

# the lunch date

Join Lillian Meidlinger every month with some of the most respected, influential and even controversial women in the region. From politicians to poets, actresses to activists, get the private dish on some of the area's most public women. By Lillian King Meidlinger

## Angie Hamilton of Lynch's Landing



Angela Hamilton is the Executive Director of Lynch's Landing, an organization charged with leading the revitalization of downtown Lynchburg. There couldn't have been a more appropriate setting for my rendezvous with Angela than the restaurant where we met. WaterStone Pizza. WaterStone is one of two popular restaurants located in the recently renovated Craddock Terry Hotel. The hotel has a long and interesting history. It is located in what was once the Craddock-Terry Shoe Corporation factory and a tobacco storage warehouse. This locale really showcases what you can do when you polish up the old and pair it with the new.

The hotel and its restaurants are stellar examples of the direction Lynch's Landing is driving downtown Lynchburg. I'll call it small city chic with a lovely dose of Southern hospitality. Angela herself embodies these notions. She is smart, motivated and committed to moving downtown Lynchburg forward. She's professional, polished and well-spoken. At the same time, Angela was a small town girl who thought of Lynchburg as the big city growing up. She is rooted to her community and lives on a renovated farm with her husband and 6-year-old daughter. A down to earth person, Angela is just as likely to be found stringing holiday lights downtown as she is to be heading up a forum of Lynchburg's heavy hitters. Did I mention she is also quite stylish and looks fabulous in orange?

**LKM:** Why don't you start by giving me an overview of Lynch's Landing.

**AH:** Lynch's Landing is a not-for-profit organization that has been charged with the revitalization of downtown Lynchburg. It is part of the Virginia Main Street

Program which is part of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Lynch's Landing, through our programs, through our events, through partnering with other organizations (both not-for-profit as well as with the City of Lynchburg), pushes initiatives and facilitates initiatives that are revitalizing downtown Lynchburg through "bricks and mortar" projects and events that reintroduce people to downtown. [We also help] merchants and business owners come downtown, find spaces downtown, and thrive in that environment.

**LKM:** For those of us not up on local history, tell me why it's called Lynch's Landing.

**AH:** John Lynch, who was the founder of Lynchburg, landed right down the street here. He came down the James River and decided to start a ferry service to get people back and forth from the Amherst side of the river to the Lynchburg side of the river. That's where we got our name and where Lynchburg also got its name, from John Lynch who was a good Quaker gentleman and made Lynchburg his home and a city.

**LKM:** Can you give me some examples of standout things you have done in the last few years?

**AH:** One of our standout achievements is that we were recognized as a National Main Street Community as a Main Street Award Winner in 2006. They only choose so many every other year so we were of the few chosen.

As far as a bricks and mortar project, I think one of the signature pieces of downtown is Monument Terrace. We helped raise the funds to restore Monument Terrace so that it could continue to be a safe environment

for people to climb the 139 steps (if they would like!), but also to be an architectural centerpiece for downtown. You can see it from the top of 9th Street to the bottom of 9th Street; it's right in the middle of town. It's really a place of pride not only for Lynchburgers, but that's also the place where all the war memorials are. As you go up to each terrace, there are monuments for war veterans of the civil war and all the wars up until present day.

And I think one of the other signature things that we do each and every year is a winter lights display. We put tens of thousands of lights up in Morrison Garden which is at the entrance to town, on the 5th Street end of town, so that people can be welcomed to downtown by a beautiful light display that changes just about every year.

**LKM:** Is that the one that was in *Southern Living*? [Note: Lynch's Landing was featured in the December 2008 issue of *Southern Living*.]

**AH:** That's the one! That was me climbing up the tree!

**LKM:** So you are really hands-on!

**AH:** It really is a hands-on job! As I said in the *Southern Living* article, you can find yourself as the director of an organization like this doing almost anything at almost anytime and that goes from climbing in a bucket truck to put up Christmas lights to talking to property owners and developers to working with Main Street merchants. You're really working with a wide variety of individuals to make downtown work.

**LKM:** Tell me about the *Southern Living* article. Did you go to them? Or did they come to you?



**AH:** They actually came to us. They had visited Lynchburg for a tourism piece a number of years ago, found downtown and had kept an eye on it, and then decided "OK, now's the time." They really are a great group of individuals. What I liked about it so much was that it was not only a recognition of what Lynch's Landing has done but also of what private investors and the city have done to make downtown a success and to keep moving downtown forward. And to show that it truly is a collaborative effort; there's not one organization or one developer or a city by itself that can turn downtown around. It's bringing all those parties to the table at the right time to push that agenda.

**LKM:** What sorts of events does Lynch's Landing host?

**AH:** We host events for anywhere from 20 to 4000 people. We host downtown forums so that we can educate people downtown and educate the general public about exciting things that are going on downtown like the Jefferson Street North project [a construction project we can see outside the window of WaterStone] and changes that we are making to parking to make it more customer- and business-friendly. Those will usually attract anywhere from 20 to 50 people.

The biggest signature event that we do every year and we've been doing it for the past 17 years is Friday Cheers, our concert series that goes from May through August every Friday night. We have local, regional and even national acts that will come. We have anywhere from two to three (sometimes close to four) thousand people come on a Friday night. It's kind of your after five Friday let-your-hair-down and relax event. We hold them in two locations: the Community Market and Riverfront Festival Park. That's why the improvements are being done to the park now, so that we can make it more of an event venue from a structural standpoint, not only for the events we do but also to attract others to hold events downtown.

**LKM:** What all are you doing to the park?

**AH:** We're putting in a permanent stage plaza, with some permanent infrastructure like water and electricity. But we're also putting in infrastructure that will support private development on Jefferson Street. There are plans

for condominiums and retail spaces. We hope to be able to spread that development from one end of Jefferson Street to the other. This will take about a year and it will be a mess but then it will be really, really nice!

I think that Riverside Festival Park is the most exciting project we have going on from a city-wide perspective, but one of the things that we're really excited about from a Lynch's Landing perspective is that we're redoing all of our branding for downtown and focusing more on turning downtown into a destination not only for people who are traveling from out of town but for our own local citizens who have been taught for so many years "go out to the suburbs, go shop at the mall." [We hope] to reintroduce them to downtown and to remind them of the fond memories they may have had of downtown as a child.

**LKM:** What do you mean by "rebranding"? Changing the PR and that sort of thing?

**AH:** Changing the Public Relations, but also totally redoing our web site and making it so that's the place you go if you want to know anything about downtown. We also want to carry that further into advertising and having public relations opportunities so that people are beginning to hear the story of downtown Lynchburg. One of the things that non-profit organizations are sometimes not really good at doing is telling their own story and talking about their own accomplishments and what they are trying to do. In our case, it's turning downtown into a vibrant, fun place to be.

**LKM:** Tell me about your membership and how you are run.

**AH:** We have a volunteer board that consists of 16 members. They range from individuals who are interested in downtown and committed to downtown to the large corporations that see downtown not only as an economic development tool but as a recruiting tool for them to attract talent to Lynchburg and keep talent here in Lynchburg. The board is committed to downtown and they show that not only through coming to board meetings but through working at events, through networking with other individuals, and effectively telling the story of downtown. It is a very supportive board and it's great to be able to work with them because it truly is a partnership. All of us are very connected to the community and I think that makes it much easier for us to fulfill our mission.

Another thing is the wonderful partnership we have with the city. It's a wonderful collaboration where we are both able to support downtown in our own ways.

**LKM:** How many volunteers do you have on your roster?

**AH:** We have a core group of volunteers that we call our "supervisors" who work for Friday Cheers. Many of them have been with us the entire time that we've been doing Friday Cheers. That's a group of about 40 individuals that come out every Friday to help us. They also help us with some of our other events like Holiday Traditions. Then we have volunteers who will come out and help us with specific projects who also work with us on our committees. We have four committees that focus on design, economic restructuring or economic development, promotion and organization, which is the committee that puts all the structure in place to make Lynch's Landing work.

**LKM:** Tell me what's coming up on your events calendar. You've got Friday Cheers starting up again in May. What else?

**AH:** Friday Cheers will start up again in May but we will also be scheduling some downtown forums to talk about the developments on Jefferson Street, changes in parking, and we'll also be scheduling some retail events so that we can highlight our merchants and our restaurants downtown. Our downtown forums and our downtown

walkabouts are where we've asked our merchants to stay open a little longer so that people can come by after work, experience what they have, and really begin to develop that relationship because I think that's what's so special about entrepreneurs along Main Street and in downtown; you begin to develop a relationship with that shop owner so that you get that phone call or that e-mail when they know that something you like has come in to their shop.

**LKM:** Tell me about how you came to Lynch's Landing.

**AH:** I think by going to UVA I definitely caught the history bug. In my past life, before I came to Lynch's Landing, I worked in senior housing and really came to believe in the not-for-profit philosophy of doing business. I wanted to stay in the non-profit arena, had a background in marketing, and had repositioned and also helped with doing some Green Fields and Blue Skies projects in senior housing. Really it was about creating a lifestyle and being able to communicate that story of "Hey, wouldn't you want to live here? Wouldn't you want to come here to this community?" If you think about it, it's the exact same thing with downtown. To be able to say, "Come back to downtown. Here is all that we have to offer whether you want to live here, work here, or play here. Here are the hundreds of things that we can offer you."

**LKM:** Are you a native Lynchburger?

**AH:** I am not a native Lynchburger; I am a native Virginian. Actually I was first introduced to downtown Lynchburg because I had an aunt who lived here when I was a small child; for me, coming here was "coming to the big city." It was at a time when the department stores were still along Main Street. So for me, working in downtown Lynchburg and trying to revitalize it brings a sense of nostalgia because I remember thinking, "Oh great, I get to go visit my aunt and she's going to take me downtown and we're going to go shopping." So I think it's remembering that and trying to restore that sense of nostalgia for people but also that sense of excitement.

**LKM:** What would you say is your proudest achievement since your arrival at Lynch's Landing?

**AH:** I think my proudest achievement is continuing to move the organization forward, continuing to make our events exciting things that people want to attend, but also that we're shifting the focus of the organization more toward marketing downtown and marketing it as a destination.

**LKM:** What do you find most challenging about your job?

**AH:** The biggest challenge is that you are working with a cross section of the population. So bringing people together who sometimes have very different agendas, bringing them to the table and getting everybody to common ground, getting everybody to consensus, is challenging. You are dealing with so many different players and really learning how to approach them in the right way. We're moving the agenda forward.

**LKM:** What a fun job!

**AH:** It is a fun job and no day is ever the same!

Lillian King Meidinger loves the art of language. Before taking on her current position as freelance writer and perennially frazzled mom of two, Lillian was the Director of the Languages Other Than English Center for Educator Development in Austin, Texas. Also on her vitae is work in education research and an intense love of travel to places near and far. She has a beloved but not particularly servicable B.A. in French from the University of Virginia and a Master's in Linguistics from George Mason University.