

Troubling Times

MWCC’s Community Considers Responses to Middle East Conflict

By **Amal Elkhoury**
OBSERVER CONTRIBUTOR

Following the Hamas attack on southern Israel on October 7th, the MWCC community is considering how best to navigate the difficult discussions that have arisen. Students must balance the emotional toll of a foreign battle with their academic challenges, and many National Guard members are anxious about being called out to fight. However, MWCC President James Vander Hooven has not yet issued an official statement for impacted students.

When asked why, Vander Hooven said, “I readily

acknowledge that I have not specified an event. I also did not send a message specific to the war in Ukraine or conflicts in Africa. But...the mental health of our students and employees is extremely important to me.”

His concern for the myriad of ongoing world events led him to hold the Community Conversation with the President event on October 26th, stating, “The intent of that conversation was to begin a dialogue on a local level on how we can begin to appreciate the humanity of one another.”

Certain communities have felt particularly impacted by the conflict in the Middle East,

including Jewish and Muslim communities, as well as those of Middle Eastern descent. Studies show that there are over 3.45 million Muslims living in the United States, with over 130,000 in Massachusetts alone. The Jewish population in the United States was estimated to be around 7.5 million, with 301,880 in Massachusetts according to World Population Review. In 2021, the population of Massachusetts was approximately 6.9 million, including about 80,000 individuals of Middle Eastern descent and 293,000 Israeli-Americans in the state.



It’s the Holiday Season

An Examination of the Holidays Celebrated (and Not Celebrated) at the Mount

By **Desiree Leader**
OBSERVER CONTRIBUTOR

The holiday season is happening all over the world. Eighty-five percent of people in the United States will be celebrating Christmas—everywhere you look, there are lights, trees, and Santas. As a matter of fact, in America, Christmas is celebrated 14 times more often than Hanukkah, and the ratio of people celebrating Kwanzaa to Christmas is 1:49. Although Christmas is the most popular holiday in America, it is clearly not the only one. Despite the Mount taking steps to be inclusive, some people feel that more could be done.

Amal Elkhoury, a Professional Writing major, does not celebrate any holidays due to her religion. As a Jehovah’s Witness, Elkhoury said that while she is used to the holidays

being celebrated around her, she feels that sometimes there is “some judgment” by people when she doesn’t celebrate them herself. Sometimes people force holidays upon her by giving her gifts against her wishes, even after specifically being asked not to. “Sometimes it does make me feel hurt,” admitted Elkhoury.

Some people on campus celebrate more than one religious holiday in the winter. Khygann Hobbs, another Professional Writing student, looks forward to both Hanukkah and Christmas. Hobbs enjoys Christmas for the togetherness and family, and Hanukkah for the celebration of a miracle. Hobbs says that one of her family’s traditions is to open a present on Christmas Eve – usually pajamas. Food is also a big part of the holidays for Hobbs. “On Christmas, we open



Photo by Jamie Coupaud from Unsplash

presents and cook a big meal,” she explained. For Hanukkah, she has latkes (potato pancakes) with red hots used to flavor the homemade applesauce she puts on top of them. She has recently disregarded her family’s tradition of a natural tree and has bought herself a fake one for her apartment.

Some students recognize that their faiths and traditions do not

receive as much institutional recognition in the form of holidays and familiarity as others, and not all of the holidays celebrated by Mount Wachusett Community College students occur in the Winter. Eid, a Muslim holiday, is celebrated in the spring or the summer and occurs twice a year. The first one

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The Holiday Season



Image courtesy of MWCC

A flyer for a “Winter Celebrations Around the World” seminar held by MWCC on December 13th.

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happens after Ramadan, a time of fasting from food and also from “habits you want to get rid of,” stated an anonymous student. She continued by explaining that

it is “such a beautiful time...of community and being together.” She noted that we have breaks during Christmas, but not during Ramadan, which can be difficult because of the fasting involved.

Taking tests can be challenging after not eating. With her birthday the day after Christmas, that day was a good time for her family to go out and celebrate together. As with most holidays, Eid

also has its food traditions; at the second Eid, a goat or cow is roasted, a symbol of the sacrifice that Abraham attempted in his son, Isaac. It is a sign of willingness. Whatever is left over after the family eats is donated or shared.

Justina Johnson, a work-study student in the Student Life department, says that there is a lot going on for the winter holidays at the college. For Thanksgiving, they just finished distributing food baskets to students in need. MWCC’s annual Winterfest was on December 5th through the 7th, and Johnson stated it was, “...a huge thing.” The Student Life department held a wreath raffle, and Johnson explained that the money goes toward paying for books through the Student Relief Fund.

Johnson emphasized that the Mount doesn’t “actually celebrate any specific holidays. We try to be inclusive.” That is why it is called ‘Winterfest.’

Another thing that MWCC does to celebrate this diversity is hosting an event through the Brewer Center. ‘Celebrations Around the World,’ speaks to the history and differences in celebrations. This event took

place on December 13.

“It is acknowledging and... teaching about the holiday celebrations around the world.” Mina Girouard, a work study student in the Brewer Center explained. She pointed out that saying ‘Merry Christmas’ can be exclusionary to people with other beliefs and holidays. Girouard also said that the holidays have changed for some families and younger generations over the years, often not having the same religious meaning and being more focused on family and tradition.

Shelley Nicholson, the Director of the Brewer Center explained that they “did this event last year and it was very well received, so we’re doing it again.” Nicholson described the format as including food, hanging around, and having a “powerful presentation on the history” of some of the celebrations by a non-denominational (no specific religious denomination) minister, Reverend Sue. After the presentation, participants engage in a conversation discussing and celebrating their diverse traditions.

The more we understand, the better we can celebrate our differences with love and respect.

Troubling Times

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Some students note that diversity can provide difficulties in addition to being an obvious source of strength. When asked about the potential impact of the ongoing conflict, Desiree Leader, a student at MWCC, reflected on the diversity within the MWCC community. She noted, “There can always be issues for people here (the U.S.) because there is such a mix of cultures.”

Unlike larger institutions like Harvard, MWCC leadership has not issued an official written statement regarding the conflict.

MWCC’s Dean of Students, Jason Zelesky, acknowledged how difficult it can be to know how best to respond, saying, “It’s this really powerful tool when we drop into someone’s inbox [with an] important message from the president, and [if] it’s a message about people dying...I don’t know how that’s going to land with people.”

Regarding a statement, a concern that Zelesky had was, “Does this minimize the issue that we’re talking about? But then [if we] don’t issue a statement on another issue...you are maybe

accidentally editorializing what is more or less important.”

Although some students may not have a direct connection to what is happening in the Middle East, they still feel the effects. Madison Mills, a Humanities major at the Mount, said, “I don’t think I am directly affected by it, but I feel it is affecting my mental health.” In today’s society, where information, misinformation, and news travel instantaneously through various media channels, students like Mills are exposed to a constant stream of updates and images

showing the often distressing events in the Middle East.

The administration is also aware that members of the National Guard might be affected by the issue. When asked, Zelesky said, “We have students here who are nervous or concerned that they may be activated if the United States enters the conflict in a formal way.” The uncertainty of the situation can weigh heavily on the minds of these students, affecting not only their academic pursuits but also their overall well-being.

MWCC does offer resources for

supporting its affected students, however. The Student Services Department offers rooms inside the Student Center for those who may be facing challenges and need to relax. Students who need a designated space to address mental health needs and take a break from their academic responsibilities can reserve a room for 30 minutes each day. These rooms provide comfortable chairs, a desk for focused work or relaxation, and even coloring books, creating a peaceful environment where students can unwind and recharge.

Join the *Mount Observer* crew and get your writing, photography, artwork, or reviews out into the world! Or maybe take on a behind-the-scenes role and help run the *Observer’s* website or social media. Whatever your interests, you can find a place on our team!



Profile: Julian Anderson

The “Parking Lot Selfie Guy”

By Elysian Alder
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Julian Anderson is the 20 year old Media Arts and Technology (Audio Concentration) major who took the Mount’s new Student Feed app by storm when he decided to kick off the semester by posting a selfie of himself sitting on the trunk of his car. The caption? ‘Parking Lot Selfie, Day 2.’

“I knew at first people might approach me, asking me if I was the guy who posted selfies in the parking lot, but I wasn’t that nervous,” said Anderson. “It was more for me than it was for anyone who liked following along with my selfie journey.”

Anderson is in his first year at the Mount, having moved from Hanson to Leominster, where he lives in an apartment by himself. “I did a lot of research on audio programs in Massachusetts, and the one with the most positive reviews was the program at the Mount,” he explained, detailing why he chose to attend MWCC.

Like many students, Anderson spent his first day trying to learn his way around campus, getting signed up for some of the services the Mount has to offer (like the gym), ordering textbooks, looking into upcoming events, and preparing himself for the semester ahead. “I knew maintaining certain habits would be key to my success academically,” he said. “Showing up to school every day isn’t easy all the time, but I knew I had people on the app that would hold me accountable if I missed a day and didn’t upload a selfie. I got into a habit of it pretty quickly, only forgetting once early on. I’ve only missed



Photos by Julian Anderson

A collage of Anderson’s selfies

two days so far this semester.”

The aforementioned ‘people on the app’ include not only fellow students, but also some of the leadership at the Mount. “One day I didn’t upload a selfie until later than

usual, and the Dean of Students, Jason Zelesky, commented, “I was getting worried!” on my post,” said Anderson.

James Smith, a 55 year old Human Services major with

hopes of becoming an addiction counselor, recently took to the app to post his own iterations of parking lot selfies—usually featuring his motorcycle. “Seeing Julian’s pictures simply inspired me with

his daily upbeat and infectious display,” said Smith, explaining his appreciation for Anderson and his selfie trend. “I appreciate his attitude. It inspires [me] to stay positive and remain teachable.”

Smith isn’t the only one talking up Anderson’s selfies, either. “Many of my classmates will tell me when they hear their other friends talking about “the parking lot selfie guy,” and they’ll say that they know me,” Anderson shared. “Their friends will light up with excitement as if I’m a mini-celebrity on campus.” Anderson says that his peers on the Media Services team are also fans of his presence on the app.

As far as other forms of social media go, Anderson tries to strike a healthy balance when it comes to his usage. “I try to make sure I spend some of my time posting things I’m interested in posting, rather than scrolling through posts that I’m not interested in seeing,” he said. “I would say I probably use Instagram the most. I don’t post anything like my parking lot selfies on any other platforms, but I have done daily challenges before where I have to do something every day.”

Anderson enjoys seeing a variety of content on MWCC’s Student Feed app, especially posts that aren’t necessarily tied to school events. He appreciates seeing his peers use the platform to simply share their thoughts, as well as lighthearted and silly content, and he hopes to continue to contribute to the feed for semesters to come. “... hopefully every school day until I graduate,” he said. “It’s given me a lot of consistency and I’ve also met people and gotten close to people just by taking 30 seconds out of my day to take a selfie!”

“It was more for me than it was for anyone who liked following along with my selfie journey.”

– Julian Anderson

Want to join in on the fun yourself? Check out the new MWCC Mobile App at <https://mwcc.edu/campus-life/mwcc-iconnect-mobile-application/> and get started!



Profile: Holiday Special

An Interview with Santino ‘Santa’ Claus

By Desiree Leader

OBSERVER CONTRIBUTOR

In an exclusive interview on November 27th, Santa Claus himself took time out of his busy schedule to speak with a reporter from the *Observer*. This is what he had to say:

Q: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me. I’ve always been a huge Santa fan. How did you come to be in this position?

Well, it’s a family job. A lot of people don’t understand that, but Santa was my father, my grandfather, and my great grandfather. It goes back to the 1500’s, [and] I will pass it on to my son at some point when I’m too old to be Santa.

Q: So you and Mrs. Claus do have children?

Yes, we do. My oldest son is Santino, and we have my daughter Holly, and then there’s Ivy. She’s the baby, she’s 22 now. We were gonna name Ivy ‘Candy,’ but we figured that was just a little too much—Candy Claus.

Q: Is your real name ‘Santa’?

I am Santino, actually. A lot of people don’t know this, but we’re part Italian. We kind of shortened it to “Santa” to make it a little less ethnic.

Q: So what happens if Santino, your son, doesn’t want to carry on the legacy?

Bite your tongue!

Q: He has no choice?

We’ve raised him to take over the reins, but if he decides he can’t, then it goes to Holly, and Holly will be Santa.

Q: Has there ever been a female Santa Claus before?

No, but it’s just because that’s how it’s always been done. There’s no rules, just so you know. You gotta be big and strong, but you should see Holly. She’s built like a linebacker.

Q: Tell me about your life in the North Pole.

Oh, boy, things are really busy. The elves are always coming to us with questions like, “How do we build this? Where do we put that? Then we got the people that are monitoring the nice and naughty lists. I know a lot of people think we do it ourselves, but there’s a lot of kids out there.

We haven’t outsourced it, but we got a special spot for the tracker elves. They keep track of who’s naughty and nice and give me updates as I need them.

Q: Updates?

Sometimes there needs to be an intervention with some of the kids that might be a little too naughty. That’s where the elves on the shelves come in.

Q: How many elves do you have?

If I had to do an inventory... there’s probably about 1,000 now.

Q: Do you pay them? Or just let them live there?

Well now, this is gonna get me in trouble with the labor board, but it’s a labor of love for them. They get room and board, and it’s a nice little community up here.

Q: How do you decide how naughty is TOO naughty?

It’s kind of a bell curve thing. We kind of compare it to everybody else for the year. You’ll probably print this, but it’s the truth - we’re fairly liberal when it comes to the scoring.

Q: How long have you and Mrs. Claus been married?

Ho, ho, I better get this right, or Mrs. Claus is gonna be really mad at me, and I don’t want to get locked out of the house up here! We’ve been married 45 years.

Q: How did you guys meet?

Well, I was in Maryland with



Photo courtesy of Mr. Claus

Santino “Santa” Claus

“A lot of people don’t understand that, but Santa was my father, my grandfather, and my great grandfather.”

– Santino “Santa” Claus

my parents while they were taking their vacation, and we actually met in Ocean City. There’s some sort of arcade and we were playing games and stuff. Pacman... nobody plays Pacman any more.

Q: So did she know who you were?

Well, no, you can’t really tell people who you are, you know. It’s kind of gotta be a little bit

of a secret. We don’t go around dressed in red all the time, so no, she didn’t know. I told her after we started dating. Let her know what was going on.

Q: Do you have any other reindeer besides the famous 9?

Oh, yeah, we have a whole other team that’s a back up, just in case. Let’s see if I can remember the names...we got Benny. That’s Rudolf’s brother. He also glows, if we need it. I’d have to check on the other names, we don’t use them a lot.

Q: Is Rudolph still the lead reindeer for the main team?

Yes, since we figured out that he had that glowing nose, and it really

came in handy that night that it was really foggy. That was the first time we had fog conditions... Until now, with global warming, there’s fog everywhere.

Q: How long does it take you to deliver presents?

That’s the magic of Santa: we have the ability to get everything done in what appears to be a 12 hour period. But obviously we are able to go a lot faster and slow down time just a bit. That’s why we want everybody to be asleep, so they don’t see how slow the clocks are going.

Q: Very cool! How long does it take you to recover from Christmas Eve? That’s a long night, and all that time building up to it!

We work 9 months out of the year, and we take 3 months to decompress. We spend some time in Maryland. They still got some snow and ice, so it makes us feel like we’re at home, just not quite as cold. Sometimes we go further south and go to Disney World. Of course, we go incognito. I can’t go around

Christmastime – too many fake Santas. Well, “helpers.”

Q: How do you feel about the “helpers?”

If they have real beards and the spirit, I’m perfectly fine. Not real happy with the ones that just sit there like they’re a prop for a picture. I want to see some joy! Some happiness! That’s what Santa’s all about.

Q: How do you spend Christmas day?

Sleeping! I sleep for 8 days straight. After that we are up and at ‘em and down in Maryland around New Year’s.

Q: What’s your favorite cookie?

I know people think it’s chocolate chip, but I’d rather have oatmeal raisin! And one thing kids don’t seem to know is that they should leave treats for the reindeer, as well. Some nice carrots or celery.

Q: Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me, Santa.

It’s been a pleasure! Ho, ho, ho, and Merry Christmas!



Beyond Critique

Director of Assessments Amanda Henrichs' Mission to Cultivate Joyful Learning

By **Katie Holgerson**

ASSISTANT EDITOR

Amanda Henrichs has been the Director of Assessments at the Mount for about 2 years and uses they/them pronouns. Originally from Oregon, Henrichs reflected on how different their life was in the Beaver State, mentioning that they were “milking goats and making porridge.” They explained the geographical distinctions between Oregon and Massachusetts, noting that Oregon experiences more rainfall and is “always gray,” with mountains for skiing and even a desert known as the High Desert on the other side. Henrichs recommends visiting Crater Lake, describing it as “incredible, it’s an old volcano that is filled in.”

Currently, they live in Northampton where they’ve lived for the past 3 years with their partner and their three cats: Walter, Penelope, and Buford. “I spend a lot of time making bread or my big thing right now is making bacon,” they said. They also have a big garden at home, and gardening is another thing they enjoy doing in their spare time, along with playing video games. They are passionate

about social justice and love to learn about niche topics.

After attending the University of Oregon for undergrad, they continued their education at Indiana University at Bloomington where they got their PhD in English literature, specifically studying poetry of the 17th century—poets like Shakespeare. Henrichs wrote their dissertation on how poets understand their literary tradition, and further explained how the Renaissance was the rebirth of classical culture, and they argued that “...the poets in the 17th century have already done the rebirth. They’re kind of bored at that point. So instead of looking to the past for literary inspiration, they started to look inward and specifically they looked to their own experience of time to write poetry.”

The role of Director of Assessments at the Mount is a complex one, providing assistance to various faculty and staff members, defining their role as assisting “faculty and staff help students learn more.” They clarified further, stating that they help staff set goals for what they would like students to learn and accomplish, measuring

what students have learned, and learning what actions will help students learn more. It requires working with faculty and staff to understand what the student experience needs in the learning environment. Henrichs explained that their job is often misunderstood by many.

Jessica Freeman, a nursing major at the Mount, shared her understanding of the job, explaining that it involves reviewing “where students should be placed in classes and the classes that fit well for them.”

One common misconception about their role is that they’re only there to critique and point out flaws. “When people hear we’re going to start collecting evidence of student learning, they get really scared that that means someone’s going to criticize or be mad or they’re going to get in trouble,” Henrichs said, elaborating with an everyday comparison. “I’m trying to make sourdough bread. So I’ve got my sourdough starter. Fun, very finicky. It needs to be stirred and it needs to be fed and all that stuff, and if I don’t do something, it’s going to mess up the product. So when I am making bread and something goes wrong, I need



Photo courtesy of Amanda Henrichs

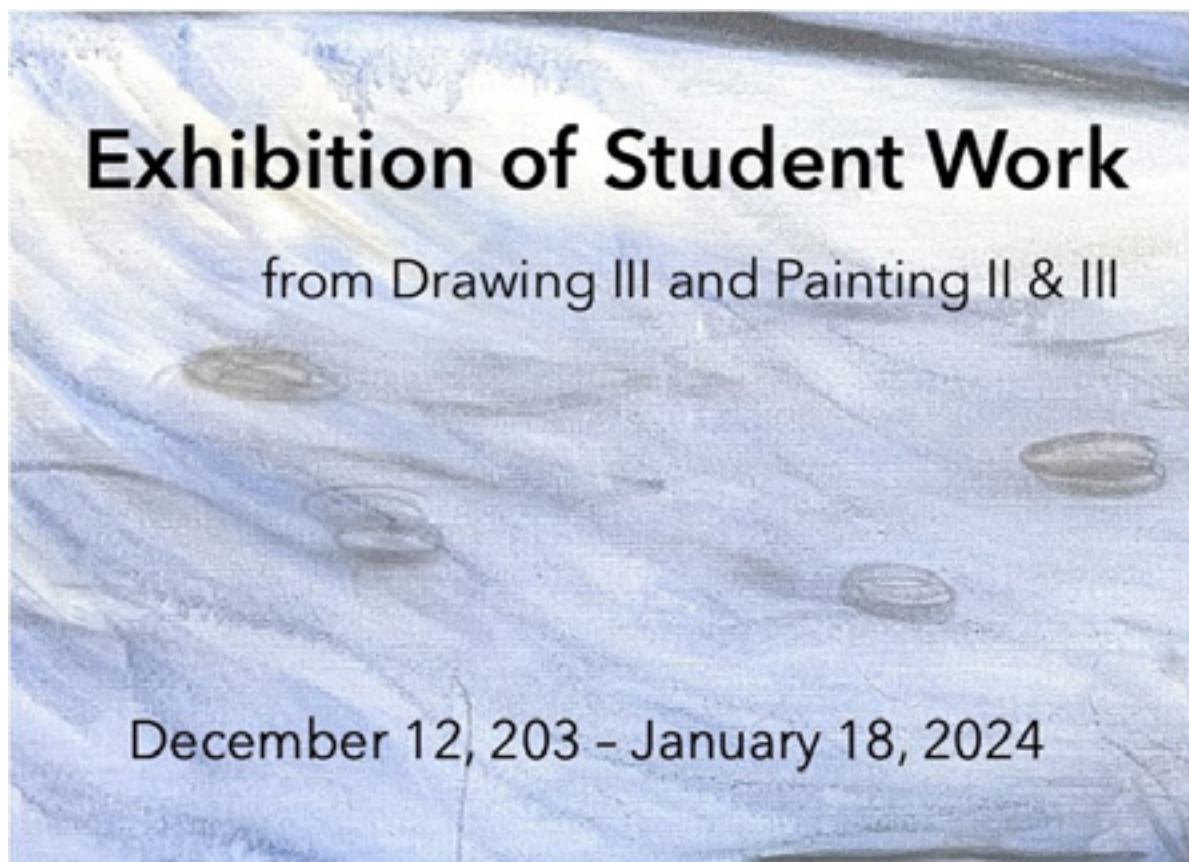
Director of Assessments Amanda Henrichs

to assess what went wrong so I can fix it because I know that’s not the product I want.” In short, they assess what is going wrong or what is going right and how it can be fixed or used the next time to help students learn more.

Henrichs wishes they could feel more of the firsthand impact of their work since they don’t get to work with students as directly as they did at their previous jobs. In previous roles, Henrichs

had been teaching composition and writing courses at schools such as Indiana University, UMass Amherst, Smith College, Amherst College and Holyoke Community College.

Ultimately, Henrichs is a person who enjoys learning. “I want learning to be incredible because that’s how I experience it,” they shared. “So I want everyone else to have as much joy in learning as much as possible.”



THE EAST WING GALLERY
Raymond LaFontaine Fine Arts Center, Gardner Campus

Exhibition of Student Work
from Drawing III and Painting II & III
December 12, 2023 - January 18, 2024

- | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Rick H. Barrell | Paisley P. Mason-Graves |
| Mercedes H. Bounnavong | EmMcGinty |
| Jordan Chignola | Cheyenne Marie Montville |
| Nevaeh R. Cook | Mar K. Morrissey |
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| Xorth Eddy | Abigail K. Randall |
| Adam M. Garcia | T Robar |
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| Taylor L. Holquist | Alonna Smith |
| Maze Love | Harleigh J. West |

Reception: Wednesday, Dec. 13 from 3:45-6 pm
Gallery Hours: Mon.-Thurs. 8 am-8 pm, Fridays 8 am-5pm
Closed December 25, January 1, 15





A Year in Tech

Top Tech Trends and Innovations of 2023

By Kent Yang

OBSERVER STAFF WRITER

Within the dynamic world of technology, several noteworthy trends and innovations emerged in 2023, shaping the foundation of the next great digital era.

Quantum computing took center stage with IBM's groundbreaking development of a new quantum computer capable of executing specific calculations millions of times faster than its predecessors.

Meanwhile, artificial

intelligence (AI) experienced a breakout year for generative AI, deep learning platforms, and advancements in autonomous robots and vehicles. Tech giants like IBM, Apple, Intel, and NVIDIA are in a fierce race to create the best hardware that leverages AI technologies.

The public ledger that exists across the network, Blockchain, saw significant strides as Ethereum 2.0 redefined smart contracts and scalability, although the NFT market has experienced an 83% decline since 2022.

Nevertheless, hope prevails as projects like Solana, Cardano, Polkadot, Avalanche, and others continue making advancements in the blockchain space.

In cyberspace, where the internet exists all around, the war on cybersecurity intensified. The Department

of Defense laid out its four complementary lines of efforts: defend the nation, prepare to fight and win the nation's wars, protect the cyber domain with allies and partners, and build enduring advantages in cyberspace.

Notably, Google recently defended against the biggest DDoS (Distributed Denial of Service) attack recorded. A DDoS attack involves flooding a server with internet traffic, causing it to slow down severely or crash from being overloaded. In August, Google mitigated a DDoS attack which peaked at 398 million requests per second. The attack lasted for two minutes.

In recent legislation, Massachusetts has passed the Right to Repair Law which allows consumers and small workshops to repair their products independently. The legislation is directed at giving consumers the ability to repair their own products instead of going back to the original manufacturer for service, including bills addressing specific products, like

wheelchairs, and other medical, digital or agricultural equipment.

Meanwhile, the Framework laptop emerged as the world's first modular laptop, designed to be user repairable. In the past, within the niche of gaming laptops, besides upgrading memory and hard disk drives, users were able to upgrade their CPUs (Central Processing Unit) and GPUs (Graphic Processing Unit.) Now on the Framework Laptop platform, users can upgrade virtually anything, offering users a very customizable and long shelf-life experience.

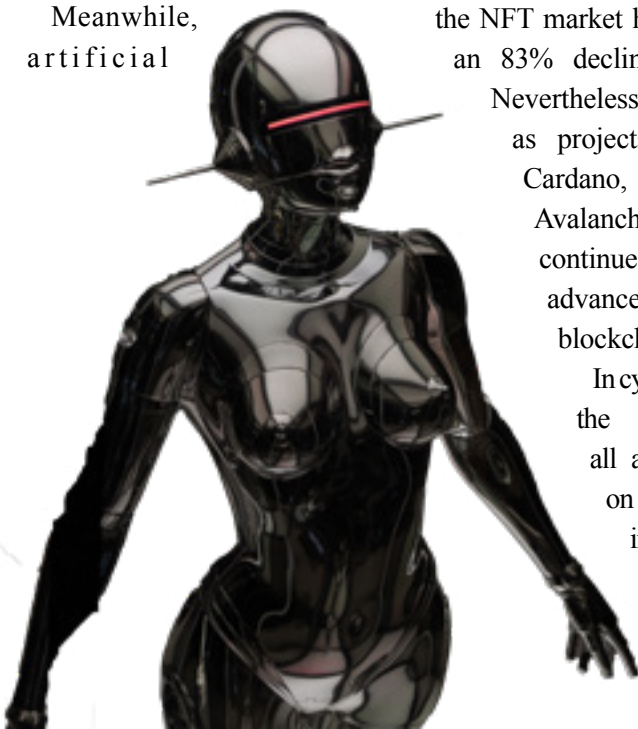
Sony Alpha 9 III took photography to new heights as the world's first full-frame mirrorless camera with a global shutter, boasting impressive features like its 120 Autofocus/Automatic Exposure, tracking calculations per second; max shutter speed of 1/80,000th of a second; 24.6 megapixel full frame global shutter sensor; 4K 120P 10-Bit video; S-Log3 and S-Cinetone; 8 Stop of 5 Axis in Body Image Stabilization,

and 759-Point Phase-Detect Autofocus with tracking.

In the portable handheld gaming space, one can say the Nintendo Switch has revived and inspired the market for some innovation. Mainstream handhelds released in 2023 include the Steam Deck OLED, Legion Go, ASUS ROG Ally, and PlayStation Portal. With these devices (excluding the PlayStation Portal), users can have a full Windows desktop experience at the palms of their hands.

On July 27th, 2023 Twitter underwent a transformation, acquiring a new identity as "X" after being acquired by Elon Musk for \$44 Billion Dollars in 2022. Microsoft on the other hand acquired game studio Activision Blizzard for a staggering \$69 billion dollars.

Lastly, Sony acquired headphone maker Audeze for an undisclosed amount with the goal of improving the PlayStation audio experience.



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Larian Studios' *Baldur's Gate 3* Takes Over the 2023 Game Awards



Image copyright Larian Studios

By Kent Yang

Observer Staff Writer

The Game Awards, initiated in 2014 by veteran game journalist Geoff Keighley, stand as an annual

ceremony honoring both creative and technical accomplishments within the gaming industry. Since its inception, the awards has gained immense popularity,

evolving into the most-watched awards ceremony in entertainment. Last year's Game Awards ceremony gathered a staggering 103 million streams. To put this into perspective, the Oscars, a longstanding and renowned awards ceremony, grappled to attain 20 million television viewers.

Coming out on top this year in multiple categories is Larian Studios' "Baldur's Gate 3," winning Best Community Support, Best Multiplayer, Best RPG, Player's Voice, and Game of the Year.

For those who haven't heard about Larian Studios, they are a Belgian video game company

that specializes in role-playing games such as the "Divinity" series. In "Baldur's Gate 3," the game takes place in the medieval fantasy land of Faerûn where the player can create a character and pick from 12 classes and 46 subclasses, providing an endless variety of unique skill sets to take on multiple factions.

The gameplay itself is a mix of turn-based, with open-world exploration, and conversations that can make the player character a variety of friends or enemies depending on which dialogue you select. In combat, "Baldur's Gate 3" is mostly turn-based, similar to games like

"Digimon Survive," "Dungeons and Dragons," "Final Fantasy Tactics," and "XCOM." As for the plot, audio and visuals, they are absolutely stunning, making it easy to see why it won so many awards. Outside of the Game Awards, BG3 has also won the Ultimate Game of the Year at the 41st Golden Joystick Awards. For fans of adventure and/or RPG games that excel in narration, character development, and voice acting, "Baldur's Gate 3" is the perfect game to check out.

For a complete list of winners from The Game Awards, visit mountobserver.com.



New England's Football Rollercoaster

A Season in Review

By Ben Howard

OBSERVER CONTRIBUTOR

Has it been a year for football, or what? The season is definitely not over, but with fall winding down and the winter chill rolling in, the playoffs will soon be upon us. It's at this point when we start to see the best teams thrive and, unfortunately, the worst teams tumble.

In years past, as New Englanders, we could always count on the Patriots notorious "second-half comeback" as a reliable backup plan when the first half didn't go our way. Nowadays, that dependable fallback seems to have vanished. We used to be able to rely on a consistent pass, carries, and catches from our top-pick lineup. With Mac Jones at the helm, fans have felt that there's much to be reckoned for. Some attribute the shifts to Head Coach Bill Belichick, while others believe it's a team-wide challenge. Whether it's a breakdown in communication between players and the sidelines or the inevitable toll of an aging head coach, something's got to give between now and next year if we want our home team to turn it around.

Back in week seven, when the Patriots beat the Bills 29-25, there was a faint glimmer of hope set for the second half of the football season. With the Dolphins coming off of a 31-17 loss to the Eagles the same week as the Pats/Bills game, the Patriots vs. Dolphins matchup in week eight seemed promising. Unfortunately, while both teams were hungry—the Dolphins for redemption, and the Pats to advance—the weak-minded quarterback Mac Jones dropped the ball—literally. Once again, New England fell into the lull that fans have become accustomed to since Belichick signed Jones in 2021.

In week ten, an opportunity showed itself. The Patriots, for the first time, were set to play on the world stage against the



Photo by Marko Tudan from Unsplash

Indianapolis Colts in Frankfurt, Germany. After all the losses this season has seen, Frankfurt was the make-or-break game to decide the future of New England's beloved franchise. The Colts were a beatable team, and while it wasn't a washout, losing on international TV certainly spelled disaster. Colts (10) and Patriots (6) left nothing new in expectations accompanying our players' performance.

More recently, backup quarterback Bailey Zappe took the field in place of Mac Jones during the Patriot's week thirteen game against the Los Angeles Chargers. A stormy day certainly made for difficult playing conditions in Foxboro—especially considering the frosty temperature of the Northeast. Regardless of the weather, the Patriots should not have suffered such a humiliating defeat: 6-0. It was final. Zappe was just like Jones in that he'd play good for a while, then bomb as if his skill was all just a run of good luck. When Belichick announced Zappe as his starting 'QB' for week 14, it's likely everyone shook their heads in dismay. Whether Zappe were to prove himself or not, the Pittsburgh Steelers needed this game to stay en-route towards the playoffs. While most had probably given up, true fans packed deep in the lion's den of Pennsylvania and watched in bewilderment.

Halfway through the second quarter, the Patriots had the Steelers by an eighteen point lead, 21-3. Sure, the Steelers got some points back, but the game ended with a 21-18 victory for New England. A win for the Pats is one thing, winning on the road is another— a sign, maybe, that the Patriots have a little more gas left in the chamber.

Now, more than ever, it's certain that for this team to redeem its name, major changes are crucial. In the remainder of the season, we'll see if the players can shape up, or if the coaches will ship them out (and potentially become prey to the same fate.)

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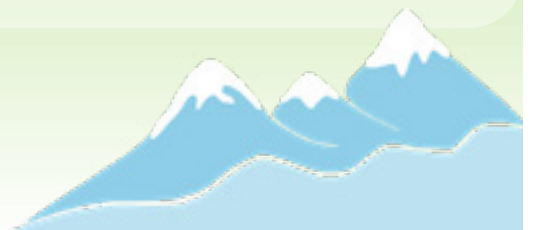
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Review: *Doctor Who* 60th Anniversary Specials

Everything Old is New Again in the Doctor's Latest Adventures



Image copyright BBC

The poster for all three *Doctor Who* 60th Anniversary Specials

By Tom Hill Jr.

OBSERVER DESIGNER

November 23, 2023 marked the 60th Anniversary of the longest-running science fiction program in history: a little BBC show called *Doctor Who*. To celebrate its 60 years on our television screens, three special episodes were released.

For the uninitiated, *Doctor Who* is the story of an alien known as the Doctor and their various companions. They travel through time and space in a ship called the TARDIS (Time and Relative Dimension in Space), solving mysteries, fighting monsters, and just generally experiencing the weird wonders of the cosmos. The Doctor has the ability to “regenerate” when they are about to die, a process that changes every cell in their body, leading to different physical appearances and personality quirks, but remaining the same character. This was a mechanic introduced to keep the show running when the first actor to portray the Doctor, William Hartnell, left the role. To date there have been thirteen “main” actors who have portrayed the Doctor, with occasional “one-off” appearances from other actors in the role.

The actor portraying the Doctor (the Fourteenth Doctor) in these specials is David Tennant; this is notable, since he has already played the Doctor (the Tenth Doctor), back from 2005-2010. Tennant’s is not the only face returning to *Who*, as showrunner Russel T. Davies has come back to helm the series, having brought it back from hiatus in 2005 before handing over the reins to Steven Moffat in 2010. Davies’ run on the show is looked back at fondly by many *Who* fans, so his return was met with much anticipation. Did the resulting specials live up to the hype? Let’s dig in...

The first special, entitled *The Star Beast*, is based on a comic strip that ran in *Doctor Who Magazine* in 1980, written by Pat Mills with art by Dave Gibbons. Its plot, involving the Doctor trying to save a furry alien called the Meep from the fearsome, bug-like Wrarth Warriors, is adapted fairly faithfully. The rest of the plot involves the Doctor trying to protect returning companion Donna Noble (Catherine Tate) and her family from the ensuing alien attack, with the added hurdle that Donna cannot remember her previous time with the Doctor; he had to erase

her memory to save her life, and if she remembers him again, she will die. This is a lot of backstory to know going in, and while there is a handy (if oddly handled) bit of narration at the beginning of the episode to help ease in new viewers, it may not be enough to fully get them up to speed. Other than this, however, the plot is fairly easy to follow, with only two main beats to keep track of: Meep vs. Wrarth Warriors, and Donna’s family, with the Doctor being the link between the two.

Besides the returning cast of Tate as Donna, Jacqueline King as her mother, Sylvia, and Karl Collins as her husband, Shaun Temple, new characters include Ruth Madeley as sassy scientific adviser Shirley Bingham, and Yasmin Finney as Rose—Donna and Shaun’s daughter who runs her own crafting business and has been noted as one of the first major trans characters in *Doctor Who*. Rose presents some nice character development for Donna, who seems determined to be a much more supportive mother than Sylvia was, sometimes to comic effect. There are plenty of nice character moments throughout the episode, especially among the Noble clan, and it’s the characters that help sell the story. A standout is the Meep, voiced by Miriam Margoyles and realized brilliantly through a mixture of CGI, puppetry, and good old people-in-suits. The visual effects overall are pretty spectacular among all three specials, especially for *Doctor Who*, which is notorious for having ideas far larger than its budget. Aside from a few wonky CGI effects shots here and there, it is possibly the most cinematic the show has ever looked. And the practical sets are nothing to sneeze at either, with the most impressive being the new console room for the TARDIS, truly putting the emphasis on “bigger on the inside.”

Despite enjoying the episode overall, there did seem to be a few pacing issues, especially toward the end, where the solution to Donna’s life-threatening memory situation is resolved too quickly and tidily.

The second special, entitled *Wild Blue Yonder*, sees the TARDIS leaving Earth behind and crash-landing in the cargo hold of an abandoned spaceship. The Doctor and Donna head out to explore, but the TARDIS then takes off without them, leaving them stranded. They decide to try to figure out where they are and what happened to the ship’s crew. This episode is actually best experienced knowing as little about it as possible, so I’ll not go into too much detail from there. Plot-wise it is the closest of the three specials to a traditional *Doctor Who* episode, with the Doctor and his companion landing in a place and then experiencing a weird, high-concept sci-fi problem. Take it as a nice sampler for the show in general (hopefully it is but a taste of the seasons yet to come). This episode also serves as a character piece for the Fourteenth Doctor, who despite sharing the face and some quirks of personality with his Tenth incarnation, doesn’t feel like “just the Tenth Doctor, again.” Tennant plays him as more open with his emotions, more “mature” than his younger self, having experienced three other lifetimes since we last saw this face. It’s subtle, but you can sometimes hear lines or see facial expressions delivered almost in the same way one of those previous incarnations might have done. This episode also features an appearance from Wilfred Mott, Donna’s lovable grandfather, played by the late Bernard Cribbins in his final posthumous role, and the episode is dedicated to him.

The final special is titled *The Giggle*, and, for various reasons, it is most likely the one to cause the biggest stir among *Doctor Who* fans. The villainous Celestial ToyMaker (Neil Patrick Harris), a character that hasn’t appeared in the show since 1966, resurfaces in the Doctor’s life and is bent on revenge, using Earth as his playground and the human race as his toys. On top of a returning

villain, *The Giggle* also sees the reappearance of Mel Bush (Bonnie Langford), a companion of the Doctor’s from 1986-87, as well as Kate Lethbridge-Stewart (Jemma Redgrave), head of UNIT (Unified Intelligence Taskforce), a military organization specializing in fighting aliens that has been a mainstay in *Doctor Who* since the 1960s. Among all these familiar faces we get a few new ones, too, the main addition being (minor spoilers) Ncuti Gatwa as the incoming Fifteenth Doctor. Gatwa brings a different energy to the character than Tennant—less world-weary, more bright-eyed and ready for adventure. His character is instantly likable and easy to forward to seeing how he develops in the role. How he appears will probably be a bit contentious among fans, as it involves some major lore updates (get ready to hear about “bi-generation” for a while).

Altogether, *The Star Beast*, *Wild Blue Yonder*, and *The Giggle* present an interesting set of adventures that do a decent job of capturing *Doctor Who* as a whole; ranging from the smaller-scale aliens-on-Earth stories covered in *Star Beast*, the ambitious sci-fi problem solving in *Yonder*, and the big event-size spectacle in *Giggle*, all connected by enjoyable characters, intriguing plots, a dash of techno-babble, and one little blue box that’s bigger on the inside.

Happy Birthday, *Doctor Who*. Here’s to many more!

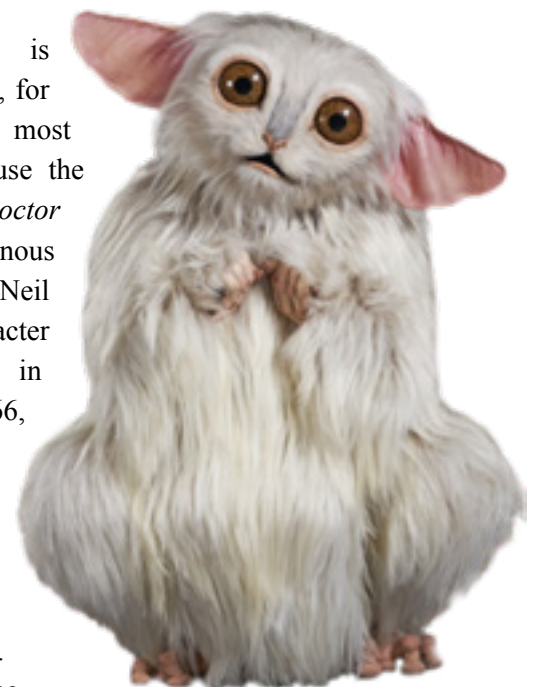


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The Meep



Review: *Elf the Musical*

Spreading Holiday Cheer for All at the Mount



Photo by Laura Cavanaugh via Theater at the Mount

By Elysian Alder
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

On Saturday, December 2nd, Mount Wachusett Community College’s Theatre at the Mount (TAM) put on a spectacular performance of their holiday show, *Elf: the Musical*, a stage adaptation of the hit 2003 film of the same name. The musical follows Buddy (David Allen Prescott)—a human raised by the elves (who are “Happy All the Time,” according to the show’s opening number) at the North Pole—as he sets out on a journey to New York City in search of his real father...and his true identity. Noteworthy in TAM’s production of the musical was its commitment to accessibility and inclusivity, as the Saturday performance was tailored to be sensory-friendly, ensuring that all members of the audience could enjoy the festive experience without barriers. Sensory-friendly performances cater to individuals with sensory needs, including those with autism spectrum disorders, sensory processing disorders, anxiety, or other cognitive or physical disabilities.

Some of the adjustments that are made to allow for accessibility include lowering sound levels, keeping lights on at a low level, reducing strobe lighting, and allowing audience members to talk and move freely during the performance. As a creative, thoughtful, and unexpected bonus for this production, the door staff at TAM also handed out stress balls in the shape of gift boxes, bright yellow and printed with the title of the musical.

“The sensory-friendly shows are very popular,” said Gail Steele, director of TAM. “Not only do we serve a population who cannot easily attend regular performances, but parents of young children find it is a great way to expose kids to theatre without the pressures associated with sitting quietly through a long show. For the past 10 or so years, we have only done a sensory-friendly option for our holiday show. We are excited to expand our offerings with a sensory-friendly performance of the children’s musical *Finding Nemo, Jr.* in April.”

Regardless of the type of

show, TAM consistently delivers a captivating lineup of talent on its stage, and being part of the MWCC community means you’re in for surprises during their productions. *Elf: The Musical* was no different, starting off with an amusing introduction to the story, delivered by none other than MWCC’s own adjunct professor, Jeremiah Riordon, who took on the role of Santa Claus. Riordon’s portrayal of the

jolly man himself was not just remarkable; it was downright uncanny, not to mention the skill it takes to capture such an iconic figure as wholly as he did.

It would be remiss not to mention the show stopping choreography of the musical. From the intricate tap routines that brought the stage to life with rhythmic energy to creative prop usage, notably the playful coordination of tossing gift

boxes during one of the routines, the choreography (courtesy of Kim Soel) of *Elf: the Musical* was a visual feast.

The dynamic between Becky Ruccio as Emily Hobbs and the exceptionally talented Xavier Cormier as her son, Michael Hobbs, ended up being one of the show’s strongest elements. Their on-stage connection felt authentic and immensely enjoyable. Ruccio and Cormier’s performances, particularly in the renditions of “I’ll Believe in You” and “There is a Santa Claus,” were nothing short of vocally phenomenal. Cormier, a mere sophomore at Monty Tech, delivered an impressive vocal performance, demonstrating a depth and control beyond his years.

TAM’s *Elf: the Musical* ran for approximately 2 hours and 30 minutes, and the joy in the theatre was palpable from start to finish. Whether the talented Prescott was lighting his way across the stage as Buddy the Elf, charming the audience with numbers like “World’s Greatest Dad” and “Sparklejollytwinklejingley,” or any of their fellow castmates were singing, dancing, or performing their hearts out, the energy that this production and everyone involved in it brought was admittedly infectious, making TAM’s production of *Elf: the Musical* just the thing to put audiences in the festive spirit.

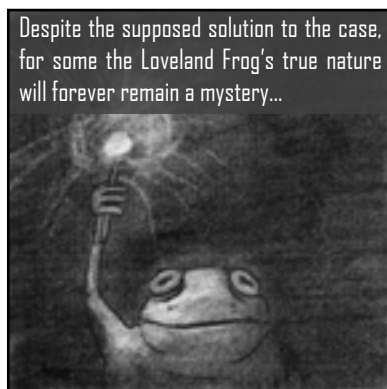
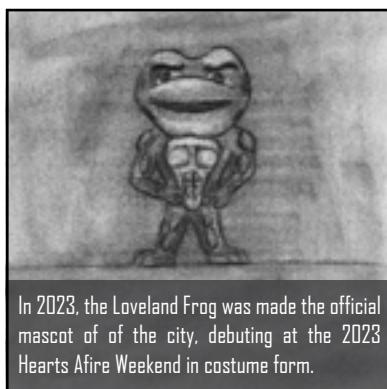
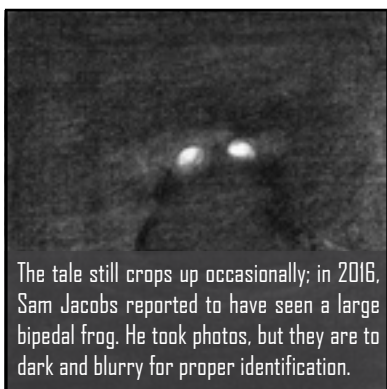
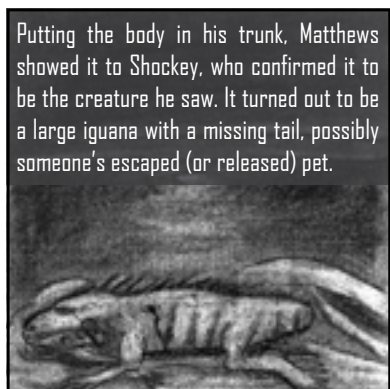
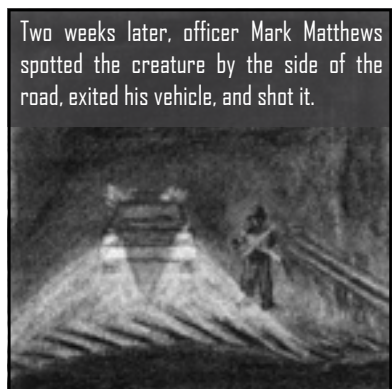
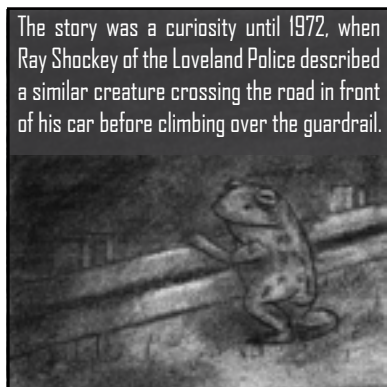
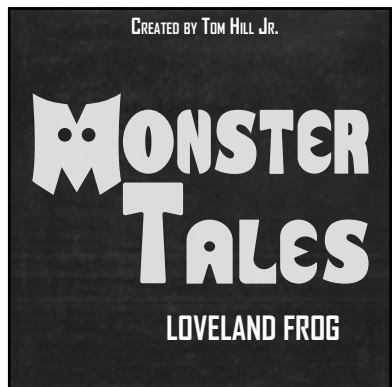


Photo by Elysian Alder

The cast list for *Elf the Musical*, displayed in the theater lobby



COMICS



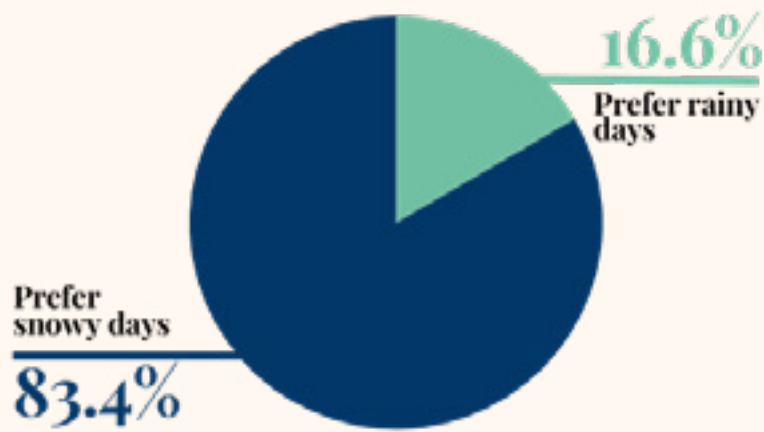
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