

THE TWO RIVER TIMES™

# SCENE

THE WEEK OF JANUARY 23 - 30, 2015



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# BOB HESPE:

## Paying It Forward

IF YOU CAN get past the enthusiasm, the real joie de vivre, the excitement over trying something new every day and loving life, then you can see that to Bob Hespe, it's even more important to give back, help others, and make a difference in the community where you live. Or wherever you happen to be.

The Rumson resident, a graduate of Middletown High School South, has run a coffee house, taught English abroad, written a children's book, and with his wife, Karen, adopted a Red Bank public garden. Hespe has crowded a lot of great things into his life.

It probably all started when Hespe was in high school and Kevin Lynn was his English teacher. A great one, apparently, because he inspired Hespe to have a real affection for the language.

After graduating, he "kicked around for a while," tinkering with ideas of what he wanted to do with his life. Lynn owned the Dubliner Pub when it was down by the Red Bank Railroad Station, and Hespe took a job there. That led to his liking the idea of coffee houses, both for fun, relaxation, poetry readings,

and camaraderie. So he opened one – the Upstairs Coffee House over the Dublin House, which had moved further up on Monmouth Street. Two years later, in 1992, there was the Java Shop on River Road in Fair Haven, a shop without the addition of jazz and poetry readings, and only open days, as opposed to the evening and late night hours of the Coffee House. It wasn't as much fun as the late evenings doing poetry readings, chess, and quiet conversation or New Orleans jazz, so he sold it.

Still wanting to do something with his great love for the language, Hespe searched out a way to teach it. The result: he became an ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher in 2002. So he spent the next part of his life in China, teaching ESL in a city outside Hong Kong. His students were children of all ages, from 5 to 17 or so, and since Hespe speaks not a bit of Chinese, "there was a lot of pointing, a lot of demonstrating, and a lot of pictures..." It's not unusual for an ESL teacher to not speak the language of his students; nonetheless, you can tell from Hespe's laughter in recanting stories from his days in China that he loved it all.

Then there was the book he decided to write, a soft cover, "Jingle Bear on Ice," geared to youngsters in second through fourth grades.

Another chapter opened when Hespe met Karen Stirling, and the duo clicked immediately, both for love and business. Stirling's own business is Stirling Hands Gardening, in which she designs gardens for private homes and businesses, tends them, and makes the exteriors of homes look beautiful. Hespe liked the impact her work had on neighborhoods and joined his wife's business.

Without formal education in the field of horticulture, Hespe took to learning more about flowers, trees, and plants through Stirling's own experience, seminars, conferences, book – anything that would teach him something he didn't know.

But still the couple wanted more. They wanted to do something for someone else. They wanted to make public sites prettier.

It was during one of his walks through Red Bank's Riverside Gardens that Hespe found his newest challenge. He didn't like the overgrown flowerbeds, the unpruned bushes, and the lack of regular care for this very public attractive piece of land along the Navesink River. He spoke to his wife who endorsed his idea, and the two approached the borough's Public Works Department. It wasn't long before they volunteered to take on the challenge of assisting the department in creating a more attractive garden. That was five years ago.

Today, Hespe and Stirling continue to prune, plant, tend, trim, and care for all the flora at Riverside Gardens. The borough donated the shrubs and ornamental grass the couple suggested for the property.

"It's important to know about the shrubs and trees you're planting," Hespe explains, "you want to ensure it's a plant that can thrive where it's planted, will be suited to its environment and not outgrow its usefulness or esthetics within the surroundings." It's easy to see Hespe has adopted as much love for plants as he did years before for the English language.

Stirling and Hespe work from their home on their daily business, but in actuality, more of the work is done on site as they confer with clients, visit the gardens to be developed, then design

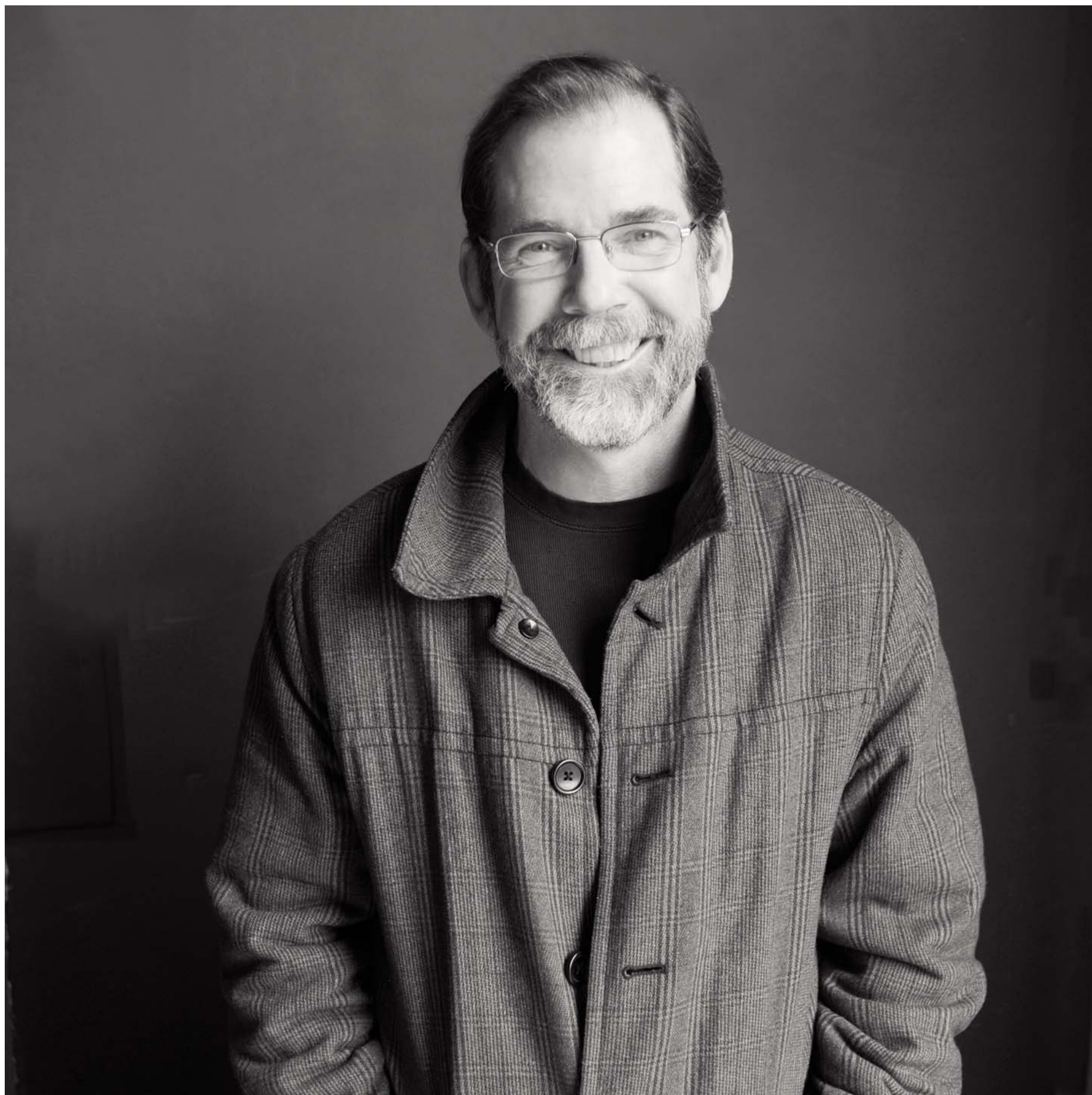
plans for client approval. They receive queries from all over the area, and the couple specializes in creating gardens that have appeal in more than one season, and from more than one angle.

With the love of his gardening work and the desire to be surrounded by their blended family, which includes five grown children, Hespe isn't traveling to Europe or Asia now to teach ESL. Instead, he's a volunteer at the Red Bank Library where he's part of the Literacy Volunteers of Monmouth County (LVMC), where he has been running a weekly conversational English class for five years. LVMC sponsors classes for adults in conversation, speaking, reading and listening. "I learn more from this than those who attend the classes," Hespe says with his usual enthusiasm. "I learn about other people's experience, their country, their lives – it's exciting." And it's obvious he loves people and wants to know more about them.

Nor was it very long before he also had a yen to improve the appearance of the exterior of the library. "It's the Eisner building, it carries a piece of history of Red Bank within its walls; it's an important piece of architecture, why not beautify it?" The result is the 100 or so daffodil bulbs he and Stirling planted in front of the building, which should be in full glorious bloom in the spring.

As for the future? Who knows what that holds, this man of all experiences shrugs. Just as with plants, it's about another dimension. "The fourth dimension," he says. "It's all about time!"

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DANNY SANCHEZ

By Muriel J. Smith