TRANSPORTATION B2 EASING TRANSIT FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES SOUTH PHILADELPHIA B3 PEDESTRIAN KILLED IN HIT-AND-RUN CRASH

The Philadelphia Inquirer

CITY, SUBURBS & SOUTH JERSEY

PHILLY®ION

Free Library looks to turn the page on drama

Tensions in the Author **Events program sparked** a series of departures. Months later, a new chapter is underway.

By Elizabeth Wellington Staff Writer

The sold-out crowd in the 400-seat Central Library auditorium erupted into applause on a recent Wednesday evening as Bill Clinton, dressed in a dapper chocolate brown suit, walked across the stage to his cozy, leather chair.

Philadelphia was the former president's second stop on a five-city book tour touting his memoir, Citizen: My Life After the White House. MSNBC host and

Washington Post writer Jonathan Capehart moderated the easygoing conversation about the need for empathy in politics. The crowd was enthralled. "It was a great, great night," said Anthony Espinal, 21, an attendee. "It doesn't happen every night that you get to see a former president. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

Clinton's visit was the latest feather in the Free Library Author Events' cap. Introduced in 1994 as a way to sweeten the pot for prospective donors, Author Events has helped the Free Library Foundation raise millions of dollars for capital improvements and literacy programs like Read by 4th, Summer of Wonder, and One Book, One Philadelphia. Featured authors have included George Stephanopoulos, Sting, and Tamron Hall.

Five months ago, however, the

future of Author Events was seemingly in jeopardy after its four-person staff offered their resignations and, within 24 hours, were summarily fired. Philly's book community was frazzled. Donors stopped writing checks. Authors vowed never to return to the Free Library's stage. So, what happened?

The short answer is the Free Library Foundation's new executive director, Monique Moore Pryor, arrived in the stacks in 2023 with new ideas for fundraising and plans to expand Author Events beyond Parkway Central, with an emphasis that included neighborhood collaborations and not just cocktail party-worthy events. And as often happens when organizations bring in new management, the old guard – in this case, the former Author Events team led by 24-year Free Library Foundation veteran Andy

Kahan — clashed with the new

The walkout came amid efforts to untangle the murky, decades-long relationship between the library and its foundation.

But it wasn't the end of the Author Events program.

"Of course, I wish it hadn't ended this way," Pryor said. "But the show will go on. It must. The city of Philadelphia deserves nothing less."

How the Free Library Foundation works

The Library Company of Philadelphia, the nation's first library, founded by Ben Franklin in 1731, was more a private club than a public library, meaning members paid a yearly fee for the privilege of borrowing books. In 1891, William Pepper secured a \$225,000

bequest from his wealthy uncle to make books accessible to everyday Philadelphians, establishing the Free Library Foundation. Three years later, the Free Library opened in three cramped rooms in City Hall. Parkway Central Library opened in 1927.

The Free Library would eventually be funded by the city with its own separate operations budget. Still, the Free Library and the Free Library Foundation operated as one for more than a century.

It wasn't until 1988 that then-Free Library president and executive director Elliot L. Shelkrot filed incorporation papers establishing the Free Library Foundation as a separate nonprofit fundraising entity to manage capital campaigns and raise money for literary

→ SEE AUTHOR EVENTS ON B3



Illuminating the way

Rabbi Yochonon Goldman, of the B'nai Abraham Chabad in Society Hill, lights the menorah to celebrate the second night of Hanukkah at an event hosted by the Center City Kehillah and the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia on Thursday at Rittenhouse Square. People gathered for an evening of music, prayer, candle lighting, and sufganiyot — traditional, and delicious, Hanukkah doughnuts. Monica Herndon / Staff Photographer

The 92-year-old Korean War vet who could save the city \$11.4M

Robert Faulds combs the internet for Philly residents who are due tax relief — and for others who aren't.

By Layla A. Jones

Robert Faulds is a Korean War Navy veteran, a Kensington native, and a retired insurance professional. At 92 years old, he has now become an amateur internet sleuth, too. With no staff and only a few simple tools. Faulds tracks down Philadelphians eligible for a city property tax relief program or who have unclaimed assets sitting unaccounted for with the state Treasury Department.

"Right now, I'm a little frustrated," griped Faulds on an early December Monday. "I don't quite understand how to use my new

He needs his printer to generate the letters he's sent to roughly 1,500 Philadelphia families alerting them



Robert Faulds, 92, at his home in Wissinoming on Thursday. "He opened a door, and the city will benefit," said Michele Kelly of the Philadelphia City Controller's Office. Monica Herndon / Staff Photographer

to unclaimed funds tied to their name that he discovered online.

Faulds estimated he sends about 30 to 40 letters to Philadelphia residents each week. He spent about \$750 on ink over a two-year period,

In return, he asks recipients just to mail back a stamp so he can keep sending out his own, unofficial letter alerts.

The letters are not forms; they vary depending on whether he's writing about an unclaimed

exemption homestead unclaimed funds. But they all open with the salutation "Dear Neighbor" and end with the same request.

"'If you are of a mind to be a little generous and can send me a postage stamp that I could use to send another person a copy of the same proposal, that would be nice," he recited.

He's received stamps, but he's gotten back much more, too.

One recipient who declined to be named because of concerns about privacy gave Faulds a \$2,000 check. Others have sent checks for \$50 and \$100, Faulds said. A nearby neighbor who learned of the homestead exemption from Faulds vis-

ited him with a \$100 thank-you gift. Faulds finds Philadelphians with unclaimed cash or an untapped homestead exemption by searching the city's property website and the Pennsylvania Treasury's unclaimed funds database.

This past year, Faulds' research prompted what Michele Kelly, director of special investigations at the Philadelphia City Controller's

→ SEE FAULDS ON B2

Largest judgments of 2024 by juries in Philly

Plaintiffs were awarded more than \$3.3 billion in civil lawsuits this year, though much of that total was reduced on appeal.

By Abraham Gutman **Staff Writer**

Philadelphia's civil courtrooms have a national reputation for the large verdicts personal injury lawyers secure in them, and this year the city's jurors didn't buck the trend.

Juries heard nearly 220 cases that went to verdict this year heading into Christmas, and they awarded more than \$3.3 billion in roughly 100 verdicts in favor of plaintiffs, according to data from Common Pleas Court. Verdicts ranged from \$800 to \$2.25 billion, but the majority of the overall sum came from 12 so-called nuclear ver-

dicts of \$10 million or more. Tort-reform proponents, who advocate for measures such as caps on civil trial verdicts, point to the growth in large verdicts as proof that Philadelphia is a "judicial hellhole."

But attorneys who litigate trials in Philly cite some of this year's largest verdicts as evidence the system is working, with judges operating as checks following a jury's decision that can reduce the award size or even order a new trial.

Here are the five largest verdicts of 2024:

\$2.25 billion against Monsanto in a Roundup weed killer case

It doesn't get much larger than this. A Philadelphia jury hit agricultural giant Monsanto with the whopping verdict in January, after finding that the company's popular weed killer product, Roundup, caused the blood cancer of a Lycoming County man.

The vast majority of the verdict - \$2 billion — was in punitive damages, and the remaining \$250 million was meant to compensate the plaintiff, John McKivison, for the harm he endured.

Over the summer, a Philadelphia judge reduced the verdict by more than 80%, to \$400 million in total.

The case was one of dozens of lawsuits against Monsanto filed in Philadelphia, and thousands nationally, making similar claims.

Philadelphia juries have heard seven Roundup cases since 2023, and Monsanto successfully defended itself in three.

→ SEE VERDICTS ON B2

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PHILLY & REGION

Easing transit for people with disabilities

Under a \$7.5 million contract. Temple Health will study how to help young adults with special needs navigate public transportation.

By Sarah Gantz Staff Writer

Temple Health will study ways to help young adults with disabilities learn how to navigate public transportation under a \$7.5 million contract from the Patient-centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI), a nonprofit research funding organization.

The goal of the Temple initiative, called Chance to Ride, is to foster independence among people who are transitioning out of support services for children with disabilities. Transportation can be a major

barrier to employment, getting involved with the community, and socializing, said Beth Pfeiffer, a health and rehabilitation sciences professor at Temple and the project's lead investigator.

The study will test two approaches — one led by staff members, and one by peer supporters who have an intellectual or developmental disability.

"Our hope is that this study can help reduce these barriers and that these individuals will have more independent forms of transportation so that they can live independently and engage with their communities," she said.

Schools, parents, and other caretakers typically provide transportation for children, but when young people age out of public support services — typically around age 21 — they may be on their own to figure out how to get around.

The program will work with individuals to address physical disabilities, communication limitations,



Temple Health received \$7.5 million from a nonprofit research funding organization to study how to help young adults with disabilities use public transportation. Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

and sensory issues that might affect their ability to travel.

The training will also cover how to read road signs and how to handle emergencies.

They will practice traveling on public buses or SEPTA's rail or subway lines, initially accompanied by a Chance to Ride provider, then

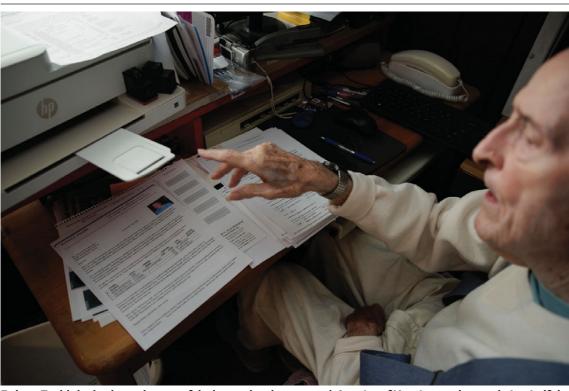
Participants will be assigned to work with either a Temple staffer or a "peer supporter," another individual with disability who has been hired to work with Chance to Ride. The study will look at whether participants report better outcomes when they work with a community member with shared personal experience or with a medically trained professional.

Participants will complete a survey after the training to report back what they found most helpful or unhelpful, and what changes they have seen in their ability to get around.

Temple is working with the University of Florida, the University of Minnesota, and the University of New Hampshire. Each institution will partner with community organizations that serve adults with disabilities to provide the transportation training.

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Verdicts



Robert Faulds looks through some of the letters he plans to send. A native of Kensington, he says he's mindful of "people in the neighborhood where I came from paying taxes, and they don't make much money. I'm motivated more by that, I think, than anything else." Monica Herndon / Staff Photographer

Faulds

→ CONTINUED FROM B1

Office, called "probably one of the longest" investigations her unit has ever done, focused on the homestead exemption.

The homestead exemption is available to all Philadelphia homeowners who live in their own house and reduces the property's tax bill by lowering its assessed value. It has been lauded for helping lower-income Philadelphians stay in their homes as values rise, but abuse of the program costs the city valuable tax dollars.

The controller's investigation revealed about 23,000 ineligible properties claiming tax benefits provided by the city's homestead exemption program for the 2025 tax season. That includes properties owned by corporations, and smaller rental properties that aren't owner-occupied.

Faulds' work could help the city recover an estimated \$11.4 million in tax revenue annually, according to the controller's report. And the office couldn't have done it without

"He opened a door, and the city will benefit," Kelly said. "It's a lot of funding that wasn't looked at."

At a news conference, Controller Christy Brady said her office investigates every outreach it gets.

'If anybody has a tip, please

bring it into our office," Brady said. For his part, Faulds is more concerned with equitable taxation. He's mindful of "people in the neighborhood where I came from paying taxes, and they don't make much money," he said. "I'm motivated more by that, I think, than anything else.'

His involvement with the controller's office began when, while searching the city property website, Faulds noticed something unusual: A share of homes with Philadelphia addresses claimed the exemption even though the homeowners appeared to live out

"When they put [a] mailing address [in] New York, that's what ticked me off," Faulds said. "Because you're supposed to live at the address that qualifies you to get the homestead.'

Faulds started mailing his research to the controller's office, which launched its full-scale investigation into Faulds' findings in September. Kelly eventually met with Faulds at his home and dropped off a goody bag of office merch.

"He's with it, and he is bright," Kelly said. "He knows everything that's going on. ... For 92, I didn't see any lapse of memory.

Over more than nine decades, the Wissinoming resident has lived many lives.

Faulds grew up on Helen Street in Kensington and remembers attending an integrated Thomas Powers Elementary School, where, at age 6, he envied the kids whose parents could afford to have little bottles of milk delivered to them. "I was really impressed," he recalled 86 years later.

At 17, he enlisted in the United States Navy. He served during the Korean War, and talked about having his photo featured in the old Philadelphia Bulletin. He recounted the day in the early 1950s when he was on a tanker near Korea and a ship carrying his brother pulled alongside. The Philadelphia brothers were reunited by crewmen who pulled Faulds to his brother's moving ship using a rope tied to an aluminum chair

"I had taken my camera with me, so I got pictures of me, my brother, and the ships moving together," Faulds said of the scene. "And, of course, I kept all those pictures."

After his Navy years, he returned to his hometown and took some classes at the University of Pennsylvania before spending more than 40 years working locally in the insurance industry.

A stroke about 15 years ago left him a lot less mobile, and the nonagenarian gave up driving in the spring.

So Faulds reinvented himself by delving into the annals of the web. "That's about all I do," he said.

Faulds is the last living of his parents' six children, he said, and he often questions how much longer he has. With the rest of his time, he said, he wants to keep working. In fact, Faulds said, he recently found 50 corporations improperly claiming the homestead exemption and wants to call it in.

"And I'm trying to understand how I could get in touch with [Michele Kelly]," Faulds said, "and send her a copy of this list again."

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CONTINUED FROM B1 \$725.5 million against **Exxon Mobil**

In another trial alleging that toxic exposure caused blood cancer, a Philadelphia jury in May awarded \$725.5 million to Paul Gill, who worked in proximity to benzene-containing products starting in the 1970s, including as a gas station attendant in New York in 1974 and an auto mechanic in Hamilton Valley, Pa., from 1975 to 1980.

Gill was diagnosed in 2019 with leukemia, which he argued in a lawsuit against Exxon Mobil was the result of "exposure to the defendants' benzene-containing products and the defendants' wrongful conduct.'

A Philadelphia judge in September denied the Texas-based oil company's appeal of the verdict. Exxon Mobil appealed again, this time to Pennsylvania's Superior Court.

Because the largest verdict of 2024 was reduced, the \$725.5 million against Exxon Mobil is the year's largest that remains intact.

\$78 million against Monsanto in another Roundup case

Monsanto still had its fair share of large verdicts.

The Bayer-owned company was hit with \$78 million in October after a jury heard nearly a month of testimony in the case of William Melissen, who developed blood cancer after using Roundup frequently for nearly 30 years.

This time a jury awarded \$3 million in compensatory damages and \$75 million in punitive damages.

\$68.5 million against OCF, subcontractors in construction worker's death

A jury awarded \$68.5 million to the family of a worker who was killed in a fall from a fifth-floor balcony at a Center City construction site. Siarhei Marhunou, 38, from

Belarus, died in December 2021 after falling nearly 50 feet from a balcony of a development at 2330 Sansom St. A few months later, his widow sued OCF Construction and project subcontractors. The complaint accused the companies of "carelessness, negligence, gross negligence, [and] recklessness" because of a temporary guardrail that failed to prevent the fall.

In June, after a four-day trial, a jury found OCF to be 50% responsible for the incident and split the other 50% among the other defendants.

\$45 million against Temple University Hospital in a medical malpractice case

In the largest medical malpractice verdict of the year, a jury sided with a gunshot-wound survivor who aspirated food and suffered brain damage two days after his discharge from Temple University Hospital.

Dylan Hernandez was shot in the neck in 2020, when he was 15, and was treated at Temple Episcopal and then the main campus on North Broad Street. His lawyers argued in a lawsuit that he and his mother did not receive proper instruction when he was discharged. Less than two days after he went home, Hernandez inhaled mashed potatoes, causing his brain to go without oxygen.

A jury awarded him \$45 million in August.

But earlier this month, in a rare move, a judge ordered a new trial, saying that the jury's verdict did "not make logical or legal sense' and that its award of future medical costs was "exorbitant."

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The construction site at 2330 Sansom St. where worker Siarhei Marhunou died after falling nearly 50 feet from a balcony in 2021. A jury awarded his estate \$68.5 million. Monica Herndon / Staff **Photographer**

DFI AWARE

LOTTERIES

Drawn daily unless otherwise noted. Those drawn after 8 p.m. are too late to make it in some of our newspapers

MULTISTATE						
Dec. 25 (Mon., W	ed., S	at.)				
Powerball	15	26	27	30	35	(3
Powerplay x3						
Double Play	8	29	30	47	57	(1
Dec. 24 (Tue., Fri	i.)					
Mega Millions	11	14	38	45	46	(3
Megaplier x3						
Dec. 25						
Cash4Life	11	17	26	52	53	(4

PENNSYLVANIA				1-800-692-7481			
Dec. 26							
Pick 2 day				0	6	(1)	
Pick 3 day			2	4	7	(1)	
Pick 4 day		0	5	0	1	(1)	
Pick 5 day	0	5	0	8	9	(1)	
Treasure Hunt		3	11	14	22	29	
Dec. 26							
Pick 2 night				4	6	(8)	
Pick 3 night			6	9	6	(8)	
Pick 4 night		7	6	1	1	(8)	
Pick 5 night	8	0	8	5	9	(8)	
Cash 5		13	16	24	26	41	
Match 6	3	14	17	30	33	42	

NEW JERSEY 609-599-				599-5	5800	
Dec. 26						
Pick 3 day			4	3	5	(8)
Pick 4 day		4	9	2	2	(8)
Dec. 24						
Pick 3 night			4	6	1	(9)
Pick 4 night		2	5	7	5	(9)
Cash 5		1*	23	25	26	29
Xtra x3						
Dec. 23 (Mon., T	hu.)					
Pick 6 Xtra	7	10	21	28	33	41
Double Play	3	7	8	13	14	42

DELAWARE				302-739-529			
Dec. 26							
Play 3 day				6	7	9	
Play 4 day			6	4	4	9	
Play 5 day		7	0	4	2	5	
Dec. 24							
Play 3 night				5	7	6	
Play 4 night			4	1	5	1	
Play 5 night		9	7	2	5	1	
MultiWin Lotto	11	13	21	25	27	33	
Dec. 25							
Lucky for Life	4	10	35	42	45	(2)	
Dec. 25 (Mon., W	ed., S	at.)					
Lotto America	4	5	40	42	52	(10)	
Bonus x3							