



ETHICAL VIEWS



November 2021 Vol. 136, No. 3 Newsletter of the Philadelphia Ethical Society

SUNDAY PLATFORMS

The public is welcome to join us

Sunday, November 7, 11 AM

Humanists and Prayer: Who Are You Talking To?

**Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader,
Philadelphia Ethical Society**



Whether before a meal, in times of communal despair, or at the start of a new session of Congress, the words, “let us pray” often surprise non-theistic humanists. Many find calls for collective religious behavior difficult to navigate. The balance between respectful tolerance of group norms and

hypocritical submission is tricky. Would it be easier to ask that “prayers” be replaced with “invocations,” “blessings,” or “benedictions”? Hugh explores the civic omnipresence of prayer and suggests ways to deal with it with integrity.

Sunday, November 14, 11 AM

Helping Immigrants and Refugees Build New

***Lives, Margaret O’Sullivan, Director,
Nationalities Service Center***

The Nationalities Service Center (NSC) provides comprehensive services to immigrants and refugees, whom it considers a critical part of the fabric of life in the United States. The NSC believes that all



Nationalities
SERVICE CENTER

immigrants and refugees have the right to lives of

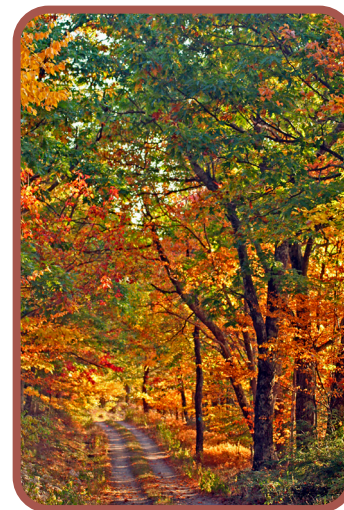
dignity, safety, stability, sustainable opportunities, and meaningful connections to their communities. O’Sullivan, whose long career in leadership positions in high-impact humanitarian organizations includes a near-15-year tenure with the American Red Cross of Southeastern Pennsylvania, will discuss the opportunities and challenges of working with these groups, with a special focus on the newest arrivals from Afghanistan.

Sunday, November 21, 11 AM

Humanist Thanksgiving

Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader

Join Hugh for mindfulness, music, readings, and reflections of gratitude. Depending on weather and other variables we may hold an informal gathering in Rittenhouse Square for fully vaccinated Society members at 12:30 PM, after the Zoom platform. Check the Weekly Announcements or email Hugh for updates.



Sunday, November 28, 11 AM

Experiencing Community at the

Philadelphia Ethical Society

Ethical Society Education Committee

Join us for an extended virtual coffee hour and—as we emerge (hopefully) from Covid isolation—share the highlights of the past 20 months with your best visuals. We’ll also play a few fun games.

*Time
to be
sociable*

IN THIS ISSUE . . .

- ~ Is Ethical Culture a religion?
- ~ Racism’s surprising toll on white people
- ~ A wedding, a founding, a Buddhist monk:
one member’s 70-plus years in Ethical Culture

TO ZOOM OR NOT TO ZOOM

Although we remain largely Zoom-bound, some small meetings this month may take place in-person. Check with Hugh or your committee chair.

On the banner: Partial image of *Brick House*, a 16-foot sculpture by Simone Leigh, recently installed at the corner of 34th and Walnut, University of Pennsylvania.

Join us just prior to each session at www.tiny.cc/phillyethics

FROM THE PRESIDENT Strengthening Our Community, Supporting Volunteers

By Michael Black-Smith

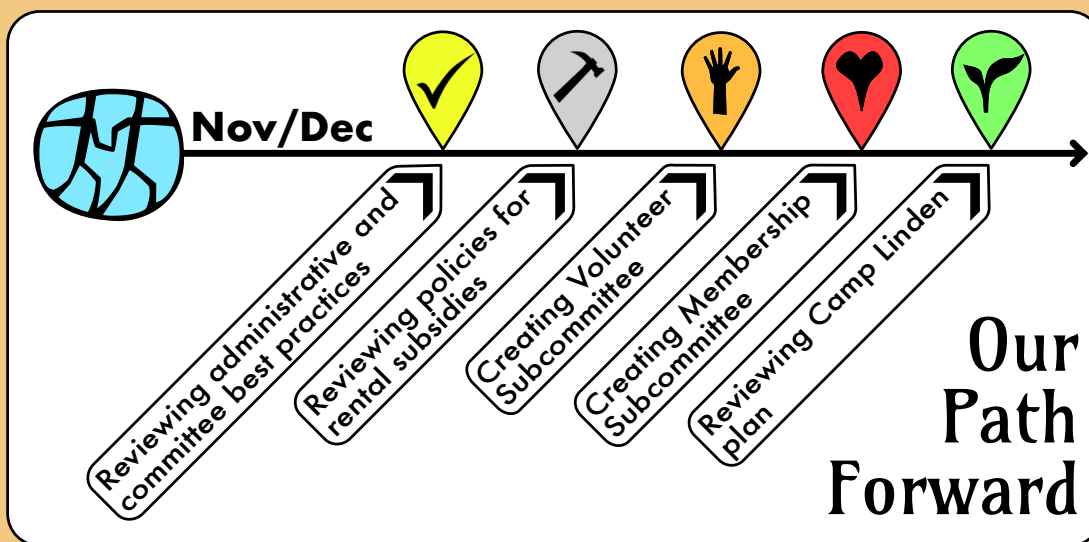


JUSTICE LOUIS BRANDEIS CALLED states “laboratories of democracy” for the nation. At the Ethical Society, committee meetings will perform that role for in-person platforms. Committees now have the option to meet in-person—masked and dispersed—in our larger indoor spaces; and some are ready to try

hybrid meetings. We are learning much from our sister societies about holding a successful hybrid platform and hope to try one very soon.

As mentioned in my first column, I want to use this space for updates on our progress with the *Our Path Forward* plan. Central to that plan is reactivation of our Community Committee, which over the past few years has fallen silent. The Board views this committee—charged with coordinating activities that transform a group of individuals into a community—as foundational to the Society’s health. We will solicit participation in the next few months. Please consider answering the call!

The graphic below presents a quick visual of the Action Steps in the five Target Areas we’re working on in November and December. Here’s what we have on-deck:



Operations (yellow/check mark): This Target Area seeks to oil the gears of our Society’s clockwork by making processes more effective, efficient, and

transparent. Toward that end the Board will be reviewing best practices for committees and administrative activities.

Building (gray/hammer): Under this Target Area, which focuses on our physical space, we are working to balance the income we rely on from market-rate rentals with our desire to help the greater community and other nonprofits by providing an affordable place to meet.

Volunteer (orange/raised hand): We are creating a subcommittee under the revitalized Community Committee to focus on volunteerism, which is the lifeblood of the Society. It will affirm and strengthen volunteers’ efforts, ranging from welcoming guests to platforms to serving on task forces to slapping a fresh coat of paint on one of our spaces.

Membership (red/heart): The new Volunteer Subcommittee is meant to support members in things *they do for the Society*. We also are launching a Membership Subcommittee, under the Community Committee, to focus on what existing and potential members *get from the Society*. One priority is expanding and diversifying membership.

Camp Linden (green/plant): The Camp Linden Committee had a productive summer during which it created a staff transition plan that includes the eventual hiring of a new camp director. The Board and Committee now are reviewing that plan.

A copy of *Our Path Forward* can be found in the members’ section of our website. Feel free to contact me with questions.

Michael Black-Smith is president of the Philadelphia Ethical Society.

FROM THE LEADER The Flame of Ethical Passion

By Hugh Taft-Morales

ONE QUESTION OFTEN ASKED by visitors to the Ethical Society is, “Do you call yourself a religion?” My answer is usually appropriately nuanced. I share that what matters most to us is not what we call ourselves but rather how Ethical Culture helps us live closer to our ethical values. It’s about deed, not creed. I explain that some members see Ethical Culture as a religion and some do not, and that both perspectives are historically and currently embraced. Finally, I say that legally we are considered a religion.

Should a visitor want to know more about our legal status, I explain that the courts see Ethical Culture’s role as so similar to that of traditional religious institutions that we should be treated as one of them. Most notably courts have ruled that Ethical Societies, like traditional religions, should be free from taxation in exchange for our commitment to uphold the separation of church and state. Thus we refrain from supporting political candidates and parties. Decisions in favor of awarding Ethical Societies tax-exempt status include **Washington Ethical Society v. District of Columbia** and **Strayhorn v. Ethical Society of Austin** (2003).

A recent conversation with some Society members about Ed Ericson’s book *The Humanist Way*, however, renewed in me a commitment that runs deeper than legal definitions. We were talking about Ralph Waldo Emerson’s influence on our movement. Ethical Culture’s founder, Felix Adler, embraced Emerson as a mentor. He was inspired both by Emerson’s faith in the individual as the primary source of moral insight and



The mentee: Felix Adler embraced Emerson’s faith in the individual.

also by the writer and philosopher’s respect for the unity of human communities and the “oneness” of the universe. Like many religions, Ethical Culture harmonizes the individual and the collective.

We also discussed what Emerson passed on to Adler

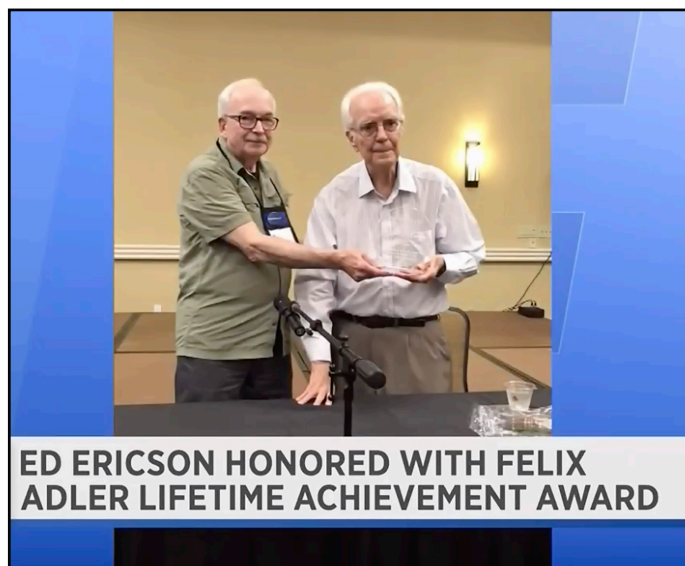
that resonates most in my heart: kindling a flame of ethical passion. In the introduction to his book, Ericson wrote of how the “flickering idea of the supremacy of ethics began to burst into flame,” leading him into a life of Ethical Culture work. (The American Ethical Union bestowed on Ericson its **lifetime achievement award**.)



The mentor: Ralph Waldo Emerson inspired Adler to see the “oneness” of the universe.

Whether or not we call our commitment to Ethical Culture religious is not what’s important. What is important is the daily rekindling within ourselves of the flame of ethical passion. The light it produces will guide us as we try to live more ethical lives.

Hugh Taft-Morales is the leader of the Philadelphia Ethical Society.



ED ERICSON HONORED WITH FELIX ADLER LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

The lifelong leader: Ed Ericson spent seven decades writing, teaching, and living the principles of humanism and Ethical Culture. PES’s John McCormick (left) presents the award..

by Rhoda Forté

WHEN I WAS 14, I learned that 6 million Jews had been exterminated during the Holocaust. “What kind of god would allow that to happen?” I wondered. I was on my way toward irreverence.

A few years later, my friend and I joined a group for teenagers that met on Sunday evenings at the New York Society for Ethical Culture, on Central Park West. Every week young people from the five boroughs would gather to discuss things that mattered to us. We would also hear inspiring words from Leaders like Algernon Black, Jerome Nathanson, and Henry Neumann. All voiced ideals that I embraced.

At 19, I was in love with a man my parents vehemently opposed. Raphael (Ray) Gould—10 years older than I—was a book dealer who had been married before and had a child. Not the husband my parents had envisioned. Ray and I planned to elope and get married by a Justice of the Peace. With the first phone call, we learned that if the bride did not have parental approval and was under 21 then the wedding would have to be a religious one. That was quite a blow until I remembered.... Ethical Culture is a religion! We were married in the study of Henry Neumann of the Brooklyn Society.

In the late 1950s, I saw an announcement in our local newspaper about a meeting for anyone interested in starting a Rockland County branch of the Ethical Culture Society. We showed up along with seven other families who were eager to begin work. From this small nucleus we grew over the next 10 years into an organization of around 40 families and a vibrant Sunday school. We never had a leader: instead we invited other Societies’ leaders and prominent local residents to address us.

Our Sunday meetings took place at The Fellowship of

Reconciliation, a pacifist organization housed in a mansion on the shores of the Hudson. During the Vietnam War Ray became the Fellowship’s public relations director. In that role he was asked to accompany the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh on a six-week global mission gathering signatures of world leaders committed to finding peaceful solutions to conflicts. On one of their many flights, Nhat Hanh told Ray, “Ethical Culture is very close to Buddhism.”

On his return, Ray became president of the Rockland Society. I continued in my role of Sunday school director. But Ray had grown concerned about the lack of diversity in the membership. Ray pushed for us to leave our home at the Fellowship and move to a location more accessible to different populations: a storefront in an underserved part of a small town. No one from that community joined. We lost the space for our Sunday school and—in the end—we lost our existing members, who drifted off to Societies in neighboring counties.

Sadly, in the early 1970s, after about 14 years during which many members participated in the Civil Rights and

Woman’s Equality movements and in Vietnam War protests, the Rockland County Society dissolved.

In 2018, having retired after 60 years as a piano teacher, I decided to move to a city and simplify my life. My daughter had just moved to Fitler Square, and when I visited she took me to lunch at Parc restaurant. As we drove down Locust Street, I noticed a library on one corner. “Nice!” Then we turned the corner onto Rittenhouse Square, and I spotted the Ethical Society. “Wow!” We turned one more time, and there was the Curtis Institute of Music. “Kismet!” I told Heidi over lunch that if I could find an apartment in this area, I would become a Philadelphian!

Rhoda Forté is a member of the Philadelphia Ethical Society



In search of peace: Forté’s former husband, Ray Gould, with Martin Luther King Jr. and Thich Nhat Hanh

FROM THE ENDING RACISM TASK FORCE

The Surprising Other Victims of Racism

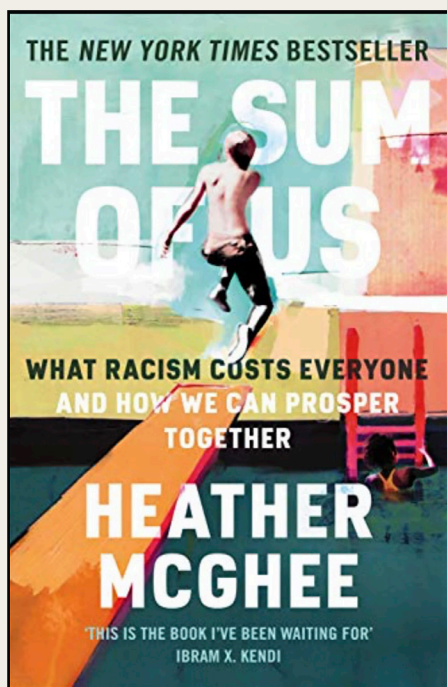
By Nick Sanders

RACISM HURTS WHITE PEOPLE. That is clear from Heather McGhee's recent book, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*. McGhee documents how positions held by Donald Trump and others like him harmed not only people of color but also the population he appeared to champion. Yet in the 2020 election the majority of white voters chose Trump. Like McGhee, I have to wonder, "how much suffering and dysfunction the country's white majority is willing to tolerate, and for how elusive a gain?"

McGhee, the board chair of online racial justice organization [Color of Change](#), explains the unexpected fallout for white people of policies touted as being in their interest. First, Trump put his big voice into the ongoing campaign to repeal the Affordable Care Act. When the ACA was passed in 2010, it expanded qualification for Medicaid coverage to 138% of the poverty level. Had that law been left intact—not weakened by judicial and state-level attacks—it would have provided insurance for 4.4 million working Americans. The largest share of those Americans would have been white.

Opposition to the ACA overlaps with anti-immigration sentiment. Supporters of immigration bans often cite the threat of freeloaders on the U.S. health care system. Although unsubstantiated, those threats raised doubts about immigrants' motivations: doubts the Trump administration fed with its draconian limitations or outright bans on immigration from predominantly Muslim, African, and Latin American countries. But immigrants from those regions have brought enormous value to the largely white communities where they have settled. Among other examples, McGhee relates how Somali immigrants revived the dying town of Lewiston, Maine.

Racist housing policies and practices also have redounded on white people. The racial disparity in home ownership and the wealth it generates is vast.



Although the early exclusion of people of color from government loan support was ruled illegal, discrimination has continued in the form of "redlining." In that practice, financial institutions refused to grant mortgages and other home-buying assistance to properties in areas they identified as poor loan risks: a euphemism for having large populations of people of color. Realtors and housing developers, meanwhile, convinced homeowners to sell out at low prices by spreading the story that Black people were moving into a neighborhood: a practice known as "blockbusting." Of course, redlining and blockbusting drove down the housing market for everyone. That includes white people.

Finally, not all harm is economic. The proliferation of gun ownership is driven, in part, by white people's fear of people of color. White people stocked up dramatically on firearms during the Obama presidency and in the early days of the Black Lives Matter movement, reports Jonathan Metzl, a professor at Vanderbilt, in his book *Dying of Whiteness*. As suicide experts warn, having a gun handy in moments of frustration or despair can turn a passing feeling into a death sentence. McGhee observes that twice as many people in America die each year from gun suicides as from the gun homicides they've been taught to fear.

The strategy of divide-and-conquer has succeeded throughout history: from Philip II of Macedon to Julius Caesar to Napoleon. Today, politicians wage wars of identity politics—pitting races against one another and squandering what McGhee calls the "solidarity dividend" created when white people and people of color work together. Neither I, nor McGhee, is suggesting that the harm inflicted by racism on white people is remotely comparable to that suffered by Black people. But if our goal is to end racism we should call out all the evil racism does—to everyone.

Nick Sanders is a member of the Ending Racism Task Force of the Philadelphia Ethical Society



Peace through music: *The Ethical Society's doors stayed largely shut in early fall. But on September 21, a few steps away in Rittenhouse Square, Leader Hugh and his guitar rallied a small crowd celebrating the UN International Day of Peace. Betsy Lightbourn (center) and Kate Esposito were among those members who dropped by for music and reflections.*

HUMANIST HUMOR

"I never joined, but I used to go to church now and then. I liked it because they always passed out plates of money at the end."

**~ A. WHITNEY BROWN,
SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE WRITER**

Good-Willed and Godless

Christopher Hitchens, the famed public intellectual and "antitheist," had a soft spot in his trenchant heart for Thanksgiving. From a 2005 *Wall Street Journal* column:

"Concerning Thanksgiving, that most distinctive and unique of all American holidays, there need be no resentment and no recrimination. Likewise, there need be no wearisome present-giving, no order of divine service, and no obligation to the dead. This holiday is like a free gift, or even (profane though the concept may be to some readers) a free lunch -- and a very big and handsome one at that. This is the festival on which one hears that distinct and generous American voice: the one that says "why not?" Family values are certainly involved, but even those with no family will still be invited, or will invite. The doors are not exactly left open as for a Passover Seder, yet who would not be ashamed to think of a neighbor who was excluded or forgotten on such a national day?"



UPCOMING EVENTS

Warn your cat away from your keyboard and join us at www.tiny.cc/phillyethics

Tuesday, November 2, 5:30 PM

Book discussion:

Hottentot Venus

by Barbara Chase-Riboud

If you missed October's discussion of the novel *Hottentot Venus*, here is another opportunity. Join Hugh and members of other Ethical Societies.



Sunday, November 7, 7 PM

Introduction to Ethical Humanism

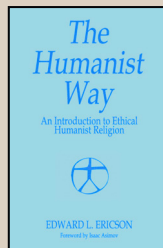
Join Hugh Taft-Morales for another introduction to Ethical Humanism. The informal session is particularly for newcomers, but all are welcome!

Monday, November 8 and 22, 7 PM

Fall Ethical Culture book discussion

***The Humanist Way* by Ed Ericson**

The series continues with a Nov. 8 discussion of Chapters 5 and 6 on the values of Ethical Humanism and moral creativity. Chapters 7 and 8, which deal with inclusion and the ideal of Ethical Democracy, are the focus on Nov. 22. You are welcome to join even if you missed earlier meetings. *If these times don't work, join the American Ethical Union discussions on Nov. 11 and Dec. 2 at 5:30 PM. Email Hugh for Zoom invites to the AEU sessions or visit the calendar section of AEU.org.*



Tuesday, November 9 and 23, 11 AM

Discussion series: *On Good Behavior (Being Here Now and Our Dual Nature)*

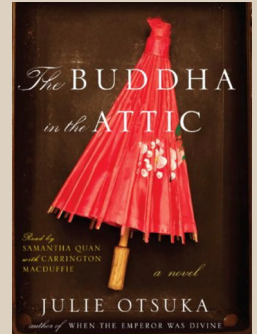
On Nov. 9, join Hugh Taft-Morales and members of Friends in the City (FitC) to learn how to bring ourselves more fully present in the moment so we can be comfortable with ourselves and with others. In a session called Our Dual Nature, on Nov. 23, we will explore a model of personality that emphasizes both our individual uniqueness and our mutual interrelatedness. *Hugh will offer these topics again to all members of the American Ethical Union on Nov. 15 and Dec. 4 at 5:30 PM. Email Hugh for Zoom invites or visit the calendar section of AEU.org.*

Tuesday, November 23, 6 PM

Book discussion:

***The Buddha in the Attic* by Julie Otsuka**

Hugh Taft-Morales will lead a discussion of Otsuka's PEN/ Faulkner Award-winning novel. This short book follows several Japanese women—brought to the United States as brides for men they have never met—through hardships, struggles and, finally, the internment camps of World War II. The meeting will take place at the Philadelphia Ethical Society (1906 Rittenhouse Square). A Zoom discussion of the book with other Ethical Societies is scheduled for Saturday, November 20, at 10:30 AM.

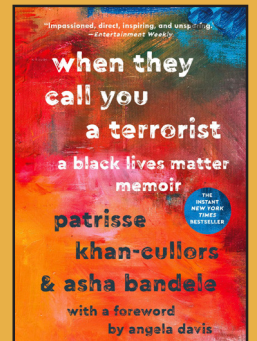


Mondays, November 8, 22, 29, 5 PM

American Ethical Union book discussion series

***When They Call You a Terrorist* by Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Asha Bandele**

Join members of other Ethical Societies to discuss the objective hurdles of systemic oppression faced by Khan-Cullors, a co-founder of Black Lives Matter, and many others trying to live fulfilling, successful lives. These sessions will help participants develop empathy and a commitment to anti-racism work.



Those who missed our October discussions can still attend November's. Sessions take place on Mondays from 5 PM to 6:30 PM.

November 8: Chapters 5-8

November 22: Chapters 9-12

November 29: Chapters 13-16

Register for this and other AEU book discussions [here](#).

For information or to RSVP, please email Hugh Taft-Morales at LeaderHugh@phillyethics.org



SUNDAY SERVICES

11 AM

Ethical Views is published monthly
except July and August.

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PHILADELPHIA ETHICAL SOCIETY COMMITTEES

Our Society is sustained by all of its volunteers who serve on the many committees that fulfill our purpose and guide our decisions. The following generous members serve as chairs of the committees, which meet on the dates shown. Members and interested others are welcome to attend. Email us to learn more at office@phillyethics.org. Join all meetings at www.tiny.cc/phillyethics

Board of Trustees
Michael Black-Smith
Sunday, Nov. 21, 6 PM

Building Committee
Michael Black-Smith
Wednesday, Nov. 24, 5 PM

Camp Linden Committee
Jeffrey Dubb
No meeting in November

Communications Committee
Drew Snyder
Wednesday, Nov. 17, 6 PM

Education Committee
Betsy Lightbourn
Wednesday, November 3, 3 PM

Ending Racism Task Force
Sylvia Metzler
Saturday, Nov. 20, 11 AM

Ethical Action Committee
Denise Marx
Thursday, Nov. 18, 3 PM

Finance Committee
Nick Sanders
Wednesday, Nov. 10, 5 PM

For suggestions regarding this newsletter, contact Leigh Buchanan
leighebuchanan@gmail.com

Where's That?

Every month we challenge readers to identify a sign, scene, or architectural detail within a three-block radius of the Philadelphia Ethical Society. We'll collect all the right answers and pull one out of a hat. The winner receives a \$10 gift card for the online store of Uncle Bobbie's Coffee & Books, a Black-owned business in Philly. Respond to leighebuchanan@gmail.com Betsy Lightbourn won last month's contest. She identified the statue Girl with a Rose in front of the Rittenhouse Hotel.

