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Annie Billington
Western Washington University

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As I walk past faces of strangers on a sidewalk or through Red Square, I often wonder about the life story behind each nameless face. I speculate about the experiences they have encountered, who they have met and what is important to them.

After reading this issue of Klipsun’s unusual stories, I realize that each person has a story behind their life. No one’s life is the same. No one’s life is like your own. Most importantly, you can never predict the history or life of a stranger. Each person has a story to tell, whether it be great or small. As you read these stories, you will peer into the windows of the lives of people linked to the Bellingham community.

For this issue of Klipsun, three contributing stories from journalism students who studied in Prague, Czech Republic reveal their experiences of living and studying abroad. Western students, Peter Louras, Josh Dumond and Lee Fehrenbacher spent fall semester in Europe studying Czech history, language and culture. Perhaps by walking past the faces of these three students, one may not expect that they participated in the Moroccan Ramadan, consumed electric green alcohol illegal in the United States or visited Auschwitz.

Whether you are introduced to European culture through a firsthand perspective, shown the heart of a cat lover or familiarized with a man with a passion for poetry and vintage clothing, you will discover the importance behind each of these people and their story.

I hope that after reading this group of stories, you too, realize the depth and magnitude each nameless face possesses. Take time to discover the life story of those around you.

Thanks for reading Klipsun. If you have any questions, comments or story ideas, we would love to hear from you. Please call us at 360.650.3737 or e-mail us at klipsunwwu@hotmail.com.

Best wishes,

Annie Billington
CLOSE ENCOUNTERS
OF THE FEMALIEN KIND

Lacy Bevis explores the Sci-fi world of local independent film producer, Zack Klinefelter. Illustrations by Alex Lombardo and Brandon Waltz.

Gasoline filled condoms, space monkeys, flaming bagpipes and gender-altering weapons.

A cold breeze sets in as the sun goes down and darkness consumes the damp forest on Blanchard Mountain above the town of Alger. In the distance the low hum of a small generator can be heard. The generator is providing power for what will soon be the only source of light for the small movie set. The large sphere-shaped lamp casts artificial moonlight over the two men who are sitting by a small campfire roasting "space monkey" meat for dinner.

Dressed in a black leather jacket and wearing a black fedora hat is Zach Klinefelter, 24. Across from Klinefelter, sits a scantily clad Jesse Babcock, 24, wearing nothing more than a green kilt and a pair of black leather boots.

"And cut," yells Klinefelter at the end of the scene. "We need another condom!"

A condom containing half a cup of gasoline is handed to Klinefelter. In the film business, these are called squibs, Klinefelter says. He holds the squib and gears up to start filming the same scene from the top.

"And action," Klinefelter says as he tosses the gas squib into the fire. A sizable flame erupts from the fire. The two actors remain still for a moment and wait until the blaze looks just right before they begin the scene once more.

Klinefelter is the director, lead actor, writer and producer of "Conquest of Area 53," an independent movie being filmed in and around Bellingham. Four years in the making, the feature-length film is almost complete.

"Welcome to my office," Klinefelter says a few days earlier as he sits down at the only empty table in the Horseshoe Cafe in Bellingham. The smell of coffee and cigarettes fills the air and loud chatter from the adjacent Ranch Room spills into the mellow setting of the dining room area. As he lights a cigarette, Klinefelter explains the premise of the movie.

"'Conquest of Area 53' is a Sci-fi / comedy about 'femaliens' who come to Earth from Venus to wage their sex war against men," Klinefelter says. He adds that the movie takes place in Area 53 where the femaliens' father ship landed on Earth.

Femaliens are a race of aliens who are born as vicious space monkeys that bite men's groins. As the femaliens grow up they shed their space monkey fur and evolve into beings that resemble beautiful human women. As adults the femaliens' weapon of choice is the "genderositer." A genderositer is a laser gun that will change the sex of a species when it is aimed at the genital area. If the genderositer does not change the man into a female the femaliens will kill him.

Klinefelter states that Mary Magdalene — the woman in the Bible who was said to have witnessed the resurrection of Jesus Christ — leads the femaliens in their war on Earth.

Klinefelter says he was inspired to use Mary Magdalene as his villainess when he watched the 1988 Martin Scorsese movie, "The Last Temptation of Christ." In the film Christ chooses to marry Mary Magdalene instead of being crucified.

"She was first sent to Earth to seduce Christ and took it personally when things didn't work out," Klinefelter says as he explains his film's version of Magdalene. "So she drank from the Holy Grail and became immortal."

Klinefelter says his character, Dr. James Ferro, was created by God to rid the world of femaliens. In the movie Klinefelter's character Ferro is a cryptozoologist with a cold heart.

"He [Ferro] goes out and finds unusual species, proves their existence and slaughters them mercilessly," Klinefelter explains.

He says his character is a great candidate to save the world from man-hating aliens.

Klinefelter also cites some of his past experiences with women as part of his inspiration to make this movie.

He explained that he first came up
with the concept for the film back in high school when he was 16. He admits that he somewhat feared women at that age, though this is no longer the case.

Babcock, who recently returned from serving in the Army in Iraq, plays Dr. Ferro's loyal sidekick, Al Polkavitch. Polkavitch is an Irish-Scottish ax-wielding warrior who uses his “flaming bagpipes” to fight space monkeys. The “flaming bagpipes” are Polkavitch’s super power.

A chain-smoking Italian-New Yorker named Glen, played by actor Rory VanBerg, joins Ferro and Polkavitch. VanBerg is also the film's second assistant director and still-photographer. Although Glen is supposed to be the comic relief of the film, many would agree that there is nothing funny about the opening scene of the movie, in which a flying space monkey bites him in the groin.

Lighting another cigarette, Klinefelter described one of the more disgusting scenes he has done while filming this movie. In the scene, “mutant slugs” attack Ferro after he stumbled running away some space monkeys. Klinefelter said his body was covered with large, live slugs. During the scene, a huge banana slug slithered up his neck and onto his mouth, leaving a trail of slime on his skin. Klinefelter yelled to keep filming and stay in character. Klinefelter says he was happy with the resulting scene and it was easy for him to act out his character's phobia of slugs.

Klinefelter became interested in making movies at a young age. At 12-years-old he started making short films with the family camcorder. It was at the age of 14 that Klinefelter was inspired by Steven Speilberg who came out with “Jurassic Park” and “Schindler’s List” in the same year.

Klinefelter explains that was when he knew he wanted to pursue movie making as a career. Though he has never been to film school, he said he convinced one of his high school teachers to start an independent study class for video production.

An avid fan of horror Sci-fi, Klinefelter cites cult director George Romero as another big influence. Klinefelter explained that Romero, who directed the “Night of the Living Dead” trilogy, used satire to make a statement about each of the “Dead” movies.

Each movie makes a statement about the time it is set in. For example, “Dawn of the Dead” was a satire on American consumerism, but was visually interesting because it had zombies eating people.

It was this love of satire that Klinefelter said he has chosen a more humorous way to tackle the issue of sexism in his movie. For Klinefelter, having femalians, space monkeys and mutant slugs was just an interesting way to present the issues in the film.

When Klinefelter is not directing or acting in the movie, he is editing scenes or sitting in a coffee shop revising the next day’s script. Klinefelter estimates that between 60 and 70 people have worked on the film, including the crew and actors. He is also currently acting in another independent film in Seattle.

“I’m at my best, my most productive, when I have a lot to do,” says Klinefelter who loves the challenge and responsibilities that come with making movies.

Klinefelter is eager to finish up production as soon as he can, and if all goes as planned he plans to show his film at the Pickford Cinema in Bellingham and then take it to independent film festivals in Seattle. As far as a nationwide release, Klinefelter is not planning on a theatrical release.

“The biggest thing we can hope for is a DVD distributor,” Klinefelter says.

He says he wouldn’t object to the movie making some money. In true independent filmmaking style, the production costs, which he estimates to be about $5,000, have mostly been paid for through loans and credit cards.

Klinefelter admits the movie is not for everyone. “Conquest of Area 53” will have a particular audience and says that B-movie lovers and film buffs will like it.

“I'm not talking about 'I love foreign films' film buffs, or Oscar-watching film buffs," says Klinefelter in his apartment. "I'm talking about the 'I love gore and nudity' film buffs."

Klinefelter also thinks an audience will be found among the alternative comedy viewers, such as anyone who enjoys “Monty Python,” because it contains similar comedic humor.

Klinefelter says part of the power of being an amateur director or actor is that they have the freedom to come out with something completely fresh without worrying about what will make the most money.

Back in the forest, the crew is still filming one of the movie's more serious scenes in which Polkavitch and Ferro share stories of past loves.

Polkavitch launches into the story of the epic fight in which he rescued the "soon-to-be Mrs. Ex-Polkavitch" from a giant octopus in the Mediterranean Sea. The scene ends when the men hear a cry for help in the distance and run off to investigate.

"And cut," yells Klinefelter when he is finally satisfied. With that comes the end of eight hours of filming for about a seven-minute scene.

“It's a cheesy movie, yeah," Klinefelter says. "But I won't rest until it's exactly right."

As for the young director's future, he only knows that he wants to continue making independent films. Klinefelter says that he just wants to be an artist and he doesn’t care as much about becoming famous. 

“A 'genderositer' is a laser gun that will change the sex of the species when it is aimed at their genital area.” – Zack Klinefelter
Left-Handed in Morocco

People, culture and religion are a central way of life in Morocco. Peter Louras describes his time and experiences in a north African city. Photos by Peter Louras.

For the first time in an hour, my taxi driver smiled. Not because we were speeding along the P28 roadway toward his hometown in Morocco, but because he just hit an elderly man with the bumper of his Grandes Taxi and ran him off the road.

"Mercedes es good, huh?" the stubbled, stern-eyed man I got to know as Hasad snickered, his eyes fixed on me instead of the road.

Considering we were traveling much faster than 0 km/hr, as the speedometer read, and the fact Hasad drove the majority of the way with his left knee so he could bend over and fix the wiring of his radio with both hands, I simply returned his smile. For 200 Dirham, or $20, this was my introduction to north Africa.

Along the 75-mile climb through the Rif Mountain Range, I watch Hasad eye the horizon and interpret his Spanish as an apology for his mind-set. "Sorry," he said. "I have not eaten anything all day."

Living in an Islamic country, Hasad is not alone. Just days into the holy month of Ramadan that began Oct. 25, Muslims, such as Hasad, are expected to refrain from every sensual pleasure including eating, drinking, smoking and sex from dawn until dusk. As one of the Five Pillars of Faith, it is an effort to renew a relationship with Allah.

Although non-Muslims are not expected to participate, in curiosity of the tradition, I agreed to taste this bit of culture while fasting in one of the most isolated towns of Morocco: Chefchaouen.

Coming to the end of a sand and limestone valley, I leave Hasad who is arguing with another man he nearly hit. Taking the first step into the Place El Makhzen, the central square, the steep mountainside hits me with smells of fresh mud and smoke.

Sandwiched between the twin peaks ech-Chaoua, the horns, for which the town gets its name, the remote Chefchaouen saw only three Western visitors until 1920, even though it is less than 100 miles from Europe itself. Even now, I hardly notice the town or any of its 36,000 inhabitants until the last mile of the main road, and realize its remote appeal to backpackers in recent years.

For a city full of empty stomachs, the people appear energetic. Behind textile stands, robed men welcome, in Arabic, French and sometimes just a grin, my foreign face. Children scurry about the feet of veiled women sitting before blankets of limes, green peppers, olives, pomegranates and dates.
"Tourists come here because it is safe and pretty," said Ahammad Sode, a salesman off the square. "To us, it does not matter if a person is rich or poor. Everyone does not eat now, so they are happy.

As I follow a man to my hotel, the city staircases through tightly-corridored medina walls: the original Arab part of a Moroccan town. An intricate maze by nature, medinas once served as a defense mechanism to protect the inner city from invaders. Today, in a resonance of Arab instrumental music, orienting through the medina reveals merchant alleyways and lingering aromas of welding, carved wood, cilantro and fresh spearmint.

Faint but escalating cheers reveal a seven-on-seven soccer game that has attracted the men of the city; adolescents in name brands and knock-off Reeboks, and elders with traditional wool burnoose cloaks and pointed hoods. While players struggle through puddles on the field, youngsters are quick to observe a few visitors on the sidelines and offer samples of "chocolate," the nickname for the local agriculture kif.

An age-old tradition in northern Morocco, the smoking of kif, or marijuana, has served as a regular pastime for locals. In the 1970s, a sudden growth took place when European countries showed interest in the drug, and even now, its illegal trade contributes an estimated $2 billion to the Moroccan economy. Many Chefchaouen locals rely on its production for income.

Minutes from the game's ending, I deny a taste for "chocolate" and follow the spectators who hurry home in the dimming light. My stomach grows at the smells emanating within households in the medina where women are preparing the night's meal.

Unsure of how to break my own fast, I befriended a Californian couple, Ryan and Lauren, who have stayed beneath the low ceilings of my hotel for a few days, and we take to the roof to watch the sunset.

For roughly $6 a night, I find the balcony of my Spanish-owned Hotel Gernika to offer a priceless view of the city. Surrounded on every side by terraced, often windowless homes. The only contrast to the whitewashed city is the colorful clotheslines and vibrant reds of Moroccan flags, adorned with a green star akin to the distant hillside. In the streets, the only sounds heard are wooden doors being bolted shut and the laughs of children fading within the walls of the medina. For a moment, the city falls silent, and the sky fades to black.

Suddenly, an air raid siren startles our group from the minaret of the Ben Rachid Mosque, nearly five blocks away and reverberates along the mountainside. Within seconds, two more mosques chime in harmony while a Muezzin, or mosque official, sings a call to prayer over the city, "Allah Akhbar ..."

In Muslim tradition, the same ritual occurs five times daily, as a second Pillar of Faith, from 5 a.m. to midnight. During Ramadan, however, the siren at sundown signals the Ftar, or breaking of the day's fast, as conveyed by the sun setting over the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Muhammad, the founder of Islam.

When the Muezzin ends his calling and the echoes grow fainter over the city, my new friends recommend celebrating our own Ftar near the Place Outa El Hammam square, in the heart of Chefchaouen. Just a short walk downhill from our hotel, we are beckoned into the Café Aladin, known for its traditional Moroccan food.

Adorned with indigo walls and high ceilings, we ease onto soft, bench-style couches before a knee-high table to select three items from a menu for $6.

Nearing the end of my first fast, I wanted to devour anything put before me, but faced a new problem: I am left-handed. While outlandish to Westerners, Moroccans do not use toilet paper, and instead use their left hand with a bucket of water as a makeshift bidet. While I came prepared to Morocco with a roll of my own, I did not want to give off the wrong impression. So I prepared, for the first time, to eat a whole meal with only my right hand.

Within minutes, our waiter presents a bowl of harira, the soup Muslims eat to break fast. Thick with chick peas, beans and lentil, a mix of 45 spices known as Rasse al Hamoute and sweet curry give harira a spicy and filling effect. With a shaking right hand, I spooned away the red liquid, mopping up the remainder with bread.

For the next course, our group feasted on tajine — essentially a stew steam-cooked in a ceramic dish over a charcoal fire. Most commonly lamb or mutton with prunes or almonds, I chose a mixture of chicken and vegetables, yellow with olives and curry.

Unsuccessfully picking at a dessert dish of crépes dipped in chocolate and a bowl of fruit, I finished eating and watched the candles burn down.

Heading back to the Place Outa El Hammam, nearly two hours after sundown, the town appears refreshed. Cafés and restaurants chatter away. Cigarette-smoking men watch television while some play chess or paracci, a board game similar to backgammon. In the streets, women walk their children, and some lower veils around their necks like scarves.

At a corner café, we join the locals for a glass of "Moroccan whiskey." The national drink, atay deeyal naanaa, Moroccan tea combines the flavors of Chinese gunpowder green tea with long sprigs of spearmint. Sweetened with a minimum of four sugar cubes per cup, the boiling yellow liquid arrives in a clear pint glass with a bundle of fresh mint floating like pond moss. The first taste hits like a sweet blast of menthol.

As if the last sip of pure sugar and mint was not enough to satisfy a sweet tooth, we paid the 60-cent bill and headed to a pastry stand for some late night snacks. Heaps of plastic-covered dates sat in a sticky block beside piles of deep-fried griwash honey-cakes.

Selecting a reasonable amount of both, we bit into the deserts, celebratory for Shawwal-mark Eid al-fitr, the breaking of the fast, which calls an end to Ramadan.

Enjoying the syrupy dough dusted in sesame seeds, I smiled at the success of my first experience with Ramadan. If a woman veiled in yellow did not catch me licking the brown residue of a date off my left hand, the day may have been perfect.
Magda B. Dorman shades the sun from her eyes as she overlooks the city from the deck of her Bellingham home.
After being silent for 51 years about surviving the Holocaust, Magda B. Dorman wrote a book about her experiences. Jaclyn Ruckle shares Dorman’s journey of triumph and her will to stay alive. Photos by Joshua Fejeran. Auschwitz photos by Josh Dumond.

Sun streams in through large windows in Magda B. Dorman’s home. Her living room furniture and walls are shades of cream and khaki, allowing the sunlight to reflect and illuminate the room.

Dorman, 82, is a petite woman who stands straight and is quick to offer cookies and coffee to visitors. She is dressed in a light brown long-sleeved polo and khaki pants. She has a short white bob, and the twinkle in her eyes reveals her zeal for adventure.

This woman is a part of world history. She survived the Holocaust – an event so appalling she was unable to speak about it for 51 years. But one day in 1996, she was ready to tell her story of survival.

“Until that point it was so deep I wouldn’t say one word about (the Holocaust),” Dorman said. “It was so embarrassing, so painful and I didn’t think people would believe me. Then all of the sudden when the story was ready to be told, I couldn’t hold back anymore. I sat to write my book and the words poured out of me.”

Dorman spent the next three years documenting her experience in the Holocaust. In 1999, she distributed and sold 75 copies of her self-published book, “Determined to Survive.”

Carefree woman
Dorman was raised in a town, located in the middle of Hungary called Kecskemet. Her father, Michael, owned and worked in an electrical store in town. Her mother was handicapped. Dorman was an only child, but was practically sisters with her younger cousin Agi Kertesz.

Dorman adored her father. When he came home from work after a long day in the shop, he helped Dorman with her homework and taught her to appreciate music and poetry.

“He taught me how to deliver a poem with rhythm, accent and grace,” she said. “I was asked to recite poetry in front of an audience when I was in high school and loved it.”

When Dorman finished high school, Jews were banned from attending universities. Dorman became an apprentice in her father’s shop and learned how to make radios.

Startled woman
Jews in Kecskemet were not spared of Hitler’s anti-Semitism. On April 14, 1944 the Gestapo, Hitler’s secret state police, took all Jewish men from the city. Dorman was devastated and feared she may never see her father again.

At 22-years-old, Dorman began a 10-month journey riddled with pain, suffering, loss and humiliation.

In June, all women in Kecskemet were forced to move into the ghetto, which was a closed off street with several families crammed inside boarded-up houses. The Nazis restricted people from entering or exiting the ghetto. Dorman, her mother, grandmother, aunt and Kertesz lived in the ghetto together.

One of Dorman’s first encounters with the Nazis occurred when a nurse inspected each woman vaginally. The Nazis were looking to see if the women were hiding gold or jewelry before being removed from the ghettos.

Kertesz knew one of the midwives who was inspecting the women. When it was Dorman’s turn Kertesz whispered to the midwife, “My cousin is a virgin, please don’t touch her.” Dorman was spared from the inspection.

“Nothing shocked me then,” Dorman said. “You get to a place where you expect the unexpected.”

Dorman was one of the 437,402 Hungarian Jews who were deported to Auschwitz on 48 trains between May and July of 1944, according to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) Web site.

Dorman was crammed into a boxcar which traveled for four days and nights. She went without food, water and a bathroom. Dorman was pushed against the side of the car, where she could see out of a small slit in the side of the car.

Prisoner
The train arrived at Auschwitz. The passengers poured out of the cars and were greeted by a large crowd of people frantically yelling names of friends and family. In the crowd, Dorman saw her mother and grandmother for the last time.

Auschwitz-Birkenau was a 400 acre extermination camp located in a German controlled area of Poland. Auschwitz was equivalent in size to 20 Safeco Fields in a square formation.

New prisoners who came to Auschwitz were sorted according to age and physical shape. Kertesz and Dorman were in the same group. Their group was ordered to take off their clothes and enter a room full of shower heads.

These rooms were used for group showers or gas chambers. Each person’s fate of cleanliness or death depended on
which button the shower room operator pushed. Dorman's group was revived with fresh water.

"That was the best shower I've ever had," Dorman said with a smile. "It was delicious. At the time I did not know these rooms were also used as gas chambers."

The barracks Dorman lived in were empty rooms with dirt floors and a minimal roof. She said at night everyone slept on the floor in the fetal position, using a neighbor's backside for a pillow. Prisoners were not allowed inside the barracks during the daytime, so they wandered around outside.

"For years I couldn't get (the stench of the air) out of my nose," Dorman said in her book. "The air smelled of a heavy substance, that couldn't be identified. It was offensive and it would not go away. Some days it was stronger than other days, but it was always present. One couldn't get used to it, nor could one get away from it."

Prisoners were offered minimal amounts of food. In the morning they received a liquid the Nazi's called coffee, but Dorman said it did not smell or taste like coffee. In the afternoon they were offered what the Nazi's considered food. Dorman said it looked like glue, and she could not identify any food elements in it. She often noticed wood and coal particles in the food and did not eat until she had been in the camp for 10 days.

"It's hard to find the words to describe what that type of hunger is like," said Ray Wolpow, Western Washington University's chair of the secondary education of Woodring College of Education and director of the Northwest Center for Holocaust Education. "Each day we feel hungry, but how does a Holocaust survivor find a word to describe what 10 days of hunger feels like?"

Wolpow has been working with Holocaust survivors since 1996 and said many struggle with the proper words to describe their horrifying experience.

Dorman made a commitment to herself to survive. She decided she would force herself to eat what they offered her, so she could return home.

Dorman shows the only picture she has of her and her cousin, Kertesz, in Hungary soon after being freed from Nazi camps.

Ill woman

After seven weeks in the camp, each woman was inspected for scarlet fever. Dorman had scarlet fever and spent six weeks in quarantine. The quarantine had much nicer bunk beds and real food. Later she found out the quarantine was an intervention of the American Red Cross.

Dorman was extremely sick for a few weeks, but while in quarantine she was reunited with friends. She was reunited with her friend Marta. When the women began to get restless and gloomy, Marta asked Dorman if she was still able to recite poetry. Dorman said the poems poured out of her.

At that time in her life, she had about 1,000 poems memorized that were ready to be recited with feeling and rhythm, she said in her book. Each afternoon, she would stand in front of the other sick women and recite poems. At night she would lie in bed and think of what poems she could share the next day.

"All of us were trying to think of ways to pass the time to (lessen) the misery," Dorman said.

She recovered from scarlet fever and was released from quarantine back to her old barracks group. This group was sorted again. The prisoners were stripped naked, and the soldiers inspected to see if the women had any muscle mass left. Kertesz and Dorman were in the muscle mass group and were put on a train to Beregen-Belsen. This camp was dedicated to fattening prisoners before sending them to work camps.

After two weeks at Beregen-Belsen, Dorman became ill with typhoid fever. She had a high fever, stomach pain and bloody diarrhea. She and Kertesz investigated the infirmary, but did not stay because her instinct told her the sick were left to die. Instead, she sat quietly and suffered alone.

After three weeks at Beregen-Belsen, prisoners marched for miles to the trains to be shipped to work camps. Still sick with typhoid fever, Dorman knew the march could
kill her. But her will to stay with Kertesz was stronger than her will to give into death. She remembers telling her legs that, "They were not sick and they had to carry me."

Factory worker
After boarding the trains, Dorman and Kertesz arrived at Salzwedel, another work camp in southern Germany. Their first morning at camp, the prisoners were brought to the ammunition factory for orientation.

The crowd stood and listened to directions from soldiers, but Dorman was ill with typhoid fever and sat on the floor. One of the female soldiers came to her and asked what was wrong. Dorman told her she was feeling ill, and a solider brought her two cups of coffee.

"Not everybody was a monster among them," Dorman said. "I like to admit some were nice— that's the truth."

Free woman
Dorman and the prisoners at Salzwedel were liberated on April 14, 1945, exactly one year after her father was taken.

After liberation, Dorman and Kertesz were taken to Camp Vassar, a facility with dorms, cafeteria and many buildings. Here the former prisoners were offered a buffet all day long, bolts of fabric to craft new clothing and rehabilitation assistance from the American and British armies.

Dorman's persistence and persuasiveness took her and Kertesz back to Hungary. When Dorman arrived in Kecskemet, she went to visit one of her aunts. As she charged up the stairs to her aunt's apartment, she passed an elderly man.

Dorman did not recognize the elderly man at first. But her instinct told her to stop and look at him again. Dorman realized the man was her father. They rushed into each others arms and laughed and cried.

Scarred woman
"With all the difficulties, with all the pain, the hunger, the injustice, the status of life, the loss of dignity; the real suffering began after my arrival back home," Dorman wrote in her book. "It's true I had my father, for which I thank God forever. But nine members of my family did not make it. For a whole year after I was back home, I had nightmares every night, hearing my mother's voice, frantically calling my name at the arrival of Auschwitz. I broke out in cold sweats and couldn't fall back asleep."

Although life after the Holocaust was difficult for Dorman, she persevered. She studied to become an actress for a year in the late 1940s, and in 1950 moved with her first husband and daughter to America. She has lived in various parts of the country, working as a fashion designer for sportswear, lingerie and uniforms.

In her book, Dorman describes Kertesz as her guardian angel. She attributes her survival of the Holocaust to her will to live and the companionship of Kertesz. After liberation Kertesz was reunited with her husband, started a family and moved to America in 1956. At age 52, Kertesz was diagnosed with cancer and died. Dorman keeps in touch with Kertesz's widow, and two children.

Three years ago Dorman and her third husband moved to Bellingham to be closer to her daughter.

As the sunlight shines in Dorman's living room, she pauses and looks out the window. Her story is a testimony of the resilience of the human spirit.

"Thank you for letting me share my story with you," Dorman said. "It takes a weight off my shoulders each time I have the opportunity to share it."

This whirlwind is not a Jewish thing.

Though millions of Jews were selected.

It is not a human thing,

Though "human beings" planned and dismembered others.

It is not even a place,

Although this factory consumed two hundred hectares
And ponds and fields full of ashes

Even a lie can be real ... real beyond my greatest nightmare.

Perverse as this may seem,

My inability to find words, to sleep, is comforting and affirming

To remember those who perished here,

To be disconnected by how they suffered

Is a mitzvah.

For me, the terror is in the thought that

Humanity may choose to forget.

Ray Wolpow, 1994
Auschwitz – A name that commonly makes people cringe and a place where death, despair and pain prevailed. Josh Dumond recounts his experience after walking through a World War II death camp. Photos by Josh Dumond.

AUSCHWITZ, POLAND — When I first saw endless rows of barbwire fences, the remains of poorly built brick structures, and the memorials of flowers and candles, an overwhelming sinister feeling came over me. Silence made its blistering presence, anticipation grew, and my stomach rose to my throat as I had no idea what to expect after stepping off the bus.

Located approximately 80 miles from Krakow, Auschwitz is home to the most notorious Nazi concentration camp during World War II and is vividly portrayed in the movie “Schindler’s List.” Divided into two adjacent camps named Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II - Birkenau, it is a place I had heard of and read about, but had never thought about seeing in person. On a cold and soggy October morning I found myself inside the camp’s museum with 13 of my fellow college students, gazing through a doorway at what was possibly the most evil and inhumane place on earth.

Our tour guide was a short, thin, blonde, Polish woman in her 20s. Her English was clear, but she spoke fast. Her emotions made it evident that Auschwitz was not a place that even an everyday tour guide could get used to as she held back tears for much of the time that she spoke.

She led us to the gate which had the cynical inscription, “Work shall set you free.” Overtaken by those misleading words, the rows of run-down barracks, endless gravel trails and ominous black-painted guard towers, our guide spoke about how Nazi soldiers hand picked people of various nationalities to perish immediately in gas chambers after reaching the camp.

The Nazis sent 1,113,000 prisoners to Auschwitz including 1,100,000 Jews, 150,000 Poles and approximately 23,000 Gypsies from several European countries from 1942
to 1945. The remaining 40,000 were prisoners of war from the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, France and the Ukraine. Most would not survive the Nazi's torture.

As we walked toward a museum with items prisoners had owned, I noticed an Israeli youth group standing outside the building that was titled “extermination.” All of us stopped immediately and watched some of the Jewish teenagers waving blue and white Israeli flags portraying the Star of David. We discreetly took pictures. I found myself on the verge of tears and we were only 20 minutes into the tour.

We then walked inside a brick building that housed portraits of Jewish prisoners whom the Nazis murdered in the camp. The Nazis forced some of these prisoners to work in the camp and if they chose not to, they were sent to the gas chambers for immediate death.

The prisoners were clean-cut, wore zebra-like uniforms, and most of them kept a straight and solemn face. But the most eerie and daunting feeling came when I realized that some of the prisoners smiled precariously at me as if they did not know the Nazis had plans to murder them in the days to come.

As much as I wanted to talk about what I was experiencing, I could not overcome the shock from what I was seeing and put it into words. I did not disturb the other's thoughts – even with a faint whisper. I knew it would take a long time for me to absorb everything to the point where I felt comfortable enough to talk about my feelings.

The ear-splitting silence continued throughout the next two buildings as the only person talking was our guide. The living quarters were inhumane. Beds were divided into triple bunks that were outlined in brick and separated with wood palletes and straw mattresses: the place reminded me of a horse stable. I became alarmed that I was standing in a building where so many innocent people had been tortured and killed. I wanted to do something about it, but could do nothing but endure a feeling of dejection I had never felt before.

Walking wordlessly into the museum, I smelled a distinctive stench I will never forget. Everyone in the dark room turned up their nose at the stale and musty smell of 4,300 pounds of human hair that was cut from the hopeless prisoners and was used to make cloth. The museum also had 36,000 pots and pans, 3,500 suitcases and other items including umbrellas, combs and shaving brushes. To me, the items individualized the prisoners because I could relate the belongings to the people who actually used them.

Now, after two hours, everyone including our guide remained silent. I did not know where we were going but as the tall, lanky, brick chimney came into focus, I knew we were about to walk into a building that symbolized destruction of innocent life.

With its utterly dull and aged concrete exterior, the brick building was the most wretched structure I had ever seen. When we reached the basement, it was lit only by candles that signified memorials for people who had died in the room, but this did not take away the aura of evil that was infused in my brain from the moment I walked into the room. I could only bear to glimpse at the pitiful steel and brick incinerators because I knew that thousands of prisoners had perished in the ovens.

The most poignant moment came in the basement when I noticed the Star of David, likely engraved by a prisoner, etched in white on the tan wall. I could only think about the final moments of terror a Jewish person suffered as he or she hopelessly carved the symbol into the wall to signify a dedication to faith and defiance of the Nazis while awaiting brutal murder.

I knew before visiting that six million prisoners had died in Nazi concentration camps in Europe. I was never able to look past that number until I visited the camp and realized that each one of these prisoners lived an individual life. Each had their own individual story and most of them were never able to tell it.

As we boarded the bus I sat in my seat without making a sound. The emotionally draining day was only half way through as we were now going to visit a second concentration camp – Auschwitz II - Birkenau.
Jimmy Henry loses himself reciting his poetry during an open-mic night at Stuart’s Coffee House in downtown Bellingham.
As Jimmy Henry rifles through the half-dozen plastic bags full of raggedy t-shirts and sweaters, he picks each item up, inspects it and tosses it onto a pile of clothes beside him. While ripping into each bag, Henry spits verse after verse of his poetry with such rapid naturalness it is unclear whether his words are scripted or not. Regardless, he is eloquent. His words are profound, and he is a wild mix of both brisk and charming. The acute energy heard in his speech is mirrored in his actions, seen over lunch as he nervously fumbles through the chip basket in front of him. Fingering each one, he breaks each chip into dime-size pieces, eating two at a time, and washes it down with an afternoon vodka tonic.

Henry’s store, Blue Moon Clothing Exchange in downtown Bellingham, may seem like the typical vintage clothing store – racks, rounders and bins of loud ’80s skirts and dresses, gaudy ’60s jackets and ’70s t-shirts and pants, yet its atmosphere and ambience are much more inviting than an average thrift shop.

Phil Rose, a graphic designer helping Henry publish his third collection of poetry, agrees that Henry is anything but conventional. “Jimmy’s a real character,” Rose said. “I have trouble seeking out the characters in America. Jimmy is not afraid to say something outrageous.”

Rose met Henry two years ago when he wandered into Blue Moon and found its owner throwing poetry at him. He was immediately attracted to Henry’s wittiness, sense of humor and politically correct societal idioms, which tended to move as quickly as his thoughts.

“Jimmy’s poetry is very erratic,” Rose said. “It’s quite clear that he writes as he thinks.”

TRACING IT BACK

Before arriving in Bellingham in 1997, the Irish-Catholic boy from New York bounced around Montana, Alaska and Utah for 15 years before winding up on the streets of Seattle.

“The good thing about being homeless is that you can do it anywhere,” Henry said, lighting his cigarette. “So I figured with a little bit of freedom, I’ll go somewhere nice.”

Henry discovered his knack for finding vintage clothing in 1982 while working as a bellman at the Old Faithful Inn in Yellowstone National Park in Montana, where he often sold his clothes to the other employees, whether it was the shirt he was wearing or the jacket in his closet.

“People would ask me, ‘Where’d you get that?’ and I’d sell ‘em my shirt,” Henry said. “I was like, wow, I paid one buck for it and sold it for ten.”

Addicted to the hustle of selling vintage clothing, in 1986 Henry moved from Montana to Park City, Utah. Opting to capitalize on the moneyed crowds in the snowy town, he began shopping full-time. His side-gig quickly turned into a profitable endeavor, often bringing in $6,000 a week.

Despite his success, his rather fulfilling life quickly turned sour and Henry’s happiness faded: his parents were ill in New York; the owner of the antique mall in Park City ran her business to the ground, leaving Henry without a venue to sell his clothing and antiques; but perhaps the most detrimental was his break-up with Cynthia, a born-again Christian girl from Chicago. After the breakup, Henry, who grew up with a Steinbeck novel in hand, began writing poetry, which became one of the only constants amid the erratic events of his past decade.

Brokenhearted with nowhere he wanted to go, Henry “took time off to go nuts and be homeless.” He was on the road with no place to live, no one to visit and no plan whatsoever.
"WHADDA YA DO FOR THE RUSH?"

Henry worked odd jobs over the next four years, yet more constant were his trips in and out of detox centers — blowing all his money on cocaine and bars, including a one-night $1,800 binge at an Alaskan bar.

"I guess I just wanted to find out what would happen," Henry said, extinguishing his half-smoked cigarette. "What do you do in life? You take Prozac and you get more TV channels, but where's the adventure? What else can you do other than go nuts, end up homeless and see what happens? Where's the danger in modern life? Oh, you can rock climb with a bunch of yuppies who wear helmets. Nah way, man. Whadda ya do for the rush?"

In 1994, Henry moved to Alaska, where he lived for several months working as a janitor and put the majority of his energy than two years on the streets, Henry needed a new scene. In 1996, on the whim of a friend's recommendation, Henry caught a Greyhound from Seattle to Bellingham.

"Someone told me they have a nice mission here. I'd gotten kicked out of all the ones in Seattle, and so I figured I might as well go somewhere decent," Henry said.

He hitchhiked a ride from the bus station to the Lighthouse Mission, a Christian non-profit organization which provides temporary shelter. Yet instead of going inside, he headed straight to the Exxon station across the street to buy four celebratory 40-ounce beers and sat by the railroad tracks. He passed out near the tracks and woke up the next morning in a detox center, not remembering a moment of the previous night.

He spent the next several months living at the mission, working out at the YMCA for three hours, wandering around town and reading and writing poetry at the library.

Left: A sign outside Henry's vintage clothing store he opened in 1999. Middle: Sitting in corner quietly sorting through piles of clothes, Henry is interrupted by an inquiring customer. Right: Shoppers peruse racks of vintage clothes.

into writing. A few months later, it was getting too cold, and Henry was bored. He grabbed his old war helmet and his bottle of whisky, stood on the edge of the highway and hitchhiked a ride south to Seattle.

With no money and no place to stay, Henry spent his nights in numerous missions near Pioneer Square in downtown Seattle, staying at each until he was kicked out. His habitual grind of moving in and out of missions and detox centers became monotonous and Henry, again, was bored. Not wanting to sleep on the streets, Henry had one last option.

"When you really want to have a good time, the Club Med for the homeless is the Harborview Psych Ward," Henry said, picking up his lighter to re-light the cigarette he had put out just minutes before. "Everyone's nice to you. If you're drunk and you've been smoking crack, they're not gonna take you if you feel lousy, 'cause that's part of the rock bottom process. However, if you call the cops and say there's a white boy down at Pike Place and he's gotta gun, the cops are there in seven seconds. That's the way to get in. I was there for two weeks. It was real nice."

After a couple times in and out of the psych ward and more

Despite attempts to have a healthy life, Henry was still manically depressed. In efforts to escape his thoughts, he would lose himself in 10-day drinking sprees, checking in and out of detox centers while casting himself further into the constant anguish his life had become.

"I used to get drunk for days," Henry said. "I was a mess because I didn't want to live. I didn't want to breathe."

Yet on Christmas Eve in 1996, after approximately six months in Bellingham and more than two years without a home, Henry refused to spend another Christmas in a mission. In the midst of a snowstorm, Henry headed to Bellis Fair Mall, stood on the corner by McDonalds and held a sign that read, "Jesus was homeless too. Thank you and God bless."

Apathetic drivers yelled at him, gave him the finger or would ignore him altogether. Compassionate drivers gave him what they could — gloves, a buck or a smile. He left that evening with more than $300, but more valuable to Henry was the blind compassion of a 7-year-old girl's gift of 35 cents that struck something in him. Starting the next day he was determined to get his life back in working order.
A FRESH START

Henry began reading his work at Stuart's Coffee House's weekly poetry slams, and would often pop into Tara Jeans, a neighboring vintage clothing store, to chat with its owner Ed Thomas, also Stuart's original owner before he sold it to his son. Thomas was impressed with Henry's aptitude for clothing, and his personable character made him amusing to be around.

"(Jimmy) has seen the tough part of life and the good part," Thomas said. "He'll make you chuckle every time you talk to him.

Thomas closed Tara Jeans so that his son could expand Stuart's. Both Thomas and Henry had nothing to do and were in need of a new gig. With $1,000 each and leftover clothing and fixtures from Tara Jeans, Thomas said they opened Blue Moon Vintage Clothing store on a shoestring budget. Being the seasoned vintage connoisseur that he was, Henry returned to what he knew best—buying and selling clothes.

"If you're too nuts to work for anyone else, you realize your limitations and you do what you can," Henry said.

The store was successful, and in 1999 Henry moved the store two doors down to its current location.

No longer a "Skid Row drunk," Henry was finally getting back the life he once had and the one he so desperately missed. A few years later, Henry bought Thomas out of the store.

Now, Henry spends his days working and writing, with his only complaint being that he rarely has time off. Last year he worked 182 days straight, but Henry doesn't think twice about it.

"At times it's really draining, but who am I to bitch?" Henry said. "I remind myself of that everyday. When I was on the streets I was like, man, I'm really going to take this bohemian bullshit to the point where it's going to kill me. I don't want much out of life, just to be acknowledged for doing something right, whether it's life or writing. I just want to be regarded as intelligent."

Over the past few years, Henry has visited several local schools speaking to classes about writing, and reading poetry from his published pamphlets "It Takes a Whole Mall to Raise a Child" and "Women are From Venus, Men are From Bars."

Henry said he needs not more than man's basic needs, and as long as he continues to write, he has no complaints.

While Henry is known for many things, his strong sense of compassion and generosity set him apart from others.

Rose recalls one day the two of them were downtown, and a man who had just been released from jail was asking Henry to give him a pair of boots. He told him to come to the store to pick out a pair, but there was a catch—the man would get the boots only if he was sober.

"Try to do whatever you can, but try to be humane about it," Henry said. "Treat everyone as an individual, and treat everyone with respect. They know it when you don't."

The benevolence Henry found in both friends and strangers alike spawned his "don't sweat the small stuff" attitude. In a tough economy, Henry said this outlook has helped him stay in business.

"Business lately (has been tough)," Henry said. "I care about it, but if something's 12 bucks and you've got six, ppsshh it's yours."

Henry breaks away as he is speaking, nearly mid-sentence, to chat with a young man who is trying on an old leather jacket. Broke and jobless, the young man passes on the coat but leaves with a smile on his face after Henry gives him the names of a few people to see about a job.

"Twenty bucks for the coat, but it goes up to 25 when you get a job," Henry said. "I don't want you spending your rent money on a stupid coat. Let's get you workin', man."

Left: Henry lounges behind the counter chatting with customers. Middle: Henry frantically jots down new poems and thoughts before performing at Stuart's Coffee House. Right: Henry grabs a ladder to replace a burnt-out light bulb.

Klipsun { 17 }
At the age of 13, while his peers were dealing with the rigors of adolescence, Barry Massey began serving a life sentence for murder. Jessie Bowden tells the story of the mistake he made and the childhood he lost. Photos courtesy of Jaida Kimmerer.

Once or twice every other week, Barry Massey, 30, casually strides down a long hallway lined with bright, colorful murals. At the end of the hall, he along with the painted murals of fish and Disney characters, enters a room full of tables surrounded by people talking to their family and friends. Barry glances around the room and quickly finds his mother seated at one of the wooden tables near the corner. As he walks toward her, she stands up and the two hug.

For a couple of hours they sit across from each other, talking about family and friends; they discuss what each has been doing since their last visit. Sometimes they play cards or get a snack from the vending machine. When their visit is over they stand up, hug and say goodbye. Diann Massey, Barry's mother turns around, with many other mothers in front and behind her and leaves her son in the Monroe, Washington State Reformatory's visiting room, just as she has done for the past 17 years.

In 1987, at the age of 13, Barry became the youngest person in Washington State history to be sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Today, nearly two decades later, the ruling still stands. "I was so young (at sentencing) that I couldn't really fathom what had happened to me," Barry said.

Barry spent the first 13 years of his childhood like most
KIDS ARE NOT BAD; PRESSURE FROM YOUR PEERS CONVINCES YOU TO DO THINGS THAT YOU WOULDN'T NORMALLY DO.

WE ALL DO THIS IN OUR LIVES.

— Barry Massey

other children. He was born into a hardworking, middle-class family in Tacoma and attended school until sixth grade. He loved sports — football especially. He rode his bike up and down the neighborhood streets and spent the night at friend's houses. He also began experiencing 'puppy love' as he called it. Like many 13-year-old boys, he wanted to be a professional football player when he grew up. Barry said his bedroom walls and school locker were plastered with pictures of professional athletes.

"I just wanted to play football," Barry said. "I had no desire to do anything else."

Until December 1986, Barry had never been in trouble. "He was a good kid," Diann said. "He played sports, and all the teachers liked him."

However, Barry said, looking back, he believed he was not receiving enough attention at home and began spending time with 15-year-old Michael Harris, his older brother's friend, who had a criminal record.

Despite the warnings Barry received from his mother about hanging around Harris, Barry continued.

"It was a mother's instinct," Diann said. "I knew the second I met him."

In December 1986, Barry and Harris burglarized a house on Harris' paper route. What they stole would greatly affect the rest of their lives, not to mention many others.

"He only knew him for one week," Diann said.

On January 10, 1987 Barry and Harris attempted to rob a marina market owned by Paul Wang. Barry said he was going to use the money to buy candy and Garbage Pail Kids.

"A lot of kids suffer from peer pressure," Barry said. "Kids are not bad; pressure from your peers convinces you to do things that you wouldn't normally do. We all do this in our lives. My situation was way worse than most. There was never any intent to harm anyone. We didn't want anyone to get hurt."

The two boys shot Wang, a husband and father of two, twice with a gun they had stolen the month before and stabbed him seven times. Barry and Harris were tried and convicted as adults for aggravated first-degree murder.

Now, at 30-years-old, standing 6 feet 2 inches tall and weighing 210 pounds, Barry's body may look to be one of a stereotypical inmate. His frame: pecs, abs and arms are chiseled from 17 years of virtually unlimited time in the weight room. A few tattoos cover his dark brown skin, including the one on his left pec, that reads his mother's name, Diann.

His face however, is almost that of the 13-year-old he left in Tacoma, yearning for candy and Garbage Pail Kids. His smooth skin, eyes so dark the pupil is barely noticeable and perfect smile convey an image of innocence; one which would make it hard for anyone to see him as the monster some may believe him to be.
tried as an adult.

Barry and his family were unable to afford a lawyer, so one was appointed to him. It turned out to be his basketball coach, a lawyer, who had never tried a case in court.

Originally, after sentencing, Barry was sent to Washington Correction Center in Shelton. Because he was so young, no one knew what to do with him, and he ended up spending most of his time in seclusion. After complaints by his mother about his isolation, Barry was transferred to Washington State Reformatory in Monroe. For a short time, Barry was sent to Walla Walla State Reformatory, however, he has been in Monroe the majority of his sentence.

Barry said that in Monroe he became somewhat of a novelty among older inmates and they sheltered him from abuse.

"A lot of older guys in here were mentors to me and helped me out," Barry said. "I spent three or four years with one mentor. He got me reading and into school."

In the beginning, however, he said he would get into fights trying to prove himself.

"I was so young and unconscious to my life in general," Barry said. "I was unconscious to what I was missing. When you haven't experienced something, you can't miss it. I didn't miss my freedom, my friends. I didn't miss the mall or the ice cream shop or the movies. I never experienced any of them."

In order to get through the tough years of puberty and the beginnings of becoming a man, Barry said he threw himself into physical activity.

"At that stage my mom would come up and visit all the time and I would just play sports," he said.

Barry's father also came to visit frequently in the early years; however, Barry said he is and always has been closer to his mother.

Since then Barry has grown up inside the prison walls. He has never had the opportunity to drive a car, go grocery shopping for himself or even attend a school dance. He has never listened to a CD or seen a DVD; things many people take for granted.

Barry said that since the age of 18 he has taken it upon himself to pass the General Educational Development test. He is involved in many programs within the prison, such as Youth and Consequences, where he speaks to troubled youths about life in prison, The Black Prisoners Caucus and the Prisoners Awareness Program.

"If I could take it all back, I wish no one would have gotten hurt," Barry said. "But the growth that I have experienced made me a better person, something that I would have never been. I love who I am now. I broke my mom's heart when I came here. For a lot of years she was emotionally broken. I didn't understand until I was 25 or 26. I didn't understand because she was there and she was a strong woman, but for a long time she was emotionally broken."

If he was not in prison, Barry said he believes he might be playing sports right now.

"I was pretty good when I was younger," he said. "I think I would have gone to college and got my education. But I could have been nothing. You never know."

Barry now has a job making $8 an hour as a metal fabricator inside the prison. While working, he wakes up at 6:30 a.m. every morning to eat breakfast, works from 7:30 a.m. until 3:30 p.m., has dinner at 4:30 p.m., after which he goes to the gym for a couple of hours. However, once 8:15 p.m. rolls around he must be back in his cell for the rest of the night, where he reads or writes letters until he goes to sleep.

"You can read or watch TV all night if you want," Barry said. "I don't watch TV, though, because it's a waste of time."

When he is not working, Barry's schedule is more open. He said he usually goes to the gym in the morning, takes a shower and then reads or takes a nap. After lunch he will either go to the library or see if there is any extra work available.

Up until a couple of months ago, Barry said he did not always sleep through the night.

"I used to have nightmares really bad," Barry said. "I think that they were about getting out 'cause I would wake up in the middle of the night, shaking the bars of my cell."

As of now, Barry's sentence still remains life without the possibility of parole. However, he is always in contact with the lawyers now representing him, regarding appeals.

If he were to get out, Barry said he knows exactly where he would go.

"I would visit my grandma," he said. "She hasn't visited me in a while because she's been sick. My mom doesn't come up as much either because she is my grandma's primary care-taker."

Barry said he would like to have a job involving physical fitness, if he ever does get out.

"Physical training is important to me," he said. "It has helped me maintain my sanity. I would like to do something like that, whether it be personal training or just working at a gym."

Barry said he will be the first to admit that he made a terrible mistake when he was 13-years-old. He said he has done more with his life in prison than he would if he was on the streets. He continues to work at improving his mind and his body.

"If I do get out, I'm going to be prepared," Barry said. "I don't want to get out and not know what to do."

Barry, 26-years-old in this photo, spends his days working within the prison, reading, writing letters and working out.
"If I could take it all back, I wish no one would have gotten hurt ... but the growth that I have experienced made me a better person, something that I would have never been.

I love who I am now."

— Barry Massey

Excerpt from a letter Barry wrote to the father of a friend, December 2003:
Illegal in most of the world due to its hallucinogenic properties, absinth is far more than your run-of-the-mill alcohol. Lee Fehrenbacher hits the streets of Prague, Czech Republic to investigate — and indulge in — the legendary liquor. Photo by Lee Fehrenbacher.
With knees bent, back arched and head hanging, my body slouched like a question mark as I stared into the bowels of a dirty toilet. For fifteen minutes I crouched there, trying to exert diplomacy in my stomach, as a battle waged between a cheap bottle of wine and the shot of absinth I had just taken.

Until I came to Prague, Czech Republic I had never heard of absinth before, but finding it in practically every bar, supermarket and hot dog stand, it was hard not to be curious about the drink.

"You hardly find any spirit that has such an amazing history," said Radomir Horacek, who is in charge of exports for BBH Spirits, one of the group of companies for Green Bohemia Company, which began distributing Czech absinth to the United Kingdom in 1998.

Even drinking absinth requires a ritualistic preparation. In the Czech Republic, a spoonful of sugar is dipped into a shot of the bright, neon-green liquid and then lit on fire. Underneath a blanket of light blue flame, the sugar bubbles until fully caramelized and then dipped back into the shot and mixed. As the sugar dissolves into the absinth, a bright blue flame leaps from the top of the glass before it is extinguished by an equal part of water.

While this type of presentation is a long practiced Czech forte, absinth has been a familiar habit for many throughout history. References to absinth date as far back as the Book of Revelations, "And the name of the star is called wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter."

Wormwood, a main ingredient in absinth, contains the chemical thujone, a substance similar to tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) in cannabis. While thujone is known to have hallucinogenic properties, the level of the chemical in today's absinth is well within the Czech legal limit, which is approximately 35 percent, Horacek said.

Absinth's true popularity began in the late 19th century, when it was issued as a malaria preventative to French soldiers fighting in Africa. When the soldiers returned home, they brought their taste for absinth with them. By the late 19th century, failures in grape harvests caused the price of wine to soar while the price of absinth dropped. Millions of liters of La Fee Verte (The Green Fairy as it came to be called) were consumed each year, and it became fashionable in artistic circles. Among some of its most avid drinkers were Van Gogh, Oscar Wilde, Charles Baudelaire and Ernest Hemingway.

"A glass of absinth is as poetical as anything in the world," Wilde once said, "What difference is there between a glass of absinth and a sunset?"

In more recent times, former Czech president and writer Vaclav Havel have also been fans of absinth, Horacek said.

"Havel came to the Café Slavia about once a week," Horacek said. "He sat in the corner ... with guards around him and he was drinking absinth."

While popular, the main ingredient, wormwood, was said to rot the brain, and the 70 percent alcohol content contributed to the increase in alcoholism in the late 19th century. By 1914, these concerns, along with pressure from wine makers, caused the ban of absinth in most countries around the world.

Absinth was not banned in Czechoslovakia at that time and in 1920 Albin Hill began producing Hill's Absinth. The drink once again gained popularity and by the 1940s, Hill had two distilleries producing absinth and other alcoholic beverages. But it was not long before the drink was banned again.

"In 1948, the Communists came to all private factories and said 'walk away, this is ours,'" Horacek said. "They had to leave everything, literally everything."

Production ceased as Communist authorities confiscatated or destroyed equipment, cars and personal family property.

It wasn't until 1990, after the Velvet revolution when Communism ended, that Albin Hill's son, Radomil Hill, was able to rebuild the family business. With many of the original recipes memorized, Radomil Hill resumed the production of absinth. In 1998, Green Bohemia began exporting Hill's Absinth, through Bohemia Beer House, to the UK and once again introduced absinth to the global market.

Horacek said that it is possible to buy absinth in the United States — even though it is illegal in America — through their Web site. Horacek said that absinth is also available in Spain, Italy and Germany, but it's still an attraction for foreigners in the Czech Republic.

"People do like to come to Prague to try Czech absinth," Horacek said. "Besides Czech beer, besides Czech girls."

Paul Belin, a 20-year-old bartender from Baltimore working at the Marquis de Sade, said as a waitress in Brno, a city East of Prague, she never once sold absinth to the mostly Czech clientele. Now in the more tourist-haven Prague, she said she sells about five shots per day. One shot costs approximately $2 to $3 U.S. dollars.

One of those five shots belonged to Chicago native Jim Zellinger, who decided to celebrate his 30th birthday with a shot of the throat-burning liquid.

"I've never felt a shot in my brain before," Zellinger said. "In the synapses of your brain you can almost feel the absinth sitting there, there is almost a surreal quality to it."

While the wormwood levels are strictly regulated now, Horacek said that today's absinth could have strange affects on the mind.

"I must admit that if you drink absinth ... you might have some very interesting dreams, something you never dreamed of," he said.

Horacek said no other alcohol affected him this way and he thought it was most likely because of the herbs in absinth.

"Everyone has their own experience with absinth," Horacek said. "They start to see things like they really are, not like they appear, but how they really are."

While I can't claim such a revelation from my own experience, I can say that I emerged from the bathroom victorious — I imagined I could have held my own with Hemingway. And while I had no hallucinations, that night I think I experienced some absinth dreams of my own: I dreamt I could move objects with my mind, and with deep concentration, I could make myself fly. That is until I awoke and felt under the weight of a major hangover.

References to absinth date as far back as the Book of Revelations, "And the name of the star is called wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter."
Lois Wade, owner of Creatures Comfort, cradles one of her many feline friends she feeds and houses.

Kittens, cats, felines ... stray, feral or tame, Lois Wade adopts them all. With anywhere from 90 to 140 cats living in her house at one time, Wade is true cat lover. **Bobby Hollowwa** describes her passion behind Creatures Comfort. Photos by **Joshua Fejeran**.
Lois Wade’s deck is filled with cages, which remain empty during the winter season. One cage, however, contains a lone cat that sits curled up in a box.

"This cat, Felix, was one of our bully cats and needed to be put in the cage," Wade says. "We took him out of one of the trailers for picking on the other cats."

While only one can sit inside the cage, many others roam throughout the house. At any given time 90 to 140 stray and feral cats call Creatures Comfort home.

Wade, 59, operator and owner of Creatures Comfort in Bellingham has made her house a home for stray and feral cats. Feral cats do not normally like humans and need work getting used to interaction with people. The past 15 years she has taken in cats from across the Whatcom County area.

"There was no one else to do the job," Wade says sitting with one cat curled up in her lap and another resting beside her. "I felt it was either help out or let a lot of cats die or worse yet, have more kittens."

Wade’s business began in 1988 when she agreed to help the Fairhaven community with an out-of-control stray cat population.

"There was a colony of black cats that had taken over the city," Wade says. "There was a myth that someone was raising them for their pelts many years ago."

Wade trapped around 60 cats and with the financial help of the local Kitty Committee the cats were spayed and neutered. The Kitty Committee is a local organization that cares for strays, providing food, medicine and adoption.

Of the 60 cats, 30 were released back to where they came from because they could not be trained to live with owners. Wade took the remaining kittens home to help them become accustomed to people and were eventually sold.

"I actually still have three of the cats that were taken out of Fairhaven," Wade says.

This is where it began for Wade. As she begins to explain how it all started an orange tabby cat jumps up from the floor and sits on Wade’s lap. Seeing this, another cat from across the room comes over and sits next to Wade, stretching its long legs as it begins to relax.

After local residents learned about what Wade did in Fairhaven, word of mouth spread and people from all over the county wanted stray colonies of cats in their community picked up by Wade.

"That is really how things grew so fast out here — people telling one another," Wade says. "Most people do not know how to care for feral cats so I just kind of took on the responsibility."

Wade continued to use the same approach in other areas as she had in Fairhaven catching the cats, having them spayed or neutered and finally releasing them back into the wild or finding homes for each cat. As time passed the number of cats at her home grew.

Wade is able to feed and house the cats by selling cats that are adoptable. Cats not fit for adoption stay at Wade’s house.

"At peak times, during the fall season, we get up to 140 cats here," Wade says. "Making sure that we get adoptions is important because that is where we get revenue to feed all the other non-adopted cats."

Finding room to accommodate 140 felines is not easy when living in an average sized home. They find places to sleep, eat and play anywhere they can. One large gray cat makes his home in the bathroom while another calls Wade’s back room, filled with books and a washer and dryer, home.

"There are cats everywhere around here," Wade says. "During the fall all of the cages on the deck are full of cats as well as the house, trailers and any other space I can find."

In spite of caring for such a large number of feral cats, Wade says she enjoys working with cats.

"When I started I really did not know that much about cats," Wade says. "I have learned so much about cats I cannot even believe it. I really love working with them."

Wade is not alone in her love of felines. She has a number of volunteers and one full time employee who loves cats just as much as she does. A recent article in the Bellingham Herald has brought in even more animals to Wade, making her volunteers and employee necessities.

Lee Averill of Bellingham is coming to Creatures Comfort for the first time and is excited to volunteer. Averill, 78, has spent her entire life around animals.

"I love all animals," Averill says with a smile on her face. "I am not allowed to have pets in my apartment so this is a great way for me to interact with pets."

After arriving at Wade’s house Averill is greeted by Alys Cameron of Ferndale, who shows her enthusiasm for cats on her shirt, which has a kitten and a heart on it. Cameron is a volunteer who has brought upwards of 20 feral felines to Wade.

"I had a really bad stray cat problem in my neighborhood," Cameron says. "I started to feed one of them and that cat died, but he must have passed the message on because I had a lot of cats coming to my house."

Cameron began volunteering at Creatures Comfort after she brought a stray colony of cats to Wade.
In cupboards and cages throughout the house and trailers, cats find space to rest anywhere they can.

"I needed the colony of cats outside of my house to be caught and neutered," Cameron says. "(Wade) gave me a couple of cat traps and told me to trap them myself and then bring them to her. I think she was surprised at how many I caught."

Cameron and Averill's main duty is to socialize with the cats as much as possible. Cameron sits on a seat in one of the trailers and lets the cats come to her. Wade has two trailers that hold up to 20 cats at a time.

"Most people think that you can not make a stray or feral cat a house cat," Cameron says. "But people need to understand that feral cats are not a lost cause."

Cameron pets one of the bigger, black cats and talks about how much work it takes to take care for 90 to 140 cats.

"Wade really has a passion for cats," Cameron says. "She gets so tired feeding all the cats and caring for them but would never let any cat go."

It is apparent when walking into Wade's house that felines are her life. She has a room at the end of her deck devoted to cats. The room is filled with scratching posts and perches for the cats to observe from.

The deck leads into the kitchen which is an 'adoption center' of sorts, filled with medicine for cats, pictures of all sorts of felines from around her property and scales to weigh them.

As Wade stands in the kitchen cats move all around her, from one bedroom to the next and into the living room. Some cats yearn to be pet and others run as soon as they see someone. The living room is filled with cages of cats that have just arrived or are in need of special care. Wade says she often finds felines all around the house, under beds, in bathrooms and anywhere they can find a spot.

The volunteers attempt to brush some of the cats but most of the cats do not want to be touched, due to their feral nature. As Averill makes her attempt to brush Charlie, a light gray and black cat, he squirms and scurries away as Cameron tells about the first cat she brought to Wade, Tommy, a stray cat from the colony around her house.

"I came to (Wade) to see if Tommy could be helped because he was very sick," Cameron said, with tears in her eyes. "But he had to be put to sleep. Sometimes you really can get attached to these cats."

Along with a handful of volunteers, Wade also has one full time employee at Creatures Comfort, Tom McCarthy. McCarthy knows all too well about becoming attached to cats he works with.

"I feel like it is an occupational hazard," McCarthy says, who has taken two cats from Wade's house. "Three is enough for me though, I live in an apartment so there is no more room."

He says being around the cats is therapeutic for him and often changes a sour attitude into a pleasant demeanor.

"With all the work that needs to be done around here it is nice to have someone else to count on," Wade says. "Volunteers are great but because they are volunteers they come only when they can, instead of being here at set times."
Wade says some of the cats she has at Creatures Comfort will never get adopted because they will never be able to live around humans. One of the cats, Barry, a multi-colored cat sits in a cage in the living room. When people approach the area Barry flees to the back corner of his cage.

"Some of the cats have not been around humans for so long they just do not know how to interact," Wade said. "Those cats will live out the rest of their days here with me."

As McCarthy leaves one of the cat trailers, Averill and Cameron enter to do a count of the cats in the trailer. Volunteers always make sure that no cats have escaped in between visits.

"We have yet to see a cat get away from us," Wade says. "But if one were to escape all I have to do is set up a cat trap and catch them."

As the two count the cats in the trailer all sorts come to greet them. Some cats run the moment the trailer door opens while others weave between legs looking for attention as others look for someone to play with.

"Every cat has its own personality and some are a lot more friendly here than others," Cameron says. "We have also named every cat but it's really hard to remember them all."

After Averill and Cameron counted twice they were only 11 cats when there should have been 15. Cameron scours the trailer for the others and opens one of the wood cabinets on the wall to find four cats nestled together hiding from human contact.

Hardly a place someone would think to look for cats, the cabinet is only about the size of a microwave. Averill reaches up to pet a tabby male cat bunched with the others. He returns the favor with a loud hiss.

"That is obviously one of the more feral cats," Averill says as she jumps back from the angry cat.

After making sure all the cats are accounted for and giving love to each cat looking for it, the volunteers head to the house to care for cats that are extremely scared of humans.

Wade says feral cats must learn to be around humans one-step at a time. The first step is to get them used to being held by humans.

"The best way to adjust a cat into being held is putting them into a pillow case," Wade says. "It is a way to make the cats feel more comfortable about being held. It gives them the sense that they can still hide."

The first cat to go into a pillowcase is Barry. Wade grabs Barry and puts him in a large white pillow case despite his best efforts to scratch his way out. Averill then sits down with Barry and begins to pet him inside the pillowcase. After stirring and squirming for a moment Barry settles down.

Though Wade has a strong love for cats she cannot stay in the business forever. She hopes to teach and inspire others so she can eventually retire from the cat business.

"It always picks me up visiting with the cats," McCarthy says. "You're helping to save cats and I feel like you are better off doing something for a good cause."
Klipsun is a Lummi word meaning beautiful sunset

Questions or Comments:
360-650-3737 • klipsunwwu@hotmail.com • http://klipsun.wwu.edu