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Catching up with the books

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Catching up with the books.

Adults Struggle to Overcome Illiteracy

By Jerry Tegarden

Larry Fenner used to go to work with a secret. Every time he faced his 20 salesmen, including several with one or more college degrees, he hid his disability. Larry, 32, president of E-Z Escape Fire Ladders, couldn't read or write.

Fenner began to fight his problem last April by enrolling in Whatcom Literacy Council's Adult Basic Education course.

"Before I came to school, my wife was the only one who knew of my problem," Fenner said in an interview before one of his twice weekly tutoring sessions at Whatcom Community College's Fountain District facility in Bellingham.

As a child in Richmond, Va., Fenner made it through the third grade in public school before his learning disability prompted the school administrators to transfer him to the Randolph School in Richmond. He characterized Randolph School as a "slow school," and said the teachers never helped him learn to read.

"I felt like I was the dumbest child on earth. People think you're trash (when you can't read), but the mentally strong ones will survive," he said.

"When I got out of the school, they sent me to a trade school to learn to be an auto mechanic. I lasted a week. The teachers set the books out on the desk and said 'study.' Well, I couldn't read the books so I hit the streets," Fenner said. "It wasn't only me. A lot of people from our school wound up in the same place and had the same problems. We went straight to the streets."

As a black child growing up in the South, Fenner never thought to question that he was missing out on what everyone else was learning in grade school.

"In the South, teachers, especially white teachers, couldn't be questioned. To question the teachers was to question the values of the black culture," he said.

"I've seen some very bitter people whose wives didn't believe the stories they'd tell until a few of us would sit down together and talk about it. Then the wives would say, 'Could this all be true?'"

In 1983, Fenner moved to Bellingham with his wife and children to help market a safety ladder invented by his father-in-law.

“I felt like I was the dumbest child on earth. People think you're trash (when you can't read)...."  
-- Larry Fenner

KLIPSUN
Up until last spring, Larry Fenner (right) could not read. Now, with the help of Carolyn Rice (left), a Whatcom County Literacy Council tutor, Fenner is overcoming his disability.

"I built my own sales force, totally by myself. I started with 10 salesmen, and I've done sales seminars and attitude training seminars, and I've done them all by memory. Everybody thought I was a great reader, but I couldn't read at all or write," Fenner said.

Last spring Fenner made the decision to seek help from the Whatcom Literacy Council because the demands of his business made hiding his disability increasingly difficult. Wilma Totten, coordinator for the council, interviewed Fenner and eventually paired him with first-time tutor Carolyn Rice.

"People like Larry aren't dumb, they just don't learn the way we do," Rice said. "He never had a chance to learn the skills necessary to read when he should have and it takes incredible courage for him to even come in, admit that he can't read and begin to work to learn."

"I've said a thousand times that it's a blessing that I have Carolyn for a teacher. I've never had this type of teaching," Fenner said. "Two months after I started learning to read I was at Birch Bay with my wife and kids. I was sitting on the beach and I read three stories in a newspaper (News For You, a newspaper for adult literacy programs) and I only missed two or three words."

"I remember Larry showing me a Seattle Post-Intelligencer article about him, his father-in-law and the ladder," Rice said. "It had a picture of him and I asked him to read it to me. I didn't know that was the first time he'd ever even tried to read the story."

Like the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, News For You contains the same type of news articles and features as any newspaper. It is written with a vocabulary that is compatible with literacy program students, but the subjects are meant to appeal to an adult population.

The newspaper is just one of the special tools adult literacy programs use to stimulate and maintain reading interest among adults. Other teaching tools used in the Whatcom County program include a series of literary classics and sports biographies reproduced in a comic book format. From these small paperbacks, adult literacy students learn what most readers in America take for granted. Plays by William Shakespeare; novels by Jack London, Jules Verne, Herman Melville and Mark Twain; and biographies of sports and political figures in American history finally become accessible.

"Our people have never read all the things that make you and I Americans. They're cut off from a great deal of our culture," Totten said.

As literacy council coordinator, Totten pairs students with tutors and recruits new tutors and trainers in twice-yearly publicity drives. The training sessions for tutors take place at the beginning of the academic year and at the start of the calendar year.

"Wintertime is the best time we've found to keep tutors and students going," Totten said. "People seem to have more time then, and to be less outdoor-oriented. They think in terms of doing something like this and, consequently, we take advantage of that. If a tutor and student are doing well by summer, we expect them to continue working together, though at a reduced rate, and to pick it up again in the fall.

"We expect tutors and students to meet one and one-half to two hours twice a week," she said. "Less than that is a waste of time." She added that tutors put in additional time in preparation, and students must practice outside the sessions.

Students and tutors get together for tutoring sessions in a neutral atmosphere, such as the study center at the Bellingham Vocational-Technical School. Distractions, such as ringing telephones and children, forced the council to abandon their earlier practice of tutoring in private homes. In the center, students can sometimes help each other by sharing skills.

"I was over at the learning center at the tech school one day, and sitting at a table were two of our students," Totten said. "One was a Native American and the other was a young woman from Vietnam. He was coaching her in pronunciation and she was coaching him in reading. Her reading
skills were higher than his. Between the two they were reading their way through this book and helping each other.

The literacy council teaches two different programs to two types of students. The first, Adult Basic Education, is for Americans who never learned to read or write. The second, English as a Second Language (ESL), is for immigrants and refugees. Totten said the council served nearly 200 students last year, and that the proportion of students in each category was 50-50. The council offers both programs to clients without requiring them to pay any tuition.

Clients are referred to the literacy council by social agencies and other students. Totten also said many of their students come by way of referrals from the Department of Labor and Industries.

"We're seeing more of those people than we have in the past. It's very common for someone who can't read and write well. They can't get any other work than heavy back work -- pick and shovel work. There isn't much pick and shovel work around anymore," Totten said.

"A lot of heavy work also means injuries. They're not going to be able to work again in that kind of job, so they've got to learn to use their brain."

"People like Larry aren't dumb, they just don't learn the way we do. He never had a chance to learn the skills necessary to read when he should have and it takes incredible courage for him to even come in, admit that he can't read and begin to work to learn."

-- Carolyn Rice

As American society has moved from an industrial base to an information base, the reading skills necessary to survive have become more demanding. In the past, a fourth- or fifth-grade education was sufficient for a person to survive. Now higher reading skills are required for the most common tasks.

"It takes an eighth-grade reading skill to read the directions on the back of a box of Jello and an eleventh-grade level skill to make sense of a driver's license testing manual," Totten said.

All of the tutorial and office staff are volunteers, except for one work-study position available through Western Washington University and Totten's job as coordinator. New tutor volunteers receive 12 hours of training before Totten pairs them with a student. Tutors sign a contract with the council that requires them to make at least a six-month commitment to stay with the program.

"There is a certain amount of time in recruiting and screening tutors and making certain they know how the council works and that it's really for them. There is the time of working with the student, my time that is, and then the time getting those two together and nurturing that tutoring relationship. We can't invest all that time in anything less than a six-month commitment and we'd like to see tutors work for at least a year," Totten said.

The Peace Corps refers potential volunteers to the literacy council for tutoring experience before applicants try to work for their agency. Totten said many former tutors request letters of recommendation from her for prospective employers around the world.

"We've had lots of people who have used the Whatcom Literacy Council ESL training as a springboard to teaching English in Asian countries. That's great as far as we're concerned. If it's grist to their mill, it's extra motivation, and that makes them a good tutor."

As of January 1988, Fenner said his studies were "going great." After eight months in the program he had just read "Satisfactory" on the back of his report card.

Fenner said rags-to-riches stories and beginning business texts are keeping him busy refining his hard-earned reading skills.

"My mind is focused on the positive things and trying to better myself," Fenner said. "Once I better myself, I can help someone else."
Friday night.
She separated herself from the seething, pulsing post-puberty cramp passing for a party packed into a Garden Street house, trying to slip away from some dweeb who just sloshed his beer on her new miniskirt.

She was kind of depressed. The cute blond guy she'd been blatantly looking at all night had glanced back, but hadn't tried to approach her. A distant stereo blared the Talking Heads' "Girlfriend Is Better" and she felt worse.

She sat alone in the darkened stairwell. The fetid stench of coagulating Schlitz mixed with the musky aroma of sweat, vomit, perfume and sex. The soft swirl of drunken sensations in her brain ebbed into cold and hard reality. The weekend wall of her boy-crazy adolescence was rapidly reduced to broken hormonal rubble.

But when you're young, you tend to exaggerate that which you don't know, she thought as the guy walked over to her and smiled.

Whatever she had been thinking about slid through a sieve in the back of her mind. She smoothed her skirt and returned his smile with an ease born of experience.

"Hi," she said.
"The big thing is eye contact," Jane said.

Chiquita agreed. "Yeah, I just pick guys out, sometimes at OB (the Ocean Beach Hotel in White Rock, B.C., a bar frequented by Western students). I'll pick out bunch of guys I think are cute and stare at them. There's also slow dances -- almost every time the guy is going to try to kiss you."

"It's because I want to be wanted. I really like that feeling of 'Oh, somebody actually likes me.' If I think a guy's really cute, I guess I like the challenge of getting him."

-- Chiquita

They described a typical Thursday night -- "Ladies' Night" -- at the OB.

"First of all, you make sure the perfume is in all the right places," Chiquita said, punctuating the conversation with shrill giggles. "And your legs are freshly shaved. Nothing turns off a guy like rugburn from a slow dance!"

And when you get there, you scope out the place, bigging up all the cute guys. When you decide on just one, you start staring at him. If he finally looks at you, you smile...and hopefully he'll know you think he's cute.

"Sometimes you get too many guys going at once," Jane ejaculated. "You'll be looking at two or three cute guys and suddenly they'll all be looking back at you. It's sort of a sticky situation."

Chiquita concurred. "You have to sort of smile at them in a way that lets them know 'even though I'm not going to scam on you there's still no hard feelings, okay?'"

"First of all, you make sure the perfume is in all the right places. And your legs are freshly shaved. Nothing turns off a guy like rugburn from a slow dance!"

-- Chiquita

One time, she said, she and Jane were at the OB and they met a guy who kept buying them beer.

"I think he liked me," Chiquita said, "but we both ended up ditching him because neither of us wanted to scam (with him)."

She ended up with another guy she did want to scam with, but kept smiling and waving at the other guy because she didn't want him to be sad. It's one of the unwritten rules of the game, she explained, that you don't unnecessarily "play with their mind" or "break their heart."
"I was getting a little scared because he was always like a brother-type to me, and here he was, trying to make the moves on me," Jane said. "He was getting real close while we were slow dancing, and after the lights came back on and we walked off the dance floor, he was still holding my hand.

"And he said, 'You're going to come back to my room and drink some beers with me.' I had to brush him off quick, so I said something like 'I'd better go see what my friend is doing first.' I didn't want to scam, because I thought we were just friends and I didn't want to ruin that."

Wiggum said these situations are potentially harmful. "The problem with power in 'games' like this is it gets way out of hand and leads to all sorts of trouble a person cannot handle - acquaintance rape, date rape, etc. It destroys everything because it takes the power away from them."

Jane and Chiquita say they've had a lot of pressure put on them to have sex, but have been able to ward off the wanton lust of wayward boys. "It's like drugs - just say no," Chiquita said. "Most guys can sense (in me) that it's just not right."

Differentiating between girls who were his friends and girls who would have been his girlfriends proved to be a pitfall in playing "the game" for "Burt," a 23-year-old senior business major who moved into an off-campus apartment this year after three years in a residence hall.

Dressed in a "Generra Crew" sweatshirt and blue acid-washed Levis, Burt settled down on his sofa and began to talk about his own scamming adventures.

"When I was a freshman, things seemed so much less complicated," he said. "Getting laid was no big deal like it is now. And it was pretty much up to the guy to do the work - meeting the girls, having to be freshman and smooth at the same time, making that big first move," he said, gesturing with obscene and exaggerated pantomime.

"What freaked it up for me is that I could never be nice to girls, you know? It was easy for other guys, love 'em and leave 'em, but they (the girls) would always hang around, expecting something. I always ended up hurting their feelings. And I never wanted to do that. But I never wanted to be anybody's boyfriend, either."

He paused, deep in shallow thought. "For me it was always the challenge of making a girl want me. Not me wanting them. I would never have sex with anyone I didn't care about."

Burt described his scamming method.

"I'd get a little buzzed and I would say anything to anybody," Burt continued, walking into the kitchen and acquiring two Weinhard Ales from his roommate's refrigerator. "Not that I was shy or anything when sober. A little eye contact and I'd be over, talking to any girl about anything, just effortlessly. I didn't even hear the things I was saying.

"I'd make an excuse to get her outside, away from all the other scamming guys. Just 'I could sure use a little fresh air' or something like that. We'd walk around and we'd talk. (At some point) I would stop...just keep talking, so I could look into her eyes, read her...and if I thought I read it right, I'd lean forward and kiss her."

He told of what happened afterward.

"It was all downhill from there," Burt said, pausing to take a long, quiet pull from his beer. "I don't know how (other guys) did it. I mean, some girls understood the game and it was no problem seeing them again a day or a week later -- usually we got to be pretty good friends -- but there'd be girls who thought you really wanted a relationship with them."

"They would come by my room 'just to say hi'...but we didn't really have anything to say to each other."

So finally I'd say 'Look...' and five minutes later I'm an asshole to all this girl's friends for the rest of my life."

Burt laughed.

"You ask 'Why do I do this (scam) in the first place?' I don't know. Because they're there. That's the best explanation I can give you."

"For me it was always the challenge of making a girl want me. Not me wanting them." -- Burt

Jane and Chiquita have lived on both ends of the broken-heart string. They admit it's an uncomfortable, unpleasant business at best.

"A lot of it depends on whether or not the guy is playing the game or not," Jane said. "If they're a scammer -- and you can easily tell -- they're not going to come by later.

"But if the guy isn't a scammer, then he'll probably hang around. Wiggum thinks some students will eventually grow out of scamming.

"I would hope these people's need for power would change, that these people will examine themselves and say, 'What is it about my self-esteem that I need to bolster it in this way (scamming)? Why do I need to feel more powerful than someone else?"
Confidence and self-discipline. These words have become synonymous with the martial arts. They also refer to what Duane Sammons, sensei, or master, of the Bellingham Academy of Self-Defense, hopes to instill in his students.

Dressed in his loose-fitting, white gi, the traditional two-piece cotton garb worn during karate, Sammons quietly paced before his intent students during an evening session at the former church-turned-academy at the corner of High and Maple streets. He began to extol the virtues of focusing one's energy through relaxation, and demonstrated this focus by leading the group in speed punching exercises. One could not help but notice the black belt, adorned with four golden symbols, around his waist.

He led the class in specific punching drills, forcefully shouting out cadences in Japanese. The students' shouts could be heard outside the academy's dojo. A dojo can be a room or building devoted to the long-term commitment of training in the martial arts. A dojo has more "depth of meaning" than a classroom, Sammons said -- a meaning of commitment to the "training of the mind, body and spirit."

As the drills ended, Sammons divided the class into groups and assigned black belt students to instruct each group. The black belt students bowed in deference to their sensei and began their tasks. Sammons retired to a corner of the dojo and began practicing a complicated, speedy kata (a series of blocking and punching drills).

As his body whirled across the highly polished wooden floor, fighting an imaginary opponent, students sometimes stopped what they were doing to admire the skillful display of their sensei, until admonishments from the black belt students would bring them back to their own tasks. Sammons ended his kata, breathing deeply and evenly to relax.

The 50-year-old Sammons has devoted almost half of his life to training himself in the ways of karate, and he juggles a full-time insurance job with the task of teaching the art to others.

After the strenuous workout and
shower, Sammons settled into a chair with a cherry Coke in his hand. The influence karate has had on him was apparent in his surroundings and his physical appearance. In his warm, comfortably-cluttered office at the dojo, he was surrounded by the weapons and accoutrements of his art. Throwing axes, armor and various swords lay stacked in piles around the room. Sammons also has black belts in the arts of Kendo and laido, two forms of Japanese fencing. Pictures of oriental men and several framed oriental inscriptions adorned the walls. A green, jade-like statue of a sitting lion sat on a table next to a carved, wooden fist -- the symbol of his dojo.

With his short, thinning, light brown hair, lightly-freckled, white skin and calm demeanor, Sammons seemed to be a living contradiction to the oriental artwork and violent tools lying about the room. His relaxed yet alert manner were the only clues to his combative skills. The fit of his snug cotton shirt was testimony to the healthy physique underneath -- a physique that earlier in the evening blocked, punched and kicked with lightning speed and potentially deadly accuracy.

Sipping his Coke, Sammons described the advantages of learning karate.

"There's always the most obvious fact that you're learning a self-defense technique. You never know what might happen. Of course, being in better physical condition is another aspect of it."

To achieve a higher personal degree of proficiency and knowledge, Sammons practices constantly.

"There's always more to learn. Like how to be a better teacher. At my stage now, teaching is important."

Karate provides Sammons with something spiritual as well.

"People tend to equate the word spiritual with religion," he said. "This isn't the case here. The Zen side of Buddhism is not necessarily religious. It's more a way of living that captivates your spirit in more than just a physical way."

"The Zen-ness of martial arts is how the mind copes with things. A unification of the mind, body and spirit that focuses on the here and now. It keeps the mind free of attachments and prejudices, and helps you to face what's going on. Zen doesn't let you set yourself up with expectations."

Sammons likened the Zen philosophy of life to music: If one misses a chord change and dwells on it, the music will continue and pass by. He said life is the same, and Zen helps one face the here and now. He has become much more relaxed, confident and disciplined in his own life and how he lives it because of this philosophy, he added.

"This helps in actual combat karate because you are faced with the immediate situation of what's in front of you. If you miss a punch you cannot dwell on it. If you screw up, you get punched."

"We combine a lot of Zen ideas and oriental warrior techniques -- tech-
Sammons leads a group of black belts through a series of speed-punching exercises.

"It turns out to be therapeutic for them."

Sammons, a boxer in college, credits his brother with pointing him toward karate. That was in 1965, and he has been training ever since. Outside of his work with the insurance company and teaching the art, Sammons spends most of his free time practicing. If he could, he would train on his own more often. The requirements of his rank sometimes conflict with this desire, however.

"I teach because it is necessary for my rank," he said, sounding much like a highly disciplined soldier. This does not mean Sammons does not want to teach. On the contrary, he said he enjoys it, and enjoys passing martial arts skills on to others. When he started the academy in 1968, he had very few students and no black belts. Today, his dojo has swelled to include more than a dozen black belts at any given session.

Sammons currently is under pressure from the upper administration of his karate association to take on duties at a national/international level. As in any organization, higher executives like to move qualified people to leadership positions, he said.

"I'm not seeking it, but I'm willing to do my share," he said.

"I wouldn't be happy if I couldn't continue training on my own. I would just have to trade off vacations and weekends to help at the administration level. They won't throw me out if I opt not to do so."

If he has to devote more time to such duties, Sammons said the black belts now at the academy are qualified to continue training the classes without him. But he added that he would prefer to stay in Bellingham, where he has lived and trained in the art for 19 years.

"I'm happy enough to be here with my dojo."
MENTAL ILLNESS

Student Rises Above Severe Depression

By Shanna Gowenlock

I

n the crowded Viking Union coffee shop, Teresa Anne Ensley, a Western Senior majoring in English, seems to blend in perfectly with the tennis-shoe and old-blue-jeans image of the current college crowd.

Ensley, like many students, occasionally skips class in order to sleep in, procrastinates until the last possible moment to write a term paper, and eats vast amounts of take-out pizza during a sleepless Finals Week. She likes watching "Late Night with David Letterman," "Saturday Night Live" and bad black-and-white science-fiction movies.

Ensley said most who know her are surprised when they learn that she uses medication to combat depression.

"I used to think those years could be erased from my life," she said, remembering her late teens. "I felt like I was being such a burden to my family -- financially and emotionally." Ensley feels the experience has helped her grow, making her strong in ways only people who face adversity can grow.

"I'm not ashamed or embarrassed about it at all." Ensley has suffered from unipolar depression since she was 16. It affected virtually every aspect of her life. She lost weight, couldn't sleep, lost interest in school and in her family -- and at her lowest point -- seriously contemplated suicide.

"I cried all the time," she said. Unipolar depression, unlike manic depression in which one experiences a series of "ups and downs," entails only varying degrees of "downs," she said.

Ensley explained that in her case, messages transmitted from the brain to the nervous system breakdown, due to a lack of dopamine, a chemical vital to sending these messages.

Ensley excused herself and wound her way through the coffee shop. She returned seconds later with two white, plastic forks. She laid the forks on the dark brown table, pointing them toward each other.

"Now, these are your nerve synapses," she explained in a mock doctor-to-patient voice. "And this is the dopamine," she continued, hanging a hand of wiggling fingers between the two forks. "Now, this is good, because there's enough dopamine. But if you only have this much dopamine," she said, curling all but two of the waving fingers into her palm, "the signals don't always get through. And sometimes...." she pointed one of the forks in a different direction, "they go the wrong way." She leaned back and smiled. Back in her regular voice, she said, "The reason I get depressed is because signals from my brain bounce all over the place."

When Ensley was 17, she was admitted to a hospital mental ward three times within a six-month period, in an effort to find a drug that would alleviate her depression. The third and last time, her doctor reluctantly prescribed a powerful, experimental drug, lithium carbonate, to help her body create a stable and adequate supply of dopamine.

"He used it as a last resort 'cuz it has been known to cause some really serious side-effects like, oh, blurred vision, dizziness, kidney failure, heart palpitations, heart failure, brain damage. Some people have gone into comas and died because of it (lithium). The problem with it is that it's toxic if you get even a teeny bit above what you should. So, when I was taking it, I had to get my blood taken every month to make sure I wasn't..."
getting too much.
It (lithium) affected my vision right
away. I had to start wearing glasses,
when before I had 20/20 vision."

"The reason I get
depressed is because
signals from my brain
bounce all over the
place."
-- Teresa Ensley

In her second year at college,
however, Ensley tried to go off the
lithium because it was beginning to af­
flect her memory, "which wasn't help­
ing my grades." But she suffered a
severe period of depression, forcing
her to go back on the lithium. A year
ago, during the summer, Ensley went
off the lithium and this time, it worked
-- she didn't get depressed.

"I practically doubled my dose of
nortriptaline, though," she said, refer­
ing to another anti-depressant drug
she was, and still is, taking.

Ensley, who hasn't had a severe
bout of depression in about two- and­
a-half-years, looks forward to a time
when she won't have to rely on
medication to keep depression at bay.

"I'd like to think I won't have to
take my medication for the rest of my
life -- I mean, we're talking about an
awful lot of pills. Between my medi­
cine and my vitamins, I'm a walking
pill factory. I'm still waiting for the day
they tell me I've got cancer or some
other disease from taking all these
drugs.

"When I get depressed, I get con­
fused. Once I got lost on my way to
class. I forgot where I was going, and
I couldn't remember where my dorm
room was. It was really scary." She
eventually found her way to the safety
of her brother's dorm room.

"I'd like to think I
won't have to take my
medication for the
rest of my life."
-- Teresa Ensley
"I'm tired all the time, but can't sleep, either. I get really negative and I can't concentrate. Being a college student is really difficult.

"It (depression) takes my grades way below average -- like, I get 'Ds' and 'Fs'," she said wryly, raising one eyebrow.

"When I'm depressed it's impossible to do school work because I can't remember lectures at all. What I just listened to is, like, a complete mystery. And if I had to read anything, I would just have no idea what it was about.

"When I get depressed -- and I'm not talking about the little ups and downs, but I mean really depressed -- I can't move. I feel real light, but super-weak. It's a big effort to move, so usually I just sit on the couch -- if I made it that far -- and watch TV. Your mind's just totally clear because you can't think about anything. Your concentration is just shot. It's an effort to have to think at all, and besides, if I think, it's usually about something depressing anyway."

The first time her parents brought her to the mental ward, she was 17.

"It was real scary," she recalled.

"The first patient I saw was an old lady. She was senile or something. I don't know, but you could tell she wasn't right. I kinda went hysterical, so they gave me a tranquilizer. It was supposed to put me to sleep, but all it did was calm me down some. It really upset the nurses because I was freaking out all the other patients with my screaming and crying."

The arrival of her personal physician and his soothing reassuring that she would not be abandoned in the mental ward finally calmed Ensley down and convinced her to let her parents leave.

"I was scared for about a week. I knew I didn't belong there. The second and third time I went in, it was fine, though, because I knew that I wasn't going to be left in some crazy house -- like in "One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest." If I had been stuck some place like that, I would have freaked out for sure," she said.

Ensley was admitted to the mental ward two times after that -- mainly because her body kept building up its resistance to the anti-depressant drugs, rendering them ineffective.

The third and last time she was admitted, she underwent extensive medical and psychological testing because her doctor feared she had a more serious underlying medical condition, which was causing her depression.

"But it turned out that he (her doctor) was right in the first place. It was just my chemicals that were out of whack," she laughed.

"This other doctor decided I was schizophrenic because I said that one of his inkblots looked like two gutted-out sheep hanging upside-down by their hind legs," she said with a chuckle. "After you look at 50 or more of these inkblots you start to get imaginative. But if you say anything that has to do with sex or death, they automatically assume you're insane or something.

"But what (the doctor) didn't know," Ensley said, "is that my family hunts, and I've seen gutted-out deer hanging from trees. These were woollier than deer, so I called them sheep," she said with a shrug.

Ensley got serious for a moment, her blue eyes seeming to concentrate on a memory.

"The whole experience has made me more compassionate toward other people. I mean, I've been down, really down, and I know what it feels like to feel like you're going crazy, or can't cope, or want to commit suicide. And I'm glad, too, because I don't look wacko. People who don't understand about mental illness, when they see me, they'll understand we're not all loony idiots. Most people don't believe me when I tell them that I've been institutionalized three times. I think they expect me to talk to myself in different voices or something, or slap my own face. I used to wish that I had polio or leukemia -- something everyone could see, because I just wanted people to know -- so they'd understand at least. Everyone used to think I was so bitchy." She sighed.

Ensley said that over the last couple of years her outlook has grown from one of hopelessness and self-pity, to her current positive outlook on life.

"It's like I need to learn and take what I can from the experience. And I have to have a sense of humor about the whole thing because if I didn't, how could I be anything but depressed? But I think that's true of most anything."
MENTAL ILLNESS

By Wendy Staley

Todd is a tall, well-built, 23-year-old with shiny, brown hair and a shy, uncertain smile. About five years ago, after successfully completing his first year at Washington State University, he was looking forward to a relaxing summer at his Seattle home. Todd never made it back to WSU. The summer prior to his sophomore year, Todd suffered his first episode of schizophrenia, one of the most common types of mental illness.

Todd, like many of the mentally ill, has been in and out of psychiatric wards several times since his first attack, and has finally accepted the doctors' diagnosis of schizophrenia. His latest episode occurred recently, on January 13. He jumped out of his 12-foot-high bedroom window after hearing voices and blacked out. Amazingly, Todd only physically injured his back, but he's returned, once again, mentally recuperating in Harborview Hospital's psychiatric ward.

"Some days are good and some are really bad, but most are just okay. It's survival. It's a 24-hour struggle each day. Working on the meds is a real struggle."

Like most schizophrenics, Todd takes anti-psychotic medications that help control his symptoms. These medications, put into use within the last 25 years, have given many mentally ill patients enough freedom from symptoms to be able to live outside of institutions.

"I still have rough days when the symptoms come back. Sometimes they give me more meds, but sometimes it's part of the illness. You just have to deal with it."

Jim, Todd's roommate, no longer lives in an institution. Medication, pictured in the foreground, allows him the freedom to live at home.
Following a severe episode of mental illness, many people move from the hospital to a congregate care facility, sometimes called a halfway house.

Bellingham has three such facilities. One, the Sun Community Service, temporarily houses nine men and women, most of whom are victims of schizophrenia or manic depression. Mary Sommerville, the Sun House's executive director, said her goal is to help residents make the transition to independent living.

Mary Sommerville.

The Sun House accomplishes this by providing counseling and training in everyday living skills, such as cooking and household chores and, in some cases, job training and placement.

"They have all this potential that their mental illness keeps them from utilizing," Sommerville said. "That's the part that really makes you hate the disease."

She considers mental illness to be a disease that can be helped with drug treatment, counseling, and "plain caring and understanding."

"Medication is real important for most (mentally ill) people. It keeps their psychotic symptoms at bay, keeps them calm, stable and able to get along. But more than medication is needed." Housing for the mentally ill is another area of need.

"Mental illness is a cyclical illness -- people have good and bad periods," she said. "Our current system doesn't have enough resources, especially for those with a volatile illness who need alternatives to hospitalization."

After working with mentally ill people for seven-and-a-half years, Sommerville has developed a real admiration for them. It takes courage and an inner strength for them to simply get up out of bed in the morn-

ing and face the burden of their illness, she said.

Todd spent close to a year living in a halfway house in the Seattle area. He is now able to rent a house with three other mentally ill men close to his own age, and work part-time with a landscaper.

Halfway houses serve their purpose, Todd said, but most mentally ill people would rather live on their own if they're able.

One of Todd's roommates, Jim, also is schizophrenic, said, "When I first moved to (a halfway house), I needed it. Then, you need things done for you. Once you're put together, it loses its value. I'd much rather live here," he said.

"You're free to go out on your own (at the halfway house.) But you have to ask for help. There's not enough staff -- only two or three during the day and one at night, for 50 residents. And most of the problems happen at night." Both Jim and Todd emphasized that not enough money is available for research into possible cures for mental illnesses.

"Mental illness is nothing to laugh about," Jim said. "Just as many people die from suicide (caused by a mental illness) as from cancer. Seven of my friends have jumped the bridge."

Many people hold false images of the mentally ill, which makes it even more difficult for them to return to society after staying in a hospital or a halfway house.

"Our society is pretty tolerant of people who behave and look differently," Sommerville said. "But people are very scared of mentally ill people because their behavior is unpredictable, erratic. They say and do odd things. There is also the mind-set that mentally ill people are violent. Movies and TV do nothing to dispose of that myth."

Other misleading ideas about the mentally ill include the opinion that these people could fix themselves if they wanted to, and that families are responsible for the illness. Most of these attitudes are due to ignorance, Sommerville said.

"There is a lack of understanding and a lack of desire to work with these people. Society would rather not deal with the mentally ill. We'd rather forget that they're there."

John Williams, administrator of the Homestead, another group-care facility in Bellingham, has worked with mentally ill patients for about 10 years.

Unlike the Sun House, the Homestead is a long-term care facility focused on stabilizing the residents' condition.

The Homestead currently is filled to its 29-resident capacity. Two or more people are on a waiting list.

Williams agreed with Sommerville that many misconceptions about mental illness still exist.

Many people think that if the mentally ill would "just pull themselves together or quit being lazy," they could face their problems and work them out, Williams said.

"That's just not the case," he added. "It's like asking someone with a broken leg to walk on it."

"The majority don't get better. We try to improve their quality of life. It usually does improve with a lot of support. But as soon as the support is withdrawn, the quality dissipates."

Progress with the Homestead residents usually is slow and difficult to see. Williams compared it to taking a photograph of someone. If you look at the photograph a few days later, any change is too small to notice. Years later, however, the photograph and the reality may be two separate and distinct images.

When asked whether he thought society should be responsible for caring for the mentally ill, Williams said, "If we want to consider ourselves civilized, yes. I think we must."

He said he doesn't think society is living up to that responsibility and believes the public's perception that we are false.

Williams' biggest concern, however, is how the decline in the standard of living in this country will affect state and federal funds for mentally ill patients.

"The mentally ill don't have a loud political voice. They tend to get shortchanged in this process."

The future treatment of mentally ill people in this country remains to be seen. But what about individuals, like Todd and Jim? What do they see in their own futures, say, 20 years from now?

"I'll be retired," Todd said, grinning. His face grew suddenly serious, he slouched in his chair and focused his eyes on the paste-colored ceiling. He seemed much older than his 23 years. "I take my life day by day. If you think about big stuff like that and it never happens, then you disappoint yourself."
I stood at the top of the highest knoll in the 40-acre clearing, panting and leaning on my carved alder walking stick. As I looked down the Kalama River Valley at the recently completed Trojan Nuclear Power Plant, Heather, my Irish setter, stood in the morning sunshine with her nose slightly uplifted, sifting the scents of this late-July morning.

Three hundred yards below the hill stood my grandfather's cabin, my one-room, 12-by-30-foot, cedar-shaked refuge from society since winter. I had come here to reconsider the predatory habits I'd fallen into during the previous two years as a pawnbroker.

I looked back at Heather to admire the way her coat glistened to a two-toned silver and red pattern of healthy canine.

I noticed that her nose was working exceptionally hard that morning and she looked at me as if to ask, "What's that?"

Seeing nothing unusual, I slowly turned to look at the mountains behind me. From the hill I could see Mount St. Helens, Mount Adams and Mount Hood. Halfway through my turn I spotted what had Heather intrigued. Less than 100-yards away, next to a mouldering old growth stump, I could see the hind quarters of a brown bear.
This was no Hollywood bear or Madison Avenue bear, tricked with a splendid and free food into film-stardom or fronting for a tobacco company. This was a wild bear, a National Geographic bear, of Dan'l Boone's bear.

Here was a grizzly bear involved in his bearish business of browsing through berry vines with his muzzle buried in a bramble of bracken and bushy blackberries.

At nearly the same moment, the bear raised his head and caught sight of me. He rocked backward onto his haunches and began sniffing the air, trying to identify just what this intruder was. I heartily suspected he was searching for a scent to tell him that I would make a better meal, and more profitable use of his time than immature berries and insects.

Luckily, the wind was at the bear's back and the scents of human and Irish setter, now spiced with the acrid odor of incipient panic, were headed in the other direction.

Sensing my sudden sweat, Heather gave a small sharp woof and looked up at me to ask, "What's up, boss?"

Small details stand out in sharp focus when all intellect suddenly deserts your mind. Heather looked especially good that morning. She glowed with health from the fringed tip of her tail to the small knob at the top of her head.

That small knob, a spot which Irish setters particularly appreciate having scratched, is unfortunately the sole seat of their intelligence. For a moment, I wondered if the bear wouldn't really rather dine on dog that morning instead of stringy human, and if somehow I could use the dog to make my getaway.

The bear heard the woof, or maybe my sharp hiss to keep Heather quiet, and stood up on his hind legs. Here, just for a moment, all thought vanished.

We stood transfixed by the sight of each other, that bear and I. Several seconds passed. Eventually I came back to myself and began feverishly reviewing my scanty stock of bear lore.

Niviaksiak, a Cape Dorset, Canada print maker, said, "To hunt the great bear, you must feel like a bear." I, however, felt more like Niviaksiak at the end of his life. On a hunt in 1959, he came face-to-face with a polar bear and died without the bear touching him.

My grandfather often told stories of bears in these same woods from memories as old as this century. Some were funny and some terrifying. At that particular moment only those ending tragically immediately came to mind.

I quickly reviewed my available choices. I could turn and run for the nearest tree and hope to climb above the bear's reach before it could catch me. That seemed a faint hope, as the nearest trees had branches that started far above any jump I could hope to make, even with a mega-dose of adrenaline.

I could try to reach the cabin, shut the door, climb up to the loft, find and load the .30-06 I hoped was still there, get down from the loft and shoot the bear in some vital organ with the first shot and someday triumphantly tell my own grandchildren about my prowess as a hunter.

I could draw on my childhood memories of American heroes and grin the bear down, Davy Crockett-style, or I could freeze in my tracks and hope for the best.

I realized that I was already embarked on the last option, so I decided to continue to do nothing. We, the bear and I, continued to stare at each other.

I knew that soon one of us would tire of this Mexican standoff and the bear was likely to be the first. I inventoried my possessions, a small task since I had only my sneakers, a pair of faded, threadbare cut-off Levis, a belt knife, a headband and my walking stick, and tried to devise some plan. I, like Slaw Rebchuck, a Canadian politician famous for his malapropisms, had been caught with my pants down.

The .30-06 back at the cabin would have changed the odds considerably, but the chances I could reach it, if the bear charged, weren't worth thinking about. The only thing I had that remotely resembled a rifle was my walking stick.

I had cut down a small alder sapling on my first day at the cabin and spent that first night carving designs into the top third by removing the bark. Along with the geometric designs, I had carved a relief of a lizard, or salamander, curled around the shaft. I was inordinately proud of the stick and carried it with me whenever Heather and I went for our morning run.

I decided that I had nothing to lose by acting first, so I slowly raised the stick to my shoulder as if it were the inaccessible .30-06.

I sighted along the slightly bent stick and found myself staring eye-to-eye with my curled lizard. It seemed to stare back and say, "Good luck, buddy, it's both our asses."

I took a long deep breath, the way you're supposed to before firing a gun, and yelled "BANG" at the top of my lungs.

The bear turned around and high-tailed it up the hill behind him, away from my position. I paused only long enough to check which direction he was going and took off in the other. I made it back to the cabin in a time that would easily have awed a Olympic track star, and sat in the chair by the stove panting and looking at an empty box of Winchester .30-06 cartridges.

I slept well that night and woke up to the roar of a four-wheel drive pickup and the baying of hounds. I walked out the door and off the porch to see what was going on just as three hunters got out of their truck and started cuffing the dogs quiet.

It seemed, by their story, that they were hunting bear and that their dogs had tracked a fresh scent to the edge of my grandfather's property. They asked me if I could continue the hunt on, or through, the property. I thought about the previous day and what had happened, or rather what hadn't happened, and politely declined permission saying, "He hasn't done anything to me, so I don't want to do anything to him."

I saw that bear, at least I think it was the same bear, once more. I was driving down to Kelso to tell my grandfather the story and restock my pantry, when the bear slid down an embankment onto the road in front of my VW Microbus. Its back, as it ambled nonchalantly along in front of me, was level with the top of the VW symbol on the front of the van. I slowed down to get another long look at him and followed him for 50 yards until the road took a sharp right turn. The bear ignored the turn, climbed the steep embankment with little or no effort and disappeared into the thicket of ferns, salmon- and huckleberry bushes without a trace.

My personal non-aggression pact with that bear came back to me years later when I first read the last lines of Sam Walter Foss' poem "The Bloodless Sportsman."

"To the hunters who hunt for the gunless game,

The streams and woods belong."
A black spire points up to the cloudy Bellingham sky from the cathedral-shaped roof of the North Garden Inn. With its black exterior, its conical turrets, and its gray roof, the grand Queen Anne-style Victorian house is a magnificent sight. Even the windows on the front doors are etched with intricate designs.

Inside the 90-year-old home, the sweet smell of freshly baked carrot cake drifts through the arched doorway of the kitchen into an adjoining room. A polished mahogany concert piano sits against one wall. The instrument's lid is propped open, exposing its hammers and strings. Sitting next to the piano, Frank and Barbara DeFreytas, both 45, relax on a green couch, and sip tea from tall white teacups.

Barbara's curly light-brown hair resembled the creamy color of the tea in her cup. She occasionally smiled as she recounted their decision to quit their nine-to-five jobs two years ago, move from their Burlington home and convert the house into a bed-and-breakfast inn and residence for university women.
"We've always done a lot of entertaining," she said. "We stayed in a bunch of bed-and-breakfast inns, and decided that this was one way of making a living doing what we liked to do. So, we started looking for a building and found this one in Bellingham, and bought it. Once we found the spot, I knew it was something we could do and not fail because I was so determined."

Her husband Frank leaned his 5-foot-10-inch frame back into the green couch and crossed his legs. His short black hair, neatly parted on the side, and his brown woolen-sweater and tan slacks, contrasted with the couch.

Frank talked about how hard it was for Barbara and him to leave the security of their jobs to start their own business.

"For two dyed-in-the-wool conservatives -- I don't mean in the moral sense, but in the working sense -- to jump into something that is off-the-wall -- working for yourself -- that was a big transition.

"We weren't particularly happy with what we were doing. I'm a former bureaucrat, and she worked in a tissue-culture lab. That was pretty boring and uneventful. So, we were looking at getting into business for ourselves.

"People are going to say you don't have any security, but you make your own security. You make your own ability to run your own life," Frank said.

Barbara agreed, and said working for oneself can be just as demanding as working for someone else. "We have to be here, but we choose to do this. It's never dull. You make your own decisions. It's kind of nice to know you have that control," she said.

Frank said the financial rewards offset the demanding work.

"The tax advantages are outrageous. Everything is a write-off. But you have to keep accurate books, and you have to deal with the public. The public can sometimes be a royal pain in the ass," Frank said, recounting an experience where a guest complained constantly.

"You do your best to do a good job, and some clown comes along and gives you a ration of crap. You want to say, 'You bastard, I'll kill you,' but you don't. You smile and say 'I'm very sorry.'"

Barbara said this kind of experience has been very rare. Only three or four of the 2,000 guests they have entertained have been unpleasant.

"We establish a personal relationship with the guests. It's not anonymous like in a hotel or a motel," Barbara said. "We don't have the kind of abuse on rooms, and we've never had anything stolen. We don't walk into the room and find beer cans on the floor, or broken glassware, or that sort of thing that you might find in a motel where no one knows you and you can trash the room."

--- Frank DeFreytas

The telephone rang in another room. Frank cautiously placed his teacup on the coffee-table, and quickly walked into the next room to answer the phone. The call was for one of the student residents.

Not only is the house an inn, but it also houses university women, Barbara said.

"We have nine girls living with us now."

Frank used an intercom to tell one of the residents about her phone-call and returned to the room.

"The students get to live in the whole house," Frank said as he sat down on the couch next to Barbara. "They have their own kitchen, and we provide breakfast. It's just like being at home, with one exception -- we're not their parents."

Tracey Jackson, a Western freshman and a resident of the Inn, sat underneath a Mickey Mouse poster in her room in the basement of the house. She agreed that living in the residence is like living at home.

"It's kind of like a family. Frank and Barbara don't watch us all the time, and there's always someone to talk to," Jackson said.

Stefanie Feagin, another Inn resident, sat on the floor mixing instant coffee in a white coffee mug. Feagin lived in a dorm last year and said living in the Inn is better.
“The dorms are so impersonal,” she said. “This has enough privacy for me, and it’s close to town.”

Jackson agreed, but said she hasn’t made the number of friends that she might have if she would’ve lived in the dorms.

“That’s really the only drawback, the limited exposure.”

Jackson’s roommate, Jeannie Walker, sat on a bed across the room and said living in the Inn has made it possible to obtain stronger personal relationships than the ones formed in the dorm.

“The kind of friendships people have in the dorms are superficial, but we get good friends,” Walker said. “I know that years from now Tracey and I will still keep in contact.”

The Inn was offered strictly to women students because they are easier to deal with than men, Frank said.

“We haven’t tried men, but I’m glad we tried the ladies. The likelihood of them throwing a beer-bust is a lot less likely than if it were a bunch of men. Plus, there’s no lack of men hanging around. There’s a whole load of guys next door.” He picked up his tea cup, clanking a spoon against the side of the cup as he stirred his tea.

“I’m not that big, And you could imagine how well I might do with a six-foot-four, 240-pound, 19-year-old drunk. Forget it. So we decided to try the ladies.”

A low pitched ring reverberated from another room. Frank rose from the couch and walked through the arched doorway toward the sound.

Moments later Frank returned and said the caller was someone making a reservation.

Barbara said when guests make reservations they get to choose their rooms.

“It’s not like a motel,” she said. “When a person arrives, we’ll give them some wine, or some coffee. We’ll call and make dinner reservations for them. Once they’ve gone to dinner, we go into their room and turn their night-light on, put chocolates beside their bed, and then lock their room up.

“In the morning, we do breakfast for two hours. I always make a fresh pastry every morning because it smells so good when you wake up.”

Adding personal touches to the business, such as baking pastries in the morning, makes the Inn more like a home than a typical motel. One area of business the Inn shares with hotels and motels, however, is advertising.

“Advertising is outrageously expensive. We’re members of (a lot) of organizations. We’re in six guide books. But word-of-mouth is the best (advertising) you can get,” Frank said.

Again, the telephone rang. Again, Frank got up and answered it. Barbara continued.

“This is kind of a slow time of year -- from now until March -- but there are always guests in the house. People come here for all kinds of reasons. This weekend is Parents’ Weekend.”

Frank walked in and interrupted Barbara with good news. “Friday night is booked now,” he said in an excited voice.

“We’re full on Friday night now. Yay!” Barbara said, clapping her hands.

“Owning a bed-and-breakfast allows you to live in a really nice house that under normal circumstances we couldn’t afford.”

-- Barbara DeFreytas

Frank walked back into the other room as Barbara stretched and walked toward a large linen-covered dining table sitting in front of a window. She joined Frank at a curved staircase that led to the upstairs rooms.

“Owning a bed-and-breakfast allows you to live in a really nice house that under normal circumstances we couldn’t afford,” Barbara said as she opened a door to a small upstairs room.

The room is the best in the house, Barbara said. When guests see this room, they usually want to stay in it.

The Inn is getting more and more guests all the time Barbara said. The couple is waiting for the business to become profitable enough so they can hire someone else to do the daily chores. Then they can relax, she said.

“It takes about five years until you can get to the point where you can say, ‘We made it.’”
To the untrained eye, cars personalized with home-paint jobs and graffiti may appear to be bad jokes. But to their owners, and to others who appreciate a sense of humor and unabashed individualism, the vehicles are more than mere modes of transportation. They are forms of self-expression.

Owners of the Landshark, an infamous example of Bellingham car art, said they thought their vehicle was too blah when they first bought it two years ago. They claimed to see no reason why their bright blue 1971 Ford Country Sedan should remain an ordinary station wagon as long as they held the pink slip.

Two of the Landshark's six owners, Carl Baron and Eric Thomas, conferred to come up with a solid explanation for the car's transformation, but had to admit they had no concrete reasons.

"When six people own the car," Baron said, "it's hard to have any direct intention that you bought it for." Looking back, he added that he thought the group acquired the Landshark because they wanted a big American car to batter. The owners have their own cars, but decided a group car would save their individual vehicles from showing signs of abuse.

Their decision to paint the car was made when they realized and acted upon their desire to be different, Baron said. They weren't sure how different they needed to be, and began to experiment.

The first changes weren't too drastic. The new owners painted a white racing stripe down the center, from the tip of the hood to the bottom of the tailgate. A message scrawled on one side proclaimed "W.W.U. Drinking Team," although none of the owners are students. The other side carried a statement that is usually construed as somewhat intimate or profane.

The "Drinking Team" banner seemed to be inspired by the group's favorite recreational activity, something they squeeze in between and during hunting and fishing excursions and treks to Canada to watch the strip acts.

Their first dabble in designing wasn't enough to keep the owners amused, however, so they went back to mixing paint. Out of this beer-muddled burst of creativity, the Landshark was born.

The car's dull black exterior features its name painted on the side in white letters edged with green, while a realistic-looking fin, crafted by Thomas from a slab of sheet metal, is bolted to the top. Marauding jaws filled with blood-tipped, gnashing teeth come together where the hood meets the grill.

Part of the original transformation from car to Landshark included a mannequin's leg, which was mounted to the front end to look as though a person was being devoured. The Landshark was backed into once, however, and the leg smashed through the radiator. The appendage...
Michael James, Jonn Trethewey, Mark Swift and Kelly Crist rally inside the old station wagon they transformed into the Birnam Woody.

was removed soon after.

Thomas explained that the Landshark design was inspired while the gang was partaking in its favorite pastime.

"We got all drunk one day and decided to paint it. We bought three rollers and two paint brushes," Thomas said. "We should have painted it with mops."

The creators of the Birnam Woody, a raunchy surf wagon named after the university apartments, were motivated by a different force. The car was a nondescript white station wagon when it was purchased, but the six new owners, all Western students, had a vision and were courageous enough to express it. They found guidance at a local one-stop shopping center.

"A large part of the design was inspired by a trip through Fred Meyer," part-owner Mark Swift said, and explained that the group began the car's transformation immediately after procuring the necessary supplies at the retail outlet.

Within hours of the change in ownership, the car's exterior was completely altered. Splashes of lunar yellow, tar black and blood red appeared on the wagon. Simulated wood grain vinyl tape was placed somewhat symmetrically along the four doors, the top was jumped upon to instill character, and spray-painted slogans appeared in the few remaining blank spots.

Passers-by of the message-touting wagon are urged to "VOTE," and are warned that "DISCO LIVES." An emotional burst resulted in "IT'S A WOODY!"

"There's genuine swear words on this car," co-owner Kelly Crist said, as he pointed with amusement at "GOSH DARN!"

Crist said the group wanted something they could turn into a woody-type surfmobile, the kind made famous in tale and song, but had no immutable plans when they scanned used car lots and classified ads.

"We just looked for a big wagon.
That was kind of our dream," Crist said. His head, covered by close-cropped light brown hair, tilted, as he looked up dreamily.

After moments of grueling and meticulous consideration, Dan Allen, Chris Cole, Crist, Michael James, Swift and Jonn Trethewey voted to chip in $25 apiece, and rolled away in a 1968 Ford Ranch wagon.

"It was just a plain white station wagon," Trethewey said. "It looked pretty dumb when we first got it."

"It's our dream to have a blatantly flagrant waste of money on wheels. It's anti-fashion," Crist said. "We wanted a car that would make us laugh when we saw it."

Although she didn't paint actual slogans on the doors and fenders of her kelly-lime green vehicle, Betsy Daulph, station manager of KUGS and owner of what she calls the Snakemobile, also made a statement when she painted her car.

Daulph speaks fondly of the 1972 AMC Matador she purchased from her grandmother two years ago for $500.

"Oh, AMC, the chief of cars," she said, laughing affectionately. "They're just so tacky."

To alter the car's image, Daulph decided a paint job was in order. She used industrial equipment enamel and said she chose the particular shade of green because it was "fun and childlike and wouldn't show the dirt." She added that, because of the type of paint she had selected, her choices were somewhat limited. Although the greenish coating was different, it wasn't enough, so Daulph painstakingly painted car-length black snakes along the Matador's sides.

"People wanna analyze it and say 'This one's a little bit different,'" she said. "People assume it's a guy's car. The same with my motorcycle. People ask me if it's my boyfriend's motorcycle. Like everything else in my life, it's meant to make you stop and think."

Daulph put a lot of thought into the design of her car, but explained that, to her, it is just another of her "weird expressions." A self-proclaimed "craft addict," Daulph dabbles in crocheting, sculpting and other artful endeavors. Her car contains a few of her creations that represent the nuances of her personality.

"It is like a little, rolling house," she said.

Although she's filled it with mementos and knickknacks, she said she's not so attached to the interior that she feels compelled to keep it clean.

She said she believes typical car owners become dependent upon their vehicles, and paralleled car owners to parasites. She is trying to maintain some semblance of independence, and said she allows garbage to accumulate on the Snakemobile's floor to express her freedom and sense of fun.
The owners of the Birnam Woody and the Landshark expressed similar sentiments about the maintenance of their cars’ interiors.

The Landshark's crew said they aren't too concerned with the tidiness of the car's interior, but they do keep a hole in the back uncovered — just in case an emergency should necessitate jettisoning cans containing fermented amber liquid.

The Birnam Woody riders also keep a space clear behind the back seat. They use it to store a five-gallon container of oil, which they said the wagon feeds on constantly. In spite of the car's consumption of vast quantities of oil and gas, the owners seemed pleased with their purchase. They claimed to derive a lot of satisfaction from their car and want others to appreciate it, or at least accept it, for what it is.

"The car is a tension-release vehicle," Trethewey said. Creating new designs is an outlet, he explained, and the group's plans for future mutations include the wagon's decapitation in the spring, and a quarterly paint job change. Maybe.

"It's kind of hard to paint in the cold," Crist said. He added that the group will have to think long and hard about any changes in the paint job.

"We can't just destroy brilliance with the facetious use of a spray can," he said.

The owners of the Landshark, who also paid $25 each to own a share of their car, once toyed with the idea of cutting the top of the car off and installing a full-size beach umbrella. They decided against it, fearing a "soggy" interior would negate the car's chief purpose.

"The idea was to have something to party in and haul people around in," Baron said. "We put our whole baseball team in there once." In addition to team transporter, the Landshark also has worked as a delivery vehicle for a local pizzeria, palace, and has been used by its owners to take them where only Jeep owners have gone before.

"We were Jeepin' it up really hard," Thomas said of their first off-road experience in the Landshark, "knockin' down birch trees -- dooka, dooka, dooka -- and the 'shark was up to the axles in mud. We were pulled out by a couple of trucks the next day."

Although the personalized cars may not be the best off-road vehicles, they are a practical means of mass transportation. In addition, riding in the cars serves as a release, the owners said, because they feel freer to express themselves and have fun.

Although Swift couldn't speak for all members of the Birnam Woody group, he explained why he contributed to the car's purchase.

"I'm really conservative," he said, "and I really use it (the Woody) to let loose." He added that he usually considers cars as commodities to be used for profit. The Woody is an exception, and is used only for recreation.

"This is just totally fun. We didn't have any need to have a group car that was just normal," Swift said.

"We've gone on a couple of missions," Crist said. "We took it to the drive-in one night and sat on the hood. It's good when you have a hankering to go on a mission -- let's leave it at that." Crist refused to elaborate on the nature of these trips, but several of the other owners jokingly referred to drag racing.

Trethewey told of how they had once offered to drag the Birnam Woody against "an interesting young lady," who refused them, saying, "I've got more respect for my car than that." That remark stopped them cold, but they admit they maintain the desire to challenge the students who emblazoned the initials of Bellingham High School on their car.

"Anytime those wusses wanna drag," Crist said, "they just gotta let us know. As long as we abide all speed limits," he added in a prissy, mocking tone.

In addition to feeling a greater sense of freedom while in the cars, the riders amuse themselves with the reactions of pedestrians and other motorists they pass on the street.

"It amazes people that this thing actually transports people," Trethewey said of the Birnam Woody.

Co-owner Swift added, "it's fun to be going down the road and having people looking at you, even if they're saying 'Those guys are jerks,' because we know we're not jerks."

"Some people look at you like you're the slime of the earth," Landshark co-owner Joe Coates said, "but other people really like the ambiance."

Daulph said she has become so accustomed to the reactions her car has brought, she fears her life may have been altered forevermore. She expressed worries about what will happen when she goes out into the real world and obtains a job that would enable her to buy a brand new car.

"I couldn't get a new car, 'cause I couldn't paint it," she said. "And then I'd be boring again."