

As wedding season arrives, businesses and clients collaborate amidst COVID-19  
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Every year, as Charlottesville jumps into spring, hundreds of wedding vendors dust off their tools and prepare for the upcoming busy months where happy couples from near and far come to eat, drink and be married. This year, however, those small businesses came out of hibernation to face a sobering reality — there aren't any weddings. According to The Wedding Report, there were 1,670 weddings in the Charlottesville area in 2019, and the average cost was \$28,615. The many small businesses that make up the local wedding industry will not be receiving their part of that income for the foreseeable future as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitating social distancing. But the vendors are in the same boat and are coordinating as best they can to get through the economic disruption together. Valley Road Vineyard, one of many wedding venues in the Charlottesville area, has been coordinating with its wedding clients to reschedule ceremonies that were slated to take place between now and Gov. Ralph Northam's June 10 executive order end date, and with bracing for the potential of an extension of social distancing. In the meantime, the vineyard is open for pick-up service and wine deliveries. While more immediate weddings are being reworked into later summer/fall dates, some new clients have set their eyes toward the future. Barbara Joynes, the director of marketing, said Valley Road already is seeing interest in weddings for 2021. "We've definitely had a lot of inquiries for 2021," Joynes said. "We've had a pretty healthy stream of bookings and are doing those initially through virtual tours." She noted that some weddings for this year are being pushed into next year, as well. "We've also been on the receiving end of planners and coordinators who are looking for another location for couples that have been displaced and need to find a place, for example, for early 2021," Joynes said.



Jazmin Portnow. Credit: Credit: Mike Kropf / Charlottesville Tomorrow

Often at the helm of wedding scheduling procedures are wedding and event planners, like Jazmin Portnow, owner and director of events at Anyvent Event Planning. Portnow has been collaborating with her clients to reschedule the more immediate weddings and said everyone has been very understanding with each other. Despite that cooperation she said some cashflow for the year has been skewed by the pandemic causing fewer new inquiries. "This is something that nobody could have predicted," Portnow said of COVID-19. "It's not the couples' fault, so they're [vendors] definitely being very lenient with their contracts and just trying to kind of make it work for everybody. So our experience has been great in terms of other vendors helping out." Portnow's is one of many businesses in the wedding industry that is adjusting course and even learning new business practices from the pandemic.



Kristin Ridge stands on the property of Valley Road Vineyard where some of her clients have celebrated their nuptials. Credit: Credit: Mike Kropf / Charlottesville Tomorrow

"People don't necessarily have policies or anything in place in their contracts to address things like this," Portnow explained. "It's taught us all a lesson, but it's also kind of nice to see the human side of business. Everybody's kind of adopted this 'We're in this together' attitude." The sentiment is shared by fellow event planner, Kristin Ridge of Kristin Ridge Events. While her calendar for April and May has effectively been "wiped clean," she notes that coordination with clients, vendors, and venues has been an open and understanding dialogue. "I was also fortunate enough to work with such great people here in this industry who were so accommodating to just make these weddings work," Ridge said. "I think everybody just realizes that we're all on the same boat here and nobody's trying to take advantage of the situation. They're just trying to be as helpful as possible." Walden Hall, a venue off U.S. 29 near Culpeper, is doing just that.



Engagement photo of Monique Mariso and Darion Carpenter. Credit: Credit: Darlene Puzon of DPuzon Photography

"Our venue actually called us and let us know that we needed to consider moving," said Monique Mariso. After being engaged for three years and dating for 11, Mariso and her fiancé, Darion Carpenter, had planned their wedding for May 23 but had to rebook for September 26 of this year. However, Mariso isn't sure what her September wedding is going to look like. "It could either go one of two ways," she said. "One: everybody wants to come because everyone's been so sick of being inside the house, or a lot of people are going to choose not to come because they're not ready to be in big environments yet." This lack of clarity has created a challenging time causing some vendors to feel the strain of maintaining their businesses. Baker, Rachel Willis, who owns Cakes By Rachel has been creating desserts for weddings for the past 12 years. "Like the rest of the wedding industry which is 99% of our business, it dissolved overnight," Willis explained. For now, Willis has been navigating how to keep some or all of her staff. She is looking into loan applications and has applied for the Paycheck Protection Program, part of the recently passed federal CARES Act.



Professional baker Rachel Willis prepares an order of cupcakes at her bakery in Crozet. Credit: Credit: Mike Kropf / Charlottesville Tomorrow

As a single mother and small business owner, she's concerned about funds during what is usually her

peak earning season. In the meantime, Willis is also infusing her talents into the pandemic in a positive way. "I wanted to do something that wasn't just feeling like I had no control of my life. I started baking cupcakes each week for healthcare workers," Willis said. While Willis is still making profits offering pick-up options for her desserts, she has turned some attention to sweetening the hectic workdays for medical professionals. To bolster those efforts, she set up a Venmo account for donations in order to buy those cupcake ingredients. "I can't believe the overwhelming response. People are all stuck at home and they want to do something to help," said Willis. "I'm so grateful for the community, that everybody's been pulling together." Wedding photographer Rob Garland echoes the sentiment. He has been coordinating with his clients concerning rescheduling and has been in contact with other wedding photographers should swaps or referrals need to be made. He says he's also fielded interest from couples who are optimistic about next year. "We've answered quite a few inquiries. I feel like people are excited about 2021 because 2020 is such a weird year," Garland said. "At the end of the day you're just thankful that people want to use your business."