

FREE

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Carolyn Sackariason/Daily Press
Comedian Paula Poundstone is surrounded by members of the press and her supporters outside the Santa Monica Courthouse Wednesday. A judge allowed her to go home after being at a Malibu treatment facility for the past six months.

Paula Poundstone released from rehab; goes home

BY CAROLYN SACKARIASON
Daily Press Staff Writer

Comedian Paula Poundstone had little to say to a judge Wednesday when he released her from the Promises drug and alcohol treatment center in Malibu after a six-month stay.

Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Bernard Kamins praised Poundstone, a Santa Monica resident, for her progress in the effort to stay sober. Kamins released her from the Malibu drug and alcohol rehabilitation center where she was sentenced after pleading no contest to child endangerment. She went home after the court hearing.

"You have remained abstinent and have done all the other tasks I asked you to do," Kamins told Poundstone during a hearing. "Today is really a day for commendation rather than to bite you."

He also commended her for attending last week's session of drug court to see how the county program works for other people who are addicted to drugs and alcohol.

"People just like you were there, from all walks of life," Kamins told Poundstone.

Poundstone, who has blamed her problems on drinking, was asked by Kamins how she felt about her treatment.

"Fine," she said softly, declining to share further feelings. Poundstone spent much of the proceedings shaking her right leg quickly, with about a half dozen friends and supporters sitting behind her.

With the judge's encouragement she added, "I feel fine."

The judge also sentenced Poundstone to a day in jail for violating probation but credited it as time served.

The comedian actually spent a half-day in jail last month for taking an unspecified medication that wasn't part of her rehab program.

Prosecutors haven't discussed the nature of the alleged actions that led to charges against Poundstone, 41. Her attorney, Steven Cron, has said that in one instance witnesses believed she appeared intoxicated while driving with children.

"Today is really a day for commendation rather than to bite you."

— BERNARD KAMINS
LA County Superior court judge

Poundstone will receive counseling one or two days a week and a psychiatrist will monitor her medication. She also will be allowed to travel to performances.

"I'm going to do this for you," Kamins said. "Now that you have proven yourself, you may leave up to three days at a time as long as you tell your probation officer beforehand."

For longer periods, Poundstone would have to get the judge's permission. Kamins expressed concern about "temptations" Poundstone may face on the road.

See POUNDSTONE, page 3

Promises maybe, but can't get no satisfaction

Malibu center settles lawsuit over patient's unsatisfied tastebuds

BY CAROLYN SACKARIASON
Daily Press Staff Writer

If you want a first rate meal, don't patronize a drug and treatment facility.

Promises Treatment Center in Malibu recently settled a lawsuit after a patient claimed he was misled into thinking the drug and alcohol treatment facility had "first rate" meals. That was one of the claims by a man known only as "Charles S.," who sued

Promises in Los Angeles Superior Court. He claimed the treatment center took advantage of him while he was inebriated at check-in and unable to read the paperwork.

After a few days of his stay there, Charles S. apparently found the quality of the food to be sobering. In addition, he felt the recreational amenities weren't what Promises had — well — promised.

Charles S. thought he was told the treatment center had a gym and a heated pool. He also felt he'd be getting daily snacks during his stay, his suit claims. None of that was provided, he asserted. He also thought he heard that the center had a success rate of 80 percent, which would give him decent odds of staying sober. His suit claims that the director of

See PROMISES, page 3

Santa Monica cabbie wins back identity in court

BY CAROLYN SACKARIASON
Daily Press Staff Writer

A Santa Monica judge Wednesday intervened in the city's cab wars, effectively ordering one competitor to change the name of his company.

The ruling came when the judge found the name "Express Cab Co." was likely to hurt the older "Express Taxi Co." by siphoning off customers. So pro tem judge Gregory Glynn ordered Kostan Gasparyan to change the company's name or pay \$5,000 in damages in what began as a trademark infringement case in small claims court.

Express Taxi Co. owner Ayman Radwan claimed Gasparyan's cab company, Express Cab Co. has a name deceptively close to his, and could confuse customers. The two cabbies first appeared in court in October, but an earlier judge postponed the case because he was unfamiliar with deceptive

See CABBIE, page 3

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LOCAL



Judge rules that cab names are confusing

CABBIE, from page 1

business and trademark law.

When Glynn took up the case he decided it was about trademark infringement. Glynn termed his ruling a “backhanded injunction.” While it’s difficult for a small claims judge to order a company to change its name, Glynn found no difficulty in ordering Gasparyan to change the name of his company within 30 days or pay Radwan \$5,000.

“The test is a likelihood of confusion and I can make that determination easily,” he said. “There are a lot of names. There are an infinite number of names out there,” Glynn told Gasparyan through an Armenian interpreter. “If you change the name there is no judgment.”

Gasparyan said he was unsure whether he would change the name or appeal the judge’s decision. He said he would research how much it will cost him to get a new business identity.

Radwan sued for \$5,000, the maximum amount in small claims, but said he wanted the name change more than the money.

“I am extremely happy and excited,” Radwan said. “I totally think that justice has been served. I hope for the guy that he has a good business but he has to change the name because it’s mine. I think the judge was extremely fair because he knew that this case is indeed confusing to the public and he knew I was not in it for the money.”

Glynn didn’t require that Radwan prove he lost \$5,000 in business due to the name confusion. The only proof Radwan had to show was written testimony from other cabbies who were confused into thinking his operation was Express Cab even though it is really Express Taxi. Even Radwan’s insurance company got it

wrong and issued his policy under the name “Express Cab.” And the judge and the two cabbies got confused during testimony on whose paperwork was whose because of the similar names.

Glynn was convinced after only 10 minutes of testimony that Radwan has the right to the name “express” because he had filed it with the city of Santa Monica before Gasparyan did. But he could only grant a stayed money judgment because of the limitations of small claims court.

“The problem is this case doesn’t belong in small claims court because you want an injunction,” he told Radwan, but then ruled in favor of his claim in a way that got around his inability to issue a name change order.

The cab wars began when Express Cab Co. came to Santa Monica this summer. Radwan claimed Gasparyan set up shop in the same city intentionally. While it’s not illegal to compete, trademark law allows protection for a recognizable name used in commerce.

Radwan spent much of the year 2000 researching the market and developing his business plan. He selected the word “express” as a way to create the impression of a distinct service. But when Gasparyan showed up, Radwan became concerned that a bad experience with Gasparyan’s cab service could mean lost business for him due to the confusion.

Gasparyan charges more, at \$2.60 a mile to Radwan’s \$2.20. “They don’t speak English and this could be a catastrophe because they charge high rates and if they (customers) have a bad experience at \$2.60 a mile they will never, ever call express anything again,” Radwan told the Daily Press last month. “I cannot notice the damages right now. I can feel it though.”

Promises settles; says patient’s suit is ‘frivolous’

PROMISES, from page 1

Promises told him about the success rate.

But that’s not what Charles S. was told in group therapy, he complained. There he learned from his counselor that only one

“You have to remember we are dealing with really sick people.”

Promises representative

in 12 patients — about 8 percent, not 80 — would emerge on the road to lifelong sobriety. He also never received individual therapy, which he came to expect.

“The representations were in fact false and defendants knew that they were false,” the suit says. “The misrepresentations were made by defendants with the intention of promoting their own interests

... These representations were made to plaintiff with full knowledge by defendants that plaintiff suffered from alcoholism and (paperwork) was first presented to plaintiff at a time that defendants knew he was intoxicated and unable to read.”

The complaint didn’t elaborate on how Charles S. came to gain his expectations if he’d temporarily lost his reading ability.

The suit sought a refund of the \$31,000 he claims to have paid Promises. The plaintiff’s attorney, David Brien, said the suit had been settled for an undisclosed amount.

But a Promises representative, who asked not to be identified, said the former patient’s claims are untrue and the case was settled because it was considered a nuisance suit. He also said Promises does have a heated pool and employs three gourmet chefs.

“Nobody ever made a representation that wasn’t the truth at Promises,” he said. “It was settled because it’s ridiculous. People can sue you for anything and you have to make a decision on how to spend your time and energy.

“You have to remember we are dealing with really sick people.”

Jailed for jaywalking



Carolyn Sackariason/Daily Press

Doris Johnson was arrested for jaywalking Wednesday on the Third Street Promenade. She was handcuffed after refusing to sign a citation Santa Monica Police attempted to issue her for crossing Santa Monica Boulevard without a green light.

The Santa Monica elementary school teacher gave officers Edgar Navaro and Adam Gwartz a hard time, claiming she was being harassed because she is black. She argued with officers that a white woman crossed before her and wasn’t stopped, which is why she refused to accept the jaywalking ticket.

“I am getting really upset for something so idiotic,” she yelled. “I stopped when you told me to stop and she continued and I am being harassed.” Her claims of harassment drew a small crowd along the Promenade who watched a simple jaywalking incident turn into an arrest.

“I don’t know why you are making a federal case out of this. You can arrest me and take me to jail but there will be consequences,” she said. “Because you are a macho cop, officer Navaro, you want to detain me. I will have your badge for this.”

Poundstone allowed to travel for performances

POUNDSTONE, from page 1

He told her attorney and the prosecutor to come up with a monitoring plan.

“It’s really more for her to have a support person, someone she can check with,” Kamins said. He also scheduled a progress report for Feb. 20.

Prosecutor Gina Satriano said outside court she hoped monitoring would help.

“The more assistance that Ms. Poundstone has, gives her the better chance to succeed,” Satriano said.

Cron said Poundstone was happy to go home.

“I think she’s glad that it’s over. She spent a long time in a rehab center that is normally designed for shorter periods of stay. She’s ready to go,” he said. “She doesn’t have complete freedom to do what she wants, but she isn’t confined.”

Asked whether or not Poundstone’s troubles will end now that the criminal charges

are over, Cron said: “I don’t think this whole experience will help her professionally.”

Cron said Poundstone’s three adopted children will have monitored visits but they will not be allowed to stay with her for the time being. He said family court will decide the future of the children. She also will have to submit to random drug tests while on probation and perform community service work.

Poundstone, who also had two foster children until her June 27 arrest in Malibu, pleaded no-contest Sept. 12 to felony child endangerment and misdemeanor inflicting injury on a child. She was sentenced in October to 180 days at the Promises center, including 125 days she had already voluntarily spent there, and five years of probation.

Criminal counts alleging lewd conduct with a child were dropped.

— Associated Press writer Cadonna M. Peyton contributed to this report.

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The Santa Monica Daily Press is a free newspaper that is circulated throughout all six commercial zones within the Santa Monica city limits.

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STATE

Airport commissioners give relief to concessioners

By the Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Airport commissioners allocated nearly \$9.5 million in rent relief to concessionaires at Los Angeles and Ontario international airports who have seen drops in revenue since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

The commission voted unanimously in favor of the funding but postponed a vote to increase parking costs at both airports. The proposal called for boosting the price of parking at LAX's central terminal from \$24 to \$35 a day. The 24-hour charge for self-parking in the central terminal area was last boosted from \$16 to \$24 in October 2000.

Rate increases would also occur at Ontario and a park-and-ride lot in the San Fernando Valley, both operated by the city.

Revenues from parking lots and concessions have dropped since the terrorist attacks and higher security costs have sent airport budgets spiraling. LAX alone lost nearly \$36 million from Sept. 11 to Oct. 31 because of lower revenues and added security expenses.

Airport concession operators have been hard hit because fewer people are flying. The relief package approved Tuesday allows concessionaires to skip their monthly minimum payments from Oct. 1 through Dec. 31. Their rent will now be determined by a percentage of their actual sales.

Labor unions complained that some concession operators have not adhered to their contracts negotiated after campaigns to organize employees. The unions have demanded that the airport deny any rent relief to concessionaires that do not abide by their contracts.

Viacom's first president Thomas Tannenbaum dies

By the Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Thomas D. Tannenbaum, a television production and development official for four decades who became the first president of Viacom Productions, has died. He was 69.

Tannenbaum died of heart and liver failure Saturday at the Motion Picture and Television Hospital in Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Times reported Wednesday.

Some of his television movies and series credits include: "The Odd Couple," "The Brady Bunch," "Mission: Impossible," "Matlock" and the "Father Dowling Mysteries."

Although much of his career was in television, he began in film with MGM in 1952. He was an associate producer of "Raintree County," a sweeping 1957 film about the Civil War era starring Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift.

He moved to Famous Artists Agency's television division and then became president of Seven Arts Television. During later work with David Wolper Productions and Paramount Television he supervised such hit series as "Mannix," "Love, American Style," "The Odd

Couple," "The Brady Bunch" and "Mission: Impossible." He also produced the 1971 series "Longstreet," starring James Franciscus.

While working for Universal Television, Tannenbaum supervised production of Emmy Award-winners as "Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys" and Lauren Bacall's first television special, "Applause." He also helped foster such series as "Kojak," "Switch" and "The Incredible Hulk."

Joining Viacom as its president in 1984, Tannenbaum brought together Dean Hargrove and Fred Silverman to produce "Perry Mason" shows in a feature-length format and the "Matlock," "Jake and the Fatman" and "Father Dowling Mysteries" series.

He was credited with encouraging writers, directors and producers instead of getting in their way, which attracted top talent to Viacom projects. Viacom became a major supplier of movies of the week under his guidance.

Tannenbaum is survived by three children, Audrey, Eric and Madelyn; and four grandchildren.

May the force be with eBay

By The Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — The Force is strong with eBay — or so "Star Wars" creator George Lucas is hoping.

Lucas is hosting a rare auction for some of his prized movie props on the Internet site, in an effort to raise money to help victims of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Bidding was scheduled to start Wednesday for an authentic storm trooper helmet used in the filming of "The Empire Strikes Back" and "Return of the Jedi" and a light saber carried by villain Darth Maul in "The Phantom Menace."

Bidding on the helmet will start at

\$2,500 and the light saber will start at \$2,000, according to Lucasfilm licensing executive Howard Roffman.

"Early on, George undertook an effort to be very preservation-oriented and was very methodical about storing and caring for all the movie props," Roffman said. "We don't let these things go very often."

Lucas' special-effects division, Industrial Light & Magic, is offering original models of various spacecraft and robots to the auction.

Money taken in will be donated to the Sept. 11 Children's Fund, which provides counseling to children related to victims of the attacks.

NATIONAL



U.S. soldier killed in Afghanistan from CA

BY SIMON AVERY

Associated Press Writer

LOS ANGELES — A 28-year-old career soldier and former high school football star from California was among the three elite Special Forces soldiers killed in Afghanistan, his family confirmed Wednesday.

Staff Sgt. Brian Cody Prosser, remembered warmly by family and friends as brave, patriotic and a natural leader, died Wednesday in what military officials described as a “friendly fire” accident. Twenty other soldiers were wounded when a bomb missed its Taliban target and landed about 100 yards from them.

Prosser’s home was in Frazier Park, a tiny bucolic mountain town popular as a day-trip destination with Los Angeles res-

“He was a good guy, very gutsy and patriotic. He was the kind of kid who would do whatever needed to be done. I think that’s why he went into the Special Forces.”

— TINA VALLONE
Friend of the family

idents 50 miles away. His brother and parents also live there.

“He was a leader, a warrior and proud to be a soldier,” Prosser’s 22-year-old brother, Jarudd Prosser, said by phone from his Frazier Park home. “He’s my role model.”

Prosser, one of four siblings, was a 10-year veteran of the Army, joining soon after graduation from Maricopa High School, where he had been captain of the football team.

He is survived by his wife, Shawna, and two other brothers, Mike and Reed, as well as his parents, Brian and Ingrid Prosser.

“He was a good guy, very gutsy and patriotic,” said Tina Vallone, a friend of

the family for more than 30 years. “He was the kind of kid who would do whatever needed to be done, I think that’s why he went into the Special Forces.”

Friends said Prosser, whose father once ran a local welding business, was also known by virtually everyone in the tiny town nestled in a section of Los Padres National Forest where the elevation ranges from 4,000 to 6,000 feet and where streets, many still unpaved, are named trails. The community and several surrounding villages are home to about 8,400 people.

“This whole community is affected. The Prosser name is pretty renowned here,” said Carla Johnston, who said she had known Prosser all his life. Her husband, Joshua, went to high school with him, and although the two were not friendly then, Joshua Johnston said Wednesday, he had the greatest respect for him.

“We disagreed and fought a lot,” he recalled. “But now that he did what he did, and my little family is safer for it, I respect the man. I really appreciate what he did.”

Although Carla Johnston recalled Prosser as being shy in high school, Jean Miller, who manages Alpine Lumber where he worked during those years recalled him as “quite a character.”

“He had a sense of humor,” she added with a laugh.

Jarudd Prosser said the family knew the risk his brother was taking in Afghanistan, adding that when he heard he was about to leave he made sure he “left nothing unsaid.”

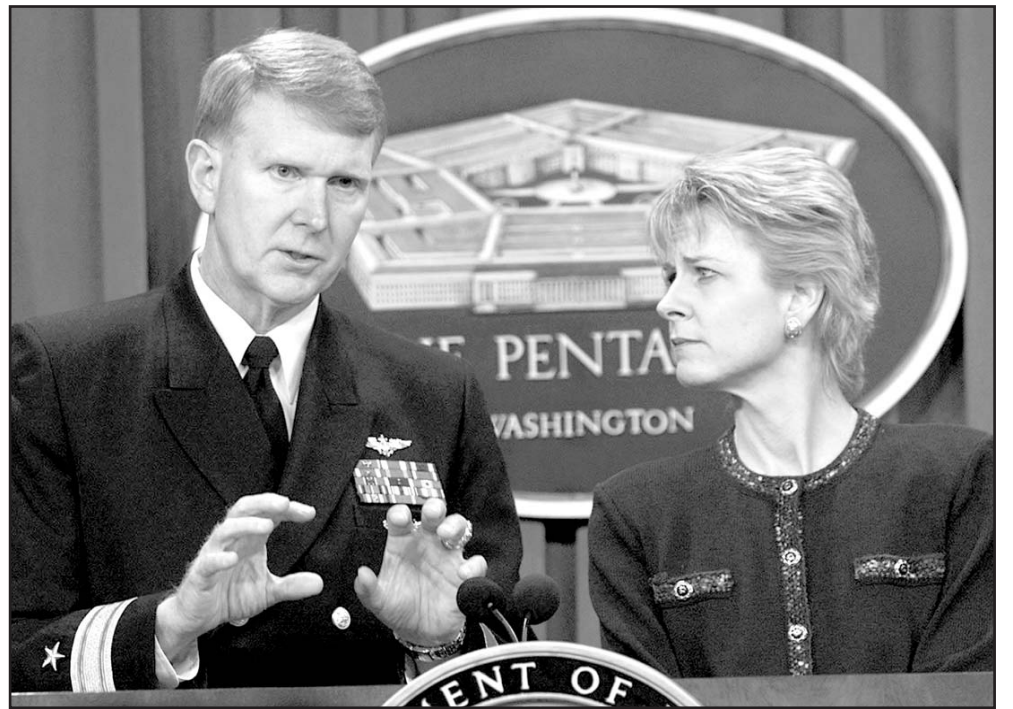
The other soldiers who died were identified as Master Sgt. Jefferson Donald Davis, 39, of Watauga, Tenn., and Sgt. 1st Class Daniel Petithory, 32, of Cheshire, Mass.

All were members of the Army’s 3rd Battalion, 5th Special Forces Group, stationed at Fort Campbell, Ky.

Five Afghan fighters also were killed in Wednesday’s incident and an undetermined number were wounded.

“In a war, people die,” Jarudd Prosser said. “It puts a lot of things in perspective. It really makes me think when you care about someone, you have to tell them that. When I heard he was going overseas, I left nothing unsaid.”

Prosser said he last spoke to his brother three months ago. He said he didn’t know when his brother arrived in Afghanistan because the details about his assignments were classified.



Associated Press

Pentagon spokesman Rear Adm. John Stufflebeem and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Victoria Clarke brief reporters at the Pentagon about the three American soldiers who were killed in Afghanistan when a bomb launched from an Air Force B-52 bomber missed its target on Wednesday. The Pentagon initially reported that two were killed, but Clarke announced that one of the injured soldiers had died en route to a hospital.

Enron shares rise amidst the rumble

BY KRISTEN HAYS

Associated Press Writer

HOUSTON — Shares of Enron Corp. jumped again Wednesday as the company that was once the world’s largest energy trader tries to emerge from bankruptcy as a viable business.

Enron stock rose 16 percent, or 14 cents, to close at \$1.01 on the New York Stock Exchange. A day earlier, shares rose 118 percent after investors learned the company had secured \$1.5 billion in short-term financing from two banks.

A year ago, shares were worth more than \$80.

Analysts said the surge likely shows that shareholders are gambling that Enron’s stock might be worth something after it completes Chapter 11 bankruptcy. But they aren’t counting on an extended rebound by Enron.

“This is an issue of psychology more than it is economics,” said Mike Greenberger, a bankruptcy and securities professor at the University of Maryland School of Law. “It could go either way, but my bet is that this is not going to be enough to resurrect their apparent reliability as a counterparty.”

Just months ago, Enron was the country’s seventh biggest company in revenue. But investors and traders alike evaporated amid revelations of questionable partnerships that helped keep billions of dollars in debt off its books and the company’s acknowledgment that it overstated profits for four years.

The company’s credit rating then fell apart, and one-time suitor Dynegy Inc. backed out of an \$8.4 billion buyout. Enron filed for Chapter 11 on Sunday and has since laid off 5,000 employees.

OPEC expected to cut oil output; Russia reduces supplies

BY BRUCE STANLEY

AP Business Writer

LONDON — OPEC is poised to trigger a 6 percent cut in its official crude oil output after Russia, relenting to intense pressure, agreed to reduce its production by 150,000 barrels a day to help prop up sagging oil prices.

Russia’s decision Wednesday ended a showdown with the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries that threatened to unleash a price war for crude. One energy analyst forecast that the overall decrease in oil output would nudge gasoline prices higher but said he expected the rise would be modest.

“It’s a very positive move in the right direction,” said Kuwaiti Oil Minister Adel

al-Sabeeh.

Oil futures surged almost \$1 higher on the news, then fell back as skepticism grew about Russia’s resolve to honor its commitment.

OPEC was preparing to issue a communique Thursday announcing it would proceed with cuts of 1.5 million barrels a day in its own production, said an official from the group’s headquarters in Vienna, Austria. OPEC’s secretary-general, Ali Rodriguez, was conferring with OPEC oil ministers on the document’s wording, the official said on condition of anonymity.

After the decision in Russia, attention shifted to Norway, the world’s third-largest exporter of oil behind Saudi Arabia and Russia. OPEC has asked Norway for similar cuts.

A firm commitment from Norway, together with the pledge from Russia, would come very close to satisfying OPEC’s demand that oil-producing countries outside the group cooperate with its plan to reduce its own production by 1.5 million barrels a day, or 6 percent. OPEC supplies about a third of the world’s oil.

“I think it makes triggering the OPEC cuts a near certainty,” said George Beranek of The Petroleum Finance Co., a Washington consultancy.

“That’s going to mean, over time, higher crude prices, which will be reflected in higher refined product prices,” he said.

However, energy analysts noted that U.S. inventories of gasoline and other refined products are plentiful. “I really

don’t think we have to worry about a return to last spring’s very high gasoline prices,” Beranek said.

In an unusual act of diplomatic brinkmanship, OPEC insisted last month that non-OPEC producers promise to trim their output by a total of 500,000 barrels a day before it would put its own cuts into effect Jan. 1.

Russia had said for weeks it would cut output by just 50,000 barrels a day. By agreeing Wednesday to triple the size of that cut, Russian oil companies appeared to acknowledge that OPEC members were probably better equipped than they to weather a collapse in prices caused by a potential glut in crude.

COMICS

The Dinette Set by Julie Larson



Natural Selection® By Russ Wallace



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edge city

by TERRY & PATTY LABAN



Reality Check® By Dave Whammond



Speed Bump® By Dave Coverly



CROSSWORD By THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 North Pole sound
- 5 On the agenda
- 11 Actor Epps
- 12 Vigorous
- 13 Give temporarily
- 14 Relaxed
- 15 Try
- 17 Outlaw
- 18 Theater worker
- 22 Gave out hands
- 24 Pester
- 25 Everything
- 26 Collar
- 27 Inclines
- 30 "The Taming of the Shrew" city
- 32 Fable writer
- 33 Planet
- 34 Quixote target
- 38 Placid
- 41 Tennis' Nastase
- 42 Charm
- 43 Different
- 44 Hotel patrons
- 45 Fast fliers

DOWN

- 1 Golf goal
- 2 Portent
- 3 Bouncy items
- 4 Trial
- 5 Europe native
- 6 Left in a hurry
- 7 Opposed
- 8 After-noon social
- 9 Golf's Ernie
- 10 Color
- 16 Busy worker
- 19 Fliers
- 20 Jacob's brother
- 21 Singer McEntire
- 22 Computer contents
- 23 Writer Wiesel
- 28 Locker room items
- 29 Piano type

PACT	SECRET
ECHO	EXHALE
TRAY	LAIN
SET	HELP
TOAST	CAL
CREPT	SCHMO
HARE	LAMA
EVENT	BARON
FED	AGENT
FROG	ERR
TOBAGO	ARIA
AWAKEN	CENT
BERETS	EDGE

Yesterday's answer

- 21 Singer McEntire
- 30 Pea holder
- 31 Hosts
- 35 Jersey team
- 36 Roster
- 37 Dregs
- 38 Droop
- 39 Cassowary's cousin
- 40 Regret

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12-6

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NEWS OF THE WEIRD

by Chuck Shepard

Man run over by cops after making point

• In an incident resembling a movie scene, Alan Martin, 49, was hospitalized in fair condition after being run over on Oct. 1. He had deliberately lain down in the middle of a busy street in Daly City, Calif., as a protest against officers' confiscating his RV, which had just been involved in a minor accident. Martin refused to budge from the street so officers tried to shield his body for a while by blocking a lane of traffic with their cruisers, but then along came one of those notorious California hot-pursuit police chases, with the car driven by fleeing suspect Kevin Domino, 37, accidentally ramming the stopped cruiser, then driving over Martin's body, then trying to straighten out his car and inadvertently running over Martin again, before taking off. (Police caught Domino a few blocks later when his car stalled out.)

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BACK PAGE

Anthrax scare won't halt Santa's letters

BY REX W. HUPPKE

Associated Press Writer

SANTA CLAUS, Ind. — Pat Koch stood before a neighborhood garden club, making her annual plea for volunteers to help answer the thousands of letters to Santa that pour into this little town's post office each holiday season.

But this year, Koch asked whether anyone was afraid to open letters because of the anthrax scare.

What happened next was perhaps the kind of bravery few would expect from a garden club.

"There wasn't one single person who raised their hand," Koch said triumphantly. "In fact, I think more people signed up this year than ever before."

As it is in Santa Claus, Ind., so it seems to be around the country, from New York City to the North Pole. The anthrax-by-mail attacks are not stopping volunteers and postal employees from opening and responding to kids' crayon-scribbled letters to St. Nick.

"I am not going to let terrorism stand in the way of helping these kids," said Phil Piccolo, a manager of consumer affairs at the Postal Service in Hartford, Conn. "No gloves or masks here. We're just doing it."

And they are doing it even though the threat of anthrax has hit close to home, with the death of a 94-year-old Oxford, Conn., woman. The same is true in New York City, where members of Operation Santa Claus are again making sure that

tens of thousands of letter-writing kids have their faith in Father Christmas confirmed.

Diane Todd, a Postal Service spokeswoman in New York, said this year's letters are being irradiated against anthrax at a mail installation in New Jersey as a precaution, but the volunteers who help delve into the letters have not been squeamish.

"You think about the kids," she said, "and you don't want the kids to be victimized."

This is a time of year when mail carriers usually grin at the sight of envelopes marked in awkward, red and green block letters, some without stamps and some with no more of an address than this: Santa Claus. Some contain cookies, dollar bills (to buy food for the reindeer) and in some cases hay, to feed directly to the reindeer.

Unfortunately, said Mark Saunders, spokesman for the Postal Service in Washington, such letters can raise suspicions. But he said there is no national Postal Service protocol for handling letters to Santa; the agency just recommends a "common-sense approach."

The Postal Service is encouraging children to continue writing letters to Santa but is asking that they follow a few steps to avoid raising handlers' suspicions: Youngsters should include their return address, and enclose only letter-size paper, not bulky objects.

In Fairbanks, Alaska, a mere 14-mile sleigh ride from the town of North Pole, Nancy Schmitt and her fellow postal

workers are as busy as ever responding to letters from children around the world.

People take time during their lunch hour to write letters, they take them home and work on them around the kitchen table, and older school children volunteer to help out. Schmitt has single-handedly answered as many as 100 letters in one year, a small fraction of the 60,000 that deluge the Fairbanks post office.

Schmitt said she did not think twice when she sat down this year to open letters to Santa.

"How awful it would be to have your letter to Santa returned, or not answered,"

she said. "Nobody's going to make me live in fear."

Back in Santa Claus, Ind., 65-year-old volunteer Jack Hauser pointed out that the letters often contain an innocent wisdom that humanity might benefit from these days. Children ask for parents to get along, for people to stop fighting, for bad things to stop happening in the world.

"If more adults would just listen to them ...," Hauser said, his voice trailing off.

"You know, these kids expect a reply from Santa Claus," he said. "Someone has to do it."

Drug dog sniffs out teacher's stash

By the Associated Press

GEYSERVILLE, Calif. — A drug-sniffing dog plodding through a high school classroom recently led sheriff's deputies straight to a small stash of marijuana — in the teacher's briefcase.

The 1.1 grams of marijuana was small enough so that the 45-year-old Geyserville High School teacher was not arrested nor cited.

Geyserville schools superintendent

William Redman refused to discuss the drug find with The Associated Press late Wednesday.

The teacher's lawyer, Michael Fiumara, says his client is being treated unfairly as school district officials handle the matter internally.

"A teacher has a responsibility of retrieving narcotics from places and students and various other sources. That's part of the education process, too," Fiumara said.



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