Shane Powell is an environmental studies and journalism major. Upon graduating from Huxley College in spring, he plans to spend a year teaching English in Thailand. Shane is an aspiring muckraking journalist, a meticulous Virgo and a devout cat lover.

Amy Codispoti is an English major and a theatre minor, and is the second biggest U2 fan in Bellingham. After graduation, Amy hopes to stay in Whatcom County, her personal paradise. Whenever she has the chance, she is outside hiking and enjoying the rugged beauty of the area. Someday, she hopes to live on Samish Island and write a novel, or at least die trying.

Christi Croft is a public relations major and hopes someday to tell everyone what to do at a respectable PR organization somewhere in Baltimore. Besides admiring her roommate's George Forman's Lean Mean Fat-Reducing Grilling Machine, Christi likes to eat miniature, multi-colored marshmallows and Cookie Crisp dry.

Craig Yantis is a senior majoring in journalism with a minor in geology. This is his first contribution to Klipsun, and he has been published before in The Western Front. Craig, who raced motocross while attending high school and community college, is drawn to racing action of many kinds.

Nathalie Oravetz will finally graduate this year with a journalism degree. This is her first article in Klipsun. She loves Lucky Charms, pink-frosting cookies and chocolate milk. She hates banana-flavored Runts.

Dave Baggenstos is a graduate student in the Psychology Department. This is his first Klipsun article. He is intensely curious about people living unusual lives. He is also interested in the kind of people who purchase George Foreman's Lean Mean Fat-Reducing Grilling Machine. Dave also listens to Miles Davis and John Coltrane in his spare time.

Laura Query is a junior majoring in public relations and minoring in political science. When she is not serving as a residential adviser in Mathes Hall, she is jogging or watching "The Tom Green Show" and eating Quaker granola bars. This is her first contribution to Klipsun and she has previously been published in The Western Front.

Jen Webber is a senior public relations major with a concentration in English. She hopes to get into sports PR. This is her first Klipsun article. Jen enjoys playing a variety of sports and listening to The Dave Matthews Band. Next fall she heads to Europe to work and explore.
Behind the doors of Bellingham's Dharma Hall, those seeking enlightenment escape into a world of silent contemplation. Shane Powell explores the quest to quiet the mind through traditional Buddhist meditation. Photos by Shane Powell.

When the attention bell rings, its high pitch rolls in long reverberating waves through a once-silent hall. The waves eventually fade, but the tone continues to resonate in the ears and minds of the room’s nine perfectly-poised inhabitants. The sound has called forth open eyes, a slow rise from black pillows, and the bare shuffling feet of a standing circle. Then in slow, deliberate motions, with only the obscure groan of hardwood floors beneath, the circle rotates clockwise.

The circle’s progression and its participants are part of a practice that has taken place for more than six years on the third floor of an office building in downtown Bellingham. Home to four lineages of traditional Buddhist meditation, the Bellingham Dharma Hall is a continuous site of solo meditation and 2,500-year-old Buddhist practice.

However, the people within the hall are not the primordial Buddhist monks and nuns of Nepal or Tibet. They are Western students, farmers, mothers — familiar people.

This type of place is often thought of as only being for exotic or special people, but meditation is a universal and natural human activity,” says Tim Burnett, a computer programmer and senior student of Soto Zen — a Buddhist tradition emphasizing self-inquiry.

The people who step through the hall’s door come for varying reasons. Some say its walls are like the embracing arms of a mother, a place to seek refuge from life’s traumas and uncertainties, confusion or depression. Others are pulled through the door in a karma-induced search for meaning.

“I think most people come because on some level they are unsatisfied,” Burnett says. “They come to see if they can settle their heart or just reside more comfortably in life.”

On Thursday evenings, Burnett can be found at the end of the Dharma Hall beside a candle-lit, stone Buddha — one leg folded under the other. His bare feet stick out of loose jeans, and his hands rest loosely in a rakasu — a cloth bib symbolic of a full Buddhist robe. The rakasu is the first tangible indication of Burnett’s ongoing work toward becoming a Zen priest — a journey he says he has been on for both three years and his entire life. The final ordination will signify his recognized status as a Zen teacher, which, in turn, means a lifetime commitment of
In America, the priest could be called an "enlightenment worker," Burnett says. "It's like hanging out at (nirvana's) door and helping other people in."

His Thursday-night practice is steeped in the rich scent of sandalwood incense. Only the intermittent muffled sounds from the street below make their way inside. The stillness is heavy, as if someone had knit the air into the fabric of the moment, threading the hall in a blanket of silence.

Zen walking meditation continues for two circles, then a sharp clap of two wooden blocks commands attention — silence severed for a pointed moment — and the walkers return to their pillows. They bow, hands aligned in the Buddha's direction, and resume sitting.

Dove Toll, a practitioner in the Vipassana or "insight meditation" tradition, speaks in a hush as she explains the dynamics and importance of rhythm in walking meditation.

"It really shouldn't be called 'walking' because you're not going anywhere," Toll suggests. "The focus is on the sensation of stepping, each foot touching the ground and quieting the mind at the same time."

Toll leads a Tuesday-evening meditation once a month at the Dharma Hall. Her group will meditate, or as it is more often called "sit," for 45 minutes, and then perform walking meditation for another 15 — back and forth in parallel lines rather than circles. With a noticeable awareness in each step, the walkers emit a calm, but vigilant energy.
like hikers crossing a stream on well-placed rocks.

Toll thinks for a quiet moment before describing the process of meditation. "It is a way to stop, look at, and then silence the mind," Toll says, in a single soft breath. "It's a way to interrupt your racing thoughts and train the mind to obey you."

Each of the hall’s traditions include sitting and walking meditation in their practices. The Vipassana, Tibetan and Zen traditions involve performing repetitious chants, or "mantras," and the Zen practice ends with three prostrations, where participants drop to their knees, and then unfold face-down with palms up and fingers splayed in submission.

Travis Eiva, a Dharma Hall member and anthropology graduate student at Western, took a 10-day vow of silence during a Buddhist meditation retreat last summer. "We sat for 11 hours a day," Eiva recalls with a laugh, knowing how absurd his statement sounds. He says they were taught to focus on the tips of their noses and observe their breath. "It creates a feeling that spreads and intensifies from your nose to the rest of your body. It's really pretty amazing," he adds.

Eiva was raised Catholic, but says he discovered Buddhism in high school. Three years ago, he began practicing a Taoist style of meditation in motion called Tai Chi. Last November, he joined the Dharma Hall, and now attends the Mindfulness tradition on Wednesday evenings.

Eiva says meditation is an unexplainable personal experience — "a way to understand and a way to live." The Dharma Hall, he says, helps this experience by creating a common community of people with many of the same goals.

Paul Warwick is one of those people. He is one of the hall’s original founders and the Monday-night teacher of the Shambhala Center, the hall’s Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

He describes his practice as a method of taming the mind, a way to cultivate mindfulness and awareness. These qualities, he says, are important, because they allow you to become comfortable enough with yourself that you can turn your attention toward other people and away from the consuming confusion of your own mind.

Warwick, who has been a meditation instructor since 1980, dresses in corduroys, a modest brown overcoat, glasses and an inviting smile; his hands rest palms down over crossed legs. With a toll of the bell, his students assume similar positions. They gather in a semicircle around a wooden Buddha, draped in a white cloth and accompanied by a vase of dried flowers. The bell’s echoes wane.

And silence, again, quilts the room.

Warwick calls the Dharma Hall a Buddhist cooperative, in recognition of the people who are paying members. By tradition, Buddhist teachings are always offered for free, so payment is not required for use of the hall. However, the space is rented and maintained by membership donations, usually ranging from $10 to $20 a month.

"The price is certainly cheap," says Warwick; "but pursuing (the Buddhist) path (also) means paying with your life; you have to surrender to it."

He adds that most people are not ready to go quite so far, that it takes a serious commitment. And maybe his statement accounts for the members who make monthly donations, but never attend the hall. Warwick explains that most of these people, despite not showing up, simply recognize the need for a place like the Dharma Hall in their community.
Dharma Hall activities revolve around Buddha images, candles and incense.

Although today the Bellingham Dharma Hall is well-funded by its members' donations, Warwick recounts the uncertainty of its creation in November 1993. 

"We began meeting once a week at the Old Fountain Bakery," Warwick recalls. "We would percolate ideas over coffee even though we had no finances to carry any of them out. I guess we were hoping someone would just give us a space."

Eventually, he says, they ran into a man who, ironically, had been to a wild dance in the hall's present location and had noticed the space was for rent.

"With high ceilings and hardwood floors, it was perfect," Warwick says.

Like the students who sit quietly within its walls, the Bellingham Dharma Hall has grown in its six years of existence. Membership has increased from three or four in each group's beginning to 10 to 20 today, depending on the night.

"It has been effortlessly successful," Warwick says, adding that the groups' practices have deepened and matured with time. But the growth in both membership and maturity, he claims, must happen.

"Large countries like China and India are crushing Buddhism out. Now, it has to establish its roots in the West, and this is only the end of the first generation," he says, referring to China's intolerance of religion and the rise of Islam and Hinduism in India.

Although it lacks the temples or deep spiritual history of Asia, Bellingham and its Dharma Hall plays a role in keeping Buddhist tradition alive. Every week the echoing attention bell continues to open eyes and bring sitting people to their feet. And although the students only proceed in methodical circles, Warwick says the spiritual path is like leaving town — and the teachers at the Dharma Hall are the guides.

"First, you leave the buildings and the chaos; then the stop signs are replaced with stop signs. Eventually it's only you and the country road and the forest ... and finally just endless mountains.

"As for mountains, there are mountains hidden in jewels; there are mountains hidden in marshes, mountains hidden in the sky; there are mountains hidden in mountains ... The mountains and rivers of this moment are the actualization of the way of the ancient Buddhas. — Dogen Hijyū, Zen Master, from Mountains and Rivers Sutra."
Bussing from the Pacific to the Atlantic, Deb Pitts converses with everyday people and finds out how interesting life on the road can be. **Amy Codispoti** takes a window seat and explores the life of a professional traveler.

Deb Pitts looks over past issues of Greyhound's newsletter, *Greyhound Today*. Photo by Chris Fuller.

A simple magnet on Deb Pitts' refrigerator reads in an elegant script font: "I am not the same having seen the moon shine on the other side of the world."

"It's true," Pitts says with a little mischievous twinkle in her pale-blue eyes.

Pitts lives with her partner, Bernie Johnson, in a house overlooking the Gages Slough in Burlington. Mozart piano music quietly filters from the cluttered living room into the sunny kitchen where Pitts' parakeet combatively squawks from his cage in sharp, accusing tones.

A close survey of Pitts' refrigerator provides evidence to back up her claim of traveling 47 of the lower 48 states by Greyhound. Pitts has yet to visit Maine. The entire right panel of the refrigerator boasts magnets. One of them is from the UFO & Research Center in Roswell, N.M., where Pitts claims to have had her picture taken with an alien. Another magnet from Wyoming reads: "Buy a Bear a Beer Day" and shows an amiable bear-and-man duo drinking together. She has one of a Chattanooga Choo-Choo train, and of course, a Greyhound bus magnet which resides high above all the others.

In gray leggings and an oversized T-shirt, Pitts stands in her kitchen rolling dough for sugar cookies she is later going to take to her grandmother's nursing home staff. Her shoulder length hair frames her face in flaxen waves; it gently sways as she rocks back and forth on the dough with the rolling pin.

In March 1996, at age 43, Pitts graduated from Western with a degree in journalism, 16 years to the month after starting. Before graduation, Pitts applied to The Skagit Valley Herald and got hired. While working at the newspaper, Pitts wrote mainly hard news including stories covering council meetings. She was also assigned a weekly column called "Your Stories."

"They gave me the assignment because nobody else was especially keen on it at the time," Pitts explains with a sarcastic lilt to her voice as she uses a glass to cut circles into the dough.

"What you had to do was pick someone randomly out of the phone book, call them up and ask them if they'd be willing to be interviewed, and then write up a story on them," Pitts explains, with a quizzical look that suggests anyone who didn't want the assignment was ludicrous.

This quirky assignment happened to fit Pitts excellently. In fact, it turned out to be the only part of her job she felt passionate about.

Although she kept trying to take people’s advice and get used to hard-news writing, she couldn’t bear to do it.

“One day something clicked,” Pitts recalls exuberantly, “I thought, ‘I don’t want to get used to this!’ I learned that I didn’t want to be a journalist, but a writer.”

A smile slowly forms on her lips as she sets the cookies on a pan, one by one, and places them in the warm oven.

“Feature writing is my strength,” she says, her smile lighting up her delicate features.

Pitts gave her two-week notice to The Skagit Valley Herald. Before settling down with another full-time job, she felt she needed to satisfy her wanderlust and plan a 30-day Greyhound trip across the United States. Curiosity and an unquenchable love for writing inspired her to write the CEO of Greyhound and inquire if he would be interested in hiring her as a writer for their magazine.

Because she was not applying for a job but creating one, Pitts did not want to write a “normal” proposal letter. Instead, she created a magazine-like folder in which to send her résumé and previously printed work. To do this, Pitts traversed down to the Whatcom Museum in search of an old black-and-white Greyhound picture.

The photo she found was from the early 1950s during the Korean War Effort and shows a line of men in long coats and woolen caps solemnly boarding a bus.

“I put it all together on my old Mac Classic, that old dinosaur! I had the photo halftoned, put in on 11x17 paper and wrote the letter to the CEO on the inside,” Pitts describes as she pulls out a copy of the glossy folder.

Pitts sent numerous clips, several from the “Your Stories” column, along with her résumé. She described her plans to take the bus for 30 days, and made suggestions about how her writings could benefit the Greyhound Corporation.

“I decorated the envelope,” Pitts says conspiratorially. “I put Irish smiley faces and picture frame corners on it and wrote ‘Personal’ in big letters because I knew the secretary would get it if I didn’t, and it probably never got to the CEO. But, it got to him!”

Two weeks later, Pitts received a telephone call that would shape her career. Her résumé had been sent to the vice president of corporate communications, and he fell in love with Pitts’ “Your Stories” clips.

“He told me that if I could call somebody at random and get a story out of...
Deb Pitts reminisces with ticket agent Mary Lemings at the Mount Vernon Greyhound station. Pitts has gotten to know Lemings through her frequent travel. Photo by Chris Fuller.

them that I could do anything for Greyhound,” Pitts says while reclining momentarily on her off-white sofa. “That’s the irony of it. The project that nobody wanted got me the job that everybody wants!” she happily concludes.

“Deb’s a pretty bold person,” comments her partner Bernie Johnson with a chuckle. “She doesn’t like to admit it, but she’s very self confident and forward. She really goes after what she wants persistently. She’s just got that kind of personality.”

After the phone call, Pitts received a free 30-day Ameripass with the only requirement being she had to go through Dallas and meet the president and vice president of Greyhound. “I went to Greyhound headquarters, and they put me up in a brand-new, posh hotel, and I got to meet all the management guys at Greyhound. It was a bit overwhelming … I felt like Dorothy in Oz,” Pitts says while giggling.

When Pitts got home from her 30-day, 35-state trip, she wrote three stories about her travels and the people she met. Greyhound bought them all.

“When I got home from her 30-day, 35-state trip, she wrote three stories about her travels and the people she met. Greyhound bought them all.”

It was decided that Pitts would work in tandem with the publication manager and together they would determine where Pitts would travel. Then, once a month, after much deliberation and planning, she would receive plane tickets to somewhere in the country and embark on her journeys.

“What I do is interview people I sit next to,” Pitts explains, “I don’t hand-pick my subjects.”

The stories that result are similar to the “Your Stories” column: she simply strikes up a conversation with the person and watches a story emerge. According to Pitts, everyone has a story that can be told about them. Her job is to discover that story and re-tell it.

“I like to write about who the person is, not just as a bus-rider, but otherwise. What got them on the bus? Where are they going, and why? I am a real slice-of-life person. I am fascinated by real, everyday people’s stories,” Pitts explains, her blond head candidly cocked to the left.

Of course, some stories stick out in her memory more than others, and even Pitts’ enthusiasm for humanity as a whole cannot disguise the fact that she has a favorite story.

“There was this Hispanic gentleman with two children, a son and a daughter, who spoke in broken English. He had three cinnamon rolls, and he gave one to his daughter and one to his son. His last one, he offered me. I thanked him, but said no. A little while after talking for a bit, he offered it to me again, and I said no thank you, again. I remember thinking that this gesture was quite kind … but little did I know how kind it really was.”

Eventually, Pitts asked him where he and his children were going, and he replied that they were going back to Los Angeles. Through the course of conversation, he told Pitts that a mere three weeks ago, his wife died from bone cancer; he took off time from working at the garbage-can factory, and the threesome went to Guadalajara to grieve with his family. They were just now returning home, just beginning a life without the one they loved.

After hearing this heartbreaking story, Pitts was touched that this kind, yet hurting man was “still so generous as to offer me, a stranger his
last bit of food.” Pitts’ eyes are distant as she ponders this experience.

“We are such a fearful society. Some people are just so afraid and paranoid of others. But I have seen and met wonderful people on Greyhound — people who help handicapped people — strangers, grandmothers who at rest stops buy cookies and hand them out to all the children on the bus. I have sat next to people and just cried with them and talked with them,” Pitts says rather solemnly while toying with a loose strand of hair.

“I admire Deb’s genuine interest in others,” reflects Johnson. “Deb is very positive and sincere, and she has the knack for getting to know someone real quick. Deb’s someone who after talking with a person for five minutes knows their entire life story ... people just open up to her.”

To Pitts, one of the biggest miracles in life is kindness and the power it evokes.

“Through one act of kindness,” she says, “we have the opportunity to touch many, many lives.”

Some of the kindest people she has met have been in what she describes as little, backwater towns.

“They are the towns time forgot; very Americana, very Norman Rockwell,” Pitts says while preparing a new pan of cookies. In such towns, travelers may purchase Greyhound tickets in unlikely places.

“In small towns across the U.S. you can find Greyhound agencies in bookstores, shoe stores, restaurants and even doughnut shops,” Pitts says while wiping some flour from her hands with a dishtowel.

The funniest agency location was in Kearney, Neb., where a man ran a barbershop, sold headstones and sold Greyhound tickets all under the same roof.

“It’s ma and pa businesses like these that keep America what it is,” she says.

Pitts has also come face to face with what she awards the “kindest town in the USA.” The kindness of the folks in North Platte, Neb., shone through one gentleman in particular.

“A UFO from Roswell, N.M. and a saxophone-playing jazzman from New Orleans, La. are just two of the many souvenir magnets that adorn Pitts’ refrigerator. Photos by Chris Fuller.
dining with dignity.

In a world dominated by big business and inflated pricing, Christi Croft discovers a café that sacrifices maximizing profit to reap the rewards of helping others. Photos by Erin Fredrichs.

It's 6 a.m. on a crisp, Friday morning. Sitting in 30-degree weather, whiskered and tired, on the frosted concrete at Third and Yesler in Seattle, his ragged, dusty cowboy hat tells the tales of his best and worst days. His torn, wool gloves are hardly keeping his fingers warm. His change jar holds just two pennies and one nickel. As busy people dressed in three-piece suits and rayon skirts walk by in complete oblivion, he keeps his head hung low and quietly asks for a few spare pennies in hopes of getting a decent meal in a warm place. Thanks to some caring people like Jill Curtis and Michael Campbell, among others, that decent meal doesn't seem so far away.

Before the sun rises from its slumber, Boomtown Cafe, Washington's first nonprofit restaurant of its kind, is already open for business. Quietly nestled across the street from the King County Courthouse, Boomtown provides breakfast at $1.25 and lunch for $1.75 to all people, but is especially targeted to the homeless and those with low income.

According to Curtis, associate director of Boomtown Cafe, that same man sitting on the ground in the torn clothing and worn shoes has a heart like anyone else.

"A lot of people feel threatened by homeless people. These homeless people are the same ones that come in, sit down and end up being really nice. They are just people like the rest of us," Curtis says.
The café is engulfed with the smell of french toast and sausage that immediately envelops and clears cold, stuffed-up nostrils. The 55-seat establishment, which is always jam-packed, is surrounded by the faint clinking of silverware on porcelain and loud conversation by all types of people with varying incomes. To the left sit two middle-class ladies engaged in conversation about a business meeting scheduled for later that day. In the booth adjacent to them sit two older men, one with missing teeth, the other with dusty black hair, both with their heads hanging low, quietly looking at their dim reflection in their coffee mugs. The workers in the kitchen are cooking and smiling while singing to Jimmy Buffett’s classic, “Margaritaville.”

Various forms of artwork made by homeless people, some of which are for sale, hang above each of the tables on the pastel peach and yellow walls. One of the pieces, “Combat of Love,” a picture of two faces drenched in color, facing one another with the determination of love, sells for $200. For this particular painting the money goes to any domestic violence organization of the artist’s choice.

Straight ahead sits Michael Campbell, former chef and one of the four co-founders of Boomtown, who serves as president of the café’s Board of Directors and works for the YWCA as director of community jobs and homeless employment programs. Campbell’s lips form a warm smile between his brown mustache and beard. His dark hair is pulled back in a pony tail, as he quietly sits in the corner drinking his peppermint tea. Having lived most of his life in the humid state of Alabama, he doesn’t mind sporting khaki shorts in below-freezing weather, along with a purple and white stitched sweater and matching scarf. With a firm handshake and an inviting tone, Campbell begins to explain how Boomtown came to be.
Campbell first encountered the food business as a line server while attending Auburn University. After working as a cook for a couple of restaurants, Campbell knew he wanted to make the food business his career. He traveled to New York to attend the Culinary Institute of America. After completing the two-year program there, Campbell went back to Birmingham, Ala. to work as an executive chef at a country club. He also worked as an executive chef, and later as director of operations, at an Alabama food service management company.

It was the unique geography and the people that Campbell noted while visiting a friend that prompted him to move to Seattle. "I liked the fact I could get from 2,500 feet in the mountains down to sea level in a couple of hours. I also liked the people I met and the raw atmosphere of the place," Campbell says while rubbing his beard gently with his fingers.

Campbell had many motivations that fueled the Boomtown idea. One major influence was the chance to work for a nonprofit program aimed at feeding the homeless called Common Meals, now called FareStart. After working with many organizations and running a pilot project called Meals of Fortune, which targeted feeding women and children, Campbell, along with three partners, opened Boomtown on Dec. 28, 1999, after five years of planning.

Many organizations, including VISTA (Volunteers In Service To America), helped support the café by placing volunteers such as Curtis two and a half years ago.

Campbell says he was also influenced by working in the restaurant field for so long and realizing that most franchises were all about maximizing profit. Boomtown gives him a chance to look at and recognize the people involved in making the business a success.

"Almost all of the folks I have talked to are looking to move forward in their lives. Folks that are homeless are not always homeless because they want to be," he says.

Boomtown has approximately seven employees with a mixture of full-time and part-time to volunteer workers. Boomtown also has a barter meal program in which homeless people who cannot afford their meals can work for minimum wage to earn food credits. One meal is equal to 15 minutes of work. Odd jobs include cleaning the bathroom, bussing tables and washing dishes.

"We recognized that it was important for people to hold on to their dignity. We didn't just want to do a free meal. We wanted people to come in and feel like they were getting a meal but they were doing it through an honest exchange," Campbell says while adding that the Boomtown idea came from a similar program in Oregon called Sisters of the Road.

Calvin Thomas is one of Boomtown's barter workers.

"I like the atmosphere and the service. They treat you with hospitality and you get wonderful food at the same time," he says as he takes a big bite out of his cheese-covered Denver omelet, one of Boomtown's three breakfast selections.

Thomas has been in Seattle for 15 years. After growing up in Chicago, he decided to come to the Emerald City after seeing a San Francisco bus advertisement for a special to Seattle for $49. Thomas lives in the vacant space above Boomtown where many other homeless people stay.

Thomas excitedly pulls a piece of yellow, crinkled paper with a name and an address written on it from his pocket. He makes clear that he is in
Patrons at the nonprofit Boomtown Café in Seattle enjoy breakfast and lunch at a reasonable price.

the process of contacting someone to help him with his resumé. He hopes to get a job with Seattle Public Parks and Recreation.

As customers walk in, they go up to the register, order one of the three menu selections written on the chalkboard, pay cash, take a number and sit down at any table. The server brings the food and drinks out for the guest. Here, breakfast is not a soggy bowl of Grape Nuts and some stale, two-day old coffee at Boomtown. Instead, a cheese omelet stuffed with vegetables with a side of sizzling sausage or bacon is the norm. Lunch is not a condensed can of chicken-noodle soup. It is a full plate of home-style lasagna or freshly-made sandwiches. Although the café only accepts cash at this point, a food stamp system is planned for the future.

Despite the cafe’s success, Campbell never loses focus of the fact that many people are involved in the creation and success of Boomtown.

"I am not Boomtown. Boomtown is the people who come in, sit down, and eat the food. Boomtown is the barterers, the volunteers and the workers. If it wasn’t for each and every person, Boomtown wouldn’t exist," Campbell says.

Campbell says Boomtown is just like any other restaurant when it comes to complaints about the service or food.

"If someone comes forward with a complaint, it is given full weight, just as it would be if you were sitting in the Flying Fish, which is one of the upscale restaurants in Belltown. If something goes wrong with your meal you should have every right to complain. That is the expectation here," he says.

Campbell and Curtis explain that everyone is welcome at Boomtown, whether a wealthy executive or a struggling college student.

"Because we are located near a law firm, people always ask, "Is Joe Blow lawyer from across the street abusing his rights by coming in here?" I say no," Curtis says. "We want to create a very dignified environment. We are open to everyone."

While some people might find it disturbing to be in the same environment as a homeless person, Lonny Spath, a former clerical worker for the state, does not mind at all.

"I don’t find it uncomfortable at all. It's a community. Anyone is welcome and that is what's great about it," Spath says.

It's that sense of community, along with the book, "The Grapes of Wrath," that inspired the cafe's name.

"When a town is booming, there is a sense of prosperity, but the reality is the boom is built on the folks who are at the bottom of the economic ladder," Campbell says just as Marlin Poplous, a barter worker for Boomtown, walks by the table with a bounce in his step and shouts ecstatically, "Hey Mike!"

Campbell, while popping a cough drop in his mouth, smiles and replies in his calm, cough-ridden voice, "Hey, how's it going, Marlin?"

To Campbell and all other workers at Boomtown, this is the type of treatment everyone receives. Instead of looking at the unfortunate ones through the windows in disgust, the people at Boomtown open their doors to embrace them.

The hours pass by on this cold Friday, and the whiskered man is no longer visible outside of the café asking for change. He is inside. With his torn hat by his side and wool gloves placed neatly on his lap, he sits at the third table to the left, eating a warm bowl of Boomtown's Pioneer Square Porridge.
Participants start their engines, buckle up, and put the pedal to the metal. Craig Yantis takes the driver’s seat and shares the inside track of go-kart racing. Photos by Erin Fredrichs.

The loud putter of four-stroke engines echo inside the walls of a warehouse. The sound of tires squealing along a smooth concrete floor makes neck hairs rise. Drivers calling themselves "Ice," "Mad Dogg," "Yellow Flag" and "Slick" battle on a winding, nine-turn, indoor go-kart course. Computers monitor lap times and standings, while drivers reach speeds near 30 mph in head-to-head competition.

Experienced racers smoothly split the turns on the course at Karttrak Indoor Raceway in Mount Vernon, bringing the kart within inches of the wall in one turn and quickly sweeping outside to preserve speed. Tires squealing, a driver presses his foot to the brake pedal, and the kart pivots around a tighter turn. The driver slides his foot off the break, and he picks up speed down a long straight stretch.

Novices reveal their inexperience in the first few laps of a race. One driver gets anxious for a tight corner and turns too soon. The kart bounces off the wall on the side of the course. The wall, made of Goodyear

Eagle racing slicks grouped together by large plastic strips, allows for cushioning and quick rebound, as well as creating a prominent thud which echoes through the building when a kart hits. Another first-time driver cranks the steering wheel too hard in a corner and sets the kart into a spin; rubber squeals, and the kart is left turned around on the track. A track assistant, wearing a baseball cap and a bright yellow shirt, jumps over a short wall to face the driver down the course. Most drivers settle down after a few laps, and are soon sailing through the course with only the occasional nudge from behind.

Coors beer racing banners hang in the well-ventilated building. Two track assistants, whose jobs are to enforce safe racing action, look on with crossed arms. As karts motor by, observers near the track quickly learn to speak into people’s ears. The noise in the building makes conversation difficult. Two karts collide on the track with a loud crash. One track worker waves a yellow flag while hurrying to separate the tangled karts.
“It’s intense out there. It’s just fun, a whole lot of fun,” says
Mike Neal, who brought his son Brady out for a day of racing in
Mount Vernon. “You get mesmerized, always want to get ahead
of the next guy.”

Joe Johns also brought his kids out to race at Karttrak Indoor
Raceway. His son Tim thanked him by forcing him into a wall,
where his tires rode up to the top and he almost flipped over.
After the race, both were smiles, showing no bad blood had
developed between them.

“I think this is one of those activities that you can get over­
confident with,” Johns says with an intuitive grin while preparing
to leave.

Many drivers are hooked after their first race and say they
plan to spend more time on the track.

Aaron Ramm, a manager at SyKart Indoor Racing Center in
Tukwilla, says he spent a lot of time at indoor go-kart racing
before accepting a full-time job with the company.

“It was really to the point that it was so addicting, so much
fun that I would do four races a night,” Ramm says. “And that’s
$60. I was thinking, what bills do I have to pay and how much
macaroni and cheese are we going to have to eat to keep racing?”

Ramm says a lot of SyKart Indoor Racing Center’s business
comes from off-season racecar drivers.

“A lot of professional drivers will come in here because they
can use the track, and it actually keeps them in shape,” Ramm
says. “Even though the kart is scaled down, it really keeps their
reflexes sharp.”

Although many experienced drivers utilize the track, Ramm
says most of the SyKart customers are driving a go-kart for the
first time. In fact, Yun S. Hong, the owner of the facility, plans to
start a go-kart driving school for kids younger than 11.

After retiring from his career with Crowley Maritime
Corporation, Hong wants to create a recreational facility where
anyone from a group of business executives to a bunch of kids
can have fun and learn valuable lessons.

Customers of all ages gather in his waiting room, sporting
navy-blue driving suits and black, full-faced helmets as they wait
for the end of the current race. Hong walks through the crowd
with a cell phone in hand, wearing a magenta suit and a
conservative yet colorful tie.

Hong’s childhood memories triggered the idea of building a
go-kart track. When he was a youngster his family immigrated
from Korea to Brazil where they were too poor to afford a car. Instead,
Hong and his family drove around a go-kart made from a two-stroke
chain saw engine.

“Today, video games are almost like the real thing,” Hong says, comparing
his experiences go-karting with one of today’s common childhood
pastimes. “The only thing today’s video games don’t give you is sweat.
You don’t get tired. But here, you get exhausted.”

Hong, once in charge of the operation of crews on tugboat, barge
and freight vessels, additionally explains the possible benefits of go-kart
racing for businesses. Getting co-workers to know each other through
recreational activities, he says, becomes beneficial to problem-solving
skills in the workplace.

“I would always try to get the sailors to get together in some kind of
way where we could try to improve communication,” Hong says.
“Sailors may sail in a small ship for as long as five to 10 years together,
but they don’t talk to each other.”

“In the event that some crisis happens on a vessel where they need

Track workers split the group up into two races. One man from the group hands the others nicknames written on a piece of paper: "Crash," "Frenchy," "Cowboy," "Bullseye," "Stroker," and "Speedy." The gentlemen take their seats in the karts, which are paired side-by-side and lined up at the start.

Track worker Jake Martin walks by to check the drivers' helmets and pulls the starter cord on each kart. The karts spark to life with a low rumble, and the race begins.

After the short distance through the first turn, Stroker takes the lead. But he suddenly spins out in the third turn after picking up too much speed. Cowboy pulls up alongside in attempt to pass, but Stroker steers his kart to the inside, shortening his distance around the corner and allowing him to maintain the lead. Cowboy, content to follow and study the leader for the next two laps, remains patient. By the fourth lap, he has picked his spot.

Cowboy steers the kart to the outside of the track for the first corner in a switch back, pulling up alongside Stroker and showing his front wheels to the leader. The second corner in the switch back approaches. Cowboy steers to the inside, crosses behind Stroker, forces his way to the inside of the turn and he makes his pass.

Bullseye, previously content to watch the action unfolding ahead, makes quiet passes on Stroker and Cowboy in the final laps and takes the win.

The drivers revert to the gentlemen they once were as they pull themselves out of the karts and take off their helmets. Grinning, they enthusiastically share stories of their crafty pass or the collision with the wall.

The group from PACCAR Technological Center seems to agree with a philosophy held by Hong, even though they raced at a different track.

"I find in business today we can work from home, we can work individually — but we lack one element — to communicate person to person without hierarchical barriers," Hong says.

"This is no different than what I call an old Japanese business school," he says. "We all come to the sauna and sit. Here we are, if we’ve got problems we can communicate."

Hong discussed the impact of a department gathering at SyKart Indoor Racing Center with one manager at Boeing. The manager told Hong that immediately after the event, co-workers started e-mailing each other at work, playfully taunting each other about lap times and race results. These kinds of activities make interaction easier between co-workers when problems arise, Hong says. When they already know each other, co-workers are more willing to work together, and they will not have to rely on supervisors to help them solve their problems.

Hong is building a conference room in the SyKart facility. The room will hold 50 to 70 people, have teleconferencing capabilities and be soundproof to keep out the rumble of passing go-karts.

SyKart Indoor Racing Center uses Belgium-made JB karts. Sitting just above the ground, the short karts are quick turners, an important feature for racing on an indoor course about 10 feet wide.

While numbers on red number plates distinguish the otherwise identical vehicles, these karts, specifically made for indoor use, must be built tougher than outdoor karts since they must withstand frequent collisions with walls. Ramm said JB karts carry a price tag of about $5,000.

Powered by 5.5 horsepower Honda engines, the karts reach speeds up to 30 mph, depending on the size and skill of the driver. Seat belts were fitted on the karts by the manufacturer as an added safety measure. The karts undergo frequent maintenance to keep them in racing condition. Ramm says common repairs include replacing tie rods, front-end alignments and changing wheels and tires.

Even on the dark, wet, windy Northwest days, real racing action can be found inside the protected walls of a few western Washington warehouses. The excitement of head-to-head go-kart racing attracts people of all ages. A business executive on lunch break can do battle with a sixth grader putting off social studies homework. The sound of squealing tires on concrete and the rumble of lawn mower motors may never seem the same again.
For a person on Electronic Home Detention, just being at home is part of the punishment. Nathalie Oravetz breaks through the invisible bars of silent surveillance.

Sam* knows if he does any of these things differently, it could mean spending the next three months in jail. He is already an inmate in his own home. Sam is on Electronic Home Detention. EHD offers people convicted of non-violent crimes an alternative to serving straight jail time. EHD allows Sam and approximately 25 people in Whatcom County to remain with their families while serving time and paying restitution for their crimes.

Sergeant Pete Klein, program manager for Whatcom County’s Alternatives Corrections Center, says the EHD program has a high success rate. EHD became an option for people facing jail time in 1989. Klein manages to keep his office tidy despite the constant addition of file folders and Post-its on his desk. His bulletin board displays letters from people who completed EHD, letters from employers of people on EHD and parents who believe the program influenced their children positively.

Klein tips back in his chair and folds his hands behind his neck. He recalls a story of an employer calling to ask if his employee could stay on EHD. Klein remembers being confused and laughs as he explains that the employee went from being a mediocre worker on the verge of being fired to someone the employer wanted to put in a supervisory position.

Part of the allure of EHD to law enforcement officials is its adaptability and simplicity. The mechanics of EHD require little more than a clean phone line and wearing a tracking device. The words sound simple but the weight of wearing a tracking device is a reincarnation of the proverbial ball and chain.
Sam, 25, wakes up every morning with the tracking device strapped to his left ankle. As he goes about his day, he says he is always aware of it. He describes it as like a little garage-door opener with a rubber wrap. Unless he's at work, he is restricted from going anywhere outside of the 100-foot perimeters set up by the monitoring system.

"It feels like a watch on your ankle, a big ol' watch," Sam says as his blue eyes glance down his denim-clad leg to the device. The device will not be removed until his sentence is up. If he did anything to tamper with it, the police would instantly be aware of it. It joins him even in the shower. The device is water resistant but if he wanted to take a bath, he would need to leave his left leg out of the tub.

Two basketballs sit inches from his feet. He reaches over, picks one up, begins spinning it, and describes his first thoughts in the morning.

"I think about when is this going to be over? Here we go again, just another day."

Just another day for Sam is not what most people would call ordinary. Anyone looking for him can find him with complete certainty in one of two places — at home or at work.

A candidate for EHD must either be a student or employed. Other qualifications for the program include being convicted of a non-violent crime, signing a consent-to-search form and not revoking it while on the program and having an approved, stable residence.

Once a judge deems the EHD option appropriate, the Alternatives Corrections Center team reviews the application to determine approval for the program.

Sam had to find a job knowing he would be on EHD. An employer would have to agree to the program's terms and have him work a set schedule.

"People didn't want to deal with the inflexibility and with me being a convicted felon," Sam says, his sentence trailing off as he looks at the empty aquarium in the corner of his room. His friends just bought him a turtle for his birthday. The turtle waits in the kitchen for its home to be made. The turtle is also waiting for a name. After some contemplation, Sam names his turtle Dizzy after the jazz musician Dizzy Gillespie.

Brown curls peek out from under Sam's navy blue baseball cap. A goatee frames his lips as they form a smile. He says his boss gave him a break because of the way he presented himself during his personal interview. She was willing to look at what other potential employers overlooked.

"My boss realized I'd be competent. She knew I'd realized what I'd done and how wrong it was," Sam says quietly.

Sam was convicted of first-degree theft. Klein explains first-degree theft as wrongfully attaining property worth more than $1,500, except when a firearm is involved. Sam's lawyer told him the maximum possible sentence he could get was 90 days in jail. His lawyer suggested he consider settling before going to court. Part of the settlement included...
serving 90 days on home detention. Looking back now, Sam realizes he should have spent more time on his decision as the judge might not have given him the maximum sentence.

“My lawyer wasn’t very helpful. Personally, I thought it was an excessive sentence for the crime I committed. But, it was a compromise I was extremely willing to make at that time,” Sam says regretfully.

Sleeping in his own bed and being able to interact with people were two reasons Sam applied for the EHD program. “I didn’t want to sleep in jail because jail sucks. It’s a terrible, terrible place,” Sam says, his eyes looking up toward the Bob Marley poster tacked on his wall.

Until he completes his sentence, sleeping in his own bed is one of very few pleasures in his life.

“They want you to know you’re in jail, which is understandable,” Sam says explaining why he can’t run any personal errands like going to the grocery store or renting movies. Sam says he can call and ask for permission to deviate from his ordinary schedule. He calls on Fridays after he gets his paycheck to ask if he can stop on the way home to cash it.

He spends a good portion of his earnings at the Alternatives Corrections Center. It costs $84 a week to be hooked up on EHD and another $10 for each urine analysis. Sam, and everyone else on EHD, must comply with weekly urine analysis testing in addition to random sampling.

“The fact that you have to go pee for them every week is a dehumanizing thing to go through. They don’t stay in there and watch you pee in real jail,” Sam says.

Although it is frustrating not to be able to run his own errands, Sam’s roommate helps him out by buying groceries for both of them. Sam thinks hard about grocery lists, since he can’t just go to the store to pick up whatever he needs.

Klein says they acknowledge traffic congestion and inclement weather. Klein knows that if he has a hard time getting to work due to snow, then other people will have similar circumstances.

Not being able to go beyond 100 feet of his bedroom leaves Sam plenty of time to pass at home. He spends most of his time reading, working out, watching television, and listening to music. A barbell rests on the floor, a stack of books is piled on the corner of his desk and numerous Phish, Beastie Boys, jazz and various other CDs litter his room as evidence of these activities.

A person can only do so much lifting weights and reading. “I do a lot of music listening, you get cabin
fever pretty bad!" He says emphatically.

Although he misses visiting friends, playing basketball and jogging, one of the toughest things about being on EHD for Sam is not telling his parents.

"My parents are unbeknownst. That's been the hardest thing, not letting them know what situation I'm in. That isn't because of the police, it's my choice. I thought it would be an extreme strain on the relationship." Sam says sadly. The basketball rolls out of his reach. He bends down to scoop up the blue Seahawks football resting next to his bed.

He says his friends have been really supportive but he misses interacting with them.

"I think people feel sorry for me. I hear a lot of 'it's not too long'. A slow smile forms above his goatee as he adds, "unless you're on it, you don't really understand."

His eyes dart around the room — the room which serves as a substitute prison cell. An electronic monitoring unit rests next to the head of his bed. The unit has three lights resembling a sideways traffic light. The red light indicates an incoming call. The yellow light shows that he's home. The green light just indicates the unit is on. Sam has to keep his phone line clear of call-waiting, voice-mail and other similar features. A computer randomly dials the numbers of people on EHD.

When his machine is contacted, the red light comes on which checks to make sure the yellow light is on.

If the computer randomly selects him and tries to call to verify that he is home, the line can not be busy for more than five minutes. If it was, it would be considered a violation of the program's terms. If the system can't get through, police officers might be called out to his house. Any such violation could land him in jail.

Narrowing down what he misses the most is difficult. He twirls the football in his palms as he contemplates.

"Just the concept of freedom ... I guess. That's what I miss the most, the concept of freedom," he says as he exhales slowly.

"When it's over I'm definitely going to enjoy the little things more. Like being able to shoot hoops if you feel like it, stopping at the store and picking up a bag of popcorn if you feel like it, being able to stop by and surprise a friend if you feel like it. It's a punishment, there's no doubt about that." Sam adds as he is suddenly interrupted by the shout of a roommate.

"Your turtle is going to run away from you!" his roommate teases.

Sam smiles and shakes his head.

"Hopefully not 100 feet!" Laughter echoes from the hall. Sam knows a sense of humor and patience are what will get him through the rest of his sentence.

He stands up, wipes his palms on the front of his jeans and leaves to go find his turtle.

"I want to find out what kind of music he likes."

Sergeant Pete Klein relaxes in his office before beginning another day of law enforcement. Photos by Chris Fuller.
Tied with a thin nylon rope into a sheer granite cliff face 1,000 feet above the ground, Peggy Drinkwater's life depends on four thumbnail-sized pieces of metal wedged into a 2-inch crack, securing the rope to the rock. She is more than 2,000 feet below the summit and it's getting dark and windy.

Exhausted, she assembles the portable single-bed-sized canvas ledge that she will be sleeping on with her partner as they live in a vertical world and ascend Yosemite's El Capitan during the next four days.

Drinkwater, a recent environmental education graduate from Western, began rock climbing her last year of high school.

When Drinkwater became interested in big-wall climbing, she spent her time practicing climbing techniques in trees.

In contrast to traditional rock climbing, big-wall climbers spend several days sleeping in hammocks or portable ledges on the cliff face as they work their way to the summit.

Climbers haul food, water and supplies as they ascend the rock. A recent trip found the 5-foot 11-inch climber hauling gear and supplies that amounted to more than 150 pounds.

On the second day of the Yosemite climb, Drinkwater and her partner ran out of water while ascending the 1,900-foot Washington Column rock.

"I really thought I was going to die... I expected my kidneys to fail... we were dehydrated... we kept laughing," Drinkwater says recalling the incident, her eyes wide, conveying the desperation she felt.

"I remembered a story my Mom told me about a father and son who were stranded in a cave and they drank their own urine to survive, so I tried it," her face cringes at the thought. "It was disgusting. I threw out the cup and eventually threw up, but I think it helped."

At 800 feet, the climbers decide to retreat. They carry their equipment part-way down the climb, drop their gear in a gulley and stumble into base camp. After rehydrating and resting for two days, the climbers retrieve their equipment and prepare to ascend El Capitan.

Their preparation involves strapping nylon loops with duct-tape to all 15 gallons of water and organizing climbing gear.

The massive granite monoliths towering above the lush Yosemite Valley dwarf the giant sequoias. The howl of the wind echoes through the land. The looming shadows of the granite rock towers slowly fall across the sleepy Yosemite Valley.

Uncertainty accompanies Drinkwater the night before the climb.
"This is the only time you ask yourself why am I doing this ... that's when I got a frog in my throat," she recalls.

As the evening takes over the Yosemite Valley, a few lights appear on the El Capitan rock face like the first stars opening a winter evening sky. The lights are climbers' headlamps. El Capitan rises a dizzying 3,693 feet above the valley floor. It is believed to be the largest single block of exposed granite in the world. If five space needles were stacked upon one another, the height would still not equal El Capitan.

The route up El Capitan requires four nights and five days for Drinkwater and her partner to complete.

Determined not to make the same mistake, the climbers haul enough water to have one gallon per day each. "The focus is very intense. We were just trying to get up the rock," Drinkwater says, recalling her thoughts on the first day. The climbers spend the first day hauling more than 180 pounds of gear with ropes and pulleys. After securing their supplies, they rappel down the rock and spend their last night at the comp.

"Three out of the four parachutes opened, one person died," Drinkwater explains in a somber tone. The person who died was a 60-year-old veteran BASE jumper and stunt woman. She had borrowed equipment that she wasn't familiar with and didn't open her chute in time. "It was really sad and her husband videotaped the whole thing."

More than 30 hours of climbing begin to take a toll on Drinkwater's body; her toes are numb. "A bone in each foot was pushed out of place from standing on the aiders all day ... this caused a pinched nerve," she says.

Aiders are made of thin nylon, woven into five loops that run about 4 feet long. The climbers stand in the loops as they put metal wedges into the cracks on the rock. They then attach the aider to the wedge and stand on it. As this process is repeated, each piece of metal is higher than the previous piece, serving as a kind of ladder.

"When I got home, the chiropractor fixed my feet ... pushed the bones back into place," Drinkwater says, casually describing the remedy.

The next day, the climbers knew they were only hours from the summit. Close to the top, Drinkwater stretches her arm so far above her head while reaching for a rock hold that she dislocates a rib. This injury is only a minor distraction, and she continues without complaint.

Covered in dirt, assorted scrapes and blisters, the climbers make the summit on the fourth day.

"At the top we almost got naked, we were so excited we danced and we had a food and water party," Drinkwater says.

Half-naked the climbers walk the painful remaining yards to the very top of the rock barefoot. The hike down in the dark is more than eight miles, but the climbers are exhilarated.

"I can't wait to go back," Drinkwater says excitedly. She plans to vertical backpack in Yosemite in the early spring, and dreams about climbing big walls in Pakistan, which make the Yosemite cliffs look like foothills in Kansas.
Communal living cultivates friendships and healing at Bellingham’s YWCA. Laura Query ventures upstairs where Teri Smith, director of transitional services, guides residents on their journeys. Photos by Erin Fredrichs.

On the path to self-sufficiency, women at Bellingham’s YWCA find a supportive hand in director of transitional services, Teri Smith. Her silvery, dark-brown hair is cut short in a bob and tucked neatly behind her ears. She wears a casual fleece jacket, which reflects the subdued confidence of this forty-something woman.

Walking swiftly through the large, high-ceilinged rooms with elegant staircases, Smith explains the goals of the YWCA, which opened in 1914. The company offers job training and educational classes for women residing in the building.

When asked about the low-income women the YWCA houses, her royal blue eyes open wide as she recalls some of the first functions, such as dances, she attended at the Bellingham YWCA. After numerous functions Smith was surprised to realize 36 women lived upstairs. Residents such as Janice Beck have altered Smith’s view of humanity. Beck came to the YWCA last August after her bi-polar condition — a mental illness characterized by extreme mood swings — forced her to leave her home.

She volunteers to answer the phone and do errands during the week. Her tall frame reaches almost 6-foot, but is muted by her soft-spoken words. Her grayish-blond hair barely pokes at her broad shoulders. The pain of a troubled life shows on her slightly wrinkled face.

"I came here because I had been hospitalized, and I was evicted 'cause no one knew where I was while I was hospitalized and my bills weren't paid."

"I just can’t describe the feeling. You have a roof over your head and you can afford it. It’s wonderful. While being in the hospital I had lost my confidence, coming here I have sort of regained it."

"I support each other. I mean we have problems, but when you get so many people together there are going to be problems. We are happy if one of us accomplishes something and are sad if one of us struggles."

Smith says she discourages the women from dwelling on past struggles. She says the most important time in their lives is right now.

"We have a lot of people who come here with a lot of regrets about their life. I like to tell the story of a woman who was driving into the Bakerview Nursery to buy a tree to put in her backyard. On her way in she saw on the big advertising board in large block letters the message ‘The best time to plant a tree was 20 years-ago’ and she thought ‘Oh man!’ and she felt a little tinge of resentment. So she buys her tree and goes back out into the parking lot, and on the back of the sign it says ‘And the next best time is now.’"

Smith believes that regardless of the situation, the right attitude can work wonders. Beck has a similar view.

For her, being forced to leave work was a devastating blow financially and emotionally.

"Work was so important to me, then all of a sudden it was pulled out from under me and I lost my identity,” she shares and then quickly adds, “I’m not saying that was the right way to be or a healthy way to be, but that’s how I was.

“Well, it’s like you get so upset, you get sooooo upset that this is the way it’s going to be forever and then you just have to stop, look, and laugh at yourself.” Beck says as she slowly rises from her old padded chair behind the desk.
I'm a believer that you can really grow as a person from the bad times. Everything that has ever been bad in my life that's happened, and there's been a lot of stuff, I've ultimately grown from it as a person and it's made me who I am today," she says.

Other women who come to the YWCA, for various reasons, are also seeking individual growth. Some of the women have struggled with issues of domestic violence, or drug and alcohol abuse. Others are college students who find the $195 per month rent affordable.

Smith takes every opportunity to make the goals of the program applicable to the lives of the residents. She paints the bathroom, which is bright with the fresh coat of paint.

"You have to remember there's 12 women and two showers. You need a conflict resolution class," Smith jokes. "You need those skills not only for communal living, but in the workplace as well... Most people are not fired from jobs because of lack of skill, they're fired for lack of social skills."

While staying at the YWCA these communal living skills are re-enforced in several ways. The women often have meals together, sharing food and conversation about the day's events. They also clean the kitchen on rotation.

Smith says the communal atmosphere of the YWCA is conducive to healing the vulnerable women who walk through its glass-paned double doors.

"I've seen people come in very nervous about the kind of people they might meet living at a place like the YWCA," Smith says sarcastically. "They are guarded. Six months later when they are leaving, they're crying and exchanging addresses and phone numbers... It is amazing to see what happens when a group of women come together." she says.

Smith wants people to understand small gestures can lead to healing.

"When you offer a hand to someone in need, that in and of itself is helpful even if it was just that one day," Smith explains.

Although Smith will carry with her many memories of the women and the place known as the YWCA, one special thing always makes her feel like she is making an impact.

"I have had some wonderful hugs in this place," Smith recalls. "I will probably think of all the times a woman came up and gave me a big bear hug unexpectedly... And they're hugging me, but I wish that I could share that hug with all the women in the community, the Y members who keep the doors open."

Smith believes that each of the women is seeking their own path to self-sufficiency. She is merely a stepping stone to direct that path.

"I see myself as just one of the many guides a woman will meet on her journey. I am not the great healer," she says. "I have very clear boundaries and a good understanding of what I am able and not able to do. I also believe that all people are moving forward in their own way and their own time."
Charmander, Squirtle, Bulbasaur, Pinsir ...

As kids across the country struggle to "catch them all," Jen Webber struggles to make sense of America’s latest super-fad Pokémon.

Photos by Erin Fredrichs.
Generation Xers remember the Garbage Pail Kid craze, charm necklaces, Star Wars collectibles and the Strawberry Shortcake dolls that were the topics of every conversation during childhood.

Later came the compulsive hunt for the bright-colored stuffed animals — Beanie Babies. The obsession not only caught on with kids, but hit the adult market just as hard.

While some diehards still pride themselves on their Barbie, comic-book or baseball-card collections, a new wave of collectors have arrived, who together have created a sub-culture of their own — Pokémon.

The sci-fi video game, first introduced in Japan in 1996, has evolved into a worldwide phenomenon. The inventor of the game, Satoshi Tajiri, 30, turned his childhood fascination of catching bugs and then watching them fight into more than $6 billion in sales worldwide. Nintendo has released three video games that are distinguished by their red, blue and yellow cartridges. If that wasn't enough ... the video game evolved into a top-rated cartoon series and trading cards.

The Pokéboom hit hard with kids all over. Youngsters wake up to the 7 a.m. cartoon, dress themselves in Pokémon paraphernalia and head to school where the game is prohibited, but talk of it runs rampant.

Kids furiously trade these cards just as fast as they collect them. While 151 of these pocket monsters exist, Nintendo is continually creating new characters, adding to the craze. Kids pay from $3.25 for an American starter pack to $5.25 for a Japanese pack.

To understand the Pokémon tidal wave that has crashed so abruptly into today's pop culture, it's necessary to go inside the minds of the people who know it best.

Thanks to her kids, Diane Bergquist, a 36-year-old homemaker from Bellingham, has been swept up by the Pokémon whirlwind. This December Bergquist was named “America's Ultimate PokéMom” by Nintendo after winning a nationwide contest.

The Bergquist family's interest in Pokémon was sparked three years ago when her 9-year-old son Brian received a Pokémon toy from a Japanese friend.

Dressed in warm-up pants and an "I Love New York" T-shirt, Bergquist looks like any other mom. As she scurries around in her socks, a Japanese custom she practices in her home, Bergquist finds what she is looking for — a small photo album that will help her tell her exciting story.

Chosen from more than 16,000 applicants, Bergquist competed in an online challenge of Pokémon knowledge and dedication. The first step on her quest to the title and crown was to answer five Pokémon trivia questions.

"The questions were really hard, but Brian and I figured them out," she says.

A lottery then picked 10 semi-finalists to write a short essay. The rest is history.

In the corner of Bergquist's modest home, her Christmas tree still stands. "I've been too busy to take it down," she says. "Busy" is quite an understatement for this mom. Since achieving her Pokétiltle, the PokéMom has flown coast to coast to tell her fairytale story. The life-changing call from Nintendo came December 13. "I couldn't believe it," she says. "I didn't think real people won contests like that. All we could do was scream."

Bergquist's husband, Eric, and their two children were all home when Nintendo told her she had won. Bergquist's daughter Brittany, 5, remembers the day. The dramatic youngster hops around the kitchen screaming with excitement as she tries to imitate what she did that day.

The family's first taste of fame came when a limousine escorted them down to the Nintendo headquarters in Redmond, Wash. Along with a life-size, yellow Pikachu Pokémon character, the Bergquists were greeted by a large group of Nintendo staff who presented the PokéMom with a beauty-queen sash that read "America's Ultimate PokéMom."
After Bergquist was crowned at Nintendo’s headquarters, the family headed east to the Big Apple — New York City. The prize for the contest included the trip and a $1,000 shopping spree at the monstrous toy store, F.A.O. Schwartz. After giving $100 of the prize to charity, the Bergquists let their children have the rest. Brittany spent much of her $450 on Barbies while Brian spent the majority of his share on more Pokémon things. While her children were let loose in the toy store, the PokeMom was treated to a full-day spa treatment.

The fun didn’t stop there. The Bergquists also visited the set of “Today.” "We were outside from the crack of dawn," she says as she points at her album. "Look, there is nobody here. We were there at 5:45 in the morning.

Making it home just in time for the holidays, Bergquist and Brian headed off again to Los Angeles to appear on the “Donnie and Marie Show,” leaving the rest of the clan at home.

"Donnie was my heart throb as a kid," she recalls, giddy as if it were yesterday. "I was even in his fan club. Look what it took me to finally meet him." The smile of a proud mom graces Bergquist’s face as she recalls some of the precious moments she shared with her son on the trip.

"A few times he would just hug me and say ‘thanks mom,’” she says. "It was good for us to spend time together. You can choose to be part of your children’s life, and I did.”

These moments make Bergquist feel she is worthy of her title.

"We want to be the heroes of our children," she says. "If I’m involved with my children, I know that I am being a good parent.” Bergquist sees the change Pokémon has made in her son since he started playing and collecting.

"I saw a lot from an education standpoint. Brian was forced to go to the dictionary to understand the card’s vocabulary,” she says. "It has also helped him with math and statistics.”

When Pokémon cards are played against each other in the game, the kids have to add and subtract how much damage in points they do to the other Pokémon, she explains.

Bergquist was also surprised to find out that her shy son was spending his school recesses writing a chapter story about Pokémon.

"Brian never used to like to write," she says. "This top mom says her kids’ passion does not come before important things like homework and Bible studies.

“It’s not a way of life,” she says. “It’s a hobby.” As a reward for finishing their homework and Bible studies, Bergquist takes her kids to Toys ‘R’ Us, which for three afternoons per week is transformed into a Pokémon mecca.

Upon entering through the automatic doors, the hum of small voices is heard in the distance. The bright fluorescent lights and smell of new plastic are almost overwhelming.

Huddled around three long tables, kids are submerged in Pokémon competition for an hour-and-a-half. Around the group, the moms set up camp, some cheer their kids on, some just catch up on the latest gossip with others. Every so often they may even indulge themselves in the game.

As Brian begins to set up his bright Pokémon board, the PokeMom scouts the group for competition. Hunter 7, a freckle-faced red-head with large glasses accepts the challenge.

As the boys set out their cards, Brian carefully places some small brown rocks to the side.

"These are damage counters,” he explains. "Each Pokémon has attack powers that can do damage to another Pokémon.”

A coin is flipped and the game is under way. Hunter plays his Snorlax at 1,014 pounds, this is the heaviest of all Pokémon, whose power is a sleep spell. The game is over when all of Brian’s Pokémon are knocked out.

"It’s a game of both skill and luck,” Hunter says. For this match Hunter is victorious. Bergquist is on the prowl for her son’s next competitor before he even gathers his cards together. This will continue for the rest of the afternoon.

To an outsider the game is all too confusing. As rambunctious kids buzz around the toy store, names like Dragonite, Nidoran, Lickitung and Exegguar are tossed about.

In the middle of all of the chaos stands a tall, curly-haired man. He is different from other Toys ‘R’ Us employees. Four-and-a-half hours each week Jacob Beckelhymer 19, known as the gym leader, plays and talks Pokémon with the kids.

The gym leader, he says, manages the crowd.
Jacob Beckelhymer calls himself a gym leader as he manages the 350 Pokeleague players at Toys 'R' Us.

"It can get pretty crazy around here. We have 350 kids enrolled in Pokeleague," he says as he opens a binder full of names and identification numbers given to kids when they register. From the look of things, it's obvious Beckelhymer is there for more than just crowd control. When he is not stamping a Pokeleague card, he answers questions about Pokemon. When he is not sharing his knowledge, he works his way down the long list of kids who have challenged him to play.

The nation-wide Pokeleague is an organized way for kids to play against each other, Beckelhymer explains. They can earn badges for competing to show off their Pokeskills. "It's kinda embarrassing to be as old as I am and know so much about Pokemon," he says. "It lets me do something else besides the usual stuff though."

The PokeMom has nothing but praise for the kid-friendly guy. "He's incredible with children."

The Pokemon language is spoken so fluently by those who play it that explaining it to novices is extremely difficult. Beckelhymer refers to the game as a "really advanced game of war."

The language comes easy for 11-year-old Grant Snyder, almost too easy.

Grant has been collecting and playing Pokemon for three years. He recently sold his collection for $150 to a local card shop. The excitement of the game is still evident in his voice. "This is Raichu. He evolves from Pikachu, he has 90 hit points, he's electric, he's a fossil card, he's non-holographic and his move is gigashock which does 30 damage to the Pokemon he is fighting."

Whether it's playing or collecting these cards, the mystery of Pokemon can only be uncovered if one takes the time to learn all 151 characters and their numerous powers. For now, Pokemon will continue to rule the kid world. Kids will continue to watch the cartoon, wear the clothes, play the game and search for the missing card to their collection. They will continue — until something better and more outrageous comes along to collect.