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So you think you’re pretty cool. We agree. In fact, the whole city is packed with people like you: unique, creative, and sort of weird. We’re all quirky, but together, we’re brilliant, damn it. Sure it sounds vain. But we’ve got the chops to prove it.

Like an Arlington couple capitalizing on their homemade Australian outback. Or city churches funding a coffeehouse that trades treats for chores. The town is simply littered with unsung success, from local designers creating sustainable fashions, to border buffs confiscating marijuana from rotund bears. And with five fellow Bellinghams on the map, we’ve got some stiff competition (see page 27). Just kidding—we’re the best. Check out the following pages to see why.

Sincerely,

Ciara O’Rourke
Editor in Chief

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The tables in the small shop, usually spaced evenly along the floor, are pushed together to make room for a makeshift stage on the left. A man donning a simple blue shirt, his hair tied into a short ponytail, is singing and playing along to his guitar. The sounds bounce off the sage green walls and the audience swells with people from the street.

The song is called “In the Garden,” and Mitchell Senti wrote it himself. Senti is the director of Envision Ministries, which owns the nonprofit coffee shop. He sees the Three Trees as a ministry—a place where people of all faiths can come in, rest and seek a friendly, safe environment.

“It’s not a Christian coffee shop in that it’s only open to Christians,” he says.

Sixteen local churches fund Three Trees to keep the coffeehouse alive. Almost all the baristas are volunteers, and they donate their tips each month to other nonprofits in town, Senti says. Approximately 15 to 20 volunteers spend four to five hours per week each at Three Trees, he says. But it isn’t just a coffee shop, Senti says; Three Trees operates to help the community through outreach and plain old goodwill. Volunteers give away two-day-old baked goods to the homeless, who can complete chores like scrubbing dishes and sweeping for coffee, he says.

Tuesdays and Thursdays are “chore list” days, says Don Warwick, co-owner of Three Trees. The homeless can come in on those days and do the chores on the list. It gives them a sense of ownership in the shop, he says. “I think it’s more honorable and dignifying to allow somebody to work for something,” Warwick says.

Carrie Dennehy, a Three Trees regular, walks in at 1:15 p.m., minutes after Warwick flips over the “closed” sign on the door. Setting her mammoth sketchbook beside a stack of art books, she orders a cup of green tea with jasmine.

Dennehy found Three Trees by accident—she wandered in on a Wednesday “discussion night” her second evening in Bellingham after leaving Massachusetts. After that, she couldn’t stay away, and enjoys spending her nights somewhere other than a bar.

“I came down for another [discussion night], met a couple people and I’ve been haunting the place ever since,” she says. Discussion nights happen every Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. at the coffeehouse. They are open forum style gatherings where regulars and visitors can discuss pretty much anything. The key is encouraging people with different viewpoints to listen to each other and talk respectfully.

Dennehy, who moonlights as a painter and photographer, compares the atmosphere at Three Trees to Cheers, where everyone knows your name. The baristas know the regulars and often strike up conversations with strangers, and Dennehy, every time she visits. Now even Dennehy volunteers, hanging up concert posters and advertising the coffee shop’s events around downtown Bellingham.

Volunteer barista Ken Walker has worked at the Three Trees since it opened in December 2005, and performs at open mic nights when the mood strikes. Senti is teaching him to play the guitar, and Walker plans to perform with it sometime this summer, he says.

“I sing sometimes or tell poems,” Walker says. “It depends on how my heart feels.” Although he has been volunteering for two and a half years, he is going to ask for a paying position soon because he plans to attend Bellingham Technical College. He hopes to stay on as an employee.

Warwick, one of the few paid employees of Three Trees, stands out in the casual Three Trees in pressed khakis and a black polo. He has just come from his other job as a barista at a Starbucks in Lynden.

Jerry Tagarden performs at open mic night.

Warwick met Senti when they both worked at The Lynden Bookshop (now Katz! Coffee & Used Books). Senti and his wife decided to start Three Trees, and Warwick said he wanted to help. Now he dashes between Three Trees and Starbucks—“Apples and oranges,” he says.

Warwick, having finished his latte, gets up to join the conversation at the next table, where Dennehy is telling a joke to a duo that just walked in. He has to maneuver his chair into the small crowd already gathered at her table. It’s Tuesday, and regulars are claiming their usual spots for open mic night. Three Trees only seats 70, and tonight is going to be another full house.

The key is encouraging people with different viewpoints to listen to each other and talk respectfully.
Fresh off the release of their second full-length album, “Young Lions,” a chance stint with Seattle music legends The Presidents of the United States of America and loads of ambitious side projects, ventures and careers, The Love Lights are shining brightly in the crowded Bellingham music scene.

“When we were first getting into the scene people wouldn’t give us the time of day,” says Rob Stauffer, the band’s soft-spoken guitarist and lead vocalist, reflecting on a time when the band was comprised of only himself, fellow guitarist Ben Ballew and bassist brother Jeff Ballew, backed by drum beats from an iPod. “Pop music, get out of here.”

After struggling to find anyone in town he enjoyed playing with, Ben had placed a want ad hoping to attract a like-minded musician. “I think I ended it with ‘No jam/funk or Christian music need apply,’” Ben says.

Stauffer responded and The Love Lights were born. The group began performing at local coffee shops, armed with Stauffer’s song book. After finding each other, the trio found comfort among fellow local acts like 10 Killing Hands; Yes, Oh Yes; Crossfox; and Deadly Sinclair. All the bands shared a similar pop aesthetic, and a wariness of their place next to the mainly rock-driven scene run by bands like Federation X and 76 Charger.

“The rawk boys never seemed like they wanted to hang out and share a Pabst with us,” Ben says. “10 Killing Hands will try to share their white Russians with you.”

The Ballews and Stauffer recorded the “Lakes and Ponds” EP at Ben’s apartment in 2005 with the help of Actual Air Studios audio engineer and owner Tim Brown, fostering a permanent partnership—Brown has since recorded the band’s two full-length albums.

Soon after, Jeremiah Austin and Sarah Jerns (on trumpet) and Diana Dizard (on baritone sax) joined the founding trio. Drummer Alex O’Farrell rounded out the lineup after auditioning for the band via YouTube. The brass section bolstered the Lights’ repertoire, and provoked concert attendees to shake their bodies—not just bob their heads.

Recording the band’s first full-length “Problems and Solutions” in 2006 was a lengthy feat: songs that were already recorded in the studio were overdubbed with horns and drums as each respective member joined the band. The tracks struggled to fit together but their grooving sound was undeniable catchy and a promising preface for the band’s future.

“That record never felt settled because we never got the chance to play the songs as a group,” Ben says. “Listening back, it sounds like we’re still feeling our ways around each other and the songs, which we were.”

The Love Lights were back in the studio again last spring, this time to record their second full-length “Young Lions,” named for Art Kane’s 1958 photo “A Great Day in Harlem” and a documentary by the same name that features a slew of jazz greats including the likes of Count Basie, Thelonious Monk and Dizzy Gillespie. In the film, an older musician refers to the new blood as “young lions”—eager musicians paying homage to the old sound, but persevering with their own flair and attitude.

“The apt description fits the band in more ways than one,” Ben, emerging as the band’s primary songwriter, had started listening exclusively to R&B, soul and Motown music from the 1960s and ’70s. Some “Young Lions” songs started as writing exercises to echo the likes of Motown acts (Sam Cooke, Otis Redding and Booker T, to name a few), Ben says.

“The stylistic turning point between ‘Problems and Solutions’ and ‘Young Lions’ came as a result of hearing Sharon Jones & The Dap-Kings on the radio one day,” Ben says. “I had an epiphany. A genuine stop-you-in-your-tracks moment. I just

“The rawk boys never seemed like they wanted to hang out and share a Pabst with us. 10 Killing Hands will try to share their white Russians with you.”
Stauffer, whose voice is more akin to mellow indie singers like Pedro the Lion’s David Bazan, prepared to belt some soulful numbers. Stauffer’s crooning on songs like “Crushing Both You and Me” slides into a frantic shout in “Communication Breakdown.” But Stauffer didn’t nail the sound without encouragement from Ben and Brown, he says. “Ben said to me ‘No you belt it, you’re a soul singer now,’ ” Stauffer says. “I don’t sing soul; there are some parts on the album where you can tell I’m really uncomfortable singing this, but it’s good because it’s pushing me.”

And the band is getting better. With each subsequent recording they understand each other more. Unified, they’ve created a graceful persona, even if correlating seven different schedules and opinions is a logistical nightmare, and rehearsals are rare.

“Tensions get high towards the finish line,” Ben says. “The biggest thing we’ve gotten out of the ‘Young Lions’ experience is learning where each others’ boundaries are.”

But the pros outweigh the cons. Each member boasts a different musical background, influence and obsessions (such as bands Pavement and Gatsby’s American Dream) furnishing the band with an unending well of ideas. Not to mention nearly the entire band is a teacher or on the path to become one, and they all have their own musical side projects.

“I like that we all have passions outside of the band,” Stauffer says. “I think it makes us more real, and that it makes us more realistic as human beings. Music is wonderful and we love it but we have things outside of it that we care about.”

Recently Stauffer and Brown started up Ghost Assembly Records, a label that takes a different approach to encouraging Bellingham’s music scene, and art in general, Stauffer says. For the past two winters, Ghost Assembly gathered local artists to write and record original Christmas music for the “It’s Actually Christmas” albums. The label hopes to make a compilation soon combining local spoken word and singer-songwriters.

The Love Lights’ horn section recorded several songs with Seattle musicians The Presidents of the United States of America for their new album “These Are the Good Times People,” and played with them at The Paramount Theatre in Seattle. The union was the result of a spur of the moment suggestion Stauffer made to the band before its show at WWU in September. They will also join the band at this year’s Sasquatch! Music Festival at the Gorge in George, Wash.

“Our road is long and bumpy, and we’re still growing a lot as individual musicians, songwriters and live entertainers.”

While the band endured early scorn, these days their music, live performances and outside ambitions almost demand the attention of anyone within earshot. “It’s infectious getting on stage with so many other people. It's hard not to feel like some kind of army—or monster.”

That said, The Love Lights like to keep things local, traveling south, but never too far out of the area. With the release of “Young Lions,” the gig with the Presidents and garnering airplay on Seattle’s KEXP, its hard not to imagine their seven-member string-, brass- and stick-wielding army invading cities soon.

“I had an epiphany—a genuine stop-you-in-your-tracks moment. I just knew that that was what we should be doing. It was the right instrumentation, right energy, right time—just the right thing to do.”

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Rugged Rags

Burly isn’t the first word that comes to mind when describing the Noppe sisters. Marissa Noppe, 27, and Adrienne Noppe, 25, are two young, attractive and outgoing women, but burly is exactly what they are.

A burly girl is an adventurous, stylish, strong and beautiful woman, Marissa says. And it was exactly that woman the sisters had in mind when they started the women’s sport apparel line, Burly Girls Clothing, in Bellingham in 2002.

Both avid outdoor-sports enthusiasts, the sisters crossed the United States in 2000, searching for new wilderness to tame. En route, they encountered an abundance of fresh powder, epic surf and muddy mountain trails. But when it came time to replace their fading gear, pickings were slim.

“We were sick of sorting through racks of guys’ stuff trying to find clothes that might fit,” Adrienne says.

Seeing an opportunity to encourage women to take their rightful place in the world of boards and bikes, Burly Girls was born. But starting a business was easier said than done.

The sisters struggled against a steep learning curve. Without strong backgrounds in clothing design or manufacturing, Marissa says making T-shirt samples proved extremely difficult and left Marissa and Adrienne overwhelmed.

“The hardest thing with a small business is that you spend all your time and energy trying to get your name out there and you still need to bring in enough money to keep the business afloat,” Adrienne says.

Despite their tenacity, the sisters fought sexism and bias along the way. Initially targeting ski, snowboard and skate shops, Marissa and Adrienne were met with skepticism from male owners who didn’t see a market for women’s sports apparel. But as women began infiltrating extreme sports, Burly Girls found its niche.

“As girls get more involved in these sports it’s actually benefiting us to be women making clothing for women because now businesses recognize the need,” Marissa says.

As business increased, the sisters celebrated their success by establishing an official headquarters. Their new office, a 10-by-10-foot room in a renovated church with two small windows and no storage space, was an improvement from Marissa’s living room, she says.

Now featured in more than eight Bellingham shops, Burly Girls offers each store a unique selection of merchandise so no two locations carry the exact same apparel—an incentive for multiple businesses to carry the line.

“We get a lot of calls from people who want to know where else they can find our stuff,” Marissa says. “It’s an opportunity to refer people back to the local shops.”

As the Burly Girls fan base grows, the sisters continue to rely on local artists and businesses to manufacture the line. Utilizing Naked Clothing, a screen-printing company, Marissa can order shirts and sweatshirts on a smaller scale, better suiting her business and preventing her from relying on larger commercial companies. Burly Girls also employs local women to hand-knit beanies and scarves, and relies on local designers and photographers for clothing ideas, its Web page and its catalogue.

“It is really important to me to support other local businesses because in turn they support my business and my community,” Marissa says.

Remaining true to their passions, Burly Girls proudly sponsors female athletes in snowboarding, surfing and mountain biking. Marissa says sponsoring a variety of events like the legendary Mt. Baker Banked Slalom, is an opportunity to showcase women pushing their limits. By donating merchandise and stickers, Burly Girls promotes women supporting women and grabs the attention of local athletes (not to mention athletes outside the United States). The five-member Burly Girls mountain biking team currently consists of women from Bellingham, Europe and Australia.

“Sponsoring women riders, even on a small scale, helps us to get girls involved in the sports and to get our name out there,” Marissa says. “Plus, we love to ride and bike so it’s a great way to turn business trips into fun trips.”

In its fifth year of business, Burly Girls continues to gain popularity. Now well-established in Bellingham, the sisters are shipping merchandise to several shops outside of Washington and online sales are increasing. All success aside, the Noppe sisters are humble.

Marissa says if the business eventually failed she wouldn’t consider the venture a complete loss. Smiling, she says the friends she has met while establishing Burly Girls are the real fruits of her labor. Adrienne adds that the experience has brought her and Marissa closer together.

The sisters have big aspirations for the future. Aside from expanding Burly Girls to include new accessories and styles, Marissa and Adrienne want to create Burly Girls equipment like specialized mountain biking jerseys, shorts and safety guards. The Noppe sisters say they believe companies like Burton and Roxy have filled the gap in snowboarding and surfing gear for women, but women’s mountain biking equipment is still difficult to find. Even common items like chest protectors are still modeled after men and don’t fit properly to the contour of the female body. Marissa says manufacturing their own equipment is a lofty goal, but one the sisters are determined to meet.
Toiletries and watchdog (trees with toilets and a dog with a wristwatch) are just two of the 55 word puzzles in the “Train of Thought” display at Mindport, where mind (“the consciousness that originates in the brain and directs mental and physical behavior”) and port (“a safe harbor and place of commerce”) create a museum of phenomena.

With the help of Robin Burnett and Joe Edwards, owner and director Kevin Jones founded Mindport in 1995 because he was interested in art and science, and because he thinks people have lost their sense of wonder to “consumerist lust.”

With 7,500 pseudo-scientists visiting Mindport each year, the $2 admission only covers 5 percent of the museum’s expenses. It’s operating at a loss but Kevin won’t raise the fee or solicit visitors; Mindport is best appreciated without a crowd, he says. Mindport isn’t a labor of profit—it’s a labor of love.

Kevin hopes Mindport’s exhibits stir curiosities, prompting visitors to further investigate unnoticed mysteries around them and inspire them to create works of their own.

“The only thing that keeps me going nowadays is involvement with art and pure science,” he says. “And by the latter, I mean science in a quest to know, not in a quest to develop more junk to sell to ‘consumers.’ ”

Kevin says school systems have always favored science and math programs more than music and art. Mindport, however, was an experiment to encourage people to look at life more holistically, to make them see science and art are equally important, says Kevin’s daughter and Mindport employee Tallie.

Art and science are fused in the exhibit “Wave Music,” which uses small plastic pipes, rubber hoses and a large tub of water to create the same calming and hypnotic feeling as ocean waves. Rock the tub and the pipes sense the water washing around them; a micro-computer translates the water’s movement into music notes, sending a percussion symphony out of the two speakers installed above the display.

Usually museums mean “Look, don’t touch,” but Mindport’s philosophy to keep people interested and learning means allowing them to manipulate the exhibits, Tallie says.

“Some people, when they come in, are really engaged,” Tallie says. “And that is interesting because it’s not television, it’s not video games—it’s not any of those things. It’s really nice to see people just come in and explore.”

Kevin built half of the interactive exhibits, and the rest were created by other staff members, or the result of group brainstorming sessions. Light Writer is one of three exhibits the museum purchased. When visitors give its two pendulums a slight push, a small ultraviolet light leaves green trails on an underlying phosphorescent screen.

Sonoluce, another new exhibit to Mindport’s interactive displays, was inspired by a light toy that Exhibits Manager Bill Lee brought back from San Francisco. Lee constructed the mechanical section and Kevin designed and built the electronic section. Now displayed in a brown cabinet in the corner of the museum, viewers can put on headphones, choose a song and watch lights inside the case dance to the rhythm of the music they chose, Kevin says.

Bellingham resident Rogan Jones decided to take his wife and two daughters to Mindport for his birthday. His daughters ran from exhibit to exhibit pushing buttons, cranking levers, splashing water and flipping switches. Nearing the end of their afternoon, Rogan and wife Wendy sat down for a breather while the girls persevered, splashing in “The Creek,” a small river where visitors can move rocks and wood pieces to build dams and make floods.

“It just always blows my mind that our kids, after two hours, still don’t want to leave,” says Rogan. “That room is not that big really, it’s just unbelievable they can be kept busy for so long.”

But Mindport is meant to spark peoples awareness and stimulate their thinking. It’s a place for people to play and observe. It’s a place enriching for any human being, whether they’re eight, or 80.
Combining both petting-zoo fare and the exotic, the Strom’s menagerie boasts more than 20 species, including wallabies, llamas, emus and ring-tailed lemurs. An hour-long guided tour winds through the expansive farm, which doubles as a pre-cut Christmas tree lot in the winter. The main draw, however, is the kangaroos.

“Most weekends we get 100 people a day,” says Joey, a fit 64-year-old woman with short, silver-streaked brown hair. “Unless you’re going to Australia, this is the only way you’ll touch a kangaroo.”

The Outback is an open-air network of fences and chain-link enclosures surrounded by towering evergreen trees. Many of the animals are visible—or at least audible—from the farm’s quaint entrance, a small clearing replete with a log-cabin gift shop, wooden benches and a stone-ringed fire pit.

Visitors traverse the muddy parking lot and gather around a crackling fire, waiting for the tour to start. Some meander into the gift shop to examine Christmas tree ornaments and “Kangaroo Crossing” road signs for sale.

Outside by the fire, Joey’s throaty alto drifts over the wood smoke. “For 50 years people have been telling me, ‘Didn’t you know baby kangaroos are called joeys?’” she says, her gently-lined face breaking into a smile. “I thought, ‘This is destiny—I was destined to have one.’”

Fifteen years ago Joey and her husband, Ray, attended an ostrich convention in Yakima with plans to raise the flightless giants for profit. “Ostriches have lean red meat that tastes like beef,” she says. “We thought it was going to be huge.”

Instead of an ostrich, however, the couple left Yakima with a blanket-wrapped kangaroo joey. Within months Strom acquired a group of kangaroos, called a mob, from another breeder and the lineage began.

“The Outback Christmas Tree and Kangaroo Farm: 500 feet.” The road sign’s proclamation seems incongruous: Christmas trees and kangaroos? In Arlington? But a sharp turn 500 feet later leads to Ray and Joey Strom’s Outback, a veritable zoo off Highway 530.

“I was in awe of how gentle they were,” she says. “I thought, ‘We could become breeders and sell them as pets.’”

The Stroms lived in Edmonds at the time, where they ran a Christmas tree farm and kept llamas and the occasional ostrich as pets. “I remember walking into their house and seeing a toddler pen in the living room,” says Michelle Adams, 44, second-oldest of the five Strom daughters. “My mom was way past having kids at this point, so I knew it had to be some new pet.”

By 1997 the couple’s mob had grown to more than 15 kangaroos and wallabies, prompting their move to Arlington for more acreage, she says.

As word spread about the Strom’s ‘roo ranching, visitors started showing up in droves to see the critters, Adams says. Joey smelled a lucrative opportunity and expanded their operation into a defunct Christmas tree farm, dubbing it The Outback.

“That first joey started as a pet and things just grew from there,” Adams says.

The tour begins at 4 p.m. A few latecomers scurry toward the group as Joey disappears into the gift shop, emerging through a side door leading into the ring-tailed lemur exhibit.

“Pooping” and “Feathers,” the two turkeys, amble ponderously toward the tour group. Children stroke the broad back of Mr. Feathers, who gobbles appreciatively. Ducklings and chicks scramble after the heels of their bustling mothers; a peacock, resplendent in blue, green and gold, fans his tail feathers with a rattling shudder.

“The animals come from all over the place,” Joey says. “Trade shows, breeders, donations—we’ve gathered a lot over the years.”

After opening a wheeled chain-link gate for the group, Joey leaves to staff the gift shop and transfers tour-guide duties to her husband, who emerges from a covered feed shed. The Outback is a two-person operation: all of the work—from feeding and cleaning to tour guides and kangaroo-breeding—is shared between the couple.

“Please, no running in here—it startles the animals,” he says, his voice hoarse from narrating tours all day. “That goes for you adults, too.”

Story by Peter Pearsall // Photos by Kevin McMillon
Ray Strom, who owns the Outback Christmas Tree and Kangaroo Farm with his wife Joey, feeds an ostrich while talking to the tour group.

He fills a fanny pack with slices of multi-grain bread and shiny, green hay pellets—treats for the kangaroos, wallabies and other herbivores.

Once inside the enclosure a sickly-sweet aroma becomes discernable: ’zoo poo, though not as potent as cow manure, nonetheless possesses a barnyard pungency all its own. Littering the ground are piles of greenish-black kangaroo ca-ca; some of it bears striking resemblance to the pellets Ray hands out for feeding.

“Leave food on the ground if you drop it,” he says. “The green you pick up might not be the green you dropped.”

A trio of covered sheds houses the kangaroos and their kin. Many of the marsupials are stretched out languorously under heat lamps, either sleeping or pretending not to notice the procession. This is their last tour of the day—they’re not everyone wants a 6-foot, 200-pound jumping jack.”

He manages to coax Rooby, a 5-foot-tall male red kangaroo, onto his feet and out of the shed. Blinking sleepily in the gray light, Rooby hops from visitor to visitor, eagerly devouring handouts of pellets and bread like an upright dog. The kangaroo’s skinny forearms are disproportionately small, like a T-Rex’s; his handouts of pellets and bread like an upright dog. The kangaroo’s skin is thin and glistening, almost as if it were made of plastic;

“Show ’em your muscles, Rooby—show ’em,” Ray says, urging the animal to flex his pectorals.

Rooby is unyielding. Sensing an end to snack-time, he slowly retreats to the warmth of his hut.

Outside another shed, a Bennet wallaby named Kate Moss pulls at a child’s coat, attempting to reach an upraised fistful of bread. Bennet wallabies—the best-selling marsupial at the Outback—stand nearly 3 feet tall full-grown and weigh between 30 and 50 pounds, Ray says. Potential owners can expect to pay $1,200 apiece for males and $1,500 for females.

“Wallabies can be house-trained to an extent—they kind of act like cats,” he says. “We don’t sell a lot of kangaroos because not everyone wants a 6-foot, 200-pound jumping jack.”

Although pet kangaroos and wallabies are perfectly legal in Argentina and Paraguay, these oddities are the third-largest rodent in the world, he says.

Beyond another gate is a walkway intersecting two enclosures. On the right, several miniature goats and Jack, a miniature donkey, mug for photos. Spamelia Lee, a Vietnamese pot-bellied pig, lounges corpulently on the left.

Further down the path, a miniature horse named Oreo tosses his mane, straining against his tether as the tour group approaches. He is nodding vigorously—almost head-banging, like a death-metal fan.

“Oreo here is a biter,” Ray says, patting the 3-foot-tall stallion’s rump. “Do you want to bite these people, Oreo?”

More nodding.

Veering left, the group reaches a secluded aviary surrounded by 6-foot fences. After feeding the ostrich and emus (and receiving a few hard nips in the process), Ray leads the procession back toward the gift shop—but not before setting Oreo loose.

“You saw all those pellets that fell out of my hand when I was feeding the birds?” he says, as the diminutive horse leans toward the aviary. “Oreo was counting every single one and he’s going to find them.”

More than an hour has passed and the tour draws to an end. A llama and an alpaca are the last attractions in the gated compound; they bat their heavy eyelashes and canter up to get some grub. Under Ray’s instruction, children and adults in turn feed pellets to the camelids—with their lips.

“Don’t worry, they won’t bite,” he says. “It’s a llama kiss.”

Back at the gift shop, Joey rejoins the group with the grand finale: two wallaby joeys swaddled in blankets, who are carefully passed around like newborns at a baby shower. After one last round of photo-ops, visitors pile into their cars and head home.

Ray attends to a lingering couple, patiently answering their questions on exotic-animal expositions and the merits of emu ranching. Besides the near-constant din of a sulfur-crested cockatoo and blue-crowned Amazon parrot caged along the back wall, the gift shop is almost quiet. While filling the birds’ water dish, Ray ponders the Outback’s future.

“I think we’d like to get more kinds of kangaroos and wallabies—there’s more than 60 different species,” he says. “But we’re not in a hurry. The neatest thing is that we have no competition out here.”

Competition would be hard-pressed to top the Stroms. If raising kangaroos and owning an exotic petting zoo doesn’t provide some semblance of job security in rural Arlington, nothing will.
Laugh it off

Story by Erin Miller // Photo by Kevin McMillon

"Caution: Adults and Kids at Play" plaster the windowed walls of Bellingham's Co-op Connection Building—a well-deserved warning if you catch sight of the local laughter yogis.

Loyalists flock to weekly laughter yoga meetings to reap the benefits of a belly laugh—an improved immune system, less stress and better digestion, according to research conducted by laughter yoga founder Dr. Madan Kataria.

Eighty-year-old Mary Lou Richardson, who leads the group with club co-leaders Mary Jensen and Linda Read, started attending laughter yoga a year and a half ago after Walt, her husband of 58 years, died.

"I just couldn’t sleep," Richardson says. "And when I went to that, the very first day I came home and slept 32 hours. Two or three hours and that’s all it took, and I thought, this is something I really, really need. And then I just kept going."

Richardson has macular degeneration, a condition that has severely reduced her vision—but you wouldn’t know if watching her maneuver through her 100-year-old renovated coal-mining cabin cradling a pot of chicken noodle soup.

"I know I don’t look blind and therein lies the problem sometimes," Richardson says.

During the week Richardson guides Columbia Elementary School students in a series of laughter exercises sounding “hahas,” “hehes” and “hohos.”

"With the children, there is just no holding back," Richardson says. But not all the students are able to laugh with their classmates. "I just told the principal the other day that there are a couple of kids in second or third grade, and they don’t laugh. It just breaks my heart there is some stuff going on in these kids lives that is so out of the realm of their experiences."

Richardson attests to the alternative medicine’s advantages, and caters the club’s philosophy to assisted living and retirement homes to help other senior citizens catch on to the quick cure: laughter. Her own health, vivacity and spirit are a sure testament to smiling in the face of adversity.

A certified hero

Story by Kwihwa Lee // Photo by Eric Schmitz

Dr. Marvin A. Wayne’s office is undergoing a remodel but the walls are still covered with dozens of certificates because, well, the man is a hero. The American College of Emergency Physicians named Wayne “Hero of Emergency Medicine” this year for his exceptional contributions to emergency medicine and advancements in patient care, says Ron Cunningham, the organization’s communication director. But Wayne says the award belongs to EMT paramedics and Emergency Medical Service staff.

Born in 1943, Wayne received a bronze star for valor as a combat surgeon in Vietnam. A physician at the St. Joseph Hospital Emergency Department and an associate clinical professor at the University of Washington, Wayne has been the local EMS medical director since its initiation in 1974.

He pioneered an automated external defibrillator at EMS of Bellingham in 1974. He has conducted extensive research in measuring carbon dioxide in cardiac arrest patients to help determine whether patients stand a good chance of survival if medics transport them to the hospital, even with ongoing CPR. Because of Wayne’s work, Whatcom Medic One has received a large amount of equipment such as semi-automatic defibrillators, pulse oximeters, end-trial CO2 monitors, anti-shock trousers, and fiber-optic video airway insertion devices, donated by major medical manufacture companies, Bellingham Fire Department Chief Bill Royd says.

With a taste for sports, Wayne enjoys kayaking, scuba diving, hockey and windsurfing, but he also doesn’t mind hibachi.

“When it stops being fun, I’ll stop doing it,” he says.
Inching toward the Peace Arch border crossing between the United States and Canada, lines of sedans, mini-vans and SUVs seem innocent enough, even if the drivers are frustrated and antsy to get moving. But Chief Customs and Border Protection Officer Tom Schreiber knows secret compartments in some of those cars hold restricted items ranging from marijuana and cocaine to humans, oranges and avocados.

Smugglers hide drugs in hollowed-out gas tanks, stash them in spare tires and tuck them anywhere an inspector won’t want to look. On a typical day, border guards make 85 seizures and confiscate 5,541 pounds of narcotics nationwide. The officers who guard Whatcom County’s northern border have seen some spectacular smuggling schemes.

Schreiber, 53, remembers an especially hairy hiding place.

In the summer of 2003, officers found 166 pounds of marijuana under the floorboards of a cage holding two rotund bears. The man hauling the cage said he was taking the bears to Los Angeles where they’d been booked to star in a movie, but Theo, the narcotics-sniffing dog, detected the drugs on a routine inspection. The incident was part of a large-scale operation that used lions, cougars and bears to keep customs agents too concerned with fangs and claws to conduct thorough inspections of the animals’ cages.

Border guards need to stay on their toes to catch the people who are constantly trying to hoodwink them. So how do officers know who’s a smuggler and who isn’t?

“Well, they have it tattooed on their forehead,” says Schreiber, as laugh lines crinkle around his blue eyes.

To catch smugglers who haven’t been branded, agents have a few tricks. They build their intuition from experience, much of which they gain on the southern border, where all officers begin their career, he says. Border-crossers’ behavior is important—they gain on the southern border, where all officers begin their career, he says. Border-crossers’ behavior is important—whether the crossing is normal. Traffic is different on a Monday morning than it is on a Saturday afternoon; it changes from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.; it’s not the same in the summer as in winter, Schreiber says. With this knowledge of normalcy and questions about who owns the vehicle, who’s in it and why they’re crossing the border, officers look for things that stand out.

Schreiber started building his smuggler-catching instincts in San Ysidro, Calif., the strip of U.S.-Mexico border between San Diego and Tijuana, which is the busiest land port in the United States.

“One year down there is like 10 years’ experience up here,” Schreiber says.

During his three years on the southern border, Schreiber saw a woman giving birth in the port of entry, victims of violent crimes such as rape and robbery, people “whacked out on hard drugs” and shoppers returning from day trips to Mexico, their stomachs full of authentic tacos.

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While many of the things Schreiber saw in San Ysidro are rare along Whatcom County’s border, drugs are common. Schreiber says that at this border he’s watched since 1993, officers catch drug smugglers daily. Usually these infractions are on the personal-use level of a few joints, but every week or so officers find a large shipment. Smugglers generally bring “BC Bud” marijuana and ecstasy into the United States, and sneak cocaine into Canada.

Most of the people carrying drugs are paid mules working for more powerful smugglers, says Jodie Underwood, a spokesperson for the Drug Enforcement Administration. These organized crime rings have the money and connections to change smuggling strategies whenever border-protection agents learn to stop their latest tactics.

The catching process can be arduous for agents of the Border Patrol, which guards the border between official entrances like the Peace Arch crossing.

Border Patrol Agent-in-Charge Bob Kohlman says he and another agent once waited on a snowy mountain trail in the United States to ambush two smugglers carrying marijuana across the border in backpacks. When they saw the border guards the smugglers bolted back toward Canada, running right into the arms of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Kohlman says sometimes serendipity works in border guards’ favor. Once an agent went out to the end of a deserted road at 5 a.m. in an unmarked car to intercept some smugglers. Out of the darkness he suddenly heard a tap on the trunk. His car was the same color and model as the one the smugglers planned to drop their drugs in.

“He just stood there staring at him with his mouth open.”

Once while walking through a parking lot on his lunch break, Schreiber caught two men pouring alcohol into their car’s windshield washer fluid container to keep the booze duty free. When they entered Canada.

Where the border is little more than a ditch between two parallel roads in the midst of mountains and fields, complex hiding places aren’t a priority. Smugglers carry drugs in bags they toss in trunks in the United States, Kohlman says.

Kohlman once sprinted toward Canada after a man carrying a duffel bag stuffed with nearly $100,000 in drug profits. When he spotted an agent on his tail, the man jumped into an irrigation ditch and popped up without the bag. With the help of search dogs Kohlman found the bag buried in underwater mud at the bottom of the ditch.

People often hide fruits and vegetables so they won’t be confiscated, Schreiber says. Canada has different regulations and agricultural outbreaks than the United States. Oranges coming into Canada don’t have to be fumigated to kill hitchhiking pests that can’t survive in cold climates. But, if a tourist picks up some oranges in Vancouver and drives them down to Disneyland where she tosses the peels, those pests could cause millions of dollars in damages in Californian orange groves.

Avoiding officers’ notice has driven smugglers to technologically-advanced extremes, such as the 360-foot lighted, ventilated tunnel from British Columbia to Lynden that agents discovered in 2005. The tunnel cost $1 million and took six months to create, but agents knew it existed before it was finished and arrested the smugglers long before they broke even with proceeds from carrying drugs through the tunnel.

Sparsely-watched stretches of border are the most frequent spots for human smuggling. Illegal immigrants usually
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enter the United States in vans crossing the border through farm fields. These immigrants fly into Vancouver without the U.S.-required passport and visa, then purchase fake passports and pay smugglers to bring them across the border.

Schreiber saw plenty of human smuggling in San Ysidro. People tried to enter the country in car trunks or more dangerous places, such as the engine compartment. Radiators sometimes burst as a car waits in a long, hot line, killing anyone inside with scalding water. Though he doesn’t see much human smuggling now, Schreiber still remembers the first time he opened a trunk and found someone inside.

“It was like when you go into the bathroom at night and turn on a light and find a spider,” Schreiber says. “I was so shocked, I accidentally dropped the lid on her.”

With practice, Schreiber got used to the surprise. Now, each time he finds something or someone being smuggled he feels the satisfaction of serving his country, which he’s wanted to do since his childhood in rural Pennsylvania, where Washington crossed the Delaware near the Gettysburg battlefield.

Old newspaper pages from historic moments such as World War II battles and Sept. 11, 2001, cover the walls of Schreiber’s office, along with pictures of his wife, Laurie, President Kennedy, his dogs and other canines. From his windows, Schreiber can see cars and-glass building that houses agricultural inspections and holding cells and the snowy peaks of the Canadian Cascades. He looks out at a border where people smuggle contraband both into and out of the United States.

When Schreiber heads home from a day spent in front of those lines of cars waiting to cross the border, he gets an unobstructed view of raspberry fields stretching out toward Mount Baker and a walk with some dogs that aren’t on the clock: his black lab, Jackie, and his wife’s yellow lab, Sunny. Schreiber is attuned to Jackie’s smuggling techniques, too: when he hears the dog’s nails tapping across the floor he knows his wife’s country-French kitchen towels are being stolen to entice him into a game of tug-of-war.

Swil Kanim’s graying black hair frames his round face as he sits among the audience gathered on the Swinomish Reservation to celebrate Earth Day. His 6-foot-1-inch frame rises regularly to greet old and new friends alike—with a hug. Audience members leave their plates of salmon and fry bread to meet the man who exchanged his house in Cashmere for a motor home, and the opportunity to work on cancer awareness campaigns and play his violin.

A master violinist and Lummi Tribal member, Swil Kanim tunes his instrument as he waits for his turn to perform on the rainy April afternoon. His schedule is packed with cancer prevention campaigns on the reservation and other community projects; performing seven shows a week, keeps him on the road. In the coming year he wants to record a gospel album and produce a documentary on OxyContin drug abuse.

He has two performances for Earth Day, driving from the first to the reservation. Scheduled to play sometime after lunch, his turn finally arrives an hour before the festivities end.

“Your presence is a gift,” Swil Kanim says to the multicultural gathering of women, children and men. For the first time all afternoon silence descends on the crowded and movement ceases—Swil Kanim speaks. He opens his childhood, and his life, to the listeners.

He talks about depression, time in the military, and barely scraping by as a street performer in Seattle. Looking serene, his fingers dance rapidly between the violin strings, transforming the middle-aged man from the audience into a sage whose melody reflects emotion.

“He is a spiritual leader,” says Frank James, a local doctor whose friendship with Swil Kanim dates more than a decade. “He would never use those terms to describe himself. He is much too humble.”

The violin wails, bringing Swil Kanim’s story to life. The music that emanates from his instrument, like the man, is sad, crisp and honest. The spectators stay silent as his final song for the afternoon ends. Slowly, they begin to clap.

“A master violinist and Lummi Tribal member, Swil Kanim tunes his instrument as he waits for his turn to perform on the rainy April afternoon.”

Swil Kanim invited people to his naming ceremony on the Lummi Reservation, which was taboo,” James says. “He was willing to push cultures together, even at a sacred ceremony.”

Swil Kanim says the fundamental ingredient to ending discrimination and prejudice involves sharing and listening to truth. He says he encourages truth by sharing the gifts the creator bestowed upon him.

When he’s not in the spotlight at shows he encourages everyone to take one of his CDs and charges only what people are able to give. His donation policy, inspired by gospel singer Keith Green, started when he performed on Seattle streets.

“It touched me to see a homeless person would bring another homeless person to me and they would take a cassette tape or CD and walk away smiling,” Swil Kanim says.

Swil Kanim’s wife, Lori Marshall says selling their house in Cashmere allowed them to travel freely to performances, but the process of opening their doors and selling their belongings and house was both a mournful and releasing experience as their things found new homes.

“We gave ourselves a year on the road,” Marshall says. “That was almost two years ago. Now we think, what’s another year?”

His ability to convey truth through self-expression draws people toward Swil Kanim, but his capacity to listen opens honest conversations encouraging people to also share. As the individuals leave they stop to pick up a CD and to say goodbye, the Swil Kanim way—with a hug.
Standing before the crowd is a bespectacled man sporting a salt-and-pepper beard and a ponytail. Donning a simple green sweater, black jeans, and a fedora, Bruce Craig narrates the tale of a poor farm boy making a living in rural Whatcom County. He is soft-spoken but animated, gesturing with a hand above his head when describing a plot of farmland covered with eight-foot-tall cedar stumps, and mumbling his lips to mimic the sound of a tractor.

Craig is a member of the Bellingham Storytellers Guild, a local collective of people whose trade is the sharing of anecdotes. The group is recognized throughout the country for their efforts in promoting the art form and working with local organizations, says guild founding-member and co-chair Doug Banner. Winning the bid to host the National Storytelling Network (NSN) conference in 2004 bolstered the guild’s reputation, drawing a record 1,500 people to a performance at the Mount Baker Theatre, and 1,000 for a show in Western’s Performing Arts Center. The NSN had never seen such numbers in their 30-year history, Banner says.

“The Bellingham Storytellers Guild seems like a low-key organization, but we’re movers and shakers in the storytelling community,” Banner says. “So there are these quiet little people in Bellingham who are actually quite famous, in certain circles.”

The success of the guild arose from humble beginnings, happening almost by chance. Banner saw violinist Swil Kanim perform at what was then Stuart’s Coffee House on Ray Street, pausing between songs to recount personal experiences and inviting the crowd to share their own stories. Banner got to talking with some of respondents about doing it regularly, the idea clicked, and the twice-monthly storytelling night was born.

The guild has come a long way since its inception in 1998, and has been keeping busy inquiring about the experiences of lifelong Whatcom County residents for its Voices of the Ancestors project, a celebration of the area’s agricultural heritage. From folklore to reality, fairy tales to non-fiction, for anyone willing to lend an ear, the Bellingham Storytellers Guild has got something to share.

To learn more about the Bellingham Storytellers Guild, visit klipsun.wwu.edu.
For the barbershop quartet U4(ee-uh) (pronounced ‘euphoria’), Feb. 14 is the busiest day of the year. From sunup to sundown, the four members—Jamie Severson, Drew Osterhout, Andrew DeMulling and Joe McCorison—sing for anyone who pays them.

“Guys will hire us to sing for their girlfriends or wives,” says Severson, who sings bass. “We usually bring chocolates and a rose.”

But they were shocked last Valentine’s Day when they were asked by a member of another cappella group to sing for Linda Clark, a 46-year-old cancer patient.

“We sang to her at her home,” Severson says. “She was lying in bed and had lost all her hair and was bed-ridden from cancer.”

At the last minute before their set, the foursome decided to sing “What a Wonderful World.”

“What we didn’t realize was that was her all-time favorite song,” says DeMulling, who sings lead. “It was really strange, too, because she said that in a dream she had heard the song.”

A week later, she passed away, but not before leaving the group with a strong impression of how music can touch a person.

“I think everyone in the quartet was really affected by it,” DeMulling says. “It was a really moving moment.”

In a genre where most of the singers are in their 60s and retired, the members of the barbershop quartet, ranging from age 20 to 32, turn classic contemporary.

Although the quartet combines barbershop and a cappella for local shows and paying gigs, the men sing strictly barbershop (a specialized a cappella) for competitions.

Tapping their toes and snapping their fingers on stage, the four are lost in a world of a cappella beats, blending pitches in perfect harmony. A band of instruments is amiss behind them, but somehow, the distinct sound of music still rings through the room.

In the technical barbershop song “Sentimental Gentlemen from Georgia,” Osterhout shows off his vocal percussion chops.

“Performing in a quartet makes you really vulnerable,” DeMulling says. “Everyone has to have a strong voice because if you mess up, people hear it.”

As with any type of music, the impact it has on people is undeniable. But DeMulling says he has noticed the strong connection people have with music seems to happen more frequently with a cappella.

It seems that in an era where dance beats and rap music reign, the four have found a way to sidestep the standard and coon emotion back into music.

Bellingham resident John “Cougar” Maatz says Main Street used to be full of people. Not anymore though—big chain stores moving into the surrounding area have put a pinch on the local jobs. Mom and Pop stores are closing down, and a lot of the young folks are moving away. Maatz even went as far as calling Bellingham a dying town—Bellingham, Minn., that is.

So while one Bellingham is suffering from a slow death, another, Bellingham, Wash., is enjoying development, international attention and national recognition. But it beg the question: with Bellinghams spread all over the world in Minnesota, Massachusetts, England and Tanzania, what’s so great about ours? It may be beautiful, laidback and bourgeois, but is it truly the best Bellingham?

Bellingham, Minn. certainly isn’t. It’s a 2/5-square-mile farm community of 205 people boasting corn, soybean, wheat and alfalfa crops.

“It’s got that small town atmosphere,” says Maatz, the town’s police dispatcher/bartender. “People around here are always willing to help out.”

Though Maatz is really saying is instead of Mount Baker, a thriving music scene, and parties, they have high school sports. And tractor pulls.

Then there is our east-coast equivalent, Bellingham, Mass. Founded in 1719, this town of 15,314 residents is often considered a suburb of Boston, says City Administrator Dennis Fraine. But despite his best efforts, Fraine couldn’t really outline anything special about this city, save for its history, essential services.

“It’s affordable,” Fraine says. “It’s also got great schools, and it has full-service fire and police departments, which all makes it an attractive place to live.”

It may be 184 years older than our Bellingham, but it doesn’t seem like they spent those extra years well. And its future doesn’t look to bright, either. Fraine says Wal-Mart moved into town about 10 years ago, paving the way for many other chain retailers and restaurants. We have fun, locally-owned business and historic buildings; they have Home Depot, Old Navy, Chili’s, Regal Cinemas, Linens N’ Things, the Gap and Staples.

“We’ve probably got about 1 million square feet of retail space in town,” Fraine added. Well, at least they have an Outback Steakhouse.

Across the pond, Bellingham, Tasmania is a remote coastal hamlet on the mouth of the Pipers River. Former Bellingham, Wash. resident Daniel Craig Giffen stopped by the town when he was bicycling through Australia. And while Giffen said Tasmania’s mountains, vegetation and rivers reminded him of the Pacific Northwest, Bellingham, Tasmania just did not compare.

“There are way more girls in Bellingham, Wash.,” Giffen says. “They don’t even have a good music scene. And their snakes are a lot more poisonous.”

Which brings us back to the question: compared to the other Bellinghams of the world, is Bellingham, Wash., really so great?

For one thing, we’re not a dying town like Bellingham, Minn. We’re not overrun with sprawl like Bellingham, Mass. We’re not about to fall off the face of the earth like Bellingham, Tasmania. And our citizens probably don’t mind missing out on Bell-in-jum’s Northumbrian pipes and stick dressing (which, by the way, is the group activity of making walking canes. Yes, canes.)

So, is ours the best Bellingham?

The answer’s been obvious from the start: yes.
KLIPSUN is a Lummi word meaning beautiful sunset.