

FREE

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2002

Volume 1, Issue 85

Santa Monica Daily Press

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Oscar Franco, 17, plays with turntables at the newly opened Pico Youth and Family Center located on the corner of Ninth Street and Pico Boulevard.

Andrew H. Fixmer/ Daily Press

New youth center aims to keep kids off streets

BY ANDREW H. FIXMER
Daily Press Staff Writer

This isn't your typical youth center. Enter the reception area of the newly opened Pico Youth and Family Center and feel a distinctly coffeehouse flavor.

Travel down the hallway covered in intricate graffiti art — the kind typically found on the side of freeways — and find a small enclave with a row of computer stations.

Opposite the computers is a large screen television, a black leather couch and a high-end video game system.

A Che Guevara banner watches over it all.

At the end of the hallway, another room contains the best technology has to offer when it comes to music recording. Turntables, a mixing station, keyboards and a CD-burner are all top of the line instruments used in recording hip-hop.

"All this is designed to help these kids express their artistic talents," said Oscar de la Torre, the center's founder and director.

But mainly the center is designed to give kids from the Pico neighborhood a place to hang out other than the streets, where they can get caught in the crossfire of gangs and the illegal drug trade.

That's exactly what happened in 1998 when four teenagers were killed in separate incidents throughout the neighborhood. The homicides sparked a city-wide movement

that eventually brought about the creation of the youth center.

"All this is designed to help these kids express their artistic talents ...Young people needed a space of their own."

— OSCAR DE LA TORRE
Youth center director

"Young people needed a space of their own," said de la Torre, 30. "The Promenade had become too expensive for young people. They needed a place to congregate."

The Pico neighborhood covers about eight square blocks just north of the Santa Monica Freeway to Pico Boulevard, and east to the city limits.

While planning the center, neighborhood kids said they wanted a place with a distinct hip-hop flavor. According to Torre, they

See CENTER, page 3

City, neighbor take the fun out of playhouse

Contradictory approvals at heart of lawsuit

BY CAROLYN SACKARIASON
Daily Press Staff Writer

(Editor's note: This is the second story in a series examining a lawsuit filed by a Santa Monica family over their son's playhouse. The first installment ran Monday.)

When City Hall changes its mind and a building approval becomes a denial, one couple decided it was time to call their lawyer.

David and Beth Levy made the call after they built a playhouse for their 6-year-old son, Jacob.

Now it's the center of the latest political —

and legal — storm in town.

The Levys thought they were being considerate neighbors when they were planning the playhouse. They brought the plans to their backyard neighbor, Tunde Garai, who wasn't happy with them. So, the Levys cut its size in half, eliminated windows facing her home, lowered the ceiling height and let Garai pick the color. After the changes, Garai approved.

So did the city's building department. "We did everything they told us to do," said David Levy, adding he spent an extra \$4,000 appeasing the city and Garai.

Everything was fine until Garai changed her mind and so did the city.

As the playhouse was being built, Garai didn't like what she saw. She complained, not to the Levys, but to then Mayor Ken Genser.

See PLAYHOUSE, page 3

Santa Monica's second homicide gang-related

By Daily Press staff

A gang-related shooting early Sunday morning in a parking lot just north of the Santa Monica Pier resulted in the city's second homicide of the year, police said.

A Santa Monica Police officer in the parking lot at 12:18 a.m. heard gunshots and saw several men fleeing the area, said Lt. Frank Fabrega, a police department spokesman.

The officer called for back-up, then pursued one of the suspects on foot northbound through the lot. That man and two others were caught by police and identified by witnesses as those involved in the shooting, Fabrega said.

A handgun and a knife were found after a search of the lot, police said.

The victim, who was not identified, was taken to a local hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

Arrested for murder were Rafael Ahumada, 25, of Van Nuys, Edwardo Solis, 25, of Canoga Park and an unidentified 17-year-old. Ahumada and Solis were booked into the Santa Monica County Jail, while the 17-year-old was taken to Eastlake Juvenile Hall.

Police suspect all three men are affiliated with a gang from outside the Santa Monica area.

The city's first homicide of the year occurred two weeks ago when a 46-year-old Lithuanian immigrant bludgeoned his 77-year-old father to death in their two-bedroom apartment.

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★★★★★-Dynamic ★★★★★-Positive ★★★-Average ★★-So-so ★-Difficult



ARIES (March 21-April 19)

★★★ Unexpected developments could jolt your financial structure. You might feel the need to intervene in someone's problem. Don't let this person think that you don't have a basic interest here. Be clear about feelings as well. Tonight: You pay!



TAURUS (April 20-May 20)

★★★★ At times, your strong personality overwhelms those around you. In fact, a boss seems destined to make anything you say wrong. Don't get into a power struggle or disagreement, as someone is likely to rip the rug right out from under you. Tonight: Make a must appearance.



GEMINI (May 21-June 20)

★★ Others touch base, as they need and want your feedback. You might be more than pleased with what you are hearing and someone's reaction. Keep your own counsel right now. As you are a talkative sign, saying less is important. Tonight: Do your thing.



CANCER (June 21-July 22)

★★★★ Keep your long-term objective and don't lose sight of what you want and need. A partner or someone you depend on acts like a boomerang, reversing directions. You might want to run, but you're going to have to deal with this person in any case. Don't kid yourself. Tonight: Hook up with your friends.



LEO (July 23-Aug. 22)

★★★★ Continue to maintain a high level of control over your work and day-to-day dealings. Someone starts leading a revolution. Let it go. You've known for a while that this person is not trustworthy. Hopefully, you've protected yourself. Tonight: Work late.



VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)

★★★★ Upset surrounds the best laid plans. As you head into work, you might have an inkling of what lies ahead. Detach and take it easy. Nothing is worth the angst or the problems. Listen to someone's opinions graciously. Tonight: Relax, watching a good movie.



LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 22)

★★★★ Your intentions are excellent. When dealing with someone individually, you feel great. Think in terms of success and change. You gain because of your ability to detach from an immediate crisis. Don't allow a child or loved one to pull you in. Tonight: Togetherness works.



SCORPIO (Oct. 23-Nov. 21)

★★★★ Others clearly have expectations and their own agendas. You're not going to be able to change what they want. Uproar surrounds intimates and/or family. You're not going to change anyone. All you can do is let go of an issue. Tonight: Accept someone's invitation.



SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22-Dec. 21)

★★★ Deal with work by yourself if you can. Communication runs off-kilter and could even shock you! Do whatever you can on your own. Don't count on others. Zoom in on what you want, as long as you're not dependent on someone's reaction. Tonight: Play away.



CAPRICORN (Dec. 22-Jan. 19)

★★★ Dig into your imagination for answers. You might be surprised by what you come across. Lighten up about a money matter. You are going to have to find a solution either way. You might as well relax. Laughter surrounds a friendship. Tonight: Be with the one you love.



AQUARIUS (Jan. 20-Feb. 18)

★★ Though you want to build security, your innate wildness sabotages your best intentions. You could cause problems within a domestic relationship. On a broader scale, you could discover that you could mess up an investment. Tonight: Happy at home.



PISCES (Feb. 19-March 20)

★★★★ Zoom in on what you want. Discussions could reveal far more than you would like to know. In fact, you could be a bit shocked by what someone shares. Stay on top of conversations. Curb an uncomfortable discussion, if need be. Tonight: At your favorite spot.



WEATHER

Today ...	AM Clouds/PM Sun	High—64°F	Low—50°F
Tomorrow ...	Partly Cloudy	High—70°F	Low—52°F
Thursday ...	Sunny	High—74°F	Low—54°F



QUOTE of the DAY

“Fall is my favorite season in Los Angeles, watching the birds change color and fall from the trees.”

— David Letterman

Santa Monica Daily Press

Published Monday through Saturday

Phone: 310.458.PRESS(7737) • Fax: 310.576.9913

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LOCAL



Child's structure, penthouse or playhouse?

PLAYHOUSE, from page 1

Genser said he passed the complaint on to Planning Director Suzanne Frick. Within a month, Frick reversed building officials' stance that the playhouse was one story. According to her and other senior planning officials, the playhouse had added a second floor — the open area underneath it.

Zoning officer Mike Gruett, who repeatedly told the Levys the playhouse conformed to all city laws, was forced to tell the Levys their son's elevated hideaway was now illegal — a decision he disagreed with so much that he quit.

A notice of violation was issued several months later. After spending \$11,000, the Levys had to choose between tearing down the playhouse, facing criminal charges, or suing City Hall.

The Levys, who live in a Santa Monica east side neighborhood, sued the city in September of 2000, asking for a public forum to argue their case against the city's reversal. The current law provides no appeals process. The suit also seeks to make the playhouse legal, with no restrictions.

The city had already offered to allow the playhouse as a "non-conforming use," under which the city might change its mind again if someone complained.

Genser e-mailed Frick twice raising the question of whether a one-story building, elevated on posts, qualifies as a two story structure. Such a distinction is critical in the zoning code, and it apparently triggered the city to change its mind.

At the center of the suit is Levys' claim that when Genser sent his e-mails, he was pressuring city staff to change the original approval.



File Photo

Six-year-old Jacob Levy's controversial playhouse is at the heart of a lawsuit filed against the city by his father.

"When a council person even makes a suggestion, you jump," said the Levys' attorney, Chris Harding. "Suggestions are read as requests and that is what happened to the Levys. We never alleged (Ken Genser) ordered it, he advocated it."

But city officials have a different interpretation of the e-mails' content.

"The e-mails speak for themselves," said deputy city attorney Cara Silver. "He was forwarding a citizen complaint."

Genser's first e-mail, March 15, 2000, a day before the city's building officer deemed the playhouse legal, states

"the structure is two stories in height (one story on tall posts) ..."

"He came up with the two-story theory," Harding said.

Genser argues he was just passing on the complaint and never advocated anything. He did ask several questions of Frick regarding whether the building was being constructed without permits.

After Garai got no response from city officials on her complaints, she went to Genser again. He e-mailed Frick on April 2, 2000, in which he wrote, "Finally, I wonder if the space under the first floor should be considered a story (I haven't found a citation to support this — yet)."

Within two weeks, Levy was notified that everything he had been told by numerous city officials for the past four months was wrong. After Garai's complaint, the city decided the space below the elevated floor is a basement, even though it isn't enclosed and lacks a floor.

"The city has not backed away from its position and they can't get out," Levy said. "Technically, an elevated dog house would be two stories and would be a violation."

"It's just preposterous, I mean it's a playhouse," he added. "I always had heard it was the People's Republic of Santa Monica but I thought that usually meant it was for the common person."

Levy's key goal is that a process be set up so any person who is served a notice of violation gets a public hearing.

"Nobody asked me formally what my side of the story was," he said. "I would like there to be a formal process and reduce the likelihood of this happening to anyone else."

Despite that the two sides have been attempting to settle the suit for months, the case continues to heat up. A judge will hear the newest arguments from both sides Feb. 25.

Center deters gang activity

CENTER, from page 1

wanted somewhere they wouldn't get in trouble for painting on walls or playing loud music.

"There was a distinct feeling of helplessness, of powerlessness among these kids," he said. "They felt their voice didn't matter."

One teen hanging out at the center last Friday seemed to appreciate the new space.

"Instead of chilling on the streets, it's better to be inside with all the music and the video games," said Heriberto Gomez, Jr., 19. "If I didn't have this place, I know I would be out there with my friends getting into trouble."

Gang activity in the Pico neighborhood has been on the rise lately. In the last three

months there have been three recent shootings on the city's east side, none of which have been fatal.

The neighborhood has been embroiled for years in a turf war largely between two gangs — the Graveyard Crips and the Santa Monica 17th Street gang.

The tension appears to be not only racially motivated between the two groups — one black, the other Latino — but also drug related. Drug dealing on street corners along Delaware Avenue has been a problem for years, residents say.

"There's trouble everywhere right now," said Oscar Franco, 17. "It's really hot on the streets right now."

Others at the center last Friday said the increased gang

activity reinforced the need for the center.

"That's just life," said Miguel Martin. "I can't do anything about it but stay away from it all and keep in here."

Besides protecting the neighborhood kids, de la Torre — who grew up on 17th Street and went to Santa Monica High School — wants to help mobilize them too.

"We want to be able to put pressure on the city council to get the services we need," said Torre. "It's not their money, it's the people's money and it should be used to help us."

The center, located on the corner of Pico Boulevard and Ninth Street, still needs more computers and technicians to



Andrew H. Fixmer/Daily Press

Graffiti art blankets the walls of the newly opened Pico Youth and Family Center. Neighborhood kids are allowed to spray paint the walls instead of illegally tagging public property.

teach the kids how to use all the new equipment, especially the turntables and keyboards. If you would like to help, please contact the Pico Youth and Family Center at (310) 396-7101.

Double fines for speeders

By The Associated Press

BRENTWOOD — Officials along Highway 4 in eastern Contra Costa County hope doubled fines will slow speeders to 55 mph after a spate of deaths along the heavily traveled road.

Highway 4 narrows to two lanes in portions between Brentwood and San Joaquin County line. Since 1998, seven people have died and 165 others have been injured in collisions along the seven-mile stretch.

"We're just hoping that the double-fine zone gets people to drive 55," said firefighter David Piepho, president of the Discovery Bay Town Council.

Piepho, 39, was nearly killed in September while driving to work at Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory. He was hit by a speeding sport utility vehicle.

Earlier this month, Contra Costa supervisors backed legislation to impose the higher fines proposed by state Sen. Tom Torlakson, D-Antioch.

Traffic along the stretch has nearly doubled in the past decade to 21,000 vehicles daily. Highway 4 also is used by a growing number of commercial trucks, and a thick morning fog sometimes blankets the roadway.

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STATE

John Waters' 'Shock Value' monologue lives up to name

By The Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Filmmaker John Waters says there are still some movies he'd like to make: "Holy Anorexia" — a film about the eating disorders of saints — and anything starring Don Knotts.

The self-described "filth editor" made the comments to an audience in Los Angeles while performing his standup routine "Shock Value."

He also told the crowd Friday how in 1988 he "accidentally made a family movie" — "Hairspray," which starred then-unknown actress and present-day talk-show host Ricki Lake.

"I remember the day I got a PG rating. I held my head in shame," Waters said.

Waters, 56, gained a following in 1972 with the cult classic "Pink Flamingos," which had characters competing for the title of world's filthiest person.

"If I discovered the cure for cancer tomorrow, 'Pink Flamingos' would still be ahead of that in my obituary," Waters quipped.

His other films include "Cry-Baby" starring Johnny Depp and Patty Hearst, "Serial Mom" with Kathleen Turner, and his most recent release, "Cecil B. Demented," starring Melanie Griffith as a fading star who is kidnapped by guerrilla filmmakers.

Waters ended his show by answering audience questions, including "Who would play you in a biopic?" ("Steve Buscemi in my youth, and Don Knotts in my autumn.")

Possible winner comes forward in record lottery

BY DAISY NGUYEN

Associated Press Writer

LOS ANGELES — A Half Moon Bay retailer said Monday he had helped a man validate one of three winning tickets in the biggest single-state jackpot in history.

Joey Blackwell, 39, store director of the Albertson's in Half Moon Bay, said the man walked into the store at 9:30 a.m. and calmly identified himself as a winner in Saturday's drawing for \$193 million.

"We're all elated. This is a small town, so everyone is just so happy with the news."

— **JOEY BLACKWELL**
Albertson's store director

"He smiled and looked refreshed, like he didn't lose a lot of sleep," Blackwell said.

The man's name was withheld because lottery officials have yet to verify the claim.

About seven people in the store quickly congratulated the man, who store employees recognized as a regular customer in his 50s. He stayed only long enough to validate his ticket and pick up a claim form.

"He didn't create a big hoopla," Blackwell said. "We're all elated. This is a small town, so everyone is just so happy

with the news."

The Presidents Day holiday means the winners of Saturday's SuperLotto Plus drawing will have to wait until Tuesday to redeem their tickets with lottery officials, said California Lottery spokeswoman Cathy Doyle Johnston.

Blackwell said he ran the man's ticket through a special scanner that showed it had all six of the winning numbers. When it was processed, the ticket read, "Prize exceeds cash limit," he said.

The ticket provided instructions on how and where to file a claim form.

Lottery officials interview those who file claim forms to determine whether they bought the ticket and if anyone else should share the prize.

The two other winning tickets were bought at 7-Eleven stores in Orange and Montebello. Winners had not made appearances at those stores by early Monday afternoon.

The buying frenzy for a shot at the \$193 million jackpot peaked Saturday night, when hopefuls snapped up a record \$6 million worth of tickets an hour.

Owners of the three lucky stores will receive \$321,666 each for selling the winning tickets. The stores have been buzzing with excitement and well-wishers since Sunday morning.

The \$193 million sum was the largest single-state U.S. jackpot, and the fifth-largest including multistate games, the California Lottery said. The biggest lottery payout in U.S. history was \$363 million in May 2000 for the multistate Powerball game.

The previous record jackpot in California was \$141 million on June 23, 2001, won by Al Castellano of San Jose.



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Peru high court upholds terrorism sentence against American Lori Berenson

BY CRAIG MAURO
Associated Press Writer

LIMA, Peru — Peru's highest court has upheld a 20-year prison sentence against American Lori Berenson for collaborating with leftist rebels in a thwarted plot to seize Congress, the presiding justice said Monday. The ruling was her last option for appeal under Peruvian law.

Berenson, 32, who has already been imprisoned for six years, must now serve out the sentence that ends in 2015 unless she's pardoned by Peru's president.

Berenson condemned the decision and said she was joining hundreds of jailed guerrillas in a hunger strike to protest prison conditions and Peru's anti-terrorism laws.

She was convicted in June of terrorist collaboration in the failed bid by the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement to take over Peru's Congress in 1995, but was acquitted of being a member of the rebel group.

It was the New York native's second terrorism conviction. She was first convicted of the crime in 1996 by a military tribunal and sentenced to life in prison.

In that trial, the court ruled that Berenson was a rebel leader and aided guerrillas by renting a house that served as their hide-out and posing as a journalist to enter Congress to gather intelligence. Berenson denied the charges and said she didn't know her housemates were rebels.

The life sentence was overturned in August 2000 and a new trial ordered after years of pressure from the United States.

The Supreme Court was Berenson's final avenue of appeal. Her lawyer said he will now seek a pardon from Peru's president, Alejandro Toledo.

Her parents, Mark and Rhoda Berenson of New York, have already urged Toledo to grant such a pardon. Peruvian officials had declined to comment on a pardon as long as the case was in the courts. There was no official reaction to Monday's announcement.

Rhoda Berenson said that she will also ask the Inter American Commission on Human Rights, part of the Organization of American States, to step up its review of her daughter's case. The case could eventually reach the OAS court, which has the power to overturn her conviction. As a member state of the court, Peru is obliged to adhere

to the tribunal's rulings.

Presiding Supreme Court judge Guillermo Cabala announced the decision Monday. He said a panel of five judges that oversees criminal appeals reached its verdict last week, but held off releasing it until Monday.

Cabala said that four of the judges voted to uphold the 20-year sentence. Cabala voted to reduce the sentence to 15 years.

Berenson, a former Massachusetts Institute of Technology student, considers herself a political prisoner and says authorities unfairly portrayed her concern for social justice as a terrorist agenda.

She condemned the Supreme Court's decision in a statement released by her parents, who have spoken regularly with their daughter by telephone from New York.

"This judicial process was a farce from its beginning to its end. I am innocent of the charges," Berenson said in the statement.

Berenson's parents said they will appeal to both Toledo and President Bush for her release.

"We know that Lori is innocent, and we remain optimistic that she will be released. We call upon President George W. Bush to right this wrong and to

Car bomb chaos



Pier Paolo Cito/Associated Press

Police inspectors and fire and rescue service personnel work at the scene where an attacker set off a bomb in a car near Jerusalem on Monday. The attacker killed himself and a police officer who stopped the vehicle.

secure Lori's release," the Berensons said in the statement.

The State Department had no immediate comment.

Bush will visit Peru on March 23 to meet with Toledo to discuss trade and combating drug trafficking and terrorism. Peruvian

Foreign Minister Diego Garcia Sayan last week did not rule out that the two presidents could discuss Berenson's case.

Bush urged Toledo during a meeting in Washington last June to consider humanitarian concerns in Berenson's case.

Corpse search continues in northwest Georgia

BY BILL POOVEY
Associated Press Writer

NOBLE, Ga. — Grim-faced investigators on Monday unearthed dozens more corpses scattered around a northwest Georgia crematory, finding skeletons sealed in vaults and bodies that had been dragged into a shed. The count rose to 139.

Forensics teams said they had identified 27 bodies, and agents warned they expected to find many more. "I can't even begin to guess" what the total will be, said Dr. Kris Sperry, the state's chief medical examiner.

Ray Brent Marsh, operator of Tri-State Crematory in this rural town 20 miles south of Chattanooga, Tenn., was arrested for a second time and authorities filed 11 new theft-by-deception charges against him, bringing the total to 16.

Marsh, 28, had been arrested Saturday and was released from jail Sunday on \$25,000 bond. He was back in Walker County jail Monday. A bond hearing had not been scheduled because Marsh does not have an attorney, chief magistrate Jerry Day said.

Calls to Marsh's home and the crematory went unanswered Monday; voicemail boxes at both numbers were full.

As investigators combed the grounds, grief-stricken families arrived with urns of ashes, wondering whether loved ones they thought had been cremated were instead among the corpses.

Marlene Elsass arrived Monday from her home in Birchwood, Tenn., about 50 miles from Noble, determined to find out whether the urn she buried more than a year ago actually contained the ashes of her husband, Richard.

"We thought we had put my husband to rest," said Elsass, who paid a funeral home \$1,363 to cremate and

bury her husband's remains.

Forensics experts studied 51 urns, and said nine likely contained powdered cement rather than human remains, Sperry said. The other 42 appeared to be human remains, but it was not clear whose, he said.

"By the hour, this is getting bigger and bigger and bigger," the medical examiner said. "That's the toughest part. We do not know, and may never find out, the names of many of these people."

Walker County officials said they were calling in federal disaster mortuary teams to help erect a mass morgue to sort the bodies. More than 400 people were involved in the investigation.

The new body count of 139 was up from 97 a day earlier. The new finds came after investigators opened four vaults hidden in a shed and found them full of bodies.

"The skeletons are all intermingled together," Sperry said.

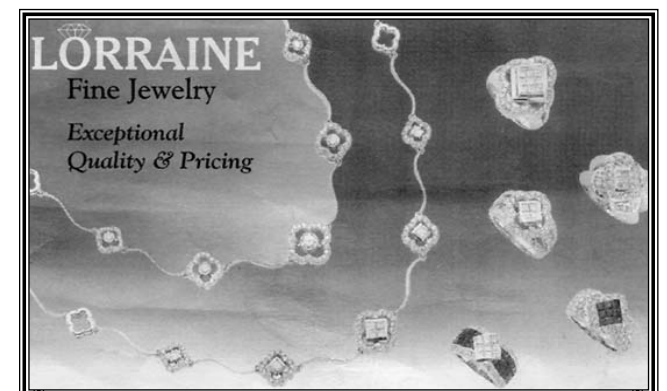
The bodies have been discovered in varying conditions, some estimated to be weeks old and some decayed for more than a decade. Handlers had been "just merely dragging them out there or dropping them out there," Walker County Sheriff Steve Wilson said.

As the body count rose, agents said they had begun examining the records of Marsh and his parents, Ray and Clara Marsh, who turned the business over to their son in 1996. The elder Marshes have not been charged. But authorities said it was clear that bodies were being dumped before the son took over.

"As far as the criminal investigation goes, we have to question everybody who was involved in the operation and that's being done," said Georgia Bureau of Investigation spokesman John Bankhead.

In almost all cases, Tri-State Crematory had picked up the bodies from funeral homes and delivered ashes later

in return, said Walker County coroner Dewayne Wilson, who is not related to the sheriff.



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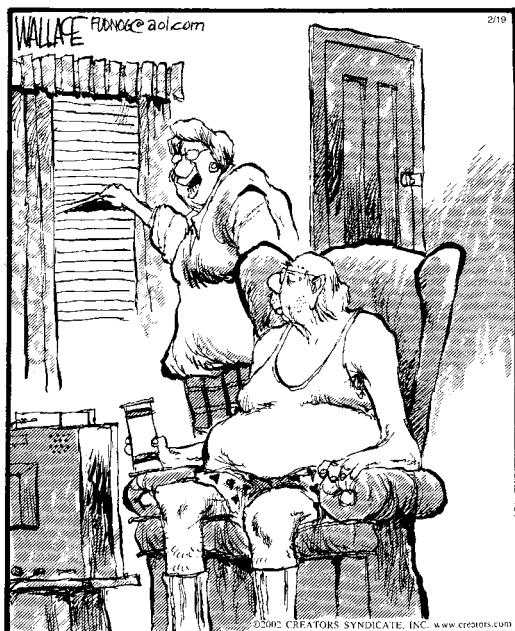
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Yesterday's answer

- ACROSS**
- 1 Infants
6 Pancake's cousin
11 Sprightly
12 Kick back
13 Suffering major losses
15 Genesis name
16 Pal of Frodo
17 Oolong, e.g.
18 Tyrants
20 Under the weather
21 Before, in poetry
22 Golf goal
23 Aerosol output
26 Talking birds
27 Miseries
28 Cut off
29 Spreading tree
30 Irish county
34 Pasture
35 Finish
36 Exploit
37 Getting lost
40 Business bigwigs
41 Modern surgery tool
- DOWN**
- 42 View anew
43 Abrasive stuff
1 Restrained
2 Spiny plant
3 Two-wheelers
4 Actor Wallach
5 Kind of deprivation
6 Studies intensely
7 Yank's foe
8 Great joy
9 Kneecap
10 Breathes out
14 Airport area
19 Casserole veggies
22 Publicity
23 Suffer from the heat
24 Old weapon
25 Many modern movies
26 Carter's veep
28 Drawn out
30 Thick
31 Pretext
32 Inquisitive one
33 Cautious
38 Rink surface
39 Deli choice

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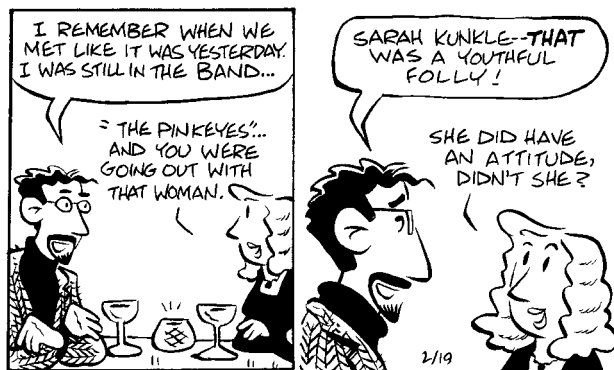
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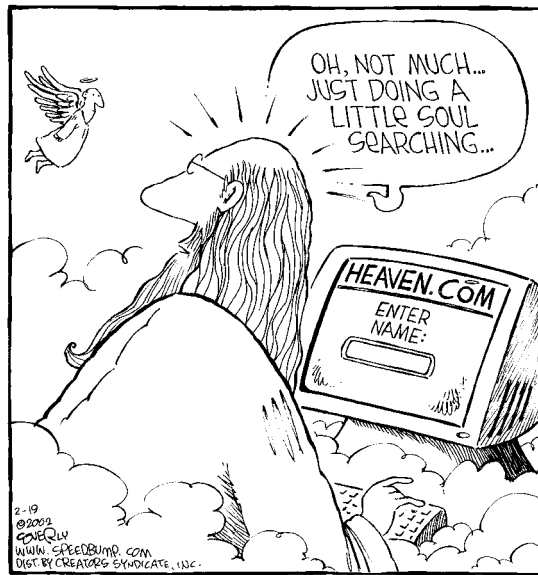
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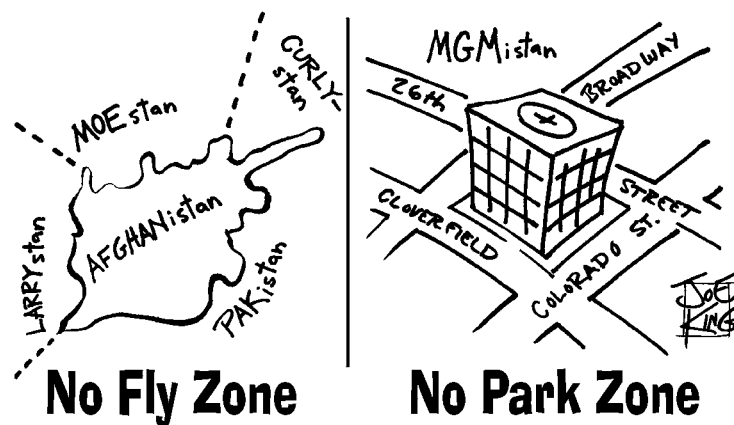
by Chuck Shepard

Convict does better defending himself

In January, murder defendant Ernest Spann, 35, an 11th-grade dropout serving as his own lawyer (dressed throughout the trial in his prison uniform because he is serving a 10-year sentence on drug charges), embarrassed a prosecutor by convincing a jury in Tampa, Fla., to acquit him in less than three hours of deliberation. At an earlier trial, Spann (with the help of a public defender) earned a hung jury, but he told the judge this time that he thought he could do better by himself.

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BACK PAGE

ODDS & ENDS

Poor groom a groom no more

By The Associated Press

BANGKOK, Thailand — A cash-strapped Thai groom spent his wedding night in jail after allegedly faking a holdup to duck out on the marriage bill.

Somsak Sowong, 26, left the wedding ceremony at the Bangkok home of his bride, Saengdaun Jonburom, 31, before it was time to exchange rings, saying he had to return home to collect \$1,775 and a gold necklace to offer as dowry.

About 30 minutes later police were informed that Somsak had been found unconscious in a bush nearby, police Lt. Chakawan Aranawat told The Associated Press on Monday.

Somsak claimed a man had hit him over the head with a gun, tied his hands with his necktie and stole the cash and necklace.

Police were suspicious about the story because Somsak did not appear to be injured.

After a long interrogation, the suspect admitted that he had concocted the robbery to cover up the fact that he didn't have the money to pay the dowry or the \$670 cost of the wedding party, Chakawan said. It was not clear who had tied Somsak's hands.

Somsak could face up to three years in prison for falsely reporting a crime. His bride-to-be has called off the marriage.

Teen business plan unrewarded

By The Associated Press

WEST CHESTER, Pa. — Usually, when teen-agers show initiative and attentiveness in business, they're rewarded. Not this time.

Two 17-year-old boys are accused of operating a large-scale speakeasy and gambling hall in a barn, using money they saved from summer landscaping work to finance the start-up costs.

"It looks like it was an organized operation that was noto-

rious for attracting a lot of local teen-agers," Chester County District Attorney Joseph Carroll said of the business that was run for a few months about 25 miles west of Philadelphia.

Township police raided the barn in December following a lengthy investigation, but the boys were not charged until Friday. Authorities did not release their names because they are minors.

Police Chief John DeMarco said officers seized more than 100 bottles of liquor, containers of beer including a keg, gambling devices and tobacco products.

Police found a fully operational wet bar with a sink and a price list displaying the cost of drinks, DeMarco said. The large gambling area had tables and chairs where multiple games could be played.

The hillside barn had been refurbished to make the operation less conspicuous, police said.

"They had gone to extraordinary measures to make sure no light or sound comes out," DeMarco said. He said the walls had been soundproofed and the windows had been covered.

Toilet talented cats need a job

By The Associated Press

WHITEWATER, Wis. — Two mischievous cats are driving up the water bill for one area couple.

Boots and Bandit, who are 1 1/2-years-old, have learned to flush the toilet and turn off the lights, said their owners Russ and Sandy Asbury.

"I've had cats all of my life," Russ Asbury said. "But these cats are different than any of the others."

The couple discovered the cats unusual talents last winter, unexpectedly.

The two were at home, Sandy Asbury in the kitchen, her husband in the living room, when they heard an unmistakable noise coming from the bathroom: a toilet flush.

"My eyes got as big as saucers. At first, I didn't know if we had ghosts or what," Russ Asbury said. "I couldn't even

imagine who or what was flushing the toilet."

Sandy, 46, checked it out and caught Boots preparing to do it again. Since then, Bandit has also become proficient at toilet flushing.

"We have to shut the bathroom door when we go to bed. Otherwise, one or the other of the cats are in there flushing away all night," Russ Asbury said.

The cats have even started flushing while someone is using the toilet, Russ Asbury said. And they've both become skilled at unrolling the toilet paper and turning the bathroom light on and off, Russ Asbury said.

"Between the water and sewer bills and cost for toilet paper, the cats are going to have to get a job," Russ Asbury joked.

Cops on horseback nab speeders

By The Associated Press

FAYETTEVILLE, N.C. — Police have managed to slow a lot of speeders zipping through town — and they're doing it without much horsepower.

Fayetteville Police Officers Rick Mulcahy and Alan Sanford have been clocking cars from horseback.

Mulcahy and Sanford have used radar guns from horses since last year. A police officer clocking speed from horseback surprises most people, they said last week.

Mulcahy recently pointed his radar gun at a black pickup truck and it registered 57 mph in a 45 mph zone. A stop was in order, so Mulcahy spurred John, his brown quarter horse, to the middle of Clinton Road and held up his hand.

The driver of the truck pulled over and Mulcahy and John trotted over to take the man's driver's license and registration. Mulcahy parked John behind the man's truck to write the ticket.

A woman in the passenger seat seemed oblivious to being stopped by a horse and complained about being singled-out when she said others were speeding, too.

"Ma'am, I can only stop one person at a time," Mulcahy replied.

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