

Petersburg residents to pose nude for Olde Towne photo show

By [CAROL HAZARD](#)

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PETERSBURG Fat, skinny, tall, short, black, white, young, old -- Petersburg is taking exposure to a new level.

People are doing what they naturally do -- only in the buff -- for Old Towne Exposed, an artful gallery of carefully shot photos to highlight the people who live and work in the Historic Old Towne Petersburg area.

"Why not?" said Garry Curtis, a quilt maker and puzzle solver, as he sat semi-exposed for the first photo shoot doing a crossword puzzle and wearing a cap with a quilt over his lap in Demolition Coffee, a new coffee, bakery and sandwich shop.

"Somebody has to do it," said Curtis, 57.

He and about 30 other people agreed without reservation to disrobe down to their skivvies or thongs but appear as if nude for the project. Ten or so more are considering it.



Brent Reid poses for his photograph at Appomattox Iron Works for "Old Towne Exposed," a photo exhibit to showcase the city of Petersburg.

The roster includes a window washer, upholsterer, painter, bartender, writer, preservationist, gallery owner, doll repairer, hair stylist, spa owner, waiter, cyclist, drummer, guitarist, gardener, sheep owner, dressmaker and shop keeper.

The photo show will open for viewing May 14 to coincide with Petersburg's Friday for the Arts!, when shops and galleries stay open late on the second Friday of each month.

Other people have done similar projects, but they've been over the top, said Mel Talley, the photographer. The expressions on the people photographed were goofy and silly, he said.

"I wanted to get people in their own elements. We have such a diverse crowd in Old Towne. The main thing is to expose the people and the businesses," he said.

"The response has been amazing. It's male and female, all races, ages and body shapes, not just the young and beautiful."

Brent Reid, 49, a cyclist and flutist, said he didn't hesitate.

"It's a good way to promote the city," he said. "An eclectic group of people have found Petersburg and almost everyone is an entrepreneur."

Reid, a computer consultant, was working at Fort Lee and living in Colonial Heights when he discovered Petersburg a few years ago. "I found jazz and sushi on a Thursday night and it was home."

David J. Urban, a marketing professor and executive associate dean at Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Business, said the implied nudity strategy is odd.

Some people will be attracted out of curiosity, he said. "And sure, it's creative, but you need to ask if the creativity is worth the prospective backlash."

The objective for an unusual promotional campaign needs to be clearly defined, Urban said.

"What messages are you trying to send and to what extent will it resonate? If it is trying to convince people to spend more time in Petersburg, you have to ask if this is likely to generate traffic. You run the risk of alienating a segment of the population you are trying to attract."

Nancy C. Thomas, president and chief executive officer of the Retail Merchants Association in the Richmond area, said the promotion is reminiscent of a calendar featuring United Parcel Service drivers and a segment about breast cancer in a health magazine showing partially exposed women of all ages.

Sometimes they work, sometimes they don't, she said. "It all depends on how people perceive them."

Kimberly Ann Calos, a shopkeeper in Petersburg and project co-manager, said the implied message is that people are so into what they are doing in Petersburg that they don't notice they are nude.

Old Towne Exposed, in 30 years, will be a history of the life and times of people in Petersburg, she said. Calos will be photographed dressing a mannequin in her store.

"First and foremost, it's an art project," she said. "We have an art community and art can sell a place." She noted that more than 60 artists participated in a sidewalk art project last fall, painting permanent works of art on about four city blocks.

"If Old Towne Exposed was normal, it wouldn't be Petersburg," Calos said. "We are wonderfully abnormal here."

Contact Carol Hazard at (804) 775-8023 or chazard@timesdispatch.com.