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WELCOME SPRING

Free ice at Rita's in Pottsville chases away winter's blues

By Ron Devlin
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POTTSVILLE — Spring was in the air as people lined up for free Italian ice Friday afternoon at Rita's Italian Ice and Frozen Custard.

In what has become an unofficial rite of spring, Rita's treats customers to complimentary ice on the first day of spring.

Toni McElvaney, who owns Rita's with her husband Greg, said it's their way of saying thanks to customers and kicking off the season.

The 40 or so people awaiting the shop's noon opening expressed relief that, hopefully, the brutal winter was finally over.

They'd had enough of shoveling snow, frigid temperatures and high electric and home heating bills. And, the recent tornado warnings as well.

Brooke Siluk brought her four sons — Jordan, 8; twins Seth and Bryce, 6, and Eli, 1 — to Rita's to celebrate the arrival of spring.

The older boys liked the snow, but agreed it was time to bid it goodbye and get ready for swimming. But not before sampling Rita's peach, blueberry and cherry ice.

Rita's introduced a new flavor, Mystery Peeps Ice — a milk shake topped with sprinkles and a Peeps marshmallow chick. It's available only for a limited time.

Rita's is challenging customers 13 years or older to guess the mystery flavor. Entries can be submitted online.

Toni McElvaney said Rita's treated 1,200 people to free ice last spring.

Rita's has been on Mt. Hope Avenue in Pottsville for 19 years.

Rita's is open noon to 9 p.m. daily, and noon to 10 p.m. after Memorial Day, through mid-October.



Brooke Siluk and sons - Jordan, 8; Seth and Bryce, 6, and Eli, 1 - at Rita's in Pottsville on the first day of spring 2026. RON DEVLIN/STAFF PHOTO

MIDDLE EAST



Iranians reach toward the coffins as they follow the funeral procession of Iran's intelligence minister Esmail Khatib and, according to Iranian officials, his wife and daughter, on Friday in Tehran, Iran. VAHID SALEMI/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Iran threatens world tourism sites, says it is still building missiles

By Jon Gambrell, Sam Mednick and David Rising
ASSOCIATED PRESS

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Iran threatened to target recreational and tourist sites worldwide and insisted it was still building missiles. Friday's show of defiance came nearly three weeks into U.S.-Israeli strikes that have killed a slew of Tehran's top leaders and hammered its weapons and energy industries.

The United States was meanwhile deploying three more warships and roughly 2,500 additional Marines to the Middle East, a U.S. official told The Associated Press.

Iran fired on Israel and energy sites in neighboring Gulf Arab states as many in the region marked one of the holiest days on the Muslim calendar. Iranians were also celebrating the Persian New Year, known as Nowruz, a normally festive holiday that is more subdued this year.

With little information coming out of Iran, it was not clear how much damage its arms, nuclear or energy facilities have sustained since the war began Feb. 28 or even who was truly in charge of the country. But Iran has showed it is still capable of attacks that are choking off oil supplies and denting the global economy, raising food and fuel prices far beyond the Middle East.

The U.S. and Israel have offered shifting rationales for the war, from hoping to foment an uprising that topples Iran's leadership to eliminating its nuclear and missile programs. There have been no public signs of any such uprising and no end in sight of the war.

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Tamaqua musician finds his voice at 47 after lifetime of 'homegrown hells'

By Hyun Soo Lee
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TAMAQUA — After decades of battling "homegrown hells," Steve Schickram has found a way to reckon with his demons through a new career as a singer-songwriter.

A Tamaqua native who has been writing songs since his teens, Schickram says he's finally found his voice as a musician at age 47. The singer recently began recording as a professional solo artist and released three albums of original material, called "The Suicide King," "Wreckonconciliation" and "Naked in a Snowstorm."

Repeated battles with substance abuse, depression and personal relationships have all been integral to Schickram's journey, and he doesn't shy away from that fact in his art.

At some point this winter, Schickram felt compelled to begin recording his songs in earnest.

"I was battling depression and battling different things, not doing anything, but I hit a point this winter where I motivated myself and got going," he



Steve Schickram poses Tuesday in the Tamaqua Elks Lodge. HYUN SOO LEE/STAFF PHOTO

said. "I just hit a point where I felt like I was good enough and my works were good enough to be out there."

He has worked at a breakneck pace, cutting song after song in his home studio, and even recording a video for his new single "Morning Tonight" in a matter of days.

Schickram said his songwriting "comes in waves."

"Sometimes, I write a lot. Sometimes, I go through droughts," he said. "It's been pretty consistent throughout my whole life. But I never

actually took the pieces and did anything with them myself at all."

Schickram's love for his hometown is reflected in the video for "Morning Tonight," a song about love and renewal. The video contains footage of the Tamaqua Train Station, the Odd Fellows Cemetery and other local landmarks essential to his journey.

Schickram classifies his music as alternative rock with occasional elements of country and R&B. Delivered in a husky tenor, his songs feature

piano and rock arrangements that strengthen, not hide, the raw emotion of his compositions. He writes bracingly direct lyrics inspired by scenes and concepts from his personal life. Drug references, self-harm and other uncomfortable topics all feature heavily in the Schickram songbook.

"Sometimes, there's things that might sound outlandish and whatnot," Schickram said, "but that's my gibberish and my code, how I process things in my head ... (Lyrics) that seem out there or seem like they might not be about real life, they are. They might just be a little exaggerated."

Schickram's musical influences include The Cure, The Gaslight Anthem, David Bowie, New Order, Simple Minds, R.E.M. and Pearl Jam.

He self-records and produces his music in his home studio, using artificial intelligence tools to create additional instrumentation and backing vocals.

In one of his quintessential tracks, the somber piano ballad "The Price That I've Been Paying," Schickram sings regretfully about impulsive decisions

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Records shattered as summer heat hits U.S. Southwest

By Seth Borenstein
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — The dangerous heat wave shattering March records all over the U.S. Southwest is more than just another extreme weather blip. It's the latest next-level weather wildness that is occurring ever more frequently as Earth's warming builds.

Experts said unprecedented and deadly weather extremes that sometimes strike at abnormal times and in unusual places are putting more people in danger. For example, the Southwest is used to coping with deadly heat, but not months ahead of schedule, including a 110-degree Fahrenheit (43.3 Celsius) reading in the Arizona desert on Thursday that smashed the highest March temperature recorded in the U.S.

"This is what climate change looks like in real time: extremes pushing beyond the bounds we once thought possible," said University of Victoria climate scientist Andrew Weaver. "What used to be unprecedented events are now recurring features of a warming world."

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