

My D.C. Dream Day



A day off would be a dream unto itself

In D.C. Dream Day, we ask our favorite people in the area to tell us how they would spend a perfect day in the District.

Leah Daniels, owner of Hill's Kitchen, doesn't understand why so many people want bread makers. "I love kneading dough," she says. "All that punching? I think it's a great way to get aggression out."

Daniels, a lifelong Capitol Hill resident, opened Hill's Kitchen in 2008. She knows many of her customers by name and wants everyone to walk out with the ideal cooking gadget and some nugget of kitchen know-how. That kind of personal attention, she says, doesn't lend itself to online sales. So during the pandemic, Daniels has been in the store all day, every day, single-handedly working with customers by email or phone to select the perfect products for these glory days of cooking.

"At first, I hand-delivered purchases," says Daniels, 39. "I was literally walking a salad spinner to RFK, a bread proofing basket to Navy Yard." Then Mr. Henry's, which was open for takeout, offered to be the customer pickup spot for Hill's Kitchen and a couple other neighborhood retailers.

Unsurprisingly, the store ran out of carb-creating items like loaf pans and pasta makers. (They're back in stock now, as are the cookie cutters in the shape of the District — and every state — plus D.C. flag tea towels and cocktail napkins. The store has recently reopened for limited in-person shopping.)

When Daniels isn't working, she's been quarantining at home with her cat, Mr. Stanley Pants, and working on her pizza crust, a customer's recipe that calls for a three-day incubation. "I've also been really into the Bundt cake and cinnamon roll," she says. "Bundt cakes are unfrosted, so I feel a little more virtuous than I do with a layer cake."

At one time, Daniels made a point of taking field trips to museums on Mondays, when the store is closed. It lasted all of one month. An entire day to do what she wants, she says, is absolute fantasy. "I've worked seven days a week since the doors opened. In my dream day, I get rid of excuses and do the things I want."

— as told to *Melanie D.G. Kaplan*

At some level, my dream day reflects the different places I've worked in the city and my love for Washington. I'm a child of D.C.: I grew up between Stanton and Lincoln parks, took the Metro from Union Station to Tenleytown every day for high school and have never learned to drive. I live and work within walking distance of my parents. I'm a true city kid.

First, I'd go to **Peregrine Espresso** in Eastern Market. That's not just a dream — it's what I do every day. It's more than coffee, it's community. My first job ever was at Primo Cappuccino in Union Station when I was in high school.

If it were a weekend day, I would wander through **Eastern Market**, visit friends who sell at the market and go to the cheese stand inside. When I was in middle school, I would occasionally sell tomatoes for a vendor at the market.

Then I'd visit **Capitol Hill Books** and browse through the stacks. That's a nod to when I graduated from college and got a job at a bookstore on East Capitol called Riverby Books. I was filling in for an employee who was on vacation, and it took them six years to get rid of me. At that point I had no idea I was interested in local business, but it was there that I developed a love of retail and particularly community-based retail. While I was at Riverby, I became friends with the guys who worked at Capitol Hill Books, who now own it.

Just a few blocks from my small-town life, there is a federal city that I like to remember to appreciate and enjoy. So I would probably go for a long walk, past the Capitol and the beautiful museums. I would end up at the **Vietnam Veterans Memorial**, where I worked as a full-time volunteer between my junior and senior years of high school, helping people find names on the wall. Because I'm a Chatty Cathy, I'd talk to people at the memorial. By engaging with people who come to pay respects, you as an observer become more empathic. I enjoy helping people understand the meaning and symbolism of the memorial.

My favorite destination on the Mall is the **Albert Einstein Memorial**, hidden behind some trees just off Constitution [Avenue NW]. You can sit on Albert's lap, and when you look down, you see constellations on the ground and feel like you're part of the world in a different way.

Cheering on my beloved **Washington Nationals** is definitely part of my dream day. It's an afternoon game, a perfect, 70-degree day. I'd meet up with a group of friends and order the vegetable pupusa and a beer. (**Seventh Hill Pizza**, which recently closed, was my favorite food to bring to the ballpark.) Of course the Nats would win in this dream, but we wouldn't know until the last moment. Through the Nationals, I have a whole new group of friends. They see my bobbleheads at the store, and just we start talking.

Then I'd walk back to the Hill and have dinner at **Beuchert's Saloon**. I'd order negroni as a cocktail, caramelized Vidalia onion soup (with aged cheddar, crispy maitake mushrooms and roasted apples), and a baby greens salad with goat cheese and soy-sherry vinaigrette. I usually sit at the chef's counter so I can chat with Andrew [Markert] and Bart [Hutchins] in the kitchen. I'd end my evening here, then I'd go home and sit on my front stoop and watch the world go by.

goingoutguide@washpost.com



MATT MCCLAIN/THE WASHINGTON POST

"You can sit on Albert's lap, and when you look down, you see constellations on the ground and feel like you're part of the world in a different way," Leah Daniels said of the Albert Einstein Memorial.



SCOTT SUCHMAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST



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LEFT: The chef's counter at Beuchert's Saloon on Capitol Hill is an excellent spot to wind down your day. **ABOVE:** Daniels became friends with the owners of Capitol Hill Books when she worked at nearby Riverby Books.