Klipsun Magazine, 1996, Volume 26, Issue 06 - September

Stephanie Thomson

Western Washington University

Follow this and additional works at: https://cedar.wwu.edu/klipsun_magazine

Part of the Higher Education Commons, and the Journalism Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://cedar.wwu.edu/klipsun_magazine/174

This Issue is brought to you for free and open access by the Western Student Publications at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Klipsun Magazine by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.
Editor’s Note

In the past few years, Klipsun has offered issues with assorted themes, such as politics, consumerism, women’s issues and relationships. When the other editors and I sat down to select which articles we wanted to run in this issue, we realized three stories shared a common theme — they all related to the performing arts.

Jeremy Stiles gives us a sample of an ordinary open mic night at a downtown Bellingham bar, where performers with visions of stardom come together with performers who don’t have the same aspirations but do share a love for music.

Wendy Gross spent time at Seattle’s O.K. Hotel interviewing several Northwest poets prior to writing her article on spoken word performances. Her story, which begins on page 14, captures both the spirit of the spoken word scene and the passion these artists have for their craft.

Similarly, Collin Coyne spins a local angle with a detailed account of what happened when the spoken word scene came to Western in May.

Finally, on page 21, Brian Olson chronicles the evolution of an Afro-Cuban percussionist named Matt McCarter. A Fairhaven graduate, McCarter was inspired by a Grateful Dead show in 1991. Since then, he has been honing his natural talent for drumming and also been sharing his skills with students.

It’s hard not to be envious of these performers because they have all found something in their lives that makes getting out of bed each day worth it. Not only do they have an outlet to express themselves, but they do so in a way others can enjoy.

I’d like to say we should all be so lucky, but if everyone had as much talent as some of these performers do, who would be left to appreciate it?

Thanks for reading,

Stephanie Thomson
Welcome to the soup kitchen — 4
Volunteers dish out warm food and friendship.
By Shelby Benny

Search dogs — 7
Man's best friend is an invaluable member of Bellingham's Search and Rescue team.
By Joanna Cerar

**THE PERFORMING ARTS**

Word association — 14
Seattle's O.K. Hotel is a haven for spoken word performers and fans.
By Wendy Gross

Also — Spoken word comes to campus.
By Collin Coyne

No experience necessary — 19
The Beech House Pub welcomes locals to step into the spotlight on open mic nights.
By Jeremy Stiles

Finding the rhythm and following the beat — 21
Fairhaven graduate Matt McCarter emerges as a top-notch Afro-Cuban percussionist.
By Brian Olson

Mission control — 11
Mormon missionaries spread the word in Bellingham.
By Quincy Hanson

The vertically liberated — 26
Hang gliding may look like a breeze, but it's not for everyone.
By Jennifer Hayes

Cover illustration by Kelly Jackson. Back cover photo by Tim Klein.
As the rain pelted my face and the wind whipped my hair skyward, I smiled thinking of the afternoon that lay ahead of me. No talk shows or time spent with friends. Instead, I had chosen to volunteer by serving food to the homeless.

I walked through the gate in the cyclone fencing that led to a large parking lot and found my way to a heavy-looking metal door.

A little bit nervous about the adventure ahead of me, I quietly pulled the door open, hoping to check out what was inside before anyone spotted me. Stepping out of the rain and through the door, I was greeted by a sudden rush of warmth and the sound of laughter.

“What should we serve today? I’m thinking some kind of tomatoey-type soup and some kind of potatoes,” said Western student Kristin Vekved.

“Whatever. I think that I’ll start on the salad and we’d better get some meat loaf in too,” Mary Johnston, 44, responded.

Vekved and Johnston stood in the spacious, immaculately clean kitchen where the food preparation for The Inn University Ministry’s Soup Kitchen takes place.

Johnston and Vekved tease each other as they begin to prepare the meal to be served to approximately 60 people later that afternoon.

“I’ve always heard about the soup kitchen, but I didn’t get involved until October of ‘95. The only way I can describe what it’s like to work here is addictive. It’s definitely addictive,” Vekved said.

“You know, seeing the same people over and over then getting to know them week after week. I mean, really getting to know them — where they came from, why
they're here and where they're going. It's definitely addictive," she said, as she emptied a can of stewed tomatoes into a large pot.

Definitely addictive," said Johnston with a laugh. She pushes her short blond hair behind an ear as she explains how she became involved with the soup kitchen.

"I used to think when I saw people on the street that they must have problems and that's why they were there, but now I realize that's not always true.

"I got involved with the soup kitchen through a friend who told me about it. They were always short-staffed when the college students left for vacations, so I was recruited and here I am."

The Inn's soup kitchen is located at 902 State Street and is open on Tuesdays and Fridays. Food preparation and set-up begins at noon and serving happens from 2 p.m. until 4 p.m.

Checking their watches and realizing that they still have an hour before people will be expecting some warm food, Vekved and Johnston continue to tease one another as they continue preparing the meal.

Molly Rieck, a 22-year-old Western senior and Soup Kitchen volunteer for the past three and a half years, strolls into the kitchen. Rieck, who is one of the few original staff persons left still volunteering at the Soup Kitchen, takes a few moments to explain the reason for starting the soup kitchen.

"The Soup Kitchen is a ministry and the basis for this ministry is Jesus Christ," Rieck said. "We count on God for provision.

"People should know that there's young people who care. We all need to realize that just because someone is homeless doesn't make them less of a person — they're real people, too. They're people, not throw-aways," Rieck said very seriously.

From looking around the room, it's evident that the volunteers care about the people they are serving.

Since the time of my arrival, 11 other individuals have arrived in the kitchen full of energy and purpose, even though slightly wind-blown and damp from the rain outside.

All of them are anxious to help and have begun work by refilling bowls with coffee, cocoa and tea, setting the six long tables with eight place settings per table and placing dishes on trays to send through the industrial dishwasher.

Across the room, JC is folding baby-blue napkins and placing them under the silverware already in place at the tables. JC is a 42-year-old homeless man, "with a lot of rough miles," who lives on the streets of Bellingham. He is also a volunteer at the Inn's Soup Kitchen.

"I've been coming in ever since it opened to help out any way I can," said JC as he continues folding the napkins.

A few feet away is Leon. Leon is a good friend of JC's. Together they have been on the streets for the past five to six years. "We've kind of lost track of time," Leon comments as his long white beard and mustache move with his rosy smile.

"There's a lot of people on the streets for a lot of different reasons and no one on this earth has the right to judge another human unless they have lived the life of the person they are judging," said Leon.
before going back to refilling a bowl of cocoa.

As he scoops another spoonful of the chalky powder into a bowl, Leon finishes his thought by saying, "People just don't take the time to build meaningful relationships in their lives anymore. People aren't used to building meaningful relationships with others, but they are used to judging by appearances."

People begin to pour through the doors of the Soup Kitchen as the washing machine in the corner of the dining room starts to whir. Glancing at the clock, I realize that it's a few minutes after 2 p.m. and time for the serving to begin.

Volunteer Justin Glessner, 20, leads the roomful of people in a prayer before the meal which results in a resounding "Amen."

The tables are lined with men, women and children who have come out of the cold for a warm meal.

Some people are dressed in worn-out, dirty clothing, while others are dressed in buttoned down business shirts and slacks.

One thing that every person in the room has in common, though, is their need for a warm hearty meal.

Volunteers rush bowls of the piping hot soup created earlier by Vekved. "I like to call it Tomato Beanie soup," she laughingly explains to a man who praises the flavor.

Loaves of bread, plates of meat loaf, bowls of spaghetti, baked potatoes, green salad and a rhubarb crumble dessert accompanied the soup. The volunteers serve the food restaurant style, in courses, and rush through the room removing plates and empty bowls.

Glessner is a recent volunteer to the Soup Kitchen, having just joined the staff in the past couple of months.

"I think that when people say they have a lot on their minds, they actually mean they have a lot in their stomach. I guess what I mean by that is whatever it is that you lack, whether it be food or love or nourishment or acceptance from your peers, whatever the one thing that you lack is that's going to be the one thing on your mind the most.

"Sometimes it seems like the people on the street have things figured out a lot better than the rest of the world because they know what's important. They know what it's like not to have material items or even the basic necessities. From many conversations with people like Leon or JC, they seem to have a grip on what's important to them."

In the far corner of the room, a man sits perched on the back of a couch strumming a guitar.

Howard is a 30-year-old man who has been on the streets of Bellingham for the past three months. Originally, Howard is from the east coast. He grew up with his family before turning to the streets soon after college.

"I have a lot of dreams. I just have to have the money or someone to help me in order to get where I want to go. I have a college degree, but without someone who cares about who you are it's hard to get anywhere," said Howard as he continues strumming his guitar without looking up.

"If I could tell people how to act I would say, 'sit down and converse with some of the people that disgust you.' Then look beyond the scraggly hair, the dirty clothes and the yellowed teeth and listen to their heart.' It's a human being who wants attention, who wants to be understood," Howard said.

Howard puts his guitar away and sits down at a table for a cup of coffee with some friends who agree with what he's just said. They all huddle around him and begin a conversation on how to get off the streets.

Volunteers prepare food from noon until 2 p.m. every Tuesday and Friday. The food is then served from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m.
PHOTOS BY TIM KLEIN

T he pager’s beeping cuts through the dark stillness of the night. Jeanne Laverdier jumps up from her bed and staggers out to the phone. It’s 2 a.m., and she has no doubt what the page was for. Mechanically, she’s dialing a number: she’s done it so many times, it’s routine. Meanwhile, a jet black Giant Schnauzer is taking in the activity and growing increasingly excited. Greta is soon jumping on her hind legs because she knows she might get to go to work as a search dog.

As a member of the Bellingham Mountain Rescue Council — a unit of Whatcom County Search and Rescue — Laverdier may be summoned any time of the day or night. She might be needed to run a base camp, or mantrack (search), or she might be asked to use her special tool: Greta. Regardless of what Laverdier is asked to do, Greta goes along for moral support.

"By the time I’m off the phone, the dog is doing back flips: ‘Oh boy, we’re going to work!’” Laverdier explains.

There’s no question Laverdier, 50, has a special bond with dogs. She’s trained them for 30 years and handled search dogs for the last 20 years. “My mother swears my first word was ‘dog,’ not mommy or daddy,” Laverdier concedes.

Greta, 4, is her fourth Giant Schnauzer, and the fourth dog she has worked in searching. For Laverdier, search dogs are more than a giant volunteer commitment — they’re a way of life. The front door of her Lynden-area home is adorned with a ceramic cut-out of a Giant Schnauzer standing on top of a red heart. Barking comes from behind the door. As it opens, Greta’s black nose pokes out.

Laverdier appears, wearing a red turtle-neck, a blue shirt and jeans. Below her short brown hair, her ears are adorned with small silver dog-footprint earrings. They’re a present from the search dog group she founded a decade ago in Fairbanks, Ala. She arrived in Whatcom County in fall 1992 after two decades up north.

Inside, two pairs of hiking boots sit ready next to the door. The pager rests under a spider plant on a doorside table. An “I’d Rather be Tracking” bumper sticker is on the wall over her desk. Near it is a charcoal drawing of Haida, her first real search dog. And Laverdier’s bedroom has a “dog wall,” with framed photos of all her dogs.

This is all left behind when the pager goes off. Laverdier grabs the equipment bags she keeps ready at all times, then heads for her slate-blue Volvo station wagon. When Laverdier opens the tailgate, Greta jumps onto the faded blue paisley quilt that lines the floor. Once Greta and Laverdier reach the Search and Rescue Building, they’re ready to work.

“Every dog I’ve ever had knew that this was not a practice; this is the real thing. Your chemistry changes because the adrenaline hits your bloodstream and you go into search mode. The dogs just cue on it.”

Inside, two pairs of hiking boots sit ready next to the door. The pager rests under a spider plant on a doorside table. An “I’d Rather be Tracking” bumper sticker is on the wall over her desk. Near it is a charcoal drawing of Haida, her first real search dog. And Laverdier’s bedroom has a “dog wall,” with framed photos of all her dogs.

This is all left behind when the pager goes off. Laverdier grabs the equipment bags she keeps ready at all times, then heads for her slate-blue Volvo station wagon. When Laverdier opens the tailgate, Greta jumps onto the faded blue paisley quilt that lines the floor. Once Greta and Laverdier reach the Search and Rescue Building, they’re ready to work.

“By the time I’m off the phone, the dog is doing back flips: ‘Oh boy, we’re going to work!’” Laverdier explains.

SEPTEMBER 1996 7
Laverdier never knows quite what to expect until she's at a search site. The mission could be wrapping up even as they arrive — or it could be just the beginning of two or three days of searching. Laverdier's employer allows her to take the time away from work in such cases.

If Greta is needed, Laverdier quickly assesses the situation. Greta is one of three dogs that may be called out, so Laverdier decides how the dogs will best work together. At this time, Laverdier may locate an article that belonged to the victim. If she can't get one, she turns Greta loose to frisk everyone in camp.

"You'll see the search dogs loose, sniffing everybody. I don't know how they catalog it. We've got 18 people flailing around in base camp, and the dog knows, 'OK, these aren't the ones we want.' The standing joke is, if you're on a search with a dog, don't get lost."

Laverdier takes a few minutes to center herself before the search. Then she's off. Greta may work on or off a leash; she could be several yards away. She trots along on the long legs that earned her a nickname in honor of Greta Garbo. She is a mass of black fur with pointy ears, resembling a small bear from a distance. Laverdier follows, intent as she looks for clues. She doesn't carry a radio or think about where she's going, leaving that job to a partner.

"When I'm working, the only thing I'm watching is the ground and the dog. I haven't got an idea where I've gone."

Some searches never turn up anything. The dogs are helpful, though, because they "clear" areas, showing the lost person wasn't there. Two years ago, Laverdier worked on back-to-back searches that turned up very little. "I worked Greta 'til her feet were so raw she couldn't move, and then I worked in base camp."

Even then, the dogs don't stop working. They comfort the family of the victim.

"They know somebody's who's upset. You will see, oftentimes, the search dogs will just zero in on that person. That sensitivity has been cultivated for years."

Other times, a dog will catch the trail and go for it. When she lived in Fairbanks, Laverdier and her dog went after a lost hiker. "We chased him for four days, up and down a valley," she says. "We kept finding where he was, and the chopper got him right in front of us."

Last fall, Laverdier was called down to Pierce County to search for a lost mushroom picker. Greta and another dog picked up the scent. "A Canadian bloodhound was coming in from below and I was coming in from above. The body was found in between us," Laverdier says.

Laverdier worked with BMRC member Seth Brothers on that mission. Brothers, a geology major at Western, says Laverdier is very skilled at her game.

"I'm really impressed by (Greta's) obedience level and all she can do," he says.

Brothers' observation hits on Laverdier's commitment to search dog training. The relatively few hours spent searching each year are the result of thousands of hours of training.

A quality search dog comes from the match of a good dog with an appropriate handler, followed by extensive training.

First, Laverdier looks at a puppy's pedigree. Does the dog's family have good track records? She tests puppies for boldness, a sense of calm and acceptance of humans. She also considers the temperament of the person who will work the dog. The independence of Giant Schnauzers works for Laverdier, but other dogs work for other people.

When a proper match is made, training starts immediately. As with police dogs, search dogs have extensive training. But the similarities end there. Police dogs are trained to be aggressive, to intimidate the public. Police dogs and their handlers are still almost exclusively male, while search dogs and their handlers are split pretty evenly between males and females. And American search dog trainers/handlers are volunteers — they are not reimbursed for their work. Finally, search dogs must be non-aggressive and able to work with other dogs and people.

"Aggression is not a highly desired trait in most search situations. It looks bad when the victim is bitten," Laverdier says with a deadpan look.

To demonstrate the training, Laverdier agrees to a trip to a local park. As soon as she grabs a pair of green and red bags, Greta is up from her nap on the floor. Her brown eyes watch eagerly from beneath bushy black eyebrows and her docked tail wags furiously. "She knows what this means," Laverdier says with a smile.

At the park, Greta stays in the car while Laverdier places some items for her to find. When Laverdier returns and opens the back of the Volvo, Greta shoots out. As Greta jumps with excitement on her hind legs, she's as tall as most humans. But as soon as Laverdier puts a fluorescent yellow and pink harness on Greta, she calms down and keeps four feet on the ground.

A long, bright pink leash is fastened to the harness, telling Greta she will be tracking — following exactly where a person walked, staying only with that scent. Before tracking, Laverdier teaches her dogs obedience and agility. "If the handler can't build rapport with dog doing obedience, you're dead in the water," she says matter-of-factly.
Obedience is second nature to Greta, as demonstrated on the way to the search area. Greta is several yards in front, heading straight for a large metal tank. "Left turn!" Laverdier shouts. Greta hangs a 90-degree left turn with her next step.

Tracking instruction may start after a few weeks of obedience work and continue for a year. Today, Greta is doing a simple tracking exercise where she finds a series of articles Laverdier left along her trail. Greta trots through the course, head down and sniffing. She pauses when she locates an article, turning to Laverdier for affirmation. At the end of the trail, Greta is rewarded with some cheese. Laverdier usually uses meat, but it is out today.

To Greta, the training is fun. "There's a point at which when you start doing it, it's all a game. The 'lost' person always has food; their toy; preferably both," Laverdier explains.

A conditioned thing," Laverdier says. "Finding a lost person is an enjoyable experience. (The dog) gets fed, his ego is boosted, he gets played with. The dog feels very important when he finds people."

Along with teaching the tracking "game," Laverdier watches for the ability to trail. Trailing allows the dogs to work within the vicinity of the track and may be used when the track starts to disappear. Greta is trailing when she wears the harness without the leash. Trailing takes an incredible nose, Laverdier says. "The dog may be 20 yards from the track, but hair drifted over there," she says. "How they do it is beyond me."

Finally, air scenting is taught. Greta wears a collar with a bell for this activity.

"The way I train, it's a cumulative use of all the skills the dog has been taught. By then, you should be able to read your dog like a book."

Many search and rescue dogs use air scenting because it's the easiest and most quickly taught skill.

Air scenting can lead a dog back to a track. "Then they'll immediately throw the air scenting out and go to tracking mode because they know tracking will always get them there," Laverdier says.

Air scenting can also save time when the dog picks up another, newer leg of the track. "They'll be working on a track, and suddenly you'll see the head pop up and the dog will pivot off the track, and you'll see the head in the air. You can hear their whole breathing pattern change. And that's when I just walk up and pop 'em loose (to find the new area). They've got it."

Laverdier teaches her dogs how to find dead bodies — a small, but interesting part of training. She uses a chemical called Pseudo Corpse, which is available only to a small group of dog handlers.

"Everything biologically decomposes. As (a body) breaks down, (it) gives off certain scents. And those smells are what the Sigma Chemical company in St. Louis has spent years perfecting — what a job!"

However, the product is needed. "At least a quarter of the searches here end in tragedy," Laverdier says. "If your dog has not been trained on that smell, and avoids the body, the search goes on for days."

Before Pseudo Corpse, most American search dog handlers didn't know how their dogs would react to dead victims. When handlers were nervous about finding a corpse, the dogs knew it.

"They only clue you might have was that the dog wouldn't go anywhere near the area. The Pseudo Corpse has made it possible that at least a handler can see what their dog will do," Laverdier says. "When you go out there and you know that your dog is looking for a body ... it's awful. I've done it. Believe me, it's awful. You're just gritting your teeth. You want to find it, but oh God, you don't want to find it."

Laverdier also uses Pseudo Drowned Victim to train Greta for, well, finding drowned victims. And she's interested in a new product, Pseudo Distressed Victim, which mimics the smell people give off when they panic.

"I'm very curious to see what it is — how the dogs work it," Laverdier says.

It may take a few times out, but Laverdier's dogs realize the seriousness of the situation when they smell the stress.

"The game goes out the window. This is where the female factor, I think, comes in," Laverdier says, referring to her preference for female search dogs. "It's the mother defending the young mode, especially if the first time they
hit that scent it’s a lost kid they’re working on. The dogs just become driven.

When Laverdier’s dogs locate a victim, they usually circle back to her, often without the victim even knowing the dog was there. Each dog has its own way of signaling a find.

“When Greta comes back, you hear castanets (as she clicks her teeth), and she jumps in the air in front of me, and then she just bows down into what among dog people is called play position one: front end down, butt in the air. She’ll skid toward me with her eyes drilled into mine. And then she just does a 180 and takes off. And that’s her command to me of ‘Mother follow.’”

However, the dogs don’t always find the victim. “I know that it’s really hard on dogs not to get in at the end, to get in to the victim,” Laverdier says. In those cases, she’ll end the search by asking another searcher to hide, then sending her dog after that person. But the dogs know they’re not finding the real victim, and they don’t forget.

Sometimes, a rescued person will come to a Search and Rescue meeting. “I’ve seen several times where the dog has gone into the crowd and pounced on the person that we looked for, and frisked ‘em up and down,” Laverdier says.

Other handlers say the same about their dogs. “And those are the dogs money doesn’t buy,” Laverdier says.

Of course, searching also takes a toll on human participants. “I get mad sometimes because it gets really frustrating,” Laverdier admits. After especially rough searches, critical incident stress debriefing is available, though Laverdier rarely uses it: “I take my therapy with me.”

Those who have seen Laverdier in action describe her as a pro.

“She doesn’t get frazzled on searches; she’s always calm,” says Rory Scribner, who trains with Laverdier. Scribner and her husband, Trent, have worked with Laverdier since May, 1995. They are training their German Shepherd, Tesa, for search work. Trent agreed with Rory, describing Laverdier as serious, analytical and steady.

“She has a real keen mind for search operations,” he says.

It takes constant practice to stay prepared for search work. Laverdier works Greta twice a week with four other search dog teams, including the Scribners and Tesa.

Weekends are spent at the Abbotsford airport, where the dogs have to track through the scents of hundreds of people. On Sundays, the teams go to different locations together, including many state parks. The locations change so the dogs don’t become area-wise.

A year of these training sessions, in addition to other training, prepared Tesa for her first search last May. Rory Scribner says Laverdier taught them “just about everything we know” through her examples and encouragement.

“She doesn’t put herself above you,” Trent Scribner says. “She asserts her information in a really positive way.”

In addition to the Wednesday and Sunday session, training continues on a daily basis. Laverdier and Greta walk a couple of miles each morning. “Everything we do is aimed at increasing Greta’s vocabulary ... so that she’s confident no matter what situation she goes into. There’s certain things I know she doesn’t like, so we do those a lot,” Laverdier says.

With their calm demeanors and impeccable manners, search dogs are attractive to casual observers. They, too, would like such a well-trained dog.

“And then they come out and see the monotonous hours and hours and hours it takes to get that dog,” Laverdier says. “I bet I’ve had 50 folks contact me in the three years I’ve been down here. Only one followed through.”

For instance, Greta was well-received at the Lynden Youth Fair.

“They’re warm, they’re fuzzy — the noble dog with unconditional love,” Laverdier says.

But the public doesn’t often see the responsibility that goes with the dogs, she says. Search dogs have to be kept safe from injury and mistreatment.

With their calm demeanors and impeccable manners, search dogs are attractive to casual observers. They, too, would like such a well-trained dog.

Laverdier with Greta

“It’s being careful that some kid doesn’t clobber the dog and undo two years of work,” Laverdier says. “There’s a lot of responsibility to see that this dog stay in a cocoon where everything is good.”

After an afternoon of playing, Greta returns to the cocoon and retreats to her bed. Time for a nap. Who knows when she’ll be called to duty again?
Sister Fisher saunters casually up to the closed door with her companion Sister Morgan trailing excitedly. They whisper to each other, deciding "whose door" it's going to be. They ring the doorbell and stand restlessly, waiting for signs of life. The door suddenly opens, and Fisher doesn't miss a beat. "Hi, we're missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," she begins. "We've been in your neighborhood sharing a message."
You may have opened the door to find missionaries on your own doorstep. There are three pairs of Mormon missionaries in Bellingham, and five more pairs between the Canadian border and Lake Samish. There is no magic number - the greater the interest the more missionaries are sent to the area, said Brent A. Youngberg, Director of the Bellingham Washington Institute of Religion, an LDS educational facility on campus.

For Bellingham missionaries Sister Morgan and Sister Fisher, the personal benefits of missionary work are innumerable. "It's like a big life lesson," says Fisher, as she tries to describe what she has gained from being a missionary abroad.

"Every day for us is different" says Morgan. Fisher laughs and says there are surprises on the other sides of the doors for her too sometimes.

She tries to be serious, but her eyes give her away. "I had to pray for a cat before," she says in disbelief. She describes a woman during the beginning of her mission who asked her to bless a sick cat. "Yeah, we just said a prayer, you know, please bless your cat that it will feel better, you know," Fisher says in embarrassment. "You get funny little things all the time like that," she says giggling.

The 22-year-old and her companion are missionaries from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who cover Western's campus and part of Bellingham. Except for their dresses and badges, it would be easy to mistake the outgoing women for students. They both seem relaxed and easy going, but it's their warm, friendly personalities that set them apart.

Twenty-one-year-old Morgan animatedly explains that it is actually easier and more fun to do missionary work on a college campus because the students can relate to people their own age. The women have yet to go door-to-door inside the dorms.

Fisher says some dorms have restrictions, and she hasn't checked the guidelines for them. "We haven't yet, but that doesn't mean we won't!" she says positively.

In the Mormon church, female missionaries go when they are 21-years-old, and males go when they are 19. Fisher only has five months left of her 18-month mission, but Morgan is just finishing her third month on the job.

They explain that the title "Sister" is earned when a woman goes on a mission. It is a title of respect that helps keep themselves and those around them focused on their work. The women have to follow a dress code that includes wearing dresses that come below the knee, nylons and dress shoes at all times. They are only supposed to have five outfits, but the women grin sheepishly at each other, and Fisher says "Well, you have to have variety in your life." She explains that the male missionaries have to wear slacks, white shirts and ties every day. "We are very distinguished, I mean you see us and you know exactly who we are," says Fisher.

Fisher and Morgan knock on people's doors 12 hours per week. "We call it tracting. We go to people's doors and talk to them about the church," Fisher explains. "It was hard in the beginning, but now it's nothing. I can pretty much walk up to anybody and say 'Hi, How are you doing?'"

Rejection comes with the territory, and the women say they got used to it quickly. But they keep a positive attitude despite the many doors slammed in their faces.

"There's good things about it I mean, I've learned to love everybody I come in contact with," says Morgan seriously. They explain how hard it is when people try to battle with them over details in the Bible. They strive not to argue with people when they nit-pick. "If you don't want to hear (about the church), have a good day," says Fisher matter-of-factly. "It's not like 'Hi, we're here to baptize you.'"

The missionaries adhere to a rigorous predetermined schedule. Fisher describes their daily routine. "We get up at 6:30 in the morning, and we have what we call personal study, which is reading our scriptures for an hour. We have to be out of the apartment by 9:30 on a daily basis." The day is usually spent finding receptive people to teach about the church, and meeting with people who have already expressed an interest. They often have dinner with members of the congregation to save money, but have to be home by 9:30, and in bed at 10:30 p.m.

Morgan cuts in, explaining that this schedule is valid Tuesday through Sunday, and they have Mondays off. "That's when we are normal people like you," she says. Fisher explains that even on Mondays they still get up at 6:30 a.m. and have personal study until 9:30 a.m. and then have until 6:00 in the evening free. They are usually gone from 9:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m.

A mission is not a whim decision for these women. Both were raised in strong Mormon households. Morgan remembers wanting to go on a mission at the age of seven. "I always wanted to come (on a mission) to Seattle," she recalls. Fisher decided she wanted to go on a mission when she was 17-years-old. "It just kind of clicked, like, 'Yeah, that's what I should do,' so ever since then I was pretty much firm in my decision." She laughs, "I guess, before I didn't think that it was me. But now it's like, how could I not? It's so me now."

There is much financial and emotional preparation that takes place before
missionaries go out in the field. All applicants must attend the Missionary Training Center in Provo, Utah. This houses all missionaries in training from the United States and Canada. There they spend three to eight weeks role playing situations, practicing communication skills and if necessary, learning foreign languages with other trainees.

Fisher explains that they don’t get paid to serve the 18-month to two-year missions, and they don’t work outside jobs during the missions. “The church pays for it, your family pays for it, or you work all your life and you save for it. I’m paying for my own mission,” Morgan says somewhat proudly. “We live on a really small budget.”

“It’s a totally different lifestyle, because I mean, we don’t date, or watch T.V. or listen to the radio,” says Fisher with a smile. Fisher explains that when you go on a mission, you sign an agreement not to do these things. “It’s by choice, you know, we can do what we want, but it keeps us focused on what we are doing.”

All missionaries carry a guidebook, called “The White Handbook,” containing rules and regulations on how to carry out their work. The handbook has mission rules for the missionaries’ safety and protection, said Youngberg. It also has guidelines on health, an economic code that dictates how money should be spent, how their living spaces should be maintained, and how they should conduct themselves in specific situations.

Youngberg said that the handbook strictly advises the missionaries not to argue with other Christians. “We are never going to bless anybody’s life by arguing,” he said. “We are very concerned about other people’s beliefs and do everything we can to honor them, even though we may not believe them ourselves.”

The missionaries must account for their time in reports submitted to their mission president. The mission president is there to help them get back on track. It hurts those who are learning if the missionaries are not living by the principles they are teaching. The other end of the spectrum is a “moral infraction,” said Youngberg. The missionary guilty of premarital sex is sent home, and risks losing his or her church membership.

Part of the reason the missionaries have such strict rules is to keep them away from temptation. For example, Youngberg said that the male missionaries are not allowed to be alone with young women. “They are committed to be dedicated to serving that two-year period, and to be worthy.”

Far away from family and friends, missionaries rely on the same-sex companions who are chosen for them by their area mission presidents. “We have to work together 24 hours a day, seven days a week,” says Morgan emphatically. They even live in the same apartment. Morgan and Fisher have been together for three weeks, but they seem like close friends. “If you don’t get along, the work doesn’t get done,” says Morgan.

Both women are far from home. Morgan is from Hartford, Conn., and Fisher is from Sacramento, Calif. “Actually we didn’t pick Bellingham,” Morgan admits. She explains that they each went through a lengthy interview process with their church leaders, and then submitted papers to the church president who chose the locations for them.

Fisher says that serving a mission on a college campus has not really affected her attitude towards school. “I’ve always liked school. I like being with people,” she says. She plans to follow up her associate’s degree with a bachelor’s when she is released from her mission. “I have five months (left), so I’m kind of like, okay, I know I want to go to school, but where do I live, and do I want to go back home?”

“I have a year left, so I have no idea what I am going to do when I get home,” Morgan says quietly. “It’s too far down the road to think about it. If I think about it, I get homesick, and it’s not worth getting homesick.”

The missionaries are allowed to write their families once a week, and they can talk to them three times a year: Father’s Day, Mother’s Day and Christmas. The only communication is by letter and phone, and they are not allowed to travel outside of their assigned area.

“It’s hard if you are brand-new like me, because I am used to being around the family all the time and this is my first time being away from home,” Morgan says, looking down at her hands. “You learn how to be away from your family and lean on other people. You get new friends and family while you are out here. We have four other elders (male missionaries) in this area, and I think we are a family. We can turn to each other to help through the rough times and the happy times. We are such a family out here, I like it.”

She looks to Fisher, who agrees softly. “We are working for a common goal, to help people out and share this.”

SEPTEMBER 1996
WORD ASSOCIATION

Modern-day storytellers recall
The O.K. Hotel crowd is sparse tonight; a few patrons sit at the bar cradling their pints of microbrews, one of the two pool tables in the adjoining room boasts shooters, and only two of the wooden booths in the dining area are occupied. In the booth nearest the kitchen, Patrick Lincoln sits flipping through the pages of a favorite anthology of poems. He chooses a piece by Ferlinghetti titled "The Love Nut" and begins to read, his leathery voice polished with a subtle Texas drawl.

"I go into the men's room in the Springfield bus station on the way back to Mulinberg county and see this nut in the mirror. Who let this weirdo in? Who let in this freak? He's the kind that writes 'I love you' on toilet walls and wants to embrace everybody in the lobby.

A musical interlude, the competition begins. Selected writers take turns onstage, reading what they believe to be their best pieces. In a series of rounds, competitors are judged and eliminated by several randomly selected audience members. The victor is rewarded with a fat wad of cash.

This evening, the tiny crowd that's gathered to watch the Slam is composed mainly of other poets, which isn't typical. Most often, at least three-fourths of the candlelit tables are occupied by cigarette-smoking, beer-swilling, wine-sipping spectators.

As a matter of fact, on any given night, at least a handful of people can be found at a club or coffee shop whose evening entertainment is spoken word performance. Places such as The Lux Cafe, The Globe Cafe, The Blue Moon Tavern and Sit 'n' Spin in Seattle set aside at least one night a month for a spoken word showcase. In Bellingham, Parker's hosts an open mic every Thursday, and KUGS-FM, Western's campus radio station, broadcasts Voicebox, a two-hour spoken word show, every Wednesday.

The increasing popularity of spoken word isn't unique to this area. Every year, more cities send Slam finalists to the national competition, music stores stock more spoken word recordings, and major tours like Lollapalooza include spoken word performers on their bills.

Scott Castle, a Western student studying English, proposed the idea of Voicebox to the core group.

"At the poetry slam, man, people sit around and drink beer, and they smoke cigarettes and they shout obscene epithets about your mother, if they like your stuff."

-PATRICK LINCOLN

He writes his phone number inside a heart on the wall...he's some kind of a pervert, Mr. Eros, the great lover who wants to run up to everybody in the waiting room and kiss them on the spot and say "Why aren't we friends and lovers? Can I go home with you?..."

After finishing the poem, Lincoln marks its page with a slip of paper, lifts his mocha to his lips and pecks at the mound of whipped cream on top.

In a few minutes it will be 8:30, and Lincoln will retreat to the dark lounge in the rear of the O.K. and wait for his slot in the open mic portion of tonight's Original Poetry Slam Competition. After the open mic and a musical interlude, the competition begins. Selected writers take turns onstage, reading what they believe to be their best pieces. In a series of rounds, competitors are judged and eliminated by several randomly selected audience members. The victor is rewarded with a fat wad of cash.

This evening, the tiny crowd that's gathered to watch the Slam is composed mainly of other poets, which isn't typical. Most often, at least three-fourths of the candlelit tables are occupied by cigarette-smoking, beer-swilling, wine-sipping spectators.

As a matter of fact, on any given night, at least a handful of people can be found at a club or coffee shop whose evening entertainment is spoken word performance. Places such as The Lux Cafe, The Globe Cafe, The Blue Moon Tavern and Sit 'n' Spin in Seattle set aside at least one night a month for a spoken word showcase. In Bellingham, Parker's hosts an open mic every Thursday, and KUGS-FM, Western's campus radio station, broadcasts Voicebox, a two-hour spoken word show, every Wednesday.

The increasing popularity of spoken word isn't unique to this area. Every year, more cities send Slam finalists to the national competition, music stores stock more spoken word recordings, and major tours like Lollapalooza include spoken word performers on their bills.

Scott Castle, a Western student studying English, proposed the idea of Voicebox to the core group.

"At the poetry slam, man, people sit around and drink beer, and they smoke cigarettes and they shout obscene epithets about your mother, if they like your stuff."

-PATRICK LINCOLN

He writes his phone number inside a heart on the wall...he's some kind of a pervert, Mr. Eros, the great lover who wants to run up to everybody in the waiting room and kiss them on the spot and say "Why aren't we friends and lovers? Can I go home with you?..."

After finishing the poem, Lincoln marks its page with a slip of paper, lifts his mocha to his lips and pecks at the mound of whipped cream on top.

In a few minutes it will be 8:30, and Lincoln will retreat to the dark lounge in the rear of the O.K. and wait for his slot in the open mic portion of tonight's Original Poetry Slam Competition. After the open mic and a musical interlude, the competition begins. Selected writers take turns onstage, reading what they believe to be their best pieces. In a series of rounds, competitors are judged and eliminated by several randomly selected audience members. The victor is rewarded with a fat wad of cash.

This evening, the tiny crowd that's gathered to watch the Slam is composed mainly of other poets, which isn't typical. Most often, at least three-fourths of the candlelit tables are occupied by cigarette-smoking, beer-swilling, wine-sipping spectators.

As a matter of fact, on any given night, at least a handful of people can be found at a club or coffee shop whose evening entertainment is spoken word performance. Places such as The Lux Cafe, The Globe Cafe, The Blue Moon Tavern and Sit 'n' Spin in Seattle set aside at least one night a month for a spoken word showcase. In Bellingham, Parker's hosts an open mic every Thursday, and KUGS-FM, Western's campus radio station, broadcasts Voicebox, a two-hour spoken word show, every Wednesday.

The increasing popularity of spoken word isn't unique to this area. Every year, more cities send Slam finalists to the national competition, music stores stock more spoken word recordings, and major tours like Lollapalooza include spoken word performers on their bills.

Scott Castle, a Western student studying English, proposed the idea of Voicebox to the core group.

"At the poetry slam, man, people sit around and drink beer, and they smoke cigarettes and they shout obscene epithets about your mother, if they like your stuff."

-PATRICK LINCOLN

He writes his phone number inside a heart on the wall...he's some kind of a pervert, Mr. Eros, the great lover who wants to run up to everybody in the waiting room and kiss them on the spot and say "Why aren't we friends and lovers? Can I go home with you?..."

After finishing the poem, Lincoln marks its page with a slip of paper, lifts his mocha to his lips and pecks at the mound of whipped cream on top.

In a few minutes it will be 8:30, and Lincoln will retreat to the dark lounge in the rear of the O.K. and wait for his slot in the open mic portion of tonight's Original Poetry Slam Competition. After the open mic and a musical interlude, the competition begins. Selected writers take turns onstage, reading what they believe to be their best pieces. In a series of rounds, competitors are judged and eliminated by several randomly selected audience members. The victor is rewarded with a fat wad of cash.

This evening, the tiny crowd that's gathered to watch the Slam is composed mainly of other poets, which isn't typical. Most often, at least three-fourths of the candlelit tables are occupied by cigarette-smoking, beer-swilling, wine-sipping spectators.

As a matter of fact, on any given night, at least a handful of people can be found at a club or coffee shop whose evening entertainment is spoken word performance. Places such as The Lux Cafe, The Globe Cafe, The Blue Moon Tavern and Sit 'n' Spin in Seattle set aside at least one night a month for a spoken word showcase. In Bellingham, Parker's hosts an open mic every Thursday, and KUGS-FM, Western's campus radio station, broadcasts Voicebox, a two-hour spoken word show, every Wednesday.

The increasing popularity of spoken word isn't unique to this area. Every year, more cities send Slam finalists to the national competition, music stores stock more spoken word recordings, and major tours like Lollapalooza include spoken word performers on their bills.

Scott Castle, a Western student studying English, proposed the idea of Voicebox to the core group.
staff at KUGS FM in Fall of 1995. Over the past several years, he's frequented spoken word readings and become a collector of spoken word recordings.

That made him the perfect missionary to evangelize KUGS.

"I'd been working at the station for three weeks, and I knew (Voicebox) was what I wanted to do," Castle said, holding a cigarette between his lips and letting out puffs of smoke between his words.

"But when I first came to them and said this is what I want to do,' they were like, 'Uh...okay...well, we don't have any spoken word stuff,' I said, 'That's okay, I have some.'"

Soon after, Castle's show was given a time slot: Wednesdays from 12-2 a.m.

"It started really slow, and when it first began I'd get calls like, 'Could you play some...uh...music? Why are you talking?" Castle said. "But now, from what I understand, there are a lot of people who regularly listen to the show."

In May, Castle recruited several of the Seattle Slam poets and spoken word artists from Bellingham and Vancouver for a live Voicebox show in Western's Viking Addition.

"The live show was an extension of the radio show," Castle said. "Live, it's just much more palpable when you see the person that wrote it deliver it. It's fascinating to me because they know where the inflections are supposed to go, and they can read it with a feeling that you can't get otherwise."

The depth oral performance adds to written prose is obvious when comparing poets' printed poetry with their live readings. Who better to administer Bukowski to a reader than Bukowski? Wouldn't any fan of Shakespeare kill for a chance to hear his recorded voice reciting Hamlet?

"I don't have the skill to convey everything in the written form of my poetry that I can, say, when I'm doing an oral performance of it," Lincoln says. "The oral form gives me another dimension to play with, to use it to enhance the poem."

As one of the Slam's regular competitors, Lincoln has become a familiar name within the Northwest poetry scene.
community. Though he's 48, Lincoln is relatively new to the art. Still, his natural talent for poetic storytelling took him to the finals of this year's Slam, and he's had the opportunity to read with some greats of prose.

"About a month ago, I got to be one of the several poets who read with Tom Robbins and Dan Savage. It was 'erotic poetry night,' and they were turning people away at the door."

Physically, Lincoln resembles a younger Santa Claus; his thick mane of greying hair is resistantly bound in a long ponytail, his roundish face is bordered by full mustache and beard, and his eyes reflect an animated gleam.

Lincoln's similarities to Father Christmas end on the surface; he's more likely to tell a child an off-color joke than to give it a stocking full of gifts. He's quick to belly-laugh or giggle, quick to wax cynical when discussing Politics or the South, yet quick to applaud heartily after a poet friend has braved the open mic. As he chronicles his relationship with the Slam, he begins to fidget like an anxious Little Leaguer talking about a trophy-winning season.

"One day I wrote a poem, and it wasn't very good, but I got a little encouragement, so I tried another one and I tried another one, and then about that time, when I'd just started getting into decent poetry, I heard about this poetry Slam thing. So I came down, started hanging around...

"It was wonderful, man!' Lincoln exclaims, laughing with the memory of it. "I mean, like, most poetry readings you go into some place with hard wooden floors and uncomfortable wooden chairs; people are wearing their designer jeans and they've got their makeup on and the whole nine yards. At the end of it, everybody goes, 'Oh, we will clap 3.4 times for cull-tcha!'"

"What I see the Slam getting back to is an immediate response of an audience who has come to be entertained," Lincoln says. "Like back in the old days, when the poets and troubadours came through town, they'd come through town in their fool's caps, beating drums and blowing bugles, and everybody would go, 'Goddamn sumbitch, they're here!'"
"They'd go out and hear 'em, and if they liked them, they'd hoist them up on their shoulders and declare a three-day holiday.

"If they didn't like them, they would pelt them with rotten food and whatever pigshit was lying around on the ground. Poets have not had enough shit thrown at them from real folks for a long time.

"At the poetry slam, man, people sit around and drink beer, and they smoke cigarettes and they shout sappy love poems.

"His rhyme and romance in a low, breathy voice. Call it a poet. He stood motionless behind the microphone, reciting his words, looking as though she was riding the edge of her consciousness.

"Her family, as though she were alluding to some higher order of things.

"She dove into a tormented character to deliver her words, looking as though she was reaching the edge of schizophrenia.

"Self-consciousness and insecurity were the central theme for a poem Jordan began by casting an obsessed stare into the crowd and repeatedly chirping, "Like me?" She noted ominously in one line that she is not the first poet in her family, as though she were alluding to some higher order of things.

"As Patrick Lincoln stepped into the orange light that flooded the stage, he announced to the audience that any comparisons of his likeness to that of Walt Whitman or Jerry Garcia had already been covered. Lincoln's sharp, lively sense of humor was the foundation for the lighter poems.

"The poem's rhythm is set to the excitement of a small, turbocharged canine who understands, among other things, that his master can't pet him all the time.

"The spoken word can communicate performance, which a large family of illegal immigrants packed into a van passing near the border. Lincoln's piece ends in solace when I'm read, but I've been read by people who ask me later what it means," Cole admits. "I know, verbally, I can get that across. There's a performance element involved with it.

"With my own personal stuff I have to betray the passion, desire, the wanting — that has to come out in my material or it's flat."

"As the forum for spoken word performance expands, isn't it inevitable that weak-talent wannabes will begin to flood the medium? With such an interpretable art form, how can one judge what is inspired and what is insipid?"

"There is a sense of rhythm and meter, "Lincoln says, struggling to describe the critical process. "That can either come out in a very formal, academic way, or you can just have an ear for the rhythm of everyday speech.

"Being honest...and...I don't know, that's a tough one," he says, shaking his head, brow furrowed.

"Cole's standards are more conceptual.

"What makes a poet a poet is a compulsory need to write and to explain yourself in certain situations," he says, in a quietly assertive tone. "I don't think poets know any more than anyone else, they're just impassioned and that makes them write it down."
The Northwest is teeming with musical talent.

From Jimi Hendrix to The Presidents of the United States of America, the area has spawned some of the most well-known acts in the music business.

But for every musician who headlines Lollapalooza or plays “MTV: Unplugged” and gets paid tens of thousands of dollars for one show, hundreds are happy to perform for free beer and the simple joy of playing music.

Undiscovered talent comes to life in the corner bars and cafes of restless cities and sleepy towns.

Anything can happen on an open mic night.

On Tuesday nights at The Beech House Pub on Magnolia Avenue, sharing the musician within is as simple as finding the organizer of the pub's weekly open mic, Marcia Guderian.

"Sign up; do what you want. Anyone can come sign up to play," Guderian says. "I bring the PA. I set it up and play the first set. I make 'em sound good; I make 'em feel good. I get 'em free beer and talk them into coming again next week."

Far from New York's Carnegie Hall or the arena-rock shows in Seattle and Tacoma, people fill the seats along the bar and at the tables in this little tavern sandwiched between The Newstand International and Cellophane Square.

As the music and the din of conversation fills the room, guitar-wielding locals trickle into the bar, make their way toward Guderian and add their names to the list.

"It's a bread-and-butter thing if you're a musician. It helps pay the bills and it's fun. I meet a lot of people; I meet new musicians constantly. It's great," Guderian said.

Guderian has hosted The Beech House's Open Mic Night
for seven years. A former visual artist who hails from Portland, she made her Bellingham debut at Jimbo's — now The Grandstand — in Songwriter's Showcase.

Guderian said she got burned out on playing there, and that's when she started Bellingham's longest-running existing open mic.

"It's still going strong, as you can tell," she said with a grin as people milled around waiting for stage time. "You never know what's gonna happen."

"Open mics make a music scene," Scott Browning, a 24-year-old guitarist from Bellingham, said. "They're proving grounds. Refined musicians go to perfect their acts."

"There's a wide range of skilled and novice musicians," Browning said.

A variety of musical styles can also be heard by sampling this city's open-mic nights. The musicians at The Beech House play electric and acoustic music — more acoustic acts usually show up than bands that choose to plug in.

The styles range from low-down blues and roots rock to airy pop and folk music.

Browning, with his light red hair pulled back in a ponytail and a guitar in his left hand, sings up to accompany a blues singer. He then sits down with some friends and a pitcher of beer.

Browning, who graduated from Western in 1994 with a bachelor's degree in history, is a regular at Bellingham's open mics.

On Monday nights Browning plays at The Royal Room, on Tuesdays he plays at The Beech House and on Thursdays he plays at Pogos Pub and Grubs open-mic blues jam.

"I do 'em all," he said.

Usually, open-mic night is a time to see old friends and make new ones.

"Bruce, the mandolin player, is a friend of mine," Browning says as he looks toward the stage, where Bruce Shaw plucks a mandolin and Ryan Wicklund strums his guitar and sings a cowboy song.

"I hadn't been down for a long time; since October," Shaw says after his set. "This is a great thing to have. It's a great way for people like us to play; a great way to let music be in the city without it being a big deal."

Shaw and Wicklund formed Blue Honey, a local band known for playing Bob Dylan and Grateful Dead covers, at a Beech House open-mic session.

On the sidewalk in front of the bar, Wicklund explained Blue Honey's beginnings.

As the other musicians take their turns and empty pitchers accumulate at his table, Browning swells with courage in anticipation of his stage call.

"I'm gonna have fun, he said, "I'm 6-foot-5, 200 pounds and a former U.S. Heavyweight Taekwondo champion. Nobody gives me shit," the tall, usually soft-spoken guitarist says with a benign chuckle.

Meanwhile, a bearded man in a white t-shirt strums vigorously on a guitar as he sings Tom Petty's "Free Fallin'." "You guys gotta help me out," J.T. Thorsen says as he approaches the chorus.

A few brave souls answer his call before the song's end. After Thorsen sings "Free Fallin'," he launches into "T for Texas." The refrain, simple as it is, reveals a place and a person that are dear to him.

"Give me a T for Texas/Give me a T for Tennessee/Give me a T for Thelma/Give me a T for Texas/You made a fool outta me."

"My mom's name is Thelma. I love Texas; I love my mom," he explained after his set.

"It's good to see Bruce here. We don't get to jam that much," he says, nodding toward Shaw.

Shaw and Guderian join Thorsen onstage.

"This song's called 'Pure and Simple,'" Thorsen says, "I want you to pay attention, because that's the way life should be.

"This is what it's all about — after hours — friends, music and pickin' my 12-string," he declares.
The first time I ever stroked a drum head was the spring of 1995, and Matt McCarter was by my side smiling. Unfortunately, the rest of my Dance and World Cultures classmates were holding their sides, rolling on the hardwood dance floor in fits from my lack of rhythm. Matt was visiting our class to teach us about Afro-Cuban percussion, and I had agreed to accompany him on the congas for a simple beat display. I was on the brink of visiting embarrassment after realizing, a little too late, that this was not so simple. "Hey," Matt said with a sly tone, interrupting the class' chuckles, "Who else wants to try this?" Of course, there was a taker, and of course, she had rhythm, but in the short silence that followed Matt's question, I not only gained more self-confidence, I also gained a new interest — playing percussion. This interest is still with me today and to Matt I am grateful. Matt, on the other hand, is grateful for the Grateful Dead.

The Beat Begins—

In 1991, at the urging of his friend Taylor, Matt traveled down to Oakland from Bellingham, where he was attending Fairhaven College, to see a Dead show. Accompanying Matt on the trip were Taylor, two other friends, and what would later become Matt's favorite companion, Taylor's set of bongos. During the whole ride down, Matt's mind was antsy with anticipation of what was in store for him at the show. The bongos sat neglected and unused, but only for the time being. After arriving in Oakland, Matt was overwhelmed by the atmosphere surrounding the Dead scene.

"At the show a lot of people were playing (drums) together in groups and circles, having a lot of fun and there was a lot of dancing and it really caught my attention right away. From far away I could hear it and I just walked right to it and stayed where the drumming was for a lot of the night," Matt recollects, his brown eyes shining like polished Milk Duds. "I thought it was a lot of fun to play in this big group of people, people I didn't even know, but you get smiles from them, and everybody was having a good time. You don't know where these people are from or what they're about, but you're all together making this music and the people dancing are having a great time ... It was pretty powerful."

— Matt McCarter on a Dead show drum circle
over. The car Matt was riding in mysteriously broke down, leaving the four road-weary travelers stranded in an unknown conservative northern California town. With time on their hands while their car was being worked on, Matt and Taylor put their hands to work on the bongos. All day long they hung out in a park, revisiting the previous day of drumming. “We explored a lot of different ideas, and a lot of different things that came across to me playing the night before. That was fun, it was kind of the day after retrospect,” Matt says, slipping back to his percussion beginnings.

Basically, this experience was the beginning of Matt’s interest in playing music. Before tapping on the bongos, Matt had only taken a few piano lessons as a kid. “The only thing I played was my stereo,” Matt joked, a wide smile spreading across his half-shaven face.

When Matt returned to Bellingham, playing percussion suddenly found itself high on his list of priorities. After finishing schoolwork, Matt and Taylor would wait for darkness and head out to drum on the steps of Old Main. “It sounded neat, because it echoed since there’s a little cave,” Matt says, trying to hide a grin, that hinted there was more to this story. “A lot of times we would wake angry people trying to get some sleep,” he added, exposing the reason for the expression.

Eventually Matt bought his own drum, an African style Ashiko, from a local drum maker. With his newly purchased pal, Matt would roam around beating the drum to his own beat. “I’d walk around at night on campus with the drum strapped over my shoulder and play things, play to the rhythm of my walking and play in the triangle outside Arntzen, listening to the different echo sounds.”

Matt’s interest in percussion had quickly become a part of his everyday life, but something was missing—other people. An interest in drumming can take you only so far, people push your percussion skill on further. “I felt like I was doing neat stuff,” Matt says “but by myself I could only go so far.” As Matt’s luck would have it, that person was soon found—on a flyer.

Arturo Rodriguez, an Afro-Cuban percussionist, was coming to Bellingham to give a free drumming workshop. The workshop was sponsored by John Butorac, a friend Matt had made through their mutual love of percussion music. Matt jumped at the chance and he attended the workshop with an open mind waiting to be filled. “It was really different than what I was used to, because at a Grateful Dead concert everybody was drumming to have fun and there was nothing you could really do wrong, but this was a specific style this guy was teaching. I wasn’t used to it at first, but it intrigued me and the challenge intrigued me, and I wanted to learn more and expand,” Matt says.

Matt kept on taking lessons from Rodriguez, developing his skill at an incredibly rapid pace. He joined a group of twelve people who had been taking lessons with Rodriguez every Sunday for about a year. Matt learned all they had learned in a couple of weeks.
These were not easy lessons, either. Rodriguez is very serious about training career percussionists. He's known for his intense and pressure-filled style of teaching. "It wasn't 'I'll set my plant on my drum for the week, but on Sundays I'll take my plant off and go to lessons,'" Matt says. Where some lessons move along at a slow pace, Rodriguez expected quick learning and a quicker memory. Matt fit in well. 

"My interest just grew and grew with this more formal study, because it's a contrast with drumming you might hear at the park, where people get together with their kitchen pots and anything you can think of," says Matt. "That's great because that's the way I got into the music, but it was really refreshing to find a more formal structure."

The Afro-Cuban percussive tradition is a combination of mostly African percussive tradition and Spanish influence from Cuba. During the 17th century the slave trade brought over a lot of percussive traditions from the Yoruba peoples of Nigeria. The many groups of Yorubas had different traditions, and all of them blended together with the slave trade. Along with the Spanish influence, these made up Afro-Cuban music.

"At the beginning it is hard because you've got to learn how to do it. There are patterns and concepts of melody, measure and clave. There are a lot of concepts you've got to take in, but it is though that formality that makes the level for improvisation even higher," says Matt. "So, once I got the tools I needed to work within the framework of this Afro-Cuban music the door just opened wide. All of a sudden, when you learn certain aspects of it, it is limitless."

The limitations Matt had run into in developing his interest in percussion began to fall as he extended his knowledge, becoming more involved with percussion in Bellingham. After noticing his talent during workshops with Rodriguez, Matt was asked to fill in a newly vacated spot for a group called Bellingham Rhythm and Dance Ensemble. Matt stayed on after this group disbanded. He and John and a group of friends began to form a nucleus centering around the rich Afro-Cuban tradition.

This group would study together, talking about certain parts of rhythms, investigating styles, reading books and listening to music. They would meet once or twice a week to talk about what they had discovered. It was in this manner that the group Akimbo began to form.

Drums are beautiful instruments to behold, and beauty does have a price. As all students know, engaging in extensive research on a subject is very time consuming. With a subject requiring hands-on practice, such as percussion, it can become very cash consuming as well. Matt and the members of the group found a way to dodge this downside to drumming - they built the drums themselves. Matt says Lui Ladere, a member of Akimbo, is a great woodsman and carpenter. Ladere came up with an idea of how to make bata drums, a
familial style drum central to Afro-Cuban music, and the group built them together as a team. The final product turned out beautiful, and cost effective, and to this day the group Akimbo still uses them for performance. Through the process of making their own drums the group became much tighter, and the roles fell into themselves. Through his ability and knowledge Matt settled into the lead drum position, and began to take the leadership role.

“I learned all the drum parts at once because nobody else knew them. I learned them all and then taught everybody the parts, and then played the lead part,” Matt said, his brown curls bouncing on top of his head as his hands swat at imaginary drums in the air.

“It took a lot of management skills, and communication skills, as far as teaching, because when your dealing with friends you need to keep that friendly rapport. And when your not dealing with your own music it is really hard to do. There were definitely some stressful times, and it was questionable whether or not everybody would stick to with it.”

The group did stick together, forming a unity through their interpretation of the Afro-Cuban music. With everyone’s skills developing, giving the players a strong cohesion, the main problem that arose was deciding on a name. “We later had much turmoil over the name of the group,” Matt says, laughing at this problem compared to their initial difficulties. “It ended up being Akimbo, because Akimbo might sound like it is an ethnic word but it’s English and it means bent or askew. And since we’re not Cuban, it’s kind of our take on the music. We can’t play it exactly like anybody else, but we kind of play it our own way. Although, we are trying to emulate the style, obviously, it is a little bent or askew. It’s very appropriate.”

**THE BEAT CROSSES BARRIERS**

During the summer of 1994, three years after his original beginnings, Matt was able to stretch the limits of his knowledge of the Afro-Cuban tradition by attending the Afro-Cubanismal festival in Banff, Alberta. In Banff, he was exposed to premier players from Cuba, who had come to the festival to study and teach. The experience of playing with these people had a great effect on Matt, but watching them teach was even more tremendous.

“What caught my interest was the way the Cubans taught, the way they looked at the music, the way they taught themselves and the way they treated the music,” Matt says. “I thought a lot about how Western ideas of teaching and music are much more drastic than Cuban. I read a lot about the music and how it is taught, and how it is treated within the society, and how it plays a significant role in any event in life—birth, marriage, death, suppertime. The events of the day are expressed through music, and a lot of the times that’s drumming. I thought it was a healthy way to look at life and a great way for people to come together and express themselves. To see some of these people who are literally the carriers of the flame in Cuba, to work with these people and see how they taught and treated their music, was very inspiring. It got me thinking about teaching.”

After returning from the festival Matt began to incorporate teaching percussion into his Fairhaven College curriculum. He conducted independent study workshops, and worked with gradeschoolers from Custer Elementary School in Ferndale. During his workshops with the younger kids Matt tried to show ways they could relate to each other musically, and instill ideas of support within them.

At first Matt was hesitant about teaching. People had approached him for lessons, but he had always concentrated on his own playing and studying.

But as he looked around, he noticed there really wasn’t that much out there for people interested in beginning to play. People who mirrored his past position. “I wasn’t quite sure I was up to it, but as I explore more of the percussive scene in Bellingham I realized that not much was happening. There weren’t that many people that knew that much about traditional percussion. So, I figured, ‘OK I’ll start teaching.’”

Matt had been developing his major through Fairhaven College around many different aspects of teaching. His favorite areas of study included alternative education, conflict mediation and experiential education, or hands-on learning. All of these interests applied directly to his teaching, and Matt tried to form a style that fused the formality of his first teacher with his own charisma. Drawing from his own experience, Matt wanted to show how percussion can initiate communication and cooperation. These aspects had been a big challenge for Matt in his own playing, but his biggest challenge was yet to come.

In the summer of 1995, only four years since his hands first slapped a drum, Matt lived out an Afro-Cuban percussionist’s dream. He traveled to Havana, Cuba to study with master players. Through the Caribbean Music and Dance Program, out of San Francisco, Matt...
was able to secure a spot at the National School of the Arts in Havana. To put this experience into perspective, imagine a Political Science major traveling to the White House.

Matt studied through the program for three weeks, and then was housed for an extra week by the family of a friend he had met. It was with this friend that Matt got a real taste of Cuban life. "It was really depressing there," Matt says, his eyes reflecting his serious tone, "because they don't have hardly anything. But by virtue of what little they have, when they decide to play it's just phenomenal, because the best thing about life in Cuba is the music and that's a given and everybody knows it and has accepted it."

The Cuban music has many different forms to express ideas of sexuality, religion, social strife and other problems its people encounter. As an outsider in a new environment, Matt didn't encounter any hostility, only love.

"People were really excited and wanted to talk to me," Matt says. "I was invited to drum quite a bit, and I played about half the time, because some of the time I would much rather watch and learn."

On his first day at the school Matt thought he had found the perfect person to learn from. A group was giving the students a performance and Matt immediately picked up his teacher. "The lead player was this phenomenal guy and I thought, 'that's the guy. That's the guy I want to learn from,' and then later that afternoon we saw another performance and I went, 'no, no, no, that's the guy,' because although they're playing the same style, there is so much room for your own feeling."

As is the case for most travelers, just when Matt was getting used to Cuba he had to come home. However, returning was not a let down for Matt, because now he was able to take firsthand experience and relate it to his playing with Akimbo. "I identified for myself what musicianship is when I went to Cuba," says Matt.

Matt also identified more with the people and the street corner players, than solely with his teachers. He realized that people place too much importance on teachers, and dodge their own responsibility in developing their skills. "People think they need to get lessons, but break it down and learn how you can make the drum sound different by yourself. You don't need a teacher to get your foot in the door, you can do it by yourself, but people don't have enough trust in themselves," advises Matt. "A big attitude is that people expect a teacher to make them good, but nobody can make you good but yourself."

Matt should know this if anyone should. In a five-year span, he had gone from no knowledge of percussion to teaching and directing ensemble. Akimbo practiced enough and grew so well together that they were soon performing for audiences. The ensemble has played locally a number of times, including performances for classes at Western, the Beech House Pub, Boundary Bay Brewing Company and Earth Day festivals held in Fairhaven. This past April, they traveled to Seattle to be one of the groups featured in the World Rhythm Festival.

**THE BEAT PROGRESSES**

Matt enjoyed the percussion scene in Seattle so much he recently moved there. This move means Bellingham will be missing a strong leader in the percussion tradition. Matt was torn about the move, finding it difficult to balance the strong ties he has to people and percussion around town with the excitement of a new adventure.

"I've done a lot of work helping people out here, and teaching them what I know, which is limited in Bellingham, but now I'm going to go to Seattle and expand on my knowledge and get taught and be the student as well," says Matt. "It's (Bellingham) not a hotbed for percussion, but it's grown a lot since I've been interested in it, and that's been good to see. You don't know something is there until you turn over the rock and look at it. So, before I was into percussion I was oblivious to it, I didn't even pay attention to it. You don't know until you become involved."

Matt's involvement in the Bellingham percussion scene has touched many people, from the author to the local group Bongo Booya, who at one time were his students.

"A really satisfying thing to see is this group Bongo Booya playing, because Arturo came up here and planted a seed and it's grown a lot, and by the same token his seed in me I planted in my students."

"So, it would be great to see two years from now, when I come back up, there's a group of students that my students have been teaching. So, hopefully it will just mushroom from there."

Matt's own interest in percussion mushroomed from his first Grateful Dead experience, and grew and grew to leave a strong mark on Bellingham and the people who crossed his path.

"When I'm gone there will still be the core people in Akimbo, and various people around town and up at Western that know and have an idea about the structure of the music, but it is going to take someone to say, 'hey we're getting together, and this is how we're doing it.'"

"I don't know if anyone is going to rise to that occasion real soon, and that's okay because I've seen it go in phases. The bottom line is that you gotta' have people, you can't do it by yourself, you gotta' have people."
JENNIFER HAYES

One imagines an individual who challenges the elements and defies gravity. Physically, only thin fabric stretched across aluminum and stainless steel bones of a glider keeps a pilot from plunging to the ground. Mentally, only attitude, experience and "presence" keeps a pilot aloft.

Ifs a sport one imagines adventure-seekers and adrenaline-junkies indulging in. Ifs a sport in which one imagines madness to be a prerequisite for participation. (How else would you explain why someone would jump off thick, solid earth into thin air?) But is it really only a sport for the fearless?

Hang gliding is definitely not for everyone, says Pete Nigren, a hang glider pilot with four years experience, but it is more peaceful, and less physical, than many might imagine.

"Its flying without the anxiety and the fear," says Nigren, 39, landscaper and former owner of Washington Windsports, a sailboarding shop he ran for 16 years. "Its much mellower and easier than windsurfing," he says.

However, Nigren explains why some people shouldn't hang glide. "Some people don't have presence. They don't have the ability to be here now and keep from being distracted." Presence, Nigren notes, is the ability to focus on what's going on at all times around a pilot — watching weather conditions and anticipating obstacles. Presence is critical for avoiding mistakes.

"I've always wanted to fly. I'd been in gliders and airplanes, but I didn't like having to use a motor — too expensive and not much freedom. Hang gliding is very accessible. I can be out of work at two and flying at three."

So, how is flying a hang glider different from flying an airplane? What drives a hang gliding pilot to fly? Is it the adrenaline surge one gets from flying 1,000 feet or more above the earth or is it something else? Nigren says the experience goes beyond an adrenaline rush. "Its more of an element of peacefulness."

Watching a hang gliding pilot, one would say it's the challenge of harnessing the wind and defeating the pull of gravity in order to reach the clouds.

Nigren readily recalls his greatest fulfillment in flying so far. "I got to cloudbase and above cloudbase. It had 3-D dimension. The cloud was solid. That was really something."

Cloudbase is a hang gliding term for the bottom portion of cloud cover.

Nigren tries to fly as many times in a week as the weather will allow. He says every flight is different, even when he launches from the same spot several times in a day.

Pilots look for "thermals" and "ridge lift" to get as high in the air as they can for as long as they can. That, after all, is every pilot's goal, indicates Nigren.

Created by changes in the landscape such as freshly tilled soil, clearcuts and other natural changes, thermals are heated columns of air that rise from the ground and drift with the prevailing wind. As they rise, thermals cool and form cumulous clouds.

As pilots fly, they look for the clouds that will help them find the thermals. In some places, pilots can find thermals that push them upwards at 1,000 feet per minute.

The strength of a thermal is determined by temperature differences between the ground and the freezing level. The difference is called the lapse rate. A higher lapse rate means powerful thermals.

Pilots also use ridge lift as another type of wind to help them fly. Wind blows against a hill and is deflected upwards. The wind pushes the glider up. Most ridge lift winds are "predictable."

Hang glider pilot finishes assembly before a flight at Blanchard Hill.
After checking the skyline for cumulus clouds, Fieser decides to go hang gliding from Blanchard Hill, a 1,300 foot cliff that overlooks the tide flats of Bellingham Bay.

Nigren says pilots enjoy flying at Blanchard because they can experience a variety of wind conditions in a day.

Fieser, 30, wearing a tee-shirt and torn jeans, unfurls the “sail” of his yellow dayglider from its bundle. He puts the battens into the small sleeves sewn into the sail, which tightens the fabric on the glider’s frame. Other pilots—some who have many years of flying experience and some who have taken only a few flights—quickly set up their gliders on the old logging road along the cliff. Hurriedly, Fieser assembles his aircraft, hoping to get the glider together before the wind dies or picks up speed.

Fieser knows conditions can change quickly. One minute, a pilot can have perfect soaring weather: conditions in which a pilot can fly, and increase altitude, for an extended period of time. The next minute, a pilot can have a “sled ride” in which a pilot doesn’t have enough wind to soar and can only fly directly from the launch site to the landing site.

Carries the 50-pound glider to the launch area. He watches the tree tops, trying to “read” the wind that will give him the best flying conditions.

The next moment, he runs as fast as he can down the cliff face and down the wooden deck extended from the cliff, which was built to add distance to increase running speed for take-off. The glider and Fieser effortlessly enter the air.

Later, Fieser explains that hang gliding is not so much an adrenaline sport as a way to experience nature from above.

“I’ve been so close to an eagle in the air I’ve heard the wind in its feathers. I’ve looked an eagle straight in the eye.”

But, Fieser explains that although hang gliding is relatively safe, hang gliding isn’t for everybody. People who are fearful, overactive, or unfocused shouldn’t be hang gliding, Fieser says. But, for those who want to fly and are a little fearful of flying without a motor, Fieser notes that hang gliding is one of the safest forms of flying.

Fieser explains that a Cessna airplane weighs one ton. If the engine stops, the plane will fall like a stone to the ground. People rarely survive a plane crash. But, if a hang glider breaks (an unlikely occurrence, notes Fieser), a pilot can deploy the parachute attached to the harness and land safely.

“The survival rate for a hang glider pilot is extremely high,” says Fieser.

Many people remember the early days of hang gliding when gliders were unsafe and think hang gliding is still as dangerous, says Fieser. But glider technology has advanced.

“You can hook one ton to a hang glider and it won’t break,” says Fieser.

Fieser agrees with Nigren that pilot error is the most dangerous aspect of flying. Panic is a pilot’s greatest enemy.

“Ninety-nine percent of flying is aviation (skill) and one percent is sheer terror,” Fieser notes. The key to successful flying is learning not to panic, which comes with experience, says Fieser.

The only way to gain experience is to fly often, about four or five times a month, indicates Fieser.

“The most important thing is to be relaxed and do what you know,” Fieser says.