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Editor’s Note

It’s tradition at Klipsun to use a theme for the second issue of the quarter. It gives the staff writers a stronger focus on their story because they have a specific set of boundaries given to them by the editors. We decided on the theme of “Youth Culture,” hoping for intimate portraits of what it’s like to be a young person in Whatcom County today.

This issue is particularly special, because every Klipsun reader has been young. We’ve all experienced being at awkward ages, trying to discover and establish identities, reaching goals and stumbling through hardships. My hope for you as a reader is that you will find a story in this issue that will remind you of your own youth, looking back at the journey that has led you to adulthood. For these kids, the journey has barely begun.

We hope you enjoy reading these stories as much as we did. If you have any questions, comments or story ideas please call us at (360) 650.3737 or e-mail us at klipsunwwu@hotmail.com.

Thanks for reading.

Kiko Sola

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Klipsun is a Lummi word meaning beautiful sunset.

Cover photos by Jennifer Holm.
John Maduta | would like to thank the Klipsun editorial staff for their help and patience. John also has successfully completed 4 out of 5 rehab programs in the last two years. He continues to struggle with internet gambling.

Lisa Mandt | graduated from Western with a degree in Journalism. She is working to become a cops reporter at a well-known newspaper. She wants to thank her boyfriend Scott Lefeber for encouraging her to always set her sights high and constantly work hard to achieve her goals.

Carl Weiseth | is a soon-to-be graduating senior with a major in Communications and a minor in Journalism. His love for Whatcom Falls inspired first inspired his story, but the amazing character and humor of the three Dudley brothers carried it through to completion.

Alaina Dunn | is a senior and will be attending graduate school in Flagstaff, Arizona next year. This is her second story in Klipsun. She would like to wish Robin the best of luck at UW next year!

Tosh's Island Life | Ailey Kato | is 22 and graduated with a Journalism minor in June. She was surprised at how well she could relate to 15-year-old boys for this story. Now she is worried about her maturity level.

On Her Own Terms | Christine Cameron | is a super senior majoring in Journalism and Public Relations. Christine would like to thank her parents for all of their love and support. She would also like to thank Brittany French for being so candid with her.

Modern Man | Niki Smith | is a senior Public Relations major. She wants to thank Mat Heggem for finding the time to talk and allowing her to sit in on his classes. She would also like to wish Mat good luck with his dance career.

Live Where You Learn | Peter Malcolm | is a Journalism major in his fifth year, thereby making him a super senior. He would like to thank the McAlisters for opening up their home to him and allowing him to dispell all his preconceived notions about homeschooled students. This is his second contribution to Klipsun.

Blue Collar Princess | Annie Billington | is a senior Public Relations major. She hopes Ashley Plagerman's passion and positive attitude inspires readers to discover life's pleasures. She would also like to thank Huizenga Livestock for the opportunity to feed baby calves.
For The Familiars, high school graduation takes back seat on the joy ride to the music business. John Maduta introduces four guys trying to become the next American anti-idols.

Photos by John Maduta.

THE SOUND OF a garage band for The Familiars lingers only in passion and not in degradation of their performance. Two live shows in Seattle, one at Zak's 5th Avenue Saloon, and one at The Showbox in the month of May, shows why these boys have what it truly takes to be rock stars. Of the band's four members three are still in high school and one a high-school dropout.

Late one evening standing under the dim glow of a city street lamp on a noisy street corner in downtown Seattle, The Familiars explain who they are, why they play punk rock, and why Fleetwood Mac is still badass. The Everett foursome informally defines themselves as a motley crew of misfits and degenerates bent on world domination. Well, maybe not that extreme, but the band does hope to make a little noise that will attract someone's attention, preferably a record label.

The band is not all over-the-top humor though. In a recent interview, guitarist Kevin Murphy, 17, says that he is elated because he received good marks on a report card. Murphy's lack of enthusiasm for general education does not seem to impair his well versed dialogue with fans, reporters and other band members. "We don't care about making anything original, because nothing is original. We don't look at punk rock as original. Punk rock has been around for thousands of years. It's just given a new name every generation," Murphy explains.

He says that the recent surge in what he calls "ego rock" is similar to bubblegum, made to be chewed and spit out — another flavor of the month. Murphy spends most of his time listening to records and hosting spaghetti parties; a mixture of pasta and Pink Floyd.

Drummer Jon Pontrello, 17, does just enough to get by in school as well. He admits that being young and doing what you already want to do in life cannot be compared to getting good news. He will be able to graduate this year despite previous premonitions a week earlier relating to his academic school life. Murphy, sporting a bedraggled beard and hairstyle reminiscent of a young Jerry Garcia, says he cannot wait to finish school so he can put more time into creating music. This is not an easy task, especially for Murphy.

"High school tries to mold your future for you, I want to mold my own, so I just do enough to get by," Murphy says.

"I hated the fact that I couldn't be inside listening to the other bands [because] I wasn't old enough,"

-drummer Jon Pontrello

shows no sign of worry when considering whether he will graduate high school next year. He reassures his self-confidence by explaining that his senior project will involve building a time machine — no joke. The dental braced, red afro and freckle faced Pontrello is all tongue-in-cheek, his bandmates say.

"I guess I do some weird stuff, for a while I used to answer the door naked when the pizza delivery man came, and this dude would always say, 'your like
the same guy from last week' which was fucking funny,” Pontrello says.

On the surface, Pontrello resembles an anthropomorphic version of Animal from The Muppet Show. Beneath the Carrot Top hairstyle lives a talented artist and wonderful entertainer. The good natured drummer laughingly recalls a time when he almost had the mortal shit beat out of him by a nightclub bouncer at a gig. Sneaking through an open back door, Pontrello says he ran into the 21 plus club and began yelling all sorts of undecipherable gibberish. He eventually ran into was the arms of a very displeased muscle necked bouncer. Pontrello says his knees were shaking after a few words in a nearby back alley with the big man. “I hated the fact that I couldn’t be inside listening to the other bands [because] I wasn’t old enough,” Pontrello explains.

Regardless, these circumstances seem to have no adverse effect on bassist Bobby Terreberry, 17. The solemn bass player just seems to enjoy the company he is in and lets others such as Murphy and Pontrello do the talking.

Terreberry’s quiet demeanor fits in well with the rest of the band, as he is sort of a George Harrison — the quiet Beatle. “I guess if I ever become famous I’d finally be able to jump in a swimming pool full of Jell-O, always wanted to do that,” Terreberry says.

From the intellectual guitarist to the wildman drummer to the benevolent bassist, one element of a punk rock band remains; the overly-dramatic lead singer. John Parks, a nineteen-year-old high school dropout fills this position.

Parks, like Murphy, is no dummy. The vocalist says he does not care for school, and that school much like any institution, is not for everybody. “I always wanted to go to film school,” Parks says and then declines to comment any further about furthering his education.

Reclusive offstage...
behavior masks Parks’ powerful onstage transformation. Much in the way of a Dr. Jekyll turning into Mr. Hyde, Parks flip-flops when the lights are lit and the microphones go hot.

Onstage, Parks’ performance is beyond mere words and comprehension, but usually involves stripping off articles of clothes and spastic dances and embolismic convulsions all the while never missing a single beat. All of which are genuine moves of a truly great musical entertainer sans the decapitated bat.

Despite their eccentricities, The Familiars find some way of piecing their talents together when the curtain goes up. Everyone in the band takes their place in this musical jig saw and for a half hour or so they remain connected.

Downtown Seattle’s Showbox, a night club known for several big name headliners, was just one instance when the right amount of musical talent was mixed in with just the right amount of booze. The aftermath of this mixture gave way to kudos from the attending crowd and small wad of dirty cash for the band. A week later at Zak’s 5th Avenue Saloon, a punk rock bar a hairbreadth from the space needle, The Familiars did themselves one better and proved that you do not need a marketable philosophy to be a successful band, their talents would simply prevail.

- THE SHOWBOX 9:00 p.m. -

The Green Room inside The Showbox theatre resembles a small urban coffeehouse; definitely not punk rock, just a simple rectangular room with lime green walls. It has a smoky atmosphere, but not to the point of discomfort; it’s poorly lit, but not gloomy. The stage is a single step box measuring no more than 6 feet back and 8 feet across; on top of which The Familiars have somehow magically set up a drum kit, and both bass and guitar amps.

An hour before show time, a thirty some capacity crowd begins to file into vinyl covered booths and around rickety wooden chairs and circular tables. The multitude anxiously waits with cigarettes lit and beers half drained. No sign of The Familiars as of yet, where could they be? The Showbox is a 21 and over venue and the underage Everett misfits are stuck behind a sliding cage door awaiting their cue. Back here The Familiars sip bottled water courtesy of The Showbox, surprisingly not glum about the impediments of being underage.

“These guys don’t even know how talented they are,” says Justin Hamacher, 23, lead guitarist for Biography of Ferns, another Seattle staple in the punk rock scene. He says this is the fifth or sixth time his band has played

"I guess if I ever become famous I’d finally be able to jump in a swimming pool full of Jell-O, always wanted to that” — bassist Bobby Terreberry
ing from moments earlier inside the Green Room. The band grins at her remark.

Parks is rambling to anyone who’ll listen, and midway into a sentence a man asks him for directions.

“He’s looking for an ice cream shop, hang on, I’ll be right back,” Parks says.

Everyone nods and the conversation turns to next weeks show at Zak’s. Murphy says that he has read in a newspaper that Zak’s is the last real punk bar in Seattle. Moments later Parks returns from his stint as a tour guide. He retreats into the arms of his girlfriend Alicia, both now silent and smoking cigarettes.

Near midnight the group begins to break up and the evening closes. The Familiars leave Seattle for their hometown of Everett. Murphy, Pontrello and Terreberry have class in the morning.

"High school tries to mold your future for you, I want to mold my own, so I just do enough to get by,”

-guitarist Kevin Murphy

"Man I hate school, goddamn what a bummer,” Pontrello says. Now, that is punk rock.

- ZAK’S FIFTH AVENUE 9:30 p.m. -

The street corner saloon known famously as Zak’s is shadowed by the Seattle Space Needle. This similarly cramped bar features The Familiars exactly one week after their performance at The Showbox. Like the Green Room, the stage is just as tiny, but the air twice as acrid.

Preparation for the band is much the same except that Parks begins to disrobe early. The crowd soon cheers for a complete strip down.

They want the full monty from Parks. The lead singer, feeling either self conscious or fearing a fine for indecent exposure stops short and dawns only a pair of spandex swim trunks for the entirety of the show.

The writhing on the floor during this performance is much more intense and much more stomach wrenching.

Between lyrics Parks stops to lick the beer laden floor, then rolls around the green and white checkered linoleum. Zak’s floor is anything but clean; it is a scuff marked mud and grime hovel.

The crowd loves the antics, but they also like the music. When Parks calls out to the sound man to check on time, he asks if one or two more songs would be okay. A voice from the crowd yells, “Do three,” and another voice in the distance bellows, “Do seven more!"

“I think they liked it,” Murphy says. The guitarist is not happy because his guitar went out during a song and a power cord was tripped during the set.

Pontrello is psyched as always and begins to fire out the words “like” and “dude” ten at a time. Terreberry quietly loads equipment with Murphy and Parks is sharing a cigarette with his girlfriend once again. Parks is still thick with grime from the filthy floor.

Murphy says his goodbyes and leaves hurriedly. He has a school presentation in the morning.

“Dude you guys were awesome, what can I say?” says newly turned fan Jason Sealy, 25. Sealy says he has worked at a record store much of his life and says he knows a good sound when he hears it. Sealy says between the indie/pop scene and the math metal (a term coined for weird time signatures and drop beats) scene in Seattle, it is hard to find a band that does the city justice. Sealy ranks The Familiars with other hometown favorites such as Mudhoney, The Catheters and Nirvana.

“One show down, several more to go,” Murphy says. Zak’s was a success for the Familiars, but not all shows compliment their talents. He recalls several gigs where their set was not up to par.

Murphy says he hopes people remember their good shows and hopes they forget the not so good ones.

The Familiars remain young and spirited despite pressures from parents and teachers encouraging them to mainstream their lives. Everett now has a crude punk band to call its own, and soon with a little luck riding on all their talents, The Familiars will prove all the naysayers wrong.

The Familiars say they could care less what the outside world thinks of their music; long hair and epileptic-like floor seizures.

The Familiars, simply put, are just a bunch of good old boys trying to pursue an elusive American dream in a way that was intended for them — trying to sell out shows while not selling out. That is definitely punk rock. X

Parks writhes on the beer stained floor during a set at Zak’s.
Katie Flannelly sits in the shade after her time riding horses at NorthWest Therapeutic Riding Center in Bellingham. Katie rides horses and swims every week.
Lisa Mandt reports on one 12-year-old athlete’s struggle and success of transcending the limitations of autism. Photos by Evan E. Parker.

"STROKE, stroke, stroke." Katie Flannelly’s swim coach yelled rhythmically from the inside of the pool at the Bellingham Holiday Inn Express as Katie began to sink slowly under the water.

"Keep going," swim coach Chris Porter said. Just then, Katie’s mom erupted from her seat shouting, “Come on honey, just a little further.”

With a pause, Katie poked her head out of the water, gave her mom a smile and finished her strokes to the other side of the pool.

After she climbed the ladder out of the strongly chlorinated pool, Katie headed toward the changing room; stopping along the way to gaze at the spinning ceiling fans with her big brown eyes and to trace the stenciled writing on the changing room door with her fingers.

For the past six months, Katie, a fifth grader, has been feeling the lettering on every door she enters and exits, mother Debbie Dean-Flannelly said. She attributes this to Katie’s increased awareness for words.

Katie, 12, suffers from autism, a lifelong developmental disability that usually appears within the first three years of life. Autism generally impairs cognitive and social abilities, causing children to act in ways that are thought to be socially inappropriate.

But Debbie has taken steps to ensure her daughter has the best chance at a normal life. While more than half the people with autism cannot speak, Katie has learned to verbalize her desires by participating in athletics and speech therapy.

Katie can only speak three to five words at once. Debbie said people assume that because Katie is autistic that she has special skills, such as knowing complex mathematical equations or having heightened senses, but that assumption is wrong. In reality, only 15 to 20 percent of autistic people have an amazing skill, Debbie said.

"Someone said there was a fine line between autism and genius — my daughter has both."

— Debbie Dean-Flannelly

At first, Katie’s inability to understand directions and execute commands made Porter’s job very difficult.

"When I first started working with her, she wouldn’t swim on her own," Porter said. "I would have to hold her all the time, and she was just dog paddling."

After five years of training, Katie went from hardly understanding the command to swim to understanding verbalized instructions such as, "Swim two laps in freestyle," Porter said.

On April 27, Katie took the gold medal for 15-meter freestyle and the silver in the 15-meter backstroke at the Special Olympics in Marysville. These medals earned her a spot in the state Special Olympics on May 30, 31 and June 1 at the Federal Way Aquatic Center. She took the bronze medal in the 15-meter freestyle at state. Katie is one of 10 Whatcom County residents who qualified for the Special Olympics.

"She likes to swim and race, but she doesn’t like to go up and get the medals," Debbie said. "So, normally the coaches get the medals for her."

This is the second time Katie has placed in the Special Olympics. Last year, she received the gold medal in freestyle, but was not selected as a state contestant.

"As she matures she just gets better and better," Porter said. After her practices, Katie is often...
rewards with either a trip to Taco Bell or Dairy Queen, her two favorite restaurants. Today she wanted ice-cream.

As Katie entered Dairy Queen, she traced all the letters on the front door, “Welcome to Dairy Queen.” Then, as she approached the counter to order, her mom handed her $2 and allowed her to order the ice cream of her choice.

After some encouragement to tell the cashier what she wanted, Katie looked out the side of her eyes for her mother’s approval and said, “Vanilla ice cream” in a quick and choppy voice.

The cashier said to her, “That will be $1.25,” Katie slowly reached for the money her mom had just given her and gave the man $1. Debbie leaned in and said, “Honey, it is a $1.25,” and with a bit of hesitation Katie gave the cashier her final dollar.

“I try to let her be as independent as I can,” Debbie said. “It is just small things like this that help her learn to make change.”

Katie does not have a lot of sensation in her mouth, Debbie said. Because of this numb feeling, Katie loves cold foods. The cold feeling stimulates her mouth.

As she sat in the booth at the Dairy Queen, she quickly ate her ice cream, leaving remnants of the vanilla on her face. As soon as she finished, she perked up and said, “Want to go.”

“Just a minute,” Debbie said, and Katie became antsy.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” Katie said as she strolled off to the bathroom alone.

This is a typical cue Katie gives when she is ready to go home. She returned after a few minutes, and stood in the middle of the Dairy Queen walking in circles to indicate it was time to go.

In addition to swimming, Katie also rides horses twice a week at the Northwest Therapeutic Riding Center. Debbie got Katie involved with horse riding because it was an activity that Katie could carry on into her adult life. Katie was hesitant to articulate her thoughts when asked which sport she liked better. She began shifting her head from side to side, looking out the window as if to avoid the question. When Katie turned her head back, she grabbed her hair, fluttered her eyelids and finally said, “Horses.”

Debbie said she tries her hardest to keep Katie in as many activities as possible to give her the best opportunity to excel in a regular environment and also to keep her entertained.

Katie stood in her kitchen chanting to her mom, “Go, want to go.” Just then, Debbie leaned over and said, “She always wants to keep herself busy.”

For this reason, Katie participates in swimming practice two days a week, horse riding two days a week, physical therapy once a week and is tutored five days a week in the Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) program.

“Katie needs to be with typical peers to work on her social skills,” Debbie said, “so she can get a chance to practice her skills in an everyday environment (meaning children without disabilities).”

Katie began showing symptoms of autism when she was about 1 year old, after she received her measles, mumps and rubella shots. She stopped learning and developed new habits such as putting all her toys in a row, Debbie said.

“It was as though the nine or 10 words she knew went away, and all she was left with was, “Go,” Debbie said. The ABA tutoring Katie receives is an intense program that assists with her motor skills. This is a time-consuming process and Katie’s mother cannot take all the responsibility of teaching these skills. Debbie hires Western students in the special education and psychology departments to work with her.

Katie has been enrolled in the program since she was 4 years old.

When Katie’s mom asks her questions, Katie acknowledges her by slowly tipping her head in her mother’s direction while simultaneously rubbing her face. Then, after a few seconds pass, Katie responds in a quick voice with her words not exceeding four letters. However, if a stranger asks Katie a question, she squints her eyes, twirls her hair and contemplates whether to respond.

It is this behavior that ABA hopes to correct.

“Non-response is not an option in this program,” Debbie said with determination. “She will respond to me.”

While Katie sometimes does not respond to strangers, she always responds to her mother.

“Katie lets play avalanche (a kids game),” Debbie said from the windowsill in the living room. Katie was dressed in a tee shirt, sweat pants and tennis shoes, completely looking the part of the athlete she aspires to be, walked over to her mother and said, “I go first.”

Katie quickly began to set up the game, pausing a few times to watch the people and the birds traveling through the neighborhood. Katie’s younger sister Kelly, 9, who does not suffer from autism, sat at the table doing her spelling homework, unable to play until she finished.

After approximately 10 minutes, Katie got bored of the game and sat up and said with an unwavering demeanor, “I’m done.” Then she carefully put everything back into its correct spot and began to set up her favorite game—marbles.

Katie built a huge marble maze with green, blue, red and yellow tubes.
stretching in every direction, but the mood was not quite right. Her mother leaned over and whispered, “Katie, do you want to listen to your favorite song?” Katie said nothing, just nodded her head.

Suddenly, the radio, positioned just in front of Katie’s marble maze, began to blare the song, “Don’t worry be happy,” as Katie sat criss-crossed on the floor dropping marbles into the maze and happily bopping her head to her favorite melody.

Katie and Kelly have lived with their mom since their parents divorced. The two children spend a few hours a week with their father, a firefighter in Bellingham. Debbie works three-quarters time as an emergency room nurse at Cascade Valley Hospital in Arlington. Debbie’s job requires her to have a live-in babysitter to take care of Katie and Kelly.

With all the extra helpers and activities Katie is involved in, her mother said everyday life gets costly.

“It is expensive. But it would be more expensive if I didn’t do anything,” Debbie said. She added that Katie would not be able to function as well as she does now if not for the programs.

“I know I did everything I could to give her the best chance at a normal life,” she said. “It is for my own peace of mind.

Katie attended classes in a self-contained classroom for a few years, Debbie said, but with cooperation from the Bellingham School district, Katie was able to get into a regular classroom. She now attends school at Silver Beach Elementary and unlike most of her peers, Katie is accompanied by two teaching assistants. Before Katie came to the school, her mother passed around a notebook that the children could read and look at to better understand Katie’s situation.

So far, the transition into the classroom setting has been successful. She is the first child with her level of disability allowed into a regular classroom, Debbie said.

“The kids really like Katie,” Debbie said, “but it is more of a little sister thing than a friend thing.”

Katie does not possess a lot of the distracting behaviors of a typical autistic child, like banging her head against the wall or screaming for no reason. Her mother said Katie just tends to take little habits that people do on a regular basis, such as twisting hair or biting nails, to the extreme.

If Katie becomes frustrated for any reason, a puzzled look engulfs her face as she begins twisting her brown locks into a tangle it takes her mother a long time to brush out the twists. This could happen during swim practice or school.

Katie has been slowly internalizing cues from either her mother, therapists or movies to help remind herself what to do and what not to do, Debbie said.

When Katie walked into the kitchen to put her dirty dish into the sink, she took a detour to the stove to slowly rub her fingers over the burners. After a few seconds, Katie slowly lifted her hand from the stove and said to herself, “Don’t touch stove. Hot.”

Debbie said she knew not to touch the stove because of an episode on the children’s television show “Barney.”

While Katie suffers from a moderate case of autism, she still manages to participate in everyday activities because of her mothers unrelenting effort to give her the best chance at a normal life.

Debbie said she has her own dreams for Katie.

“I want her to have a real job,” Debbie said, “not working at McDonalds forever. I want her to live in a duplex with a care-provider on the other side. I want her to have a retirement fund and benefits.”
Anthony Dudley, 15, leaps from a cliff at Whatcom Falls Park in Bellingham on a hot spring afternoon. Dudley and his two brothers spend as much time at the falls as possible during the summer months.

With two disabled parents the Dudley triplets juggle house chores, homeschooling and lazy days at Whatcom Falls. Carl Weiseth follows the brothers through their daily adventures. Photos by Evan E. Parker.

SUNLIGHT PIERCES THE freshly budding forest, as a boy’s shout echoes through the rumbling waterfall. Between a wall of rainbows cast by the falling water’s rising mist, the fearless youth catapults from the 30-foot sandstone cliff, narrowly clearing the jagged rocks, as he gracefully cuts through the surface of a deep pool at the base of Whatcom Falls.

He surfaces to the cheers of onlookers hooting their approval at his daring leap and swims from the icy mouth of the waterfall to the muddy warm shallows. Hauling his lean body from the water and shaking his short brown hair, the 15-year-old boy glances up the steep face just in time to see his own mirror image plummet into the frigid lagoon, immediately followed by another laughing duplicate.

“Damn, this shit is cold,” yells Anthony Dudley, the last of
the nearly identical triplets to pierce the water. "My balls are freezing."

Soon Levi, Nathan and Anthony are darting up the slippery rock path leading back to the launch point. Shivering from the snow-melt stream, the triplets race barefoot through the shade in anticipation of the warm sunlight ahead.

"We don't really like to compare each other, but I know everyone else does," Levi says. "They'd say I'm too skinny, Nathan is all cool and Anthony is buff. It usually just circulates."

Anthony, the most reserved of the three brothers, further elaborates on the unique qualities of each sibling, his blue lips quivering from the cold.

"Levi, he's kinda the cocky one who likes to mess with people and Nathan, he just likes to fight a lot," Anthony says with obvious brotherly pride. "Anyone messes with him, he fucks them up."

Once atop the cliff, the brothers perch upon the warm rocks and aimlessly chat in the crude manner typical of most 15-year-olds. They joke about girls, rap music, cars, fights — all the subjects closest to a teenage boys heart.

"Tupac is the best rapper ever," Levi says without once shifting his eyes from a blond emerging from the water. "You know nobody today even competes man. He had the best lyrics, the best voice and he was a real gangster. He didn't have to pretend."

Moments later, the laughing brothers are rapping Tupac lyrics, and all three are trying to improvise free-style lyrics of their own. They bounce their muddy toes against the smooth rock, keeping a beat for their words to accompany, until the warm sun draws them back to the drop-off for another jump.

Despite the brother's seeming fearlessness on the steep cliffs surrounding the rushing water, Anthony admits that they were scared of dropping the falls when they first began coming.

"We don't get scared of the jump much anymore, but we used to," Anthony says. "I haven't been here in a while, so it is still a little scary, but I already jumped off a couple times today. What really scares the hell out of me is the cold water."

Nathan says the three brothers have been coming to Whatcom Falls since last summer when their 20-year-old half-brother Phillip Gierman first brought them to the Bellingham park from their rural home in Blaine. He says that once the weather starts getting sunny, they make the 30-minute drive to the falls about twice a week with Gierman.

"We come out here all the time during the summer," Anthony says. "My brother has to work at night and we can't drive, but we come out here in the afternoon when its sunny and just hang out for a couple hours."

Soon Gierman needs to begin heading home for work, so the triplets collect their clothes and begin walking down the gravel trail leading back to the parking lot.

After driving back to Blaine in their brother's $200 1984 Toyota Tercel, the brothers pull into the dirt driveway of their century-old home, surrounded by fields and woods. A large shaggy dog, a goat and three chickens wandering near a bin of old auto parts greet the boys as they pile out of the car, still damp from their afternoon escapades.

Though the close-knit triplets seem at first glance to be poster-children for a generation of irresponsible youth — in this case, first impressions couldn't be further from the truth.

Their mother greeting them at the door suffers from chronic fatigue immunodisfunction syndrome, a debilitation which greatly limits her activities and energy. Their stepfather, considered by all three brothers to be their true father figure, also has a workplace induced disability. After years of lifting and throwing wood, he developed severe carpal tunnel syndrome and tendonitis and has had recent wrist surgeries, preventing him from using his hands too much.

"We have to do most of the physical stuff around here because my mom gets really tired if she has to do much, and my dad has hurt arms from work," Anthony says. "It's not a big deal though, I mean, they've been providing for us for our whole lives."

With three 15-year-old boys doing laundry, cleaning the house, taking care of garbage and chopping wood to heat their home, it seems likely the triplets house would be a mess. But in reality, their home is far cleaner than most. The kitchen is spotless, with shining counters and clean dishes in the cupboards. Their living room is equally tidy with spotless hardwood floors, clean tables, and every item neatly sitting in its place. Even the bedroom the three brothers share is remarkably tidy — their beds made, model cars parked in even rows on the window-sill and drawings neatly pinned along the walls.

"I'm a little bit obsessive compulsive about keeping stuff clean," Levi says as he scrubs at a tiny stain on the otherwise unblemished kitchen counter top. "We all keep things pretty clean around here. It really bugs me if they're not."

Susanna Tolar, their mother, says the triplets are incredibly supportive of her, taking care of the many menial motherly tasks that would quickly tire her out.

"The boys help tremendously with the cleaning and organizing around the house, which helps me a lot because I..."
have physical disabilities and I can’t do so much,” Tolar says with a smile of gratitude. “But when they put things away, I sometimes have to go on a treasure hunt because I can’t figure out where they put certain items.”

Nathan says the brothers don’t really mind having to do extra work around the house. Although he admits it isn’t always fun, a strong sense of family keeps the brothers united in their efforts to keep the house orderly.

“I guess there are some times when it kinda sucks, but there are a lot of things around the house that just have to get done each day, and we’re the only ones who can really do them I guess,” Nathan says nonchalantly.

Tolar says she doesn’t mind her sons jumping from the cliffs surrounding Whatcom Falls, and like any mother, she emphasizes the importance of safety and caution when climbing around the rocks. The triplets have taken Tolar to the falls before, and she has seen the large drop between the cliff’s peak and the rushing water, but she isn’t worried — her sons have been jumping cliffs since they were ten years old.

“Around 5 years ago, when we lived out in South Dakota, there was a place there called Jenny Gulch,” Tolar says. “Their older brother slowly got them jumping the cliffs into the water there. Gradually he had them jumping off the five-foot, and then moving up to the ten-foot cliff, and by the end of the day he had them jumping off these cliffs from about 20 feet up.”

Despite her disability, Tolar has home-schooled the triplets their entire lives. She feels that avoiding public school allows for more flexibility in learning and lets her sons be more physically active and creative than they could be in a classroom.

“You do get to do things a little different, like, a little bit more your own style,” Nathan says, glancing up at several drawings pinned to their green bedroom wall. “Like this art, that’s all from home-schooling when we were younger. For most kids, they were just drawing some triangles or a house or something, but we get to draw some trucks and put together models. Most kids aren’t doing that at school.”

Though they spend fewer hours doing school work than teenagers in public school, the brothers do have complaints about the social isolation of homeschooling in a rural area like Blaine.

“It kinda sucks because you don’t get to be all popular and stuff,” Levi says. “You don’t really meet as many people, especially girls, but that’s part of why going to Whatcom Falls is so cool. We always meet kids down there, especially when there’s lots of people there in the summer.”

Another complaint the triplets share is their inability to earn any money while living so far away from any major city or neighborhoods. Gierman, their older brother, is quick to point out the disadvantages his brothers suffer living “out in the boonies” on 40 acres of woods and grassland.

“There is no opportunity out here for them,” Gierman says sympathetically. “When I was younger I self employed myself mowing lawns, and having that extra cash in your pocket is awesome. But out here in the woods, what are you supposed to do?”

Nathan quickly answers the question with a classic adoles-
cent hillbilly impersonation which starts all four brothers laughing.

“You sit around and chew tobacco and spit in a bucket, then you call your goat over here and you screw it,” Nathan jokes.

Though living in the isolation of the woods may sometimes bother the three brothers, their distance from the city presents the opportunity for pleasures denied most urban youth. As they pile into Gierman’s four-wheel-drive Toyota, the brothers smirk in anticipation of the car ride ahead. Gierman starts the car with a screwdriver — the key doesn’t work and the ignition system is disassembled — then cranks up the Tupac as he pulls out of the driveway.

After flying down Blaine’s back roads for five minutes, they pull onto a thin, unmarked gravel road towards a field of mobile home debris and random pieces of rusting metal. Gierman downshifts, revs the whining engine, then peels out, sending a cascade of gravel flying from behind the car. As the triplets yell encouragement, Gierman fishtails the beat-up car through a maze of potholes, rusty appliances, and thick bushes.

“Don’t break your transmission line again,” Levi yells from the backseat.

As the car reaches 30 mph, Gierman pilots it towards a hump in the ground. The triplet’s heads nearly hit the roof of the car as the entire automobile rises from the ground, then crashes back down with a teeth-jarring thud. Suddenly Gierman cranks the wheel to the left and the car crashes through a six foot wall of scotch broom bushes. Gierman stumps on the gas although he can’t see further than his front bumper, and the car plows a path amidst the thick brush scraping against the windshield and windows. All three Dudley brothers triumphantly shout as Gierman’s car emerges from the bushes covered in yellow flower petals and scotch broom branches.

After Gierman skillfully maneuvers the vehicle through two high-speed laps across the grass, gravel and mud, the brothers quickly exit the car and inspect it for damage.

“I thought I heard something break on that last turn,” Nathan says as he peers under the front bumper.

“Don’t worry man,” Gierman assures him after a brief survey of the car. “I didn’t mess anything up this time. This baby is tough.”

After their 20 minute outing, the brothers return home to kill time before dinner. They take off their shoes before entering the back door, then flip through auto magazines and discuss plans to customize their future cars once they are able to drive. Anthony plucks out tune after tune on an old guitar which has only four of its six strings remaining. He is amazingly good for having taught himself, and is able to play many popular songs just by sounding them out.

At home, the triplets are well-behaved, loving and supportive of their parents and brother. They are far more appreciative of their family than most teens, and seem to truly empathize with the hard work and effort both their parents have put into providing for them.

“Even though Jerry might not be our biological father, he’s the only one who was there for us, and made sure we had food and a house and stuff,” Levi says. “What did our other father ever do? He stopped sending child support, he stopped writing us, he stopped calling us. He isn’t even worth our time.”

Anthony’s disgust with their biological father is a little more poignant.

“If I ever saw him, I’d probably kick his ass,” Anthony says in a tone that indicates the seriousness of his threat. Though the triplets can be somber and thoughtful in certain situations, their mother confirms that they often have a difficult time reigning in their natural playfulness and energetic personalities. For these rambunctious brothers, trips to Whatcom Falls provides an outlet for pent up energy and adrenaline away from the monotony of housework and home schooling.

“It’s just really good to get out somewhere different, and hang out with other kids,” Nathan says. “We spend a lot of time just playing in our woods or hanging out at home, so it’s cool when we take a trip into Bellingham on a sunny day.”

To the Dudley brothers, the falls represents more than just an entertaining swimming hole. It is a place to meet new people, partake in teen rebellion and even try and meet girls. For triplets with a social sphere limited by home schooling and the location of their rural house, Whatcom Falls is a place to expand their horizons, even if it is a long drive away.

“It’s a little bit of a pain to drive out here,” Levi says as he scopes two cute girls climbing out of the water. “But it’s always worth it. When the sun is out, it’s pretty hard not to have a good time at the falls.”

Rushing water flows over Nathan as he waits in a pocket of water at Whatcom Falls.
a question of faith

Alaina Dunn follows a Jewish girl as she finds her roots, explores her faith and searches for camaraderie. Photos by Jennifer Holm.

The girl isn't sure she believes in God. This Jewish girl. This girl who’s learning Hebrew for a bat mitzvah and fasts all day in observance of Rosh Hashana. This girl with a 4.0 who is president of her synagogue’s youth group. This is the girl who isn’t sure she believes in God.

It’s a contradiction, perhaps, but one that she, Robin Crookall, is not concerned with. At 18, Crookall is like most high school seniors. She’s got mad senioritis and lots of homework to get through before graduation. She’s got a boyfriend named Ty who won’t be joining her at the University of Washington next year because he’s still got another year of high school.

The fact that she debates the existence of God does not seem especially unusual to her—it’s one of the things she loves the most about being Jewish.

“I love the Jewish nature to discuss and never be satisfied with the right answer,” she said. “You always have to go further and ask more questions, and I like that because I’m not one for straightforward answers. I want to know why and when.”

It was her confirmation class, she said, that made her love the reformed Jewish culture. She and her classmates learned about other religions, as well as the traditions of their own. Each student was pushed to discover what he or she truly believed, Crookall said.

“Our synagogue is really comforting and really helped me discover who I am and what I believe on my own, while still being Jewish, and still believing in the people and the traditions,” she said.

For Crookall, believing in God and subscribing to the Jewish religion are not mutually exclusive. She’s drawn to the traditions, she said, and the values she has learned, such as acceptance, openness, and an appreciation for other religions.

“Even though I might not consider myself one who believes in a higher power, I still believe in the religion,” she said. “I love the culture and the rich heritage of the Jewish people. I love the traditions. I love the holidays.”

Her family has been the most important force in her life. It has been her center of worship, as she has never lived in a community with a large Jewish population. She grew up in Yakima, and moved to the Bellingham area with her parents when she was quite young.

Because her mother is Jewish and her father is Christian, Crookall’s parents originally intended to raise her as both a Christian and a Jew. As time passed, however, her mother concluded that she would get enough Christianity from everyday life and decided to raise her as a Jew. She started attending Sunday school in Yakima, but when she relocated to Bellingham she did not continue her classes until the seventh grade. At that point, the class was beginning to study the Holocaust. Her mother encouraged her to attend, but did not demand it.

“It was never forced upon me to go,” she said. “It was always on my own and I think that really helped.”

Her father, whom she describes as non-religious, accompanied the family to services and celebrated the holidays with them. The family also celebrated Easter and Christmas because he enjoyed the traditions. The Christmas tree became affectionately known as the “Hanukkah bush.”

“I was never confused,” she said. “I always just thought, ‘oh, we’re the Jewish family and we celebrate Christmas because my dad likes the holiday and it’s fun.’”

Crookall said that outside of the home, her Jewish identity has always made her stand out. Bellingham’s small Jewish population has meant that she and her friend Ariel are often the only two Jewish students in their classes.

“At my school I can probably count on my fingers how many Jewish kids there are, and I know all of them,” she said. “In a way, it’s always been part of my uniqueness.”

Her uniqueness is shared by a handful of other Jewish students who make up her youth group, People Here At Temple, or PHAT. This will be her last year in the group, having held the positions of freshman representative, secretary, treasurer and her current position of president.

“I love the youth group,” Crookall said. “And I like that we try to have something for the few Jewish kids that are in town. It’s nice to get together with Jewish kids. There aren’t a lot of them.”

However, a large population of Jewish kids exists in Seattle, though. Crookall has been attending events hosted by the Northwest branch of the National Federation of Temple Youths (NFTY) since her freshman year. It’s a nice change from the “tiny town” she’s used to, she said, and she’s always a little jealous of Seattle’s bigger population.

“Those are the funnest things to go to because there are like 80 Jewish kids there and that’s like the most Jewish kids I’ve ever seen in my entire life,” she said.

It’s hard, she said, because so many of her close friends are...
"hardcore Christians." Most of them go to church together on Sunday, and Crookall can’t help but want the same camaraderie.

“I sometimes wish I had a community like that where I could call up five of my friends and say, ‘Hey, do you want to go to synagogue with me on Friday night?’” she said. “Instead I have like, two.

The NFTY group has helped though, and she tries hard to encourage the members of her own youth group to attend as well.

“It really helped me, going to my first event freshman year and seeing all those Jewish kids and being able to connect with them and seeing that they weren’t afraid to be Jewish and have that be ok,” she said.

Sometimes, though, Crookall’s uniqueness can become tokenism. During the holiday season this year, several people in Robin’s school wanted to have a Christmas-themed door-decorating event. One of her teachers approached Robin and her friend Ariel and asked the two if they had any objections. Robin said she and her friend were taken aback by the question.

“We were like, ‘Well, we’re not the only two people in school who don’t celebrate Christmas’, ” she said. “There’s Muslims and Sheiks and there’s other people in school beside us. She was asking for our permission and we said we couldn’t speak for the other Jews in the school. We didn’t really care, but we’re pretty liberal on that subject.”

Liberal or not, some of Crookall’s experiences have been harder to brush off. A few of her ardently Christian friends have told her they feel sorry for her because they believe she is going to hell. Her most painful experience involved her best friend.

“She said, ‘I feel really sorry for you because you’re not going to go to heaven,’” Crookall said. “And I told her, ‘Well, I think I’m going to heaven. I don’t even know if I believe in heaven or hell, but I’m a pretty good person. I’m probably going to go there.’ She said, ‘well someday you’ll see the light,’ and I said, ‘well maybe I’ve already seen the light. I think I’ve got enough light in me for the rest of my life.’”

Although their friendship recovered, Crookall said the incident cut deep. It was the first time she had ever experienced discrimination and, in her words, “it sucked.” In hindsight however, Robin said she felt sorrier that her friend had been raised to believe such things, and that it would have a continuing impact on their friendship.

“I felt bad because she couldn’t get over it,” Crookall said. “I can never be as close to her because I’m not Christian. It hurts, but we try just not to bring it up.”

Crookall admits that at times she’d like her own youth group to be as large as her friends’ Christian ones. She’s a little envious to see them passing flyers about an upcoming event, or talking excitedly about the great turnout at the concert the night before.

“I always hear about how much fun they have,” she said. “And it’s just local stuff on a Thursday night and they can have it once a week and they can have it in their big gyms with speakers and games and stuff. I can’t do that. I can’t do that because we just don’t have the numbers. It’d be kinda nice to have other people to relate to, other people to go to services with, and other people so I wouldn’t have to be constantly explaining myself.”

Much of the explaining, she said, happens during the high holy days, such as Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. In accordance with tradition, Crookall will fast for Rosh Hashana and will not eat bread during Passover. The sense of being different is especially strong during these times, she said.

“When I’m fasting, I don’t get a day off,” she said. “I don’t get a day off from school. Everybody gets a day off for Christmas. I don’t get off for Hanukkah—I don’t get off for the high holy days. And there’s no one really to share that with except my family.”
Lummi Island youth Tosh Bolack hangs out with friends after school to relax.

TOSH'S ISLAND LIFE

Tosh Bolack has called Lummi Island home for all 15 years of his life. Ailey Kato visited Tosh and his family on the Island to find out how growing up in this rural island community has shaped his life. Photos by Jennifer Holm.
Tosh Bolack says he never wants to leave Lummi Island. This 15-year-old has grown up in 13 different houses — all on the island. The light blue house he lives in now overlooks the ocean where the sun sets. The beach is just across a two-lane road and down a set of stairs.

Lummi Island, a community with approximately 800 full-time residents, is a 25-minute drive and a 10-minute ferry ride from downtown Bellingham. Islanders catch the $4 ferry at Gooseberry Point, located on the Lummi Reservation, and it leaves once every hour.

The 8.8 square-mile island is fairly rural with one grocery store, a tiny library, an art gallery, one school and a post office. Although the Ferndale chief of police lives on the island, the only policing of island activity is from a patrol car once a month.

“A lot of hippie parents move out here to partake in whatever they want,” says Tosh, who considers his parents hippies because his mom buys all organic food, his dad has long blondish-brown dreadlocks and they like to go to hemp festivals.

Approximately 100 other teenagers live on the island, according to the Whatcom demographics in the Census 2000. Tosh is one of these teenagers and his free spirit matches the Lummi Island way of life.

Tosh tells his mom, Robyn La Rue, he is going to the rope swing down the road that he discovered just a couple of days ago. He says he will help with the yard work later.

“I still haven’t seen that rope swing,” Robyn says in a concerned tone. “I probably don’t want to.”

“Yeah mom, you don’t,” Tosh says grinning back at her.

Tosh, his brother Ty Bolack, 13, and his friend Albin Machalski, 15, walk down a winding two-lane road, with more pedestrians and bicyclist than cars. Everyone they pass, Tosh waves to or says hi. They turn left to go down a path and walk right past a sign that reads, “Sunset Beach Private.”

“It’s only private to tourists,” Albin says.

The path leads to a long shore that used to be a sandy beach, Tosh says, but it’s starting to become filled with rocks. As they walk down the beach toward their newly discovered toy, Tosh says they are going to smoke pot because it makes the rope swing a little scarier.

Smoking pot, he says, is a part of his life and many of his friends’ lives. He first started experimenting with weed when he was 10 or 11 but can’t remember his first experience.

To get to the rope swing, Tosh climbs up a steep slope. He uses his long legs and arms to climb up the rocks and dirt. Tosh is 6 feet and 2 and a half inches tall when he stands up straight, but most of the time he slouches. His pants slightly sag below his waist revealing navy blue boxers with a bright orange pattern. He wears a black shirt with a drawing of Lummi Island on the front. When he gets to the top, he disappears into a green tangle of bushes and leaves.
After a few minutes, Tosh emerges from the trees, ready to swing.

He grabs onto the well-worn white rope tied to a tree and jumps off the 20-foot cliff. He swings out over the beach, almost to the water, while the tree bounces up and down.

"Isn't that the best feeling," Tosh says to Albin after instructing him how to jump.

Tosh lets go of the rope and tosses it back up to his brother. He runs his hands through his naturally brown shaggy hair. He says in the past he has dyed his hair every color he could think of.

Five swings later, Tosh, Ty and Albin make their way back to the house. Ty thinks he forgot his sweatshirt and has to walk back down the beach. Tosh and Albin wait for him but arm themselves with rocks. When Ty returns, they start playfully throwing rocks at him and Ty tries to fight back. Tosh says whoever is last, gets stuff thrown at them.

Travis Phillips, Tosh and Ty's step dad, greets them back at the house and tells them it's time to pull weeds and mow the lawn.

Tosh's parents divorced when he was 5, but both still live on the island. He lives with his mom who is building a greenhouse in her yard and works as a landscaper on the island. Along with the lumber and power tools in the front yard is a purple bus. The bus used to be called the Bead Bus, where Robyn would make jewelry. She sells her beaded jewelry in the island art gallery down the road. She recently moved all of her beads into the house so that Ty, the youngest of her four sons, can make the bus his room for his room for

Tosh says he is going to stop smoking pot as soon as summer starts.

In July, Tosh will be 16 and wants to get his license along with an '87 Silvardo from his dad. His parents decided that they will give him random drug tests to make sure he has stopped smoking before he can drive.

I'd rather have my license," Tosh says but was still surprised about the restriction.

Robyn says Tosh has to test clean of marijuana for six months before she will allow him to get his license.

"I'm vehemently against them smoking because it affects their grades and the clearness of their minds," says Robyn, who doesn't drink alcohol or use any drugs.

Another part of the deal for Tosh to get his license, Robyn says, is that he has to improve his grades. She says Tosh, a sophomore at Ferndale High School, needs to at least get a "C" average.

To get to school, Tosh wakes up every morning at 6:15 a.m. to catch the 7 a.m. ferry and then the school bus on the mainland side. It's a 40-minute commute to school. Usually he doesn't get home until 4 p.m., which makes for a long day.

Robyn says Tosh's teachers like to have him in class because he's a bright student and talkative, but once he leaves school he doesn't always take note of his assignments or do homework. Robyn says she thinks he would do better in a vocational or alternative school because he likes hands-on activity.

"I just don't like that school," Tosh says walking into the kitchen. He's covered in bits of grass from mowing the lawn outside.

Tosh says his favorite classes are an aqua culture class and a class where he learned how to make a snowboard. What he doesn't like are some of the teachers at Ferndale High School. He says he wants to take Running Start classes at Whatcom Community College next year. He is interested in taking sign language classes and wants Albin to teach him sign language. Albin is fluent in sign language because both of his parents are deaf.

"I've been trying as hard as I can in school lately," Tosh says. "I'm trying to clean up my act.

Tosh may be struggling academically, but finding friends has never been a problem for him. Robyn says, She says it seems like someone is always calling him on the phone or stopping by the house.

Last weekend, Robyn says what started off as having one friend over to spend the night on the beach turned into a party of 20 friends. She says in the middle of the night it started raining and she knew the group would be seeking refuge at her house. Robyn went out to Tosh's bedroom, a separate room off the side of the house, and tried to open the door but couldn't. Finally someone moved from the door and when she opened it she found 14 sleeping bag cocoons piled into his small room. In the morning, she fed everyone toaster waffles.

"We go through some serious grub when friends are around," Travis says. "We're the parents that don't mind when the kids show up."

Robyn says she thinks kids who grow up on Lummi Island have a strong sense of self and can easily talk to adults. She says they might be a little naive, but they are not shy.

Earlier in the day, Tosh visited his entrepreneurial friends at the ferry dock. Three girls were selling hot dogs, cookies and juice to people waiting in the ferry lane. Tosh bought one of their two hotdogs. He asked if they had made any money. The trio said they were going to, but first they had to get their propane grill started again. One of the girls said...
she didn’t know how to attach a fresh canister of propane to the grill.

Up the road from the ferry dock is the only grocery store on Lummi called The Islander. On one outside wall of the store is a mural in progress. The mural, painted in different shades of green, is of the island and water. Tosh says his mom is the painter of the mural.

Tosh, Ty and Albin walk in The Islander and buy a gallon of milk for Robyn, a can of V8 for Tosh and a pint of Starbucks’s Mud Pie ice cream for the three to share. Tosh says, “Put in on The Book,” the ongoing family tab, to the cashier. He says he doesn’t get an allowance, but his parents give him money as he needs it.

“The store is a very important part of their existence,” Robyn says jokingly.

Most shopping has to be done off the island and anything bought on the island is more expensive than on the mainland. Robyn says she buys organic food but laughs at the thought that this fact makes her a hippie.

Robyn, 46, grew up in San Francisco. She says she was too young to be a “true hippie” during the Vietnam War years, but her older siblings and cousins were. Being a hippie at that time was more about political issues than about what people wore. Recently, she took Tosh and Ty to a peace march in Bellingham. She says she sometimes wishes she could move to Bellingham to give her sons more opportunities and educational experiences.

“It’s a trade-off for the beauty of the environment and more things to do,” she says.

Robyn sits on a stool in the kitchen occasionally snacking on dried banana chips and dried ginger. All around the room are 3 x 5 cards with Spanish words for objects in the kitchen. Robyn says she wanted to learn Spanish after a two-week trip she took with Tosh to Chile.

Moving off the island for at least a year is something Robyn says is important for anyone who has spent all their life on Lummi Island.

Tosh says he is not really sure yet what he wants to do after high school. He might move off the island, but he knows he will always come back and be close to family.

He says his mom and him have a pretty good relationship. “I can talk to her about anything I can talk to my friends about,” Tosh says. “She knows how I’m feeling all the time; it’s kind of funny.”

Robyn says the other day, Tosh and her were sitting on the couch together. She looked at him and said, “I know this is probably a difficult time for you. It’s probably going to be the hardest age in your life.”

She says a tear welled up in his eye and he said, “Yeah mom, it’s a hard time.”

High school can be filled with many pressures, but Tosh is usually having fun by finding something active to do like kayaking, skateboarding and snowboarding.

Tosh, Ty and Albin stood on the deck of the clubhouse, a small banquet room that can be rented out for special occasions. The clubhouse is perched approximately 50-feet above the water. Small waves crash against the big rocks below. Just beyond the rocks the water darkens as it deepens.

“I bet you could jump off this railing and land in the water without hitting those rocks,” Ty says, asking for the other two’s approval.

“No, I don’t think so,” Tosh says. “It’s too far to jump. You’d hit the rocks.”

Tosh climbs up onto the railing, about as half as wide as his shoe. After finding his balance, he looks down.

“No, you wouldn’t make it,” he says standing high above the shore. The ocean below him, glistening in the sun, is the only thing that separates him from the mainland straight ahead. After a moment, he finally steps down off the railing. “Let’s go back home,” Tosh says. ☺
on her own terms

Brittany French, 17, looks out a bus window at Western Washington University on her way to work. French, an emancipated adult, hopes to attend WWU in the future to study math.

Brittany French has experienced tragedy, abandonment and abuse. Where others would succumb to despair she persevered to create her own kind of life. **Christine Cameron** tells the story of a girl vindicated. Photos by **Evan E. Parker**.
"I put one bullet in the gun, spun the chamber, held the pistol to my chin and pulled the trigger,"

Brittany French said as calmly as if she had just ordered a glass of water in a restaurant. "I asked God why I had been given this bullshit life."

She had been merely looking for a book to read when she came across her mother's gun. She said she doesn't remember much after pulling the trigger.

French, who was 12 at the time of her attempted suicide, had been home alone.

"My mother walked out the door and said she was going grocery shopping," French said.

Two weeks passed and her mother still had not come home.

"It would build up," French said. "At first it was a couple of hours, then it was overnight, a few days and then a little over two weeks."

Inside a 12-foot mobile home located in Tacoma, she had no electricity, no food and no phone.

"I didn't have anywhere I could go or anyone I could call and get help from," French said.

Finding the gun seemed to become the solution. She said she just broke down.

French remembers the times when her mother would eventually come home.

"She'd always bring people back with her," she said. "I wasn't treated well by her friends and her friends were older guys. I had been sexually abused for the last two months. I saw no escape."

Today, five years later, she can remember pulling the trigger however, does not recall much after that. What she does remember is that eventually her mother finally came home a few days later. She said finding the gun seemed to become the solution. She said she just broke down.

French said after the incident with the gun, she cried for days, curled up on her bed.

"I'd sleep and cry and sleep and cry and that was it," she said.

Her mother, having problems of her own and being unable to console, finally sent French back to live with her stepfather.

"She didn't know what to do with me," French said.

Having lived with her stepfather before, she said she felt he could have treated her and her siblings better while growing up.

"He believed in the belt," she said.

She said her stepfather felt fear was the best way to get respect.

Since a young age she has moved more times than she can remember, living with various family members, friends and even her youth pastor.

She finally moved out on her own in the winter of 2003 at the age of 16. Now, sitting in her own one-bedroom apartment, having just turned 17, she recalls a conversation with her stepfather.

"He called and told me he was proud of me and my grades," French said. "But he doesn't take any of the credit for it."

French said now that she is living on her own, her relationship with her step-father is more neutral.

With the desire to be independent she decided to become a legal adult at age 17. French was emancipated on May 23, 2003, and eligible to sign the paperwork needed to enroll back into high school. She said she is looking forward to getting her driver's license and is planning on attending Scheme High School this fall. From there, she will register at Whatcom Community College and enroll in the Running Start program.

During the interview French sat curled up in a fleece blanket, her dark red hair pulled back in a half ponytail, resting slightly curled upwards on her shoulders. With an innocent face, many could assume she is closed off to the world.

Yet, she is able to speak openly now, to a mere acquaintance about life experiences that many would only imagine as a worst nightmare.

"If I can't talk about my experiences, then maybe I have something to be ashamed of," French said. "Talking about it is a way of convincing myself that it's not my fault. Life dealt me an ugly hand and I changed that."

With direct eye contact and a steady voice she chatters on about her memories from high school and her past.

She is a girl who bites her nails when she's nervous. She is also a girl who loves to shop and watch videos with a good friend.

Despite her calm exterior, this girl with bright brown eyes and a huge smile has dark secrets.

Although a handful of people knew of the abuse she suffered, she remembers only one account of it being reported.

"One night, my sister and I were sitting watching television, laughing about a program that was on," French said.

She said her stepfather thought she was provoking and arguing with her sister so he smacked her.

French remembers that a teacher noticed a bruise and reported it the next day in school. While Child Protective Services did come, all they did to help was to tell her to stay at a friend's house for a few nights until the situation calmed down. She eventually went home.

Throughout all the stress and turmoil of living in abusive and unstable
environments, she always stayed on top of her schoolwork. French received a 4.0 grade point average for most of her academic career and was on the honor roll.

During her year and a half at Peninsula High School, she was class president, and involved in talent shows, sports and the drama department.

Generally a quiet and reserved young girl, she became a different person when in front of people for the Associated Student Body.

Before getting up on stage, she said she would hyperventilate because she was so nervous in front of a crowd. Somehow, all the anxiety would fade away once she was in the spotlight.

"When I'm on stage, no one knows I'm nervous," French said. "I can write good speeches and I can give them. I'm good at closing out the world."

She said she loves the thrill it gives her.

Being at school was a relief and an outlet for French. Rarely leaving her room at home, except to go to school, she remembers shutting out her family's fighting by closing her door and immersing herself in writing, drawing and reading.

"I didn't have to think about anything but what was in the book," she said. "I would ignore them." With the support of her neighbor, Mary Judt, a woman she called her aunt, she continuously succeeded in school and was complimented on her maturity and good grades.

"If you hear that enough, you just want to try harder and harder," French said.

Church became a large part of French's life growing up.

"I needed to have faith in something because I needed to know there was something better out there than what I was given," French said. "That it would all be okay."

Now, looking past the white front door of her one bedroom apartment, one can find a more personal slice of this young girl's brand new independent life. Inside, different pencil drawings are hung sporadically on her living room walls. Many various types of monkey stuffed animals and figures are placed in and on top of bookshelves. A few picture frames of close friends show happier moments in her life.

Everything in her apartment, she said she has saved up for and paid for by herself. After briefly living with her pastor and his family in Bellingham, she managed to save $3,000 working as a telemarketer. Once she was confident that she could pay a deposit on an apartment and handle rent and bills, she decided to move out on her own. French still works at Beechwood Resorts and is solely supporting herself.

However, no matter how strong and independent French's life may seem now she is on her own, her old fears still haunt her. "I can't stand being in the dark," French said. "When I turn off my light, I jump to my bed. I'm afraid of the boogie man I guess."

For a girl who is afraid of the dark, French still likes scary movies and books.

"It's like performing, it's scary but I love the adrenaline rush it gives me," she said.

As for more realistic fears, she worries that her past emotional scarring will catch up with her one day.

"One of my fears is that I could easily be emotionally abused in a relationship," French said. "That I could end up with someone like my stepfather."

While many teenagers her age have at least one parent supporting them, French has no safety net.

She said her independence has become an issue of pride.

"At this time, I'm still afraid of failing at living on my own," French said. "I'm afraid of literally asking someone for help."

French's life centers around paying
rent, having a car payment and sending monthly bills.

Instead of calling her mom when in need of money, she mentioned that her mother has called her multiple times for money.

As she remembers the phone call, her eyes lower slightly and her voice softens.

“My mom said she wanted to see me when I came home to visit,” French said. “She also asked if she could borrow money from me. It made me angry that she would ask me and it was then that she lost her privilege to see me.”

Although French’s situation is different than many people her age, she said it is incredibly important for her to succeed at everything she does.

“I wanted to support myself instead of some irresponsible person trying to take care of me,” French said. “I was tired of being someone’s burden.”

She describes her childhood surroundings as poor white trailer trash. “I am proud to say I’ve achieved a lot on my own,” French said. “No matter what I do, I can take credit for my glory and my success because I did it on my own.”

Although she values education and plans on getting a degree, French has other dreams for her future.

“I really just want to be a housewife,” she said. “I want to raise my kids and be there for them as much as possible.”

She said she is frustrated at how she was raised, but looking back she is not sure what she would change.

“I wouldn’t be who I am today without the experiences I’ve had,” French said. “I don’t know if I would change that I was raped and molested because I don’t know what kind of person I’d be without those experiences.”

Surrounded by drugs, dysfunction and alcohol her whole life, French said she decided to steer her life in the other direction.

“Most people that have been faced with the circumstances I’ve been faced with would normally use that as to why they won’t try and why they fail at everything that they do,” French said. “I made the decision early on to use those same excuses for why I’m going to try.”

She is happy with the person she has become, and hopes to remain strong in spite of life’s many obstacles. French said she saw beyond what many fall prey to in her same situation.

“Growing up around it I saw that it was a dead end life,” French said. “I don’t want these things people have done to screw up my life to be excuses of why I can’t succeed,” she said. “I’m better than that and better than them.”

French lives alone in a Bellingham apartment that she furnished with money she earned as a telemarketer.
Mat Heggem danced his way through high school. Niki Smith caught up with this 18-year-old modern dancer, premier danseur and choreographer before the pursuit of his passion takes him to the East Coast. Photos by Evan E. Parker.

THE RED CURTAIN

rose and blackness covered the stage, with faint images of people clustered in the left-hand corner. The music started and the stage lit up the color of greenish-yellow. Seven girls and one boy were draped in ragged and torn clothes, while moving rhythmically together.

The boy onstage was Mat Heggem, 18. He is a graduating senior at Pacific Dance Company and Bellingham High School. He is also the only competitive male dancer at the Pacific Dance Company and is leaving Bellingham this summer to pursue a dance career on the East Coast.

After this performance at the Mount Baker Theatre many people gathered carrying flowers in hand, ready to congratulate performers of the Pacific Dance Company on their spring concert dedicated to their graduating seniors.

"There is something about dancers that just drew me to them," Heggem said. "They have a flare of personality, dedication and a work ethic compared to none."

In the studio, Heggem was dressed in a white T-shirt and black thermal pants cut off at the bottom, stretching in the middle of the dance studio before ballet class. Four girls in Heggem's class sat in a circle together talking about the latest gossip at school. He paid no attention to the girls, and as he stretched he checked his posture in the mirrors. Heggem took off his black ballet slippers and started dancing across the hard wood floor with his bare feet. Quickly he popped up into a handstand and took another peek at himself in the mirror, remembering to point his toes.

Because it was the week before rehearsals, classes were not run in a linear form. The teacher, Sarah Frewen, was filling in for someone in the spring concert and was learning her part. The rest of the dancers were spread out on the floor, working independently on their own routine.

Heggem got bored practicing and brought a portable dance bar onto the hard wood floor. He jumped up onto it, hanging like a monkey. When the teacher called them to all come to the middle of the dance floor Heggem moved the dance bar off the floor and scurried to his position. As the music played he moved fluently remembering to point his toe and hold every movement as long as possible.

At the end of class Frewen asked if they want to do a sequence with jumps or without. Each member voted. The girls did not want jumps and Heggem, the only boy in the class, wanted to. Needless to say, the girls outvoted him. While Frewen instructed the class on what sequence she wanted them to do across the floor, Heggem became distracted by two girls peering in through the window. He stuck his tongue out at them with a sassy look.

"Are you paying attention?" Frewen asked. Heggem quickly looked at Frewen and nodded his head with a sheepish look on his face.

Heggem, like many kids, experimented with several different activities, from gymnastics to swimming. It wasn't until his grandmother signed him up for an
Bellingham High School senior, Mat Heggem, 18, dances at the Pacific Dance Company in Bellingham. Heggem dreams of dancing professionally, and one day owning his own dance company.
"Dance is a way of expressing myself without having to deal with my insecurities."
—Mat Heggem
“I don’t get nervous before I perform,” Heggem said. “That is a thing that separates me from people at the company. It’s like a job and I don’t really think about the audience, they just happen to be there. It is more of an internal thing that pleases my body and me.”

Each dancer is required to be two hours early on performance night. Heggem said that during those two hours he likes to pamper himself by putting lotion on his feet. He said if there is anything he spends a lot of money on, it would be large quantities of lotion.

“It is my own unique kind of warm up,” Heggem said. “It gets me focused.”

One of Heggem’s favorite things to do at the Pacific Dance Company is choreographing dance pieces. He said he took an improvisational choreography class the summer after his freshman year. It introduced him to choreography and he quickly grew to love it.

A week before the performance, Heggem is working on his piece with his peers.

Heggem balances on one leg, while his other foot rests upon his knee like a flamingo. He starts clapping his hands helping the dancers find the beat, “five, six, seven, eight.” He abruptly stops the music and explains that he wants to see sharper and more distinct movements. Walking over to one of the dancers Heggem bent over her and grabs her leg, guiding it up and around him.

He said, “this is what I want.” Heggem believes that modern dance is a celebration of what the human body can do, and he tries to incorporate those moves into his pieces.

“It’s kind of a power thing,” Heggem said. “I like pushing my dancers’ boundaries.”

Heggem has choreographed two pieces at the Pacific Dance Company and wants to continue to work with other dancers.

Heggem’s piece that he performed in the concert had no title.

“I feel like a title clouds what I am trying to do,” Heggem said. “I have not gotten to the point where I can title my own piece. I would not want to confuse the audience.”

Heggem said that some of the movements he asked his dancer to perform pushed their comfort zone. It dance asked the dancers to roll on top of each other and get into formations that were uncomfortable and challenging to their bodies.

Heggem said that he does not like to watch the pieces he choreographs on stage during the performance. He feels that, at that point, it is in the dancers’ hands to show the audience what he has taught them.

“I have spent time pulling together a piece of what I want, but when they are on stage it’s up to them,” Heggem said. “I don’t want them to think that I am watching and critiquing. It tells them that the overall performance is all that matters, not getting the choreography right. I just want them to do it with confidence.”

Heggem has learned a lot at the Pacific Dance Company and said he will continue his dancing and education at Goucher College in Baltimore.

“My dream one day is to have my own dance company where I will be an independent choreographer and dance with my students,” Heggem said. (Dancers) have a flare of personality, dedication and a work ethic compared to none.”

—Mat Heggem

Heggem catches his breath between numbers at the Pacific Dance Company in Bellingham.

“(Dancers) have a flare of personality, dedication and a work ethic compared to none.”

—Mat Heggem

Klipsun {29}
Diana McAlister is a principal, a teacher, a nurse, a lunch lady and most importantly, a mother. Peter Malcolm takes a look at one family’s homeschool. Photo by Erika Björnson.

BETHANY MCALISTER AND her younger sister Caitlyn are supposed to be working on their school assignment — a thick journal filled with artistic and meticulously constructed depictions of American history. Instead, they’re chatting and giggling in some sort of language only sisters can understand. Their teacher strides across the room and surveys them with a serious look. Bethany and Caitlyn look up, their faces full of anticipation as the teacher speaks.

“Anybody want some nachos?” the woman asks as she presents the heaping pile to the girls.

“Thanks mom,” the girls say in unison as they dig into the steaming plate of cheese and chips.

It’s noon on Friday, and time for the girls to take a break from their studies. Their mother Diana McAlister begins to speak, but she is cut off by a ringing telephone, something that happens frequently at this converted farm home on the outskirts of Arlington.

“Cait, will you get that please?” Diana asks.

But Caitlyn is already on her way, dragging her feet, all too aware of her role as the unofficial secretary for the house.

Bethany and Caitlyn have been homeschooled ever since they started kindergarten and are the last of the four McAlister daughters to be taking classes just a few steps from their bedrooms. Bethany says spending so much time together helps the family form tight bonds.

“We’re a really close family,” Bethany says. “I trust my sisters more than anybody from outside my family. The four of us get along really well.”

Seventeen-year-old Bethany is a high school senior who loves playing softball, listening to alternative rock and watching her favorite movies over and over. She looks every bit a hip teenager, dressed in jeans and a blue cotton shirt with the red number ‘64’ stitched on the front. She talks animatedly, making her curly brown hair bounce from side to side.

“We were going to dress up in high-water sweatpants, tight pigtails and glasses and talk about our chess club or sing the national to mess with you,” Bethany says with a laugh, referring to her own generalization of a homeschooled kid.

The stereotype of a homeschooler, as defined by Caitlyn and Bethany, is a sheltered, brainy kid with a large vocabulary, who wears tight sweatpants that are tucked into their socks. By this definition, both girls are not typical homeschoolers.

As her older sister dominates the conversation, 14-year-old Caitlyn is shut out and resorts to nervously doodling on her notepad. Wearing a red hooded sweatshirt that wraps around the bottom of her shoulder-length dirty blond hair, she perks up when the topic of discussion turns to boys. As she gripes about her social restrictions, she makes sure she is out of earshot from her mother.

“I couldn’t go on a date if I was asked,” Caitlyn says with a note of bitterness.

Though Caitlyn doesn’t have a boyfriend, Bethany is quick to point out that her sister has some interest in a family friend, whose photo is held safely in her wallet. Much to Caitlyn’s horror, Bethany lunges for the wallet sitting on the round table and grabs it at the same time as her sister. The
two struggle for possession of the sacred object, Bethany looks extremely amused while her sister has a look of panic mixed with embarrassment.

"Beth don't!" Caitlyn pleads. "Give it back!"

Not wanting to subject her sister to any further torture, Bethany relents and lets Caitlyn have the wallet.

"Sorry," Bethany says sheepishly.

The girls continue to work on their assignments and talk energetically, which is a tad misleading because Bethany is recovering from the previous evening's senior prom, where she rubbed shoulders with 30 other homeschooled students at a swank country club.

"It was fun but I wasn't too pleased with the music the DJ was playing," she says.

While Bethany talks, prom attendee Diana excitedly shows off her digital camera photos of her daughter with her date and an endless stream of other teens dressed in tuxes and dresses.

The girls are articulate and attractive and they carry themselves with an air of sophistication that is beyond their years. They have many similarities: their passion for softball, their ability to communicate with each other with only a look, their love for Dave Matthews Band and, perhaps most important, the alternative education they are both receiving.

When Bethany speaks about homeschooling, she praises it for molding her into the ambitious and responsible young woman she is, but she also has some complaints.

"I really don't like how it affects my social life," she says, "I never get to hang out. If it was my choice I'd be in public school."

—Caitlyn McAlister

Bethany has mostly good things to say about being taught at home by her mom while most of her peers are in public school, but Caitlyn is much more critical.

"I really don't like how it affects my social life," she says, "I never get to hang out. If it was my choice, I'd be in public school."

Caitlyn had her wish granted earlier this year when she was allowed to attend Post Middle School for three weeks until she was pulled out because she was unable to keep up with her assignments. Though she says she is a little resentful about being homeschooled, Caitlyn is now accustomed to it and doesn't pine for public school like she used to. She says now that she has seen how public schools operate she has formed her own stereotype.

"Public school kids are dumb," she says with a straight face that lasts for two seconds before it dissolves into laughter.

Though she is admittedly less social than her sister, Bethany thinks Caitlyn's distaste for her educational system is more of an age issue than anything else.

"When I was her age I didn't like (homeschooling) much either," she says. "When she gets a little older and gains more perspective, she'll change her mind."

One of the potential problems with homeschooling is the effect it can have on the relationship between the child and parent.

"Sometimes it puts a strain on your relationship because it can get to be a little too intense," Bethany says. "On the other hand, spending that much time with your mom strengthens your relationship too."

Bethany says she acts as a mediator between her mother and Caitlyn, giving her sister explanations and advice when she gets fed up with her mom from time to time. Bethany is also an important confidant for Caitlyn, who can disclose things to her she wouldn't want her mother to know.

When Bethany speaks about Caitlyn she has an air of pride and nostalgia. She says her younger sister still has a lot to learn but possesses some traits she is envious of. Bethany describes Caitlyn as social, funny and honest.

"She doesn't back away from who she is," she says.

Though the girls feel quite differently about their current situation, they both say they have a lot to look forward to.

Bethany plans on attending college in the fall and is excited about becoming an adult and gaining the responsibility that comes along with it. Caitlyn, meanwhile, is anticipating getting her driver's license so she can spread her wings a bit.

Throughout the afternoon, Diana pokes her head around the corner periodically, sometimes to check if her daughters are doing their work, and other times to sit and praise them.

"As a mom I'm supposed to believe that my girls are smart and beautiful," she says, gazing fondly upon the girls, "but in reality, they're probably just your average, run-of-the-mill American girls — except they're kinda pretty and kinda smart."

Diana is the co-founder of Family Academy, an accredited "school without walls," and serves as teacher, principal, nurse and cook, in addition to her other motherly duties. Diana is a very caring and protective mother; two traits encompassed the metaphor she uses to describe her relationship with her daughters.

"I'm like a big bear with my cubs — don't mess with me or my cubs," she said.

Diana says homeschooling doesn't necessarily shelter students, but it does protect their innocence a little longer.

"My girls are just unaware of some things," she says bluntly. "They don't even know what a high school reunion is."

From across the room a slightly offended voice answers her mother.

"Of course we do," says Bethany. "It's not like we haven't seen Romy and Michelle's (High School Reunion)!"

But the girls have to admit the truth — their eyes have not seen much of what their public school counterparts have.

"Sometimes I'll be with my friends and they'll say something and I'll be like, 'What's that?' " Caitlyn says with a laugh, exposing her braces and going a little red in the face.

"They're always like, 'We'll tell you when you get older.' "

Bethany says one of the biggest problems with being a homeschooled student is the unavoidable stereotypes that are given to them. She says most of these generalizations are false but added that a new one should be created.

"I think there should be a stereotype about homeschool moms," she says with a laugh. "Homeschool moms are crazy."
Ashley Plagerman, 18, hauls buckets of water to more than 250 thirsty calves at Huizenga Livestock in Everson.
From muddy barn boots to a crown and sash, the dairy princess is the public persona of the dairy industry. Annie Billington follows Whatcom County's dairy princess from the barn to the grandstand. Photos by Evan E. Parker.

WITH THE SUN slowly rising at 6:30 a.m. Ashley Plagerman, 18, walks through mud puddles and sawdust with a smile on her face. Amongst the stench of cow manure and the sounds of calves groaning, Plagerman, dressed in her ripped blue jeans, navy blue thermal Henley and black barn boots, prepares milk bottles for the 279 calves at Huizenga Livestock in Everson.

Christian music and a sermon play softly in the background on the radio as Plagerman, her co-workers and boss Ted Huizenga, 36, prepare the calves' bottles in the milking room. Huizenga mixes 50 pounds of powdered milk with water in a 50-gallon barrel, while pails of nipples and crates of bottles wait to be filled with breakfast for the calves.

"The calves are like little kids," Plagerman said. "You have to watch them and give them medicine when they're sick."

As the sound of a lawnmower approaches the aisles between dome hutchess that house the calves, their heads pop out simultaneously, aware breakfast is about to be served. With the help of her brother Eric, 16, and co-worker Kyle Emmons, 15, Plagerman gives each cow a bottle, filled with four pounds of 170-degree milk. The sounds of sucking and slurping echo through the farm as each calf latches onto its hand-prepared bottle.

"It's really peaceful," Plagerman said. "You feel like you are really appreciated by the calves."

Plagerman grew up on her grandparents' dairy farm where she was expected to complete chores every day. While most children's chores consist of washing dishes, Plagerman helped raise calves on the family-run farm.

"How many people get to have their kids come out and help them at seven o'clock in the morning?" Plagerman asked. "You are a close family because you depend on each other."

From the time she could walk, Plagerman wore her barn boots all day and had an active role on the farm. She drove a truck when she was 8 years old because there was no one else to drive. Life was never boring on the farm, she said.

At a very young age, Plagerman learned the importance of keeping farm animals alive. If animals died, money was lost,
Ashley makes sure that all the milk bottles are delivered to the calves each day.

“If you are a girl and involved in the dairy industry, it’s expected that you run.”

— Ashley Plagerman, Whatcom County dairy princess

her family would be out of a job and her life would be negatively affected, she said.

Plagerman has spent the last year as the Whatcom County dairy princess, a much more glamorous role than tromping through mud at the farm. Since 1956 the Whatcom County Dairy Women have sponsored the Whatcom County dairy princess program. The dairy princess acts as a saleswoman and representative for the dairy industry and its products.

“If you are a girl and involved in the industry, it’s expected that you run,” Plagerman said.

She was encouraged to run not only because she was associated with the dairy industry, but also because her mother was the Clallam County dairy princess as a teen.

“I kind of wanted to follow her footsteps and I wanted to give back to the dairy industry because it’s our family’s way of life,” Plagerman said. “Being dairy princess you spend an entire year representing the dairy industry.”

She said she felt a lot of pressure to be dairy princess from her family and people in the industry. Pressure, combined with Plagerman’s competitive edge, led her to run and win the dairy princess title in 2002.

“I thought this would give me a good opportunity to be more involved in the industry,” Plagerman said. “It’s my way of saying ‘thank you.’”

In June, Plagerman represented Whatcom County, as she ran for state dairy princess. She was not crowned state dairy princess.

One of Plagerman’s main responsibilities as Whatcom County dairy princess involved educating the public about the importance of dairy products in a person’s diet.

Plagerman said it is important to tell people about dairy products so they purchase the products. If no consumers buy dairy products, farmers will lose their livelihood. By encouraging people to eat and drink dairy products she helps farmers survive.

During her reign Plagerman taught lessons in classrooms across the county about the role dairy products play in one’s daily diet. She said children are more intrigued by her title than adults, because she wears a crown. Children looked up to her as much for being a princess as for her knowledge about the dairy industry.

“Theyir first question would be, ‘Do you have a prince?’, ‘Do you live in a castle?’, ‘Do you sleep in your crown?’, ” Plagerman said.

Children may not realize the title of dairy princess involves more than merely wearing a crown and sash; Plagerman’s schedule reflects her duties as princess. During her reign, she was given a list of two or three events per week she was required to attend. During the week of the Northwest Washington Fair, she was expected to attend the fair throughout the week, handing out ribbons and giving a speech to a grandstand full of people.

Aside from her dairy princess commitments, Plagerman also does a lot of volunteer work. In June, Plagerman graduated from Meridian High School and earned her associates of art degree from Whatcom Community College.

Plagerman trades in her blue jeans and barn boots for dark gray dress slacks and a button-down collared blouse at Washington Mutual 15 hours per week. Since she was 16, she has interned as a teller at the Lynden and Cordata Place branches.

While her co-workers yawn during their shifts, Plagerman maintains her enthusiastic, smiling persona.

When the bell chimes behind the teller counter
Plagerman is alerted that a car is approaching the bank drive through. As she approaches the window, she says, “It’s been a long time. How are you?” to a gentleman in his car. Similar to her enthusiasm when feeding calves, Plagerman seems to make a friend with each customer that comes through the bank doors. She interacts with customers as if she has known them for years, addressing them by their first names and creating a personal and warm feeling in the bank.

Because of Plagerman’s busy schedule, she said she spends a lot of time away from home. “Sundays are great days,” she said. “(Lynden) shuts down, you kind of get to, too.”

With the numerous public events Plagerman participates in, her personal appearance is an important aspect of being dairy princess. During her reign, she was instructed to conduct herself in an orderly manner and look presentable. “Prior to dairy princess, I was very much a farm girl,” Plagerman said. “It’s sometimes a pain to be all prim and proper.”

The dairy princess receives a clothing allowance, demonstrating the importance of her appearance. Her princess wardrobe must only be worn at official appearances, in addition to wearing shoes, nylon hosiery, her crown and sash. “You become more aware of your appearance and that becomes important,” Plagerman said. “I wish it didn’t have to be that way. I think that people are going to be more willing to listen to me and respect me if I didn’t have my ripped jeans and boots on.”

Plagerman took etiquette classes when she was crowned. She learned the proper way to sit, stand, walk and eat. “Oh my, there is a list,” Plagerman said. “There’re so many things you have to do when you sit down (to eat).”

Plagerman said her etiquette classes paid off because she was so familiar with the skills. During a lunch with the dean of admissions at Calvin College, she was thankful to have learned those skills.

This fall, Plagerman will begin the next journey of her life. She is attending Calvin College, a Christian college in Michigan.

As the dairy princess, Plagerman said she has learned important communication skills, which she hopes to incorporate into her future career. Although she is not sure what line of work she wants to pursue, she knows that she does not want to work in the dairy industry. “This is what I’ve grown up with and I have to say goodbye,” Plagerman said. “I’ll go off to college and I’ll be done. It’ll be a memory.”

A kitten found behind sacks of powdered milk gets attention from Ashley at the end of her day feeding cattle at Huizenga.