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Klipsun

- The Waterfront
- Afghanistan
Like many of you, my time is limited. To keep myself organized, every day I write a list of things to do. It’s always a very long list of things such as, “Finish essay,” “Go to gym” or “Do laundry.”

But after reading the stories in this issue of Klipsun, I was inspired to write a more important list of “Things to Do.” I wrote a list of things to do in my lifetime. Several of the stories in this issue feature local people who have made sacrifices for the sake of others or have set incredible goals for themselves. Although aiming to be the world’s no. 1 female powerlifter, climbing Mount Everest or serving in the Army were not on my list of things to do, these stories encouraged me to think of all the great opportunities I would like to have and the things I would like to do (or at least try) in my life.

I hope you will also find these stories to be motivating, whether they encourage you to follow a childhood dream (as football player Erik Totten did), give something a second chance (as one of our writers did for “Welcome to the Waterfront”) or try something new (such as kiteboarding). Whatever you gain from these stories, I hope you also decide to think about and write your own list of things to do in your lifetime.

If you have any comments about a Klipsun story or any story ideas to offer, we would like to hear them. Please call us at (360)650-3737 or e-mail us at klipsun@hotmail.com.

Best wishes,

Karla Tillman, Editor in Chief
Matt Black | is a junior journalism major from Oak Harbor, Wash. His goal for this article was to capture the excitement of a sport almost nobody has heard of, but no one forgets. He hopes this article, his first for Klipsun, will inspire more people to “go fly a kite.”

Christina Tercero | is a senior photojournalism student. Her story on migrant workers is dedicated to all families who sacrifice so much to give their children a chance for something better. Viva La Familia!

Scott Lefeber | is a senior public relations major. He hopes his story about a female powerlifter will show people that they really can reach their goals. He would like to thank Liz Willett for her time and wish her good luck at the world championship in May.

Courtney Brousseau | is an environmental journalism major. After this quarter, she will head off to New Zealand to explore and backpack. After that comes real life.

Jeff Hoffman | is a public relations major whose love for sports drove him to write this piece on Western’s most prolific athlete in recent history. He will graduate this summer, and he plans to pursue a career in sports information.

Candace Nelson | is a senior journalism major. Her inspiration for this story came from her sister, Kelly, and future brother-in-law, PFC Garrett Thoms of the U.S. Army. Candace would like to thank Mike, Katie and Jimmy Opitz for sharing their story.

Robin Duranleau | will be graduating in March with a degree in public relations. She wants to share her experiences at the Waterfront with readers, in hopes that they too will see past the stereotypes of a historic Bellingham establishment.

Veronica Bruffy | is a senior communication major graduating in March. As the youngest of six girls, Veronica is hoping this publication will finally distinguish her from being known simply as “the baby.”
Enveloped in a thick, black wet suit, Mike Sumpter cuts across the choppy water off Chuckanut Drive on his kiteboard, weaving back and forth. A large kite hovers above, guiding his way. Suddenly, he hits a wave and pulls in on the reigns of his kite, shooting into the air like a seagull, flying to a height of almost 20 feet. After floating through the clear blue sky for what seems like an eternity, Sumpter drops back to the water with a splash and continues his journey.

Kiteboarding, a fusion sport that combines wakeboarding with windsurfing, may be the most electrifying thing to happen to the kite since Benjamin Franklin. Although the sport is unknown to most of the world, it is quickly making a name for itself in Washington.

“The air is the big attraction to kiteboarding,” Sumpter said. “It’s like...
reverse bungee jumping or swinging on a giant rope swing.

Sumpter, 36, is one of about a dozen Bellingham residents who can be seen "kiting" in the frigid Puget Sound waters near Bellingham year-round. Although the group of kiteboarders in the area is small, it is growing. Sumpter said.

"Every summer we get a couple more guys that come out," he said.

The idea behind kiteboarding, which is also referred to as kitesurfing, is fairly simple. Kiteboarders are carried across the surface of the water behind a large, maneuverable kite attached to them by lines and a harness. By using the full power of the kite and the wind, kiteboarders can launch themselves into the air where they can perform a wide variety of aerial tricks impossible in most other sports. The combination of the speed and air that kiteboarders can attain is unmatched in other water sports such as windsurfing and wakeboarding.

When Seattle resident John Penxa, 37, began kiteboarding in the Seattle area three and a half years ago, people couldn't believe what he and his friends were doing out on the water.

"They treated us like rock stars," Penxa said. "They would come running up to the beach talking to us. It was kind of weird."

Sumpter discovered the sport three years ago while windsurfing. When he saw people flying across the water getting huge amounts of air impossible for a windsurfer to attain, he knew he had found his new passion.

"I saw some other guys kiteboarding and doing all these crazy tricks, and it just looked really appealing," he said.

Unlike windsurfing, which requires high winds for any kind of action, kiteboarding can be done in winds as slow as 12 knots (14 mph), making it the perfect sport for the protected waters of Puget Sound.

Kiteboarding first started in the early 1990s when Bill and Cory Roeseler, of Kirkland, created a kite that could be launched and re-launched from the water. At the same time, halfway around the world, Bruno and Dominique Legaignoux, of France, were developing similar kites.

Since the sport's beginnings, kiteboarding has developed gradually. Penxa compared it to the way snowboarding developed in the 1980s, with many innovations in the sport stemming from the tinkering of individual enthusiasts.

Most of the advancements in the sport have been related to the equipment. Today, kiteboarders generally use inflatable kites. These kites, inflated prior to launching, are favored because of their performance in light winds and their ease in re-launching from the water. Several varieties of
boards are used by kiteboarders as well. Bidirectional boards, which are similar to wakeboards, and directional boards, which are similar to surfboards, are the two most popular types.

One of the hot spots for the sport, and the place it was first developed in the United States, is the Columbia Gorge, located near Hood River, Ore. For the past three years kiteboarding has been a featured sport at the Gorge Games, an extreme-sports festival. Taking place in July, the competition draws top kiteboarders from around the world. The Professional Kite Riders Association and the smaller Kiteboard Pro World Tour give professional kiteboarders a chance to compete as well.

Sumpter said the best places for Bellingham residents to catch some kiteboarding action during windy days are Bellingham Bay or Glass Beach off Chuckanut Drive. Many other beaches in the Puget Sound area are frequented by kiteboarders.

Sean Smith, a University of Washington student and manager of Seattle’s Urban Surf, the primary dealer of kiteboarding gear in the Puget Sound area, said he has seen interest in the sport skyrocket since his store started selling gear three years ago. Smith himself started participating in the sport after talking to some professional kiteboarders that frequented Urban Surf.

“Watching people just go out and rip and do all these crazy tricks made me want to try it,” he said. “It’s an adrenaline rush and a half.”

Although the sport’s expanding popularity has been great for stores like Urban Surf, it has also led to more injuries related to the sport.

Penxa, one of the three founders of the Seattle Kitesurfing Association, said the sport is much more dangerous than most people realize.

“Lack of control with a kite can endanger others as well as the kiteboarder. The 90-foot lines that connect the kite to the kiteboarder can become lethal weapons when traveling at high speeds. Because of the danger that many beginning kiteboarders pose to others on the water, kiteboarding has been banned at some beaches in places such as Hawaii.

Penxa said one goal of the SKA is to improve the reputation of the sport by ensuring that no preventable accidents occur. So far, the plan has worked.

“We've been fortunate,” he said. “So far there haven’t been any serious injuries.”

The SKA currently has about 200 members, most of whom safely learned the sport with help from more experienced members of the group.

The best option for people hoping to begin kiteboarding is to receive lessons from someone familiar with the sport. Several licensed teachers in Seattle offer lessons through Urban Surf, and numerous companies in the Columbia Gorge area specialize in teaching kiteboarding to beginners. Lessons range from about $100 for a two-hour lesson to thousands of dollars for weeklong lessons. Lessons generally include all the necessary gear. For those looking for a less expensive way to learn the sport, several instructional videos are available as well.

Kiteboarders generally learn in three stages. The first involves mastering a stunt kite. This kite, which is usually about 2 square meters in area, is a smaller version of the actual kites used on the water. The key to kite-flying is having the ability to control the kite in a position where the wind will not be striking it at full force. This position, called the neutral position, allows boarders to stay in control and avoid being dragged through the water against their will. Kiteboarders should generally spend several days mastering the stunt kite on the safety of land before they move into the water. Once they have complete control of the stunt kite, beginners can step up to the real kite and harness for an activity.
called body dragging. Body dragging involves being dragged through the water without a board, while controlling the kite at the same time; the key idea is for kiteboarders to be able to control their direction and speed in the water.

Once this step has been mastered, it is time to kiteboard with the actual board and kite. The main challenge when starting out is being able to do both tasks at once, Sumpter said. He compared it to wakeboarding, where you are in control of the boat as well as the board. Smith said beginners can expect to be out on the water six to seven times before they get up and going on a consistent basis. Just like sailing, an important skill in kiteboarding is being able to go upwind as well as downwind.

Penxa said most beginners learn by doing “the triathlon.” “When you start out kiteboarding, you’re going to swim a little, hike a little and kite a little,” he said.

Sumpter added that it can be difficult for those starting out. “It’s got a steep learning curve,” Sumpter said. “The kite will abuse you for your mistakes.”

For Sumpter, that meant a month of bruised ribs and several episodes of being dragged along the beach. Those experiences were nothing compared to injuries some other people sustained when first learning the sport, he said.

It took Sumpter an entire summer of teaching himself before he felt he had mastered the art of kiteboarding. “I was pretty cautious when I began,” he said.

Another drawback to the sport is that it can be very expensive. Standard equipment, including a kite, board, harness and other safety equipment, will cost about $1,200. Most experienced kiteboarders have kites of varying sizes for different wind conditions. Kite sizes range from about 3 to 20 square meters in area, with the bigger kites being used for low wind conditions and the smaller kites used in high winds.

For those planning to kiteboard in the frigid Northwest waters, a wet suit costing several hundred dollars is also essential. Users can save some money by buying used equipment at most places that sell kiteboarding gear. However, new gear is the best bet in a sport where safety depends so much on the equipment.

Despite these dangers and the price, Smith said Urban Surf has seen a dramatic increase in customers over the last several years. People who had never heard of the sport are now coming in to buy gear and ask for lessons. “We get most of our beginners in the summer; that is when it grows the fastest,” Smith said. “But the nice thing about Seattle in the winter is that it doesn’t have to be too windy, and you can just go out on the water and rip.”

― Sean Smith, manager of Seattle’s Urban Surf

Winter is a time of rest for the land in Skagit Valley and a time of hardship for migrant families who count on agricultural work to survive. **Christina Tercero** finds out what happens to local migrant workers when the season of cold hits local fields. Photos by Christina Tercero.

As dusk claims the lower Skagit Valley, a pale fog stretches over the cold earth, creating a quiet that lies halfway between the fields it grew out of and the sky it cannot reach.

During the winter, as the fertility of the valley rests beneath clods of bare earth, many migrant and seasonal workers return to their hometowns or look for work outside the agricultural industry. But even during the slow months, from October to January, more than 13,000 migrant workers and their families stay in Washington to prune vines and fruit trees, sort flower bulbs and prepare the fields for next year’s crops.

About 80 percent of Washington’s migrant workers are Latino. The other 20 percent are individuals mainly from Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia and the Caribbean.

In Skagit Valley, just outside La Conner, lies a migrant camp comprised of several old houses, outdoor shower stalls and toilets, several trailers and a huddle of cabins. At first glance, the camp looks empty, but a few workers are still living there.

A line of drying clothes is strung between two trees. Fresh vehicle tracks on the camp’s dirt road lead toward the main houses. Two trucks are parked in front of one house. Spanish music plays from inside the house. The rapid dialog from a Mexican soap opera frequently interrupts the mariachi stanzas.

In response to a rap on the house’s side door, 22-year-old Hugo Castillo Cruz pulls back the piece of cloth that serves as a curtain for the front door’s plastic window.

In the house, sheets are hung as privacy curtains between the rooms. A collection of mismatched chairs, couches and a bed fill the living room.

Currently, Cruz and five of his friends rent this house. Cruz, in Spanish, introduces his friend, 18-year-old Miguel Angel.

Angel and Cruz are from the same town near Monta Rey, Mexico. Angel is starting his third year in the United
States. He is the first in his family to migrate from Mexico. He left behind a sister, brother and both parents. He said one of the most difficult things about the work he does is the fact that it takes him so far away from his family. Angel and Cruz both agreed that homesickness was the hardest aspect of the migrant life.

Angel and Cruz harvest potatoes in the Skagit Valley during the winter. Then, in late winter and early spring, the flower crops bloom and are in need of workers. At the end of the tulip season, Angel said he, Cruz and their friends will move to Pasco, in Eastern Washington, for the asparagus season.

At the end of this year, Angel said he hopes to return to his home in Mexico to visit his family. In the meantime, however, he and Cruz will work and earn money to send home to their families.

Mount Vernon resident Jessie Cavazos grew up in a migrant family. He remembers traveling from the Rio Grande Valley in Texas to farms throughout the United States. The Cavazos family followed crops from Texas to Ohio, Michigan, Idaho, Eastern Washington and finally Skagit Valley.

"Migrant families work seasonal jobs," Cavazos said. "They travel from state to state, city to city, to try to find employment. For a lot of families, winter means increased financial hardships because they don't have the same income they previously had."

Cavazos said many families try to save money during summer in preparation for winter, and when winter comes, they try to live as frugally as possible.

"They live in migrant camps where they don't have to pay rent, or if they do, they pay a minimal amount," Cavazos said. "Or, they live in an apartment with two or more families living together. It's difficult even for a close-knit family to live this way. The children don't have enough room to play, and the adults don't have enough privacy."

Consuelo Guandique, the regional manager of Opportunities Industrialization Center for Washington's Farm-Worker Investment Program, said landlords often forbid their tenants from having more than one family in an apartment.

When migrant families are given such stipulations, Guandique said they often invite migrant men, who are single or working the fields without their families, to come live with them in exchange for rent and utility assistance.

"But these men cannot give much," Guandique said. "Usually they are sending money back home to support parents, wives and children."

During the winter, migrant families who are not able to save enough money during the summer depend on food banks and community assistance to help them through their time of unemployment.

"The winter causes more expenses, such as food and energy bills," Cavazos said. "Many of the families are struggling to make it."

Guandique said many migrant families are unable to apply for federal or state aid during the winter because they do not meet the basic requirements.

Some of the stipulations for receiving aid are: They must be documented workers; half of all earnings must be from farm labor; they must have worked at least 680 hours during the past year; and they must agree to a history check on their past year of employment.

It is difficult for many migrant workers to meet these requirements because of the fact that most migrant workers are out of the agricultural work industry for about three months each year, and during that time they are either

"For a lot of families, winter means increased financial hardships because they don't have the same income they previously had."

— Jessie Cavazos, former migrant worker

Opposite and below: Fog lifts off the land on a winter afternoon in Skagit Valley.
Most migrant camps in Skagit Valley lie quiet and empty during the winter months. With the arrival of flower crops, these beds will fill with the tired bodies of men and women who work the fields.

“When they up and leave, they just up and leave. And they take their children with them.”
— Consuelo Guandique, regional manager of Opportunities Industrialization Center

unemployed or employed in a job outside of agriculture.

Anita Stolpe, a supervisor for the Whatcom County Department of Social and Health Services, said Bellingham DSHS tries to assist migrant families in and around Whatcom County. She said outreach programs focusing on migrant camps and communities offer families educational, financial and medical assistance.

“Our [Whatcom County’s] migrant population is pretty stable,” Stolpe said. “It is the same people coming back each year. They are pretty aware of the services we offer.”

These services, however, are only accessible to those who meet the eligibility stipulations and are legal residents or documented workers. Guandique said that if winter is difficult for documented migrant workers, it is especially difficult for undocumented workers. She said where documented workers might have a chance to receive financial aid, undocumented workers have no hope.

Undocumented workers are ineligible for health care assistance, DSHS aid and food stamps. They are also ineligible for unemployment compensation or social security benefits, even though social security taxes are taken out of each of their paychecks.

Guandique said that most undocumented migrant families depend almost entirely on food banks, churches and missions to get through the winter.

Cavazos said a growing winter trend for some undocumented migrant families is for only the husbands and fathers to return south to look for work during the northern work lull.

Most of these men feel it is safer for them to leave their families for a few months rather than worry about them getting caught by the Immigration and Naturalization Service and sent back to their homeland, he said.

While winter brings financial difficulties and discomforts for each member in a migrant family, it also carries with it the possibility that children might have to change schools.

Cavazos said migrant families in Washington do one of two things: They either “settle out” or return to their home state or country. Both options usually require the families to relocate from the town or city in which they ended the harvest season to a new place.

Those who “settle out” remain in-state but move off the farms and into temporary winter homes, usually away from the agriculturally dominated areas into areas where they might be more likely to find supplementary work.

“When they up and leave, they just up and leave,” Guandique said. “And they take their children with them.”

Cavazos, who is currently working with Skagit Valley’s Northwest Educational Service District 189 as the parent service coordinator, said the purpose of his job is to educate school administrators, teachers and parents about educational and social issues of the migrant lifestyle.

He said ESD goals are to get people to work at implementing diversity within educational programs and curriculums, to help students overcome language barriers and to create understanding within the school system about what education means for the futures of migrant children.

Cavazos said it is important to help teachers understand that migrant parents, in their endless struggle to supply for the needs of their family, sometimes find it necessary to place their children’s education as a secondary priority. He said a teacher often finds out a migrant child has moved from one of the child’s school friends or through an investigative checkup after the child has had three absences.

“What often happens is families return to their hometowns after the peak seasons,” Cavazos said. “They pull their children out of school, sometimes not even informing the school administration that they are.”

Because areas such as Skagit Valley serve so many migrant children, Cavazos said his high priority is to find teachers and administrators who understand the difficulties and issues of the migrant lifestyle. The large number of migrant children within the school system is not unique to the
Skagit Valley, however. About 43,000 migrant children attend schools throughout Washington.

Guandique said most of the younger migrant children attend school during the winter if their family’s circumstances allow them to. The older youths, however, may or may not attend school. Guandique said the families of older youths sometimes need them to get jobs of their own so they can help bear the family’s financial burdens. She also said older children sometimes choose to stay home because they feel uncomfortable at school because of the language and cultural barriers.

Guandique said she herself had trouble grafting school into her migrant childhood. She recalls adamantly informing each of her new schools that she had already completed the sixth grade, but because of the way her family followed the crops, she did not have any of her school transcripts and her mother did not know how to acquire them.

"Basically, I remember having to repeat the sixth grade three times," Guandique said.

Cavazos said while he was growing up, his whole family traveled together. He and his 10 brothers and sisters all worked and went to school. During the winter, they returned to their home in Texas. He said he loves working with migrant youths because he can relate to the issues they deal with on a day-to-day and season-to-season basis. Helping people that are in the same situations he encountered as a youth helps him to remember where he came from and keep him grounded in his roots.

Cavazos said this helps him to stay continually appreciative for the home, family and income he has now, as well as for past sacrifices made by his family.

In the winter quiet and fog, the migrant camp lies dark and empty along the northern bank of the Skagit River where it divides Burlington from Mount Vernon. The camp’s long, wooden cabins look as old as the earth that provides a livelihood for families living within their thin walls. Signs that prohibit trespassing are posted in Spanish and English, and an old McDonald’s playground lies half-covered in grass and blackberry bushes.

Years ago, when the camp served as their temporary home, Cavazos and his brothers and sisters carved their names into one of the cabin’s rough plank walls. They are not the only names carved into the walls of the camp, nor will they likely be the last left by migrant workers and their families, as reminders of lives lived and hardships endured. Cavazos said the names carved on the walls of that camp and the memories of living the migrant life create a legacy that needs to be shared with his two sons and the generations that follow them. They are links to the past and to family roots; they cannot be forgotten or discarded.

As the tender, green leaves of daffodils and tulips spear through the still-cold earth, migrant families will prepare to work the fields of Skagit Valley once again.

And with the coming of fertility and growth, the camp will fill with workers. Some will return to wives and children. Some will return to old friends, some to old schools and all will return with the hope of an income that will provide their families with a chance for a better life.
Liz Willett wants to be the most powerful woman in the world. So far, the Ferndale resident has won three bronze medals at the powerlifting world championship. Scott Lefeber talks to Willett as she prepares to go for the gold at the next world competition in May. Photos by Evan E. Parker.

Beads of sweat fall to the rubber floor as iron weights clatter together. Cautiously taking a half-step back, a look of determination fills the eyes of the powerlifter. The 5-foot-11-inch, 280-pound frame slowly sinks to a squatted position holding 611 pounds.

Lizabeth Ann Willett, 31, recently became the second American woman in the history of the International Power Lifting Federation to squat more than 600 pounds. Her 611-pound squat and 386-pound bench press were both personal records for her. These record-breaking lifts easily secured her the victory at the United States Power Lifting nationals, referred to as the USAPL, for the fifth consecutive year on Jan. 26 in Killeen, Texas.

Willett, of Ferndale, is one of the United States' elite women powerlifters. She has won five powerlifting national championships and has competed worldwide representing the United States and USAPL. Willett's combined score of 1,460 pounds lifted in Texas was 71 pounds better than her personal best and more than 400 above the 1,046 she lifted five years ago.

"Who would have ever thought? I was a smoking bartender for [several] years and I quit smoking to go to the gym,
Liz Willett warms up at Bellingham Health and Fitness Center during her squat training for an international powerlifting competition.

Willett was one of eight students from her graduating class of Craig High School in Craig, Alaska, located on a small island off the west coast of Prince of Wales Island.

"Even though it may have been a different experience growing up, I wouldn’t change it if I could," Willett said.

When Willett was 19, a client came into Mark Air Cargo, where she was working at the time, and noticed her large size and shape. The customer then casually asked her if she would like to lift weights after work. Since that day, Willett has used the talent she was born with. After a short six months of working out and lifting weights, Willett soon won all of Alaska’s teen titles and all of the Northwest’s.

"I am just lucky," Willett said. "[Powerlifting] is just something that has always come naturally to me."

After a year of working and competing, Willett moved to Deming where she soon met her husband, Richard Willett, through a mutual friend. She and Richard married and had a son, Steven, now 8. Her pregnancy prevented her from competing for several years, but in 1999 she returned to the gym and powerlifting.

"There is no one as big as me, there just isn't," Willett said. "And I might as well use it."

Powerlifting competitions consist of the squat, bench press and dead lift. These three lifts must be completed in one full repetition each, with no faults or violations, to be officially recorded in a competition.

"Before I lift at a competition, I have to have new white shoes and new white socks," Willett said. "Lizards are my good luck charm also. I keep one in my workout bag at all times."

Willett's goals and training routines are set by her coach, Larry Maile, who lives and coaches in Alaska. Although coached by Maile, Willett trains closely with her workout partner, Darin Richardson, in Bellingham.

"Maile is the guy who tells me what to do and Darin is the one who keeps things interesting," Willett said.

Richardson, who has competed in the USAPL, currently participates in the American Powerlifting Federation. He travels throughout the Northwest to compete in regional competitions, primarily in the bench press. Richardson is known by many as "the benching colossus of the north," for his bench press of 501 pounds in an official APF meet.

"Darin has a lot of knowledge to help guide her," said Brandon Seigel, 25, a Western graduate who has worked out at World's Gym and watched Willett train since she began in 1999. "They work really well together."

Maile, director of the forensics unit at the Alaska Psychiatric Institute, coaches the USAPL women's team, which consists only of women who have won a national championship. Currently, 12 women comprise the USAPL women's team, including two alternates. Powerlifting teams are organized similar to wrestling teams. Athletes are divided into 10 weight classes, ranging from 97 pounds to the 198-and-over group.

"Liz is ideally suited for this sport," Maile said. "She has the frame and muscle density that nobody else in the world has."

"Who would have ever thought? I was a smoking bartender for several years, and I quit smoking to go to the gym and switched addictions."

— Liz Willett, powerlifter

Willett wraps her knees before tacking on more weight. This evening, Willett lifted 535 pounds.
Expressions say it all in powerlifting. During the brief explosion of strength during the lift, Willett's face reveals the intensity required to squat more than 600 pounds. After the lift, Willett rests her head on the bar.

Richardson and Willett met in Bellingham's World Gym (now Bellingham Health and Fitness Center) in 1999, when Willett said she approached the biggest and beastliest-looking men in the weight room, one of whom was Richardson.

“I went up to the big four uglies in the corner. You know, the big, huge, ugly men in the corner, cussing and swearing. I was a couple years out of pregnancy and not too healthy looking, and I told them, ‘Hey, I can squat 500 pounds,’” Willett said.

The men proceeded to laugh at her. But Willett did not let the laughter intimidate her.

“They let me work out with them that day and tried to kill me to see if I would come back, and I did,” Willett said.

The next day, Richardson and Willett met for their first training session, a strenuous leg workout. She survived her first training session with Richardson and the two have been partners ever since.

“I didn’t think she could do it,” Richardson said. “But after watching her work out, I said, ‘OK lady, you’re in.’”

Willett said Richardson has been her training partner since day one, directing and persuading her to compete.

For many, the sport of powerlifting is the ultimate test of overall body strength and coordination. It involves focus, goal setting and determination, Richardson said.

The squat is an exercise that focuses on the quadriceps, gluteus and hamstring muscles in the legs; it involves flexing at the knee joint and entering a squatted position, and then extending the legs until reaching a standing position.

“With my size and shape, the squat is my best lift,” Willett said. “It is the easiest for me.”

The bench press is a commonly used exercise for developing the chest. This requires exercisers to lift the barbell over their chest using a wide overhand grip. Then, while lying on their back, they must lower the weights to the upper chest and press the bar until their arms are extended. Willett attempted the world record in the bench press at her last competition, but she failed to accomplish the 400-pound lift.

A dead lift is one of the best exercises for overall development in the lower body. This exercise is performed by keeping the hips low, back straight and shoulders pulled back. Keeping a straight back, the barbell is lifted from the floor and the hips are straightened. This contraction brings the barbell up to waist level and completes the dead lift.

Although Willett excels in the squat, she struggles with the dead lift because of her shorter arms and larger frame. She says that losing a few pounds may boost her dead lift but could negatively affect her squat and bench press. A shorter and rounder shape, such as Willett’s frame, can be used more successfully for the squat.

“I never know how much weight is on the bar in a competition,” Willett said, explaining how she does not like to know because it would become a game with her mind and not a test of her true strength. “Larry sets the numbers and I just go for it.”

An average week in the gym for Willett consists of about five days of two- to three-hour training sessions. Richardson and Willett train together as much as possible.

“We are like brother and sister,” Richardson said. “She is one of the best workout partners I have ever had.”

Many powerlifters need a consistent workout partner they can rely on to spot them with the enormous amount of weight they lift. Without a partner, many lifters cannot achieve their maximum potential.

However, Richardson’s and Willett’s work schedules limit them to one or two sessions together a week. Willett works Monday through Friday at Bioplex Nutrition in Bellingham, a vitamin and supplement supplier that also sponsors her in competitions. Willett is an office associate there, and performs an array of tasks.

The diet of a powerlifter is a key ingredient to accomplishing their desired goals, Willett said. It is crucial that every lifter consume protein in large quantities.

“During the week we concentrate on the proteins,” her husband, Richard Willett, said. “We eat red meat about
three to four days a week and have just gotten used to things like cottage cheese and yogurt.”

Willett sticks to a strict diet Monday through Friday, but on the weekends she escapes the routine.

“I am the beer-and-pizza person, just like everyone else on the weekends,” Willett said.

Richardson constantly brings new ideas and exercises to each training session with Willett. Varying exercise routines keeps from negatively affecting muscle growth and strength development, Richardson said. By picking up tips from magazines and books, he tries to bring a fresh outlook to their workouts.

“The key is to stay focused and to not get bored,” Richardson said. “It is a sport of determination and drive.”

Varying exercises by using free weights instead of weight-assisted machines can work a muscle in a completely different way, Richardson said.

Powerlifting is a personal sport that requires focus and training in order to succeed. Motivation and mental preparation can be the deciding factors when the lift is being performed.

“The support and encouragement she receives amazes me,” Richard Willett said. “Everyone is always behind her 100 percent.”

As Willett prepares for a lift, she flings her wavy, blond hair over her shoulder and begins to juggle a block of chalk in her palm. The chalk is used to dry sweat from her hands to prevent her from dropping the weight. Willett wears her red and white overall suit loosely to maximize flexibility in every joint.

As she moves to position herself next to more than 400 pounds, she develops a slow pace a few feet away from the barbell. One final moment of intense focus covers her face as she calmly puts her hands on the bar.

“I don’t think you can do it,” Richardson says, challenging her.

Richardson’s comment sparks a fire in Willett as she plunges for the weight. Following a quick jerk and sudden pull, the weight slams to the rack, completing the lift.

“She’s got the drive to be the best,” Richardson said.

With the bench, squat and dead lift being the three focus lifts for Willett, she still manages to mix in a variety of other exercises to target other muscle groups on a routine basis. Working calves, triceps and biceps helps supplement the larger muscles and keeps them in shape, Willett said.

“The key is to stay focused and to not get bored. It is a sport of determination and drive.”

Willett came back to powerlifting in 1999 and has done nothing but succeed in the sport since then. She said that pushing the totals to the world-class marks they are today has been one of her biggest accomplishments. She said the improvements that she and other lifters worldwide have made have brought her a feeling of satisfaction.

“Liz is one of the best powerlifters in the history of powerlifting,” Maile said.

Recording three bronze medals over the past three years in the world championships, Willett looks to the future and to the next world competition in Chicago this coming May. She said she feels confident and wants to break the 500-pound barrier in the dead lift, which would give her a new personal record.

“If she stays focused, she could very easily get first place at the next world competition in Chicago,” Richardson said.

Willett calls her family the secret weapon in her powerlifting success. She and her husband, Richard, live a short distance from his parents’ home, where they often walk to dinner.
There's No Place Like Homestead

Breathtaking views and feeding bald eagles draw human explorers to the Deming Homestead Eagle Park over and over again every year. Courtney Brousseau takes some time out to discover more about the park and talk with enraptured visitors. Photos by Evan E. Parker and Courtney Brousseau.

“Hey, there’s one up there!” Janet Campbell pointed a slender finger skyward, singling out a lone Douglas fir tree squatting behind a thin wall of shorter trees. A silhouetted figure sat atop the fir, a larger-than-life Christmas tree ornament.

“Big one,” her husband replied, glancing up at the shadowy figure in the tree as he stepped out of their white trailer carrying a camera, an extra-long lens and a tripod.

The treetop silhouette did not move even as birds cackled and people chattered 40 feet below. As the sun filtered through the cloud bank, the shadow disappeared, revealing the figure’s distinct markings. It was an eagle.

And Campbell’s husband was right. It was a big one.

This bald eagle is one of more than 200 that spend the winter at Deming Homestead Eagle Park. The 22-acre park is located along the Nooksack River on Truck Road, a thin stretch of gravel off Mount Baker Highway near the Highway 9 South interchange.
Felled trees, stumps and boulders chained together form a salmon habitat in the Nooksack River at the Deming Homestead Eagle Park. Salmon seek refuge in the branches and shadows of the structure.

Campbell’s small, black, wavy-haired dog whined and tugged on its leash, eager to explore the park’s sandbars, trails and animal inhabitants. Despite the activity below, the eagle still did not move.

The park, approximately 15 miles east of Bellingham, is Whatcom County’s only public eagle observation park. The birds flock here for a chance to snatch fresh and spawned salmon out of the river in their sharp talons. Humans have a different reason for visiting – recreation.

“My husband is quite into photography, so we thought we’d come up here and see what it’s like,” the Seattle resident said, running her fingers through her dark, curly hair. “We looked up eagles on the Web and we found this place. And it’s quite lovely.”

Joe Meche, an 8-year board member of the North Cascades Audubon Society, led a troop of Brownies to the eagle park in late winter. He said it’s a great place to take kids to raise their awareness of nature.

“The Brownies, all 7-year-olds, were going nuts there,” he said. “We’d see an eagle up in a tree and it was almost impossible to see, but we brought a [spotting] scope. It was great to watch them as their little eyes came up to the scope. They bugged out. Each girl went, ‘WOAH!’”

Meche has lived in Bellingham for 27 years, but he still visits the eagle park six to eight times each year.

In 1991, 30 million Americans took trips for the sole purpose of viewing wildlife, including observing and photographing the natural world, according to a 1993 U.S. Department of the Interior survey.

Audubon Washington recently developed the Great Washington Birding Trail to help these nature observers easily locate 68 stops along a driving route from Blaine to Edmonds and east to Wenatchee, where birds are most likely to be seen. Its purpose is also to make the public aware of habitat preservation and restoration. Deming Homestead Eagle Park is one of six stops in Whatcom County along the birding trail.

Homestead spreads across a narrow valley with the Cascade Mountains as a backdrop between three forks of the Nooksack. It is an important route for animals, too. Salmon, eagles, elk and other wildlife pass through during yearly migrations, although some of that has changed.

“The herd of elk now is not nearly as big as it used to be,” said Hank Rensink, former owner of the property. “About 25 years ago there were at least 32 in one herd, and I don’t think it’s that big anymore.”

The eagles and salmon have suffered just as much.

In 1976, the bald eagle was placed on the federal endangered species list. In 1978, the Washington State Fish and Wildlife Service estimated approximately 100 nesting pairs of eagles in the state.

Since then, the number of nesting pairs has grown to roughly 600. In 1995, the eagle’s status was changed to “threatened” in Washington state. A threatened species is a native species that is likely to become endangered in the near future if special protection and management efforts are not assumed.

Eagle populations have changed drastically over the years. The Pacific Biodiversity Institute attributes the population boom to the banning of pesticides such as DDT, and protection efforts launched on both state and federal levels.

Near the entrance to the park, seven 40-ton structures poke up from the riverbed. The great lumps of felled trees, stumps and boulders are held together with long metal chains. The pieces occupy a sloping curve of the park, dangling over a 5-foot sandy cliff.

Signs with large, red letters bearing the words, “DANGER: UNSTABLE RIVERBANK. KEEP BACK,” deter would-be explorers. Beneath each structure, young, brownish salmon and adult fish flit cautiously through the water from one shady spot to another.

A silhouetted figure sat atop the fir, a larger-than-life Christmas tree ornament.
"Ironically, my sister and I are both eagle nuts. We have lots of eagle stuff that we wear." – Hank Rensink, former owner of Homestead

seeking refuge in the snags and branches.

To any unknowing hiker, these structures would look like nothing more than a woody, gnarled mess. But they are actually part of a carefully calculated and constructed salmon habitat area.

“They were part of the county’s flood-control project. [The builders] put a buried dike between Truck Road and the river that protects the park now,” said Gordon Scott, conservation director for the Whatcom Land Trust. “These are habitat structures.”

He explained that as the river floods the bank, the structures fall in naturally and form pools that offer shade and shelter for water creatures. Some have already begun the downhill slide into the water. As each mass of debris inches closer to the water, floating pieces get tangled in the structure, creating more aquatic habitat and hiding spaces for water creatures.

The seven masses act like surrogate trees, fulfilling a missing natural niche for fish. Traditionally, dead and fallen old-growth trees would have provided the necessary habitat of deep pools and clumps of branches in the river for these animals.

But settlers and commercial loggers removed old-growth forest from most of the watershed, Scott said.

Past the salmon restoration habitat, the land spreads out flat before dropping off at a sandy overhang. Tufts of yellow-green grass jut out of the hardened ground. Clumps of small trees, rosebushes, cedars and cottonwood stretch toward the winter sky. The land slopes down, carrying pebbles and sticks closer to the water’s edge.

“That specific piece of property, 2,000 years ago, was a lakebed,” Rensink said. “Just downstream, before you get to Deming, is a big rock vein that goes across the river. The Nooksack flowed south through Acme. Now it flows north through Acme.”

Beyond the water’s edge, sandy gravel bars zebra-stripe the landscape, interrupted only by fallen logs bleached white by the sun. This natural beauty provides a more than adequate backdrop for the eagles that feed here.

“December to February is the principal time they feed on the spawned-out carcasses of salmon,” Scott said.

Eagle habitat varies from ecosystem to ecosystem. However, eagles typically need sheltered forestland with a healthy population of fish and open, flowing streams, according to the Pacific Biodiversity Institute, a Washington state organization that conducts scientific research in the fields of conservation biology, ecology and natural resource management.

Lured by baby chum salmon as well as dying adults, the eagles hunt along the park’s gravel bars and the edges of the Nooksack River, but they are not confined to the borders of the Deming Homestead Eagle Park. They flock between the park and four nesting sites located along the Nooksack Valley, using the former primarily as feeding grounds and the others as night-resting habitat.

Visitors, wrapped snugly in mittens, fleece pullovers, GORE-TEX and woolen hats, defy icy breezes that funnel through the hills. Faint echoes of birds’ calls carry on the wind. The sharp yet sweet smell of water, teeming with insects and fish, hangs heavily in the air.

“It’s absolutely perfect for little kids and families, little kids who you want to introduce to nature,” Meche said. “But don’t let them get too close to the river or they’ll end up in Ferndale or Everson.”

Near the parking lot, a large, wooden kiosk with a sign stands between parked cars and the pedestrian paths.
This sign details the park’s history, telling an older story of Homestead.

Hank and Lorrell Rensink donated this piece of land to the nonprofit Whatcom Land Trust in 2000, beginning the property’s new stint as an eagle park. The Land Trust gave the park to Whatcom County Parks to manage last March.

Rensink said his father purchased the land, the site of the earliest Deming Homestead, in 1938. The family lived nearby and farmed the land for 60 years before the Nooksack River inched too close to their property and they decided to donate it.

Both Rensink and his father once farmed the land. It was a dairy, a small one by today’s standards, Rensink said. The place was bigger then because the river hadn’t taken it. The Rensinks owned between 25 and 30 cows. They raised beef and replacement heifers.

Scott, from the Land Trust, remembered the first time Rensink conceived of making a place where wildlife could flourish.

"I was standing there with Hank at the time and he said, ‘I want to give it away, I don’t want to lose the land,’” he said. "Then we looked up and saw 10 eagles wheeling overhead, screeching and squawking.”

Scott said it was then that he, Rensink and other board members dreamed up the idea of turning the land into an eagle park.

“The idea] was fine with me,” Rensink said. “So they suggested it and I agreed to the park idea. Ironically, my sister and I are both eagle nuts. We have lots of eagle stuff that we wear.”

As for the future of the eagle park, Rensink said he looks for changes in some of the more permanent inhabitants of the park, namely the trees.

“I would like to see more evergreen trees growing on the property,” he said.

Many of the trees currently growing in the park are what Rensink calls “brush trees” — species such as alder, maple and cottonwood.

Since Whatcom County weather is so variable, cloudy conditions might sometimes hide the park’s main attraction — eagles. Nevertheless, visitors still manage to have a good time, as Campbell proved when she smiled at the clouded sky, watching the dark outlines of birds dart in and out of the wisps of mist draped over the trees.

“Even though the fog makes it hard to see the eagles, it’s pretty the way the fog is against the hills,” Campbell said. 

To access Deming Homestead Eagle Park:

- Take Interstate 5 to exit 255
- Travel east past Highway 9 South intersection and turn right on Truck Road.
- A parking lot is located on the right.

"Even though the fog makes it hard to see the eagles, it’s pretty the way the fog is against the hills.” — Janet Campbell, Seattle visitor

Visitors read facts about salmon habitats on one of the informational signs scattered throughout the park.
Spotlight Steeler

Although many athletes dream of playing professionally, few ever get that chance. Jeff Hoffman talks to Western grad Erik Totten about playing football for the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Many young boys in America dream of becoming a professional football player as they practice driving their team down the field for the game-winning touchdown. For former Western student Erik Totten, that dream came true as he donned the black and gold jersey of the NFL’s Pittsburgh Steelers and became the first Western graduate to play a regular season game for an NFL team.

"To be truthful, I dreamed of playing in the NFL since the second grade," said Totten, a 23-year-old safety from Maple Valley, Wash. "I mean, ever since Barry Sanders came into the league - he was my favorite player - that was always my dream."

While most kids have such dreams, the reality is that very few actually play in college, let alone in the pros.

According to the most recent Statistical Abstract of the United States, about 971,000 high school students play football each year. Of those, only 65,000 will play at the college level, 875 will sign NFL contracts and a mere 300 will make an NFL roster.

"People don't realize how hard it is to get a shot, and that's not even half the battle," Totten said. "Getting into camp as a free agent is like 10 percent of what you have to do to actually make it."

Totten doesn't look like a typical NFL player at 5 feet 9 inches tall and a little over 190 pounds. He has a quiet and reserved demeanor, but when he begins to talk about football he demonstrates his knowledge and passion for the game. This is what grabbed the attention of the Steelers' coaches.

"He's not the biggest or the fastest guy for the position in the league," Pittsburgh secondary coach Willy Robinson said about Totten. "But he loves to strike people, he has a great work ethic and he's serious about the game."

From 1998 to 2001, Totten was a standout player at Western as a safety and kick returner. According to Paul Madison in the Sports Information Department at Western, Totten graduated with the school career records for yards returned on punts (1,242) and kickoffs (1,347), and was named Western's Male Athlete of the Year for 2000-01. He put together a stellar season in 2000 when he was named to six All-American teams, being a first-team pick on three of them.

"I was being told that I would get a shot [to play professional football] -
that I would get picked up as a free agent — but I was always really weary of totally planning on that happening,” Totten said. “I had no thoughts of myself being drafted because only three-fourths get drafted.”

Totten was not drafted by a team in the 2002 NFL draft, held in April, but he waited at home to see if any team would want to sign him as a free agent.

“I gave all the scouts my draft-day phone number and I just went home and waited,” Totten said. “About 15 minutes after the draft, the defensive-back coach for the Steelers called and said they had just signed me. I said, ‘Cool.’”

Totten’s NFL journey began at rookie camp, a time for new players in the league to learn about the team and its game plans. All players are expected to show up at rookie camp except for the big-name players. In camp, Totten started by learning the basics, like how to set the huddle.

“For the next three days, they put the whole defense in,” Totten said. “In rookie camp, all the rookies’ heads are just spinning; we don’t know what is going on.”

Coach Robinson remembers first meeting Totten during rookie camp.

“He was as nervous as a frog on a skillet,” Robinson said. “But he spent extra time in here with me, and if he had questions, he wasn’t afraid to ask. He was really quick at picking up our system.”

After rookie camp, a month of coaching sessions and workouts, training camp finally began. The training camp schedule was grueling. The players woke at 7 a.m., and had meetings and a practice before lunch. After an hour off, the team returned for more meetings, another practice and dinner. The nights ended with another couple of meetings, the final one around 10 p.m.

“It’s really structured,” Totten said. “Every night at around 11, our quality-control guy would come and knock on our door and make sure we were in there with lights out.”

During his time at Western, the largest crowd Totten played in front of reached 18,998 fans at the University of Montana in 2001. But when he stepped onto the field for his first preseason game against the New York Jets, the crowd topped 57,000 at the Steelers’ new stadium, Heinz Field.

“It gets loud sometimes, but once you are on that field you aren’t really thinking about what is going on around you,” Totten said. “You are just thinking about what you have to do on that particular play.”

Totten played most of that first game, as the regular players were pulled midway through the first quarter.

“I was nervous before the game, but once I got out there it was just fun again. I was just playing the game,” he said. “I guess after that Jets’ game - I played well, didn’t make any mental errors, had a couple of tackles - it was then when I thought I could play and that I had a pretty good chance.”

Totten played with the team throughout the preseason, recording nine tackles and one sack in the four games. The sack came against the Detroit Lions’ star rookie and former University of Oregon standout, Joey Harrington.

Following the final preseason game, the team released him and assigned him to the practice squad where he spent most of the season.

Being on an NFL practice squad is similar to redshirting a season in college. The five players on the squad, who practice with the 53 players on the active roster, are expected to be there for all of the meetings and practices, but they don’t play or travel to any games.

“Every week I would play as one of the 11 guys playing the opposing defense against our starting offense,” Totten said. “I remember the first time I intercepted Kordell Stewart. That was kind of cool. But you kind of get past that; you get out there and everyone is just a regular guy.”

On Nov. 21, the Steelers announced that they had signed Totten to join them in their game against the Cincinnati Bengals. Two players in the Pittsburgh secondary were hurt and unable to play in the game, clearing a spot for the Western grad.

“I was definitely excited,” Totten said. “I didn’t get a tackle on special teams in that game, which was disappointing because I got a tackle in every single preseason game,” Totten said.

Totten remained on the active roster the following week for the team’s game against the Jacksonville Jaguars, but didn’t go to the game. He knew his time was running out.

“The guys that were hurt started getting healthy, and so I pretty much knew that I was going to be going back down to the practice squad the following week,” Totten said.

The next week Totten returned to the practice squad where he would wait for another shot, but that shot never came. Though he was part of the active roster for the Steelers’ playoff game against the Tennessee Titans, he was one of eight players who did not suit up for the contest.

With rookie camp still four months away, Totten has returned to Western to get in shape and prepare to go through the same gauntlet with the Steelers again next year. Coach Robinson said he liked Totten’s play this year and his prospects for the future.

“At the blink of an eye, if someone goes down, you would like to have a guy like Erik to put in,” Robinson said. “If he does step forward, which I think he will because of the way he studies the game so much, then he’s got just as much of a chance as any other guy out there.”

Opposite page: Pittsburgh Steeler Erik Totten, right, became the first Western graduate to play in a NFL game during the regular season. Totten graduated from Western in 2001.
Five months after giving birth, Lt. Col. Katharine Opitz was deployed to Afghanistan. Candace Nelson speaks with Opitz and her husband as they both anxiously await her return to their normal lives as parents in Olympia.

Months after Christmas, wrapped gifts waiting to be opened surround the tree, and stockings are still hung by the chimney with care.

Mike Opitz, 38, is aware that Dec. 25 has come and gone. He did not forget to take the decorations down. In fact, he bought an artificial tree for the first time this winter so he could wait and celebrate the holiday with his wife, Lt. Col. Katharine Opitz, who has been in Afghanistan with the Army for six months.

"Katie and I are both goal-oriented people, and ever since she has been gone it seems like everything in our life has been put on hold until she returns," he says.

When Katie, 39, was deployed to Afghanistan last summer, she left Mike and their then 5-month-old son, Jimmy. Katie was among 115 Fort Lewis soldiers deployed.

"She should be home in a couple of weeks," Mike says, leaning against the counter and taking a sip of coffee in the kitchen of his house in Olympia. "It's nothing compared to six months."

Since Katie has been away, Mike has had to make a few changes to his normal routine. He now keeps toys for Jimmy in his office. He also sends his sauce mixes, olives, pepperoni and artichoke hearts in the mail for his wife's Friday night pizza dinners with other soldiers in Afghanistan.

But it's the little things that remind Mike that Katie isn't there.

Before Katie left, she and Mike encouraged one another to eat healthy and exercise. The Opitzes liked to invite friends and neighbors over for barbecues and dinner parties. They also enjoyed outdoor activities, such as camping and hiking. They haven't been able to do their favorite activities together for several months.

But Mike's life goes on in Olympia as Katie's does in Afghanistan. The two are waiting to celebrate their son's first Christmas, and to finally spend some time together.

Katie works seven days a week, and she hasn't had any time off. Instead, she looks forward to phone calls home and mail call. Katie says she can always tell when she receives a package from Mike because he sends them from a Package Express near their house. She immediately feels the package to see if it has a video inside.

Katie watches her baby crawl around the house and play with toys on videos that Mike has sent her. Before Katie left, Mike bought her a laptop computer with a DVD player and himself a camcorder that records on DVDs so Katie could watch Jimmy grow. She says the videos make her feel closer to home.

"My tent mates could always tell when I was watching a 'Jimmy video' because I would be grinning from ear to ear," Katie wrote in an e-mail. Katie becomes teary-eyed when she sees Jimmy on the videos or hears Mike's voice.

"The tapes mean the world to me," she says. "I just feel like I missed out on so much."

"I just pray that Jimmy will remember that I am his mommy." - Katie Opitz, deployed soldier
Deep down inside I felt a sense of duty [and] honor, and that I needed to do my part even though it was not the best time for me or my family. - Katie Opitz

Before they were married, or even dating, Katie served in Desert Storm. She says she thinks she was deployed then because she was single.

"It was tough going [to Desert Storm], but it doesn't compare to how it was leaving a little baby and a husband behind," Katie says. "When you have someone who is dependent on you for their needs, it creates a different feeling inside of you."

Mike says he is hoping the Army will allow Katie to stay at Fort Lewis for the next two years, but with conflict in Iraq and North Korea, another deployment may be inevitable. Katie is hoping that her unit will be stabilized at Fort Lewis for at least the next six months.

The Army deployed as many as 37,000 troops to the Gulf Area in January. Many National Guard troops were also called to active duty, including a reserve unit from Detroit, which will replace Katie's unit at the Kandahar airport.

After she returns, Katie will have some time off until her gear arrives back at Fort Lewis. Mike plans to take a couple of weeks vacation to help his wife get reacquainted with civilian life, and so they can spend time together as a family. The Opitz family will finally be able to do all the things they have had to put off, such as taking their annual ski trip to Salt Lake City and unwrapping the gifts under the Christmas tree.

"Ever since she has been gone, it seems like everything in our life has been put on hold until she returns." - Mike Opitz, husband

Katie spent four years in the Reserves prior to coming on active duty. She is currently assigned to the Fort Lewis 10th Forward Surgical Team. When she's at home, she works at Madigan Army Medical Center two days a week to keep up her skills as a critical care nurse. She plans on working two more years before retiring.

Mike and Katie met through a mutual friend and Army nurse after Mike was out of the Army. They were married in 1999.

"Deep down inside I felt a sense of duty [and] honor, and that I needed to do my part even though it was not the best time for me or my family," - Katie Opitz

"Deep down inside I felt a sense of duty [and] honor, and that I needed to do my part even though it was not the best time for me or my family," - Katie Opitz

Katie says.

Katie's unit is working from a base set at the Kandahar International Airport. Her mission is to help the people of Afghanistan. Most of the surgeries her unit performs are on local people. She also treats many children who have been involved in farm accidents, suffered gunshot wounds or stepped on old land mines still in place from the Russian-Afghanistan war.

As she works, Katie feels better knowing her son is in good hands. Mike and Katie hired a live-in nanny, Karen Hewitt, to look after Jimmy while Mike works.

"She's done a wonderful job with this little boy," Mike said.

Katie describes Hewitt as being an "angel from heaven."

In addition to caring for Jimmy, Hewitt takes care of the family dog, cooks dinner and cleans the house.

Although she knows her baby is well cared for, Katie still has concerns.

"I just pray that Jimmy will remember that I am his mommy," she says.

Katie is waiting to hear when she will leave the extreme temperatures of Afghanistan and return to her family in Olympia. Her unit is scheduled to return in a couple of weeks, but the soldiers cannot be given an exact return date because the Air Force planes that transport them are busy bringing troops to the Gulf area.

Katie has been able to update Mike about what is going on regularly. She calls home three times a week. The Army limits calls to 20 minutes at a time. When she calls, Katie asks about Jimmy a lot.

"She wants to know what's happening, what's changing," Mike says.

During one phone call, Katie heard Jimmy in the background and asked Mike to hold the phone up to his ear. Mike said to Jimmy, "Say hello to your mamma, it's your mamma." Katie heard Jimmy say, "Ma, ma, ma."

"It made my day," Katie said. "Those are the moments that I will cherish the most."

Mike and Katie also send photos back and forth by mail and e-mail. Katie and the other soldiers share photos and stories of what is happening back home as a way of supporting one another.

Each unit has a family support group to help the family members left behind. Mike says he doesn't use it because as a former infantry soldier stationed at Fort Lewis, he is familiar with the base and the military.

Now, Mike owns Trans Northwest Construction Inc. in Olympia. He works from home for a few hours in the morning before going to job sites in the afternoon.

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Now, Mike owns Trans Northwest Construction Inc. in Olympia. He works from home for a few hours in the morning before going to job sites in the afternoon.
With a tune from a Clint Eastwood movie whistling in my head, I opened the door to what I expected would be a bar full of toothless drunks, prostitutes hanging over banisters and crazed bartenders shooting at the customers.

I didn’t know what to expect from the Waterfront Seafood and Bar. Friends and co-workers warned me not to go alone, even on a sunny afternoon. “It’s dangerous,” they whispered, laughing at the thought of a 22-year-old college girl in designer jeans walking into the so-called “Sniper Saloon.”

Most Bellingham residents—a large number of the rest of Americans—have heard that accused snipers John Muhammad and 17-year-old Lee Malvo stayed at Bellingham’s Lighthouse Mission, only blocks away from the Waterfront. Muhammad, like many travelers passing through town, stopped by the local tavern for a beer or two.

Waterfront bartender Millie Ulmer said she served Muhammad for nearly four months, but she didn’t recall any suspicious behavior. She said he was quiet, polite and friendly, not unlike the majority of the customers she serves during her morning shift. This, however, didn’t seem to matter to the national media. The New York Times, Playboy and the National Enquirer all ran stories on the “Sniper Saloon.”

Customers and bartenders claim that convicted serial killers Ted Bundy and Kenneth Bianchi (also known as the “Hillside Strangler”) were former Waterfront customers. But as Ulmer pointed out, no one could have known these men would end up with their mug shots plastered all over television and newspapers around the country.

Farmer and her husband bought the Waterfront after they closed the dart-league players. “We just happen to be the first bar on the way uptown from the mission,” Farmer said. “Eventually the word got out that these men would end up with their mug shots plastered all over television and newspapers around the country.”

Five years ago, when owner Lynne Farmer and her husband bought the bar, the Waterfront had a bad reputation. “We just happen to be the first bar on the way uptown from the mission,” Farmer said. “Eventually the word got out that these men would end up with their mug shots plastered all over television and newspapers around the country.”

Farmer feels that many people have the wrong impression of the Lighthouse Mission. She said when people come to Bellingham looking for opportunities, they can stay at the mission until they get on their feet. “For a lot of people, the mission is just a stepping stone,” Farmer said.

On the weekends the Waterfront turns into a dart bar, where Farmer plays host at dart-league tournaments. Farmer, who also sponsors three co-ed baseball teams, said she sponsors 20 to 30 dart teams, with players ranging in age from 21 to 60.

“Tf “Y” ith a tune from a Clint Eastwood movie whistling in my head, I opened the door to what I expected would be a bar full of toothless drunks, prostitutes hanging over banisters and crazed bartenders shooting at the customers.
The Waterfront Seafood and Bar was recently described by the media as one of the most dangerous bars in the United States. Robin Duranleau gives a first-person account of the history and misconceptions of “The Sniper Saloon.” Photos by Evan E. Parker.
"[The Waterfront] doesn’t make the hair stick up on the back of more than I can say for a lot of bars around here."

with over-serving alcohol or serving alcohol to a minor.

“We’ve turned [the Waterfront] into your regular neighborhood pub, but even to this day, after owning it for five years, people still say, ‘I can’t believe you’ll go down there by yourself,’ because of the bad reputation from before.”

As Farmer and I talked, I scanned the room searching for some kind of evidence that would help me understand why this bar was thought of as ill-fated and risky.

Farmer told me that messiness was her biggest pet peeve. I looked around at the clean tabletops, the freshly vacuumed floors, and I realized the bar was cleaner than per-

Lisa Mattice gets a kiss from Jason Stiltz, left, after throwing a bull’s-eye, while fellow lovers Brian and Tammy Doll, right, share a similar moment together.

Leslie Ulmer’s kisses Lisa Mattice after she throws a bull’s-eye.

Bartender David “Davey” Day, who has worked behind the counter at the Waterfront for nearly 19 years, said the majority of people who come in during the day are “working guys” on lunch break. He said people come in from Georgia-Pacific, the plywood mill or the railroad.

The Waterfront Bar has been a part of Bellingham history for more than a hundred years. Farmer said the building once had a trapdoor leading down to the basement. Fishermen pulled their boats right up to the building and came through the trapdoor into the bar. She said the bar is the last standing building in Bellingham built on pilings. Looking out the back windows, it almost looks as though the Waterfront is floating.

Day was an iron worker for nearly 35 years before joining the Waterfront staff. He described the bar as “a social club” where people come to relax and enjoy themselves.

Day, a sarcastic man who joked dryly with his customers, told me to make myself at home and pull up a barstool. He teased his friends to leave him alone so he could give me his undivided attention. I was seated at the bar scribbling notes as the people around me chattered about their lives, sipping coffees...
your neck, which is

– David Day, bartender

and Budweisers, occasionally throwing dollar bills at Day to pay for their drinks and a couple of pull tabs.

I realized I was sincerely enjoying the time I was spending with these people. They had included me in their social circle, and not once had I felt uncomfortable.

"[The Waterfront] doesn't make the hair stick up on the back of your neck, which is more than I can say for a lot of bars around here," Day said.

Joe Greco said he has been coming to the Waterfront for more than 20 years. He sat on one of the comfortable barstools at 11 a.m., sipping a steaming cup of coffee, munching on a ham-burger and raving about the good food. He said he just laughed at all the bad press about the bar.

"They don't have a choice of who comes in here," Greco said. "It's like [the media] thinks every scum comes to the Waterfront. I just blew it off."

Greco said he enjoys the Waterfront's comfortable atmosphere. He said he likes the mellow mood and the familiar faces he sees when he stops by.

The "family" feeling of the bar came to life when Ulmer began talking about a regular customer whose house had recently caught fire. She said the bar took donations from patrons and employees for the customer, and they raised a substantial amount to help their friend.

"That's the kind of bar we are," Ulmer said. "We just let [the customers] know they're appreciated."

This wasn't the first charity fundraiser the Waterfront participated in. After Sept. 11, the bar had a benefit dart tournament and raised between $700 and $800. They sent the money to Red Cross to help the families of the terrorists' victims.

Barb Bonkoski, right, laughs with Jimmy Rundquist as The Waterfront's Friday night action picks up.

Three years ago, another customer's house burned, killing her husband and two dogs. The Waterfront had a spaghetti benefit to help the loyal patron, raising nearly $1,000.

The bar has even helped families grow. Day said the Waterfront has been the site of four weddings in recent years. He said one of the bartenders is also a minister. They used an alter, decorated the bar and kept it open for people to stop in and give their congratulations.

"We've had some good times," Day said. "We try to take care of each other."

I left the Waterfront Seafood and Bar with a smile on my face, marveling that my initial perceptions of the bar had changed. I wanted to share with all of Bellingham the kindness and loyalty I experienced at the Waterfront. I'll never look at a tavern in the same way. As Day pointed out to me, the Waterfront truly is an undiscovered place.
Veronica Bruffy tells of Mike and Kristy Woodmansee's attempt to become the first American married couple to summit Mount Everest, a mountain that has claimed more than 150 lives. Photos courtesy of Mike Woodmansee.

A Lesson in Deception

At 27,000 feet, the spikes on the bottoms of Mike and Kristy Woodmansee's boots dig a mere three-quarters inch into the wind-polished mountain face. The needles on both oxygen tanks slip to zero and the dizzying breathlessness rises. A claustrophobic tension screams in their lungs as final hopes of becoming the first American married couple to summit Mount Everest fade. But even in their oxygen-debilitated stupor, the couple grasp that although they have failed, they are not failures.

Eleven individuals on the team attempted the summit that late-May morning of 2000. Seven, whose oxygen systems came from Russia and the United States, straddled the countries of Nepal and Tibet on the summit of Everest. But four of the climbers had to turn back. Their oxygen systems had faltered.

The Woodmansees are known in Skagit Valley as fitness fanatics. Besides mountain climbing, Mike, a 47-year-old accountant, has a long history of competing in Ironman triathlons and marathons. Kristy, 30, an assistant in her mother's medical billing business, is a former Washington State University soccer standout and a marathon runner herself. She began mountaineering in 1992. While mountaineering with Mike, she learned to keep the momentum, be cautious when necessary and be confident, but not overly so.

Together, the couple have summited more than a hundred peaks in the United States including some in the Cascades. Mike has climbed more than 400 peaks around the world, including Alaska's formidable Mount McKinley. But even with 20 years of mountain climbing experience, Mike believes Kristy is a much better athlete than he is.

"She could outdo most men up there [on Everest]," he said.

Climbing Mount Everest, the world's tallest mountain at 29,035 feet, was perhaps the greatest challenge these adept climbers would ever experience.

Mike and Kristy would leave behind their families, careers and cushy sofas for 71 days of icy sleeping bags, rice, lentil soup and contaminated water.

Preparing for "Sagarmatha," the Nepalese name for Everest, meant training, scheduling, raising money, gathering equipment and eating-a lot.

"We had to kick up the training for Everest," Kristy said, her light green T-shirt outlining the muscles on her 5-foot-5-inch frame. "But it was hard to get outside for long periods of time because of the Northwest's rainy weather, so we did a lot at the gym...on the machine, or swimming."

Henry Todd, the Woodmansee's guide, urged them to each gain 20
pounds before leaving.

"Being a woman, and being able to eat whatever you want, I mean, that never happens," Kristy said.

At this point, the Woodmansees knew nothing of Todd except his name and his job title. Those in the climbing world knew substantially more of Todd. They knew him as a stormy Everest guide from Scotland who offered would-be summitters the chance to reach the world’s highest footstep for a little more than half the price of his competitors $29,000 per person compared to $50,000.

For that price, Todd would provide porters, food at the different camps, cooks, and oxygen tanks for the grueling and debilitating 3,000-foot climb across South Col. He would also provide sherpas, Tibetan and Nepalese natives who would transport all of this equipment. But as the Woodmansees would soon learn, Todd’s low price came at a high cost.

The date of departure seemed distant when the Woodmansees were preparing in December, but March 24, 2000, soon closed in. Everest had enticed 4,400 adventurers over the years, yet only 748 people had been able to summit the mountain. More than 150 people had died on the mountain. Most of the dead still lie on the mountain, testament to its awesome power over human mortality.

The flight to Kathmandu, Nepal, provided time to contemplate the weeks ahead, which Mike filled by writing in his journal.

"March 24: Read Angie’s [his daughter] wonderful, poignant letters while lounging in Singapore. Brought tears to my eyes (again) and quadruple reinforced the thought that I must come home! We KNOW we are capable of making the summit and returning safely, yet realize it is possible that things can go bad. Every once in awhile I get a 15-second panic attack when I realize the audacity of our task. I calm myself, thinking that the venture is mentally and emotionally manageable if taken one day at a time."

On March 27, the 12-person team assembled in a Twin Otter Airplane bound for Lukla, in the Khumbu Region.

After an 11-day, 11,000-foot climb over a span of 32 miles from the cobblestone streets of Lukla, Kristy and Mike arrived at base camp. At 19,500 feet, the camp was set up on top of the Khumbu Glacier. For eight days the

Mount Everest, looming above the clouds at 29,035 feet above sea level, is the highest peak in the world.

“We KNOW we are capable of making the summit and returning safely, yet realize it is possible that things can go bad.”

– from the journal of Mike Woodmansee, climber
Kristy Woodmansee inches over a half-mile-deep crevasse on the Khumbu Icefall. Climbers use ladders to negotiate these natural divides.

party rested, surrounded by half-mile-deep crevasses, ice pinnacles shooting above the tents and eerie moments of rumbling avalanches in the distance reminding them of the icy reality surrounding them.

"It was long stretches of boredom interrupted by short moments of sheer terror," Mike said.

To prepare for the summit, acclimatization was necessary to combat the deadly realities of fatigue, nausea, cerebral edema and pulmonary edema. High-altitude climbing becomes easier after a series of mini-climbs, which push the climbers higher each time before they descend back to base camp for rest and recuperation.

"[Acclimatization] is a very real process. It's not where anyone can sneak by; you face it," Mike said. "You're slow, and it over-accelerates your heart rate, and your respiratory rate is also affected."

Each mini-climb included the 1,500-foot Khumbu Icefall, where the glacier tipped over a steep edge off the side of the mountain. The Woodmansee's first Icefall climb lasted four and a half hours. By the fifth ascent through the Icefall, Mike and Kristy were able to cut the time to two and a half hours.

"That was one of the scariest parts... the Icefall," Kristy said. "You don't realize it because it's a pretty mellow place on the mountain, elevation-wise."

"April 13: Suffice it to say that a crevasse 15 feet wide and 100 feet deep, traversed by spindly ladders, is a heart-stopping sight. A single ladder can span about five feet, given a foot or so anchored into the snow on either side of the crevasse. A 10-foot-wide crevasse requires two ladders lashed together with polyurethane water ski-type rope. A 15-foot crossing requires three ladders, the maximum extent of our horizontal crossings... so this awkward dance is done right smack dab over the deepest part of the crevasse. Nowhere to run to. Nowhere to hide; it is impossible NOT to notice the crevasse below you even though you are concentrating on the scarred-up rungs with all your heart, mind and soul."

"The wind there is very ferocious. It is very much a mountain pass."

– Mike Woodmansee, climber

On April 23, one month after their flight from Seattle, Mike and Kristy were ready for the next challenge. At 4:30 a.m. they awoke for a breakfast of porridge and milk tea before shouldering their packs and trucking through boulders, yak dung and littered oxygen bottles, all typical characteristics of a base camp. On this night, the goal was to reach Camp II for an overnight stay before moving to Camp III.

The six-man team bypassed Camp I to make better time, stopping only briefly to chew on energy bars and swallow Gatorade before moving on to Camp II. The team reached Camp II and spent the night.

As they prepared and packed to reach 24,000 feet the following day, a storm was brewing. Todd radioed from base camp, adamantly urging the group to return to the base that evening. But reaching Camp III was crucial for proving they could attempt the summit.

The team held firm and convinced Todd to compromise. They would spend the night on Camp II, ascend to Camp III in the morning and return to base camp that same day.

From Camp II, climbers must travel toward the perilous Lhotse Face, a steep, shiny ice wall where one wrong step has often meant death for an ill-fated climber.

"We started the climb on the Lhotse Face in a hard wind that was blowing snow and ice into our faces and freezing our fingers," Mike said. "Frankly, not sleeping on Camp III was fine with us as it is a legendarily poor sleeping spot and the real value is just working your rear off getting to that altitude."

Once back at base camp, the team was told that by reaching Camp III without incident and with enough reserves to descend in the same day, they were ready to attempt the summit. The date set for departure was Saturday, May 6.

With 10 days to contemplate their mission, Mike and Kristy descended to the village of Dingboche. They reveled in the food, padded cots and warmth before their downtime expired and they had to return to base camp.
On May 6, the team began their attempt for the summit. They arrived in Camp II after five hours and 35 minutes. But throughout the next two days, weather conditions prevented them from making much progress.

"Nowhere to run to. Nowhere to hide; it is impossible NOT to notice the crevasse below you..."
- from the journal of Mike Woodmansee, climber

"May 8: Another nondescript day weatherwise. Not terrible, but enough wind, snow and clouds to prevent movement on the mountain."

While waiting for the storm to blow over, Kristy and Mike learned that the team was in line to be the first summitters of the year. But the greatest challenge was yet to come.

"You have to get to the South Col with enough time and enough wits about you to recoup for the summit," Mike said.

Also known as the Death Zone, South Col's dangerous height of 26,000 feet and 30-below temperatures are almost impossible to defend against. Mike and Kristy said that climbers at that altitude do not want to eat, drink, put on their boots or even go outside of the tents. Climbers have only one opportunity to summit. They must ascend through the Death Zone to the peak, because at this elevation, the body's survival mechanisms begin to fail within 24 hours. Problem solving and critical thinking are reduced to a sixth-grade level, and fluids in the brain or the lungs can rupture.

"The wind there is very ferocious," Mike said. "It is very much a mountain pass. To get out of the South Col, you climb a 100-foot band of ice. Of course it's pitch dark, and snow is hitting you at 40 miles per hour."

Ten minutes out of the Col, Kristy noticed Mike step out of the line. His gloved hands were fidgeting with his respirator.

"You've got your headlamp on. You're trying to figure out what is wrong with the damn thing, and you don't come up with many solutions, and it won't work. So you fiddle with this and fiddle with that," Mike said.

Mike's oxygen tank was failing. Kristy's was beginning to falter. At that moment, the Woodmansees realized that their goal had transformed from reaching the mountain's summit to securing their own survival. They knew that descending to the Col and picking through the oxygen tanks would be futile. They knew their attempt at the summit was over.

Two weeks after returning home, the London Times printed a story reprimanding Todd for refilling used oxygen bottles in the notorious black market of India. Kristy and Mike had used two of those oxygen bottles. But they did not know that when they were up on the mountain.

"We come to find out that India puts Talcum powder into the oxygen bottles to draw out the moisture," Mike said.

"At the kind of temperature on Everest, the powder causes the respirators to fail. We knew that things were going wrong up there and that they had to do with Henry's actions, but in that vulnerable state, there is nothing you can do."

Back in Skagit Valley, as a light drizzle speckles the skylight on the ceiling of their home, the Woodmansees ponder their adventure on Everest. Mike rocks in his La-Z-Boy recliner, hands clasped on his lap. He glances proudly at the gold-framed photograph of the Khumbu Glacier hanging from the wall. Kristy sits cross-legged on the floor, back against the couch. Her blue eyes look compassionate as Mike speaks.

The Woodmansees believe there was never a time on the mountain where they questioned their motives for climbing Everest. But would they want to do it all over again?

"I realize there are a lot of those situations where we were putting ourselves in harm's way," Mike says. "I guess that wouldn't keep me from going back, but it keeps me from having to go back."

The Woodmansees spent nearly three months calling this place home during their quest to summit Mount Everest.
- Eagle Park
- Mount Everest