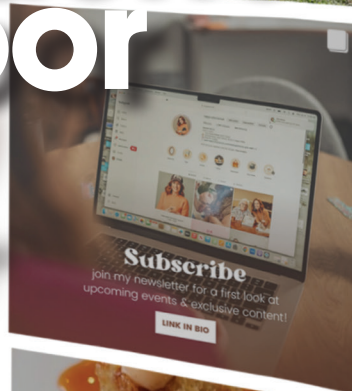
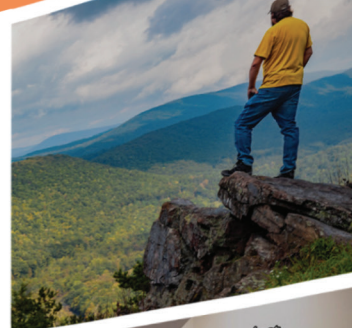
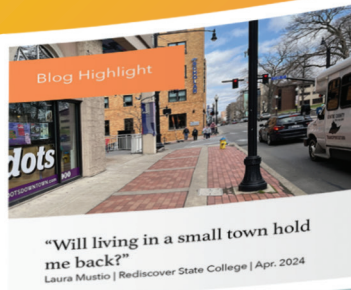


SU FOOD
SCENE



Hannah Morris shows off *Town&Gown's* Centre County Visitors Map

When you think of an “influencer,” what do you imagine? Jet-setting travel vloggers showing off their backpacking trips to millions of followers? Pristine families who seemingly have it all, and who are showing you how you can have it, too (with some affiliate links, of course)?

But what about your next-door neighbor?

A growing number of Happy Valley influencers are showing off just how great it is to live, work, and play in Centre County, inspiring their followers to embrace the same.

Cat Janisko, founder of *Pennsylvania Junkie*

of my days, I’m taking care of my kids, and then trying to capture content, trying to edit content, emailing about partnerships or collaborations—and then I’m lying in bed until midnight or 1 a.m. scheduling posts. Then, there’s the whole engagement side of things. I think that’s one of the really important parts about being an influencer—engaging your audience and showing that you care about them. You have comments coming in the middle of the night, and you’re trying to respond to those in a timely manner, too.”

Now Morris is planning a Happy Valley Hannah merchandise line, as well as a podcast. She credits the Happy Valley community with assisting her in her fast growth, including *Town&Gown* founder Mimi Barash Coppersmith and a content creator accelerator program

‘An expression of love’

You’ve probably seen Happy Valley Hannah, either on your social media feed or via local news coverage. At the suggestion of a friend, Hannah Morris, the woman behind the brand, turned her already robust social media page documenting her family’s life in Happy Valley into something more: a business opportunity. She partners with local businesses and organizations to spread the word and, for her audience, provides activity ideas and recommendations specifically geared at families. The venture has quickly become a “24-7 job.”

“It never shuts off,” she explains. “Most

at the Happy Valley LaunchBox.

Another Pennsylvania influencer who’s managed to turn a social media side gig into a full-time content creator career is Cat Janisko, founder of *Pennsylvania Junkie*, which focuses on all things unique to Pennsylvania—from favorite places to regional colloquialisms. A Penn State alum, Janisko started her journey in 2018 with a simple trending video. Now she spends her days traveling around the state, creating content, partnering with others, and planning how she’ll grow the brand in the near future—which for her, too, includes a podcast.

No matter how busy she is, though, her goal remains the same: providing her followers with joy and helping them see all the amazing aspects

of living in Pennsylvania.

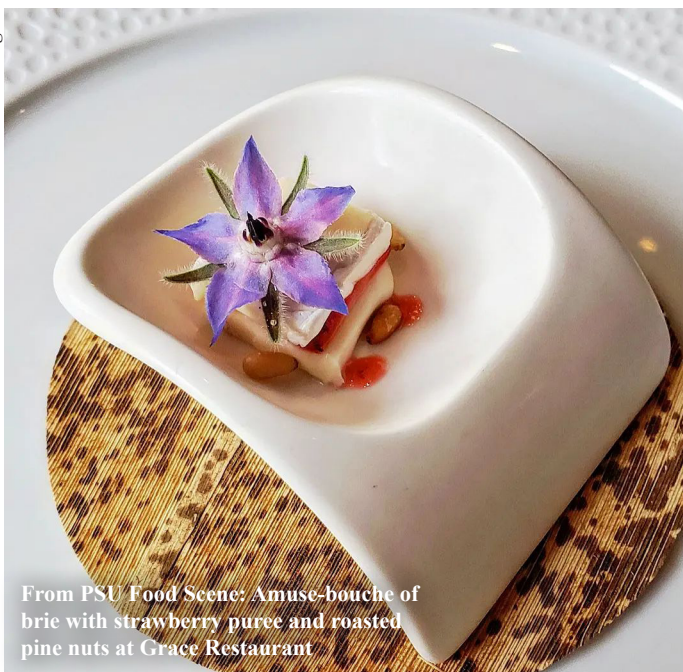
"I know we use the terms 'influencer' and 'content creator,' but, to me it's just an expression of love," she says. "I really do feel like we overcomplicate it all. I feel like this is an expression of love for me, and if ... that's what I was able to do for people—bring them joy and share what lights my heart up—and do it for a living, then I've lived a pretty full life."

A community resource, first and foremost

For both Janisko and Morris, their personal identities are very intertwined with their online identities. However, that's not the case for all influencers.

For example, take Brian Douglas. He started the PSU Food Scene Instagram page in 2021 as an effort to support the local dining scene, which was still reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic. Just by glancing at the page's feed, you'd have no idea that the person behind the page is this Penn State alum with a degree in hotel restaurant management and who now

Brian Douglas



From PSU Food Scene: Amuse-bouche of brie with strawberry puree and roasted pine nuts at Grace Restaurant

works in supply chain management full-time. However, with no social media or tech skills, Douglas has grown a following that's latched onto his coverage of Centre County restaurants, with posts showing off mouthwatering meals accompanied by Douglas's thorough, well-written commentaries on restaurants' backgrounds, owners, and offerings.

"It was something I could do as a little side hobby for fun, to help out local businesses, to share a passion of mine, being a foodie, but also help the local community," he says. Then, word of mouth spread, and restaurants began reaching out to him for coverage (which, he notes, he currently provides for free, as he wants to be sure he can provide proper value before he begins charging for partnerships).

Still, he's keeping things low-key. He doesn't have a website, though he hopes to check off that box in the future. He's also working on a book about Centre County dining.

"I'm just doing this as a fun thing, to be a local resource," he says.

Similarly, a new and influential brand, Rediscover State College, acts as a community resource first, with the faces behind the brand staying further from the limelight. Created a few years ago by a group of seven local professionals,

all with other day jobs, the platform specifically targets an audience of people who may be considering moving back to the area.

"There was a need for someone to be communicating directly with people thinking about moving back to town," says Laura Mustio, the team's content coordinator. "We also simultaneously realized that State College's online presence had a lot to be desired as far as letting people know what was really going on here, in addition to things related to Penn State. There's so much awesome stuff happening. There are so many cool people in this town doing great things and great work, and that needs to be amplified more."

Rediscover State College distributes content through a weekly newsletter, online blog, podcast, and social media platforms, but it also operates a concierge service of sorts, allowing those interested in moving to the area to reach out to the team and get answers to all their burning

Influencers' Top Happy Valley Picks

Of course, we had to ask all our influencers for their top area recommendations. Whether you're visiting the area, newly moved to Centre County, or a lifelong resident, these are the attractions, restaurants, businesses, communities, and events they recommend you check out.

- **Hannah Morris:** The Arboretum at Penn State and the just-opened new Palmer Museum of Art, Penn State Berkey Creamery, Boal City Brewing, Dulce Luca Café
- **Cat Janisko:** Boalsburg, Mount Nittany, Penn State Berkey Creamery
- **Brian Douglas:** Olde New York, The Koop, American Ale House, Big Bowl Noodle House, Maxx Ramen, Dulce Luca Café
- **Laura Mustio:** 3 Dots Downtown, Happy Valley Restaurant Week
- **Jim Cheney:** The Columbus Chapel & Boal Mansion Museum, Rothrock State Forest, Bald Eagle State Forest

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Jim Cheney at Penn's View Overlook in Bald Eagle State Forest.

Happy Valley questions.

"Our primary marker [of success] is helping people actually move back," Mustio says. "How many people are reaching out to us that we're able to help actually go through the process and answer their questions? The real, tangible help that we're offering people ... and having that consistently increasing, is what we're using to measure whether we're doing our job or not."

The OG Pennsylvania influencer?

As the number of influencers in Centre County has grown over the last few years, though, Jim Cheney might just be the original. After spending the first leg of his career traveling the world and writing on a generic travel blog, he moved to Pennsylvania and in August 2013 jumped into a full-time career running Uncovering PA.

"At the time, nobody was writing about things to do in Pennsylvania," he says. "There are some other sites now. There are obviously influencers out there on social media. At the time, none of that existed. It was basically ... lists of things to do, but no one was writing about [them]. I was

like, somebody should write about this stuff.

There has to be good things to do in the state. Somebody needs to be sharing these places. So, in August of 2013, I launched the site. It's been my full-time job ever since."

Cheney doesn't really care for the term "influencer," as he still puts the bulk of his creative energy into his website and crafting evergreen content, versus social media. That feels a bit different than the standard idea of what an "influencer" is, he says—but he admits that his content does carry influence.

He says, "I get comments multiple times a week from people thanking me for the places they read about and for helping them travel and do things around the state. That's always really rewarding to hear—how many people are actually using my site, not just reading it or my social posts, but actually seeing somewhere they want to visit and going out and visiting it."

And all of this influencing? It's good for business

Ellen Matis of Hello Social Co. frequently works with travel destinations and their

businesses, tapping influencers and content creators to help highlight their offerings—and, from her perspective, there is a difference between the two. Content creators craft all their content themselves, from an authentic perspective, whereas a traditional influencer may not, even if they're influencing their followings to support a brand or business. The real value for Hello Social Co.'s clients comes in that authenticity.

"Content creators are a great way to show that human beings are coming and interacting with your destination or brand and having a real experience and posting about it," she says. "At the end of the day, the biggest advice we give to our clients is, 'People buy from people.' So, rather than that brand just regurgitating, 'We've got a sale coming up,' [a content creator] is an actual human being saying, 'I really liked shopping here or visiting here, and these are the reasons that you should do it, too.'" **T&G**

Holly Riddle is a freelance writer for Town&Gown.

Check out These Influencers

Happy Valley Hannah

- 📍 happyvalleyhannah
- 📷 happyvalleyhannah
- 🌐 happyvalleyhannah.com

Pennsylvania Junkie

- 📍 pennsylvaniajunkie
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PSU Food Scene

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Rediscover State College

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