Life Changing Experiences
Editor's Note

It's tradition at Klipsun to use a theme for the second issue of the quarter. It gives the staff writers a stronger focus on their story because they have a specific set of boundaries given to them by the editors. We decided on the theme of "Life Changing Experiences" hoping for amazing, interesting and inspiring stories.

This issue is particularly special to me, because it is my last Klipsun as editor in chief. And while this chapter in my life comes to a close, I'll leave with the knowledge from my personal experiences and these stories that failure is not fatal and success is not final.

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

Thanks for reading,

Kiko Sola

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Jeanna Barrett

Jeanna is a graphic design and journalism major and aspires to someday work for a fashion magazine. She would like to thank her parents for always believing she's number one and supporting her through life's obstacles. She continues to grow in accordance with their unconditional love and friendship.

Ben Brockhaus-Hall

Ben has written for the Western Front, the Lynden Tribune and is currently the sports editor at the Record-Journal in Ferndale. This is his first time in Klipsun magazine. Ben wishes Steve Brewster the best of health and good luck in his battle with MS. Hopefully someday the medical field will find a cure for MS.

Katie Grimes

Katie is a senior public relations major who has recently found a special place in her heart for feature writing. For her second contribution to Klipsun, Katie would like to thank Jessica and her family for taking the time to share their amazing stories and insights. She hopes their experiences inspire everyone to look beyond prejudices to seek the truth.

Michele Girard

Michele is a senior public relations major. She would like to thank Melanie for allowing her to tell this story of a life change that is often misunderstood. She would also like to thank her six roommates and Shauna for their advice and time spent reading her story.

Jordan Lindstrom

Jordan would like to thank Michelle for sharing her amazing story and congratulate her on the new addition to the family. He would also like to remind the fuzz that flu-shots are important, just don't take the look to the extreme.

Joni Schiffner

Joni is a senior majoring in journalism with an emphasis in public relations. She would like to thank all the people at hospice that were willing to take time out of their extremely busy schedule to talk to her. This story has touched her personally and her ultimate goal was to try and put into words how wonderful this organization is.

Cailin Long

Cailin is a journalism major graduating in June. She would like to thank John Hoyte for taking the time to share his adventures with her. She hopes readers can learn a little about history while enjoying this wild tale about an elephant crossing the Alps.
Fostering Love

Kisses!

Our daughter Annie

Story time

Δ day at the carnival
Standing in front of the floor-to-ceiling aisle of pastel diaper packages at Safeway, Mount Vernon residents Jim and Cheryle Coapstick tried to blindly guess the weight of their unfamiliar 15-month-old baby that they had brought home from the Skagit Valley Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS). Jim cradled her in one arm, bouncing her up and down. Counting 15, 20, 25 — he held the small girl out in front of him like a sack of potatoes. Neither of them could decide how much she weighed, so Jim took the child over to the produce department where he placed the baby gently on a scale. The arrow whipped all the way around and strained past its 8-pound limit. Finally, the Coapsticks took her to the fish department where the clerk placed a white piece of butcher paper on the fish scale and plopped her down.

"I wish I could have had a camera," Cheryle laughs as she reminisces about the first time she and her husband brought Chassey home, whose name they changed to Annie when she was adopted. At first the child appeared to be healthy, but the Coapsticks would later learn of the multiple disabilities their daughter had.

Although Cheryle did not have a camera to capture the memorable family moment at Safeway, she has spent hours documenting every other moment of her daughter's life through pictures pasted in multiple, thick scrapbooks. The first scrapbook Cheryle created for Annie sits open on the glass coffee table in her living room. Each page contains photos of a doll-faced little girl with wispy brown hair, chubby cheeks and dark eyes. Cheryle flips to the front and points to a photo taken the day the Coapsticks brought Annie home.

"The moment I set her on the floor and took that picture, she was my child," she says. "In my heart she was mine, and I started to cry."

— Cheryle Coapstick

After the Coapsticks had Annie in their home for several months, they received a call from DSHS asking them to foster Annie's 4-year-old brother and 3-year-old sister. Her brother eventually went to live with their grandparents in Florida. The girls were supposed to follow their brother shortly thereafter, but they continued living at the Coapstick's home five years later.

The Coapsticks and their biological children Casey and Emily quickly fell in love with Annie and her sister Mimi, whose name they changed to Tammy after she was adopted. The family did not realize at the time the huge responsibility they were acquiring, and that they would...
spend the majority of their lives caring for the girls.

When Annie first entered the family's lives, Emily was a sophomore in high school and Casey was in the Marines. "One of the hardest things I had to deal with was wanting to be a carefree teenager and having to help out more then I wanted," Emily said. "No longer was I the baby and got all the attention I could want. I had a lot more responsibilities than I had bargained for."

Jim, Cheryle and Emily were used to dictating their own time and schedules and were not used to having small children around.

"When Annie arrived, our world was turned upside down," Jim said. "Here was this cute little crawler who was totally dependent upon us. It was different than when our biological children were young because we didn't know what (Annie's) background had been, what kind of trauma she had been through, or what had been done to her. That meant some things we might do with our biological children we did not want to do with her because we were afraid it could traumatize her.

Annie had night terrors for the first five years. The tiny girl would thrash from side to side in her bed — shrieking and crying without waking up. When she was old enough to talk she started yelling "No, no, no. Stop. I don't want to."

Cheryle, Jim and Emily would take turns comforting Annie during her night terrors. It was not long before they discovered Annie had many more problems. Annie has been diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD), Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Visual Perceptual Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) and fine and gross motor delays. She also has been exposed to alcohol but not enough to be diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.

"One of the signs of (RAD) in children is very stiff bodies," Cheryle says as she points to pictures of Annie sitting in a right angle on the grass and another picture of Emily holding Annie with her legs and arms stiff as a doll.

According to Radkids.org, RAD usually develops in children who have had a history of severe neglect or are traumatized by emotional, physical or sexual abuse. RAD kids learn that the world around them is unsafe and adults cannot be trusted. They isolate themselves from dependency on adult figures such as parents. It took a while before Annie formed an attachment to Jim and Cheryle.

After the Coapsticks welcomed Annie's sister Tammy into their home, they discovered she had even more problems than Annie. Tammy has Alcohol Related Neurological Disorder, RAD, Central Auditory Processing Disorder, ADHD and Sensory Integration Disorder.

"She can't get her own bathwater because she can't tell if it's too hot or too cold," Cheryle said. "If you put a plate of food in front of her she did not know if she was full or hungry and it took four years of occupational therapy for her to eat with a fork and spoon — we still have to remind her."

Tammy is now 11 years old and in fourth grade. In addition to Tammy's disorders, she also has hearing loss in one ear, speech and language delays, difficulty expressing what she wants to say, loss of her fine and gross motor skills, and she is mildly mentally retarded. "Over the course of the years, we were trying to figure out what was wrong," Cheryle says. "We don't know a lot about the circumstances that they lived through."

According to case documents that DSHS had about the girls' family history, the Coapsticks know that Tammy was born premature and was not fed properly. Binge drinking and drugs were also involved before and after her birth, and she was most likely sexually abused and hit on the head.

"So many people were telling me, 'It's not your kids,' but when you get the kids, and you fall in love with them, and you don't know what's wrong with them, and you find out — you deal with it and it doesn't matter," Cheryle said.

The Coapsticks could legally call Annie and Tammy their own children in December '99, five years after battling with the courts and DSHS for adoption rights. Even after the girls had been living with the Coapsticks for five years, and their home was clearly the best place for the children, the DSHS caseworkers were still adamant about the children living with blood relatives. Caseworkers at DSHS believed the grandparents in Florida, who had their brother, should take the girls. After numerous court appearances, a judge finally signed a consent form to override the decisions of DSHS and allow the Coapsticks to adopt Annie and Tammy.

"I had always assumed systems set up to deal with our children such as foster care and school would do whatever was in the best interest of the children," Jim said. "Having two special needs children has shown me how much the systems are detached, inflexible bureaucracies that are far more interested in staying within budget and not rocking the boat than meeting the individual needs of the kids they are dealing with."

Annie is now 9 years old and in third grade. Both children attend special-ed at Centennial elementary school and spend hours in numerous forms of therapy each week. Annie most likely will not have to spend all of her school years in special-ed, but Tammy will. Tammy will also always live at home with Jim and Cheryle for the rest of her life.

Katie Johnson, Tammy's one-on-one teacher at
Centennial, said Tammy is extremely inattentive at times and lacks consistent memory of skills she has previously learned. Johnson said that she will sometimes exhibit anger without apparent reason and her inconsistency in motivation and attention makes it difficult for Tammy to progress and build skills.

Although periodically still lacking consistency, Tammy's focus, confidence and willingness have progressed. Tammy has greatly improved her fine motor, reading and math skills.

"Tammy is an eager learner and an enthusiastic participant in the school and classroom," Johnson said. "She is likable, friendly, and has appropriate manners most of the time."

Although Tammy and Annie both receive comprehensive teaching techniques, Cheryle has fought for many of the opportunities the girls receive at school, such as visual therapy to help them read.

"We just don't send the girls to school and not worry about it," Cheryle says. "I spend a minimum of a couple hours a day researching disabilities and special-ed laws. I know more than I want to about special-ed laws. It's my hobby — special-ed and therapy. It's just a good thing that I like to read and research. I will never be a soccer mom — I'm a therapy mom."

Annie and Tammy do occupational therapy for 30 to 60 minutes each week. Occupational therapy teaches the children day-to-day living skills such as cutting, pasting and writing.

They also both attend private speech therapy and have worked with physical therapy, musical therapy, Sensory Integration therapy, which helps to organize their senses to function properly and Cranial Sacral Therapy. The Coapsticks receive approximately $1,000 a month from DSHS to aid in therapy expenses.

Between special-ed, therapy and day-to-day needs, the Coapsticks are more than full-time parents. The family never goes on vacation unless it is with at least four adults to watch after the girls. Cheryle receives 68 hours of help per month from an assistant from the Department of Developmental Disabilities, and her mother lives in a house in her backyard and helps with the children every day. Annie sleeps at her grandmother's house every night because it is too much work for Cheryle to prepare both girls for school each day.

"At times (Annie's) funny and at times she's mad," said Gladys Shutt, Cheryle's mother. "She's great company. It's hard to tell people how the kids are when they ask. They don't understand those kids. Some days they're okay, some days they're not. They've come a long way and we're hoping that they'll be able to be better and understand more."

In addition to their therapies, both girls love to take part in normal activities such as swimming and art. Annie and Tammy just participated in Special Olympics bowling and Annie likes to dance on top of coffee tables. While the disabilities might be a lot of work and frustration, the Coapsticks would not change their life for anything.

"In a perfect world, they would both be only children because they need that much attention," Cheryle says. "They have made tons and tons of progress. We wouldn't give them up for anything, but little did we know."

The Coapsticks are very open with Annie and Tammy about their previous family and adoption process. The girls like to look through their scrapbooks Cheryle made for them and hear about their journey to the Coapsticks' home.

"I just can't imagine my life any other way," Cheryle says. "If it was mapped out and there was going to be this and this, I probably would have been too scared. But as it has folded out, it's okay. Sometimes it's a blessing to not see how your life is going to change."

Not only have Annie and Tammy have benefited from their adoption — it has changed Cheryle and Jim's life forever. For them, raising the two girls has brought them continuous rewards.

"What price do you put on a little girl running into your arms saying 'Daddy,' affectionately and hugging you around the neck?" Jim said. "There is no other job in life that carries so much satisfaction — no matter how much the work."

For Steve Brewster, life began to change drastically about seven years ago. Every since childhood, he had enjoyed an active lifestyle. Growing up in Bellingham was perfect for him. It had an abundance of bike paths and plenty of beautiful terrain where he could ride his bicycle. In the winter he would journey to Mount Baker to ski.

He loved sports so much that he started his own business in 1971, a small sporting goods store, when he was just 21 years old. The Sportsman Chalet continued to grow, moved a few times, and finally ended up at its current location in downtown Bellingham.

In 1992 at the age of 42, Brewster met Lesli Tatro through a friend. After knowing each other only 54 days, Brewster asked for her hand in marriage, and she accepted. For Brewster, life was good. They have now been married for 10 years.

Then, around the time he turned 46, Brewster began to notice differences in his body. It started out with leg problems. He found that he was often tripping for no reason.

"His balance was off when we would go skiing. His
legs would go numb,” Lesli said. “He was a gorgeous skier. I mean he had owned a ski shop for 30 years. (Losing his balance) just wasn’t him.”

Brewster went to a series of doctors who all thought he had a back problem. In 1998, Brewster went into surgery in an attempt to correct his back. Less than a week after the operation, his tripping problems came back. He went through four different MRIs on his back.

Up to that point, Brewster had heard of the disease Multiple Sclerosis, but he had never considered himself a candidate to have it.

“It was the furthest thing from my mind. I knew the name MS,” he said. “But I didn’t know what it did to the body.”

After talking with several more doctors about his problems, and undergoing a fifth MRI, Brewster was diagnosed with MS.

Over the next couple of years, Brewster’s condition got worse. His leg problems continued, and soon he had to walk with a cane. From his ankles down, he was completely numb. His right hand began to go numb as well, until he could barely write with a pen.

“It feels like a shot of Novocain”, Brewster said. “But it never wears off.”

Multiple Sclerosis is a chronic autoimmune disease of the central nervous system. It causes destruction of myelin, a protein which surrounds the nerves, in patches throughout the brain or spinal cord. This causes nerve pathways to interfere with each other.

Symptoms of MS range from minor ailments such as dizziness, fatigue, sexual dysfunction and difficulty with balance, to hearing loss, seizures, blindness and the inability to walk at all. The symptoms are unpredictable and vary from person to person.

According to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, approximately 2.5 million people worldwide are known to have MS, including 400,000 Americans. Each week, approximately 200 more people in the world are diagnosed with the disease. Although women are two to three times more likely to acquire the disease, men can get it too. Men are often underdiagnosed, meaning not diagnosed when they actually have MS, or in Brewster’s case, misdiagnosed with back problems.

People with MS can expect one of four clinical courses of the disease, according to the society. The first course is Relapsing-Remitting MS, which is the most common form of the disease, affecting 85 percent of people with MS. These people experience attacks of the disease, but they recover partially or fully.

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People with Secondary-Progressive MS, the third form of MS, begin with Relapsing-Remitting MS, followed by a steady worsening of the disease, sometimes experiencing attacks and recoveries and various rates of progression.

Before drugs to slow the rate of MS progression first came on the market seven years ago, approximately 50 percent of people who began with Relapsing-Remitting MS developed Secondary-Progressive MS within 10 years of their diagnosis. With drugs now available, the percentage has gone down.

The rarest form of MS is Progressive-Relapsing, which represents only about five percent of people with the disease, according to the society. People who have this steadily get worse and have clearly defined attacks, with or without recovery. Between attacks, the disease continues to steadily progress.

For Brewster, the disease has continued to progress, but he said he does not experience clearly...
defined attacks of the disease.

Brewster's MS progression was most rapid in 2000, and he was forced to sell the Sportsman Chalet. "That store was his whole life," Lesli said. "He worked there every day for 30 years."

She said he would work long hours seven days a week, and he absolutely loved every minute of it. "I miss my business more than anything else," Brewster said. "Selling my store was the hardest thing I ever did. I would have never sold it, but I came to the point where I couldn't take care of the business. I miss it a lot. I miss dealing with people especially."

Three years later, Brewster is in a wheelchair most of the time. His legs, although he can still feel them, are numb. He can no longer do many of the activities he used to love.

Brewster said MS affects his relationships with everyone he knows.

"You find out who your true friends are," he said. Brewster and his longtime friend Jim Bland still go out to breakfast every Sunday. The staff at Boss Tweed have their table ready for them before they arrive.

"So you just try to make the most of what you have. I try to dwell on the positive. It's hard at times. To say it's not, I would be lying. If you dwelled on the negative all day long, it would make a pretty long day." ~ Steve Brewster

Bland met Brewster more than 30 years ago through his brother. The two have been friends ever since.

"We used to play racquetball a couple times a week at the Bellingham Athletic Club," Bland said.

He said the two would often travel to Canada, Seattle, Tacoma, and around the county to play in racquetball tournaments.

"I remember after he told me (he had MS)," Bland said. "I couldn't believe it. Every day I thought it would be okay, like I could snap my fingers and he would be alright. But it wasn't the case. I wonder why the good Lord picked him."

Brewster said that thankfully he can still see as well as ever, but sometimes he has slight speech problems, such as thinking of words to describe things. He said although he probably still could drive an automobile if he had to, he chooses not to for the safety of himself and others. He said he can sometimes walk if he is wearing leather-bottomed slippers and can slide his feet along the ground, but MS drains so much energy, it is easier to use a wheel chair.

Just by looking at him, sitting in his living room chair, one would not expect him to have this disease until he stands up. He can still use the bathroom and shower by himself, but he can no longer do many of the things that he used to enjoy.

"It's a frustrating disease," he said. "I look like I should be able to do things." "You look at yourself, and say 'Why can't I do this?' I feel like I should be able to function, but I can't."
“We haven’t changed our diet. If there was some mystical remedy, you know, eat a pound of dirt or something, I’m sure I’d eat a pound of dirt if it would do something.” ~ Steve Brewster

Lesli has stood by her husband’s side through all of his troubles. It’s been really hard,” she said. “You want to do things with your husband, but you can’t. We used to ride bikes together, ski together, and do everything together.”

When asked why they fell in love, both agreed it was because of the similar interests they shared. “We used to sit in the hot tub,” Brewster said. “We always enjoyed it out there, because once the jets stopped, we would just sit out there and relax and talk to each other.”

He said they can no longer do that because heat often triggers his MS. He said after sitting in the hot tub for awhile, he can barely get himself out. “On a nice sunny day, I’d go out and sit on the deck and read a book,” he said. “Now I have to be careful. If I stay out too long, I can’t get back inside.”

Brewster said that Lesli continues to be an active person, and that she has been very supportive of him and his battle with MS. “I know she feels guilty when she does these (outdoor activities),” Brewster said. “I don’t want her to quit these things just because I can’t do them.”

He said that one of the most frustrating things about having MS is seeing people with the ability to do something with their life, who never take advantage of their ability. “Just seeing people walk down the street . . . I would love to be able to do that,” he said.

Brewster said he has taken drugs for his disease. He tried Copaxone, which is designed to slow the progression of the disease and quantity of brain lesions by 20 percent. With Copaxone, he was required to inject himself with the drug every day of the week.

Brewster then tried Avonex, which although it had a needle twice the size of Copaxone, he was only required to take it once a week. Luckily for Brewster, his medical insurance covered most of the cost of the drugs, which would otherwise cost him a couple of thousand dollars per month, he said.

Brewster said he is not currently taking any medicine for his MS, and has not been since last spring. He said taking the medicine is painful and makes him feel ill. “There was a time when I was taking the Avonex and I would experience two or three days of symptoms where I couldn’t do anything when it was hard enough for me to do anything anyway,” Brewster said.

Brewster said that since he stopped taking the drugs, his symptoms have not gotten any worse. As far as diet, Brewster said that he has read research articles, but nothing has ever been proven, nor have any doctors told him that any specific diet helps control MS symptoms. “We eat healthy,” Brewster said. “We haven’t changed our diet. If there was some mystical remedy, you know, eat a pound of dirt or something, I’m sure I’d eat a pound of dirt if it would do something.”

Brewster said that the most important thing is to stay physically active and positive. He said he works out at the St. Joseph Hospital South Campus Rehab Center a few times a week. He does a lot of upper body exercises, but also tries to work out his legs. He said that he does keep the muscle tone on his legs firm, even though it is hard for him to walk.

With the help of his wife and friends, Brewster tries to retain a positive outlook on life, and continues his battle against Multiple Sclerosis. “No matter how bad I’ve got it, there’s always somebody out there that has it worse than I do,” he said. “So you just try to make the most of what you have. I try to dwell on the positive. It’s hard at times. To say it’s not, I would be lying. If you dwelled on the negative all day long, it would make a pretty long day.”
At the age of 12, Jessica Keberle learned more about the politics of race in six months than most people learn in a lifetime. Katie Grimes explores the effects of apartheid on a young girl who lived in Africa. Photographs by Erik Robinson and Katie Grimes.

"Every white home had a huge fence around it, not for protection from wild animals, but from blacks," Jessica Keberle said with surprising coolness.

The year is 1995. The place, Capetown, South Africa. Nelson Mandela has just been released from prison and elected president. The repressive curtain of apartheid that held the country in its grip for more than five decades has been abolished.

Twelve-year-old Keberle steps off a plane and into a world of chaotic transition. This is a world far away from her hometown of Spokane. This is a world defined by race, social unrest and conflicting politics.

"Landing in South Africa, the country itself felt unstable," Keberle said. "Everyone was trying so hard to make it feel equal, pretend it was better, but it just wasn't."

In the middle of her sixth-grade year, Keberle, currently a Whatcom Community College music student, moved with her family to South Africa. Her father, a music professor at Whitworth College, was offered a job teaching jazz at the University of Capetown.

"This was a huge opportunity for him," Keberle recalled, cuddling with her kitten Bella in her Garden Street apartment. "It was a chance for us all to see and experience some of the most amazing jazz artists in the world."

Keberle's mother, father, 15-year-old brother and 9-year-old sister packed their belongings and made the 20-hour plane trip to their new home in Rhondebosch, a suburb of Capetown, located on the southern tip of South Africa.

Keberle closes her eyes and runs her hand through her pixie-cut,
auburn hair, remembering her first impressions. Her hands find each other and rest delicately in her lap. Her shadow plays against a tribal tapestry adorning the wall.

“Tons of black people lived there. Piles of cardboard boxes - this was their town.”

The residual effects of apartheid continued to show through everyday aspects of South African life, even though it had been technically abolished at the time Keberle moved.

“You could feel it; in the air, in the way people looked at each other,” Keberle said. “Sometimes it was scary.”

Apartheid was originally sanctioned in the 1940s when the National party of Dutch Colonizers (also known as Afrikaners) came into power. Strategists for the National Party invented apartheid as a means to maintain social domination while extending racial separation. Apartheid race laws included prohibition of mixed marriages and the sanctioning of white-only jobs. All South Africans were classified by race. People of “black” classification were required to carry “passbooks” containing fingerprints and photo identification.

Many of the shantytowns Keberle saw upon her arrival, vast settlements lacking sufficient sanitation, electricity and water, were the end result of the apartheid Bantu Authorities Act. This act established the basis for the African reserves known as “homelands.” These homelands were independent states, which Africans were assigned to based on origin. Africans living in the homelands needed special permission to enter South Africa and became aliens in their own country.

Though Keberle said her parents tried to educate her about the politics of Apartheid before they moved, nothing they told her could have prepared her for the things she saw.

“I was never scared for my life,” she said. “Only scared of the things I had heard, the stories. Just being stared down by someone of the other race like, ‘What are you doing in my territory?’ That was the scary part.”

Keberle’s understanding of South African politics before she left was based on videos her parents had rented whose subject matter ranged from the teachings of Nelson Mandela to the massacres of native tribes.

“My understanding was that the country had been ruled by whites forever, under white supremacy, and now they had a black president,” she said. “With that knowledge, I knew things would be crazy, different, hectic...and they were.”

As an afternoon ritual, Keberle and her mother would visit a tea shop near their home. Sitting outside, sipping tea and people-watching was all the education Keberle needed to understand the social conflicts within South Africa at the time.

“White women would go out of their way to cross the street to avoid black men,” she said. “Black women would cross the street to avoid white men. The fear I saw in all of their faces, it was not a fear from respect, it was just pure fear.”

It was not only in the streets that Keberle experienced the racial tension, but also in her own home. Keberle’s parents often had dinner parties with friends, many of whom were white. Within the safety of their gated community, the topic of race at the dinner table...
was often the cause of heated discussion. “Some of my parents’ white friends would start slamming blacks, bashing Mandela, claiming he was unfit to run the country simply because he was black,” she said.

Keberle remembers her mother ushering her and her siblings out of the room in an attempt to shield them from the debate. Keberle’s mom, Ann Winterer, remembers these dinners and her internal conflict with how to handle them.

“I didn’t want to hide (my children) from it, but I didn’t want it in their face either,” she said. “I wanted more than anything to physically protect them. What I was most afraid of were the things happening outside the house. South Africa had the highest crime rate in the world. I never left them alone.”

Tensions from the outside world penetrated Keberle’s school life as well. Schools for children below the high school level were segregated by gender. Students were not given the opportunity to study in a “mixed” environment until age 15. Each student at Micklefield School for Girls in Capetown was required to dress the same, in pink blouses, skirts, tights and shoes.

“Like a Pepto-Bismol explosion,” Keberle said with a laugh.

Though the uniforms at her school were standardized, the treatment of individuals was not, Keberle said. Upon entering a school with a melting pot of different races and cultures, Keberle assumed that those of her own race, Caucasian, would be the first to accept her. She was surprised to find that this was not the case. The major groups of girls within the school mirrored the major race groups within the country, Muslim, Black and Dutch or Afrikaner, said Keberle. The Caucasian girls in school were Dutch, of the same descent as the previous rulers of the country, the Nationalists. According to Keberle, many of these girls and their families continued to believe they were the supreme race. They didn’t accept Keberle because she from America.

“It was weird, not being accepted by your own race,” she explained. “I was white, but that was not what determined my acceptance. They viewed me the same way they viewed blacks or coloreds, as something different they didn’t like.”

Keberle said jealousy was the driving emotion behind the girls’ negative attitudes toward her.

“In other nations, Americans are either hated or adored,” she said. “Either they love you because you come from this great, free country or they hate you for it. In this case these girls were very jealous of the freedoms I had as an American.”

Keberle tugs at her shirt, explaining that a simple thing, like being able to pick an outfit to wear to school, was a freedom most South African girls never experienced.

Besides personal style, personal safety was something Keberle took for granted until she moved to South Africa, a place where safety was a constant concern.

“Walking alone is something you can do in many parts of America but something you could never do in Capetown, not even during the day,” she said. “They were jealous of this freedom, too.”

What shaped Keberle’s experience more than anything else was the friends she finally did make. Keberle said she found kindred spirits within the Muslim, black and “colored” groups of girls at her school. These friendships opened up entirely new ways of life to Keberle. Visiting the homes of her Muslim friends introduced her to the practices of Islam. After a sleepover she would wake up for morning prayers and would participate in the fasts of Ramadan. Through some of her black friends, she was able to experience life in a shantytown first hand.

“Some of my friends lived in these places (shantytowns),” she said. “Their homes were no bigger than this room, 12-by-8 feet. That was the only time it was safe for me to visit the shantytowns, if I came with someone who lived there.”

A year before her arrival in Capetown, two white women had been killed for entering a shantytown unaccompanied. Besides opening her eyes to different religions and
lifestyles, Keberle’s new friends revealed a side of her personality she didn’t know existed. Before moving to South Africa, Keberle was a self-proclaimed tomboy. Her American interests revolved around sports, especially soccer. Keberle never played dress-up or wore skirts. Her wardrobe consisted of T-shirts and shorts, whatever would comfortably cover her 5-foot-2 frame. Upon her arrival in Capetown she was determined to continue this lifestyle; what she was not ready for was the lack of social acceptance of a little girl acting like a little boy.

The only soccer teams in Capetown were all male. Though this fact did not initially sway Keberle from playing, the way her male teammates and coach treated her did. “I was never an equal, I was always a girl.” Keberle said with a half smile. “I was just, ‘baby’ to them. When I had the ball, I could hear my coach down the field yelling, ‘Go Baby! Go Baby! Go Baby! It was too much.”

Keberle quit the soccer team and began to hang out with her with her friends from school, all of whom had grown up in South Africa and had much different ideas on what young ladies should do for fun.

“For the first time in my life, I got my nails done, I went on shopping trips,” she said. “I cheered for sporting events instead of participating in them.”

Capetown girls had a very formal way of carrying themselves, Keberle said. To her new friends, Keberle’s tomboy tendencies seemed brazen and rough. Through their example, she soon discovered the softer side of her personality. She began wearing skirts and fashionable tops, something she would have never done in the United States.

“South Africa was where I started wearing make-up, bras and form-fitting clothes,” Keberle explained. “It is where I found my womanhood.”

This change from knee-scraped tomboy to purse-toting teen caused the biggest reaction among her friends when she returned to Spokane six months later.

“For them, this was the biggest shock,” she said. “I was wearing skirts while they still had on sports bras and soccer shoes.”

The reaction of Keberle’s friends to her new look was not positive at first. However,

“Every white home had a huge fence around it, not for protection from wild animals, but from blacks.”

— Jessica Keberle

only months later, her friends found that they too were interested in shopping trips and make-up. After this, things between Keberle and her friends seemed to go back to normal.

“More than anything, my time spent in South Africa made me grow up faster, my friends just had to catch up,” Keberle said.

Keberle views her time spent away from Spokane as a pivotal point in her develop-
After spending 31 years as a man, Melanie Pacific underwent the operation of a lifetime. **Michele Girard** reveals how one woman found peace within herself. Photos by **Tara Nelson** and graphic illustration by **Scott Rickey**.

Next year, Melanie Pacific is meeting some old high school friends in Florida for a reunion slumber party. She is excited to see them, but anxious for their response when they see her. Last time she saw them, she was a high school boy. Now she is a 52-year-old woman.

Melanie, a Bellingham resident since 1971, was born as Paul Pacific. Paul went through a long process of denial before coming to terms with his gender. Once he did, he had to tell his family and friends—some who had known him for more than 40 years—that he was transitioning to become a woman. He underwent therapy, documented changes and surgeries to further become who Melanie is today.

Melanie speaks softly when she tells her story. She occasionally gently brushes her shoulder-length, straight, reddish-brown hair out of her eyes and then returns her hands to their clasped position on the table. She wears little makeup, but looks much younger than her age. Her skin is smooth and her nails are manicured. The khaki-colored purse she carries sits next to her chair on the floor. Without hearing her deeper-than-female voice, there is no obvious indication that she was once a man.

Paul grew up in Watertown, New York, with three sisters. As an 8- or 9-year-old boy, he sometimes dressed as a girl. He would put on a dress and walk around his house, always careful that no one would see him.

**A Woman at Heart**

Growing up, most of his friends were girls, and once he was invited to a girls’ slumber party. He did not enjoy rough sports such as football, and he preferred running track. He only had one girlfriend, but was not attracted to males. He did not feel he fit in with either the male or female role, but was most comfortable with the feminine role.

"In the confusion of growing up, there's two circles," Melanie remembers. "And I was in between."

Paul's sister Rhonda Cimino remembers her brother as very quiet with a great sense of humor. She also said he was very competitive and loved to take cars apart and fix them.

"Every now and then you would catch this very sweet side," Rhonda said. "In my younger years I would occasionally think, 'Geez, he's more like my mother than I am.'"

As he got older, Paul continued to cross dress in his home. After he married in 1975, he kept his habit concealed by only doing it during days that his wife Mary was at work or not expected home.

"It was like a stress relief," Melanie said. "When I was in drag, so to speak, it just felt right. For me it wasn't a sexual experience, as more a transition from one gender to another."

Paul was a mechanic in Bellingham, a job Melanie no longer works at, when a customer Paul knew only as Bill came in to pick up his car. To Paul's surprise, Bill was dressed as a woman. Later that day, he anonymously called Bill and asked him some questions about his life.
Melanie remembers being relieved to find someone else in Bellingham in a similar situation.

On Paul and Mary’s 18th wedding anniversary in 1993, he finally told Mary he had been cross-dressing and that he was confused about how he felt as a male. It was something he had anticipated telling her for the past several months, he just never found the right time until the night of their anniversary.

“The desire finally comes to a head and you have to do something,” Melanie said. “I told her it wasn’t that she wasn’t woman enough, but that it was something with me.”

Mary said she was not shocked to hear about the cross-dressing, but rather slightly surprised at that moment.

“She had a lot of feminine tendencies,” Mary said. “But it’s not something that you hear about every day, that’s for sure.”

Mary had noticed that her husband was unhappy. She also said that ever since the beginning of their relationship, Paul tried to be overly masculine about everything, which Mary now knows was an effort to combat his emotions.

Once Mary knew about the cross-dressing, she encouraged Paul to go out in public. He started by driving around in his car and gradually worked up enough confidence to attend a Washington Gender Alliance meeting. As Paul left for his first meeting, he was concerned with who would see him, and what they would do or say.

“It’s extremely frightening, but also very exciting,” Melanie said. “Once you experience it, there’s no holding back.”

Twice a month, Paul started meeting with a psychotherapist in Seattle who helps people deal with gender issues. It was a significant turning point for him when his therapist diagnosed him.

“She said ‘You have a core identity of a woman,'” Melanie said. “And I just started crying.”

Melanie said it completely changed her life when she accepted herself as a woman.

“You have to stop questioning why and how, and just accept who you are,” she said.

When she asked her therapist for a ‘bathroom letter’ she could show to anyone questioning her gender when she entered the women’s bathroom, she saw the word transsexual associated with her name for the first time. Soon after that, she started thinking about Sexual Reassignment Surgery, or SRS.

“Really, it’s a self-realization,” she said. “I didn’t want it for sexual reasons, but so that when I look in the mirror I feel appropriate for me.”

Her therapist wrote her a letter to take to her doctor so he could prescribe hormone pills. She started taking them in 1999, and within a few weeks she said she felt a sense of peace. She felt less tense, but said it could have been more mental than physical. Six months after starting to take the hormones, she noticed her skin softening and her muscle tone weakening. Physically, she said, she started to have softer, rounded features. In 2000, she began electrolysis to remove her facial hair.

Watching Melanie transform physically into a woman was strange for Mary.

“At first it was very shocking to see a man with breasts because I’m not a lesbian,” Mary said. “You just realize that you have to take it one day at a time.”

Mary said that although she had been attending the Gender Alliance meetings with Melanie, and she knew others had undergone SRS, she did not expect Melanie to consider it.

“I didn’t think she’d take it that far,” Mary said.

Melanie’s therapist recommended that she think about SRS, but in order for her therapist to write the recommendation letter, she had to live her life as a woman full time for one year. To do this, she had to change her name, wear women’s clothing and take on the image and mannerisms of a woman.

“The mannerisms came fairly easily for me because they were always there,” Melanie said. “Once I quit hiding who I was, it seemed to come quite naturally for me.”

Melanie’s therapist recommended that she think about SRS, but in order for her therapist to write the recommendation letter, she had to live her life as a woman full time for one year. To do this, she had to change her name, wear women’s clothing and take on the image and mannerisms of a woman.

“The mannerisms came fairly easily for me because they were always there,” Melanie said. “Once I quit hiding who I was, it seemed to come quite naturally for me.”

She chose the name Melanie because as a teenager she knew a girl named Melanie who was very pretty and gracious. In 2001, she legally changed her name to Melanie Anne, taking the same middle name as her middle sister.

Beginning her year transition necessitated that she tell her family and friends about her decision. Her mother was very understanding, as well as her sisters.

Rhonda, who lives in New Mexico, said she was surprised when she heard the news that her brother was transitioning to a woman.

“My first response was, ‘Oh interesting!’” she said. “He’d been my brother for 45 years and now he’s my sister.”

She said when she saw Melanie, she asked her a lot of questions, but was glad to see that she was happy.
"I'm just thrilled that she's having a good time of her life now," Rhonda said. "I'm still getting used to the idea, but it's kind of cool.

Mary's family and some close friends did not take the news as well. Last Christmas, a card from a family member came in the mail addressed only to Mary. Melanie did not dwell on the negative experiences.

"People are either going to accept you or they aren't," she said. "I tell people, 'Don't try and understand it, because we (transsexuals) don't even understand it.'

After her year of living as a woman, her therapist presented her with the second letter she need for SRS. Melanie said that not all transsexuals have the surgery, but because she felt it was inappropriate to look in the mirror and see her male appearance, she opted for the surgery.

She flew to Thailand for SRS because of the research she had done on a surgeon there and on his methods. For the basic surgery and hospital stay, it is approximately $6,000 in Thailand, compared to $17,000 for a surgeon in Arizona. On Nov. 23, 2002 she had the surgery. After a month-long stay in Thailand, she came back to Bellingham.

She said many people have the idea that transsexuals change their sex because they are attracted to the same sex, but that is not the case with her. She was never attracted to males and now identifies as a lesbian.

Their marriage is still legal because they were married as a man and a woman, Mary said.

"I fell in love with her person, the inner person," Mary said. "It wasn't a physical thing, it was for her soul inside, and that's what keeps us together."

After years of therapy, more than 300 hours of electrolysis and thousands of dollars, today Melanie is a confident woman in her 28th year of marriage. She is a director of the Washington Gender Alliance, located in Bellingham, and regularly supports other men and women in the same situation she was in years ago when she attended her first meeting.

The WGA, founded by Barb Yaple, is a support organization that facilitates meetings for people who are questioning their gender, coming to terms with their true gender or dealing with coming out. Resources are available to assist anyone who asks. At a recent Tuesday night open support meeting, conversations about the struggles of wearing makeup for the first time mixed with stories of the past week. The meeting was the 363rd consecutive Tuesday meeting of the group.

Mary has also become involved in the organization and she facilitates meetings for Significant others, Friends, Family and Allies of transgendered people, or SOFFA. She said the group normally meets once a month, but has been temporarily suspended until a greater need is shown.

Melanie said she loves to go shopping with Mary and enjoys picking out outfits for her. Shopping is different now for her than before, when she would hurriedly pick something out and purchase it without trying it on, for fear someone would question her.

"A lot of people think it ends with the surgery, but that's where it begins," she said. "I'm enjoying a life that I should have had a long time ago."

Melanie said she estimates 10-25 woman like her live in Whatcom County. She is thankful for the Internet because more and more people can find resources to help them deal with their own identity, as she did.

"The group is getting younger," she said. "I credit the Internet."

She said the first thing she did when she got Internet access was to search for information about gender issues. When she found other people like her, it made it easier for her to accept her identity. However, the information about the negativity toward transgendered people and gays and lesbians held her back for a while.

"I think things are changing. It's not that big of a deal anymore," she said. "It's more in the public's mind. The biggest obstacle is ourselves."

According to gender.org, at least once every month a transgendered person is murdered.

"They think that we're gay," she said.

In an attempt to educate the public about gender issues, Melanie often speaks in various classes at Western Washington University. She also enjoys working on antique cars with Mary.

"She's much kinder and much more sensitive," Mary said. "She's a much happier person now than she was as a man."

Rhonda echoed Mary's sentiments and said that she never thought her brother was unhappy before, but now she sees that Melanie is definitely happier. She said that she is now more outgoing, and that she is glad she can use her creativity in new and different ways.

Melanie said her mother now tells people she has four daughters, something Melanie is very proud of. She smiles when she talks of how lucky she is to have such supportive family and friends. Without the support, she may not have gotten to where she is now.

"As you become more comfortable and more confident, then things progress," she said. "You think you can control this, but you can't."
Despite the deafening wind and disoriented feeling, Michelle was trying to stay as still and calm as possible. She focused her eyes forward, straightened her back and tried to stay positive. She didn't want to panic and ruin the concentration of her partner, Terry, who was strapped to her back and desperately trying to untangle their parachute, which had failed to open properly.

She was scared, but she had faith her experienced sky-diving instructor would fix the problem.

"It's alright Michelle, I'm going to pull the back-up (parachute)," Terry said.

Michelle had forgotten about the back-up, and she was suddenly filled with a sense of relief. When Terry pulled the cord, however, instead of slowing down, they went into a violent spin.

"What now?" cried Michelle over the roar of the on-rushing wind.

"There's nothing else I can do," Terry shouted back.

"So we're going to die," a panicking Michelle said.

"Yeah," was all Terry replied.

With that, they both became silent and began processing the idea of death as the objects on the ground quickly grew larger.

Michelle Papernik is lucky to be alive.

Jordan Lindstrom tells the story of how she cheated death and rebuilt a broken body. Photos courtesy of Michelle Papernick and Scott Rickey.

Snohomish resident Michelle Papernik, 34, and her sky-diving tandem partner Terry Hallmark didn't die in the 1995 accident, however, a set of miraculous circumstances both saved their lives and helped give Michelle a new perspective on hers.

Although the incident left her with permanent bodily damage which forces her to regularly visit the chiropractor, affects her short-term memory, and has caused her to battle depression because of an initial loss of lifestyle, it also helped give her a new purpose and personal identity. She has since discovered a new value in family, married and given birth to her first child, and has gained a better understanding and appreciation for everyday life and the little things.

The Accident

The first time she tried it, Michelle fell in love with sky-diving. She enjoyed thrills and thought nothing compared to the rush of freefalling for as long as 60 seconds.

"I had been once before, about a year previous (to the accident), and I thought it was the greatest thing I had ever done," Michelle explains. "Going sky-diving again was a present to myself celebrating seven years of being clean and sober."

She says the morning she got the call telling her the sky-diving trip at the Snohomish County Airport was taking place, she had a strong premonition of death.
"I was worried," Michelle says, remembering her actions that morning. "I went through my house and cleaned because I didn't want my parents to deal with a mess if I died. It was a very eerie feeling."

That feeling, she says, continued until the jump.

"In the plane I insisted (Terry) show me we were connected," Michelle says. "I was worried we were going to come apart during the fall."

At 10,000 feet they left the plane and, although Michelle felt she was jumping to her death, initially everything went smoothly. The two were tandem jumping, a system in which a passenger and instructor are harnessed together and use the same main parachute.

At 6,000 feet, however, the near-fatal chain of events began to unfold.

"Usually the act of the parachute opening jolts you into an upright sitting position," Michelle explains. "When that didn't happen, I knew something was wrong."

After falling another 4,400 feet to about 1,600 feet, Terry attempted to open the reserve parachute as Michelle tried to stay calm and still. In most parachute systems the main chute is designed to cut away when the reserve is opened.

The reserve, however, only served to further tangle with the main chute and speed their descent – which at times reached speeds of up to 80 mph.

It was then, Michelle says, when she began processing the idea of death.

"I was filled with peace," Michelle says while attempting to put the experience into words. "I didn't want to pray not to die, so I prayed for peace. I felt an angel wrap her wings around me and comfort me. The only negative thought in my head was that my body was going to break into so many pieces my parents wouldn't be able to bury me whole."

Because of their extremely high rate of speed, their chance of surviving a direct impact with the ground was almost none.

Instead of hitting the ground first, however, Michelle and Terry hit power lines.

"The next thing I remember is the collision," Michelle says.

Amazingly, instead of hitting the ground and dying on impact or being cut in two and electrocuted by the power lines, Michelle and Terry hit the mostly hollow transformer box attached to the power-line pole. It broke their fall just enough to avoid life-ending injuries.

"I remember the sensation of my face hitting metal," Michelle says. "We blew the transformer. Even though it sounds horrible, it wasn't as bad as it could've been."

Michelle and Terry landed, still connected, in a tangled and ragged heap in a small grassy area surrounded by obstacles. They had a driveway to their right side, a chicken coop to their left side, a dumpster a foot from their heads and a building not far from their feet.

"When I first regained consciousness (after hitting the ground) I didn't know if I was alive or not," Michelle recalls. "I remember the paramedics gathered around me, but I still questioned if Terry and I had gone to heaven connected."

Michelle broke her left femur, left hip joint, nose and pelvis. She also experienced severe nerve and tissue damage over much of her body and extreme head trauma. Terry badly damaged his legs.

"It was a total spiritual out-of-body experience," Michelle says. "I couldn't move anything but my eyes. Terry was screaming behind me and I was thinking to myself, 'shut up, my head hurts.'"

Michelle said her first thought after realizing she wasn't dead was that she was paralyzed.

"I told the paramedic to unlace my boots a little before he took them off; then I was quiet," Michelle says. "I was comforted by an angel – I felt her presence."

After the paramedics stabilized and untangled Michelle, she was quickly rushed to a hospital where she spent the next three weeks recovering.

The Recovery

When she first arrived at the hospital, Michelle was in serious but stable condition.

"She was aware, but not totally conscious," says Michelle's mother, Cheryl Traylor. "Her eyes reached out for us. She wasn't moving but I could tell she wanted a hug."

It could've been worse, but the fall left Michelle with injuries and mental scars that have changed her life.

Michelle says that early on, doctors considered amputating her left leg because of the severity of the damage. They thought a prosthetic limb would give her a better chance at walking again.
"It's just pure chance I still have the leg," Michelle says. The decision to keep her left leg, however, was not without consequence. She endured months of intense physical therapy in an effort to regain her ability to walk. "I could see progress everyday," Cheryl recalls. "I knew for her (at first) it was horrendous because she didn't know if she would ever walk again. But she worked so hard in physical therapy. The guy teaching her to walk put in extra time because he saw how much effort she was giving."

Despite this fighting spirit, Cheryl says she had doubts about Michelle's recovery. "At one point I wondered if she would ever walk or be able to have children," Cheryl says. "I don't know if she allowed herself to see that."

Michelle says the physical aspect of her injuries, (the scars on the left side of face and chin, the limp she endured after relearning to walk and the chronic pain she tolerated for six years), gave her an understanding of what it meant to struggle and persevere.

Also, because of her head injury, Michelle discovered what life could be like for a person missing certain mental faculties. She says the year prior and the year after the accident are still hazy, and she has problems with short-term memory loss. "I'm the type of person that remembers the names of my kindergarten classmates."

Michelle says. "Now, sometimes I can't even remember the order of the alphabet. One time I couldn't remember what an 'r' looked like -- it's just really random stuff."

She says because of her mental troubles, she found it difficult to work and had most aspects of her life altered in significant ways. This loss and change of lifestyle, along with the reality of the accident, caused her to struggle with depression for periods of time after leaving the hospital. "Medically, the doctors considered I was fully recovered," Michelle says. "It was difficult afterwards though: I went through ups and downs (mentally). It took a good year for it to sink in that I lived."

Before the accident she was a waitress at The Keg Steakhouse & Bar and was a part-time professional masseuse. After the accident she had trouble keeping up with just one part-time job.

"My mom saw the fear in my eyes (when the doctors started talking about my injury). At that point she just felt like anything else was just too much for me--I was struggling just to walk again." -Michelle Papernik
"Physically, I just couldn't keep up with the massage part of my life," Michelle says. "Mentally, it was difficult finding a job because I was having trouble with little mental mistakes."

Cheryl says Michelle was guarded about her struggles. "She didn't complain to us about her problems," Cheryl says. "She did what she could to protect us from a lot of worry and we thought everything was going fine. I think she had trouble coping with things because of a frustration with not being able to grasp things like she always had."

Cheryl says the family still doesn't fully understand the damage to Michelle's head. She was referred to a specialist who was going to examine her injury, but she never went. "I was so overwhelmed with all the physical pain, and my parents thought the doctors were giving us worst-case scenarios," Michelle remembers. "My mom saw the fear in my eyes (when the doctors started talking about my injury). At that point she just felt like anything else was too much for me – I was struggling just learning to walk again."

Because she couldn't make a sufficient income for an extended period of time after the accident, Michelle's parents promised to pay her mortgage on one condition – that she never sky-dive again.

A New Perspective

Cheryl says once Michelle learned to cope with and accept her situation, she saw a change in her daughter's aura and outlook.

"It was almost as if one of those angels that protected her (in the accident) is still there," Cheryl says. "When she walks into a room she lights it up. She just has a glow and enthusiasm about her."

Her feelings about family have also drastically changed. Before the accident, having a family was not part of her future plans. Now she is married and recently gave birth to her first child.

"I didn't think having a family was part of my life script at all," Michelle says. "Basically, after the accident, I wanted a child more than anything."

Cheryl says she believes Michelle's attitude toward family has changed in part because of her near-death experience.

"(Michelle) knew there must've been a reason why she was spared," Cheryl says. "God must have had plans for her. Showed love for her family – it was definitely a life changing event."

The tough times she faced after her head injury also gave Michelle a new-found sympathy for those with mental difficulties.

"It helped me as far as judgment on other people," Michelle says. "I could feel how much people judged me with the head injury. If someone makes a mistake now I think about what could've happened in their life. Maybe a stroke has made them who they are."

Cheryl says while it's difficult to define the exact change in Michelle, she has noticed slight differences in her attitude since the accident.

"She is simply more understanding and compassionate for people," Cheryl says. "Some things are so subtle. She was never a harsh or mean person, the accident just helped give her a total appreciation for life."

Now, with a child, Logan, born on Nov. 15, and a new card-making business up and running, Michelle can say she's put the accident in the past.

"There have been times when I felt like I wanted to go again just to show myself I could do it," Michelle says when asked if she would ever sky-dive again. "But I know my friends, parents and husband wouldn't be able to stand the stress."
Located in Bellingham, the Whatcom Hospice Foundation allows patients to be surrounded by the ones they love while in the comfort of their own home. Joni Schiffner tells of four people’s special contributions. Photos by Tara Nelson and Josh Fejeran.

Executive Director Mike Kirkland sits behind his desk and marvels at the kindness of the community as he handles all the donations made each day to Whatcom County Hospice Foundation. Volunteer Peg Murray reflects daily about how she eases the pain of her patients with the touch of her hands or one simple prick of a needle. Chaplain Mary Lodge drives home from a patient’s house amazed by the healing power of her words. Nurse Cathy Schramer reminisces about the time a mother interviewed her to make sure she was suitable to take care of her dying 6-year old son.

These people are not the only members that complete the health care team at Whatcom Hospice, but they each play a major role in an organization that assists patients who have been diagnosed with a terminal illness and have been given six months or less to live.

Hospice is an alternative service for dying patients to spend their final days in the comfort of their own homes, surrounded by people they love.
This organization not only touches the hearts of the families it helps, but also shapes the live of those who work for them.

The Executive Director

In 1991, 56-year-old Mike Kirkland and his family were living in Spokane and had discussed moving west to Bellingham. Kirkland came across an ad announcing an opening for director of a new hospice program called Whatcom Hospice. Kirkland had heard about other hospice programs from a former colleague who left to run a hospice in Spokane. His background as the director of development for Whitworth College and his master's degree in community education made him a perfect candidate for the job.

"It was great because my family and I wanted to move out west," Kirkland said.

Twelve years later, Kirkland still proudly calls himself one of the pioneers of the Whatcom Hospice Foundation. He has the joy of allocating hospice funds to help families pay for what the government cannot, from expensive medications and rent to child care and phone bills.

The government pays for hospice through reimbursement from Medicare, but it does not cover many personal needs. Kirkland and the organization believe they provide funding to cover the essentials of everyday life.

His days begin with phone calls, trying to collect donations and contributions from many community members, local vendors and companies. Previous donors include Haggen Food Stores, Sehome Classic Car Wash and the Cherry Point BP Refinery.

"Each gift is important," Kirkland said with a gentle look in his eyes. "For example, one elderly lady sends a gift of $5 every month, faithfully. I value that as much as the large gifts because that one comes from the heart."

Kirkland's job has taught him the importance of giving to charities and that aspect has carried over into his personal life. He and his wife set aside a certain amount of money each month to give to three or four charities. One is Hospice.

Kirkland's job also has allowed him to grasp the importance of his own life and has given him the ability to discuss death openly with his family. Today he has a living will so his wife will know exactly what he wants when he dies.

"Hospice has given me a different perspective on the end of life," he said. "I do not fear it at this point; I understand it much more fully."

The Volunteer

Peg Murray, 39, has been offering her services as an unpaid masseuse and acupuncturist for more than a year now and has no problems with it providing her services for free.

As she attended Pacific College of Oriental Medicine in California to become an acupuncturist, Murray had to accumulate a certain number of training hours practicing her craft. She spent over half of her training hours working for a San Diego hospice.

She decided to move to Bellingham after her graduation because she needed a change of climate and a smaller town with less havoc, she said. Shortly after the move, she began volunteering for hospice.

"There is something special - special is not even the word for it," she said. "There is something profound about letting someone into your life at the end of (their) life."
"There is something profound, about letting someone into your life at the end of (their) life."

— Peg Murray

Murray said she enjoys providing patients with massage and acupuncture services because they are honest with her.

"(The patients) have no reason to lie to me; they're blunt and to the point," she said. "There's no bullshit, just respect; no facades."

She takes pride in knowing that after she leaves her patients' homes they will be more peaceful than when she arrived.

Like Kirkland, hospice has helped to put her life's priorities straight. She explains that even when coming home to a messy apartment or getting cut off while driving in her car, she realizes life is too important to focus on the little things.

She swears she bothers her friends with her daily calls just to say 'I love you' because she simply doesn't want to leave anything left unsaid.

"Who knows? I could get off the phone and walk across the street to get the mail and be killed," she said.

The Chaplain

"Hospice has changed my life completely," says soft-spoken Chaplain Mary Lodge. "I got divorced, went back to school and moved 3,000 miles away from home."

Lodge was a volunteer for 10 years for a hospice in Pennsylvania before moving to Bellingham a year ago to work as Chaplain at Hospice.

Lodge attended a seminary to obtain a master's degree in divinity and also has completed 32 hours of her Clinic Pastoral Education training while working for Hospice.

A member of the Ordained Clergy Congregational Church, Lodge puts her religious beliefs aside and allows her patients to dictate what kind of support and guidance they need at the end of their lives.

She provides spiritual and non-spiritual support for patients and families of hospice. She visits people to pray with them, shares spiritual guidance if asked, brings them communion and has performed baptisms. Sometimes, just sits by a patient's bedside to hold their hand.

Lodge shares one of her favorite memories of giving one of her patients a guided meditation designed to make him feel as if he were at the beach by describing the sights, sounds and smells.

This is one example of many experiences that have personally touched Lodge while working for hospice. Her work has also provided her with a passion that she never had before.

The Nurse

Cathy Schramer takes a seat at the table in the conference room to discuss what it means to be a team leader for hospice. Behind her, the white board reminds nurses to be friendly and smile. The fluorescent lights above cause a tiny angel pin worn at the bottom of her nametag to just barely twinkle. She begins talking casually, as though she is speaking to an old friend.

Schramer, 51, starts by outlining what the Hospice's goals.

"Hospice provides quality of life until the end of (a patient's) life," she said.

In 1982, Schramer graduated from the University of Washington with a bachelor's degree in nursing. At the time, she wanted to go into pediatrics. But, a year later, Schramer's mother was dying of lung cancer and her family needed help. They called hospice and her mother became her patient. Hospice allowed Schramer to take care of her mother.
She described the exact moment she knew hospice was a great organization. "(My mother) didn't have a lot of pain up until the last three weeks," she said. "Her doctor was unresponsive (when she needed medicine) so I called the hospice nurse, and all she said was, 'I will get you the medicine you need in an hour.' She has knowledge of what to do in a crisis and made it happen."

Shortly after her mother passed away, Schramer decided to switch to oncology. In 1988, Schramer started working for a hospice in Everett. In 1996, she moved to the Bellingham hospice.

She said one of her most memorable patients was a 22-year-old senior in college dying of lymphoma. She said he was just like any typical college student, with goals for the future and a love life.

"He had a real plan for life," she said with a distraught look in her eyes. "It was one of the saddest times in my life. Here was a guy with so much potential and he was taken way too soon."

She said, sometimes she becomes too emotionally attached to a patient and Hospice consumes her whole life. She said she has tried to quit several times, but for some reason, something always brings her back to Hospice. Once you are back, you are hooked she said.

"Each person has a passion in life," she said. "It is my passion to get people things they need."

Their dedication

As National Hospice Month comes to a close, hospice celebrates Mike, Peg, Mary and Cathy's commitment to the organization's philosophy of "allowing patients the best quality of care at the end of their lives."

Kirkland described their goals best when he said, "Hospice offers people the opportunity to go through a very difficult and personal time of your life with the maximum amount of support and the minimum amount of evasion in their life."

Kirkland not only emphasized what the organization does for patients and families but he described with pride what the organization does for him.

"Hospice impacts me personally because I get up every morning and come to work and I know in the course of the day that I am going to do something to help someone," he said. "I feel I represent an extremely good organization." 📺

"Hospice has given me a different perspective on the end of life...I do not fear it at this point, I understand it much more fully."

— Mike Kirkland
In 1959, Bellingham resident John Hoyte made history on a whim. Cailin Long tells the story of how he and a small crew crossed the Alps with an elephant named Jumbo and helped to unravel one of history's greatest riddles. Photos by Tara Nelson and courtesy of John Hoyte.

For the past 37 years, Bellingham resident John Hoyte has run a successful engineering company that boasts clients such as the United Nations. He said he would never have had the confidence to start his own business had it not been for an unlikely response to a strange request he made in 1959.

In 1956, Hoyte graduated from Cambridge University in England with an engineering degree. At that time, a discussion was buzzing among scholars concerning which way Hannibal marched an army and 37 elephants over the Alps to defeat Rome in 218 B.C.

Hoyte, always a lover of history, was intrigued. He and three classmates decided they would be the group to traverse the great mountain range. At the time, historians were juggling what they felt were the two most plausible theories regarding Hannibal's true route over the Alps. One argued for the Col de Clapier route, while the other supported the alternate route of Col de la Traversette.

"It was an interesting detective story, I think," Hoyte said, recalling the last of his wild oats sewn as a college student. "It was a typically British thing to do. We were following in a noble tradition."

Ironically, Hoyte was more intrigued by the pointlessness of the matter being debated than the actual determination of Hannibal's route over the Alps was probably that we were all exhausted by study and only too pleased to find a new topic of conversation ... Moreover, we discovered in it a strange fascination ... The suggestion was that a group should look for Hannibal's route that very summer."

Hoyte, along with Richard Jolly, David Jenkins and his sister Elizabeth, decided they would be the group to traverse the Alps. One argued for the Col de Clapier route, while the other supported the alternate route of Col de la Traversette.

"It was an interesting detective story, I think," Hoyte said, recalling the last of his wild oats sewn as a college student. "It was a typically British thing to do. We were following in a noble tradition."

Cambridge Carthaginians

In his book, Alpine Elephant: In Hannibal's Tracks, Hoyte wrote, "The reason why ... we started to talk about..." Klipsun
Forward, you madman, and hurry across those horrid Alps so that you may become the delight of school boys.

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which way Hannibal crossed.

"I've always loved history, and it intrigued me that these scholars were so deadly earnest about this topic that really doesn't matter." Hoyte admitted. "We know Hannibal crossed and got his elephants over, but which way he went really isn't that crucial."

On this first journey over the Alps, the crew made some determinations of its own. After climbing the two passes under the guidance of two frontier gendarmes, Jolly, Jenkins and the Hoyte siblings decided that Col de Clapier was the most likely path trodden by Hannibal and his weary army. Having studied Polybius' *History of Rome*, the crew knew that more than one pass offered a view of the Po Valley where Hannibal descended into Italy to attack Rome. But they felt that the Col de la Traversette was not expansive enough to sleep an army of 30,000, and that the climb to the top was possibly too great a challenge for a herd of elephants.

In an attempt to make their theory known, the four companions sent an article to the *Manchester Guardian* in hopes of publicizing these historical findings. Although the *Guardian* rejected the article, *The Times* picked it up instead. The two-column article was titled *Cambridge Carthaginians*. It was the first of what is now a mountain of press clippings that cover Hoyte's alpine adventure. Once he established the fact that a human was capable of crossing the Col de Clapier, he could not stop wondering if an elephant could do the same.

Jolly recalls how much this question begged Hoyte for an answer.

"Would it all just stop there or would he find an elephant?" Jolly asked. "It was a mixture of extraordinary determination and strong Christian faith that led John to believe that somehow he should be doing this."

Hoyte's inner historian was nagging him to complete the research he had begun with his first trip. It was time to incorporate the truly determining factor. Hoyte would not rest peacefully until he found out if an elephant could sustain the high altitudes, harsh weather and steep grades of the Alps.

"When talking about it with a friend, he said, 'Well, why don't you take an elephant across?' Hoyte recalled. "I couldn't get to sleep that night thinking about the possibility. If I could only get an elephant, this would make our pass the one to be in the history books."

**A Strange Request**

When he rose the next morning, Hoyte began searching for an elephant. He wrote letters of inquiry to the British Consuls in Lyons, Geneva and Turin, the three biggest cities near Hannibal's trek. In the letter, he boldly asked if anyone knew of an elephant for rent.

Within a week, Hoyte received a letter from Turin, Italy. It turned out that the very day Hoyte's letter arrived, the town's leading newspaper carried an advertisement for a young elephant in need of an owner. Signor Arduino Terni, director of the Turin, Milan and Varallo Sesia Zoos, bought the homeless elephant, Jumbo, and offered her to Hoyte on loan, along with her trainer. Terni even agreed to pay for the 150 pounds of food Jumbo would consume each day.

Once he had the elephant, there was no turning back.

"I didn't have any excuses," Hoyte said. "I couldn't say I didn't have the money so I can't do it. So we had to plan an expedition with food and provisions and boots for the elephant."

Hoyte and Jolly, two of the original Cambridge Carthaginians, formed a team for their second trip over the Alps, known as the British Alpine Hannibal Expedition. To execute the mission of guiding an elephant over the Alps, an entire task force was necessary. It consisted of a veterinary officer, cook, treasurer, cameraman, quartermaster and literary expert. Jolly would be the expedition's secretary and leader of the advance guard, and Hoyte was appointed the expedition leader and publicity officer.

Quartermaster and literary expert Michael Hetherington was a former classmate of Hoyte and Jolly at Cambridge. He knew Hoyte best for his participation in the Christian Union.

"He always came across as a very gracious man with an attractive Christian charm," Hetherington said. "Particularly as a leader."

Hoyte, on the other hand, was not so sure of his capabilities as a leader.

"I had never led an expedition in my life," Hoyte explained, "and here I was 27 years old, and suddenly I was the leader of a sort of world-class expedition with several carloads of press reporters following us."

Cook and zoologist Clare Eagle remembers Hoyte in his first position of authority.

"He was always very pleasant," Eagle said. "He got his way with humor and quietness."

After fitting Jumbo for a jacket and boots, produced by
England's top shoe designer, Jumbo began an intense training regimen to prepare her for the steep grades of the alpine peaks. Feeling confident with her sleek new frame and fashionable get-up, the team arranged for Jumbo's seven-page spread in Life magazine, which paid for a portion of the trip. All Life demanded in return was exclusive rights to Jumbo's rear end.

In the small wine-manufacturing town of Montmelian in France's Isere valley, Hoyte and his nine companions stood on a heap of ruins that was once a fortress with an astounding view into three gaping valleys. The towering peaks of the Great Alps made even two-and-a-half-ton Jumbo seem petite. Here, the adventure commenced with the cutting of a red ribbon and the dream of one Englishman.

Polybius' History of Rome acted as a Bible for the crew, describing Hannibal's passage in a day-by-day account. With its painstaking detail, the group was able to follow in what it presumed to be Hannibal's precise footsteps.

Where Hannibal rested, so did the expedition. Jolly said Hoyte would fantasize out loud about the battles Hannibal must have fought against tribal gangs friendly to Rome.

"John had a whimsical sense of fun once we got into the idea of exploring which way Hannibal crossed the Alps," Jolly said. "John turned his imagination loose and would suddenly go into a lyrical description of what Hannibal may have been doing."

Though the Cambridge Carthaginians had determined Col de Clapier to be Hannibal's most likely point of passage during their first trip in 1956, the members of the expedition were concerned about Jumbo's safety. They had witnessed the way falling rocks spooked Jumbo and worried that journalists would climb La Crosta, the steep rock slope leading to the Col de Clapier, to get one last shot of Jumbo in all her glory.

Hoyte made the final and difficult decision to cross at the Col de Mount Cenis as opposed to the Col de Clapier. Despite his decision, the expedition was a success at unveiling the capabilities of an elephant to cross the Alps, as Hannibal did some 2,000 years ago.

As Hoyte explained in his book, "By showing that an elephant could climb to over 7,000 feet without undue difficulty, we demonstrated that the distances between the strategic points on the Isere-Arc-Clapier route could have been covered by an elephant within the timetable laid down by Polybius."

Not only had the expedition drawn international attention, popularizing historical events, but it also helped to shape Hoyte into the man he is today.

Today

At the age of 71, what was once a nagging question has now become an entertaining tale about how Hoyte and a daring damsel named Jumbo solved a
2,000-year-old mystery. Seated in his home atop one of the many hills surrounding Lake Whatcom, a contagious smile spreads across Hoyte's face as he recalls his passage.

"The journey was great, but the preparations and getting an elephant were certainly the most creative part," Hoyte explains. "That's where I found my real joy in life - putting things together in an imaginative way. That's where I've really found pleasure in my job, in my engineering.

Hoyte started the Spectrex Corporation after discovering the prototype for the first spectroscope in the basement of his 90-year-old uncle, Fred Vreeland. Hoyte still receives an occasional order for a spectroscope. However, Hoyte is also the sole creator of a pocket-sized air sampler, which is the only pump capable of testing an individual's consumption of air. It is used by many oil refineries and was put to use extensively during the cleanup of the World Trade Center.

If not for one strange request, Hoyte might never have known his capabilities as a leader and his potential to be president of his own company.

"That was one of the results of (the expedition)," Hoyte said. "Stepping out on my own and not depending on somebody else.

Running his company in California while living the retired life in Bellingham has given Hoyte the opportunity to pursue his true passion, though, living his life for Christ.

"Our relationship with God means a great deal to us both," said Luci, Hoyte's wife of 13 years, who said she might never have become interested in Hoyte if it were not for his participation in the expedition.

"One of the first things my friends told me when setting us up on a blind date was that this was a man who took an elephant over the Alps," Luci said. "I'm a bungee jumper and a risk taker, so I thought, 'This is my kind of guy.'"

Ever since Hoyte became a Christian while serving in the British army, he said his main priority in life has been sharing his faith in Christ. Now he uses the expedition as a metaphor for his faith.

"Life is like a journey over the mountains," Hoyte explained. "We are called to follow Jesus, but if we go our own ways, we'll be bogged down in quicksand. Over the mountains is not the easiest way, but it is the best way. We are made to hike over the mountains, where we can find satisfaction outside material gain. We need an inner purpose for life that doesn't depend on outward circumstances.

Hoyte has traveled to various countries in order to encourage his fellow Christians living with less fortunate means. When living in California, Hoyte attended Menlo Park Presbyterian Church. Members of his congregation traveled as far as Guatemala, El Salvador and Mexico where Hoyte was able to share his adventures.

"It's really worthwhile to help people realize that history is alive, and you can really get excited about it," Hoyte said. "I am proud to be able to pass this adventure along to other people.

To this day, Hoyte enjoys telling his tale to intrigued young historians. Recently Hoyte spoke to the sixth graders of Waldorf School in Bellingham, who were studying Roman history. Each year, he travels to Palo Alto, Calif., to make an appearance at the private, all-girl high school Castilleja.

"It was a venture into faith," Hoyte said. "To really step out, you have to take risks; you have to write letters; you have to be imaginative. Because if you don't, you won't get that one shot, that one-in-a-million opportunity."