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Editor’s Note

Going to the chiropractor. A seemingly insignificant event for most people, but what if you are a dog? Part of the joy of editing a publication staffed by students is seeing what sorts of stories they will come up with. Giving few restrictions to our writers ensures that topics they choose will be unique and spontaneous.

In this issue, you will find stories directly related to the experience of their writers. The love for her favorite shoe inspired Christina Twu to investigate the history behind Chuck Taylor All Stars. As an intern for the Seattle Mariners, Katie James stumbled across the story of a Safeco groundskeeper whose skill in landscaping runs in the family.

Stories in this issue reflect the interests, talents and creativity of its writers, and we hope you enjoy reading them as much as we did.

Klipsun encourages readers to let us know how you feel about anything you see in our magazine. 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. Thanks for reading.

Best wishes,

Katie Grimes

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Where the green grass grows
Although he does not swing a big bat or have a stellar arm, Seattle Mariners head groundskeeper Bob Christofferson is a crucial part of the ball club. **Katie James** takes a look at this greener side of baseball. Photos by **Keith Bolling** and **Jamie Carpenter**.

Deep inside Safeco Field, below the hoards of screaming fans and mounds of garlic fries, a dim room, just 10 feet by 15 feet with no windows and ceilings almost too low for a person to stand, is packed with baseball keepsakes. Tattered team pictures, shiny new plaques and dozens of baseballs line the shelves, which, combined with a plush leather couch, a few file cabinets, a desk and a mini-fridge, fill the room to near capacity.

Amid the clutter, head groundskeeper Bob Christofferson, 50, sits in his “apartment” watching the game on a 27-inch television. His short, hefty frame is outfitted with a blue sweatshirt bearing the familiar logo of the Seattle Mariners. A worn baseball cap covers his white hair, and his dry, chapped hands play mindlessly with a corkscrew. On the other side of his office wall lies his “backyard” — a 106,000-square-foot field of grass home to the Mariners ballclub.

After spending the majority of his life in the profession, Christofferson’s attitude toward his job proves one thing: It is his life.

“I enjoy every day I come to work,” he says. “I don’t consider this a job. It’s just part of my life.”

Christofferson’s groundskeeping roots run deep. His father, also Bob, was a game-time groundskeeper at Tacoma’s Cheney Stadium when Christofferson was growing up, and he always immersed his son in his job — he spent countless hours at the stadium with his dad watching its then-inhabitants, the Tacoma Giants, play ball.

“I pretty much lived there,” Christofferson says. “I started off just picking up the bases after the ballgame. At that time they were about as big as me.”

On days when he did not get to go with Dad to the field, he would sneak out of his family’s Tacoma-area home and perch atop Tightwad Hill, which is adjacent to the stadium. “I’d hide behind a bush and watch the game. At the time I didn’t realize that (my dad’s) eyesight was so bad by then that he never would’ve been able to see me anyway,” Christofferson says.

Christofferson continued to work for his father and play baseball himself throughout college at Central Washington University, where he earned a teaching degree. In 1981,
when his father retired, Christofferson was offered a job in what was to become his true calling.

"I kept getting a pink slip every year from teaching school. I got offered to run Cheney Stadium, and it just kinda stuck with me."

During his 19 years as the full-time head groundskeeper at Cheney, Christofferson was responsible for all of the grounds keeping and maintenance duties, manning the parking lot, selling concessions and souvenirs and from time to time even picking up garbage. During his time there, he saw the World Fastpitch Tournament and the Goodwill Games played on his field, as well as a change of franchise, when the Giants became the Tacoma Rainiers in 1965.

"It was a lot of multi-tasking. (During the Goodwill Games), I parked a trailer behind my office and just stayed there. I never left for 10 straight days."

In July of 2000, almost exactly one year after the opening of the new ballpark, he was offered the head groundskeeper position with at Safeco Field.

**Doing things 'the right way'**

On a bright April afternoon, with the sun stretching to every corner of Safeco's 1,172,127 square feet, Christofferson has the field to himself. The reach of the bleachers and the height of the scoreboard dwarf his stocky frame as his red riding lawnmower grazes over the vast green field.

"I'm an old-fashioned traditionalist," he says, pulling his chariot up alongside the visiting dugout. "I don't like those swirlly designs that people are doing nowadays. I like to see things, do things myself. I don't like to use computers. My data's what I see on the field. I like watching the water when it's going onto the grass."

He is admittedly very protective of his field, and those who work with him can see the lengths to which he goes to keep the turf in top condition. Some even say he likes to talk to his grass, which "isn't far from the truth," says Chrisofferson's assistant Tim Wilson. His antics have even earned him a comparison to former Mariners manager Lou Piniella.

"He'll be the first to take care of you and back you up, but if you cross him and his grass, he gets a little sensitive," says Wilson.

His old-school methods are admittedly a result of the years spent observing his father, when tarps did not exist, and the only way to keep a field dry was to keep dumping wheelbarrows of dry sand on top of the wet, which was "the right way," Christofferson says. Nothing about Safeco Field, however, is old school.

A "spider web" of between 20 and 30 miles of heating coils lie 8 inches below the grass, which is made up of 80 percent Kentucky bluegrass and 20 percent perennial ryegrass, according to the Seattle Mariners Web site. Christofferson can pump warm water, usually at a temperature of 50 degrees Fahrenheit, into the coils to heat the ground. The heat also can compensate for extensive shade and low levels of direct sunlight, according to the Web site. A sub-air system also is installed at the stadium that can either suck water out of the grass or blow air into it.

The nature of his job requires him to be at the ballpark virtually every day, though he tries to spend one day per road trip at home with his wife, Cyndy, and children, Tyler, 20, and Lauren, 18, both of whom work with their dad and the grounds crew during the games. Although Christofferson says Tyler and Lauren are not planning to follow in his footsteps, they support what he does.

"This profession requires you to pretty much throw your watch away," he says. "I'm fortunate enough to have a very understanding family. I'm always around the field. Even if I'm at home I'm thinking about the field."

Now a resident of Puyallup, Christofferson says his yard at home pales in comparison to the yard at Safeco.

"It certainly doesn't look as nice as this," he laughs. "Sometimes it looks OK, and sometimes it looks really bad. I put all my energy into this field. I tell people, 'You want to come look at my grass, come up to Safeco.'"

**All in a day's work**

After almost 24 years in the business, Christofferson says he looks forward to game days now as much as ever. He arrives at the ballpark between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m. to complete paperwork, check in with his bosses and create a game-time schedule for his two assistants, three seasonal employees and 13 game-time crew members. On any given night, Christofferson works with a crew of seven people, who are stationed at various points around the park.

"I've got the best crew in baseball," he says, detailing the escapades of their last get-together when they had a potluck in the visiting clubhouse to watch the Mariners' game on the road. "I try to create a family atmosphere for the guys because they put a lot of time in, too. They leave their regular jobs and come here and they don't get home until midnight sometimes, and their families miss them."

Wilson says he even considers Christofferson and himself to be "the best of friends."

"I have a lot of respect for him," Wilson says. "He's personable and he's a hard worker. He loves his grass, and he takes good care of the people who take care of him and his field."

At 11 a.m., Christofferson pulls his lawn mower out of the tunnel in centerfield where he keeps it. He mows the infield into a series of straight, bisecting lines while his assistants, Wilson and Leo Liebert, mow long, straight rows into the outfield. The process,
“Winning is everything here, and the field plays a big part in the outcome of the game.”

— Bob Christofferson
Mariners head groundskeeper

which usually takes approximately 3 1/2 hours to complete, is followed by watering the infield before the visiting team takes the field for batting practice around 2:20 p.m. Christofferson waters the infield two or three times a day depending on the weather.

The first thing I do in the morning when I wake up is look at the weather on the television. I watch it pretty closely. I have to be able to make the call of whether the roof will stay open or will close,” he says.

When the home team takes the field for batting practice and warm-ups, Christofferson is right there with them in the line of fire, dodging baseballs left and right, talking to the players and coaches and smoothing out any imperfections. The visiting team then takes the field, and Christofferson retreats to his office, which he refers to as “a good place to hide.”

“After that, it’s time to come out, line the field, water it one more time, then play ball,” he says. “The day goes quick because there’s a lot in it.”

Christofferson watches the game intently on the television in his office. His eyes scan the green and brown for any divots, holes or imperfections. When he sees something he does not like, he quickly grabs his walkie-talkie, which he rarely lets out of his sight, and radios a member of his crew. Every three innings, Christofferson takes the field, rake in hand and crew in tow, to smooth out the dirt.

“You can’t tell a ballplayer anything”

When the Mariners play at Safeco, it is Christofferson’s job to do everything he can to make winning come a little bit easier. His primary job is to make the field playable for the team. The length and thickness of the grass at Safeco makes it a fast outfield, says Christofferson. The grass is cut to exactly one and 1 1/8 inches.

“Winning is everything here, and the field plays a big part in the outcome of the game,” he says.

Christofferson stays in close contact with the players regarding issues about field conditions. If the infield or grass is too soft or long, it is his job to make it right. According to Christofferson, each pitcher likes the mound prepared a slightly different way.

“(Pitcher) Jamie (Moyer) is very crafty,” he says, hesitant to give away too much information about Seattle’s ace. “He knows what he likes. He likes the mound fairly firm — not hard but firm. He also likes to be able to manipulate the other pitcher. He’ll make a hole (on the mound with his foot) to cause the other guy to get upset.”

Christofferson says he maintains a good relationship with Moyer, who comes to him frequently to talk about his mound preferences. As for the rest of the rotation, he and his crew try to feel each pitcher out by just watching their styles and deliveries.

“We kind of log everything in our heads and try not to keep anything written down,” he says.

Another method of Christofferson’s is sloping the baselines. By adjusting the lay of the dirt, he can cause a ball that otherwise would have been foul to roll fair. The players know the slope of the dirt and use this knowledge when making plays. If something is slightly off, the players bring their complaints straight to Christofferson.

He says that while he does not shy away from any of the play-
Although recording studios traditionally appear in big cities, Bob Ridgley has taken a farm and transformed it into a recording studio that caters to all types of musicians. Paolo Mottola talks about Binary Studios and the art of recording. Photos by Keith Bolling and Paolo Mottola.

A large black mailbox is the only marker on the street identifying a narrow gravel driveway. Splitting a thin wall of trees, the short, bumpy driveway widens, and a panoramic view opens. A two-story house stands off to the left. It is painted brick red with white trim, matching the one-story chicken shed to the right and dairy barn just across the driveway. Behind the buildings are a rolling field of tall, green grass and the beginnings of a dense evergreen forest freckled with deciduous trees budding new leaves.

The 15-acre farm, secluded in a valley off Mount Baker Highway, belongs to 50-year-old "Binary" Bob Ridgley. He lives in the two-story house with his wife, Susan Rice, 45, and a large black cat named Big Pussy, but Ridgley is not a farmer.

Ridgley owns and operates Binary Studios, an audio recording studio located on the farm, which has served musicians for the past 15 years. With the help of two engineers and two part-time interns, Ridgley records a variety of musical styles, from hip-hop to classical, heavy metal to jazz.

"I think the physical space has a lot to do with the recording," Ridgley says. "There are the big cities and the warehouses, but it's scenic up here, and that attracts people. Why else would people be driving up from Seattle to record?"

Besides recording, Binary Studios provides musicians with convenient access to outdoor activities. The studio is situated 20 minutes from Bellingham Bay, so musicians can explore downtown or enjoy water activities at the bay or nearby lakes. They also can ski or hike at Mount Baker, which is 45 minutes from the farm. Musicians have the option to lodge at one of Ridgley's five cabins in the small town of Glacier at the foot of Mount Baker or in the dairy barn, "Studio B."

Ridgley began building his own recording studio 15 years ago to cut the expense of having to rent studios to record musicians. He converted the farm's chicken shed, Studio A, into a professional audio recording studio by himself, except for the specialized caulking and electric wiring. Studio A contains one open room and four isolation rooms for recording, the control room — where songs are produced and mixed — and a lounge. The process took him eight months.

Five years ago, Ridgley remodeled the second story of the...
dairy barn into Studio B, which took five months. The first story of the barn still has milking equipment. Ridgley says the previous owners were dairy farmers who contracted with Dairygold Co-operative Society Ltd. The second story of Studio B has a

“I think the physical space has a lot to do with the recording. There are the big cities and the warehouses, but it's scenic up here, and that attracts people.”

- Bob Ridgley
Owner, Binary Studios

kitchen, sleeping quarters and bathroom. Musicians can plug into the walls of the common living area, across from the kitchen, and utilize the acoustics of the 1,000 square-foot room, with a 28-foot ceiling, while an engineer monitors the recording from Studio A.

In 1980, Ridgley graduated from Western with a bachelor’s degree in music performance and education. He says that after his first recording session, in 1972 at Kay-Smith Studios — now Bad Animal — in Seattle, he started hanging out at recording studios and learning how to engineer and produce.

“I was fascinated by the whole process,” Ridgley says. “Part of being a musician is recording, and I knew it was something I should learn for the future.”

Ridgley began working at various studios throughout Seattle. He worked as a studio musician, who is someone artists hire to record on albums, as well as a contract engineer, the person who records musicians.

“Sometimes I'd be working on different projects at different studios at the same time,” Ridgley says. “When you start out (engineering), you have to do a little studio hustling to make money.”

On the farm, Ridgley educates his interns about the recording, producing and mixing methods he learned during the 32 years he has engineered.

“They help set up for a session and serve as assistants to the engineer during a session,” Ridgley says. “They set up microphones, keep track notes and move equipment. We give them free time to practice their skills and work on their own stuff, too.”

Western junior Matt Bisch, 20, has been interning at Binary Studios since January and said a good recording is as much about people and atmosphere as it is about the technical aspects that he is learning.

“Bob’s not throwing people into something they don’t know about,” Bisch says. “He explains what's going to happen. If musicians are comfortable, the recordings work, and that's why they come back.”

Hard-rock band Cast of Characters is working on its first album at Binary Studios. Guitarist Brendan Madden, 24, says the sessions have been great because the engineers are easy to work with and focus on trying to get them the best sound possible. He says the comfortable environment helps the band stay relaxed while recording.

“When we first went out there, we didn’t know what to expect,” Madden said. “It’s cool because it feels like you’re in the middle of nowhere. If I want to take a break from the music, I can just step out the back door into the pasture and get a breath of fresh air.”

An entire corner of the lounge in Studio A is a cluttered gallery of pho-
tographs of people who have recorded at Binary Studios. Ridgley stands in front of the corner, wearing a music-festival T-shirt and pants. His long, curly brown hair is pulled back in a ponytail under a baseball hat. His eyes, shadowed by the hat's bill, squint through thick lenses as he names some of the people in the photographs and recalls some bands he has recently recorded.

"We had in this blues band from Everett called Station House Blues," Ridgley says. "They were all police officers and one of the guys recently lost his partner in the line of duty. They were going to sell the record and give the proceeds to the family. I thought that was pretty cool."

In early April, Ridgley recorded a concert and jazz band from LaVenture Middle School in Mount Vernon. Band director Amy McSeeley, 41, says she takes her students to Binary Studios because she wants them to create a quality product from their work in class.

"The students work incredibly hard and don't realize how difficult recording actually is," McSeeley says. "It's an application of everything they've learned about, not just music but focus and concentration, too."

Ridgley can sympathize with the students recording music for the first time. He said he can vividly remember the first time he was being recorded at Kay-Smith Studios.

"I was in a jazz group," Ridgley says. "I remember playing, and I just could not get the trumpet solo where I wanted it. I did it over and over again. I don't know if I ever was really happy with it."

Ridgley said he will work with musicians at varying levels of ability because he understands that people are at different stages in their musical development.

"We might get somebody out here that's not that good, but that's where the person's at right now," Ridgley says. "I know people who I recorded when they were kids, and now they're adults, and I see them change over time. So I'm up for anything. You have to start somewhere."

Ridgley points to a few other pictures of classes that have come to record at the farm in recent years. The smiling faces in the photographs look at the wall across the room where a collection of posters hang, picturing jazz legends Charlie Parker, Dexter Gordon, Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis.

Walking into the control room, Ridgley passes a desk on his right stacked with tapes and papers. Above the desk hangs a "Cows with Guns" poster autographed by Dana Lyons, who recorded the comedy record at Binary Studios.

"The song was recorded for a morning radio show and then everyone wanted it," Ridgley says pointing out an illustrated book that he saw inspired by the song on the desk. "It went number one in Australia."

Ridgley says comedy is one of many forms of audio that people have recorded over the years at the farm, but much of what he records at Binary Studios mirrors the trends of the time.

"For a while there, it was a lot of art music. Then it was the whole grunge
thing. Then we started seeing hip-hop and metal," Ridgley said.

In the control room, Ridgley sits down in front of the mixing board and two computer monitors. The mixing board contains enough knobs, buttons and switches to satisfy an airplane cockpit. To the left and right of Ridgley are small, black speakers used for playback. A small monitor in the top left corner of the room, used to watch recordings in Studio B, is turned off. The window in front of him looks out into the open room of Studio A.

"We get a lot of local bands in," Ridgley said. "A lot of them are putting demos together so they can get gigs around town. We set them up, get the sound happening, get them comfortable. They play their material and record some parts afterwards, called overdubs. Then we mix it, master it and they walk out with a CD."

Cathouse Blues Band lead singer Kurt Aemmer, 51, said Binary Studios provided his band members with the warm vinyl sound they were looking for when they recorded their first album, "It seemed like a good idea at the time..." The Washington Blues Society nominated the album for Best Washington Blues Recording in 2004.

“When I walk behind the studio to the backyard, it feels like I’m at a friend’s house when I was a kid,” he said. “You don’t feel that way too often at 51. It’s a really personal experience, being out there, for me.”

–Kurt Aemmer
Singer

“Our engineer, Dave Weldon, was amazing," Aemmer said. "We were able to communicate to him what we wanted, and he’d do everything to get it for us. I was really surprised.”

Aemmer was born in Bellingham and said that when he drives out to Binary Studios, he drives past the house on Sunset Drive where he grew up.

“When I walk behind the studio to the backyard, it feels like I’m at a friend’s house when I was a kid,” Aemmer said. “You don’t feel that way too often at 51. It’s a really personal experience, being out there, for me.”

Ridgley understands.

“It’s about the idea of getting out of where you’re at,” Ridgley said. “There has to be inspiration, a creative space. Different people need different places to create.”
An eagle with a pedicure, a one-eyed hawk and an owl that is afraid of the dark are all residents at the Sardis Raptor Center in Ferndale. Take a walk on the wild side with Kelseyanne Johnson as she explores the time and tears it takes to keep injured Northwest birds of prey flying high. Photos by Kelseyanne Johnson.

Sarah Mintz slowly walks into the brightly lit examination room, clutching a bundle draped in a white sheet close to her chest. Mintz grips two yellow feet with talons an inch long that protrude from beneath the sheet. The other people in the room stop talking as she lowers herself onto a stool.

“Ready?” asks Sharon Wolters, director of Sardis Raptor Center.

When Mintz, a volunteer at Sardis, nods, Wolters flips back the sheet to expose the head of a bald eagle. The eagle’s yellow eyes swivel in their sockets and the pupils contract as it tries to take in its surroundings.

Wolters grabs a clear, funnel-shaped mask that she slides quickly over the eagle’s head. The eagle, named Homer, thrashes her beak inside the mask, screeching, as her opened beak smacks against the plastic. After 10 minutes, the anesthetic from the mask begins to work, and Homer becomes more relaxed.

Wolters gingerly lifts one of Homer’s feet and begins trimming back the talons. Homer’s talons were too long, causing her to puncture her feet when she perched in her cage. Wolters pauses to slip her finger into the mask. She uses one of her long fingernails that resembles her patient’s talons to gently try to close Homer’s eyes so she will fall asleep easier.

Homer is one of the many residents at Sardis in Ferndale, which is approximately 14 miles north of Bellingham. The center is the largest raptor-rehabilitation clinic in the Northwest. Wolters and volunteers at Sardis spend hours nurturing ailing or injured raptors back to health so they can return to the wild. Raptors are birds of prey such as hawks, eagles, falcons and owls. The volunteers strive to avoid the residents’ sharp beaks and talons while maintaining their cages, training them for educational shows and performing simple and complex surgeries.

Sardis began as a wildlife rehabilitation center that took in all kinds of species. A former police officer from California, Wolters opened Sardis in 1990 with her husband. Wolters, who trained police dogs, did not have any formal training with wildlife. Through her own research and training with veterinarians, she became versed in wildlife rehabilitation. She had to undergo testing and the center had to undergo inspection through Washington state as well as the federal government to obtain licenses to rehabilitate wildlife.

Wolters cut down on the operation in 1995 because of the
workload the center involved. She says the cen­
ter was taking in thousands of animals every year.
“You’re starting at 4 in the morning and going until 10 to 11
at night,” she says. “Volunteers were burning out because there
was so much work.”

A bobcat, three wolves, a deer and a few horses still reside
at Sardis, but the center primarily focuses on the rehabilitation of
raptors.

Sardis is a nonprofit organization dependent on donations
from local businesses and the time that volunteers
dedicate. Approximately 30 people volunteer their time.
Wolters says this is not enough.

The center has faced numerous obstacles in the past
year. Donations have decreased since Sept. 11, which i
has put financial strain on the center. Keeping the center
running smoothly also has become more difficult since
Wolters was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis In 2003.
Despite these developments, Wolters says she is not
going to quit.
“I’ll direct this from a wheelchair if I have to,” she says.
Wolters, a petite woman with short, graying hair, is the
beating heart of Sardis. She never sits still. She runs back and
forth between the examination room to check on an injured owl,
to her rooms upstairs to answer a phone call and to the wildlife
cages outside, in tennis shoes and a gray, faded sweatshirt.
She only slows her pace when a bird is in the vicinity, and
then she moves with deliberate cautiousness.
“It’s more dangerous having raptors, and some of these birds
can cause a lot of damage,” Wolters says. “They’re wild animals
and should be treated as such.”

Unlike a parrot, raptors are built to kill and eat with their sharp
beaks and talons. For example, a bald eagle can exert 200
pounds per square inch of pressure on anything it grips with its
talons, including human arms and hands.

Sardis is dedicated to animal comfort and maintaining a calm
environment for the wildlife. Birdcages stand in neat rows along
a manicured gravel pathway. Dozens of peacocks roam the
grounds while two geese guard the parking area, hissing at
strangers.

The property is never silent. An eagle screeches. Wings
flutter inside a cage. The lonesome howl of a wolf echoes across
the grounds. The only sound missing is that of human voices.
The little conversation that people have is said in low voices so
as not to disturb Sardis’ recuperating residents.

“With wildlife, you can literally scare them to death,”
Wolters says.

Most birds that come to the center have undergone
some kind of stressful occurrence. Whether it was hit by
a car or shot by a hunter, each bird has been
traumatized.

People will sometimes bring the birds to Sardis and
sometimes volunteers have to go get the birds. One volunteer
had to climb a ladder up a three-story building to retrieve owl
chicks that were nesting in a chimney and bring them back to the
center.

Even being at the center can be stressful for the birds,
Wolters says. When wildlife is put into a stressful situation, it can
go into shock.
“As far as they’re concerned, we’re predators and we’re going
to eat them,” she says.
The next patient that comes into the clinic is literally scared stiff. Volunteer Stephanie Estrella holds a little owl with brown, black and white feathers wrapped in a towel on her lap. Volunteers brought the owl, which had a fractured wing, to the center a few days earlier. The owl is rigid with fear and gazes at the ceiling with its huge yellow eyes. Wolters has to force feed the owl because it is accustomed to hunting for its food in the wild.

When the feeding is complete, Wolters rips open the belly of a frozen chick with one of her nails to put back in the owl's cage so it might get the idea and eat on its own later.

Working at Sardis involves a lot of dirty work, Estrella says. "It's as glorious as having a bald eagle on your glove to crawling on the floor bleaching cages," Wolters says.

Cleaning bird poop out of the cages, gutting frozen chickens, mopping and bleaching are some of the tasks volunteers do at the center. One minute the volunteers scrub small swimming pools that have algae encrusted on the bottom and the next they clean eagle vomit off the floor.

The volunteers' efforts not only keep Sardis operating efficiently for the raptors that come and go, but also the center's permanent residents. Not all the birds can be rehabilitated and returned to the wild.

One such resident is Mote, a barn owl who has a bone deficiency. Mote was raised by humans and does not display normal owlish behavior. "He's afraid of the dark and live food, so he's definitely not an owl," Estrella says.

Birds such as Mote become part of Sardis' Hunters of the Sky educational program. Wolters and volunteers take the birds to schools, fairs and festivals to introduce the public to raptors. Mote often shows off at events. He mutters a sound that resembles an espresso machine when someone puts a microphone or any other blunt object in front of his beak.

Some birds, however, cannot survive as residents at Sardis and have to be put to sleep. "I don't think it's fair to keep a bird locked up who was born in the wild and will keep slamming into the walls trying to get out because they don't understand that getting out means death," Wolters says.

A bird's future is still uncertain when it is ready to be set free. In the case of a saw-whet owl released a few weeks ago, it seemed uncertain of what to do when its cage door was opened. Instead of flying free, it hopped forward and did not lift a wing. "It's kind of an uncertainty because we don't track them, so we don't know if they're OK," Estrella says.

It is the point of release, however, that keeps volunteer Andy Lyman continuing to help at Sardis. When the birds fly out of the cage with a "whoosh," it can be an emotional experience, Lyman says. "I think that's what it's all about," he says. "It's a balance. You can't save them all, but it keeps me coming back by releasing them."
In October 1997, amongst bitter winds and snow flurries, a filthy and disoriented Erin Brademan marched into a prisoner of war camp. She was stripped naked, sprayed with a fire hose and doused with talcum powder to kill body lice.

Brademan was not in a foreign country being detained against her will — she was being trained by survival-school instructors in the combat-survival course at Fairchild Air Force Base in Spokane. The course is one of five separate survival courses the U.S. Air Force offers, but has the most grueling reputation, Brademan said. The school specializes in teaching survival and interrogation techniques to soldiers who may land in enemy territory.

"The instructors treat this simulation as close as they can to a real war prison," Brademan said, holding her stomach. "I had my bellybutton ring ripped out when I first arrived in the camp because in the beginning we were supposed to remove them. Throughout my time at the camp, I saw others in my class get their ribs broken and some teeth kicked out; it was a nightmare."

Brademan’s Combat Survival School class consisted of more than 200 men and two women.

"It didn't bother me that there was only one (other) woman in my class, because I love breaking down barriers like that," Brademan said. "Most people see a petite 5-foot-3-inch pretty blonde with big blue eyes and think ‘What she has done with her life?’ People have no idea what is under the surface."

Ten percent of the military consists of females, mostly in support divisions or desk jobs, and only a select few are seen in the field. Only 1 percent of women in the military serve in the combat-survival division, Brademan said.

Brademan grew up in Duluth, Minn., north of Minneapolis, as the middle child of three brothers and three sisters. Of seven children, she was the only one who chose to go into the military to pay for her education.

"My parents never agreed with paying for college," Brademan said. "They thought if we paid for it ourselves, we would have more respect for the education we received and earned. It was really comical because I am the smallest sibling in my family and the most unlikely to choose the most physically demanding
Being a woman in a man's world is not easy. Leslie White recounts a woman's struggles and trials to make it through the grueling process of a combat-survival course. Illustrations by Jeanna Barrett.

road. But I have always been a spitfire and a tomboy that liked physically challenging things."

After graduating from high school in 1994, Brademan joined the military and was stationed in Grand Forks, N.D. As her friends and siblings began settling down and having families of their own, Brademan began serving her country. Brademan's older brother Jarrod Brademan, who is married with one child, always knew growing up that his sister was different from the rest of the family.

"She has always been independent and mentally strong," Jarrod said. "Erin never chose the traditional path of settling down and having kids like her siblings. It takes great strength for a female to make the choice she has made and that is a big inspiration to me."

She spent the next four years traveling to all the separate survival-training schools, including arctic survival training in Alaska, jungle survival in Panama, water survival in Florida, arid survival in Nevada and the Combat Survival School in Washington. To receive certification as a survival instructor, Brademan needed to complete all five courses, she said.

In Spokane, the Combat Survival School begins with three days of instructions on how to survive in the wilderness with techniques in evasion, interrogation tactics, mapping coordinates, preserving snow for drinking water, trapping wild game and sleeping accommodations.

"Instructors teach us how to survive if we were to ever be shot down in enemy territory," Brademan said. "It's all about giving us the tools in any environment to make it home safely keeping in mind our motto to return home with honor."

After learning various survival techniques in the classroom, the soldiers, with only their fatigues, a knife, snowshoes, a compass and a sleeping bag, were bused in the early morning hours to an undisclosed location in the hills outside Spokane.

Ordered off the bus, Brademan and her peers stood silent in the snow with anticipation. The cold air froze their breath creating a fog that loomed overhead. An instructor shouted orders that echoed against the vacant landscape to the group of trainees. The trainees were then broken into groups of seven.

"They informed us that we needed to evade and escape the
enemy for 10 days or there would be consequences," Brademan said. "We had a map, and each day we had to get from point to point without getting caught. At that moment, I still didn't understand what I was about to experience."

With freezing temperatures and a foot of snow on the ground, her team of seven set out to accomplish its mission. Miles from any town, Brademan's team trekked across streams and up hills thick with trees and brush blanketed with snow. The cold air smelled of crisp evergreen pine as they traveled in silence, with only the low murmur of bubbling creeks that conceal their footsteps in the snow.

Talking was prohibited, so hand signals and tapping codes replaced conversations and shouted directions, Brademan said. "You felt like any moment you could be caught, and we had no idea what they would do to us if we did," Brademan said.

They hiked for several miles each day, setting traps to snare squirrels and deer when they became hungry. Out of desperation, her team resorted to eating bugs.

"I quickly realized why our nicknames on the first day were the 'bug eaters,' " Brademan said with a laugh.

At night, Brademan's group tore down pine tree branches thick with needles. They stacked them in layers on top of the snow to make a bed to sleep on.

"We would have to take off several layers of clothes at night because we were soaked with sweat from the strenuous day of hiking," Brademan said. "Otherwise, if we went to sleep, we would freeze to death. So we piled branches on the ground and laid on them all huddled together to create warmth."

Day after day, her team began to grow weaker from the frigid temperatures and lack of food. They were plagued with exhaustion and malnourishment; even the strongest men began to show signs of doubt on their faces, Brademan said. All of their clothes were filthy and wet, but Brademan had a bigger problem on her hands.

"The odds are high when you are here for 17 days that you are going to have your period," Brademan said. "They don't give women tampons or (sanitary) pads in their pack. We are treated equally as the men. So you have to make do with what you have, and it sounds disgusting, but a wool sock had to do."

Being the only woman in her class, Brademan had to go through these female issues on her own.

"When you are the minority in a group, you can be pressured to conform, and in her case it was to become more masculine in order to fit in with the men," said Jen Leita, Western Washington University's center for performance excellence lecturer. "It can be difficult for the person who is the minority not to have someone to share your experience with, someone who can understand what they are going through. But, in her case, it seems that her goal was not to gain special treatment or to be looked upon as different."

The military, and especially the survival schools, have always been male dominated, said Brademan.

"Being the only woman on my team, of course I had men who were stronger and physically in better shape than me, but most understand that they are only as fast as their weakest person," Brademan said. "They had respect that I was out there giving all I had."

Halfway through the course, Brademan learned from her instructors that the other woman in her class had been seriously injured and had to leave.

"I wasn't going to let that happen (to me)," Brademan said with confidence. "For me it was even more motivation. I was not going anywhere."

On the 10th day, Brademan's team had successfully evaded the enemy, but to its surprise not one team had been captured.

"Come to find out they had no intention of capturing us those 10 days," Brademan said. "But instead, they captured us all at once and made us prisoners of war at a makeshift prison war camp for 24 hours."

Shivering and naked, Brademan was given clothes, blindfolded and thrown into a small wooden cage. For several hours, she could hear men around her whispering strategies and ways to escape. Then the heavy steps of her captors drew near. With a sudden jolt, they ripped Brademan out of her cage, and dragged and pinned her to the ground in front of her male teammates.

"They try and use the women to get soldiers to speak about their country or give up information," Brademan said. "It is a good tactic because men have this innate desire to help women, and if they hear you scream, it affects them. So they used me to train the men to not give in to that."

No serious injuries occurred in the prison camp, Brademan said. The instructors, however, had the authority to be physical to try to make someone to give up information.

"My hands and feet were tied together behind my back, and I was placed in a barrel full of water up to my neck for 40 minutes in
20-degree temperatures,” Brademan said, shaking her head. “They also had persuasion tactics that included placing us in front of turkey dinners when they knew we had not eaten well for several days.”

After 24 hours in the prison camp, the instructors bused the soldiers back to the base to debrief them on the mistakes the teams made. In order to pass the course, the teams would be placed back in the prison camp the following day. The instructors gave them 72 hours to be released or escape, otherwise they would fail.

“At this point I had lost over 30 pounds, and from the exhaustion it was difficult to think clearly,” Brademan said, looking down at her petite frame. “We had to come together as a team, elect a representative, find teammates that could become distractions to the guards and find a way out of the camp.”

When a person is in a position this strenuous and it does not match his or her ability level, it could affect his or her confidence in a negative way,” Leita said.

Making it through a situation like that could give the person a new sense of their own willpower, she said.

It took Brademan’s team the entire 72 hours to be released from the prison camp. The details of interrogation techniques within those 72 hours remain confidential, Brademan said.

“Needless to say, it was a nightmare to get through, but we made it as a team in one piece,” Brademan said.

After the 72 hours was over, her team — dirty, tattered and exhausted — was released into the center of the camp. As their eyes squinted from the sunlight, they turned to see their instructors slowly raise the American flag and heard the National Anthem that signaled the completion of the course.

“At this point, I was extremely emotional because it was a feeling of such personal accomplishment,” Brademan said. “It was more than imagining graduating from college or even having a child.”

It took Brademan four years to complete the five survival schools. She earned the rank of technical sergeant, which means she was qualified to teach at any of the survival schools. She then worked in the Combat Survival School as an interrogator in the prison camp eight times a year for two years.

“It was amazing to actually use the things I had learned for the past four years,” Brademan said, with a smile. “You are never prepared enough to do this kind of work, but it is very gratifying to use what I have worked so hard to learn.”

Brademan, now 28 years old, lives in Vancouver, Wash., and is working as a waitress to pay the rent while attending her fifth year of law school, at Lewis and Clark College in Oregon. The U.S. military paid for all of her education.

“I think people tend to underestimate me and my abilities at first glance,” Brademan said. “Sometimes when I am waiting tables or commuting to school, I think about my accomplishments and wonder what other challenges in my future I will conquer.”
Karen Mueller is a chiropractor, with a difference — all her patients are animals. Gig Schlich speaks with the pet healer and discovers the wild and wooly field of animal chiropractic. Photos by Keith Bolling.

Karen glides her hands gently up the old Eskimo dog's backside, digging strong fingers into its deep white fur coat. Koji grumbles his satisfaction as she works her way up his back, releasing his tension with a squeeze here and a knead there. She has done this a hundred times to him, but he always enjoys it as if it is his first. It makes him feel young again. Finished, she cradles his head in her arms, gazing lovingly into Koji's wise and careworn coffee-brown eyes. She kisses him playfully on the nose. He licks her face in gratitude.

No, it is not a tidbit from an Arctic Harlequin Romance novel — it is Karen Mueller, a veterinarian certified in animal chiropractic, demonstrating spinal adjustments on her 15-year-old American Eskimo dog.

Mueller, owner of Mueller Animal Chiropractic in Bellingham, has been using chiropractic techniques in her animal-care practice since 1995. During the past nine years, she has treated a variety of animals, including dogs, cats, rabbits, ferrets, horses and even a llama.

"(Llamas) have that long, snaky neck," Mueller says, relating the difficulties of working with some of her subjects. "A nervous llama can be quite challenging."

The field of chiropractic is based on the premise that illness and dysfunction in the body is caused by the misalignment of its parts, especially the spine. A chiropractor's job is to find these trouble spots and put them back into line, often

(above) German shepherd Grace apprehensively anticipates her chiropractic adjustments, as owner Stephanie Stolzoff holds her.
(Left) Golden retriever Micci happily gazes out of the room in which she has been adjusted.
"As pets age, they tend to get stiff. With an animal who's kind of creaky and not getting up quite as quickly as normal, a lot of times just restoring their range of motion with chiropractic can really help them be more flexible and athletic."

- Karen Mueller
Certified animal chiropractor

Karen Mueller aligns German shepherd Grace's neck as owner Stephanie Stolzoff looks on.

Golden retriever Micci looks out of the massage room.

Grace relaxes as Mueller moves her hands up his spine.

"As pets age, they tend to get stiff. With an animal who's kind of creaky and not getting up quite as quickly as normal, a lot of times just restoring their range of motion with chiropractic can really help them be more flexible and athletic."

- Karen Mueller
Certified animal chiropractor

with forceful twists and thrusts. Cracks often are audible as the joint or vertebra pops back into place.

Koji's back and neck snap, crackle and pop like a bowl of Rice Krispies as Mueller moves her hands up his spine. He is unfazed by the procedure, waiting obediently for Mueller to finish. She lifts Koji off the grooming table, and he bounds away, back paws spinning out on the polished wooden floor. He now moves like he shed a few years of his life on the table.

"As pets age, they tend to get stiff," Mueller says. "With an animal who's kind of creaky and not getting up quite as quickly as normal, a lot of times just restoring their range of motion with chiropractic can really help them be more flexible and athletic."

Mueller says she strongly believes that increased activity during the later years of an animal's life can mean the difference between a healthy, active older pet or one that is sedentary and plagued with pain and ill health.

Her profession faces some obstacles. Mueller is the only practitioner in Whatcom County certified by the American Veterinary Chiropractic Association and one of 11 in Washington state. The public has little awareness of the existence of animal chiropractic, Mueller says, let alone the benefits it can have for animals.

"If people are thinking chiropractic — if they've had treatment or somebody they know has had it — then they are open to it or come looking for it," Mueller says. "But if they haven't heard of it or if I were to suggest it (as a veterinarian), they almost never come."

Mueller's interest in the field was sparked by her own visits to a chiropractor for chronic back pain. Her practitioner, familiar with Mueller's background in veterinary medicine, mentioned an association that provided training and certification for people interested in chiropractic for animals. At the time, Mueller had a 13-year-old Dalmatian named Chip, who was suffering from debilitating pain that she had tried to treat.

"I decided to pursue the training," Mueller says, "partly because I was benefiting from chiropractic care and partly because I was so frustrated with not being able to provide what I'd like for my own dog."

Mueller visited the association's chiropractic school, Options for Animals, in Hillsdale, Ill., for four weekends of classroom instruction and hands-on tutorials. The school requires students to perform 150 hours of training through correspondence courses and to participate in case studies and practical exams to become an association-certified practitioner, Mueller says. The course takes approximately one year to complete and is only open to those who have a license to practice veterinary medicine or chiropractic.

The field of animal chiropractic was born in the United States in 1988 with the formation of American Veterinary Chiropractic Association, according to the association's Web site. The founders were interested in applying human chiropractic techniques to animals and setting standards for the education and licensing of practitioners. Today, the American Veterinary Chiropractic Association and Options for Animals have trained and certified more than 1,100 licensed animal chiropractors worldwide.

After earning her license, Mueller began treating her Dalmatian. The results were dramatic. After a few sessions,
Grace looks at Mueller as she massages Grace's tail.

"I'm always surprised that there isn't more demand. But I think that it's still catching on."
- Mueller

Mueller was able to alleviate the animal's pain. Chip, already old, was able to live for the next couple years relatively free from suffering.

Such tales of immediate improvement are not uncommon for some of Mueller's patients. A single session often makes a dramatic difference.

Penny Gates is the owner of Frankie, a pint-sized papillon with a set of ears that could send him sailing in a windstorm. His long, feathery hair and the oversized ears have earned his breed the nickname "butterfly dog." A few years ago, Frankie developed mysterious, agonizing pains that would set him whimpering and sometimes screaming in pain. Gates was desperate for a solution.

"It was amazing," Gates says. "After the first treatment, this dog that could barely walk before without crying out was suddenly zooming around the house. He was extremely happy to be rid of the pain. Karen just said, 'Wow! I wish I had a video of that!'

Todd Perry, a veterinarian at Fountain Veterinary Hospital in Bellingham, has also seen the benefits of animal chiropractic although his own practice and principles rely more on the traditional approach to medical treatment.

"I don't see a chiropractor myself," Perry says. "If I've got a headache or my back hurts, I take a pill and walk on."

A friend once brought in a stout, curly-haired Belgian cattle dog that was having neck problems to see Perry. After a few visits, the animal's condition was not improving. Perry had heard a buzz about Mueller's practice and decided to send the dog to her.

"My medical treatment of anti-inflammatories and muscle relaxants was doing nothing to help this dog," Perry says. "Karen's adjustments did."

Perry sees animal chiropractic as a valuable option for many animal patients. Most importantly, the treatments are less traumatic than the surgeries often prescribed for back and joint problems. If it does not work, the only harm is to the owner's pocketbook. He says, however, that chiropractic does not work in all cases.

"I've seen it do amazing things, and I've seen it do nothing," Perry says. "It's not a panacea, but it definitely has its place. I think it's helped a number of animals."

Mueller sees new patients for an initial fee of $89. This first consultation includes a thorough examination, review of X-rays or other diagnostic materials and any necessary adjustments. Follow-ups cost $38 and last about half an hour. She recommends the animal return every two weeks during the initial treatment phase. For larger animals, such as horses and the occasional llama, Mueller will travel to the owner's farm for a slightly higher fee.

She works out of Village Veterinary Hospital in Bellingham, where she treats her patients every other Thursday. As business picks up and more people learn about animal chiropractic, Mueller says she would like to eventually expand her hours to once a week. For now, balancing her practice, two small children and a husband keeps her busy.

"I'm always surprised that there isn't more demand (for animal chiropractic)," Mueller says, as she finishes working on her fluffy white Eskimo. "But I think that it's still catching on."
Picking up his feet with conscious steadiness, John Carlson walks in the thin soles of his dirty, dilapidated Converse Chuck Taylor All Stars. He does not have the option of dragging his feet, but carries his lanky, towering frame through Western Washington University’s campus gracefully as he braves the notorious bricks.

Carlson, 19, started sporting his Chuck Taylor All Stars in high school to further identify with the all-ages punk scene. He still wears his first crimson pair, now faded to pink, with the back right heel of his sole completely unattached to the canvas. The thin, rubber remnants of his favorite sneakers are tarnished with dirt and rubbed-off ink, and the canvas is balding into gaping holes that display Carlson’s bare feet.

“They’re all gnarled from being stepped on at shows,” the tan, slightly freckled teenager says in a mischievous tone. “I made it a point to wear them to every punk concert. I would stick safety pins in them.”

All Star owners can wear their sneakers any way they please. In the 1980s, comedy sweetheart Punky Brewster wore a different colored sneaker on each foot. Hip-hop-inspired fashion requires the pant leg to be tucked into blindingly clean high-tops, while those raised in punk youth culture prefer to wear their high-tops dirty with a rustic pair of undersized, boot-cut Levis.

With every Converse Chuck Taylor pair individualized by the owner’s personal style, the sneaker has become ubiquitous in the fashion industry.

The sneaker first appeared nationally on basketball courts in 1931 at the request of former New York Celtic player Chuck Taylor for a more comfortable basketball shoe. Since then, the Converse All Star has taken on institutional status in pop culture and social history, selling approximately 750 million pairs and surviving limited-edition fabrics, the Los Angeles riots, eight consecutive runs as the official basketball shoe of the Olympics, bankruptcy, a switch in ownership and the death of punk icon and All Star enthusiast Joey Ramone.

Nike bought Converse out for $305 million in 2001. Although Converse public relations manager Robyn Hasson declined to comment about specific sales before and after the Nike takeover, she did say that as an international icon shoe, the Converse All Star sneaker sales have remained steady under Nike ownership.

Seattle resident Steve Swift, 52, says he remembers wearing the bleached-white Chuck Taylors as part of his mandatory physical-education uniform in grade school.

“In junior high, my Conversees got stolen a few times,” Swift says. “That’s how popular they were. I finally got so upset that I talked to my school counselor about getting me a lock.”

By high school, Swift acquired affection for the classic, black-and-white All Stars, for which his sisters teased him tremendously. He says he started wearing them because he knew no one would try to steal the black ones.

“All the basketball jocks wore the white ones,” he says. “All the nerds wore the black ones. I don’t mean nerdy like they use it nowadays. I mean the good students. If you wore black high-tops, you were an outsider.”

**Roots in social history**

Before rap culture dominated the airwaves, “Monster” Kody Scott became a gang member in 1963 at the age of 11. Soon, he would earn notoriety in South Central Los Angeles as a ruthless killer. Other Crip members crowned him “Monster,” which became his most widely used name.

Along with gaining his “Monster” reputation, Scott would be one...
of the first to pioneer the classic Crip dress code with Converse sneakers, using the shoe as a group identifier.

Scott later changed his name to Sanyika Shakur after disavowing his gang membership and becoming a black nationalist. In a California maximum-security prison, he wrote his autobiography, “Monster,” recalling life as one of the original Los Angeles gangsters.

Shakur points out the unparalleled dress code between Valley “gangstas” and Valley punks:

The punk movement was in full swing at that time, and the Valley punk rockers initially mistook us — the eight of us who were steeped in the subculture of banging — for punk rockers because of our dress code. Perhaps they thought we were their New African counterparts from the city. We dressed almost alike, but it was only coincidence — we had never seen or heard of punk rockers before coming out to the Valley.

Drawing on the dress similarities of bandANNas and black Converse Chuck Taylor All Stars, the two abrasive groups became comrades:

We circled one another in an attempt to distinguish authenticity, then finally made a pact and began to hang out.

Converse camaraderie

When Swift first noticed that others wore the black Converse sneaker in the halls of his high school, he had to wonder why, since the shoe was so stigmatized as unpopular and dangerous.

Swift says that although the shoes did not necessarily spawn the relationship between him and his high school friends, wearing the black sneakers together became a group identifier.

“We were men of the 1950s,” he says. “We show no emotion. We slap each other on the butt after a touchdown and that’s it, but there was that camaraderie of rebellion (in wearing the shoe). The teachers didn’t like them very much.”

Swift vaguely recalls teachers associating black Converses with gang colors.

“In the 60s, public school systems wanted ‘cookie cutter,’ look-alike kids,” he says.

Carlson did not think that friendship could revolve around a shoe, but on second thought, he says the sneaker symbolizes the punk camaraderie between him and his best friend.

“(Matt and I) went out and both got a pair together because we wanted to feel punk rock,” he says with boyish affection.

Missing in action

Paris Texas, in downtown Bellingham, opens its doors to eager spring shoppers. Many of those who saunter in are flip-flopping, camisole-clad women in their early-20s, giggly with sun and spring-shopper’s fever.

The shop is a mini-Mecca for the vintage-inspired shoe — pointy, round, pink, flat, kitty-heeled, tall, bowed, buckled, red, black, brown, blue, metallic, suede, patent leather and canvas. Yet something is acutely missing from the shelves of hipster shoes.

Paris Texas co-owner Ty McBride is apologetic that Paris Texas does not carry Chuck Taylors. His well-sunned face contorts into a superficial melancholy.

“I know,” he says. “It’s sad. But that’s commerce.”

McBride says he regrets the fact that Nike bought out the struggling small Converse label, as demand exceeded supply.

Under the Nike ownership starting in 2001, Converse only sells wholesale at a minimum commitment of $20,000 a year, McBride says. In his former store in San Diego, he bought by the case instead.

“I don’t really think (the recent success in sales) is about the (vintage) nostalgia anymore,” McBride says. “This is a shoe that transcends style. It’s not really specific. My mom has a pair. I don’t think it means anything (to her).”

McBride also notes, however, that the basic black canvas with rubber soles is still trendy in punk and emo scenes.

“A lot of punk kids are straight edge and vegan, and the shoe has no leather and no animal byproducts,” he says.

By using the term “straight edge,” McBride is referring to a small subculture of punk youth, usually vegan or vegetarian, who abstain from drugs and alcohol to counter the “sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll” lifestyle.

Still going strong

Curtis Lindahl, manager of Journeys at Northgate Mall, can attest to the shoe’s universal popularity. The store he manages shelters a large, imposing Converse All Star tower with a new array of colors, including bright pink and baby blue.
With the new editions, Lindahl says nearly everyone can accessorize around the sneakers. “It’s really just a fashion shoe now,” he says. “Our tube sock sales have gone up because girls like to match them with their new Converse.”

On the outskirts of the store’s Converse territory, matching purses and jerseys conveniently line the walls. Within a typical 13-week period that does not include holiday sales, Northgate Journeys sells 64 pairs of Converse All Stars, yielding a 3.3 turnover rate. That means that about every one in three customers buy a pair, Lindahl says.

Journeys assistant manager Bailee Scott attributes the sneaker’s increase in popularity to Converse’s expanding consumer market. “Five years ago, you were really punk rock if you wore the black ones,” she says.

Now, she says, the shoe has gained consumers, while retaining its original consumers. “If you’re hip-hop, you like it. If you’re punk rock, you like it,” Scott says. “If you’re a kid, you like it.”

Recapturing a feeling

“The tongue doesn’t stay in quite right,” Swift says. “They always flop to the side.”

When Swift was in grade school, he would cut the tops off to remedy the tongue’s off-centeredness.

After 35 years, the high-tops resume their original habit of tongue flopping. Still, Swift finds every possible occasion to wear his favorite sneaker.

“I will wear my Converse to church,” he says. “My wife tries to get me to wear other shoes.”

Swift also wears his sneakers to work with a nice pair of slacks, if the business venture is under his supervision, and he has no one in particular to impress.

“I wear them until they’re worn to shreds,” he says. “They turn into house slippers.”

Swift owns five pairs of Converse All Stars; two pairs have yet to be removed from their boxes. He says he is generally a nostalgic person, but originally started wearing the shoes because they were functional, versatile and inexpensive. Under the current retail value of $39, Swift says they are too expensive and hesitates to buy another pair.

“I am sure that the last time I bought these they were $20,” he says, carefully and hesitantly taking his last purchased pair out of the box for the first time.

In the middle of the food court at the bustling Northgate Mall, Swift sniffs the new rubber of his sneakers and examines the “Made in the USA” tag on the inside of the tongue flap, a pre-2001 relic from when Converse produced the shoes in the United States.

“I am kind of nervous now because it looks like I might have to buy a couple more (pairs),” he says.

Carlson recently rediscovered his old sneakers after putting them in retirement over the summer. In assessing their sentimental value, he decided the sneakers still had a few good years in them. “It’s just some canvas thrown together, but they’re such a big part of me,” Carlson says. “They’re a huge part of my identity.”

Carlson wore his shoes every day in high school. He wore them in his school picture, as well as to his high school graduation commencement.

“I wanted (my shoes) to be showing (at commencement), so I had to have a talk with my mom,” he remembers. “She wanted me to dress up and I said, ‘Only if I can wear my Converse.’ She agreed.”

As Carlson walks on the eroded rubber soles of his faded Converse All Star Chuck Taylors — sneakers reduced to canvas shreds and now resembling more of a high-top sandal — he suddenly becomes acutely aware that his shoes carry the history of his adolescent life.

“They’re a big symbol for the dreams I’ve had with punk music, specifically,” Carlson says. “These shoes bring me back to that day where we had no idea we would be getting involved in (playing in our own band).”

In America, All Stars have played a significant role in social history and pop culture through agents such as the OGs and 1970s punk rockers, athletic and celebrity endorsement and corporate takeover.

Once the sneakers leave the shelf, however, a whole new history is stamped into the shape of their soles, the bottom of their heels and the stiffness of their ankles — the history of the person who decides to wear them and make them their own. ☺