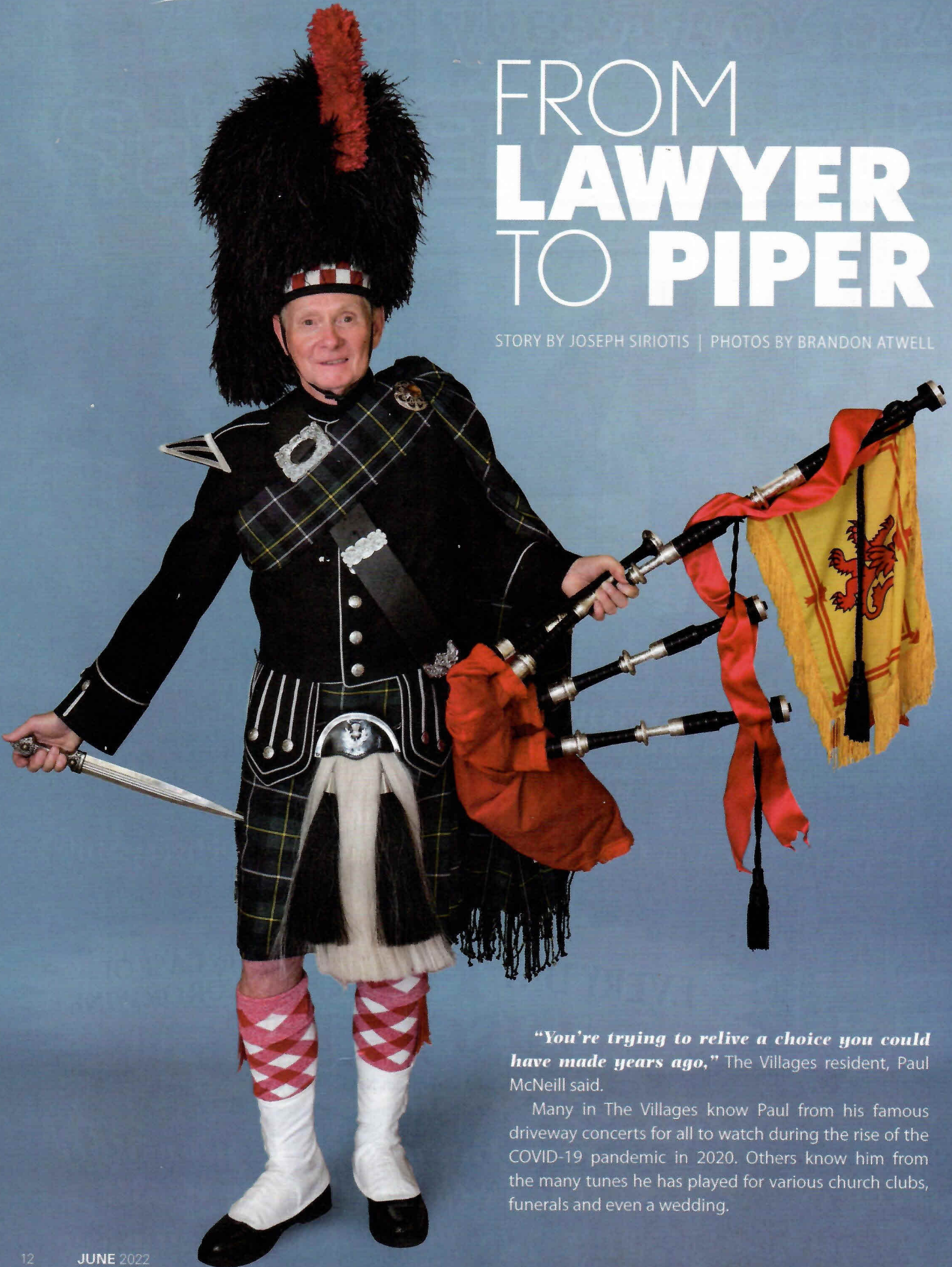


FROM LAWYER TO PIPER

STORY BY JOSEPH SIRIOTIS | PHOTOS BY BRANDON ATWELL



“You’re trying to relive a choice you could have made years ago,” The Villages resident, Paul McNeill said.

Many in The Villages know Paul from his famous driveway concerts for all to watch during the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Others know him from the many tunes he has played for various church clubs, funerals and even a wedding.



"I call myself a church piper," Paul said; "For churches, I play for Sunday services, church groups and funerals, a lot of funerals."

What a lot of people may not know about Paul, however, is that if you told him prior to 2010 he would be playing an instrument, let alone the bagpipes, he would think you were insane. Even though he was naturally gifted at music from a young age, Paul found himself getting swept up by the workload of law school and his career that followed.

"I just drifted away from (music)," Paul said.

Paul spent 25 years as an international tax attorney for the United Nations before he retired and moved to The Villages in 2010. Shortly after he settled in, he decided to take a music class at the Enrichment Academy and was taught by a bagpipe band from the Sons of Scotland. Paul felt a special connection. The bagpipes weren't just any instrument to him, it was an instrument tied to his culture and his ancestors.

"I'm second generation Scottish," Paul said.

Paul's talent with the bagpipes grew and picked up the attention of the United Nations, his former employer, seven years later. They asked him if he wanted to travel to Africa, a continent he was familiar with. Paul had previously worked in Rwanda and Sudan during his career, where he tried to promote the recreational sport of golf. He put himself in harm's way just for attempting to do so on several occasions.

"During the civil war there (Sudan)," Paul said; "I was being interviewed by a TV news crew about teaching golf. Suddenly, national security officers drove up and arrested me for playing an unauthorized sport. The crew kept filming, and the video was shown on T.V."

Paul was being sent to Liberia to play the bagpipes this time.

"I was the only bagpiper in the entire country," Paul recounts. "That's hard work. All those churches want you to come to funerals, a lot of funerals, weddings,



diplomatic events and the U.N compound."

The hard work paid off when Paul was presented with the greatest honor he ever received from playing the bag pipes.

"I ended up playing music for so many events there that the U.N issued a peacekeeping poster of me playing," Paul remembered.

The hot, Liberian climate also gave Paul an idea while he was there. The heat was so unbearable on weekends that Paul found himself wearing a kilt when he went to play golf. He saw the potential for a trend.



"I asked The Villages if I could wear a kilt here too," Paul said. "They said, 'yes,' and even gave me permission in writing in case a starter questioned it. But the idea hasn't caught on. There's work to be done."

When Paul looks back on his memories with the bagpipes, there is one that sticks out to him and it's "the most embarrassing." It happened when Paul was waiting on the TSA line at the Orlando International Airport.

"I had my pipes as carry-on luggage," Paul said. "They went through the X-ray machine, and the operator must have thought they looked like pipe bombs."

When the TSA supervisor went to see what the confusion was about, he took advantage of the opportunity; he used it as a training session and called over all the operators at the TSA lines, so they know what bagpipes look like through an X-ray machine.

"I shut down all the TSA screening lines," Paul remembers, chuckling.

Paul continues to play for various occasions, with a playlist that's grown to 250 songs he "plays by ear." He recently added another song to his list in response to the difficulties faced by Ukraine — the Ukrainian national anthem. It was a process, however.

"I transcribed the melody into the nine notes the bagpipes play," Paul said. "Then I took an English translation of the lyrics and went through the process of re-ornamentation to make syllables and notes fit together."

Paul is thankful for the calling he received to play the bagpipes, despite that it took so long. He continues to play for various events and always finds ways to get the audience involved as he spreads cheer to everyone who listens.

"It's a Villages success story," Paul said.



“ I WAS THE ONLY BAGPIPER IN (SUDAN). THAT'S HARD WORK ... A LOT OF FUNERALS, WEDDINGS, DIPLOMATIC EVENTS AND THE U.N. COMPOUND. ” — Paul McNeill

Right: Paul with friend Buck Buchanan on the first tee at De La Vista executive course.

