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VAULT, BALANCE, CLIMB: THE ART OF PARKOUR

HARLEYS INSPIRING YOUNG HEARTS

MOVING ON FROM ADDICTION
In the span of Klipsun’s existence, it has served as campus yearbook and magazine, spurred controversy over racy illustrations and won numerous awards for excellence from the Society of Professional Journalists, the Washington Press Association and others. Klipsun has worn many covers over the years, but continues to this day to serve as a face of Bellingham lifestyles.

This issue goes to the heart of Bellingham: whether it is overcoming a life-shattering drug addiction, where Whatcom County drug cases surpass the average rate of Washington state, or following a group of leather-clad bikers riding their hogs in support of children with cancer, there is a little glimpse of everything. Take, for example, a group of bicyclists who meet every Wednesday to ride their bikes – rain, sleet or snow. Or a coffee shop that serves as the town hot spot for chess matches, where every person from any walk of life, is welcome. And where else do you find a group of people jumping over tables, buildings and trees for fun?

In the production of this issue, our staff strove to make changes in content, design and photography to become a more readable, more enjoyable magazine. Klipsun has evolved over the years and will continue to change and morph as we strive to serve you, our readers. We welcome and appreciate your feedback. Happy reading.

Nicole Lanphear
Editor in chief

Klipsun: is the Lummi word meaning beautiful sunset. Klipsun is a student-produced magazine, published twice a quarter in the fall, winter and spring. Special thanks go to Heather Steele and the staff of Western Washington University’s Publishing Services.

Cover: Dane Vennewitz (front) and Rafe Kelley (back) balance on a fence in Whatcom Falls Park.

Photo by Damon Call
Photo Illustration by Sarah Frantz & Tyler Nelson
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Correction: In the January 2008 (Vol. 38, Issue 3) edition, in the story “Twist on a Taxi,” Jeff Backman was misidentified in the picture on page 5.
The motorcycle engines can be heard from far away as they thunder down the roads and freeways. Their destination is not the Harley-Davidson Café or an average dive bar. The riders have a different kind of pit stop in mind.

Bikers Fighting Cancer is a non-profit organization based in Bellingham that raises money for children with cancer and their families.

Members organize fund-raisers, go on “motorcycle runs,” bring much-needed items to hospitals and occasionally focus on individual families or children. All members of Bikers Fighting Cancer have been affected by cancer in some way, whether it be having it themselves or having a family member with cancer.

Co-founder Patrick Healy says the idea for the club all started with a boy named Ray.

Healy, originally from the Seattle area, was living in Southern California in 2002. He felt a lump on his neck, but says it did not hurt. The lump grew larger, so he set up an appointment with an ear, nose and throat doctor. Doctors informed Healy that he had incurable non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma.

Healy, then 49, began chemotherapy treatments. During one of his first rounds of chemo, he met Ray, a 12-year-old boy with brain stem cancer.

“Here I am, sort of feeling bad for myself,” Healy says. “I thought, ‘this kid really needs support.’ I talked with his mom and dad and tried to figure out a way to raise some money for them so at least Ray’s mom could stay with him while he did treatments.”

Healy went on a local radio station and asked if people would pledge a certain amount of money per mile he rode his motorcycle. He says he wanted to go to Sturgis, South Dakota, because he had never been there before, and there is popular motorcycle rally held in Sturgis every year. His doctors advised him not to go because of his own treatments, but Healy rode from Palm Springs to Salt Lake City anyway and raised approximately $8,000 for Ray and his parents.

Healy knew Ray had always wanted to be a biker and be in a bikers club, so Healy suggested they make their own. Ray thought of the name and designed the logo. Healy had two patches made for both of them to wear. Healy and Ray became the co-founders of the club. Shortly after, Ray passed away.

“It was something I had to do. Old men like us, we can have cancer and we can deal with it, but those kids need a chance to go around the block a couple of times.”

-Ken “Rat City” Richards, member of Bikers for Cancer

Healy says, “I kind of went through the gutter a while.” Not wanting to deal with his cancer alone, Healy moved back to Seattle to be with
family, eventually moving to Bellingham with his wife and children. When he was in Seattle, he shared Ray’s story and met others who cared about the same ideas as he did. Together they kick-started the club again.

One of those members was Ken “Rat City” Richards, as they call him in the bike world. Richards and Healy grew up together, but had lost touch. They were reacquainted through a mutual friend.

Healy told Richards about his cancer diagnosis and about Ray. Richards says one of the first activities Bikers Fighting Cancer did together was ride to Mary Bridge Children’s Hospital in Tacoma to visit children with cancer. Members cooked the children hamburgers and gave Harley rides, Richards says.

In 2006, doctors informed Richards and his family that their 10-year-old niece, Brianna, had a brain tumor. She went through operations and chemotherapy, but she did not survive.

“That’s when it became something much more to me,” Richards says. “It was something I had to do. Old men like us, we can have cancer and we can deal with it, but those kids need a chance to go around the block a couple of times.”

Richards says that, as of now, he is still cancer free.

“Knock on wood, I’m sure my time’s coming,” Richards says. “I’m on the outside looking in, but Pat’s been there, done that, as the saying goes.”

Bikers Fighting Cancer has approximately 30 members, but the number is rapidly growing.

The club is open to both male and female riders, which he says is not common for biker clubs. It has quarterly meetings to discuss plans and events. The main thing the club tries to do is locate children who need its assistance.

Angela Pedersen, 31, joined the club a year and a half ago. Her husband is also a member of the club. She used to ride on the back with him, but recently got her own bike at the end of January.

She says she makes crafts such as “Never Give Up” dolls for the children and crafts for fund-raisers the club organizes.
Pedersen was one of the first women to join the club and says she likes the fact that it is open and equal to anyone.

"It doesn't matter whether you are male or female," she says. "We all just want to help the kids, and that's the way I look at it."

Pedersen, who works at St. Joseph Hospital in Bellingham, says sometimes people in the community look down on the club.

"They think 'oh we're just a bunch of bikers,' " Pedersen says. "But we're no different than anyone else. We have retired police officers and military, a couple people who work at hospitals and many others."

Healy says one of the things that is different about the club as a non-profit organization is that none of what it is given in donations is used for reimbursement or salary but given right back to the children.

In May 2007 Healy heard about a 15-year-old girl from Ferndale who was diagnosed with cancer two months earlier. He contacted her family immediately, and the Bikers Fighting Cancer club began visiting Chelsey Ebert at home and at the hospital on a weekly basis.

"We can be advocates for other bikers. Families who do not understand what their other family members are going through need people to talk to."

- Dan Marantette, member of Bikers for Cancer

"It's not really about what we did for her, but what she did for us," Healy says. "Chelsey was a superstar, and she stayed a superstar when she was diagnosed. Alongside Ray, she was one of the bravest kids I've known."

Chelsey's grandmother, Pam Fralick, says Bikers Fighting Cancer carried Chelsey through with constant support. Chelsey passed away on Christmas Day in 2007.

Fralick says Healy called her to introduce himself and told her about his story.

"From that moment on, there wasn't a week they didn't stop by," she says. "They were there to give me hugs and support. They made sure we knew that their club was there for us, and would always be there for us."

Fralick says bikes have always been a part of Chelsey's life. Fralick’s husband and Chelsey's grandfather, Gary, has a Harley that Chelsey used to ride with him.

Healy says Chelsey wanted her...
funeral to be a “no cry zone,” and wanted a lot of noise. Bikers Fighting Cancer members escorted the procession from the church to the cemetery wearing pink on their leather jackets and bikes, he says.

Fralick says she hopes the attention from Chelsey’s story will also carry on the message of Bikers Fighting Cancer, and encourage more people to join the club.

“Chelsey appreciated them—appreciated every single visit,” Fralick says. “They have big hearts and give up a lot of their time. And they can’t do it on their own.”

Dan Marantette, a Bellingham resident who is on the finance committee for Sudden Valley, says he received a call from Healy explaining the club. Marantette rides a motorcycle and had melanoma, which is now in remission.

“This group has developed a purpose,” he says. “We can be advocates for other bikers. Families who do not understand what their other family members are going through need people to talk to.”

Marantette says the club is trying to become a federal non-profit organization, not just state recognized, so all donations given to the club would then be tax-free.

Richards says biker clubs can have bad reputations, but Bikers Fighting Cancer could possibly change the images.

“Even if some groups don’t get along with each other or are territorial, they all are 100 percent behind our cause,” he says. “Maybe this will show them that this is what we need to be like.”

Healy says the club is planning to visit Mary Bridge Children’s Hospital again in March, and is also talking with a family from Spokane who have a 6-month-old daughter with cancer. He says they want to raise money for the parents so they do not have to work while their daughter is receiving treatments in Seattle.

He says they will continue to bring children with cancer do-rags, chap stick, video games and the most popular item, phone cards, so they can talk to their friends all day from the hospital.

“That’s what these kids need,” Healy says. “They need someone to come in who knows what they’re going through and can remind them that they’re a kid again. If their life’s cut short, we as bikers are going to go in there and let them experience a little bit of life before they go.”
Chess isn't really Aaron Bel Cher's thing. He knows how the pieces move, but he doesn't often get the chance to sit down and move them.

The breaks from his hectic work schedule are more often measured in cigarettes than in chess moves. Still, not having the time to play hasn't kept Bel Cher, the scrappily-haired, broad-shouldered 26-year-old manager of Fantasia Coffee House, from making his place of work one of the most popular spots for chess in Bellingham.

Three chessboards permanently sit on tables that flank the front door. Eight men crowd the three boards. Each wears the blank stare of someone looking six, seven or even 10 moves ahead. Many of these men are regulars who spend hours at the shop daily. At Fantasia, anyone is allowed to play, and Bel Cher really does mean anyone.

“We have people from all walks of life in here,” he says, motioning to the chessboards. “Some are business men from around town and some are homeless people from the street.”

Bel Cher has few expectations of the chess players. They must order something off the menu and they must abstain from disrupting other customers. As long as these rules are followed everyone is welcome to play.

“A lot of these guys come here because it’s one of the few places they can feel welcome,” he says. “[The homeless] players don’t even go into Starbucks; they get thrown out immediately.”

Juan Hector Perez, 27, says he comes to Fantasia after work in the morning.

“I really enjoy playing here. I get a taste of chess styles from people of all walks of life,” he says. “Some of these guys are very, very good, some have talent that you would not really expect.”

Behind Perez, a man who had been sitting motionless, except for his endlessly roving eyes, extends his hand and moves his queen.

“Check” is his barely audible mumble.

Perez compares a good chess game to a well conducted symphony.

“Each piece is like an instrument, and when used to its full potential, a maestro can turn the game into a beautiful orchestra,” he says.

Bel Cher rolls his eyes at Perez’s analogy as he refills coffee for a customer. He does not subscribe to the subtleties that draw so many players to his shop. Either that, or he is simply jealous that his schedule does not allow him to join in the song. Either way, his convictions are unaffected.

“Everyone deserves a place to play,” he says. “No matter where in life you may be, you should be treated the same. I’m happy that I can provide a venue for that.”

The electric buzz of intense concentration lessens as a game ends. Players shake hands, shuffle seats and settle in for another game at the shop where they feel welcome.

“Everyone deserves a place to play. No matter where in life you may be, you should be treated the same.”

-Aaron Bel Cher
manager at Fantasia Coffee House
When dogs saunter into the Ruff Day Doggie Daycare around 7 a.m., Sally and Larry Lewis are ready. Water buckets are filled, toys are organized in each room, non-allergenic cleanser is mixed properly in case of a doggie accident and Sally’s cup of coffee is filled to the brim.

Sally and Larry Lewis are the owners of Ruff Day Doggie Daycare, an inner-city dog facility in Bellingham, whose mission is to provide dogs with a safe environment with supervised playtime, love and compassion.

“We have owned the facility for just over two months and we have been having so much fun,” Sally Lewis says. “It’s our love for dogs that has brought us here.”

Dog daycares have become a popular alternative for many working dog owners who don’t want to leave their dogs unattended for a long day. According to a recent study by the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, animal care has become a $41 billion industry in the United States.
Golden retrievers, golden labradors, poodles, chihuahuas, huskies, pugs, beagles, cocker spaniels, collies, german shepards and Wheaton terriers are some of the numerous breeds seen every day. The facility tailors to every breed of dog, but the dogs are required to be at least 10 weeks in age and have all shots accounted for.

The Ruff Day Doggie Daycare has been a part of the Bellingham community for the past year and a half and has always maintained a steady clientele.

Sally Lewis says that on a typical day, dogs have a meet-and-greet session for approximately an hour before splitting into four different rooms within the facility. Each of the large rooms has an employee assigned to play, run, socialize and teach manners to each breed. At various times throughout the day, dogs are escorted to an outside playground to use the restroom and get some fresh air. Most owners come to pick up their dogs around 4 p.m. with the facility closed by 6 p.m.

“It’s amazing to watch the transformation in each dog from when they come to the daycare to when they leave,” Lewis says. “Dogs arrive with so much energy and depart exhausted and ready to go home.”

Although Sally and Larry Lewis are not certified dog trainers, Ruff Day Doggie Daycare is a member of both the American Boarding Kennels Association and Pet Sitters International.

After the scattered dog hair has been mopped up, the drinking buckets cleaned, toys washed for stray dog saliva and the facility lights turned off, Sally and Larry Lewis load up their dog, Gracie, and head home ready to retire and prepare for another day at Ruff Day Doggie Daycare.

Story by Brynne Berriman
Photos by Damon Call
Someone to Keep on Speed Dial: Taxi Jim

On a cloudless night in the Fairhaven District, two young women huddle together after a night at the bar. They cross their arms against their chests to combat the cold. The familiar shine of headlights peaks over a hill and a bright yellow minivan with the familiar markings of a taxi cab pulls up to the curb across the street from the girls.

Out jumps a round-faced man in faded blue jeans, a worn black leather jacket and a burgundy University of Oklahoma baseball cap. His brown ponytail sticks out the back of his cap and flails in the wind. A shrill shriek of excitement comes from one of the girls as she runs to give the cab driver a hug.

This kind of late-night rescue missions is one of the reasons Jim Icenbice drives taxis.

Icenbice gets people from point A to point B, something he's been doing for more than six years. He originally started out as a cab driver in Eureka, Calif., completing a brief stint as a tow truck driver, and eventually moved up to Bellingham to work for Yellow Cab. In that span of time, he says he's been through a lot.

"Just name it," Icenbice says. "I've seen it."

Like the time an unsatisfied customer decided to cut the ride short, opened the side door and jumped out while the taxi was still in motion at 35 mph. Or the time a middle-aged woman offered him $50 for casual sex and a glass of wine. Or the countless hours he has spent cleaning vomit out of the minivan's carpet. Or the times drunken couples have decided to have sex in the backseat of his minivan—he says he charges extra for that.

So goes the life of a graveyard shift taxi driver. Icenbice says he has seen more than his fair share of outrageous behavior, but it's just one part of a job he thoroughly enjoys.

Icenbice loves his job so much he even gives his personal cell phone number to passengers that get on his good side. The select clientele of just less than 300 know him as "Taxi Jim," a nickname he's had for years.

The people lucky enough to obtain an entry in Icenbice's cell phone number list think of him as a safe, friendly and trustworthy cab driver. But he says his job description can change with each ring of his cell phone.

"I've been a baby sitter, I've been a grief counselor," Icenbice says. "Hell, I've even been a Dr. Phil on wheels, giving relationship advice to people."

Icenbice says he also tends to be a guardian angel for young law-breakers, going on what he calls "rescue missions" to pick up underage drinkers hiding from the police in the bushes outside of rowdy house parties, a situation he remembers being in once upon a time.

Icenbice says some people just aren't cut out for the oftentimes stressful job. But he loves people, and he loves driving. He says cabs and he are the perfect combination; Taxi Jim is a fitting nickname.

"I've even been a Dr. Phil on wheels, giving relationship advice to people."

- "Taxi Jim" Icenbice

Story by Kaleb Gubernick
Photo by Damon Call
Stacy Block is the owner of local hobby shop “Eagles Games, Models and Minatures,” a store that has been in Bellingham for 20 years. The store, located in downtown Bellingham, is the result of Block’s dream to open and run his own business.

Why did you want to open a hobby shop?

“I wanted to be self employed for a long time, so my goal was to go into business for myself. This store was originally a franchise for about a year and a half from a store in Seattle. After a year, it became apparent that the deal was not as presented so I exercised the escape clause that was in the deal and then went out on my own.”

What are your first hobbies?

“Plastic model kits got me started. Then I read Lord of the Rings and that was pretty much it. So yeah, it was Tolkein and monster models.”

What are the odds of a small business being successful?

“Fifty percent of small businesses fail in the first three years, but only 5 percent make it for 20 years. A lot of people mistakenly think that if you make it five years you have it made. The only thing that stays constant is that your expenses go up.”

How many games do you play?

“I play Warhammer and that’s pretty much it. I used to play some board games too. Years ago I realized that there’s just little time to learn everything that’s out there. I’ve just focused on one game system since many of these games take to much time to learn. If you don’t play them constantly you lose it.”

What were your first hobbies?

“Plastic model kits got me started. Then I read Lord of the Rings and that was pretty much it. So yeah, it was Tolkein and monster models.”

What are some of the problems running a small business?

“Biggest one is cash flow. Everything from cleaning toilets to dealing with customers; when you’re a small business person you do everything. Sometimes it all goes smooth and sometimes it doesn’t.”

What are the perks?

“Getting to know a lot of people. If I stayed with what I had before and did not do this I would not know the range of people that I know. That probably is the best thing, you know, community.”

Story by Jeff Ehrhardt
Photo by Justin Steyer
Superheroes in the making

Local Bellingham group practices parkour

Story by Jamie Callaham
Photos by Damon Call
Rafe Kelley can still see the 4-year-old’s face at Whatcom Falls Park from the afternoon he was weaving a group of five trainees in and out of trees, jumping over logs and vaulting over walls. The little boy’s mouth was at a full-open drop. One after another, each trainee’s hands hit the slick wet picnic table with a thud. Their legs zipped through their arms while their feet hit the ground and made them look like frolicking cats. All the while, they continued to run through the park.

“Dad, what are they doing?” the little boy asked his father.

“They’re training to be superheroes, son,” he said.

Jumping, vaulting and running are all ways of moving from point A to point B as quickly and efficiently as possible. This is parkour. Men and women, of all ages participate in parkour from Paris to Bellingham. In October 2005 there were a little more than 30 members in of Washington’s online Parkour Forum. Four years later more than 800 members have joined the site from across Washington, according to washingtonparkour.com.

“Parkour is generally defined as a way of training the body to be able to effectively overcome obstacles in your environment, so that anywhere you go you can move past what you find in front of you,” Kelley says.

Kelley, 25, is a truceur. Truceurs are people who have the energy, strength and most of all, discipline, to execute the movement and practices of parkour.
“Parkour is generally defined as a way of training the body to be able to effectively overcome obstacles in your environment, so that anywhere you go you can move past what you find in front of you.”

– Rafe Kelley, truceur

Getting Started

Parkour was named in the 1980s when David Belle, parkour founder, started using his father's, Raymond Belle, way of training for war and life. He believed in training by the natural method, otherwise known as méthode naturelle. The method includes 10 basic actions people do in their everyday lives. The actions include walking, running, jumping, climbing, moving on all fours, swimming, balancing, lifting, growing and defending oneself.

"[David Belle] believed that if you use these as your basic method of training and engage in these regularly, you would have great fitness because that's what they [people during WWI] had in their lives," Kelley says. "They didn't train. They didn't have gymnastics or coaches. They just lived lives where they had to do this all the time."

Kelley first heard of parkour in 2005 from his brother who showed him videos online. Soon after, he called Dane Vennewitz, a gymnastics buddy, who was more than willing to try the new moves and experience something different.

"I saw it and I fell in love," Kelley says. "That's how I felt. I wanted to do it too. It's a beautiful thing."

Kelley brought parkour to Bellingham, but the Internet brought parkour to the world. Through endless videos and forums, Kelley helped give Washington a place of its own in the online parkour community.

People from all over the world promote parkour with Web sites such as americanparkour.com or parkourworldwide.com. The sites give participants a place to find other traceurs and talk about training locations and different parkour techniques and moves. In September 2005, Kelley helped Chris Pascual, a friend and parkour enthusiast, start the Washington Parkour Forum online to bring Washington parkour advocates together.

Parkour videos swarm YouTube and Facebook. Many universities, including Western, have their own parkour Facebook group. The largest parkour group on Facebook has more than 1,100 members from London, Germany, Philadelphia, Chicago and Washington.

Austin Hinderer, the creator of Western's Facebook parkour group, wants to help generate more interest in parkour within the Western community.

“IT's a great way to get in shape, it teaches you disciplines similar to martial arts without the element of violence,” Hinderer says. “And it's a great mode of transportation.”

Training

Kelley has trained men and women from 4 to 50-years-old. Training mostly occurs in a gym where they can train safely and away from tree limbs and broken glass found in a park.

Training can be described as a structured play, Kelley says. Training is also the place to strengthen skills and learn more about them, he says.

Truceurs can incorporate many flips and twists. The tricks give viewers a little something extra to "ooh" and "ahh" over, Kelley says.

"If people think of parkour for its effectiveness, flips are not an effective way to overcome an obstacle," Kelley says. "Some people feel flips help them overcome their fear, as well as expressing themselves and having freedom."

Parkour seems much more of a physical activity than a mental one since it requires climbing walls and pushing off rocks while running at full speed, Kelley says.

Kelley says parkour is as mentally beneficial as it is...
(above) Dane Vennewitz jumps from tree to tree as part of his training ritual.

(left) From left to right: Austin Hinderer, Thomas Marshall, Rafe Kelley, and Dane Vennewitz fly over a downed tree.
physically. He says parkour forces people to understand what they are capable of and how to push those limits when necessary.

“It’s not about being worried about the next person, or being worried about reaching someone else’s level or failing to reach the level people expect you to,” he says. “You have to say, ‘I want to do this for myself, I know I can do it and I want to do it because I believe in myself and that will help me and be enjoyable for me.”

**Femme Jam**

Men started the parkour phenomenon, but it is not limited to men. Parkour videos show men jumping from one wall to the next, grabbing it with their hands and pulling themselves up with their arms. Climbing up a wall may seem unbearable for a woman because of the strength that is needed, says Beth Kelley, an active female traceuse.

Beth Kelley, a Western graduate student, says it can be intimidating to see a guy climb a 12-foot wall, but that as long as women try, they should feel proud to get up a wall half the size. Everyone has to keep trying to reach their goals, she says.

Laura Gorrin, a Western freshman, says parkour is for everyone, but everyone must go at his or her own pace.

“It’s true that [women] have a biological disadvantage in some cases, but that shouldn’t stop you,” Gorrin says. “Parkour is all about doing as much as you feel comfortable with, and improving at your own rate.”

Few parkour videos show female traceuses. They don’t show women in the same intense situations that men are in, such as high walls or far drops. Women would be more inspired to engage in parkour if there were more female participants because they would be influenced by each other, Beth Kelley says.

“It’s nice to go out with women because you notice that you adapt to situations in similar ways,” Beth Kelley says. “It’s nice to go out and see people at your skill level or who have the same physique as you.”

Anyone can have the mental discipline and relaxation it takes to run, climb and jump, Kelley says, or maybe even become the next superhero on the block.
Combining the love of art and chocolate

Story by Shana Keen
Photos by Justin Steyer

Dressed in his trademark jeans, a long-sleeve shirt with the sleeves pulled up, a white apron tied around his waist and a red floppy hat, the candy man Jerry Hruska rushes to save the chocolates, including more than nine types of specialty truffles, in the window display exposed to the sun. The sun surprised Hruska after waking up to a frost-covered morning in Bellingham.

Sweet Art, a candy shop meets art gallery, sits on Railroad Avenue sandwiched between a shoe repair store and Taco Del Mar. The sign above the door is that of a painting palette, but replacing gobs of paint are pictures of a snow cone, candy cane, lollypop, truffle and other candies around the edge. A large wooden painted candy cane conceals the column of the doorstep.

The sun bounces off the gold, orange and yellow of the oil painting of fall foliage sitting behind the chocolates in the window. The wood signs chained to the tree outside its door during business hours are the only advertising its owners, Hruska and his wife Vivian Mazzola Hruska, do to bring new customers into their shop.

As a local “mom n’ pop shop,” Hruska and his wife have no employees and attempt to keep their overhead low. Instead of spending money on advertising, they rely on a base of loyal customers, word of mouth and a few people who simply wander in after spotting the store. In a storefront that saw its share of turnover, the couple looks forward to the 10th anniversary of the business’ opening. They may not follow the traditional small business plan, but they make it work their own way, Hruska says.

Marzipan pears: Hruska started making these pears because his last name means pear in Czech.
Hruska greets those who stop by the store by asking how their days are going and whether or not they have been to the store in the past. If the answer to the latter question is no, he jumps into a quick explanation of the place.

He makes the award-winning chocolate and candies from recipes passed onto him from various candy makers he befriended throughout his lifetime. His wife creates all the artwork hanging in the store. Her award-winning painting highlights local spots in Bellingham and in Laguna Beach, Calif., as well as seasonal nature and animals. The fused art hangings, pins and necklaces are more recent additions to her repertoire.

The “Best in Show” ribbons from the Northwest Washington Fair in Lynden that his wife and he won hang on the wall near the door. Hruska won for best candy in 2005 for his English toffee, and Mazzola won for best art in 2003 for her paintings.

Samples of Hruska's love fudge sit on the counter by the door and some knowing pedestrians stick their hands in to grab a quick sample and go. The creamy concoction melts in the mouth and has people coming back to the store, Hruska says.

Hruska's road to creative candy success

Hruska began making English toffee as a high school student in Montana in 1962. The neighbor ladies had a recipe for the toffee, which they passed onto Hruska. After seeing what it was like to make something delicious, he thought he might like to be a chef. Hruska got a job at a local restaurant with the help of the local health inspector who was a family friend.

In Southern California after time in the Navy and college, Hruska opened up a shop making candies. His shop outlasted many others in the area, he said. He met candy makers who passed on some of the recipes he still uses today.

Hruska and Mazzola met in 1991 in Laguna Beach, Calif. Every day he went in to the art store she worked at to buy a different colored pencil. He went through the whole collection of two different companies before they were married. She wasn't too interested at first, he says.

"She ran and hid when I came in," Hruska says. Hruska says Mazzola's artistic personality drew him to her.

“My whole thing is that my mother wanted all her kids to be artists,” Hruska says. “But what I knew was a starving artist, so I just married an artist so we could be only half starving.”

After she gave Hruska a chance, they fell in love and headed to Las Vegas for a drive-thru wedding at the Little White Chapel. The two lived in Laguna Beach overlooking the ocean, but their landlord passed away and their house was sold. Mazzola told Hruska she wanted to move somewhere a bit colder than southern California.

They almost ended up back in Hruska’s native Montana, but he is thankful his real estate agent advised the couple to wait until they had seen the property near Glacier National Park in the winter before making any commitments to the area. During a visit to friends down in Portland, Ore., Hruska decided to visit another friend...
who had moved up to Bellingham. They visited and liked what they saw. Hruska says Mazzola loved the idea of living up by all the mountains.

After the lease was up on the house they rented for the first year, they bought a house and started thinking about opening a candy shop plus art gallery in Bellingham. Railroad Avenue always appealed to them. Mazzola loved the feel of the place with local businesses such as the Bagelry. A spot opened in 1998, and the couple jumped at the opportunity to lease it.

Sweet Art opened with its little kitchen in the back of the store where Hruska does everything from start to finish on the candies.

The candies can often be a two-day process, Hruska says. He makes the caramel from scratch. After the ingredients melt together, it must be poured out and cooled before it can be turned into its final form of turtle or Carmel Dippy. Homemade marshmallow must be allowed to set up for at least 24 hours before it can be handled. Truffle centers are mixed together, shaped and allowed to set up. Then comes the chocolate dipping process.

“There’s a precise heating-up process and cooling-down process,” Hruska says. “You can’t put hot chocolate on hot candies. That will just melt into a gooey mess.”

Customers inquired about the possibility of him making his great English toffee with dark chocolate instead of the traditional milk. He decided to change up the cut as well and replaced almonds with hazelnuts and called it Czech toffee after his heritage.

Mazzola does her artwork, helps makes a few of the candies and helps out around the store during the busy holidays, which include Christmas, Valentine’s Day and Easter. Valentine’s Day is the busiest day of the year, Hruska says.

Customers who keep the little shop going

Customer Helene Peters came in on that sunny January afternoon after Hruska had successfully saved the melting chocolates.

“How’s the candy man today?” she says. “I’m just in here for my usual.”

Peters has been coming to Sweet Art for the chocolates for eight years on her yearly visit from Minneapolis, Minn., to see her daughter, Western librarian Sylvia Tag. She bought three Mt. Baker truffles, which have a Kahlua center, one hazelnut truffle and one raspberry baby truffle to take back to her friends in Minneapolis. She added two more Mt. Bakers, a slab of dark chocolate bark for the family to share that evening and a French hen shaped chocolate for her granddaughter’s 15th birthday.

“I come here because I think he makes the best chocolates in the United States,” Peters says. She turned toward Hruska and says, “I’ve also tasted chocolates from Europe, so I hope you’re not offended.”

Less than two minutes later, first time customer Jas Singh walks in. Working as an accountant for the hospital, Singh was on his lunch break and looking for the chocolate place he heard had amazing fudge.

“My whole thing is that my mother wanted all her kids to be artists, but what I knew was a starving artist, so I just married an artist so we could be only half starving.”

– Jerry Hruska, candy maker

After trying the sample of the fudge, he says he would definitely frequent the store, probably more often for him than his spouse.

Plans for the future

Hruska wants to change the look of some of the cases inside the store. He plans to put new shelves into one of the cases and fill it with chocolates shaped from his collection of antique chocolate molds. Rabbits, French hens, little soldier boys and the Eiffel Tower are just a few of his molds.

Hruska says he knows that each day will hold new challenges. One day he rushes around saving chocolates from the unexpected sun, the next he barely sees any customers in the store and the next he has a flood of customers that leaves him scrambling to keep up with his chocolate demand. He says he can never tell what the day will hold, but it is sure to be sweet.
To me, the cycling community in Bellingham is phenomenal. I have the best group of big brothers any girl could ever ask for.

-Marie Kimball, Mount Baker Bicycle Club Membership Chair

The air is cold and crisp and feels like needles pricking skin. The riders stand straddling their bikes as they wait for one another. Their breath is white and foggy as they talk among themselves. The sound of clip shoes snap into place, helmet headlights click on to light the way through the trails and the ride leader points south as the nighttime adventure begins. The Mount Baker Bicycle Club is ready to disappear into the cold night.

The winter months turn the weekly rides into nighttime trail rides and the dedicated cyclists exchange their road bikes for mountain bikes. They head down to Boulevard Park toward Connelly Creek to the Interurban trails then up to Lake Padden and back to Boundary Bay Brewery & Bistro for recaps, boasting, dinner and beer.

The Mount Baker Bicycle Club started in 1974 and is the only club of its kind in Bellingham. The club encourages safe and healthy cycling practices for recreational riders, transportation riders and racing riders. The club provides multiple rides during the week depending on the season for all riding levels as well, Ellen Barton, president of the club says.

Barton says a group of Bellingham riders decided to put together a weekly ride more than a decade ago. Rain, snow, even hail, could not stop the group of riders from being adventurous says Doug Schoomover, ride coordinator for the club. The Wednesday night ride is the only ride that happens year round. Other rides are seasonal, Schoomover says.

One Wednesday night last November, the sky opened up just as 5:45 p.m. was rolling around and riders were leaving work. As soon as the group of riders was ready to hit the trails, it started hailing and the ground turned white. Schoomover says he was ready to pack up at that point and head for home. Then a few of the riders, who rode in on their bikes, wanted to go regardless of the
hail beating down on them.

The few riders who rode in on their bikes encouraged the others to go along for the ride. Schoomover says it was a short, cold, wet ride, but not bad in the end. Schoomover says the group has faced some extreme weather, but that night was the most memorable.

Barton says even snow won’t keep the most dedicated riders from riding.

“It’s possible for limited participation if it was snowing, but people with studded tires will still go if it was snowing or icy,” Barton says.

Membership chair Marie Kimball says she tries to ride three times per week and includes the Wednesday night ride as one of the three. She helps organize and takes responsibility for the Wednesday night ride, but shares the responsibility with Doug.

“To me, the cycling community in Bellingham is phenomenal,” says Kimball “I have the best group of big brothers any girl could ever ask for.”

Kimball says she has invested nearly $15,000 into biking. One of her bikes alone cost $7,000, and she has four. But not all members are as financially invested but, it doesn’t mean they don’t love to ride just as much Kimball says.

Kimball says everybody gets their tires checked before heading out on the road. The group tries to take off at 6 p.m. but doesn’t hold strict to that time.

“We are generous with time, we sit around and chat about what direction we are going whether its north or south,” Kimball says.

The ride can last approximately an hour and half to two hours. Then the group gathers at Boundary Bay for dinner and everybody tells his or her rendition of where they were on the ride, who came in first and who had an unplanned rendezvous with a sign that said “No Camping.”

The door swings open to Boundary Bay and laughter floods out. Down at the end of the dinning room, the group of riders sits at three tables pushed together. With beers in their hands, voices raise over each other as they all swap stories as the nighttime adventure comes to an end.

Story by Annie Runnels
Photos by Damon Call

(above and below) Some of the members of the Mount Baker Bicycle Club, ready for their weekly night ride.
Elena Garcia remembers sitting in the passenger seat of an old red sports car, the light of the Walgreen’s sign permeating through the dark parking lot from the side of the building where it hung. It was late at night, perhaps early morning, and Garcia wished the driver, a young man she barely knew, would take her home. Nothing made sense. She was confused and uncomfortable that she was taking part in this late-night venture.

Across town, the driver’s friends were cooking methamphetamine in Garcia’s bathroom. An array of chemicals used to concoct the drug now lay in the tub she once filled with bubbles for her boys at bath time. Garcia remembers how her eyes burned when she entered the house that night, just as she remembers details from countless other situations her addiction has put her in.

This was Garcia’s life for many years, a stranger in her own home, but a victim of her own choices. Garcia is not alone in her experiences; the effects of drugs and alcohol continue to rise in Whatcom County, steadily keeping pace above state and national averages.

In 2005, 155 deaths in Whatcom County were alcohol or drug related, according to the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. More than 9 percent of the 14,470 deaths in Whatcom County between 1994 and 2005 involved drugs or alcohol. In 2005, the national average of clients receiving state-funded alcohol or drug services was 7.76 per 100 people, 13.34 in Washington State and 17.44 in Whatcom County.
Addiction no longer controls Garcia’s life because she has been drug-free since March 24, 2006, her “clean date.”

Garcia, 27, started drinking alcohol and smoking weed when she was 13. Police arrested her for driving under the influence at 16, only four months after she got her license. By 18, Garcia had been to four treatment centers and was pregnant with her first son.

“As a teenager, I thought that’s what everyone did, party and go out, so I never thought I was an addict,” Garcia says. “I just thought I was the unfortunate one that got caught.”

Garcia stayed clean while pregnant, but started drinking and smoking weed when her son was 4 months old. Her son’s father, also an addict, and Garcia didn’t let parenthood impede their partying. She remembers when their son brought them a bong from the bathroom when he was 2 so they could get high.

Garcia terminated her next two pregnancies. When she discovered she was pregnant for the fourth time, Garcia downed shots of vodka throughout the day and doesn’t remember picking her oldest son up from daycare that night, an errand she was often too drunk to recall.

The boys’ father left before their second son was born. The stress of being a single mother in recovery led Garcia back to drugs after nearly 11 months clean. Her mother took care of the boys while she served one day in jail and 28 days in treatment for her second DUI, followed by 60 days of house arrest.

When she passed a urine analysis after smoking weed, Garcia figured she could party on the weekends, but would stick to alcohol and marijuana and stay away from hard drugs. It wasn’t long before people were partying at her house nightly, drinking and doing foilies—a mixture of baking soda and cocaine or methamphetamine, made into a paste and put on a piece of foil. The user holds a flame underneath the foil and inhales the smoke through a straw.

“A lot of the times I wondered why I would continue to get loaded even though I knew what would happen after I do it,” Garcia says. “I lose everything, my whole life falls apart, I can’t deal with anything. But I wasn’t done yet. I still wanted to get high.”

Bellingham Police Officer April Mitchelson estimates more than 80 percent of drug users never clean up. Mitchelson, a detective on the Northwest Regional Drug Task Force for the last four years, says most users cannot kick the habit because the body changes after the first use.

“Once you use something like meth or heroin, there’s just no going back,” Mitchelson explains. “It alters the chemistry in your brain.”

Lex Rivers, regional manager and part of the clinical staff at Catholic Community Services Recovery Center in Bellingham, is more optimistic about the recovery rate of addicts. Rivers argues 50 percent of addicts will reach a point in their lives when they know they have to get clean.

“Kids can grow out of it or grow up, they figure it out,” Rivers explains. “I’m thinking of parents who lose their kids and then get them back. It may take 10 years, it may take 20 years, but a lot of people eventually get out of it.”

For Garcia, initially losing her kids was not enough. Every night after the boys’ bedtime, at least 20 people would come to hangout and get high. Strangers knocked on her door throughout the night. Garcia says she began to worry for her boys’ safety. She told her counselor at outpatient treatment about the situation and Child Protective Services (CPS) threatened to take them from her.

The next day Garcia had her mother pick the boys up from daycare and take them home to live with her. Garcia says CPS would have let her keep her boys if she went to detox, but she wasn’t ready to leave the drugs behind.

Rivers says the brain is still developing during adolescence, so continued drug use at this early stage can affect the development of coping skills, such as how to talk about feelings and deal with stress.

“If you’re habitually abusing during
Regardless of the chosen drug, users often become dependent, Mitchelson says. At the height of her drug use, Garcia, 5 feet 5 inches tall, says she weighed 90 pounds. Her once coffee-colored skin was pale and looked like a thin coat glued to her protruding bones. Heavy, dark circles lay beneath her eyes because the drugs kept her up for days, sometimes weeks.

Dr. Steven Arendt, who has practiced medicine for the past 25 years, says methamphetamine mimics adrenaline in the system and increase metabolism so users cannot sleep and often lose unhealthy amounts of weight.

Garcia says in her mind, the extended periods without sleep seemed like long days. Her lifestyle made her fearful and uneasy. She pulled hooded sweatshirts over her headphone-clad ears whenever she left the house and rarely divested her eyes from the ground. One night, Garcia woke up with no memory of going to sleep. A group of five men had drugged and gang raped her. At Planned Parenthood, she learned she contracted Gonorrhea and Chlamydia.

Drugs are dangerous because it’s hard to use them recreationally without becoming dependent, Mitchelson says. Regardless of the chosen drug, users often find themselves poor, unemployed, infected with communicable diseases and facing unwanted pregnancies, Mitchelson says.

The following years were plagued with stints in treatment, death threats from drug dealers and constant paranoia. Garcia met and started a relationship with another addict. They drank, smoked weed and injected Oxycodeon and methadone. Garcia only saw her boys on special occasions and holidays.

Garcia soon realized she lost touch with her support group. She missed her boys. She was afraid to get clean, but arranged to stay at the Center for Alcohol and Drug Treatment of Wenatchee, Wash.

"I got on the Greyhound and I was alone. I had nobody," Garcia says. "I don’t know what it was, but I just knew I had to get on that bus."

At the center, Garcia had to detoxify for a week before treatment. Oxycodeon and methadone can cause severe withdrawals, so Garcia had to medically detoxify with a clonidine patch and anti-nausea pills.

"Your knees ache and it feels like you need to kick your legs out to make it stop," she explains about the withdrawals. "It wouldn’t go away. The muscles in my body cramped, I was hot and cold, hot and cold. I couldn’t sleep, I could barely eat. I would just cry and cry and cry. I was in pain. You feel like you’re gonna die."

Arendt says addiction has physical and psychological components. The severity of each varies depending on the user and the drug. A physical addiction causes withdrawals when the addict stops using the drug, whereas a psychological addiction is more of a habit that is difficult for an addict to function without, Arendt says.

Garcia says overcoming her physical addiction forced her to deal with the psychological issues. She didn’t trust people so it was difficult to work with a sponsor. Her sponsor taught her to love herself and be proud of the woman she is, something Garcia says was not easy.

"I abandoned my kids so I could get loaded," she says. "I stayed away from them for two years. I didn’t care if they had to worry if I was alive or dead or when they were gonna see me next. That’s how selfish the disease really is."

Garcia now describes herself as a woman with integrity, dignity, respect and love. After she left the Center, Garcia moved to a clean and sober house in Bellingham. She moved in with her mother and her boys shortly after her one-year anniversary.

Rivers says addiction can destroy families because it affects trust levels, creates stress and leads to secrets, lies and stealing. He says addicts have difficulty maintaining close relationships because their addiction becomes more important.

Before she left for treatment, Garcia had strained family relationships. After returning from treatment and celebrating six months clean, Garcia’s family began trusting her. Now her father tells her she makes him proud and Garcia watches her niece overnight. It has been harder to reconnect with her mother, Garcia says.

"My mom and I have a very hard relationship," Garcia hesitates, struggling for words. "She still has a lot of anger and resentment toward me. She doesn’t understand how a mother could abandon her kids."

"I want that house and the dog and the nice car—everything you dream about when you’re a little girl. I know I can get that if I stay clean. Anything is possible when I’m clean."

- Elena Garcia

Garcia attends her meetings and continues to do her step work. One of her friends in the recovery program takes her mom to meetings with her, something Garcia hopes her own mother will do some day.

It’s important to have a support group aside from family, Garcia says. Everyone in her life is either in recovery or knows she is, which helps keep her motivated to stay clean.

"I’ve had to do a lot of growing up and realizing where I want my life to go," Garcia confesses, her charming features hiding all signs of her troubled past. "I want that house and the dog and the nice car—everything you dream about when you’re a little girl. I know I can get that if I stay clean. Anything is possible when I’m clean."

It has taken her a long time to get where she is today, but Garcia says she now has something she never had before: March 24, 2006, a day she’s determined to always call her clean date.

Garcia celebrated 2008 with some friends in recovery and their families. As a group, they represented more than 50 years clean. It was the first New Year’s Eve Garcia spent with her boys. They toasted the New Year with sparkling apple cider.
KLIPSUN is the Lummi word meaning “BEAUTIFUL SUNSET”