



HOT SUMMER BOOKS

10 titles to keep you turning pages. Pat Conroy, Thomas Pynchon, more. **5E**

Your Sunday faves: Olivia Fortson's party photos; crossword, chess and Sudoku; Tracy Curtis' flabby psyche; what's hot this week.

Carolina Living

Who's online?

Helen Schwab dishes dining:
http://helending.blogspot.com



Rachel Sutherland on fashion:
http://obsshoeifits.blogspot.com

◀ **Sarah Aarthun** is paid to party:
http://obsent.blogspot.com



PHOTOS BY EMILE WAMSTEKER - SPECIAL TO THE OBSERVER

Morganton native Brandon Aldridge was hired off his first internship to design evening wear for iconic designer Betsey Johnson.

Why touring 'Phantom' never dies

CULTURE



LAWRENCE TOPPMAN

"This is the end of the Broadway musical as we know it," said a fellow theater enthusiast after "The Phantom of the Opera" won the Tony for best musical of 1988. He spoke with disgust, but he was a prophet.

Except for Andrew Lloyd Webber's own "Sunset Boulevard" in the '90s, no top Tony-winner since has come from the grand Broadway tradition of large orchestration and lush melodies that are free from pop or rock music influences.



Lloyd Webber

That doesn't mean "Rent" and "Spring Awakening" and "Avenue Q" lack charm, heart or good tunes. But the style of the Golden Age of Broadway, which began with the operetta-like "Showboat" in 1927, seems to have just one practitioner now: Lord Lloyd Webber.

Stephen Sondheim, who'll be 80
SEE TOPPMAN, 6E

The Sunday Contest

WE ASK, YOU TELL

This week: In praise of dads

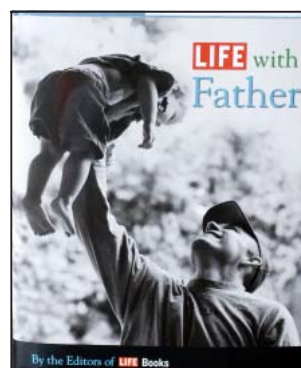
BY MICHAEL WEINSTEIN
Features Editor

To celebrate Father's Day on June 21, send a brief e-mail about lessons you learned from your dad to living@charlotteobserver.com.

The winner gets three books about dads, including "Life with Father," a beautiful photo book.

Subject line must read **dad**; include your name, city of residence, daytime phone.

Deadline: 3 p.m. Tuesday.



Last week's winner

We asked you to give us ideas about summer break. We got a good one from **Kajal Patel**, a fourth-grader at Steele Creek Elementary:

"First week of my summer vacation, I will enjoy sleeping late, watch my favorite cartoons, movies and eating out at the food court. Second week I will start my swimming lesson, dance class and sign up for reading program at public library. ..."



Patel

I will daily read, write and do many fun activities with my friends and family, like ride a bicycle, going for walk at local park, running and swimming. ..."

FROM THE mills TO Manhattan

Morganton native Brandon Aldridge followed his passion for fashion

BY RACHEL SUTHERLAND
Style Editor

In 1997, Brandon Aldridge was a 25-year-old college dropout and serial job hopper. Friends and family thought he had talent for something, but he didn't know what it was.

He finally found himself back in his parents' Morganton home, taking a job at the Doblin Mastercraft textile mill hauling 200-pound buggies across the plant.

Mill work was a way of life for decades across the Carolinas. Generations were born, lived, worked and died in the former mill villages that dot the Piedmont - Belmont, Mooresville, Gastonia. For countless people before him, mill work was the only option. It was how you fed your family, how you kept a roof over your head, how you paid off your car.

But for Aldridge, it turned into a springboard in ways few could have imagined. Just eight years later, the kid who had been making \$8 an hour in a mill was designing evening gowns worn by singer Rihanna and Paris Hilton.

Until recently, he was designing the evening wear collection for industry leader Betsey Johnson, traveling to Asia to oversee production and working backstage during runway shows at New York Fashion Week.

The high-fashion experience is still a bit surreal, Aldridge



Brandon Aldridge walks up 7th Avenue in Manhattan in February to the Betsey Johnson studio, where until recently, he was the evening wear designer.

said. Like the time he rode with Johnson to Bryant Park right before one of her runway shows. As they stepped out of the car onto 40th Street, the paparazzi flashbulbs were blinding.

"I remember thinking, this is the craziest thing - for someone who comes from Morganton - to be experiencing this stuff."

SEE ALDRIDGE, 3E

ONLINE SLIDESHOW See more photos of the Brandon Aldridge story at www.charlotteobserver.com/style

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