

# Do you really need that MRI of your back?

I've seen a lot of patients waste time and money when trying to get relief for their pain. A good example is "Ralph," a 56-year-old man with intense low back and leg pain that had been bothering him for two months. Despite having spent a lot of money on medicine, shots and testing — the MRI alone was over \$1,000 — there was no relief in sight. The pain prevented him from working, sleeping or really doing much of anything at all. He came to my office desperately seeking some relief.



MICHAEL NOONAN

I took a quick look at the MRI and X-ray reports, but they didn't interest me much. Like almost all people his age, there was some arthritis, and some disc wearing and bulging. But these were not the cause of his pain; I am sure the MRI would've looked the same a month before his back and leg pain started.

As a doctor of chiropractic, I was trained to rely far more on the patient's history — what caused it, how long it has been there, previous episodes, the timing and nature of the pain, etc. — and the exam. Of course, I had a strong suspicion of what was causing his pain — joint and muscle problems in the low back and hip — and the exam showed exactly that. If he had a badly pinched nerve that might need surgery, I'd find that from the exam, not the MRI.

He responded quickly to care — there was some relief after the first visit, and by the fourth visit, he felt 75 percent better. Currently, he has very little low back or leg pain, and he is back to doing heavy work at times. There is still some numbness in the foot, which will probably either be permanent or slowly ease over time. He continues to come for treatment once a month to control his problem; he doesn't want a repeat of what happened to him.

I'm confident that if a follow-up MRI were done today, it would look no different than it did when he was in so much pain.

Of course, MRIs can be very helpful; they are great for looking for diseases, such as cancer. But they simply don't show the cause of the pain for most back and neck pain patients. Also they don't show whether a patient will benefit from chiropractic care, acupuncture or any other wellness-based care. And perhaps most importantly, they

See Noonan, Page C2

# Sending out an olive branch to myself

I have a love-hate relationship with my forsythia bush. It was on my property before it was my property, having been planted at the end of a hedge of bridal wreath spirea by an owner or two before me.

Its full and beautiful yellow blooms entice me in spring. I watch for them to pop out on the blondish and bare-looking branches of the bush, indicating spring truly has arrived. The bright yellow blooms provide such a brilliant contrast to the bleak grays and browns of winter's detritus, and feed my hope about what is yet to arrive.

Little bursts of God's promises for better times.

As I have come to know the bush over the years, I understand that its blooms are more plentiful and vibrant in the years it has the protection of more snow around it; and contrastingly, they are sparse in the low-snow years. With a Bachelor of Science in botany, I understand the science of it, yet I tend to see my relationship with this plant as more personal than scientific.

I call the sparse years "the olive branch" look.

Generally one or two branches close to the ground reach out, tentatively offering their yellow blooms to the world, leaving the rest of the plant open for criticism about what it has not accomplished.

See Curves, Page C2



JULIE HARRIS

# Tending the life of the mind

As Millinocket languishes, literary ladies are enriching their community

BY MEG HASKELL  
BDN STAFF

In more prosperous days, the once-bustling paper-making town of Millinocket, incorporated in 1901, boasted numerous clubs to enrich the lives of residents and enliven the spirit of the community. Over the decades, Lions, Elks and Masons rubbed shoulders with Rotarians, Oddfellows and Knights of Pythias. Women could join the Supreme Emblem Club, Eastern Star, the Rebeccas, the Pythian Sisters and other groups.

Ladies with time on their hands and a taste for culture in this far-flung community in northern Penobscot County — typically the wives of mill executives, doctors and other professionals — might be invited to join the Millinocket Garden Club, the Millinocket Philharmonic Club, the Millinocket Art Society or the Millinocket Literary Club.

These days, with the huge paper mill closed since 2008 and the paper industry contracting across the state, Millinocket is in steep decline. The population has dropped from more than 7,700 in 1970 to about 4,400 in 2016. Three of the four elementary schools have closed in recent years. Property values have plummeted as the town tries to plot a course for the future.

Responding to these and other

changes, most of Millinocket's civic and social clubs are now defunct. A few have consolidated with groups in neighboring communities.

But the Millinocket Literary Club, founded in 1937, is alive, intact and well, and still committed to its historic mission: "to promote the intellectual growth of its members and to encourage an interest in social, civic and moral questions of the day."

"A few years ago, we thought we were going to have to disband," said club member and historian Trudy Wyman, who also is the curator of the Millinocket Historical Society. "But we're doing better now. We've had kind of a revival."

With so many Millinocket residents retired or just plain unemployed, she said, the club has recently picked up several new members and is busy planning the future.

With membership capped at 25, the club is not a book group. Instead, monthly meetings held at members' homes from September through May consist of educational presentations. Recent talks have included photos and artifacts from a member's recent trip to the historic salt mines, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in southern Poland, a personal collection of handwoven fabrics from indigenous villages in Central America, and the personal email correspondence be-



MEG HASKELL | BDN

Millinocket Literary Club members Peggy Sturman (front row, left to right), Shirley Thornton and Leslie Jenkins, along with (back row, left to right) Trudy Wyman, club treasurer Margaret Bond and club president Betsy Neal are shown at the Millinocket Historical Society museum recently.

tween one member and her daughter in India.

"Our programs are a wonderful opportunity to relive important experiences and share our interests with the group," member Leslie Jenkins said.

In addition to enriching the social and intellectual lives of its

members, the Millinocket Literary Club seeks to cultivate curiosity and creativity in the larger community. Its longstanding poetry competition for elementary school students was recently transformed into an art competition, which educators said would

See Ladies, Page C2

# A Second Career and a Creative Calling



MICKY BEDELL | BDN

From working on destroyers at Bath Iron Works to shelves lined with tiles of sailboats, herons, lupin and bumblebees, Kim Walker has spent nearly two decades respectively on two very different careers. With the help of a book on tile making, Walker eventually found her creative calling. She is a designer and maker of custom tiles in Franklin. "I love what I do. It got to the point where I was like, 'You live one time.' And honestly, it was like night and day. Every day I felt better and better and better and happier." You can read more and see samples of Walker's art on visual journalist Micky Bedell's Made in Maine blog at [bedell.bangordailynews.com](http://bedell.bangordailynews.com).

# Age of Disruption tour aims at anti-ageism revolution

BY MEG HASKELL  
BDN STAFF

Dr. Bill Thomas, innovative thinker, writer and entrepreneur, wants baby boomers to return to the altruistic, politically active, world-changing ideals of their youth and stage a revolution in the culture of aging in America.

"The baby boom generation has exerted an extraordinarily powerful influence over whatever age it is occupying at the time," the geriatrician said in a recent phone interview. "As it begins to exit middle age, this generation will exert that influence over the long-term care environment and the process of aging."

At 56, Thomas sees himself as a catalyst in a national anti-ageism revolution, and on May 20, as part of a national tour sponsored by AARP, he will bring his message to Maine.

Thomas, who lives in Ithaca, New York, is perhaps best known through fellow physician and writer Dr. Atul Gawande, who featured him in his 2014 bestseller, "Being Mortal." In a chapter titled "A Better Life," Gawande describes Thomas as a burned-out emergency physician who, in 1991 at the age of 31, accepted position as medical director at an

80-bed nursing home for adults with severe physical and cognitive disabilities.

Shocked by the dreary facility environment, the lack of stimulation and "the despair in every room," Thomas set about filling the environment with art, music, plants, children and animals — including 100 birds. The resulting pandemonium initially disrupted the nursing staff, but the approach proved its merit, Gawande says, when residents responded with laughter, creativity and general animation.

Thomas went on to develop his Eden Alternative approach into a nonprofit organization aimed at improving and energizing the quality of life for seniors, regardless of their level of independence or their living environments. The caregiving techniques, which include building strong personal relationships, encouraging creativity and empowering seniors to maintain independence, have been incorporated into existing nursing homes and assisted living facilities across the country. Training is also available to family caregivers and others who interact daily with older adults.

The Eden Alternative gave rise to another Bill Thomas innovation, the design and construction of so-called Green Houses, home-



COURTESY OF DR.BILLTHOMAS.ORG

Geriatrician Dr. Bill Thomas will bring his Age of Disruption event to Portland on May 20 as part of a 30-city tour sponsored by AARP.

like skilled nursing facilities with just 10 bedrooms and private bathrooms, built around a big, country-style kitchen and gathering room.

"We took the Eden Alternative and put it in a brand new building," Thomas said. "Instead of a nursing home designed for the convenience of the staff, we said, 'Why not make it like a house, so frail older people don't have to live in an institution?'"

In Green Houses, residents are

encouraged to build friendships with each other and with the staff. Meals are enjoyed family-style. Independence, interaction, creativity and privacy are valued over staff convenience and routines. Thomas said nonprofit Green Houses are reimbursed by Medicare, Medicaid and private insurance policies, similar to mainstream nursing homes, making the model an affordable alternative for middle-income elders.

See Thomas, Page C2