

FREE

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Santa Monica Daily Press

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Girl connected to Maran murder appears in court

BY CAROLYN SACKARIASON
Daily Press Staff Writer

The 15-year-old charged in connection to the murder of Santa Monica teenager Deanna Maran appeared in court for the first time Friday.

A Brentwood teenager, half-sister of the prime suspect, faces charges of battery in the Nov. 17 incident, which has attracted national attention.

Friday was the first time Maran's parents, Ilja and Harriet, laid eyes on the teenager and her mother, Angelique Bernstein.

No press or outsiders were allowed in the Inglewood courtroom for the proceedings, and the Maran parents were not allowed to speak to the judge except to state their names for the record. No contact was made between the two families. However, the Marans felt they received the cold shoulder from Bernstein.

"I didn't like what I saw," said Ilja Maran. "I didn't see remorseful people."

The 15-year-old, whose name is being withheld because she is a minor, was allegedly involved in Maran's murder. She allegedly kicked Maran while her

half-sister, Katrina Sarkissian, allegedly stabbed her at a party in an upscale Westwood neighborhood.

According to eyewitnesses in press reports, dozens of people watched while the girls fought and older, college students prevented anyone from rescuing Maran in an attempt to watch the "cat fight."

Sarkissian died while in police custody on Nov. 18 — the day after the murder. The Los Angeles Coroner's Office ruled in February that she overdosed on anti-depressants.

Maran was fatally stabbed about an hour after she found the 15-year-old girl damaging property at the home where the party was held, according to friends. Maran told her to stop and the girls began shoving each other. Party goers broke up the fight but another ensued after Sarkissian and her friends showed up. Maran allegedly was attacked in front of the home, where a teenage boy she didn't

know had hosted the party. Apparently, his parents were out of town.

After months of investigation by the Los Angeles Police Department, the district attorney's office charged the 15-year-old girl with one count of battery, a misdemeanor. The DA's office also charged her with a felony — making a terrorist threat unrelated to the case. Apparently the girl had threatened someone over the Internet months after the party.

The girl is expected in court again May 31 for a pre-trial hearing.

The Maran parents got little satisfaction from Friday's proceedings, which was a standard arraignment — the first appearance before a judge.

Harriet Maran said the girl suspect glanced at her and Ilja while in the courtroom, but the girl's mother, Angelique Bernstein, stared directly at her.

"There was no shame," Harriet Maran

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Carolyn Sackariason/Daily Press
Harriet Maran, right, and her husband Ilja, far left, talk to the press and their attorney, Tony Glassman, outside the Inglewood Courthouse Friday.

Police cut back patrols in Pico neighborhood

Operation continues with community outreach and helicopter patrols

BY ANDREW H. FIXMER
Daily Press Staff Writer

The Santa Monica Police Department announced Friday it is withdrawing the extra patrols assigned to a troubled east-side neighborhood.

The increased patrols were instituted almost two months ago as a crack down

on gang-related shootings concentrated in the Pico neighborhood. The operation was later expanded to increased bicycle patrols and fly-overs from a Hawthorne Police Department helicopter.

Since the extra deployment of officers, crime has dipped substantially in the neighborhood and except for one early incident, there have been no further shootings.

"There has been a significant change in activity in the Pico neighborhood," said SMPD spokesman Lt. PJ Guido. "It's

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Possible decoy deployed in juvenile's high-profile case

BY CAROLYN SACKARIASON
Daily Press Staff Writer

The family of a teenage girl charged in connection with the murder of 15-year-old Deanna Maran of Santa Monica may have had a double at Friday's court proceedings in the case.

The presence of a double, used as a decoy, may have been an attempt to deflect attention from the growing national interest in the story from media outlets like the New York Times, Dateline NBC and ABC's Good Morning America.

It also may have been an attempt to protect the defendant's identity.

While the media was stationed outside the Inglewood Juvenile Courthouse Friday morning, the mother of the 15-year-old facing one count of battery in connection with Maran's Nov. 17 murder, walked into the building with an unidentified girl believed to be her daughter, the defendant.

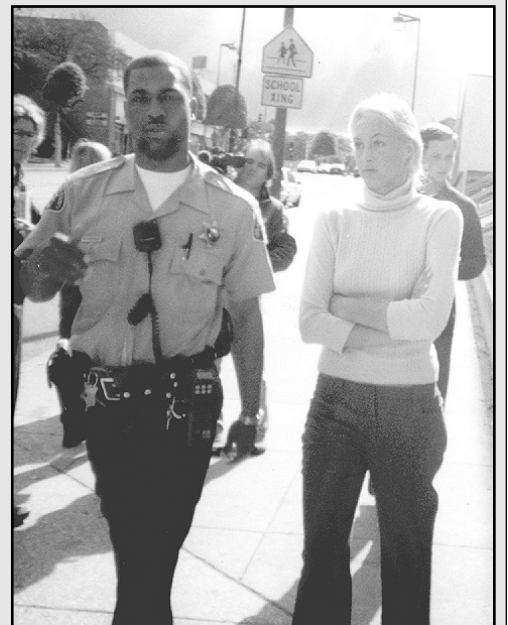
However, Maran's parents, who were in the courtroom, said the girl accompanied by Angelique Bernstein and an attorney, wasn't the defendant — though she looked almost like her. They both wore long, blonde hair in a braid, were dressed alike and were similar in build, the Marans noted.

The girl who had entered the building with Bernstein and the attorney exited

alone, causing the media to focus on her for filming and photographs.

An unidentified woman scolded the media earlier for taking photographs of the girl who she described as her daughter. She was nowhere to be found when the possible decoy left the building

See DECOY, page 3



Carolyn Sackariason/Daily Press
This unidentified girl may have been used as a decoy for a defendant in the Maran murder case.

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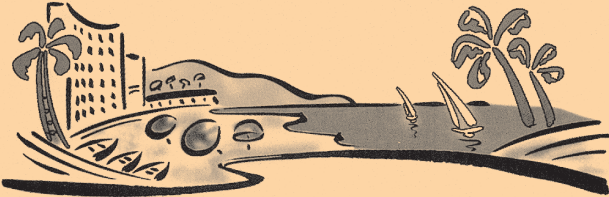
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♈ ARIES (March 21-April 19)

★★★★★ Handle someone with indulgence and caring. What this person might be requesting could feel like a lot intellectually, but it also could feel right on an emotional level. Trust what is happening here. Don't stand back. Express your feelings. Tonight: Let a loved one choose.

♉ TAURUS (April 20-May 20)

★★★★ Someone makes up for someone else. Think twice about what you need to do regarding an emotional issue. Sometimes, being too forgiving encourages difficult behavior. You might choose the high road. Trust your own behavior. Tonight: Speak your mind.

♊ GEMINI (May 21-June 20)

★★★ Get into a spring project that you have been putting off. If you're not careful, it will be summer before you know it! Decide to spend some money on getting more of what you want. Make your life easier. Tonight: Keep it relaxed.

♋ CANCER (June 21-July 22)

★★★★★ Your imagination lands you in a positive position with someone. Let your inner child out more often, and you'll delight a child or loved one. Play away all you need to. Catch up on news from another. You could be surprised. Tonight: Romp away.

♌ LEO (July 23-Aug. 22)

★★★★ Stay close to home. Don't push another away from you. Be open to revealing more of who you are and where you are heading. Others like this openness, especially someone close to you. Foster stronger ties. Invite friends over later in the day. Tonight: Let the party happen.

♍ VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)

★★★★★ Be generous with others. Not everyone can or will meet up to your expectations. You don't need to tear them down as a result. Give someone space, but, at the same time, enjoy yourself to the max with friends. Contribute to a key cause. Tonight: Where your friends are.

♎ LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 22)

★★★ Your devil-may-care attitude could hit you where you least want or need. You don't care, reading your horoscope, but you could be going "ouch" in a few days. Don't spend what you don't have. Look at your budget and pay all your bills first. Tonight: Not everything has to cost, does it?

♏ SCORPIO (Oct. 23-Nov. 21)

★★★★★ You know when you're on a roll. Enjoy what is happening. Pick up and take off at the last minute. Don't forget to invite that special friend along. Be open to exploring or doing something completely different for you. Tonight: Another appreciates your innovative spirit.

♐ SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22-Dec. 21)

★★ You understand far more than you realize, yet continue to not assume anything. As a result, another decides to tell you a lot more than he or she intended to. Be open to sharing a difference in approach. Remember to be as gentle as possible. Tonight: Low-key is the word.

♑ CAPRICORN (Dec. 22-Jan. 19)

★★★★★ Join friends. You need to take in a view other than your own. Friends give you their thoughts, whether you ask for them or not. Instead of resisting, work with those around you; work your pals' ideas. Not every suggestion will be wrong. Tonight: Answer to your popularity.

♒ AQUARIUS (Jan. 20-Feb. 18)

★★★ Where others lack, you fill in. You're certainly on top of work and your responsibilities. You might want to give in to whimsy, but the spotlight illuminates you. Consider ways of subtly slipping off and doing what you want. Be careful when dealing with someone more fragile than you. Tonight: Pick up the phone and make a key phone call.

♓ PISCES (Feb. 19-March 20)

★★★★★ Your emotional nature emerges when dealing with a child or loved one. You might need to reassess your thinking about a key person in your life. You might note that this person doesn't always do what you want. Consider a new direction. Tonight: Have a party.

QUOTE of the DAY

“When ideas fail, words
come in very handy.”

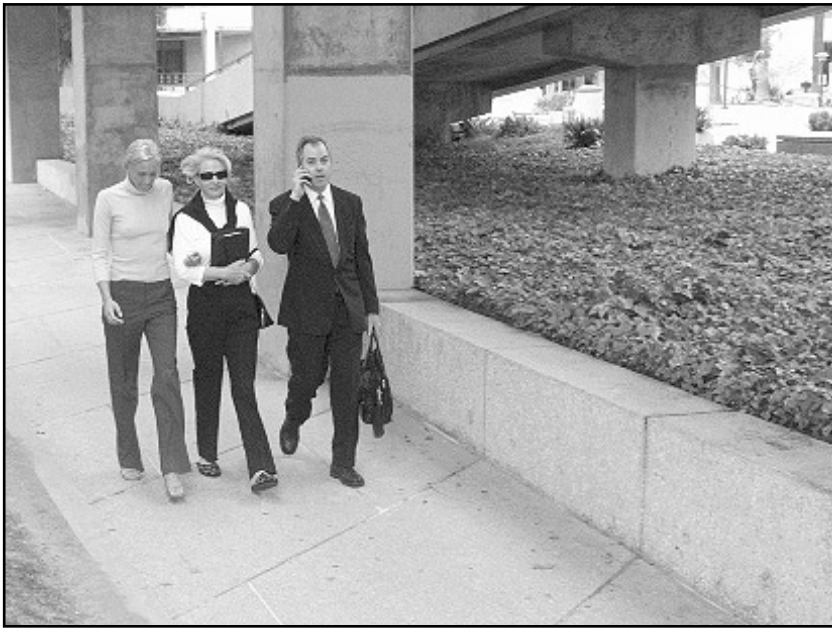
— Goethe (1749-1832)

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LOCAL



Carolyn Sackariason/Daily Press

Angelique Bernstein (center) walks to the courthouse with two unidentified people. The girl on the left may have been a "double" to avert attention from the media.

Accused's lawyer urges no photos of teenager

DECOY, from page 1

escorted by a bailiff.

The Marans, Harriet and Ilja, said the defendant didn't exit the building the same way they did after she was arraigned.

By the judge's order, the press was not allowed inside the court room.

Deputy district attorney Rebecca Noblin said the woman who scolded the media told her she was concerned about the press taking pictures of her daughter and that they were friends of the Bernstein's.

"I didn't watch (the defendant) walk through the building," Noblin said. "This is supposed to be a

juvenile proceeding anyway."

The defendant's attorney, Gary Casselman, wouldn't confirm that a double was used. He urged that no photos be taken of the accused teenager because she is a juvenile.

The 15-year-old, whose name is being withheld because she is a minor, was allegedly involved in Maran's Nov. 17 murder. She allegedly kicked Maran while her half-sister, Katrina Sarkissian, reportedly stabbed her at a party in an upscale Westwood neighborhood. Sarkissian died while in police custody the day after the murder from an overdose of anti-depressants.

Juvenile's attorney says family portrayed unfairly

MARAN, from page 1

said. "She looked at me twice and just stared me down."

The Marans, who raised their four daughters and one son in their Santa Monica Ocean Park home, haven't heard from the Sarkissians, the Bernsteins or the parents whose home was the scene of the party.

Gary Casselman, the attorney representing the minor, said he won't try the case in the press and has advised his clients to do the same. He did, however, say his clients' have equally experienced tragedy as one daughter is dead and the other is facing criminal charges.

The case has caught the attention of local and national media, which Casselman said has been manipulated and has cast his clients in a negative light.

"It's very tragic," he said. "They are nice people and they have been portrayed inaccurately and somewhat outrageously."

Maran, also known affectionately as "Lala," would have turned 16 years old on April 17, which coincidentally also was the five-month anniversary of her death. The Marans threw a Sweet Sixteen party for their daughter last week where about 50 of her friends and family gathered at the Maran home.

Maran, who stood 5-foot-6 and had the build of an athlete — she was on the water polo and volleyball teams at Santa Monica High School — was known as fearless. She was dubbed by her classmates and friends as "Daring Deanna" and often stood up for other people, even if it meant confrontation.



Deanna Maran

In pursuit of what

they say is justice for the death of their daughter, the Marans have retained Santa Monica lawyer Tony Glassman to pursue civil charges against the family of the girls who had a role in Maran's death, as well as the family which owns the home where the party was held.

Glassman, who showed up to Friday's court proceedings but wasn't allowed in the courtroom, said a civil suit will likely be filed within the next two weeks.

"We are going to take a long, hard look at this to see who is involved."

— TONY GLASSMAN
Maran family attorney

"We hope to give the Marans some satisfaction to find out everything possible about that night," he told the Daily Press this week. "We are going to take a long, hard look at this to see who is involved."

Numerous eyewitness accounts by kids attending the party say another girl — a Samohi senior who has since dropped out of school — helped pin Maran down.

LA deputy district attorney Rebecca Noblin has said that police detectives couldn't link anyone else to the crime based on interviews with witnesses and their investigation.

However, through the civil case, more witnesses could emerge with further information. In addition, criminal charges could still be filed.

"We'll file the complaint, then get the reports (which are closed), send out subpoenas for witness and get them under oath," Glassman said. "(The district attorney's office's) reaction to us moving forward with this is if we dig up something, we'll relay it to them."

Pico activists want more community-based patrols

PICO, from page 1

only one measurement, but we're a step closer to making the people in the community feel safe."

The focus will now shift toward organizing residents into neighborhood watch programs and working with people who live in the community. Police officers will work with residents on ways to prevent further violence, which they said is being perpetrated by a few criminals.

"There is only a small percentage of people responsible for most of the violence in that community," Guido said. "And though it may be caused by less than one-half of 1 percent of the people there, it's still a percentage that gives people the perception of not feeling safe."

Officers with the community relations unit will continue to organize meetings with residents and work with them on taking back their neighborhood through graffiti control and helping them clean up their neighborhood.

Officers will help residents put up fencing where needed, and make sure gates are locked. They want to encourage residents to report graffiti problems quickly and any unclean alleys and sidewalks.

"Community-orientated policing is something we are really focusing on," Guido said. "Anything that would help build up the community will be a part of this new kind of policing. This is not just

a police issue, it's a community issue."

Even though the department has returned to normal staffing levels in the neighborhood, there will still be 24-hour patrols and bike cops riding throughout the neighborhood. The department's undercover unit will continue its work, and the Hawthorne helicopter will continue to make periodic fly-overs and assist SMPD officers on the ground.

Oscar de la Torre, director of the Pico Youth and Family Center, encouraged the police department to continue with community policing. He previously criticized the department for beefing up patrols in response to the shootings.

"I think community policing is what has needed to happen all along," said de la Torre, a Pico community activist. "It's a concept that never materialized in the Pico neighborhood, and it needs to be emphasized."

However, de la Torre said he was suspicious of the department's plan. He said police stationed in the Virginia Avenue Park substation rarely walk down the street and talk with residents.

"You rarely see them take that type of approach," he said. "But I hope that becomes a priority with the police department. I hope we can all develop mutual relationships built on trust and mutual respect."

Peter Tigler, president of the Pico Neighborhood Association, said he liked having the extra patrols in the neighborhood

and said the group will continue to pressure Santa Monica for more funding for police officers stationed in the neighborhood.

The organization especially wants to expand the days and hours of bike patrols, which Tigler said were making a significant difference in the area.

"The taskforce was one thing, but we want something on a more permanent basis," he said. "If they feel their deployment is better used elsewhere, that's their prerogative. But that doesn't change our

prerogatives."

Tigler stressed the police department was moving in the right direction with community policing and helping the neighborhood organize itself.

"I think the community relations will help. A more involved community is a safer community," he said. "We all know it's not totally a police problem or a police fix. We all must get involved and come together as a community to really put a stop to this."

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OPINION

LETTERS

Only in Santa Monica ...

Editor:

Now that a national conglomerate has stolen the country, let us look at smaller crimes in smaller arenas.

Only in Santa Monica can a ruling party (SMRR) dictate to the populace, even though that party's agenda and charter relate to issues long ago visited by state rent control laws or coastal commission regulations.

Only in Santa Monica can city councils openly break state laws by holding CLOSED meetings. Only in Santa Monica does the city attorney deem that this is acceptable. (Not RIGHT... just technically legal).

Only in Santa Monica do the addressless have more rights than the productive.

Only in Santa Monica can the solution to too much traffic be to slow it down.

Only in Santa Monica can meddling and micro-management by the planning commission and council suffice as "vision."

Only in Santa Monica would these two units work to destroy long held family LOCAL businesses; renege on new deals around the pier; waste time and money discussing the "bread and circus" for the masses on the Promenade. (We particularly enjoy the underage performers portraying Michael Jackson ... oh the irony!) Not to mention the various scoundrels, brigands and ne'er do wells that inhabit the place.

Target, the YMCA, the "new library," Hooters?... all clutter projects ... We are amazed that the producer of the Target Store Impact Study actually had integrity and told the council what any 10 year-old knew ... a TARGET-sized store was a BAD idea in the heart of an already congested town.

OOPS. I guess the council thought they could speak to us once again of "slowing the growth" ... while falling all over themselves to cater to developers, carpet-baggers, and consumerism.

Brings to mind Main Street, where the Boulangerie condos, the Powerhouse Lot, and the Civic Center "Housing Format" ... all current projects, which will permanently clog all access to the freeways and downtown Santa Monica when they are all up and running.

This council, along with the help of the Bayside District and the Pier Restoration Corp., seeks to micro-manage every square foot of retail business, and bolstered by the planning commission staff, have succeeded in making the Main Street and pier corridors vast minefields of ordinances, levies, fines, threats, assessments, application fees, and permits. Main Street must have businesses that the neighborhood can support.

We need more policing, less meddling by planning staff and an understanding that there is NO shortage of resident housing, only a shortage of people with \$5,000 rent money.

There are now several businesses belly-up on Main and while the market has exerted some influence on these failures, the city needs to recognize that "mommy and me" shoppers and families are not going to fight traffic, parking, and criminal types in order to spend straight retail money.

They might put up with two out of three ... but the collapsed winos and resident vagrants are more than a barometer of the neighborhood's decline.

There is a hole in the ground behind the police station; might I suggest that we utilize it as a Monument to the Council's Hubris.

This city council views itself as a leadership model ... WRONG ... they are supposed to represent OUR ideas ... not their own.

Only in Santa Monica is the public given three short minutes to voice their democracy... perhaps we should give these self-anointed council members and their backers three minutes each to get out of town.

Slow growth?

NONSENSE ... QUICK HUGE GROWTH, by canning this current crop of wannabe rulers.

Enough already.

Big government is not nearly as dangerous as SMALL (self satisfied) government.

We will take big government anytime. But only in Santa Monica.

We would like our city back in the hands of the citizens, elected by neighborhood, instead of the power centralizing private club format we now watch operate.

Mel Bloch
Santa Monica

Opinions expressed are those of the writer and do not necessarily reflect those of the Santa Monica Daily Press staff. Guest editorials from residents are encouraged, as are letters to the editor. Letters will be published on a space-available basis. It is our intention to publish all letters we receive, except those that are libelous or are unsigned. Preference will be given to those that are e-mailed to sack@smdp.com. All letters must include the author's name and telephone number for purposes of verification. Letters also may be mailed to our offices located at 530 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 200, Santa Monica, 90401, or faxed to (310) 576-9913. All letters and guest editorials are subject to editing for space and content.

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STATE



CALIFORNIA BRIEFS

Security concerns at Ventura high schools

By The Associated Press

VENTURA — All Ventura County high schools should install perimeter fencing, place officers at entrances, use security cameras and establish weapons search procedures to improve student safety, the county grand jury said.

Inspired by a rash of campus shootings nationwide in recent years, the grand jury visited all 200 public high schools in the county and concluded safety plans were in place but the level of vigilance varies.

The grand jury report released Thursday praised the Simi Valley Unified School District for adopting the attitude of "We are Columbine," and said all county school districts should do the same. Fifteen people died in the 1999 Columbine school shooting.

Still, Simi Valley's campuses are not the most restrictive in the county. The Oxnard Union High School District uses metal detectors, for example.

The grand jury faulted Ventura, Buena, Oak Park and Nordhoff high schools because visitors could enter campuses undetected. The Ventura and Buena campuses aren't completely fenced.

Among the other grand jury recommendations: All school districts should adopt teen courts to judge student offenders; place identification marks on school buildings so law enforcement can identify them from the air; and ensure that security funding is equitably distributed among campuses.

Zoo proposes \$336 million parking plan

By The Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — A project to build an underground parking structure for the San Diego Zoo and expand the world-famous park would need a \$336 million contribution from taxpayers, according to a proposal.

The zoo presented a plan Thursday night detailing financing needs for city officials. The City Council is expected to consider the matter over the next year or more.

The zoo wants to build exhibit space on its current parking lot, which can accommodate 2,700 vehicles. A new Park Boulevard Promenade would incorporate a four-level parking structure for 4,700 vehicles.

The project calls for elevators and escalators to take visitors from the parking structure to a new zoo entry plaza, and a 2 1/2-acre greenbelt.

The zoo would pay the entire cost, as yet undetermined, of all construction within its 125-acre leasehold, said Douglas G. Myers, executive director of the Zoological Society of San Diego.

New trial set for longtime convict

By The Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — A man who has spent 11 years in prison for a 1991 stabbing death has won the right to a new trial, where he is expected to present new evidence to show that he acted in self-defense.

A Superior Court judge ruled Thursday that the evidence, gunshot residue found on the victim, would have changed the outcome of Ray Pitts' trial.

Pitts, 46, long has insisted that he stabbed Michael William Schneider in self-defense after Schneider first fired at him with a small-caliber handgun during a drug deal in El Cajon.

With no one to corroborate his story, however, Pitts was convicted of second-degree murder, which carried a term of 16 years to life.

Last summer, tests conducted on plastic bags used to cover parts of Schneider's body and his clothing revealed particles of gunshot residue. The bags and clothing had never been tested before by the police or Pitt's original defense attorney.

The District Attorney's Office, which argued that Pitts should not get a new trial, could appeal the ruling, reach a plea agreement or retry Pitts.

Pitts will remain in jail without bail pending a new arraignment on the charges Monday.

Ex-dispatcher files \$98,000 harassment suit

By The Associated Press

PORT HUENEME — A former dispatcher filed a sex harassment lawsuit against the Police Department claiming officers touched her breasts, told off-color jokes in front of her and encouraged her to have more sex.

Crystal Hammer's suit filed in Superior Court this week claimed she was fired for complaining about the alleged harassment. She is seeking \$98,000 in back pay and unspecified general and punitive damages.

"She never encouraged the sexual behavior or indicated in any way that it was welcome," attorney Douglas Stenzel said. Hammer became a full-time dispatcher in September 1999 and officers began "subjecting plaintiff to a pattern of offensive and unwanted sexual behavior at work," the suit said.

Last October, Estrella fired Hammer "in retaliation for complaining of the sexual harassment, assaults and hostile work environment," the suit said.

Defendants include the city, Police Department, Senior Officer John Brisslinger, Sgt. Roland Burns, Sgt. Christopher Graham and Chief Fernando Estrella, who said he couldn't comment because it was a personnel matter.

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Community Yoga Classes offered to students of all levels. \$6, Monday through Friday 8:30 a.m., 12:30 p.m., and 3:30 p.m. Saturday 2 p.m., Santa Monica Yoga, 1640 Ocean Park Blvd., (310) 396-4040.

Ballroom Dancing is offered every Saturday in the auditorium of the Felicia Mahood Senior Center, W.L.A., \$2 per person, 1 p.m. - 3 p.m., (310) 479-4119.

Puppetolio! hosted by Santa Monica Puppet & Magic Center will be held Saturday & Sunday at 1:00 p.m. & 3:00 p.m. Episode 2 plays at the 3:00 time. Shows are always followed by a demonstration, Q & A, and a tour of the Puppet Museum and workshop. The program is for all ages, 3 and up. All seats: \$6.50. The Center is located at 1255 2nd Street in Santa Monica, adjacent to the Third Street Promenade. Reservations/Information: (310) 656-0483 or www.puppetmagic.com.

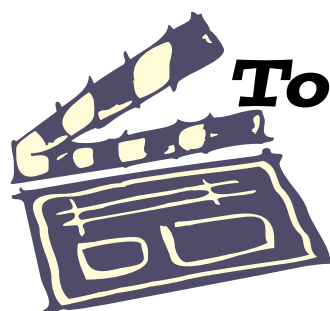
Free classical music! The Elizabeth Mandell Music Institute at Crossroads School in Santa Monica presents a Chamber Music Concert featuring current Crossroads students. Sunday, April 28th at 6 p.m. Bing Theater of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Wilshire Blvd. For more information please call (323) 935-2066 or (310) 829-7391 ext. 232.

Lindsey Haly, Chicana-Irish poet, writer, and journalist presents "Poems & Prose by a Venice Ex-Patriot." Sunday, April 28, at 2 p.m. Main Library Auditorium. 1343 Sixth Street, Santa Monica. This program is free and open to the public. (310) 458-8600

Author Madeline Drexler will be giving a lecture/signing for her book, SECRET AGENTS: The Menace of Emerging Infections, at the Midnight Special Bookstore (1318 3rd St. Promenade, Santa Monica) on April 28 at 3:00 p.m. For more information call: 310-393-2923.

Project Pride, an afternoon drop-in Social Center for ALL Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual and Transgender teens 13-18 years of age. Sundays from 4:30 p.m. To 6:30 p.m. 1424 4th Street between Broadway & Santa Monica Boulevard. The center is one block East of the 3rd Street Promenade, on second floor, room 220A. Free snacks! Sponsored by Jewish Family Service of Santa Monica. (310) 393-0723. Ask for "Project Pride Info."

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STATE

Crash injures one



Bruce Chambers/Associated Press

A light plane crashed on Troy High School's varsity baseball field Friday morning before school started in Fullerton, Calif. The piloted radioed a news helicopter that it was having trouble before crash landing on the field in Fullerton. The pilot and a passenger walked away and another passenger, a woman, was injured and transported to a hospital.

After year, Sea Launch to send satellite aloft

BY ANDREW BRIDGES

Associated Press Writer

LONG BEACH — After a year hiatus, Sea Launch officials said Friday they are preparing to resume launching satellites into orbit this June from a platform floating in the equatorial Pacific Ocean.

The launch of the PanAmSat Galaxy IIIC communications satellite will be the first for Sea Launch since May 2001. The satellite is designed to provide Internet, audio, video and data services to the United States, Latin America and South America for 15 years.

The launch will end a lull brought on by a global slowdown in the satellite market, a blip in orders for the company and a delay in the delivery of the Boeing Satellite Systems 702 model satellite, said Donald Carter, vice president of operations for Sea Launch.

Boeing delayed delivery to this weekend to redesign the solar arrays on the satellite model. The company discovered last fall that the arrays on six of its 702 model satellites already orbiting the Earth were losing power, said company spokesman George

Torres. The satellites cost between \$150 million and \$250 million.

Since Sea Launch's inaugural launch in 1999, the company has scored six successes. A software problem doomed the March 2000 launch of an ICO Global Communications satellite.

Sea Launch, whose international partners include The Boeing Co. and Russia's RSC Energia, is unique in the world of space.

Rather than launch from land, the company uses a converted oil rig to launch its rockets into orbit from the ocean. The floating rocket platform, accompanied by a command ship, makes the trek to the launch site on the equator 1,500 miles south of Hawaii for each mission.

Since the Earth spins faster there, the extra boost allows Sea Launch's Zenit rockets to carry 30 percent more weight than comparable rockets launched from Cape Canaveral, Fla., said company spokeswoman Paula Korn.

Sea Launch has contracts for 11 launches for 2002 and 2003. To be profitable, the company seeks to launch six to eight satellites a year.

Four men plead guilty in \$3.5 million investment scheme

By The Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Four men who bilked U.S. and Canadian investors out of \$3.5 million pleaded guilty to wire fraud, authorities said Thursday.

John M. Thomas, 55, of Laguna Hills, and Cenobio Herrera Lanz, 57, of Downey, entered their pleas Wednesday, said Thom Mrozek, a spokesman for the U.S. attorney's office.

Thomas also pleaded guilty to one count of money laundering.

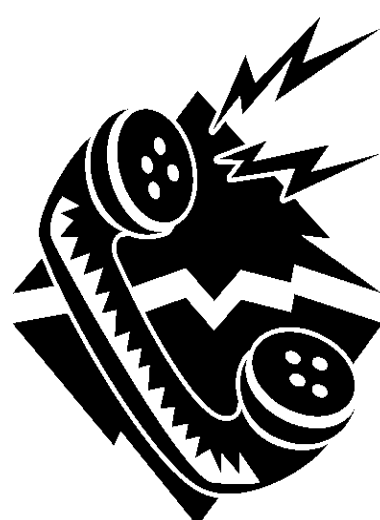
Michael J. Gibbons, 70, of El Segundo, and William T. Lewis, 50, of New Haven, Conn., pleaded guilty to wire fraud earlier

this year. Gibbons also pleaded guilty to money laundering.

The men ran an investment program called Circle Foundation Investment Trust. Investors were guaranteed annual return rates of up to 2,000 percent and were told their money was safe in an escrow account, Mrozek said.

In reality, the four men were drawing money from the account, he said.

The men face up to five years in prison for each count of wire fraud when they are sentenced later this year. Thomas and Gibbons face an additional maximum sentence of 20 years in prison for money laundering.



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NATIONAL



Fighting fire from above



Ed Andrieski/Associated Press

A helicopter drops a load of water Friday on a hot spot on the Snaking forest fire near the small mountain town of Bailey, Colo.

Toll system in New Jersey is a ticket to aggravation

BY AMY WESTFELDT

Associated Press Writer

SECAUCUS, N.J. — Motorists' mailboxes are stuffed with \$25 fines for 35-cent tolls they say they paid. Trucking companies have assigned employees to do nothing but argue bogus violations. One man was charged for tolls as many as 30 times while he was home on the sofa for a week, recovering from open heart surgery.

New Jersey's E-ZPass electronic toll system was supposed to make things, well, easy by relieving traffic jams, reducing pollution and letting commuters sail past toll booths without stopping to fumble for change.

Instead, it has become the bureaucratic equivalent of a rush-hour pileup.

After committing more than \$300 million to the system, New Jersey is confronted with motorists who complain they are fined for violations they never committed or billed for driving in places they never were. The state has suspended installation of the system for a four-month review and launched legislative hearings to find out who is responsible.

The foul-ups have added to the miseries of driving in the Garden State, where motorists already pay the highest auto insurance rates in the nation and where the recent introduction of a \$400 million auto-emission inspection system was bungled.

The state adopted E-ZPass in 1999. Motorists attach electronic devices called transponders to their windshields. When

they drive through a toll booth, the system automatically deducts the toll from their credit card or from a prepaid account. Cameras photograph the license plates of toll beaters, and violations are mailed to the car's owner.

MFS Network Technologies was awarded the contract of nearly \$500 million to install E-ZPass. A regional consortium headed by New Jersey borrowed \$300 million of that by issuing bonds. The remaining \$190 million was to be paid for by the \$25 fines collected from toll cheats.

That, at least, was the idea. Instead, between 1999 and 2001, it cost the state \$19.2 million to collect \$13.3 million in fines.

E-ZPass drivers say they are being driven crazy by bogus violations that force them to spend hours on the telephone and run up postage costs to resolve.

New Jersey has issued 1.6 million of the transponders. Various other agencies in the New York metropolitan area have issued an estimated 3.2 million more, and drivers can use the E-ZPass system from Massachusetts to West Virginia. But the lion's share of violations and complaints have come through New Jersey.

MFS paid the state millions of dollars in fines for missing construction deadlines. Adesta Communications of Omaha, Neb., later bought MFS, then filed for bankruptcy and sold the E-ZPass contract to WorldCom Inc.

WorldCom said last month that it would work to improve customer service.

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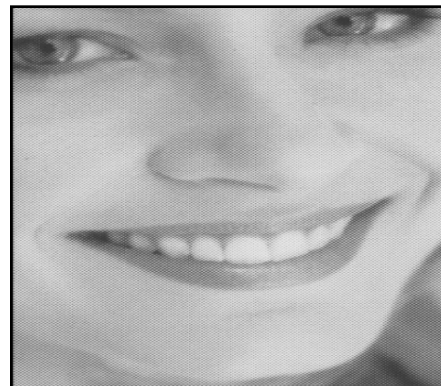
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SPORTS

Blazers are clueless trying to figure out Shaq, Lakers

BY LONDON HALL

AP Sports Writer

TUALATIN, Ore. — The Portland Trail Blazers are so clueless about what to do with Shaquille O'Neal that coach Maurice Cheeks will take suggestions from just about anybody.

Since the reporters gathered at the Blazers' practice suburban facility had no brilliant strategies to offer Friday, Cheeks stared glumly at the floor, realizing that he alone would have to come up with something to prevent the Blazers from being swept again by the Los Angeles Lakers.

"I'll have to review the tape again and come up with some kind of scheme, if there is a scheme that I can do to make them believe that we can win this basketball game," Cheeks said.

Portland never led in Thursday night's 103-96 loss, the Blazers' sixth straight postseason defeat to Los Angeles. Game 3 is Sunday at the Rose Garden.

If the Lakers were bothered by letting a 21-point lead slip to six with 1:43 to play, they had forgotten all about it by Friday. They appeared very relaxed during a light practice in El Segundo, Calif., and as the workout concluded, several players did an impersonation of Portland's Dale Davis getting ejected from Thursday's game.

The best was by Rick Fox, who drew laughs when he removed his shirt and stalked around the court.

Not that the Lakers weren't taking Game 3 seriously. The Blazers beat them twice at the Rose Garden during the regular season, and Portland will try anything to avoid losing to Los Angeles 3-0 in a best-of-five series for the second straight year.

"They'll probably be more physical," Lakers guard Kobe Bryant said. "It's going to be a battle up there. We expect it to be physical, emotional. We've just got to keep our poise."

The Blazers erupted almost on cue in the second half of Game 2. They picked up four technicals and a flagrant foul that might have stunted their comeback.

Davis' episode was the result of the constant frustration he's had to endure as the primary defender on O'Neal. He was hit with a technical while arguing a foul. After another foul, Davis kicked the ball into the stands, earning another technical with 4:12 left in the third quarter. Davis disrobed on the way to the locker room, and raised an arm to a heckling fan.

Cheeks couldn't believe it. "There's no excuse for it," he said.

The coach sympathized with his center's predicament, however. Portland has played five postseason games since Davis was traded from Indiana before the 2000-01 season, and O'Neal has been a nightmare for him every time. Davis has fouled out twice, been ejected from two other games, and was suspended for another —

the final game of the series last year, after Davis threw an elbow at Robert Horry in the Blazers' tantrum-filled Game 2.

"When you make one good play against Shaq and they call a foul against him, it kind of knocks the fight out of you a little bit," Portland's Bonzi Wells said. "Dale's a competitor and he likes to go to war with guys. Some stuff wasn't going his way and he lost his composure a little bit."

The Blazers watched game tape Friday but did not hold an organized practice.

"Sometimes it's better to step away from

it than stay there and beat their heads in on what they didn't do right," Cheeks said.

The easy day probably won't stop Portland from thinking about the futility of slowing down O'Neal. As for the Lakers, they talked as if the name and disposition of their opponent didn't even matter.

"I think we're starting to kick into that mode," O'Neal said. "As long as we keep doing that, it's going to be pretty easy for us. ... I'm not concentrating on what they do, I'm concentrating on getting one more of those balls (championship trophies)."



National Basketball Association playoff schedule

By The Associated Press

FIRST ROUND-Best-of-5 (All times EDT.)

Saturday, April 20

Indiana 89, New Jersey 83
Sacramento 89, Utah 86
San Antonio 110, Seattle 89
Charlotte 80, Orlando 79

Sunday, April 21

Boston 92, Philadelphia 82
Boston leads series 1-0
Dallas 101, Minnesota 94
Dallas leads series 1-0
L.A. Lakers 95, Portland 87,
L.A. Lakers lead series 1-0
Detroit 85, Toronto 63
Detroit leads series 1-0

Monday, April 22

New Jersey 95, Indiana 79
series tied 1-1
Seattle 98, San Antonio 90
series tied 1-1

Tuesday, April 23

Orlando 111, Charlotte 103, OT
series tied 1-1
Utah 93, Sacramento 86
series tied 1-1

Wednesday, April 24

Detroit 96, Toronto 91
Detroit leads series 2-0
Dallas 122, Minnesota 110,
Dallas leads series 2-0

Thursday, April 25

Boston 93, Philadelphia 85
Boston leads series 2-0
L.A. Lakers 103, Portland 96,
Lakers leads series 2-0

Friday, April 26

New Jersey 85, Indiana 84
New Jersey leads series 2-1

Saturday, April 27

Charlotte at Orlando, 12:30 p.m.
Sacramento at Utah, 3 p.m.
San Antonio at Seattle, 5:30 p.m.
Detroit at Toronto, 8:30 p.m.

Sunday, April 28

Boston at Philadelphia, 12:30 p.m.
Dallas at Minnesota, 3 p.m.
L.A. Lakers at Portland, 5:30 p.m.

Monday, April 29

Detroit at Toronto, TBA, if necessary
Sacramento at Utah, TBA, if necessary

Tuesday, April 30

Charlotte at Orlando, TBA
New Jersey at Indiana, TBA
Dallas at Minnesota, TBA, if necessary

Wednesday, May 1

Boston at Philadelphia, TBA, if necessary
San Antonio at Seattle, TBA
L.A. Lakers at Portland, TBA, if necessary

Thursday, May 2

Indiana at New Jersey, TBA, if necessary
Toronto at Detroit, TBA, if necessary
Minnesota at Dallas, TBA, if necessary
Utah at Sacramento, TBA, if necessary

Friday, May 3

Philadelphia at Boston, TBA, if necessary
Orlando at Charlotte, TBA, if necessary
Seattle at San Antonio, TBA, if necessary
Portland at L.A. Lakers, TBA, if necessary

Perez has nearly perfect game

By The Associated Press

CHICAGO — For six innings, Odalis Perez was perfect. He settled for a one-hitter, giving up just a bad-hop infield single Friday in Los Angeles' 10-0 victory over the Chicago Cubs.

Corey Patterson led off the bottom of the seventh by beating out a bad-hop infield single behind second that came up high on shortstop Cezar Izturis, whose throw to first wasn't in time.

Chris Stynes then hit into a double play, and Sammy Sosa grounded out to end the inning, allowing Perez (3-1) to face the minimum 27 batters.

In pitching his first major league shutout, the 23-year-old left-hander walked none and struck out six.

Shawn Green and Adrian Beltre drove in three runs each and the Dodgers scored six times in the sixth inning with Perez making the first and third outs.

Kerry Wood (2-2) was wild for a second straight start, walking seven and giving up five runs and five hits in 5 1-3 innings.

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INTERNATIONAL



German school shooting



Christian Seeling/Associated Press

A young girl is helped by rescue workers out of a police armored vehicle Friday as police officers aim their guns near the Gutenberg high school in Erfurt, eastern Germany, after an expelled student opened fire in the school, killing 17 people before shooting himself as commandos closed in, police and witnesses said.

Nobel Prizes worth \$970,000

By The Associated Press

STOCKHOLM, Sweden — This year's Nobel Prizes will be worth \$970,000, the same amount as last year, the foundation that administers them said on Friday.

The Nobel Foundation said it had increased the prize money by such a large amount last year — about \$100,000 — it decided to keep the same level for the 2002 awards.

"As we increased it quite substantially last year, by 11 percent, we thought it could be there for a year or two," foundation executive director Michael Sohlman said.

The annual prizes, created in the will of Alfred Nobel — the Swedish industrialist and the inventor of dynamite, were first awarded in 1901 and celebrated their

centennial last year.

The foundation also announced the market value of its invested capital in 2001 was \$359 million. Its stock portfolio amounted to \$246 million at year's end, down 5.6 percent from the year before.

The Nobel Prizes, which include gold medals and diplomas, are always presented on Dec. 10, the anniversary of Nobel's death in 1896. The prizes in literature, physics, chemistry and the prize in physiology or medicine are awarded in the Swedish capital, while the peace prize is awarded in Oslo, Norway.

The Bank of Sweden Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel was established separately in 1968 but is awarded in Stockholm with the other awards and is worth the same amount.

Angry opium shop keepers protest raid on their stores

BY KATHY GANNON

Associated Press Writer

GHANI KHIEL, Afghanistan — Soldiers stormed in by the hundreds, smashed the bolted wooden doors of ramshackle shops and seized more than six tons of opium at Afghanistan's biggest drug market.

The raid this week was the largest show of the interim government's resolve to wipe out the lucrative opium trade that resumed with the fall of the Taliban.

But it went badly wrong.

The soldiers appeared more like a thieving party, ripping the watches off the wrists of store owners, pulling money from their pockets and taking everything in the shops — as well as the opium, shopkeepers said.

"They weren't interested in destroying our opium. They took our opium to sell," said Javed Khan, a store owner. "They were just thieves."

"Look! They just grabbed my watch from my wrist," said Mohammed Nabi. "They ordered us to sit down and then just took everything."

Now residents of Ghani Khiei, 36 miles east of the provincial capital of

Jalalabad, are fighting mad — and heavily armed.

"We're ready to shed blood over this," Khan said.

On Friday, a rocket launcher was pointed toward the village entrance. Residents warned they were ready to do battle with the government if a settlement is not brokered by their elders, who were meeting to find a way out of the impasse.

Negotiations won't be easy. Fifty residents are in jail and the entire village is up in arms.

The elders, swathed in voluminous turbans, sat in a stark white cement building in Ghani Khiei. Outside, their bodyguards brandished rocket launchers and Kalashnikov assault rifles, and railed against Haji Abdul Qadir, the interim regime's governor of the eastern province of Nangarhar.

When the opium market flourished, shopkeepers in Ghani Khiei had a routine. They sat in their dusty courtyards on rope beds, sipping tea and waiting for customers.

On Friday, they gathered as usual, but their shops were shuttered and their mutterings were filled with anger.

They accused Qadir of sending soldiers into Ghani Kiel because most residents

Israeli troops raid West Bank town in campaign

BY KARIN LAUB

Associated Press Writer

JERUSALEM — Despite a new U.S. call to halt incursions, Israeli troops entered a West Bank town on Friday, killing a local militia leader in a firefight. Israel's defense minister said there would be more raids whenever his forces had new intelligence leads on the whereabouts of suspected militants.

Friday's incursion into the West Bank town of Qalqiliya was the longest and most extensive foray into Palestinian territory since Israel wound down its large-scale military offensive earlier this week. Israeli tanks rumbled into Qalqiliya at 4 a.m. and stayed until 10 p.m.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, meanwhile, told U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell that he was willing to release Yasser Arafat from confinement if the Palestinian leader agreed to leave his West Bank headquarters alone, without several wanted Palestinians who have taken refuge in the besieged compound.

Sharon told Powell in a phone call that Arafat could go to the Gaza Strip or any area of the West Bank, said an Israeli official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

It appeared unlikely the Palestinian leader would agree to the Israeli terms since he has said he would not hand over the six wanted men — five allegedly involved in the assassination of an Israeli Cabinet minister and the sixth in arms smuggling.

Earlier Friday, Israeli troops fired tear gas and stun grenades toward hundreds of demonstrators marching toward the Ramallah compound to protest Arafat's monthlong confinement. At one point, Palestinians fired several live rounds from a nearby building. Israeli troops responded with live fire, and the crowd quickly dispersed. Eleven people were injured, none by bullets.

At another flashpoint, Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity, four Palestinian policemen surrendered to Israeli troops on Friday and two Palestinians inside the compound were wounded by Israeli sniper fire. The wounded were evacuated and given medical treatment, the Israeli military said.

Despite the shooting, there were signs the 24-day standoff between Israeli troops and more than 200 Palestinians inside the compound, including about 30 militiamen, was entering the final phase.

The dispute now centers on the fate of six wanted Palestinians in the church — whether they will be escorted to Gaza, as the Palestinians propose, or be sent into exile, as Israel demands, said Palestinian negotiator Salah Taameri, who was to

are loyal to a rival warlord, Haji Zaman Khan. Since the collapse of the Taliban last year, Afghanistan has disintegrated into areas controlled by warlords and their heavily armed men.

Outside the capital, Kabul, the interim regime's rule is weak.

At the entrance to Ghani Khiei, a graffiti-scarred board put up by the deposed Taliban still sits slightly lopsided. It reads: "Drug abuse is the greatest evil of our society. Let us save our lives, save our children's lives."

But inside Ghani Khiei's opium market, store owners say they aren't ready to change.

meet Saturday with Arafat to discuss the deal.

Capt. Joel Leyden of the Israeli military said negotiations would not be open-ended and the military option remained. However, another spokesman, Lt. Col. Olivier Rafowicz said Israeli troops would not enter the compound by force.

The standoffs in Ramallah and Bethlehem have held up Israel's troop withdrawal from the two towns that were among six Israel occupied during the military offensive.

President Bush has demanded repeatedly that Israel leave the Palestinian cities, and he said Friday he'd had enough of the Israeli incursions.

"The Israelis understand my position. ... There has been some progress, but it's now time to quit it altogether," Bush said near his Texas ranch.

However, Israeli Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer said his forces would act on any new information about the whereabouts of suspected militants.

"The Israeli military works on the basis of intelligence," Ben-Eliezer said during a meeting with troops in the West Bank. "The moment there are intelligence reports of gangs, individuals and suicide bombers, we have no other choice but to launch incursions to prevent these attacks."

More than 1,000 Palestinians were arrested in the Israeli offensive, including top militia leaders, and the interrogation of the suspects was expected to yield more information about militants still at large, Israeli military commentators said.

In Friday's incursion into Qalqiliya, Raed Nazal, the local leader of a radical PLO faction, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, was killed in a firefight between soldiers and Palestinian gunmen.

Sixteen Palestinians were arrested in the town, including several who were on Israel's wanted list, the Israeli military said. The governor of Qalqiliya, Mustafa Malki, put the number of arrested men at about 50.

Malki said Israeli troops blew up an empty four-story building and destroyed two apartments, one with explosives and the other by firing a tank shell. Malki said there appeared to be no apparent reason for the demolitions, since the owners of the building and the two apartment were not involved in anti-Israeli activities. Just before leaving, Israeli forces blew up the local Palestinian intelligence office.

The Israeli military had no comment, but said troops had found a bomb factory with grenades, vests for suicide bombers, explosives and weapons. As a result of the operation, a terror attack was prevented, the military said.

"When they give us roads, schools, hospitals and something that brings us as much money, we will stop selling it," said Gul Ahmed Shah, a store owner whose long gray beard was shaggy and unkempt. Other shopkeepers agreed, speaking at once, interrupting each other, each in turn complaining about the woeful state of their economy.

"We have nothing to feed our children with," said Qari Saddar.

"Who is going to pay our bills? This government?" Mohammed Naurang asked.

"They can't even bring law and order. There is no security. There is nothing here but opium," said Zamaryar Mahmood.



COMICS

The Dinette Set by Julie Larson



Natural Selection® By Russ Wallace



by TERRY & PATTY LABAN



Reality Check® By Dave Whammond



Speed Bump® By Dave Coverly



CROSSWORD By THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Asimov forte
 - 6 Door parts
 - 11 Sharp-ened
 - 12 Use
 - 13 — lunch
 - 14 Join together
 - 15 Tidies up
 - 17 Corrida call
 - 18 Under-standing
 - 19 Become less dense
 - 22 Collection
 - 23 Program-mer's work
 - 24 Farm carrier
 - 25 Stowe route
 - 27 Belfry denizen
 - 30 Trig function
 - 31 Char-lottesvill sch.
 - 32 Actor Wallach
 - 33 Rink user
 - 35 "Vertigo" actress
 - 38 Explosive stuff
 - 39 Greek ending
- DOWN**
- 40 Keats, for one
 - 41 Bowler's button
 - 42 Diminishes
 - 1 Surprises
 - 2 Shallow ravine
 - 3 Purpose
 - 4 Greek cheese
 - 5 "Why tell me?"
 - 6 Traffic problem
 - 7 Blvd. kin
 - 8 Strand
 - 9 Galoot
 - 10 Winter weather
 - 16 Japanese rulers
 - 20 "Search me!"
 - 21 Diarist Anais
 - 24 Fakae locks
 - 25 Bible dancer
 - 26 Cutlery
 - 27 Interfere
 - 28 Opposed
 - 29 Fore-telling decks
 - 30 Met performer
 - 34 Verdi work
 - 36 Epoch
 - 37 Krazy —

BAKER	TIRES
OLIVE	ADAGE
PECAN	BEIGE
KNEE	ASSN
MOSS	TAME
EMU	RAKES
LAPSE	INANE
DRAWN	NIRIM
SEDA	AUTO
SATE	MARC
TROTS	BIKES
EERIE	USUAL
MAMET	TESTY

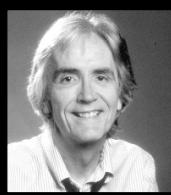
Yesterday's answer

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11					12				
13					14				
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18				19		20	21		
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	25	26					27	28	29
30							31		
32				33		34			
35			36	37		38			
39						40			
41						42			

4-27

STUMPED?

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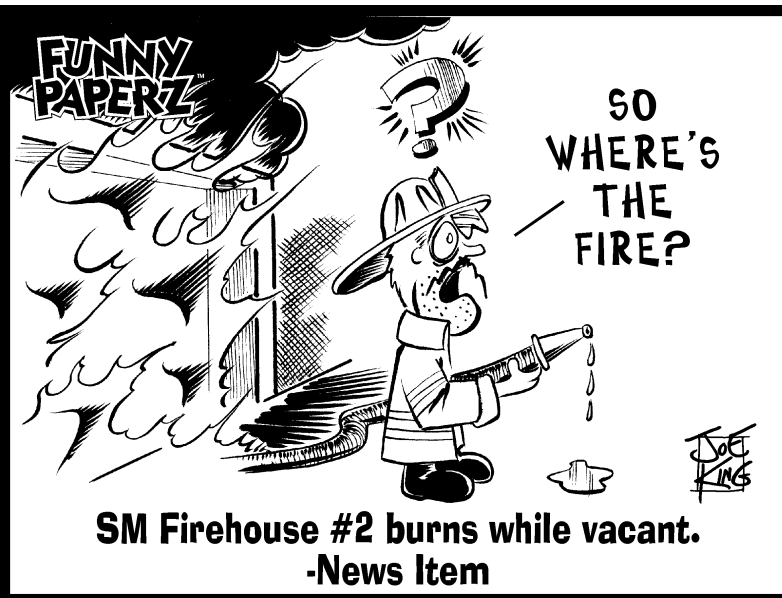


NEWS OF THE WEIRD

by Chuck Shepard

A bookstore that refuses to sell its used-books

Carol Urness, recently retired University of Minnesota librarian, opened a used-book store in February in St. Anthony, Minn., consisting of about 1,000 books from her own collection, but told a Minneapolis Star Tribune reporter that often she refuses to sell a book on the shelf because she can't stand to part with it. "The first day, a woman walked in and bought three books," she said, "and I about had a stroke." "This bookstore is hard to find," she added, "and once you get here, it's almost impossible to buy anything."



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-News Item

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Announcements

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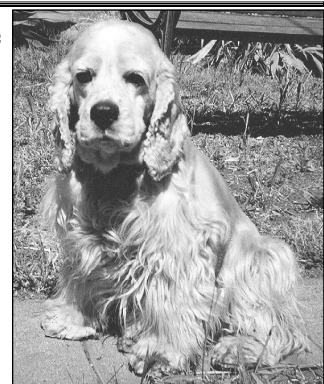
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BACK PAGE

ODDS & ENDS

Robbers clear out florist

By The Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. — A robbery by any other name would smell as stinky.

Someone swiped the entire stock of roses at Country Floral and Gifts early Thursday. And the thieves didn't stop with the 400 roses — they also took more than 100 stuffed animals and ripped apart candy bouquets to take the chocolate.

"It was a clean sweep," said owner Lynda Worm. "They stole our vacuum cleaner."

Most upsetting to her, however, was the loss of a three foot, bright pink, stuffed bunny that had been in the family for 15 years.

"It's a sentimental thing," she said. "We just want it back."

Man seeks revenge for bad haircut

By The Associated Press

COEUR D'ALENE, Idaho — A man who was upset over a haircut allegedly threatened to ram a salon with his pickup truck.

Paul Peyton III, 29, was upset with the grooming he received at a Fantastic Sam's salon, Kootenai County prosecutors argued this week during Peyton's trial.

Peyton drove his truck onto the sidewalk in front of a salon in Post Falls on Dec. 12. Peyton denied trying to hit the salon, telling police he had put the truck in the wrong gear and accidentally lurched forward.

Peyton is charged with felony aggravated assault. If convicted, he could be sentenced to up to five years in

prison and a \$5,000 fine.

Peyton had gotten a haircut a week earlier at a different Fantastic Sam's in Coeur d'Alene. Unsatisfied with the job, he later returned and was offered a second cut — after which he demanded his money back.

Peyton was told he would have to talk to the owner, Carol Holloway, at the Post Falls shop, reports said. He later went to the shop.

"He just looked angry and distraught," Vali Moore, receptionist at the store, testified. Peyton complained to a waiting customer that he had a "butchered haircut," Moore said.

Peyton got into his truck, backed it up and then accelerated over the curb and onto the sidewalk in front of the store, witnesses said. Peyton then sped away.

Retired pilot sets Navy record

By The Associated Press

WHITING FIELD, Fla. — A pilot instructor who has flown more hours in T-34C trainers than any other active-duty naval aviator has retired with a record that probably never will be broken.

Lt. Cmdr. Bradley Mason made his final flight Wednesday in the same Turbo Mentor that he used as a student pilot in 1983 at this base on the Florida panhandle.

That gave the 41-year-old Miami native 4,438.8 hours in T-34Cs during his 20-year Navy career.

His record is safe because the Navy is phasing out the aging Turbo Mentors and replacing them with a new plane, the T6-A Texan II. Both are single-engine turbo-propes used for primary flight training.

Mason said his final flight was routine but difficult.

"Actually, it wasn't until I came around and saw the runway when I said 'Oh my God, this is the last time I'm doing this,'" he said. "And I must say I nailed that landing."

Mason will retire in nearby Pensacola with is wife, Becky, and their three children. He plans to look for work as a commercial pilot.

Rare bird found in Michigan

By The Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — A one-of-a-kind bird is now making its home at the World Bird Sanctuary in suburban St. Louis.

Executive director Walter Crawford said Thursday that an albino Black Vulture — the only one known to exist and just the second ever seen — arrived about five weeks ago. The white bird with pink eyes was found in Michigan.

Wildlife officials feared the vulture could not survive in the wild. The World Bird Sanctuary, which houses about 300 birds, is recognized worldwide for its educational and rehabilitation efforts.

Crawford said the bird is now healthy and living next to another rare bird — an albino Great Horned Owl.

Experts believe the vulture is about a year old. After DNA testing determines the vulture's sex — birds don't have external sex organs — officials will decide whether to try to breed it, Crawford said.

"It's a beautiful, beautiful bird," Crawford said. "That and the owl are probably two of the prettiest ones I've ever seen."

The albino appearance is the result of lack of pigment in the skin and feathers. The only previously recorded albino Black Vulture was discovered in Kansas about 20 years ago, Crawford said.

YOUR OPINION MATTERS! Send your letters to Santa Monica Daily Press: Attn. Editor
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