Improving the Community
Editor's Note

Last summer I spent 20 hours per week working as a public relations intern at the Whatcom Museum of History & Art. Although I wore a nametag that said "VOLUNTEER," I was not doing the work entirely for free — I was receiving university credit. When my supervisor asked me to write a feature story for the member newsletter about museum volunteers, I was surprised to discover that hundreds of people contribute their time and energy (for free) to this downtown landmark. As they contribute to the museum, they are ultimately improving the Bellingham community.

Although Klipsun doesn't normally have a theme, we editors decided to use one for this issue. We instructed our staff to write stories focusing on individuals, organizations, nonprofit groups, volunteers, programs, events, businesses or anything else that contributes in some way to the improvement of communities within Whatcom County. Sound too general? That's because it was; we didn't want to be too specific. And the result was exactly what we had hoped for. We received a diverse collection of stories. Some you might expect; others might surprise you.

Community improvement is happening everywhere, not just in the places or with the people you’d imagine. For example, have you ever noticed the decorative benches and colorful metal garbage cans on the sidewalks of downtown Bellingham? When I worked at a downtown shop, every day I'd throw out my coffee cup into one of the hideous concrete garbage bins on the sidewalk in front of our store. One day I stepped out to toss my cup, but the garbage bin was gone. We complained about the inconvenience for a week, mumbling about the perishable items (e.g., banana peels) that created a stench in our store's overflowing garbage can. But as I complained, I had no idea that bright, festively designed garbage bins had been created and were in the process of being placed throughout downtown. And with the addition of artsy new benches, a little color was added to this business district. People actually took the time to think about how downtown could be improved, and how they could contribute to beautifying the area.

After reading these stories, I was more thankful for those who work to make our community a better place. I think you might be too.

If you have comments, call our office at (360) 650-3737. Thanks for reading.

Best wishes,
Karla Tillman, Editor in Chief

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*Special thanks to Laurie Rossman and everyone at Publishing Services
Jeanna Barrett | is currently working between waiting lists on a graphic design and journalism double major. Her dream is to work for a big-city fashion magazine. The lively, unique ambiance of Community Food Co-op inspired her to write about the thriving community business.

Veronica Bruffy | Since this is her second time being published in Klipsun, Veronica will no longer be accepting personal phone calls and all fan letters will be directed to her secretary, her mother. As a March cum laude graduate, Veronica is extremely busy trying to land a once-in-lifetime job with the nearest McDonalds, so please...leave a message.

Scott Lefebere | would like to thank his family, his friends and his girlfriend, Lisa, who have provided support, motivation and guidance throughout his college years.

Suzanne DeSelms | is a journalism major in her final year at Western. She plans to graduate this summer. She has previously been published in the Western Front, the Kent Reporter and in her high school newspaper. She'd like to thank all the people involved with this story for their cooperation.

Candace Nelson | would like to thank the creators of www.google.com because without it, she never would have heard of Teen Court. Through the search engine, she also found a child genius named Candace Nelson — no relation. She is currently using Google to find a job because she graduates in June with a degree in journalism.

Kristina Beall | is a senior public relations major who is wishing and hoping she will graduate in December 2003. This is her first article published in Klipsun. She would like to thank Michael Falter for his patience and helpfulness.

Betsy Anderson | is a senior communication major with minors in journalism and theater — graduating in June 2003. She thanks everyone at Lydia Place for their contributions and willingness to share their experiences.

Brandon Ivey | enjoys writing stories. He would like to thank the Klipsun editors for their help.
A woman wearing Carhartt overalls and dirt-crusted work boots patiently waits her turn while snacking on turkey from her plastic deli bag. Her blue eyes crease at the corners as she laughs with the lanky man towering over the deli case.

"Can I get another half-pound of pastrami-seasoned turkey?" she asks him in between bites.

As he thrusts the crinkled bag over the counter, she grabs a brochure and points out how the turkey is grown naturally and contains no nitrates, MSG, phosphates or artificial ingredients.

The opportunity to provide healthy, chemical-free food for her family is one reason Bellingham resident Ruth Schreiber has shopped at the Community Food Co-op for six years.

"There are more pesticides, fungicides and herbicides used [in food] today, more than ever," she says. "The co-op supports organic farmers. By using methods organic farmers use, it encourages natural cycles. It's healthier not to take in effects of chemicals on your body."

RuthAnne Muller, member outreach facilitator and board administrator for the co-op, said the majority of customers who shop there are looking for a healthier lifestyle.

"A lot of people come to shop here because they've read enough about pesticides to realize that they don't want to be eating them," Muller says. Many Bellingham residents regularly
drive by the Food Co-op, located on the corner of Holly and Forest streets, but don't understand what the business is. For 32 years, the co-op has offered a healthy alternative to mainstream grocery stores with commercially grown food. The majority of the products at the co-op are organic and are purchased from local organic farmers. This contributes to the success of local farming businesses and the economy.

The Community Food Co-op started in the 1970s when Whatcom County residents formed a buying club for items they couldn't find in mainstream grocery stores, Muller says. Once a week, someone would travel to Seattle to purchase pre-ordered organic foods and then distribute them out of his or her garage. Eventually, enough people were involved to purchase a small store.

In the late 1970s, the co-op's membership included approximately 250 members. Today, it serves approximately 8,000 members.

Currently, Washington State has 18 food co-ops in cities such as Everett, Port Townsend, Seattle and Olympia. The Skagit Valley Food Co-op in Mount Vernon is Bellingham's neighboring co-op.

Co-op businesses are based on democratic ownership. Customers either invest time or money, making them members of the co-op and partial owners. All members have a vote in business decisions. Every co-op is locally based, has a concern for the community and provides education for its members.

To become a member at the Bellingham location, the co-op requires a one-time fee of $90. This entitles the member to one share of the business and one vote in what happens in the business. No member has more say in business decisions than any other member.

"You really, truly own a tiny piece of the store," Muller says. "It's your store, and money goes into improving the business and then back out into the community."

Members can choose to pay $3 per month until the $90 fee is paid. The co-op management made the fee affordable because they understand a lot of people cannot come in and plunk down $90, Muller says. Members also pay an annual fee of $4.

A member might decide to cancel his or her membership at any time, for whatever reason, and all money used to purchase shares of the co-op is refunded. Other customers can shop at the co-op without being a member, but a 6.5 percent surcharge is added to the prices, Muller says.

Some prices at the co-op tend to be slightly higher than prices at a commercial grocery store. At Haggen in late winter, green beans were $1.89 per pound and red bell peppers were $1.99 per pound. At the co-op during the same season, organic green beans were $2.98 per pound and organic red bell peppers were $3.98 per pound.

The co-op's prices are higher because the store doesn't buy products in large quantities, and organic products are generally more expensive than commercial products, Muller says.

"Comparing price is like comparing apples and oranges," she says. "Organic food tends to cost more than commercially raised food."

Although organic prices are generally higher, the prices have significantly lowered since organic produce first came into the market, says Wynne Johnson, produce manager of the co-op.

"[Organic prices] are on their way to evening themselves out with commercially grown produce," Johnson says.

Western student Tera Johnson, 22, doesn't mind the expensive price of organic produce because she thinks eating organically grown food is worth the cost.

"Oftentimes organic food looks scrappier and is more expensive, but inside your head it tastes better," she says. "I'd rather eat an awesome organic apple versus one that is coated with wax."

The co-op is a not-for-profit business. If the co-op does make a profit at the end of the year, the money has to be put back into the business or given to the members.

Because the co-op has been growing rapidly in recent years, members have chosen to invest any profit into improving and possibly expanding the business.
While the store continues to expand, it offers its customers many groceries that cannot be found at other grocery stores.

One feature at the co-op is an aisle of bulk items such as organic soy and mango trail mix and organic gummy bears.

In the same aisle, large tubs of almond butter, organic peanut butter and organic raw tahini sit on a shelf. The small sticker on the tub of tahini describes the substance as freshly ground, organically grown, raw-hulled sesame seeds, a rich-tasting, healthy alternative to peanut butter.

Above these tubs are large, red grinding machines filled to the brim with peanuts. The machines allow customers to grind their own fresh peanut butter. On shelves below the grinding machines are stacks of recycled glass jars and plastic containers for packaging the fresh almond butter, peanut butter or tahini. Customers can also fill the recycled containers with organic substances such as canola oil, virgin olive oil, soy sauce, molasses and raspberry honey.

Self-serve dry herbs and spices are another advantage of shopping at the co-op. Plastic bags and scoops are provided for choosing the herbs or spices from more than 250 jars.

In addition to basic spices such as nutmeg, cinnamon and paprika, other unusual spices include: wild yam root, dandelion root, horsetail grass and kelp. The dry herbs and spices cost approximately 32 cents per ounce.

The majority of groceries at the co-op contain certified-organic ingredients. The co-op’s goal is to provide healthy, whole-grained, non-processed, organic and sustainable food, Muller says. Sustainable foods are farmed with methods that replenish the soil with nutrients. This soil can be used over and over again.

“Our focus is providing good food,” she says. “In most cases, the best food you can get is organic and sustainable food.”

Each year since 1990, the growth of organic food sales in the United States has increased by 20 percent. In 2000, retail sales of organic products reached $7.8 billion. Today, one out of four Americans buys organic products, according to Agriculture Research Magazine.

Organic farming techniques replace toxic chemicals by using cover crops for nutrients rather than chemicals, releasing beneficial insects rather than pesticides, adding compost instead of nitrate-based soil and using manual labor instead of herbicides to control weeds, says Bob Scowcroft, executive director of the Organic Farming Research Foundation.

On commercial farms, tomatoes are picked green and rock hard and taken to chambers and gassed with alcohol so they will turn red, Scowcroft says.

“It looks good, but it might not taste the best,” he says. “Organic foods are grown for freshness and taste rather than longevity and shelf life.”

Approximately 173,000 miles of U.S. rivers and streams are contaminated by chemical-based agriculture, and 4.5 to 5 billion pounds of pesticides are used globally each year, according to New Hope Organics, which lists results from numerous studies on its Web site.

“In organic farming, [there is] no agricultural chemical residue, no groundwater contamination from nitrates and no spray-drift exposure to workers,” Scowcroft says.

In addition to offering organic groceries, the co-op has other items such as reusable canvas shopping bags, organic cotton leggings, imported wines, incense, candles and natural wood dishes.

Currently, the store's local organic produce includes only carrots and potatoes because of the cold weather in Whatcom County, Johnson said. In the winter months, the co-op receives most of its produce from other locations such as California and Mexico.

However, for about four months in the summer, the co-op's produce is 90 percent locally grown. The store has contracts with 12 to 15 local farms, including Harmony Farms and The Growing Garden, Johnson says.

Nancy VanDeHey, Whatcom County resident and owner of Harmony Farms, says she has had an expanding awareness of healthy food production since college and opened her 5-acre farm five years ago. Her farm provides 50 different types of vegetables and fruits to grocery stores interested in organic produce.

For VanDeHey, organic farming is a health and environmental issue. The Food Co-op was her first marketing avenue when she started out, and accounted for approximately 20 percent of her total sales, she says.
“They bought from me my first year when I was a rookie and they’ve bought from me every year since then,” VanDeHey says. “The co-op has been there for local farmers in a good way ever since I’ve gotten to know it.”

Supporting local farmers is one way the co-op promotes growth of community businesses and economy. Another way the store encourages local economy is through cash donations and sponsorships of community events. The co-op also offers its own events such as forums, to discuss how the store can better support local farmers, and a community shopping day. On the third Saturday of every month, the store holds a community shopping day and 2 percent of all sales are donated to different local organizations, Muller says.

“The essential spirit of the co-op is our commitment to community, involving membership, creating a sense of community within the store and definitely a commitment to organic and sustainable local products,” Muller says.

Part of the community environment includes a café with organic food, espresso, juices and smoothies. Customers can stop to eat before or after shopping, simply for a meal or to study, Schreiber says.

The store also offers a play area for children whose parents are shopping.

Schreiber says she loves the variety of shoppers she sees at the co-op.

“All different types of people shop here — men with business suits, college students and the hippie-tie­dyed type,” she says.

Muller said college students are customers who specifically help the co-op thrive and be successful. After every summer, when college students return, she notices the store’s sales increase.

Whether the co-op’s customers are school-aged, middle-aged, plain-clothed or eccentric, they continue to come back and membership continues to increase.

“In organic farming, [there is] no agricultural chemical residue, no groundwater contamination from nitrates and no spray-drift exposure to workers,”

—Bob Scowcroft, executive director of the Organic Farming Research Foundation

“I like how they’re not just a grocery store but how they support the community through various programs,” Tera Johnson says. “[The co-op] is less alienating and more personal than a large grocery store. I think it has a good community atmosphere.”
R
eddish-orange tints the sky and signals the end of the day. Amid the coming darkness, fluorescent lights cast a shadow on a young girl running a gentle hand over the neck of a 12-year-old quarter horse. The animal’s muscles ripple under the brown winter coat, glistening from a mixture of sweat and dirt. The girl shifts her weight and places a foot in the stirrup, her left hand clutching the horn on the western saddle. The leather crackles in protest to her petite frame, and in one fluid motion, she pushes herself into the air, swinging a leg over the back of the 1,000-pound animal.

Fifteen-year-old Katie Smith does not completely own the horse, Jazzie, but she knows everything about her. She respects Jazzie’s special no-potassium diet. She knows exactly the way the horse likes her ears scratched and the tension she shows when guided into the horse trailer.

At 3:30 p.m., when other girls at her high school head to volleyball practice, dance lessons or home to watch television, Katie and her sister, Candis Smith, 17, drive to a 12-acre piece of land at 3331 Bay Road in Ferndale — a place they call their second home.

Katie takes her time brushing out Jazzie’s tangled mane, then uses a fine-toothed comb to work through the horse’s tail. It’s Tuesday. A sheet of paper with handwritten directions is stapled on the door of each of the eight stalls to remind the six girls and one boy of Tuesday’s barn chores. The chores include checking all salt blocks and fence lines, sweeping the floors, checking the food troughs and drawing fresh water for the horses.

Outside the corral, Wendy Rice, 36, uses her hand to shield the glare from the setting sun. Her eyes watch the girl and the horse intently, both testaments to the success of her 19-month-old nonprofit organization, Happy Ark.

With Steve, her husband of 16 years, Rice’s goal was to establish Happy Ark as a sanctuary for animals and kids, a place where horses and children help each other. Rice hoped her love of horses could become a positive outlet in Whatcom County for children ranging in age from 6 to 17 years old.

Rice watches Katie pat Jazzie’s rump. The woman’s black hair is interspersed with strands of gray. Rice owns the horse and the land. She stands with arms across the chest of her...
5-foot-3-inch frame. At first glance, her pink sweat suit and rubber muck-shoes would not depict a trace of equestrian finesse. The stereotypical English outfit of khaki-colored, tight riding pants, slim black blazer, velvet helmet and knee-high, leather boots are absent from her dress. But her love for these horses is unbridled.

Rice started Happy Ark short on funds, with a little persistence and a lot of desire. Lindsey, Rice’s 15-year-old daughter, says the kids who claim Happy Ark as their second home are all best friends. Their love for horses is a simple and obvious connection, yet looking deeper, the tie that binds them is much stronger. They all seek friendship, support and dreams for the future.

Rice’s goal stifles a lack of confidence, and for a few hours each day, she succeeds in blocking out the kids’ unsettled school and home lives, and provides them with an equine companion who trusts them and takes comfort in their gentle hands.

Five months ago, Rice made a promise to Katie. She would hand over Jazzie, papers and all, as a gift. But there was a catch. Katie would have to maintain her grades, stay away from drugs and alcohol, take full charge of Jazzie’s grooming and performance and most importantly, graduate from high school. “I made a pact and I intend to keep it,” Rice says. “The hard part lies in Katie’s hands. I want to give these kids a place full of love...that I never had.”

Rice said her own parents abused her, both physically and emotionally.

“They told me pretty much every day that they didn’t want me,” Rice says.

But her parents owned horses, which eventually changed Rice’s life and saved her from depression. Rice said the animals were neglected as well, and she began spending every spare moment caring for the horses.

“Those horses saved my life,” Rice says. “Without them I would have been into drugs, pregnant by 13 or out on the streets.”

At 20, Rice married Steve. By 23, they had two children, their daughter, Lindsey, and a son, Nolan, now 13.

“My kids are just golden,” Rice says. “I realized there are so many kids out there and in this country who just need a loving environment.”

She wanted to provide a supportive place for as many children as possible. With that thought in mind, Rice was determined to do something about it.

The Rices moved to Juneau, Alaska, in 1992, where Steve found a well-paying job on one of the Alaskan ferries. Rice was employed as a correctional officer, but she felt she was called to do something more with her life. The couple decided to become foster parents.

Nine children stayed at the Rice household before social workers found permanent
homes for them. One of the nine was 4-month-old Linea, who spent two years with the Rices. But the phone rang one morning and on the line was a somewhat familiar voice. Linea’s mother wanted her back.

“It broke our hearts to see her go after two years,” Rice says. “After Linea, we wanted to keep helping children, but we just couldn’t have our hearts broken again.”

Adding to their loss, Steve was in a work accident that left him with a spinal cord injury, resulting in early disability retirement. The couple decided it was time to move back to Washington. After almost seven years in Alaska, they returned to Whatcom County.

The Rices moved into their new home just a few miles from Rice’s childhood home, where her parents were still living. The parcel of land the Rices bought rekindled her love for horses. She began to teach Lindsey the rules of equestrian riding, and she bought an 18-year-old horse for Lindsey to practice with.

“She was a natural,” Rice says. “She was training unbroken horses by the following year.”

Rice wanted to become a foster parent again, but Steve was adamant about no longer wanting to take in foster children. The whole family had become very attached to Linea, and they were planning to adopt her when she was taken away. Steve refused to get that emotionally hurt again.

“Then out of nowhere I said, ‘Then why don’t we have kids come here and work with the horses?’ And Steve just nodded his head,” Rice says. “It was pretty funny...spur-of-the-moment.”

Rice knew she would have to begin a state-sponsored organization to be able to afford costs and eliminate skepticism from others. Rice spent hours researching information about nonprofit organizations from friends and the Internet. She requested the paperwork and, once the packet arrived, filled it out to the best of her knowledge.

“They wanted a president’s signature and board members,” Rice says, holding her grain-laden hand out to a Spanish white stallion. “I became president, Steve as vice president and close friends and family were board members.

For Rice and Steve, it seemed their efforts to complete and send all necessary paperwork was simply acknowledged with more papers.

On July 11, 2001, they received a signed certificate from the state. Happy Ark was finally approved as an official nonprofit organization.

Once Happy Ark became endorsed, Rice began the dirty work. She placed classified ads in the Echo and the Bellingham Herald to acquire equestrian tack, and she publicized Happy Ark to children in Whatcom County by way of posters and hay drives. Rice, Lindsey and Nolan used local stores to set up an informational table, but most publicity was by word-of-mouth. Both Lindsey and Nolan spread the news at their schools.

About eight months later, a woman in Alger donated her 5-year-old horse, Shortcake, to Happy Ark with the condition that the horse would always be around the kids. Weeks later, Happy Ark received 20-year-old Dria. The horse had little proper care, and she had never been ridden before. Lindsey stepped in and took on the job of training Dria.

“Dria was tough because she was pretty scared of the saddle and she bucked a lot,” Lindsey says. “But we needed her to be gentle for the other kids, so I told mom I would train her.”

Three weeks later, Dria and Lindsey won a first-place ribbon at a horse-schooling show.

“Mom does all the paperwork and I do the grunt work,” Lindsey says, as her hands work meticulously at braiding the tail of a 5-foot-tall pony. Rice wanted to support all the kids emotionally, but to do that she knew she would have to set limits and rules.

“This is not a Christian organization,” Rice says. “But we have morals and standards that we live by.”
Rice made a list of rules: No smoking, swearing, drinking, drugs, put-downs, and no boyfriends allowed on the property — unless they were interested in riding, too.

She hung a schedule of chores on the barn door. The children have their own horses to care for. This means grooming and feeding every day, exercising and training regularly, but also being in charge of veterinary care such as worming, shoeing, and providing yearly check-ups and shots.

"The kids are really focused," Rice says. "If we don't have the funds, then they need to find a way to raise the money for hay and grain and vet bills."

The Rices knew a diverse group of children and teens would be arriving on their property, sometimes without constant supervision, and they had to trust those kids.

To a stranger, Katie's broad smile and big eyes would not reveal the anger she tries to control at school and at home.

"Once she yelled at the teachers for telling her to quiet down, stormed out of the school and didn't return for the week," Rice says.

Rice says the Smith girls' parents are divorced. Their mother has to work a lot, making it difficult for constant parental guidance.

Katie's blond ponytail whips from side to side as she and Jazzy gallop by. She uses a quick flick of her wrist to guide the horse around a barrel positioned on the north end of the riding arena. But Katie is not the only one careening around the property.

Candis finishes her chores in the barn and leads her speckled white horse, Rashad. An old boyfriend abused Candis for months before she found support at Happy Ark. With Rice's guidance and the friendships she has made with the other girls, Candis left her abusive relationship and now focuses her attention on Rashad. Rice smiles with a kind of motherly love when she brags about Candis' interest in veterinary school.

"This means that she wants to go to college," Rice proudly explains before her voice lowers. She says it will be difficult for Candis's mother to financially support a college education.

"But I am trying to get scholarships for her so that she will be able to afford college," Rice says. "I just could not live with denying her that opportunity when she has a drive to go."

Six-year-old Madison Roth, who steadfastly argues she is 6 and a half, joins Katie, Candis, Lindsey and Nolan in the corral. Madison, Rice's niece, spends most days with her aunt, cousins and the other children at Happy Ark. The group of five walk slowly around the corral. Their laughter resonates through the barn and the stalls.

"There are always kids around here," Steve says. "It is uncommon to hear it so quiet unless they are all out riding in the woods."

Rice has received letters of thanks from kids she has worked with.

"It's those letters — like those that say, 'If it hadn't been for you, I would have been suicidal or drugged-up' — when I get reminded of the reasons I organized Happy Ark," Rice says.

Candis stands in the corral holding the halter of a light brown Arabian. She whispers a few words, audible only to the animal, whose ears prick as the words register a command. The girl pulls back expertly on the halter, and the horse gives a slight tug with its head and pivots as the two make their way back to the stables.

"Every weekend we do something like go riding or have sleepovers," Candis says. "I just really like the girls and I love the horses."

"There are always kids around here. It is uncommon to hear it so quiet unless they are all out riding in the woods."

— Steve Rice, Happy Ark vice president.
No wallflowers at this mixer. Everyone is out of their seats at the Bellingham Senior Activity Center's Tuesday afternoon dance.
For nearly 1,200 local senior citizens, the Bellingham Senior Activity Center is a home away from home. **Scott Lefeber** joins a group of these active folks to learn about what makes the center an important part of the Bellingham community – good food, excellent company, dances, games and a trip to Mexico to boot. Photos by **Evan E. Parker**.

The sharp crack of pool balls colliding and the squeak of chalk rubbed on the tips of pool sticks were the only sounds that echoed from the poolroom in the Bellingham Senior Activity Center.

Dale McAtee, 80, explained how many outstanding pool players have come and gone throughout the years. McAtee said he remembers 1987, when he and his partner won the countywide tournament championship, held annually for the members of all eight senior centers in Whatcom County.

"I played pool here with a guy who was 99 years old one day," McAtee said. That same weekend, the night of the man’s 100th birthday celebration, he went home, went to sleep and never woke up.

A memorial board now hangs in the poolroom to honor members who have passed away, McAtee said.

The Bellingham Senior Center is a facility that benefits those in the community who need a place to go and a sense of belonging. Many seniors who lack entertainment and community in their lives come to get involved in activities or to socialize with others.

Members at the center often share similar experiences or situations with each other and reflect back on times shared with friends and family.

To the right of the information desk, near the entrance to the center, is a room with five pool tables and many such memories. A few steps past the information desk, the center breaks into a maze of rooms and hallways.

The rooms provide space for the wide range of classes, activities and services the center offers. The facility is designed to provide a place where people over 55 can come together to help inform the community of their needs and interests, center manager Michael Spinale said. Members can help raise community awareness of their needs and interests by joining together to implement programs and services they can benefit from.

The center also encourages seniors to pursue an independent, healthy and active lifestyle, Spinale said.

"One thing that is hard for some to realize is that you don’t change drastically when you turn 60," Spinale said. "People who are involved in the center and its activities are taking a responsibility for themselves."

For many senior citizens, the center provides a place to go, a place to belong and a place where they feel part of a community. These things are necessities in everyone’s lives, but especially the lives of the seniors, program supervisor Turtle Robb said.

"The center provides companionship for many," said Irene Shirley, a center member for more than 20 years. "Some don’t have anything else in their lives."

The center, located on the corner of New and Halleck streets in downtown Bellingham, offers classes ranging from crafts to foreign languages and low-impact exercise. It is a social center for many seniors interested in games, songs, music, dancing and special tours.
"The senior center offers so many things," said Laura Slough, a center intern and human services major at Western Washington University. "I wish my grandparents were involved in a program like this."

One activity that keeps seniors active and has been a favorite for many is dancing. Every Tuesday afternoon at 1:45, the center offers a dance which allows the seniors to boogie or simply listen to a small band compiled of center members.

Dancing is a great way for seniors to be active while having a good time, Slough said. Also, seeing others so active is encouraging for everyone around them, she added.

― Laura Slough, Bellingham Senior Activity Center intern

Members receive a monthly bulletin and also get the privilege of registering for classes or vacations with the center. Updated trips and services are found in the monthly bulletin to keep the members abreast of what's happening at the center.

Many local seniors who do not belong to one of the eight county centers mistakenly believe the facility only caters to elderly people who want to sit in their rocking chairs all day. But Bill Heykamp, 68, does not believe in the negative stereotypes that some Whatcom County seniors have toward the center.

"If you can't find something you like at the center, then something is wrong with you," said Heykamp, a two-and-a-half-year member.

The center serves as a second home for many people, Heykamp explained. Some people whose health has deteriorated to the point where they can't do anything on their own are picked up by special buses to come to the center.

"I enjoy the center immensely," Heykamp said. "I come here every day and have met a lot of new friends."

He said most people who come to the center have lost husbands or wives. A sense of belonging and socialization is why many people who are lonely come to the center, Heykamp said.

"I got involved at the center when my husband passed away," said Setsuko Smith, 74, a center member for the past seven years. "Now I come to the center every day."

Smith said that after traveling around the world with her husband, who was in the Navy, Bellingham was the perfect place for retirement. It is not too hot and not too cold, she said.

Spinale said he spoke with a member once who explained how the center gave him a purpose and a sense of identity. The man said he had always either had school or work in his life, but when he retired he had no place to go.

Some just need the feeling of being a part of something, Spinale said. Taking away responsibilities that you have had your entire life can be hard for some people to grasp.

For many, schedules are what people become accustomed to, Spinale said. Taking away an everyday routine can limit motivation and interaction for those programmed to a certain lifestyle.

Nearly 200 volunteers help out at the Senior Center.

"There is no way we could do anything without our volunteers," office coordinator Arlene Just said. "We couldn't exist without them."

Volunteers help with everything from being part of the breakfast crew to teaching classes. Currently, most of the volunteers are also members of the center. Some members who are actively involved at the center also volunteer during the week to help with basic duties and tasks.

"Another reason I come to the center is because they have the best meal in the whole town," Smith said.

A hot, well-balanced lunch is provided by the Nutrition Project, one of the many programs offered at the center. Lunch is served from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday through
Friday, and is federally funded. The meal is provided on a donation basis of $2.50 for people over 60 and $4.25 for people under 60.

“Every day we begin getting really busy before lunch is served,” Robb said.

“Lunchtime is one of the more popular activities that people really enjoy.”

Shirley said she enjoys the food the center provides, but tends to not order the coffee after having several bad experiences.

“I have to give you a note of caution,” Shirley said. “Just don’t drink the coffee. I think it flows directly from the bathrooms.”

Meals are also delivered by the Meals on Wheels project, a service funded by the member’s fees. This service is available twice per week upon request by seniors who are homebound or recuperating.

The Whatcom County Council on Aging and the Parks and Recreation Department operate eight senior centers in Bellingham, Deming, Ferndale, Sumas, Lynden, Blaine, Everson and Point Roberts.

The Bellingham facility is part of the Whatcom County Parks system, which maintains the building and provides operational staff, management, maintenance and repair personnel. In addition, the center provides support staff through its fundraising efforts and membership fees. Membership dues are an annual $20 per person, and the center currently has approximately 1,200 members.

“Nothing is forced on you at the center,” McAtee said. “It’s a great way to get to know a lot of people.”

Tours and trips are offered through the center as well as the Tour Program of Whatcom County. Spinale said many seniors enjoy traveling but don’t always have someone to travel with.

The Whatcom County Senior Tour Program is a countywide program for all eight centers. Any member of the Whatcom County senior centers may make the trip.

The center offers guided day, overnight and even international extended tours. One recent tour, which Spinale helped guide, direct-

ed some seniors to Copper Canyon, Mexico. The tour group returned home from the 10-day trip Feb. 24.

“We want to promote seniors’ independence,” Robb said. “We want to help them lead happy and healthy lives.”

Health care for seniors is also provided through a wellness program. Services range from glaucoma screening to health-education lectures.

Spinale said the center is also about prevention and staying well.

“Falling is the No. 1 health hazard for senior citizens,” Spinale explained. “If you can improve your flexibility and balance, you will increase your bone density in your skeletal system and reduce the risk of injuries.”

All Whatcom County senior community centers have initiated a theme of “wellness” as a major focus. The Well Adult Program provides regular blood pressure and weight checks, in addition to other preventative health care screenings. The basic concept of “wellness” is to encourage those who want to make a positive impact on their body and life, Spinale said.

He recalled meeting an 88-year-old woman who taught him how to perform a leg press. She was definitely proud of her accomplishment and had benefited from the program, Spinale said.

“I was amazed at how much [weight] this lady was lifting,” he said. “I even felt challenged by the amount of weight she was lifting.”

Participants in the program are responsible for their personal health by getting exercise, eating right and enjoying social interaction, Spinale said.

“The motto at the center is that there are no strangers here, only friends you haven’t met,” Heykamp said.
For most people, a dog is a loving pet and companion, but for a blind person a dog can mean independence and safety. Suzanne DeSelms learns how Whatcom County residents train puppies to become guide dogs. Photos by Evan E. Parker.

Three years ago, 60-year-old Gary Burdette couldn't make it through a day without falling at least two or three times. A heart operation left him legally blind, and he was having trouble navigating through his daily life.

Burdette, an Everson resident, now travels all over Washington and across the country with relative ease. He said he owes his freedom and independence to a yellow Labrador retriever named Jabar.

"He's saved my life a number of times, probably more than I even know about," Burdette said, recalling a few times when he thought it was safe to cross the street. He would have been fatally wrong if Jabar hadn't held him back. Since getting the dog, Burdette only falls about twice each year.

"That's only when my male ego gets the best of me," he laughed.

Guide Dogs for the Blind Inc. trains dogs like Jabar for four to six months to learn how to guide blind people. But before the dogs start formal training, they have to learn the basics.

Bellingham resident Linda Knutzen, 52, leads 4-H members in a community service project raising puppies in Whatcom County for Guide Dogs. She currently has six puppies in her group, including her own puppy, 5-month-old Jennalee. Knutzen has led the group since 1994, though it was not her original intention.

"My daughter wanted to raise a dog when she was in high school," Knutzen said. "We applied for a puppy and the leader said she didn't want to do it anymore."

Knutzen said she then found herself in California for a month, taking classes on raising guide dog puppies in order to take over the program in Whatcom County. She didn't get started immediately because she had to have at least three puppies to start a group. Once enough people were interested, Guide Dogs shipped the puppies from the California campuses where potential guide dogs are bred.

After 14 to 17 months, the puppy raisers must return the dogs to the school for training as a guide dog. Knutzen said this part is much easier for the dogs than it is for the people.

"The [Labrador retriever] is the most successful breed because it is easy for
them to transfer love,” Knutzen said. “She could walk out of here with you and be just as happy.”

Though they love their dogs, Knutzen’s 4-H’ers have learned the hard way that guide dog puppies aren’t pets. Guide Dogs has strict rules about playing with the puppies. They aren’t permitted to fetch anything, ever. Knutzen explained that playing with balls, sticks or Frisbees teaches the dogs to obsess about chasing things.

A working guide dog must ignore every possible distraction, including flying objects, other dogs, birds, cats, small children with outstretched hands, food on the ground and loud noises like fireworks or gunshots. The puppies are permitted to play tug-of-war with a person, however, since it is a game blind people could play with their dogs.

Looking back, 11-year-old Lauren VanWingerden said she wished she’d been a little older before volunteering for the program. She’s been having difficulties keeping 5-month-old Laddy out of trouble.

While her mother was in the backyard, Laddy stood on his hind legs to reach the kitchen counter and quickly stole two tortillas while Lauren’s back was turned. She jerked his collar sharply, the only correction approved by Guide Dogs, and told him no. But when she turned her back again, Laddy made a dash for the remaining bits of food on the floor. Later, Laddy tried to take cheese right out of Lauren’s hand.

“I’m doing OK,” Lauren said. “But if I were older, he’d respect me more.”

Lauren’s mother, Lisa VanWingerden, agreed with her daughter. She said Laddy recognizes her as the alpha-female of the family, and doesn’t always listen to others.

“Usually when he takes advantage, it’s with the kids,” she said. “He knows who the vulnerable candidates are.”

Currently, Laddy remains at home with Lisa while Lauren is at school. Lauren attends Happy Valley Elementary in Bellingham, and has only been allowed to have Laddy at school for visits, not for class every day.

In some states, guide-dog puppies are legally allowed anywhere a working dog is allowed, but in Washington, this is not the case. Public schools do not necessarily allow the dogs, since they are not yet certified guides. It is left to the discretion of the principal, much to Knutzen’s chagrin.

“She’s doing the top community service anyone can do,” Knutzen said of Lauren VanWingerden. “She’s given a year of her life to train a dog that someone will need as a partner. It’s a lot better than donating some canned food.”
Lauren said she feels she's doing a good thing by volunteering her time to take care of Laddy. She said she wanted to do something to help, understanding that it would have been much easier to just get a regular dog. Everywhere she takes Laddy, people ask questions about him.

"I guess they just aren't used to seeing a dog in a mall," she said.

With Laddy, it takes twice as long to do anything, but Lauren has learned patience by taking the time to answer each person politely. Her mother has told her it's important to promote the program she has volunteered for. The most common question is: Is it hard to give up the puppies? Lauren quietly tells the person that this is her first guide-dog puppy, but she's definitely not looking forward to that part.

If Laddy doesn't make it through to be a guide dog, he will be offered back to the VanWingerdens first. Lauren has already asked her mother for permission to keep him should this happen. Lisa said they do plan to keep the dog, but this means they can't raise another puppy. The family already has a pet dog, and both Lauren and Lisa agree that three dogs can't share one house. For now, they are just trying to raise Laddy the best they can.

Once per week, Knutzen takes her group on scheduled outings to help the puppies get ready for the life they might soon be living. This week, the group is meeting at the mall, taking the bus to Dairy Queen, having a snack and walking back. The dogs must learn to behave in every imaginable situation, especially around traffic and large groups of people.

Not only do the dogs have to be comfortable in crowds, they have to learn to ignore exciting distractions like a floor sticky with ice cream or a small child reaching out her hand to pet the dog.

Knutzen said this is currently Jennalee's biggest problem. She licks any hand that reaches toward her, even though she knows this is not acceptable behavior. Knutzen admits she is partly to blame for the problem because she hesitates to correct Jennalee in public.

When a guide-dog puppy misbehaves, its owner is required to tug the dog's collar to correct the behavior. But Knutzen said she has found the correction frightens small children, who often think they have done something wrong to cause the dog to be punished.

Otherwise, Knutzen said she takes pride in Jennalee's progress.

"I can take her anywhere with confidence," she said. "She's smart and learning fast."

Jennalee is not fearful, aggressive, lazy or obsessed with balls and toys. These are all qualities that can get a dog dropped from guide school once they have been returned.

Also, a guide dog must always be in perfect health. Guide Dogs pays all the vet bills while the puppies are in training, as well as while they work as guides. The dogs must be checked frequently for diseases and for hip dysplasia. These problems are most common for larger dogs like retrievers and German shepherds, breeds that also make the best guides.

Overall, Knutzen said, only about 50 percent of the puppies make it through the program to become guide dogs. Last year, Guide Dogs gave away 342 dogs. The dogs are valued at $60,000 each because of the amount of money it would normally cost to train.

"I've got a perfect dog that does everything he's supposed to, but it's not because of anything I did. It's all because of the puppy raiser."

— Gary Burdette, guide dog owner
house and feed these dogs without the help of the volunteers and the company.

The dogs must learn other unusual habits, especially regarding the sensitive subject of "going potty." A guide dog is not allowed to go if it is working, or if it is still wearing its harness.

The puppies wear special green coats that designate them as guide dogs in training, and the same rules apply. The puppies must wait for their owners to remove the coats and give the "do your business" command; only then are they permitted to go.

Since the puppy raisers don't know where their puppy might live, the dogs are trained to use blacktop, instead of grass, to do their business.

Knutzen explained that if a puppy is permitted to use grass, it will never go anywhere else. This could pose a problem for a blind person in New York City, who has no idea where the nearest patch of grass might be.

Once the dogs are returned to Guide Dogs, they go through intensive training to become guides. They learn to navigate through busy streets, watch for traffic and practice "learned disobedience." If a blind owner instructs the dog to go forward, the dog must first decide if it is safe to do so before following the command.

"Basically, they have to be able to think," Knutzen said.

The dogs stop at every change in elevation, such as a curb or stairs. This lets the blind person find the step, and helps eliminate dangerous falls like the ones Burdette experienced. They also learn to look out for hanging awnings or anything else the blind person may run into.

All this sounds like quite an undertaking, especially looking at a mischievous puppy like Laddy. But statistically speaking, three of the dogs in Knutzen's group will become guides.

Stephanie McGreevy, 17, is almost done raising her second dog for her senior project at Lynden High School. She says giving up her first dog wasn't too hard because it was dropped from the program early.

"She was too nervous in public," McGreevy said. "But I'm not too worried this time."

McGreevy's new dog, a 15-month-old black Lab named Royana, is due back to school at the end of April. McGreevy said she's feeling much more confident about this dog because she has taken Royana with her everywhere. Since  

McGreevy attends classes at Whatcom Community College through the Running Start program, she hasn't had much trouble taking the dog to school. However, she did ask the class if it was OK to bring Royana.

More than anything, Knutzen stressed that as part of their training, these puppies should be permitted to go anywhere. She takes Jennaloo to the hospital, to appointments with her doctor and dentist and to lunch with her girlfriends.

Burdette proudly declared that Jabar has been places and done things that Burdette himself hasn't ever done. Jabar rode in a helicopter in Hawaii with his puppy raiser, in her quest to expose the dog to every possible environment or condition he might experience as a guide dog. Burdette said the puppy raisers don't get enough credit for the hard work they do.

"I've got a perfect dog that does everything he's supposed to, but it's not because of anything I did," Burdette said. "It's all because of the puppy raiser."

"She's doing the top community service anyone can do." — Linda Knutzen, on puppy raiser Lauren VanWingerden
Only 11 percent of teenage offenders are likely to re-offend after being sentenced at Teen Court in Whatcom County, according to a survey. Candace Nelson reveals the true meaning of being judged by a jury of peers.

Seventeen-year-old Jason Som waited at Whatcom County Courthouse wondering if the girl he was representing would show up for her sentencing. Approximately one week before the hearing, Som met with the girl, who was charged with shoplifting, to discuss her case. Later in the week, the girl's mother told Som that her daughter had run away.

Som is a junior at Timber Ridge High School in Bellingham. He is involved with Teen Court, a real Whatcom County court that sentences second-time teenage offenders.

"I think she got a sentence that fit her needs," Som said of the girl, who finally showed up for her sentencing. "[The sentence] was better than a real judge would give her."

That is the idea behind the program that began in 1998. Whatcom County was first in the state to have a Teen Court.

Maya Smith, an Options High School student, said Teen Court greatly benefits the community. She has seen offenders voluntarily write apology letters, and she believes they feel remorse for their actions and learn from Teen Court.

Teen offenders are less likely to re-offend after going to Teen Court. Only 11 percent of defendants re-offended, compared to 25 percent of teens who re-offended after being sentenced by a juvenile judge, according to a Teen Court survey.

Som's client was one of nearly 30 Whatcom County teens who pleaded guilty to a second misdemeanor and agreed to face a courtroom of fellow teens instead of a traditional judge.

"[Teen Court] puts people in touch with what they've done," said Sehome High School senior Mark Tull. "It holds people responsible by their peers."

Tull has been both an advocate and jury member in Teen Court. Teen Court meets the second Wednesday of each month to sentence four offenders. It is the second and often final step after their first offense.

"[Teen Court] holds people responsible by their peers."
— Mark Tull, Sehome High School senior

"[Offenders] find that they'd rather face their peers [than a judge]," said Cathy Beaty, program coordinator at Northwest Youth Services. NWYS is an organization that works with juvenile offenders and checks to make sure they have met the requirements of their sentence.

The first time a 9- to 17-year-old is arrested for a misdemeanor or gross misdemeanor, he or she is offered diversion. Diversion is a program in which juveniles are held accountable for their actions without going through the juvenile justice system in order to avoid having a criminal record.

A first-time offender goes before a community accountability board, a group of adults that sentences teen offenders. The board tends to give lighter sentences, one reason being that it is the offender's first offense.

After a second arrest, the teen has the option to plead guilty and face his or her peers in Teen Court.

Beaty meets with teen offenders and their parents to discuss the advantages of Teen Court. The biggest advantage is that Teen Court does not result in conviction, so the crime does not appear on a permanent record. And Teen Court is free, whereas the juvenile court fee is approximately $100.

"I think a lot [of offenders] take Teen Court to get their record expunged," Court Commissioner Charles Snyder said. "They think it is easier than real court — then they find out it's not."

Snyder helped launch the Teen Court program in Whatcom County.

Eighty-six percent of offenders do not re-offend after Teen Court. The few who do re-offend go on to the regular juvenile court to face a judge.

Som said he recommended a tougher sentence for his shoplifting client than the prosecutor did. The jury came up with a completely different sentence. Still, Som thinks his client benefited from Teen Court and got a fair hearing and sentence.
Defense advocates meet with their clients prior to the hearing to learn the events leading up to the incident and its circumstances, so they can present them in court. They also find out what the offender has done since the incident, such as having been punished at home, apologizing to the victim or making attempts to right the wrong.

After the presentation, both defense and prosecution give sentence recommendations to the jury members, keeping in mind that the offender has already pleaded guilty.

Community service is the most common sentence. Jurors can assign 20 to 100 hours. Jurors are given a list of possible sentences that include fines of less than $100, restitution and reimbursement to the victim-impact panels.

“I like being a juror,” Tull said. “I get to see everything about a case.”

Another common sentence is jury duty on an upcoming Teen Court hearing. In 2001-2002, however, 13 previous defendants voluntarily returned to Teen Court to serve as jury members, advocates and court clerks.

“[Participation] gives them a chance to get involved in something that is positive,” Snyder said.

Snyder said the teen offenders tend to react positively to receiving sentences from other teens. He said that sometimes juveniles see him as “just an out-of-touch adult,” so consequences from their peers have more impact on the offenders.

“[Offenders] are more willing to accept consequences from their peers,” Beaty said. She said some people thought the consequences were too harsh, but most thought they got fair hearings from Teen Court. Som said the girl he represented went on to be a juror. He said jury duty helps neutralize the tension the offender feels for the court.

“Even if they just come back one time, I think it helps,” he said. Students participate in Teen Court for a variety of reasons. Some are required to attend for school government classes, some attend to satisfy community service requirements and others choose to participate as an extracurricular activity.

Timber Ridge High School didn’t have a Teen Court program until last year, when Som’s teacher mentioned bringing the program to the school. Som said he was interested and began working to get other students involved.

Eleven Whatcom County high schools are currently running or are involved in Teen Court programs.

Each school has a faculty adviser who works as a liaison between NWYS and the students. Each school also has an attorney mentor from Whatcom County who volunteers to meet with the students and coach them before the hearing.

Options High School teacher Steve Hoffman helped pilot the program in 1998 when Options and Lynden High School were the only two schools involved.

“The kids really enjoy it,” he said. “They all want to prosecute; they don’t like to defend.”

Hoffman, who has a legal background, meets with his students every Friday to discuss upcoming cases. He often encourages teen advocates to convince the defendant to speak during the trial to show remorse.

The faculty advisers work with Beaty to provide information to the students. Informational packets include the offender’s police report and questionnaires filled out by the parents and teens.

Beaty also schedules judges for the night of Teen Court. Approximately 40 people are involved in each session.

The night consists of trials running in two courtrooms consecutively. Each school has different roles; for example, one school will provide jurors, another will provide attorneys and one will provide bailiffs and clerks.

“For anyone who participates, it’s an alarming experience,” Beaty said. “It’s seeing the justice system up close.”

She said the teens learn about the legal system and learn to respect the courts by removing hats and not chewing gum. They are also required to dress professionally.

Tull has been an advocate in cases for possession of less than 40 grams of marijuana, shoplifting and malicious mischief (e.g., graffiti charges). He said he has learned a lot from Teen Court and a career in law is a possibility in his future. He has received additional help preparing for court from his parents, who are both lawyers.

Tull said he has also learned to work and be productive with people of different backgrounds than his own. He said he feels as though he is helping people with his role in Teen Court, and hopes to be a judge in an upcoming trial.

The teen judge is a new position to Teen Court this year. Students must apply for the position. So far, only one teen has been a judge.

Som said although he has gained experience in public speaking, improved his people skills and become more comfortable in a courtroom, a career in law is unlikely in his future. But he thinks Teen Court has at least given him the opportunity to go into law if he ever changes his mind.

“[Teen Court] gave me a chance to make a difference in our county and community,” Som said. “I’ve never had a chance to do that before.”

Illustration by Kit Shaughnessy
Popcorn, candy and reduced admission for seniors may be the only similarity between blockbuster movie theaters and small, independent film theaters. Kristina Beall discovers the Pickford Cinema, a local movie theater that thrives off of independent films and community support.

Red velvet chairs with wooden armrests line the stairs. The matching velvet curtains turn the 1,100-square-foot room into a magical box. The lights begin to fade and the screen comes to life. A movie at Bellingham’s Pickford Cinema has just started.

Primarily a venue for independent, foreign and underground-released films, the Pickford Cinema, located on Cornwall Street, is the only independent film theater in Whatcom County. It allows local filmgoers an opportunity to experience films that are not normally seen in Bellingham. "To make a place truly livable, you need good art, music, literature and - by all that is holy - film," Pickford theater manager Michael Falter said. "I think film is the art form of the century."

The Pickford replaced the Grand Cinema in 1998. The previous owners had financial troubles and had to close the Grand Cinema after being open only a few months. Falter believes it is hard to keep an independent theater open if the main goal is to make money. A nonprofit business needs community support.

"It was a little cinema, struggling financially and about to close permanently," said Alice Clark, Whatcom Film Association executive director.

The owner of the Grand Cinema placed ads around the city looking for anyone who wanted to save the independent-film venue, and that is how Clark became involved. "I couldn’t handle the thought of only having a Regal Cinema. I need independent films," she said.

A group of 25 people interested in saving the independent-film venue responded to the ad and formed the Whatcom Film Association in 1998.

The WFA is a nonprofit arts organization that helps bring a range of films to the city. Documentaries, such as "Bowling for Columbine" or "Creek Story,” would never have public viewing in Bellingham if an independent theater like the Pickford was not around.

In spring of 1998, the WFA decided the best way to preserve a theater for independent films was to start from the beginning. The group restored the Grand Cinema and turned it into the Pickford. Today, the WFA has five staff members and 11 board members.

"I think we have added a lot to the downtown," Clark said. "People now have a reason to come downtown after 4 p.m." The success of the Pickford is a result of community support. Before it opened, the theater sold memberships for the WFA and the Pickford to raise money. Many people bought a membership without knowing if the theater would ever open. The desire to have an independent theater was so strong that some people just wanted to support it any way they could.

Today, the group has around 1,300 members. Since it has opened, the Pickford has worked to entertain the community with films, while educating and enlightening, Falter said. "Involving the community is what we’re all about," Falter said. "So we try to show films tailored for different groups, whether they are senior citizens, school groups or any other members of the community."

Finding a movie that best fits the community can be difficult. Falter travels to festivals around the country and in Canada to find films that will receive a good response. The members also give their input. If they see a film they want shown at the Pickford, Falter will listen to the requests and view the film to see if it is suitable for the community.

"It’s ideal to see them far in advance so you know how the audience will react," Falter said. "I don’t think you can pick a film before you see it first."

One of the Pickford’s most popular films recently was "Bowling for Columbine." The Michael Moore film was sold out almost every night. The film discusses America’s obsession with fear and the correlation of guns. It examines why Americans continually shoot each other because of fear.

During the run of "Bowling for Columbine," the Pickford had about 200 high school and junior high students view the film. The theater worked with local schools and had viewing for students during special matinees. Prices for the students were reduced from $7 to $2. The hope was that after the students saw the film, they would begin discussing issues that affect them, Falter said.

Melissa Logan, a Pickford regular, recently saw "Bowling for Columbine." She said she prefers the Pickford in com-
parison to other movie theaters.

"[The Pickford] plays really original films in a small, cozy atmosphere," Logan said. She said she would much rather see documentaries than mainstream films.

Clark echoes these thoughts, saying she believes children need to see other films besides mainstream and formulated movies.

"I hope that children will have a better appreciation for films," she said. "They need to see films besides the Disney movies."

Students, however, are not the only target audience for the Pickford. The venue also tries to involve senior citizens.

The theater has senior matinees when classic movies like "Casablanca," a 1942 classic with Humphrey Bogart, are shown.

Admission prices are reduced for seniors to $2.50.

Although the Pickford is frequented by film viewers of all ages, a main goal is to attract a larger audience. Falter said they are looking to relocate the 92-seat theater to a bigger venue on Bay Street, where more community members can attend the shows.

"Dialogue is critical, and has been difficult in our existing space to provide the forum for students or, for that matter, anyone interested in film, politics or human rights," Falter said. "One of our goals in moving to a new space is to provide a much larger concession area with tables and chairs for impromptu gatherings, and a third screening room that could be used for post-film discussions and meetings."

If the Pickford moves to the new location, it will have two screening rooms with approximately 175 seats in one room and 85 seats in the other. A third screening room, which would probably not have a 35mm projector but would have other media possibilities, would have approximately 20 seats.

Local filmmakers find that the Pickford provides a good opportunity for them to show their films. For the last three years the WFA has produced the Projections Film Festival, which gives local filmmakers a chance to screen their films.

Community members watch many of the films during the festival, and then the staff at the Pickford and WFA pick the films that will be shown at the Pickford based on how the community reacts.

Dan Hammill, a filmmaker and a former Western student, believes the Pickford strengthens the community by supporting an expressive culture and allowing individuals to express their views without censorship.

"Instead of major corporations having control of what we see, we have the control," he said.

At the Projections Film Festival in 2001, Hammill won best film for "Fabulous Bakettes," a film about two middle-aged go-go dancers. Having a film screened by the public is the goal of every filmmaker, even if it does not win, Hammill said.

"Projections provides an opportunity for filmmakers on no budget to have a venue to show their work," he said.

As a result of Projections, another festival started. Every year after Projections is over, the films that were not chosen to be screened at the Pickford are shown again at the Rejections Festival.

It is a great learning opportunity to have a film critiqued by people who are in the business, Hammill said.

The Projections Film Festival also gave birth to another organization, though not yet named, for filmmakers. A group of 45 to 60 independent filmmakers meet monthly to discuss films, build a society of filmmakers, give critiques and share equipment. Networking to share human resources and equipment allows some filmmakers, like Hammill, to start out in the business with nothing. Without even owning camera or film equipment, Hammill has been able to create about 12 films.

"When I first started going to [the Pickford], I would look at those films and say, 'That could be me; I could make that,'" Hammill said.

As Projections and the Pickford continue to grow and gain support, the filmmaking community in Bellingham grows with it. The independent-film scene is becoming more visual, Clark said.

In the future, Falter and Clark hope Bellingham becomes known for independent films by all filmmakers. Since Bellingham is between Seattle and Vancouver, Falter believes Bellingham is in the perfect place for a center of independent film.

"[The Pickford] not only shows movies, but builds a community as well," Clark said.
Homeless women and children in Whatcom County find the help they need to get back on their feet at Lydia Place. Betsy Anderson meets some of the residents at Lydia Place and discovers that, with the help and love of many volunteers, these women and their children have been given a second chance at life.

Photos by Evan E. Parker.

A tall, young woman wearing a pink bandana, a black tank top and brown pants danced joyfully around the dining room to “Daft Punk” tunes from a portable radio in the kitchen. She scraped freshly baked French toast and cinnamon apples into a plastic container. Shana (name changed), 23, came to Bellingham from a small town in Oregon on Jan. 18 with her 5-year-old son, Adam (name changed), just to visit some friends. She was scared and homeless, and wanted to start a better life for herself and her son.

She was not excited to return home to drug-dependent friends and a controlling family. After a few phone calls, she found an opening at a Bellingham women’s shelter and moved into her new home at Lydia Place within an hour.

Lydia Place is a nonprofit transitional housing facility governed by 15 volunteers who serve as the shelter’s board of directors. After the purchase of the house in 1989 by six women from Church Women United, homeless women and their children had a place to retreat to. The home has eight bedrooms and a maximum occupancy of 18.

“I didn’t even know Lydia Place existed,” Shana said, as she fed a hot bowl of spaghetti to her son. “I love it here. I get to learn everything I need to know at this place.”

She said her parents interfered with raising her son because they disapproved of her parenting and they would not allow her to be his sole guardian. She said she is glad she moved because she didn’t want to lean on and be influenced by her old friends any longer.

“I was sick and tired of seeing people’s lives deteriorate,” she said with confidence. “Nobody had their [lives] together, and I just knew that I had more ambition than the people around me.”
Ninety-five percent of Lydia Place residents come from domestic violence situations. The home requires a mandatory program for the residents, including life-skills classes, case management, a therapeutic children’s program and family advocacy group. The women don’t pay rent, but they are required to give 30 percent of their income per month to help fund program-service fees.

The shelter is a middle-class house with light blue, chipped paint and a chain-linked fence. On a late winter afternoon, one car filled the narrow driveway, and an old gray one was parked in the alley across the street. A woman peeked out the front window briefly and then disappeared. Up the concrete steps from the sidewalk is the porch, which has a white, rusted baby gate near the top. A sign outside the front door reads, “Lots of Love Inside.” A weathered wooden table with a hand-painted nautical star fills the space of the front porch.

The staff members at Lydia Place teach Shana and the other women exactly what they need to do in order to become self-sufficient. The workers also show the women how to access resources in town such as Brigid Collins, a family support agency, the Temporary Aid for Needy Families agency and Head Start, a preschool for 3- to 5-year-olds children who come from low-income families.

“They teach you everything you need to know to live on your own,” Shana said. “I knew I’ve always been way too intelligent to stay at home.”

One house rule forbids violence in the home. Staff and volunteers at Lydia Place believe violence is an unacceptable way to discipline children, and instead they urge mothers to use verbal communication.

Shana’s mom used violence as punishment when she was growing up, and Shana said she consequently learned to use it with her own child. But she repeatedly emphasized that she always hated to spank her son, Adam.

“Before I came here, I had to spank him to get his attention, but that isn’t allowed here,” she said. “I had to learn to connect with him on another level, but I have always wanted to do it this way. I want him to learn how to listen through reasoning.”

A few interns from Western Washington University work at Lydia Place each quarter. Interns like 22-year-old human service major Laura Edelstein can either work with children in a family-advocacy position or with mothers in case-management work.

Edelstein works as a family advocate 16 hours per week. She said she volunteered at Lydia place for about nine months, but she loved working with the children so much that she decided to intern during winter quarter. For now, she is shadowing and learning from other family-advocate interns who have been there longer; but spring quarter she will plan a children’s group and do one-on-one sessions with kids.

On this afternoon, she sat in a small child’s chair at one side of a table while 6-year-old resident, Kelsey [name changed], fed her a plate of pretend food.

Edelstein and Kelsey were positioned on one side of the downstairs playroom. A banner with yellow writing on a blue background speckled with white stars reads, “You never know
Teresa Josephson, the executive director of Lydia Place, looks out into the neighborhood with Adam, right, and another child at Lydia Place.

what you can do until you try.”

Across the room hung a chart about anger: “It’s OK to feel angry, BUT — Don’t hurt others, Don’t hurt yourself, Don’t hurt property — Do talk about it.”

Kelsey, who has been in the house for six months with her mom, was having one-on-one time with her 22-year-old advocate Lindsey Tomazin, a fourth-quarter intern at Lydia Place. Kelsey continued to hand plates of play-food to them. Edelstein was shadowing Tomazin while playing “restaurant” — observing her and learning the process of forming a close relationship with a child.

Edelstein will take part in a position like Tomazin’s spring quarter.

While mothers are in self-sufficiency classes with their case managers, their kids get “play therapy” from group interaction with their family advocates. Classes for women and children are on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. The sessions are divided between one-on-one time and group time.

“It’s a chance for the kids and mothers to build a relationship with somebody else and to begin having someone else to trust,” Edelstein said.

The tenacious 6-year-old rushed to a corner of the room and brought back her feelings chart she had made with her family advocate.

“It’s a chart I made for January. I got a sticker on each day I went to school,” Kelsey said with a proud smile.

Kelsey and her advocate made the chart together during a one-on-one session. Then she got to watch “The Jungle Book 2” as a reward for going to school every day.

Edelstein said that since she has been working with her advocate and other kids, Kelsey has been expressing herself more when she has strong feelings about something. Kelsey drew a picture of a sad face during one group session, on a feelings coloring sheet, expressing how disappointed she would be if she couldn’t find her lost toy or if a classmate teased her.

“Just getting to know the children and the residents, and forming relationships with them, is what I like,” Edelstein said. “I like knowing that the kids know I care about them, knowing they have someone they can trust.”

February was “trust-building” month and January was “communicating feelings” month. Edelstein explained that the kids participate in a repetitive six-month program where they are able to focus on and embrace important life-skills — including safety, family, trust-building, feelings, self-empowerment and coping skills.

Anita Mapes, 59, is the donation coordinator at Lydia Place and has been volunteering there for 11 years. She said she appreciates the friendly atmosphere the staff and volunteers provide.

“We’re a representative of hospitality,” Mapes said.

Lydia Place is currently home to seven moms and eight children. Mapes said she thinks the women are not ashamed, but simply glad to be at the home.
While Mapes sat in the volunteer office that afternoon, she explained how the volunteers and staff don’t work over the residents’ heads as if they are incapable people. But the staff and volunteers do provide a homey place for the women and children to live, and they offer advice to the residents on how they can live their lives comfortably, Mapes said.

“We might bake pies and cookies, read to the children, go shopping and help in the house-hunting process,” Mapes said.

One of Mapes’ friends, who was program director at Lydia Place 13 years ago when the shelter opened, invited her to come and volunteer at Lydia Place because she knew Mapes was interested in serving underprivileged women around Bellingham.

“I’m a combo of being a nurse and a civil rights advocate,” Mapes said. “I have always been helping people in the community.”

As donation coordinator, she was excited to find that Lydia Place receives donations from many community members. But, she added, the Wise Buys Thrift Store on Holly Street, a store specifically managed by volunteers to provide money for Lydia Place, do return donated men’s clothing and men’s golf clubs, items not of use to the women and children at Lydia Place.

“Knowing you’re helping somebody to get through a difficult time is worth it. We’re helping [the residents] to get back up and going so they can help someone else,” Mapes said. “I have a really strong feeling about the success of the program.”

Volunteer Helen Jacobson, 55, sat on a comfy, vintage recliner across from a blue-and-orange-flowered couch. Wheat-colored curtains lined the living room windows, half open to let the sun peek through.

Jacobson explained how she used to attend training at the confidential Women Care shelter, a 30- to 60-day emergency facility for women who are victims of domestic violence. She stopped going after she decided volunteering there would be too intense for her.

Jacobson learned about Lydia Place in September. She came shortly thereafter to volunteer. She said she really enjoys being someone the residents can talk to.

“I’ll come here and play with the kids. I like to be grandmother,” she said. “I’m here for a friendly face. Even when the moms are here I can play with their children and then they can do laundry or take a break and relax, and the child gets someone else to interact with.”

She said she doesn’t know what society thinks of homeless women, but she thinks the women at Lydia Place are great-spirited and inspiring.

“It’s like they’re getting it together,” Jacobson said.

She said if a woman needs a place to stay, Lydia Place is a nice and rewarding place to live.

“I feel like I’m making a difference. I got a whole lotta smiles to give away, and it’s not costing me a thing,” she said with a grin.

Edelstein said homelessness in Bellingham is a big problem, and residents at Lydia Place can gain skills for their new life outside of the transitional home.

Shana said since she and her son have been living at Lydia Place, her son has realized he is not the only child in the world and has learned to respect others.

“That’s what community living has done for us,” she said.
Ross Brackett is sick of Bellingham's lack of all-ages music venues. Brandon Ivey introduces this local 22-year-old who "gives a fuck" about making live music accessible to people of all ages.

Most 22-year-olds do not own property, most 22-year-olds do not publish journals and most 22-year-olds do not give a fuck about all-ages music. But Bellingham native Ross Brackett, 22, cared enough about all-ages music to form the Give a Fuck Coalition. The coalition publishes a journal documenting all-ages music in Bellingham. And just to make sure all-ages music has a permanent home, Brackett bought a church for that sole purpose.

The inspiration for GAF was a venue known as the Show Off Gallery. The Show Off was once the main place for all-ages music in Bellingham. All-ages means anybody is welcome, from 4-year-olds to 104-year-olds.

Located in Bellingham's industrial district, the warehouse-like structure with three makeshift bedrooms played host to shows—often four per week—until spring 2002.

The venue was forced to close so its owner, who also owned the boat store next door, could use the extra space for storage. Brackett said he heard the residents of the Show Off were actually evicted because of lack of upkeep to the building. The toilet stopped working and was never repaired. There was no shower. Walking across the floor meant stepping on empty beer cans. Cans also overflowed from a shopping cart that sat inside the building. These factors led to a constant smell of spoiled beer, body odor and toilet residue.

But no matter what the Show Off's condition was in the end, Brackett still...
Brackett wrote in the eulogy, a month after the Show Off's closing.

It might be hard to believe that a decomposing building saved Brackett's life, but don't judge a building by its odor; it was what happened inside that counted. It was there that Brackett, a self-described "dork," met others like himself - "geeks" and people who expressed themselves through art.

"There was an entire culture that celebrated the attributes of oddness, of honesty and of truth," Brackett said.

One of the people Brackett met at The Show Off was Matt Fuller, one of six people currently involved with GAF. Fuller, 25, lives in the church with Brackett. He also writes for the GAF journal and hosts "The Corner Pocket," a local Tuesday night music show on KUGS.

"The Show Off was one of the first places [Brackett] felt he fit in," Fuller said.

Brackett purchased the church on I Street in the summer of 2002 for $169,000. He said he bought the church as a way of replacing the Show Off with a legitimate venue.

Brackett described The Show Off as dank, filthy and cold. Even with that description, it was the place that inspired him to buy a church.

"The Show Off Gallery saved my life. And now I intend to return the favor," Brackett wrote in the eulogy to the Show Off, printed in the second issue of GAF's journal.

"This and the acts that followed were something completely different from anything I had seen before, and I knew that I wanted those bands, those people and that venue to become a big part of my life."

Brackett described The Show Off as dark, quickly arranged shows, Brackett said. "No place where it feels like you're safe and yet things could get out of control in a really amazing way."

The church is only part of GAF's plans for reinvigorating all-ages music in Bellingham. The GAF journal documents what Brackett feels strongly about.

"We want to create a better framework for the community. We'd like to exist and document it," Brackett said. "There's a lot of art being created that isn't as easily appreciable by standard meters — art that encourages people to create their own art — and that excites me."

Fuller said he is involved with GAF because of the positive influence he feels music has on kids.

"I'm sick of going to the mall and seeing 14-year-olds, bored, drinking Orange Juluses, when they could be at a rock show," Fuller said. "If a 14-year-old goes to a show he is more likely to ask his mom for a guitar."

Fuller believes a key element of awareness is getting young people involved in the all-ages-music scene.

"That's how you build a music community," Fuller said. "If you don't focus on the kids, it's fatalistic."

Fuller said people in the community care about all-ages music but have not done anything about it.

"It hit him [Brackett] the hardest that the Show Off wasn't going to happen," Fuller said. "Obviously. The guy bought a goddamn church."

Brackett is working diligently with the city to make sure his venue is legitimate. He said he does not want to operate without permits in fear of being shut down, and he hopes to host shows at the church by May.

Fuller said the city, not neighbors, is keeping GAF from putting on shows at the moment.

"It has nothing to do with neighbors' concerns," Fuller said. "Ross is so set on the city being unable to reject this concept that he is bowing down."

Fuller, who has booked numerous all-ages shows in the past for himself and friends, hopes to host weekly, all-ages open-mikes at the church shortly.
"An all-ages open-mike is fucking necessary in this town," Fuller said. "That's how you step into performing."

He said the open-mike would be like a discussion group where performers could become comfortable playing in front of a crowd, and they could get feedback from their peers.

"It will be like an open house for the church, with coffee and cookies," Fuller said.

The other project GAF is working on is the third issue of the GAFJ (the GAF journal). It should come out in spring 2003, about 10 months after the second issue.

Despite the enthusiasm, Fuller said he is not happy with the lack of activity from GAF recently.

"We haven't done anything," Fuller said. "It's three words, 'give a fuck,' and it's just empty to me right now."

Open-mikes and the journal should change that emptiness, Fuller feels, but he said GAF is not afraid to point out its shortcomings in their publication.

"We need to be in people's faces about how long it's taken," Fuller said. "[The journal will acknowledge that] we're sorry, we're supposedly this big advocacy group that's done nothing."

Fuller and Brackett are producing the GAF journal because they feel that Bellingham's other music publication, What's Up, does not focus enough on all-ages music. What's Up covers the Bellingham music scene and is published once a month.

"All of us [GAF] realize there's a lot of stuff going on around town and all What's Up is, is an inner clique of older Bellingham kids representing themselves," Fuller said.

"What's Up speaks for a small crowd, i.e., the 3B and Factory."

Brackett said he wants the GAF journal to provide a unique perspective on Bellingham music. The first journal was a parody of What's Up magazine. The second issue came out last year, with 20 pages full of varied subjects such as local music, an essay on bears and winning Pictionary drawings. The third issue will contain album reviews, show reviews, more essays and art.

"[The] What's Up [staff] are good people, but there's no competition to encourage or explore music that is not immediately applicable to their lives," Brackett said.

The Market Zeros, a band comprised mostly of high school students, was recently mentioned in What's Up.

Brad Lockhart, 17, plays in two bands, the Market Zeros and Black Eyes and Neck Ties. The Market Zeros are at the forefront of local all-ages music.

Lockhart estimates that the Market Zeros have played 60 shows in Whatcom County during the last two years. The shows, however, are not handed to the band; most are self-booked.

"We get shows in bars from people hearing us, and three-fourths of our band is still in high school, so sometimes we play at school," Lockhart said.

He said the Market Zeros play at the Rome Grange once a month. The Rome Grange is on the Mount Baker Highway, 15 miles east of Bellingham. Lockhart said the Grange costs $100 to rent for an evening. Boy Scout meetings, wedding receptions and square dances normally happen at the Grange, Lockhart said, but the owners of the Grange do not discriminate because he is in a band.

Like Brackett, Lockhart is proactive in producing all-ages music. Lockhart helped found the Revolution Room, an all-ages venue at The Breakwater Church in Bellingham.

On days when there were shows, Lockhart would work six hours straight for free, setting up gear and making sure everything went as planned. The Revolution Room is currently on hiatus as Lockhart and others reorganize. He said he and others are still working on producing Revolution Room shows and are currently looking downtown for a

"As soon as people take the focus off the bars, that's when all-ages music will get successful."

— Brad Lockhart, the Market Zeros
cheap building to rent.

“It could be a café or thrift store during the day and a venue at night,” Lockhart said. But he said problems arise when people do not consider experiencing something foreign solely because it’s unusual.

“Sometimes people think they’re too cool to go to shows,” Lockhart said. “People need to be willing to see new shows and not just be all about the downtown scene.”

Lockhart agrees with Brackett that Bellingham music consists of more than a couple of bars.

“As soon as people take the focus off the bars, that’s when all-ages music will get successful,” Lockhart said.

Music is the driving force behind Brackett’s and Fuller’s lives. Fuller said it is easy to understand why music is so important; every time he sees Brackett at a show it makes sense.

“He gets into the music,” Fuller said. “He is flailing and always has a big grin on his face.”

“There’s no place [in Bellingham] for weird, dark, quickly arranged shows. No place where it feels like you’re safe and yet things could get out of control in a really amazing way.”

—Ross Brackett, GAF founder

Lockhart said kids are sometimes apathetic about all-ages shows. He said the lack of alcohol causes indifference.

“It’s hard to get people to come out to shows when it’s not a party, when it’s only a show and there’s no drinking,” Lockhart said.

Brackett agrees that underage drinking and all-ages music do not mix. In his Show Off eulogy he equates the deterioration of the building with the venue’s lax alcohol policy. Fuller said the final days of the Show Off were even worse.

“The Show Off got really sketchy and scary towards the end,” Fuller said.

He said that along with underage drinking, hard drugs were commonplace.

Those attitudes are what Brackett is fighting against as he establishes the church’s legitimacy. Though motivated by music and journalism, Brackett said he would not be able to do normal work in those fields.

“I can’t see myself booking for a bar or writing for a newspaper,” Brackett said.

Brackett seems to be accomplishing his goals as the third GAFJ nears publication. While working with the city to make the church a legitimate venue, Brackett said he plans on finding other places in Bellingham to host shows.

**Missing out on the music...**

**Why Bellingham has few all-ages venues:**

- **The Show Off Gallery**
  closed due to owner’s need for extra storage/lack of upkeep

- **The Revolution Room**
  currently on hiatus as reorganizing takes place

- **The Pedal Project**
  fire code

- **The Norway Hall**
  expensive to book

- **The Rome Grange**
  still hosts shows, but in rural Whatcom County

Venues for Bellingham’s all-ages shows are limited. Local bands like Ein and the Data Dogs (bottom) and nationally known bands like the Catheters (top three) must play shows in houses if they want people under 21 to attend. Photos by Brandon Ivey.
Klispun is a Lummi word meaning beautiful sunset