, she probably would have gone to work in a factory and wouldn’t have pursued college, she says.

“The same kind of programs that helped me at Baden Street, I’m now the director of,” she says. “Who would have thought that?”

Jackson-Yelder oversees a wide range of after-school activities for about 600 children ages 5 to 18, including dance, arts and crafts, cooking, tutoring, and career exploration. And Baden Street has an aquatics program for seniors and children with disabilities.

After raising four children of her own and working at Baden Street for nearly five decades, Jackson-Yelder
says that she’s learned a lot about children and parents.

“Keeping kids out of trouble means keeping kids busy,” she says. “You have to create a thirst for knowledge in children.” Exposing children to the arts, culture, and business is important, particularly for children from households with limited resources, she says.

“How else can they learn if they aren’t exposed to the world, and how are they supposed to develop confidence in those situations?” she says. “You can’t tell children to dream and then not give them something to dream about. That’s what we try to do here.”

And teens need a safe place to hang out with friends and socialize, she says.

“We know how important this is for babies and young children, and we know how important it is for older adults, but for some reason we seem to forget how important this is for adolescents,” Jackson-Yelder says. “Sometimes they just want to chill and be with their friends, and there aren’t enough places for that. When they chill on the street corners, that’s when they make their own activities.”

Unfortunately, Jackson-Yelder has less funding to work with these days while the challenges children face have become much more serious.

“When I was starting out you hardly ever saw a kid go into foster care from around here,” she says. “There was always a grandmother, an aunt or uncle, somebody to take that kid in. If the family next door didn’t have food on the table, you brought them over something. But that’s not always so anymore.”

The things that worry Jackson-Yelder most are an increase in drug use by young people – what she calls getting into negativity – and the politics and bureaucracy that get in the way of helping children.

“I know what we do here works because I’m a product of it,” she says. “But when I see my kids make it – and so many do – that really restores my faith.” She readily lists a resume of Baden Street children who have gone on to become engineers, doctors, teachers, firefighters, and police officers.

“I even have one youth who went to work for Hillary Clinton,” she says. “I always say our biggest job is teaching them to believe in themselves and once they’ve made it, give back. You’ll never be without happiness.”

BY LEAH STACY

By the time Sarah Knight whirled into Glen Edith Coffee on a Monday afternoon in November, she’d been awake since 3 a.m. She was still flushed from several hours spent at the zoo chasing her young sons — a 5-year-old and an 18-month-old — around, but when she sat down with a mug of apple cider, she had officially switched from “mom mode” to “work mode.”

Knight is the founder of Roc Girl Gang, a social media-based platform that champions local female creatives in Rochester. She’s also a freelance graphic designer, perhaps best known for her prints featuring the streets of Rochester (you can check them out at West Elm in the Culver Road Armory and online at her Etsy shop, sarahknightdesign).

Knight, who is 33, wasn’t always a Rochester resident — or a graphic designer. Her journey to the Flower City began 15 years ago at Houghton College, where a freshman Knight met a senior soccer player named Rusty. They were married soon after she graduated from college, and by then Rusty had landed a job in Rochester. Knight took a job as an administrative assistant at a local church, and discovered she hated the work.

“I’m not an organized person at all, so it was torturous,” she says. “But I see my kids make it — and so many do — that really restores my faith.” She readily lists a resume of Baden Street children who have gone on to become engineers, doctors, teachers, firefighters, and police officers.

“I even have one youth who went to work for Hillary Clinton,” she says. “I always say our biggest job is teaching them to believe in themselves and once they’ve made it, give back. You’ll never be without happiness.”

SARAH KNIGHT CONTINUES ON PAGE 12
established, and I wanted to know how they got started, what did they struggle with at first. And I thought, ‘I bet other people would like to know, too.’”

It was around that time Knight finished her original print featuring Rochester street names, but she had only 275 Instagram followers — mostly friends and family — and not many were from Rochester. “I was looking for a platform to let people know about this print,” she says. “Could I tag someone? Could I email somebody? I kept looking, but realized that no one really was doing this.”

She’d been following a local woman, Paige Smith (@vacillavi), and decided to contact her about a giveaway. “She said yes; I got a ton of followers; she got a print; and it went super well,” Knight says. “That was the first Roc Girl Gang collaboration. And then I thought, ‘Why doesn’t this exist?’”

Last spring, her youngest son was often awake fussing. In the middle of one such March night, Knight began working on a mission statement and “dream team” for her idea. She was about to take over the @ExploreRochester Instagram feed for a week, and she wanted to announce the idea to their thousands of followers. When Rusty woke up around 6 a.m., she announced she had a name: Roc Girl Gang.

The mission of Roc Girl Gang is to feature “local female creatives, entrepreneurs and movers & shakers in Rochester” through Q&A-style interviews and short features on Tumblr and with posts on Instagram and Facebook. Since Knight launched the site and social media accounts in May 2016, it has grown to more than 6,000 followers on Instagram, and has hosted more than 25 interviews and 15 features. (Editor’s Note: Leah Stacy was recently interviewed on Roc Girl Gang.)

In 2017, Knight will take it to the next level: from social media to social gatherings. RGG is set to launch a speaker series on January 28 at Rochester Brainery. Called “Becoming Boss,” the series will highlight women on their creative journeys. Knight will moderate, and panelists include Danielle Raymo (Rochester Brainery), Tanvi Asher (Shop Peppermint), Stacy Ercan (Stacy K Raymo (Rochester Brainery), Tanvi Asher (LivesStyled) will also host a mini workshop on styling and lighting portraits.

Two flags fly above the entrance to the South Wedge Mission at 125 Caroline Street, a flag representing Black Lives Matter and the Pride Flag. Yet, the South Wedge Mission’s ministry of social activism and community engagement — and that of its pastor, Matthew Martin Nickoloff — goes beyond mere flag-waving.

BY DANIEL J. KUSHNER

A Fairport native and Princeton University graduate, Nickoloff was sent back to Rochester as a “mission developer” in late 2012 by the Evangelical Lutheran Association of America. He started the South Wedge Mission, his first pastoral position. “I’m technically a missionary of sorts,” Nickoloff says. “I’ve always been a very social justice-oriented person,” says Nicole Iaquinto, a SWM member and assistant pastor for community outreach at Greece Baptist Church. When she attended a service and saw that others “actually wanted to engage the community in practical Christian hospitality, I was like, ‘Heck, yeah.’”

The following Sunday, Nickoloff spoke to his congregation on the parallels between John the Baptist and the water protectors of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in North Dakota.

You can’t read a story “about an indigenous man living under occupation going down into a river to speak truth to power and call for a change of life and not also think of the Sioux,” Nickoloff says. “It’s kind of a softball lobbed at us from the spirit saying, ‘If you don’t get this shit, I don’t know what I’m gonna do with y’all.’”

Led by Nickoloff, the church has raised several hundred dollars for the water protectors of the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock, and continues to raise money at events like its “Beer and Carols” sing-along. Other events hosted by the Mission include “Midweek Mindfulness Community,” which
explores Buddhist breathing exercises and meditation and is open to all every Wednesday.

The South Wedge Mission also serves as a regular concert venue for its Live at Mission Hall series, which was started by Nickoloff and his longtime friend, local impresario Tim Avery, to give music lovers access to more all-ages shows. The series has hosted folk, rock, indie, and classical artists, ranging from locals like Ben Morey, Cammy Enaharo, and Passive Aggressives Anonymous, to national acts like Christopher Paul Stelling and Julianna Barwick.

“There’s something about music for me which is kind of like the charismatic belief in speaking in tongues: that it arises out of this place within us that’s deeper than words, enables us to kind of speak in tongues in a sense,” Nickoloff says. “So I think Live at Mission Hall, our concert series, is kind of the most Pentecostal, charismatic thing that we do at the church, because it’s allowing all sorts of different people to just let the spirit within them speak, and to connect with each other on a level that’s deeper than words and maybe bigger than any one person’s belief system.”

It is clear, from talking to Nickoloff, that South Wedge Mission’s goal is to be an inclusive community of active Christians who live a practical faith rooted in the love of Christ.

“If you look at people who have actually practiced radical, faithful discipleship — like Oscar Romero and Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King Jr. — all of the big names that we love to talk about but we hate to follow, because it means we have to die,” Nickoloff says, “if anything, they are the only people who have taken it seriously. And so, we practice our way into this belief.”

Liz Pritchard wasn’t diagnosed with autism until she was 15 years old, after she had been forced to change schools multiple times because she was so badly bullied. Drawing has always been therapeutic for Pritchard, and today she uses her art — in the form of a series of self-published comic books — to try to communicate and connect with others.

“I have a difficult time getting my point across to people with words, which is why I draw,” Pritchard says. Pritchard grew up in Holley, New York, and currently lives in Spencerport while pursuing a studio art degree with a psychology minor at SUNY Brockport. She’s also the staff cartoonist for the university’s student paper, The Stylus.

To date, Pritchard has created five comics that she self-published in three trade paperback volumes. “They’re about a little bit of everything,” she says. “Mental illness, high-functioning autism, it deals a lot with self-doubt — learning to cope with it, coming to terms with the universal emotions that everyone feels.”

That last element is the key to connecting with anyone, Pritchard says. “I want others to feel they’re not alone, because when you get to a low point, sometimes you think you’re not worthy of what’s best for you. But you are.”

Pritchard draws emotional and psychological conditions as people, in a manga or anime style. “I’ve always been drawn to anime in comic books; that greatly influenced my style — it’s my main go-to, my passion,” Pritchard says. She’s been a fan of the style since she was a tiny child, favoring “Sailor Moon,” “Pokémon,” and “Dragon Ball Z” — these days, she’s more into “Cowboy Bebop,” “Lupin the Third,” and “Revolutionary Girl Utena.”

She says that because the cartoons are so expressive, she would imitate their mannerisms. “I love the exaggerations in details, and that’s what I’m trying to do: exaggerate something to get a point across.”

Page after page of Pritchard’s comics show characters — various sides of Liz — engaged in power struggles and helping one another with crucial lessons, grappling with emotions and reality, and bursting out of the prototypical comic frames into indefinite, hazy environments.

“I see my conditions as opportunities rather than limitations,” she says. “They’re a part of me but they don’t define me. They give me opportunities to learn about myself and other people.”

And her work is increasingly getting noticed. Pritchard attended the world Autistic Network for...
Community Achievement conference held in Vancouver last October, where she was recognized as an ANCA World Ambassador representing the United States, and was honored with the INAP Visual Arts Recognition Award.

“This was really life-changing for me,” Pritchard says. “Everyone there representing different countries had different types of autism. So I met people ranging from non-verbal to very verbal, but they all communicated in unique and interesting ways.”

Her duties as a World Ambassador are to promote, network, connect, and represent what ANCA stands for. Toward this end, she’s traveling to international conferences every weekend next April — to Turkey, to an as-yet-undetermined Asian country, and to California.

She was also featured on Samantha Craft’s Spectrum Suite, which spotlights girls and women with autism.

There’s a troublesome level of invisibility regarding girls and women with autism, Pritchard says. “I think there’s just as many girls who are autistic as boys, but because girls with autism may be very passive and tend to mimic social cues, they pass under the radar.” Boys are more likely to have external reactions, while girls withdraw, she says.

There needs to be more education about autism from the right sources — straight from the people who have the conditions. “No two autistic people are alike” she says. “But just because we process things differently, doesn’t mean we don’t feel the same things that neuro-typical people do. I hope that through my art, I can connect with other people and help erase the negative stigma that surrounds these conditions by focusing on feelings more than labels.”

Children are stories unfinished. They’re malleable and vulnerable, and everything that happens to them — good or bad — can change the course of their lives. And children can thrive even if they come from tough environments. That’s what draws Yversha Roman to community and youth work and advocacy.

“They’re not completely stuck in whatever’s happening around them,” she says. “They’re more affected by what’s going around them, but there’s still opportunity for a lot of change there, a lot of growth.”

Roman, 32, is assistant director for school-based programs at the Center for Youth. She oversees the organization’s afterschool, alternative school, counseling support, and life skills programs in the Rochester, Greece, Mount Morris, and Kenmore-Tonawanda school districts. She’s also on the advisory board for Nazareth College’s community youth development major, which is one of few such programs in the nation; she’s a graduate of the college. And she volunteers with La Cumbre, an organization devoted to advancing the Rochester Latino community.

Roman’s passion for youth and community work started in her early teens. She grew up on Evergreen Street near St. Michael’s Church on North Clinton Avenue in a single-parent household. Her family was poor, but her mother was very involved in the community. Roman followed her example.

By the time she was 15, Roman was active with the Spanish Action Coalition, she’d helped form a youth group at St. Michael’s, and she worked as a peer educator for Action for a Better Community.

As the years passed, she watched as some friends went to jail, got pregnant at a young age, or died. She saw neighbors trying to build better lives for themselves and their families, only to find obstacles and a lack of opportunity.

“I want to be able to provide a voice and insight,” Roman says. “I feel that I have experienced things that need to be shared and need to be fought against. Once I realized that I could turn my passion for community work into a career, I was all for it. It just made sense.”

Recently, her interest in community advocacy led her to politics. She ran unsuccessfully for a County Legislature seat in 2015, but earlier this year took over as leader of the Legislative Districts 7 and 26 Democratic Committee in the city’s northwest. The post had been held by Felipe de Chateauvieux, a beloved and highly-respected party leader who died in late 2015.

Roman also serves on the board for WomenElect’s newly-formed Rochester chapter. The organization’s goal is to get more women to run for elected office. “I don’t consider myself a politician per se; I consider myself someone who is invested in the community, who understands the power of being at the table, or even making noise,” she says.
BJ Scanlon threatens me with a sunflower. Wait, it's not a sunflower; it's a knife, because I say it is. Now it's a gun.

And that, Scanlon says, is the nature of improv: you accept what you're given, and you expand on it. Come to think of it, he says, many of the activities and organizations he's involved in operate on that same philosophy; everyone works together to create something better.

Scanlon may be the busiest man you don't know. He's senior legislative analyst for Rochester City Council, secretary of the board for Trillium Health, half of the improv duo Broken Couch, part of the Canary in a Coal Mine sketch comedy group, he helps run the youth program at the Gay Alliance of the Genesee Valley, and he's an LGBTQ advocate, too.

He was named The Funniest Person in Rochester by the Webster Comedy Club in 2015, but he shunned stand-up because he'd rather not work solo.

“That was a short career,” he says. “I didn't like when people introduced me as the winner of The Funniest Person in Rochester contest, so I just sort of stopped doing it. You've got to go out on a high; you peak and you leave.”

Scanlon is also one hell of a dresser. Today, it's melon-colored chinos; an aqua shirt with generous cuffs that add a splash of "swashbuckler" to the aesthetic; a dark blue jacket; his grandfather's engraved ID bracelet; and a pin with a print of the carpet in Portland, Oregon's airport. His socks have bowling pins on them.

“I grew up as a thrift-store kid,” Scanlon says. “We had everything from apron pants to wood-heeled disco shoes. We had wonderful collections of T-shirts and, like, a burlap suit set with purple trim. And the moment I was able to afford my own clothes, I just started buying bright-colored things.

“I try really hard to work hard, but you like what you like, you know?” he says.

Don't dismiss him as an empty, vintage suit, though: Scanlon is both style and substance. He came to Rochester in 2008 via an AmeriCorps posting; he was the organizer of the Center for Youth's "safe place" outreach program. He did temporary work at the Jewish Home of Rochester, and also worked with runaway and homeless youth through Hillside and the Center for Youth.

Somewhere in there he took his first steps into politics, becoming legislative aide to City Council member Matt Haag. This year, he hit the campaign trail for Democratic Congress member Louise Slaughter and presidential candidate Hillary Clinton.

But it was Donald Trump who washed into the presidency on a tsunami of hate, instead. And Trump's victory has given Ugly America license to harass and verbally attack particularly those people who live on the margins, such as LGBTQ Americans.

Scanlon wants LGBTQ people to spread out — to socialize with new people or try a new restaurant across town, for example — to increase the community's visibility and build cross-cultural alliances during this uncertain time. And, he says, the Gay Alliance should form partnerships with other activist groups such as Black Lives Matter and Rochester NOW. Together, they would have a louder voice.

“I think we started with fear, and fear is starting to subside, and there's groups of people that are looking to put forth action,” Scanlon says. “I think we really need to expand our fight beyond our own community on this issue, because we have pretty good protections locally and we need to make sure that in the next four years, we don't lose them on a national level.”

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Brass Palace is more than just a studio. Yes, it is a small recording operation that runs out of a space on Mt. Hope, but it’s also home to a fresh approach toward music with open ears and open minds.

Founder Chris Vandeviver has big ideas that apply to a band’s sound and promotion, and Brass Palace is the nexus where art and commerce meet. Some recent recording projects include Soviet Dolls, Benny Beyond, Horrific and the Horribles, and Barbarossa.

“Brass Palace is essentially me,” Vandeviver says. “I was creating music in the band Sakes Alive; I played guitar and vocals. That fell apart, and I wanted to resume making music, so I started accumulating gear of my own. I was like, ‘I’ll totally circumvent ever going into a recording studio again.’ Then as I started to explore recording I went into the rabbit hole, a very deep one.”

Vandeviver moved to New York City briefly where he got some work as a remote assistant for a commercial composer. But it seemed like he spent too much of his time working in a coffee shop.

“One month in, it was like, ‘I need to find another means of making money because this sucks,’” he says. After moving back to Rochester, Vandeviver began amassing clients of his own. And they dug his approach.

“I have a lot of philosophies,” he says. “I don’t want to get weird and preachy, but I just have particular ideas on how a band or artist should work in the modern era of Spotify and Apple music.”

Vandeviver laments the fact that people are simply just overwhelmed by options for entertainment. Artists are up against things like Netflix — where people can sit down and binge watch for hours and still be invested — but it’s hard to get those same people to come out to a show.

“And maybe a show isn’t the way to do that,” he says. “The way we’ve come to know what being in a band or artist in the 80’s was — when Minor Threat and Black Flag would record a record and pound the pavement for years — maybe it’s not the right model anymore. That’s it in a nutshell.”

Whether it’s making music or making sure it’s heard, Vandeviver is all in.

“I get heavily invested in every project I work on, probably to a detriment,” he says. “I get real excited about the music. I project a lot of enthusiasm. I want to help artists. So I make a lot of suggestions. But at the end of the day, it’s their call; it’s their band and they do what’s right for them.”

Sometimes, Vandeviver doesn’t even wait for opportunity to knock.

“There are a number of instances where I’ve reached out to bands: ‘Hey, I’ve got some ideas. Would you like to try them?’ When Druse released their last EP, I approached them ahead of time and said, ‘Even though you didn’t work with me on it, I love you guys, and think it could do more than just throwing all five songs up on Bandcamp.’”

The fact that his approach is focused heavily on things like promotional videos and over all media blitzes, it’s a necessary component if the music is to be heard.

“The most important thing at the end of the day is the audience,” Vandeviver says. “But I don’t suggest pandering to your audience or writing songs because you think they’re going to like them. You should be authentic and write music you like. You also have to be thoughtful and considerate to what your audience gets out of it. A lot of bands, in my experience, want people to come to the show because they want them to watch them play their music, and that’s not very incentivizing to people. I just want to challenge artists.

“I like when bands are interested in inviting other perspectives to the music. And my interests have grown exponentially since I started recording. When I was in bands I was quick to write stuff off. Now, I’m sort of forced to see the beauty in different situations. I’m trying to see outside myself.”

And this is something Vandeviver accomplished by getting involved in every aspect of the artists he works with at Brass Palace. He ain’t just a knob-twiddler.

“I refuse to be the guy who just presses the record button.”
Sapphire Williams, 23, is much less distressed than when I interviewed her following her arrest during a Black Lives Matter protest in downtown Rochester last summer. Williams, who had never attended a rally or joined a public protest before, was charged with disorderly conduct after she gave an impromptu speech.

She refused to accept a plea bargain and pleaded not guilty, which risked giving her a criminal record if her case went to trial and she lost. It was a difficult decision, but Williams maintained all along that she, like every US citizen, has the right to freedom of speech. The charge was eventually dropped, though the incident still affects her. “I still find myself breaking down in tears thinking about it,” she says. “It makes me emotional thinking about all of the injustice that disproportionately affects African-American communities.”

Williams and a friend were headed to the East End bars on July 8, parking in a lot on East Avenue, when they saw police cars with their lights flashing and dozens of officers in the streets.

“I sort of stepped into the street and the first thing I remember saying was, ‘This is the whole entire reason why we’re here. Don’t you get it? This is the problem — you can’t intimidate people into submission.’”

Williams says that she spoke for about two minutes and though she was talking loudly, she wasn’t screaming or behaving in a threatening manner.

“I wanted to be heard, but not to be mistaken for anger or some other negative emotion,” she says. “I genuinely wanted the officers to hear something from the heart.”

Williams began to answer a couple of questions from a reporter when she saw a group of police officers rushing toward her, she says.

“Needless to say, it shocked me to my core to see something like this, and when I realized that they were coming for me, it was like I froze,” she says. Williams was one of more than 70 people arrested that day.

“It was embarrassing — demeaning — that’s the word for it,” she says. “I couldn’t help but think, ‘What did I do wrong? I was speaking.’ I never, ever imagined I would end up spending the night in jail for that.”

She says that the incident changed her perspective on many fronts. For instance, when she went to court, she stood before a black female judge, but she wonders how things would have turned out if she had stood before an older, white, male judge.

And she’s not convinced that protests are effective because they’re often not viewed in the spirit that they’re intended, she says. There’s a strange distortion that occurs even when it’s captured on video, and viewers will watch something through their own cultural lens, she says.

Still, Williams is glad she stood by her principles and refused to say that she was guilty. And she would do it again, though she wishes she could have used her brief public platform to help others, she says. Many people have heard about her through social media, so now the incident serves mostly as a conversation starter, she says.

Williams, who earned her undergraduate degree in Africana studies, says that the horrible legacy of slavery and Jim Crow is that people who have dark skin are often socialized into thinking that they are inferior and deserve to be treated unfairly.

“They start convincing themselves that they actually did something wrong,” Williams says. “I’m still trying to figure it out myself; did I do something wrong? It’s really sad. It’s just sad.”