

The Providence Journal

22 Rhode Island artists, athletes, scientists, activists, and more to watch in 2022

Journal Staff

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What will 2022 bring?

There are things we know: the state, the nation and the world will continue to contend with the coronavirus pandemic, which will enter its third year.

An election will determine control of Congress nationally, and Rhode Islanders will decide who the governor will be for the next four years.

Housing, crime and social justice issues will probably continue to be themes for discussion and debate.

We asked members of The Providence Journal news staff to share short profiles of people they'll be watching in 2022. Most of them are not household names today, but we think they could be key players in the year ahead

Joann Ayuso

Age: 49

Hometown: Providence

Position: Founder, Movement Education Outdoors

Joann Ayuso fell in love with the outdoors while she was in the U.S. Army Reserve. She still remembers the sights and smells of hiking through the woods from those days three decades

ago and the sense of escape it gave her.

She would go on to work as a massage therapist and build a business as a personal trainer, but it wasn't until she was recovering from a serious knee injury after being hit by a car that she figured out that what she really wanted to do was share the feeling of being outside with young people who otherwise wouldn't have the opportunity.

Ayuso founded Movement Education Outdoors in 2018 as a way of teaching hiking, camping and kayaking to youth of color and limited economic means. That first year, her budget was \$2,500, and six teenagers signed up for the program. By 2019, enrollment had grown to 297.

But then COVID hit, and she decided to rework what she did to focus on smaller groups and a more intensive 20-week course. The organization's budget has grown to \$150,000, but Ayuso is still a staff of one. She's hoping to hold her first big fundraiser in 2022 and possibly bring on someone to help.

Ayuso tells a story of a boy who participated one year. He was quiet, and she would later learn that he was on the autism spectrum. When she was teaching him kayaking, he wasn't initially at ease on the water. Ayuso had to tether his kayak to hers the first time out, but by the third trip he was ready to go alone.

"We clapped for him, and his smile was from ear to ear," Ayuso recalled. "He just turned into a whole new person, talking more and contributing more to the group. My heart almost came out of my chest."

— *Alex Kuffner*

Omar Bah and Teddi Jallow

Ages: Bah, 42, Jallow, 36

Hometown: Providence

Position: Married co-founders, Refugee Dream Center

In his home country of Gambia, Omar Bah worked as a journalist until the government kidnapped and tortured him. He fled and eventually, in 2007, arrived as a refugee in Rhode Island, where he experienced “a kindness I had never seen in my entire life.”

“I got this overwhelming support from Americans. People helped me with everything.” Food, shelter, job training.

His wife, Teddi Jallow, followed three years later. Together they formed a new purpose in their lives: to pay that kindness forward to other arriving refugees, like the 250 Afghans expected to arrive in the Ocean State in 2022.

As the founders of the Refugee Dream Center on Broad Street, they serve about 200 families, which represent about 2,000 individuals. Like them, many arrive needing the basics of life and without a cultural understanding of how the American Dream really works.

The dream that they’ve heard so much about, the couple tells their clients, doesn’t really start until they reach self-sufficiency and no longer depend on the help offered them.

“People sometimes end up thinking I just have to sit and have free food and free housing, and of course that’s not how things work,” said Jallow. “We tell them they have to let it go. Because the moment you let it go, that’s when you will actually have the American Dream.”

Being a refugee is harder than being an immigrant, they say. “No one asks to be a refugee,” said Bah. “Everyone had a normal life in their own country, families they could depend on. Then something happens, and suddenly you are air-lifted here.”

Many refugees from the Middle East and Africa are used to relying on their extended families.

“There, the idea of self-sufficiency doesn’t exist,” said Bah. The center strives to teach them, he said, “to take care of yourself.”

— *Tom Mooney*

Erik G. Brine

Age: 45

Hometown: Jamestown

Positions: Directs defense-related research and development initiatives at the University of Rhode Island; Jamestown councilman; colonel, U.S. Air Force Reserve, leading over 2,300 airmen as they provide airlift capacity and aerial refueling around the globe. Brine is also a co-founder of Operation Encore, a nonprofit group that helps talented veterans and members of the military community pursue professional careers in music.

A Boston University alum who touched down at URI this year, Brine has cobbled together an eye-catching résumé during a career that began in the military.

Flying the C-17 Globemaster and other aircraft, he logged 100 combat missions into Iraq and Afghanistan. He also rose to significant military leadership positions.

These days, while living in Jamestown, Brine is vice commander of the New Jersey-based 514th Air Mobility Wing, which was deeply involved in the recent airlift from Afghanistan.

His military feats could be a harbinger of future accomplishments in his civilian career.

Brine's new university post has put him in a position to contribute heavily to an effort that seeks to further develop sectors of the Rhode Island economy tied to the state's ocean-oriented geography, from the defense sector to aquaculture.

One early goal is linking data sensors that gather myriad types of information all over Narragansett Bay. And 2022 is seen as a big year in fundraising for the overall "blue economy" initiative. One undertaking has set out to land up to \$100 million in grant funding.

"I think 2022 has the opportunity to be an incredible year," Brine said, "because of the number of programs being implemented both at the federal and state level to reinvest in our communities."

— *Mark Reynolds*

Cherie Cruz

Age: 49

Hometown: Pawtucket and Central Falls

Position: Co-founder of the Formerly Incarcerated Union of Rhode Island

As a single mother with a felony conviction and no high school education, Cherie Cruz had the odds stacked against her. She'd grown up in shelters and public housing projects, with parents who both did time in prison. Violence was a constant — at one point, she was stabbed in the chest.

But Cruz survived and went on to earn not one but two degrees from Brown University, becoming the first generation in her family to graduate from college.

Plenty of people who have been incarcerated have equally remarkable trajectories, Cruz says. But all too often, barriers to finding housing and employment stand in the way.

In 2019, Cruz and more than a dozen others founded the Formerly Incarcerated Union of Rhode Island. Composed of volunteers who have firsthand experience with the criminal justice system, the group offers support to people who are navigating similar challenges.

"This is a skill set," Cruz said. "We've been there — we're experts."

The organization is also a growing force at the State House, and it helped push for the passage of the Fair Chance Licensing Act, which ensured that people with criminal records are no longer banned outright from certain professions.

Priorities for 2022 include reducing the number of primary caregivers who are incarcerated and ensuring that eligible voters who are being held on bail have the opportunity to cast a ballot. The group also wants to make sure that Rhode Island doesn't legalize marijuana without expunging past charges and guaranteeing that people who were once criminalized can take part in the economic boom.

The overall goal: Get policymakers to hear from people who have been directly impacted.

— *Antonia Noori Farzan*

Michelle Cruz

Age: 43

Hometown: East Providence

Position: Director of community engagement at Trinity Repertory Company

A singer-songwriter whose band once opened for the Roots, Cruz has found a job that blends her love of music with her passion for community engagement.

The daughter of Cape Verdean immigrants, Cruz is the director of community engagement at Trinity Repertory Company.

“Trinity was the first theater experience I ever had,” she said. “My first play was 'A Christmas Carol.' It floored me. All that running around and running between the aisles. It inspired me to become a performer.”

Cruz was hired by Trinity in 2019.

Despite the pandemic’s interruptions, she has created two programs to open up a live theater experience to underserved communities.

The first, the Green Light Ghostlight Project, invites veterans to tell their own stories on stage. One man told a heartbreaking story about his tour in Iraq. Another played the violin. A third veteran read from the Greek play "Antigone." The title refers to the green light that the families of veterans light in their homes; the ghost light refers to the white light in theater lobbies that signals when a play is about to begin.

Trinity added a third white light, symbolizing that a veteran’s story was about to be told.

Cruz's second project is a community sing-along, something that ties her life as a performer with her commitment to community outreach.

She was inspired by Jon Batiste, the leader of Stay Human, the in-house band for "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert." Batiste used to stage “love riots” in New York City, where, like a piper, he would start playing on the street and people would follow him.

Starting in 2019, Cruz and an actor playing Scrooge would march from Trinity to Burnside Park for the annual tree-lighting ceremony.

“I thought, ‘Why don’t we have something for folks who can’t afford 'A Christmas Carol'? We all went caroling down the street while Scrooge did his bah-humbug thing.”

But Cruz's activism doesn't stop there. She's on the advisory committee for minority farmers, part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

And she wants to launch her own business, a blog on health, wellness and food.

"Especially after the pandemic began, I wanted to lead an intentional, caring and giving life," Cruz said. "I want to be mindful of those around me. It's about having nurturing relationships."

— *Linda Borg*

Jon Dodd

Age: 60

Hometown: South Kingstown

Position: Shark researcher

Jon F. Dodd expects to learn more about the sharks that swim near Rhode Island in 2022, but that knowledge will likely raise even more questions.

"It is truly remarkable how much there is still yet to learn about sharks," says Dodd, executive director of the Atlantic Shark Institute in Wakefield. "Every time we get an answer to something it seems like five more questions arise."

The 2021 season was productive for Dodd. Among other things, the institute tagged eight great white sharks with tracking devices. Dodd plans to expand his research in 2022.

More: RI researcher announces eight white sharks tagged this summer

"Ultimately, we want to answer the most pressing questions about sharks, their biology, survivability and sustainability," Dodd said.

The son of a police officer, Dodd founded the institute in 2017. He earned a biology degree from URI in 1984; his research allows him to pursue a fascination with sharks that started after a close encounter with a big blue shark when he was 14 years old.

Dodd's institute studies several different shark species, but the biggest surprise for him so far is the number of great whites detected in Rhode Island waters.

More: How one fisherman tagged 2 great white sharks off RI

Are most just swimming through on their way to find bigger prey among the thousands of seals off Cape Cod? Will a growing seal population around Block Island encourage the sharks to stick around? Is there a shark nursery near Rhode Island?

Stay tuned. Jon Dodd is on the case.

— *Jack Perry*

Rebecca Gibel

Age: 42

Hometown: Providence and New York City

Position: Actress

Actress Rebecca Gibel described the past year, appropriately, with a film reference: “‘Groundhog Day’ without the comedy hype.”

While the pandemic had prompted her to adopt “quiet and stationary patterns of existence,” the coming year will be anything but.

Gibel, who has acted on the big screen, the small screen and the stage, just wrapped up several projects that will be released in 2022: a second season of the dramedy series “Bridge and Tunnel,” an appearance in the black comedy “Don’t Look Up,” alongside Leonardo DiCaprio and Jennifer Lawrence, a yet-to-be-announced Stephen King film, and a role in “Salvation,” a movie loosely based on the true story of a Pentecostal pastor in Alabama who was convicted of attempting to murder his wife with a snake. (Gibel plays the wife.)

Add to that Gibel’s return to Trinity Repertory Company in the spring, and it’s shaping up to be an eventful year.

Gibel has been selected for a role in “Fairview,” a Pulitzer-winning play dealing with race and prejudice, written by Jackie Sibblies Drury, whom Gibel knew while both studied at Brown University.

Gibel described the production as “a kitchen sink realism family dramedy about family gathering to celebrate a grandmother’s birthday” when “all of a sudden, the world kind of explodes.”

“I had read 'Fairview,' and for some reason I didn’t ever let myself dream of being in it,” Gibel said. “It’s smart, it’s funny, it’s surprising in ways that I don’t want to spoil.”

— *Amy Russo*

Katie and Matt Gray

Ages: Katie 39, Matt 41

Hometown: Portsmouth

Position: Co-owners, Ragged Island Brewery

To say that Matt Gray has something brewing for 2022 is more than just a bad beer pun.

"2022 will be a major year for us; we'll be opening our farm brewery officially," Gray said. It will be just the second farm brewery in the state.

In March 2017, Ragged Island Brewery began small.

"We started a one-barrel brewery," said Gray, adding that a barrel is a unit of volume equal to 31 gallons. "When we started, we were producing two kegs of beer at a time."

Later that year, they expanded to 3.5 barrels, which continued until June, when their lease in Portsmouth Business Park expired.

Though the farm had zoning approval in 2019, COVID had other ideas about construction schedules. The last two summers, Gray ran a beer garden there under a special-event license.

"It helped sustain us through the tough times," he said.

Now, with a target date to start brewing in March, Ragged Island will have a 10-barrel capacity.

Gray, who grew up on Aquidneck Island and owns the brewery with his wife, Katie, will brew IPAs, sour ales, lagers, stouts and porters.

Their 37-acre farm at 54 Bristol Ferry Rd. in Portsmouth will grow hops, an essential beer-making ingredient, as well as other crops, in addition to brewing and selling beer and other farm products. It will also host outdoor events for just people looking to unwind.

Said Gray: "What we're creating here in Portsmouth is definitely a destination brewery."

— *Paul Edward Parker*

Terrence Gray

Age: 57

Hometown: West Greenwich

Position: Acting director of the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management

The coming year would have been a big one for Terry Gray, no matter what.

Having taken over as the state's top environmental official last summer after Janet Coit ended her decade-long tenure in the post to head up federal fisheries management, Gray would have been expected to be hitting his stride in 2022.

But the demands of the job grew with the passage of the Act on Climate, the state law that requires Rhode Island to reach net-zero emissions by 2050. Its supporters, of which there are many, call it the most important piece of climate legislation adopted by the state.

As head of the DEM, Gray is also in charge of the council of state agencies that will decide how to wean the state off fossil fuels. And the first piece of their work is due by the end of next year with an update to the state's 2016 greenhouse gas reduction plan.

Gray expects the work of the Executive Climate Change Coordinating Council to start shifting from a focus on planning to something more action-oriented. That could mean

making it cheaper for homeowners to buy electric heat pumps. Or investing in electric school buses for the urban communities that disproportionately suffer the effects of air pollution. With lots of federal money poised to come through, there are many possibilities.

“One thing that has really changed since the passage of the Act on Climate is the urgency,” Gray said. “Every agency in state government is working on this. We need to start charting our course now.”

— *Alex Kuffner*

Cedric Huntley

Age: 63

Hometown: Providence

Position: Executive director, Nonviolence Institute

Cedric Huntley, executive director of the Nonviolence Institute, has had a busy year. The institute, which aims to teach violence prevention strategies, shouldered a heavy workload as it responded to Providence’s seemingly endless pattern of shootings. In the coming year, it’s likely the organization’s work will only grow.

Huntley is a community leader to watch, as the institute could receive up to \$500,000 from the American Rescue Plan Act. The money, to be distributed by the mayor’s office, would allow for creation of a citywide nonviolence training program.

“Growing the training department is certainly something that’s critical,” Huntley said, adding that even during the pandemic, “we have really extended our activity,” holding about 25 training programs in 2020 and 2021.

Mayor Jorge Elorza developed the idea for a citywide program after the May shooting on Carolina Avenue, described as the city’s largest, which injured nine people.

While Huntley knows the work of the institute is crucial, he also knows he needs funding to do it.

Huntley is wary of what he called “a lot of stops, starts and stops” in funding for the institute, but he tries not to fixate on the finances.

“We really can’t focus on that,” he said. “We have to be consistent in keeping our efforts and our commitment to the mission of preventing and educating people on nonviolence.”

— *Amy Russo*

Aisha Isabel and Sarai Mejia

Ages:18

Hometown: Providence

Position: Student activists

Sarai Mejia and Aisha Isabel are first-generation Americans. Mejia was born in Providence to parents from Guatemala, and Isabel to parents who are Dominican. In high school, both joined Youth in Action, Mejia from Classical and Isabel from the Paul Cuffee School. Both earned paid staff positions while following the curriculum for leadership and activism.

Boston College, by giving Mejia one of 30 "Options through Education" scholarships, is betting that her equity leadership will help the 90%-white university in its diversity efforts.

Isabel moved up fast in Youth in Action, becoming a co-coordinator as a sophomore.

"I sometimes forget that I'm only 18 because Youth in Action allowed me to manage and coordinate with adults on important movements like getting ethnic studies into Providence schools," she said via text.

What she learned was "to listen and collaborate with people in my community to get the resources they need," instead of "waiting for someone to help us."

As its website says, Youth in Action equips teens "to name and address equity issues in their communities." Students meet weekly at 672 Broad St., spending the first year telling their stories and listening. Being heard, Mejia said, helps you know who you are.

Last year, the organization won \$20,000 in a national fundraising competition sponsored by the Gannett Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the publisher of USA Today, The Providence Journal and many newspapers across the country.

— *Donita Naylor*

Xaykham Rexford Khamsyvoravong

Age: 37

Hometown: Newport

Position: Managing director at CBRE Investment Management and head of asset operations for its U.S. Infrastructure Partners group.

I met Xaykham Rexford Khamsyvoravong in a legislative drafting and advocacy class at Roger Williams University School of Law. His final project — drafting legislation to enable the transfer of municipal assets to municipal pension funds — made a heady proposition. Khamsyvoravong, or Xay, presented his proposal to a mock committee with uncommon polish and aplomb. A classmate urged “keep an eye” on Xay — one day he’d be governor.

Since growing up in Barrington, the son of pediatrician Linda Rexford and Phoummy Khamsyvoravong, a refugee from Laos, Xay has earned dual degrees from Brown University: a BA in international relations and master’s in public affairs. He holds a law degree from Roger Williams, magna cum laude. He worked in his 20s as General Treasurer Frank T. Caprio’s deputy chief of staff, through the 2008 financial crisis.

He has melded his public-sector interests in a career in finance, through positions at Morgan Stanley, Webster Bank, and now at CBRE Investment Management, where he leads asset operations for its U.S. Infrastructure Partners group.

He serves as chairman of Providence Water, among the first utilities entirely powered by renewable energy in the region, and he sat on Cranston’s Investment Commission. He is a Grow Smart Rhode Island board member.

Khamsyvoravong uses phrases like “building skill sets” that seem to promise a political career ahead. He cultivates an uncanny interest in bedeviling — some would say boring

— issues such as public pension liabilities and infrastructure.

“We need to be much more thoughtful and more creative about how we are financing our infrastructure. Washington and Wall Street are not going to have the solutions,” he says.

What’s ahead for Khamsyvovavong?

“Would I like to be in public office someday? Absolutely,” he says.

— *Katie Mulvaney*

Saron Simon Mechale

Age: 26

Hometown: Providence

Position: Founder and president of goTeff Inc.

Teff is not yet a staple in Rhode Island the way it is in the Horn of Africa.

But Saron Simon Mechale of Providence hopes to raise the grain's Rhode Island profile, even if it's never thought of like coffee milk or pizza strips.

More: Ancient grain fuels modern dream for Providence entrepreneur

Mechale is the 26-year-old founder of goTeff, a food startup that makes teff into healthy crisps for snacks and salads.

The Brown University graduate didn't go to culinary school, but she knew she wanted to start a business and give back to her native Ethiopia. Making food from teff, the key protein-rich ingredient in the sourdough flatbread called injera, was a way to do it.

Earlier this year, the Rhode Island Commerce Corporation awarded goTeff a \$50,000 innovation grant so the company can enlist baking industry experts to help it scale up.

Mechale said the biggest challenge goTeff faces is finding a manufacturer that can work with teff, which doesn't behave like wheat or other grains.

"The current production is manual labor, so we are trying to figure out how do we automate it and fit into existing manufacturing capabilities," Mechale said.

Mechale is selling goTeff products at farmers markets and stores such as Plant City and Urban Greens Co-op.

As she looks to scale up, Mechale is introducing some spicier flavors and refocusing on one of goTeff's original markets, endurance runners.

"Running in Ethiopia has an amazing history, and part of the success story is this grain," Mechale said.

— *Patrick Anderson*

Night Jean Muhingabo

Age: 22

Hometown: Providence

Position: Rhode Island College student and advocate for refugees

Born and raised in a refugee camp in the Republic of Congo, Muhingabo had a dream: to get his family to the United States. He arrived in Providence with his mother and younger sister when he was 16, speaking French but no English.

But he was lucky. He had an English teacher, Brandy Moore, who stayed after school to help him and invited him to join the Refugee Dream Center, where he connected with other refugees struggling with the same cultural challenges.

Five years later, Muhingabo is now a senior at Rhode Island College, where he studies public administration and global information systems. An advocate, poet and activist, he volunteers at the Refugee Dream Center, where he leads the youth group.

He is also a global peace ambassador at the Global Peace Chain and serves on the board for the Refugee Dream Center and Brown University's Swearer Center for Public Service.

In 2018, he was selected by Plan International USA as a youth advisory board member, where he and other members plan the Youth Leadership Academy, a week-long advocacy training program for high school students.

Muhingabo is also a young champion for education at the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, one of only 60 young adults accepted worldwide. Here, he hopes to become an advocate for refugee youth, giving them a voice.

He is also planning on applying for an opening on the Providence School Board.

“Refugees are not powerless,” he said. “We are strong. I celebrate when I see positive changes in people. It’s great to see refugees like me follow their dreams.”

— *Linda Borg*

Tom Nichols

Age: 61

Hometown: Middletown

Position: Writer

After a long career as a Naval War College professor, Tom Nichols will soon retire from the Newport school. Already, he has opened a new chapter as a contributing writer for The Atlantic, penning the Peacefield column.

The transition is easy for Nichols, who will continue to teach at the Harvard Extension School. He is the author of the critically acclaimed books "Our Own Worst Enemy: The Assault from Within on Modern Democracy" and "The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters."

"It was an honor to teach U.S. military officers," Nichols says, "but my career with the Navy spanned the fall of the Soviet Union to the withdrawal from Afghanistan, and so I had already decided it was time to turn that responsibility over to a new generation of scholars.

"The Atlantic is itself an American institution, and moving from academia to journalism is not only exciting, but taking on a different kind of responsibility, especially at a time when I

think American democracy is the midst of a crisis."

Nichols will unquestionably find a large audience for his new work. He has more than a half-million followers on his Twitter account, @RadioFreeTom.

— *G. Wayne Miller*

Jeremy Peña

Age: 24

Hometown: Providence and Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

Position: Baseball player

The next baseball standout with Rhode Island ties to reach the major leagues could be debuting soon.

The ongoing lockout between the sport's owners and the Players Association might delay that. Their eventual new Collective Bargaining Agreement and a key free agent signing elsewhere are among the falling dominoes required to see Jeremy Peña suit up for the Houston Astros at the start of the 2022 campaign.

The former All-Stater at Classical High is the organization's number-four prospect, per MLB.com. Peña is a shortstop regarded as the premier defensive player among Houston's minor leaguers. Surgery on his left wrist cost Peña the majority of his 2021 season, but he returned in time to bash 10 home runs in just 30 games with Triple-A Sugar Land.

Peña flashed his significant physical tools with the Purple before a three-year college stint at Maine. He was selected 102nd overall in the 2018 draft, the earliest a member of the Black Bears had ever heard his name called. The son of former professional Gerónimo Peña — who played 378 games for St. Louis and Cleveland from 1990-96 — turned 24 in September.

How the Astros opt to shape their roster going forward will determine whether or not Peña receives an immediate opportunity next season. Carlos Correa is one of several elite shortstops in the market for a blockbuster contract, and his potential departure from Houston could prompt the club to look inward for a solution. Peña is likely to top that list.

Aura Fajardo Quintero

Age: 40

Hometown: Warwick

Position: Chocolatier and entrepreneur

In 2022, Aura's Chocolate Bar in Cranston will take its candy-making business from bean to bar. That's a very good thing.

"My head is buzzing with all the things I'll be able to do," said chef Aura Fajardo Quintero.

A native of Caracas, Venezuela, who graduated from Johnson & Wales University with a degree in pastry, she opened her Cranston shop at 250 East St. just a few months ago. It's the expansion of the business she began four years ago at Hope & Main, the culinary business incubator. Her bars are also in specialty stores in Rhode Island.

Why the switch from baking?

"It was out of a love for chocolate," she said.

A job at Hebert Candies in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, sealed her passion for becoming a chocolatier.

In October, she competed for and won \$8,000 from the Samuel Adams Brewing the American Dream program. That infusion of money paid for a large chocolate tempering machine that will allow her to make her handmade chocolates more rapidly. She's been using a small one meant for home use to melt her chocolate.

She has also ordered a machine that will crunch the cacao nibs she gets from Venezuela and the Dominican Republic. Processing the chocolate in her own shop means she can make sugar-free, dairy-free and other specialty chocolates.

Though her cacao comes from abroad, she infuses her chocolates with local ingredients, including Sons of Liberty whiskey, sea salt from Newport and honey from North Kingstown. In addition to truffles and bonbons, she makes milk, dark and white chocolate bars as well as coffee milk chocolates, another homage to her adopted state.

— *Gail Ciampa*

Jesse "The Tree" Ramos

Age: 29

Hometown: Providence

Position: Hip-hop artist

Ever since he released the stellar album "Space Tomatoes" in February 2020, Jesse The Tree has been on an upward trajectory. Ramos is incredibly consistent and prolific, and he has a knack for telling stories through his lyrics over vintage samples and killer beats.

His talents recently got him signed to underground hip-hop icon Sage Francis' label Strange Famous Records, and 2022 is shaping up to be a big year, with a highly anticipated new album on the way.

Reflecting on 2021, Ramos says: "This year was a wild and strange one for certain. With the pause in the world that the pandemic created, I took a long time off from shows and worked a lot on writing and recording and trying to grow musically. I was both fortunate and grateful to learn from and work with Sage Francis, Mopes, and more of the Strange Famous Records crew over the past year and a half and get signed to their label this fall. It's a label I grew up listening to, my older sisters were, and still are, big underground hip-hop heads and put me on to Sage's music when I was younger. It's a really nice feeling to work on something I love with people that I admire and respect deeply.

"I always daydreamed about something like this since I started making music, and it's been a cool ride," he adds. "Especially since I get to continue sharing my rhymes and thoughts with people I love, especially my family. My album with Strange Famous will be coming out in February of next year with some features from local artists and beyond. Until then I'll be finishing up school, playing some shows around town, and hanging out with my cats."

— *Rob Duguay*

Xavier Truss

Age: 20

Hometown: West Warwick

Position: Football player

There's no Rhode Island football player bigger than Xavier Truss.

Yes, Kwity Paye is a bigger name — right now. Paye, the former Bishop Hendricken All-Stater, was drafted by the Indianapolis Colts last spring and is having a productive rookie season.

But Truss is 6 feet, 7 inches and 330 pounds, so he has several inches and pounds on his former high school teammate — but now he's got a chance to do something neither Paye nor any Rhode Islander in recent memory has done.

Truss took his talents to the University of Georgia and is more than a name on the roster. A redshirt sophomore, Truss has become a contributing member of the Bulldogs' offensive line and will be out there when they play Michigan in the College Football Playoffs.

If this sounds like a big deal, it is. It's hard to find a Rhode Islander who's been this close to winning the national championship. Paye was terrific at Michigan, but the Wolverines couldn't beat Ohio State. Joseph Putu played for some good but not great Florida teams. Will Blackmon has a Super Bowl ring, but his Boston College teams were never title contenders.

Former La Salle All-Stater Liam Coen, now the offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach at the University of Kentucky, led the University of Massachusetts to the FCS title game in 2006, but that's not the title game most college football fans like to talk about.

Truss' rise on the Bulldogs' line is breaking down just like he told The Providence Journal prior to his senior year at Hendricken. He redshirted in 2019, played six of 10 games in 2020 and started in the Peach Bowl before blossoming this season, playing all 13 games.

He'll be on the field for the game against Michigan, and if Georgia can win, Truss will be back out there against either Alabama or Cincinnati.

That's a big deal for any player. And a bigger deal when you're a kid from Rhode Island — who will have the entire state rooting him on.

— *Eric Rueb*