Every day, life presents us with obstacles. Big or small, we must confront these head-on in order to continue on.

Three stories in this issue of Klipsun exemplify the necessity of carrying on in the face of overwhelming obstacles.

"Putting the Pieces Back Together" by writer Emily Krahn tells of a local woman's turn to art for healing in the midst of loss.

In "Back to Basics," Shawn Query explores the day-to-day challenges Whatcom County residents face as they strive to overcome functional illiteracy.

Writer Ciara O'Rourke's story "Missing in Laos" tells of the actions family and friends are taking to bring a Western alumnus home.

I highly encourage you to read these and other stories featured in this issue.

Sincerely,

Taune Sweet
Editor in chief
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Brilliantly colored angels, though frozen in frail form, seem to fly about the vividly lit room. Their features are delicate and their figures fragile, but the slightest ray of light illuminates the various hues that make up their shapes, emitting a powerful light. A light that stirs inspiration from within. A light that for some, can actually heal.

This light inspired Nona Fisher, a 62-year-old teacher of stained glass technique, to begin her work in stained glass 21 years ago. Through her teaching, Fisher helps students learn a new craft and helps some cope with personal loss as well.

Fisher is a soft-spoken woman who gives off a calming air that only is erased by her enthusiasm for her craft. Mention the art of stained glass and her eyes flash from their soothing gaze to reflect the vibrant connection she feels with her work. Her passion to create images from colorful glass was spurred by her own tragedy, one she says she wouldn't have overcome without this craft.

"It probably saved my life," Fisher says. "It's the best therapy in the world."

In 1986, Fisher's parents were killed in an automobile accident. Although heartbreaking, it provided Fisher with the funds to purchase equipment to begin stained glasswork — something she was always interested in but couldn't afford to do. After her parents' deaths, Fisher found sanctuary in her work.

"You get lost in this," Fisher says. "People can talk to you and you don't hear a thing. I always recommend it to those who have experienced a tragedy because it helps to take your mind off of it."

In addition to teaching classes at the Roeder Home in Bellingham and the Lynden Pioneer Museum in Lynden, Fisher does commission work for local residents. Fisher's commissioned creations include colorful windows, various animals and 83-inch-high golfers. Recently, she has focused on creating angels.

"I started making the angels when I moved to Bellingham," Fisher says. "I was overwhelmed with how beautiful it was. Surrounded by mountains and the water, I was inspired all the time."

She creates the angels, which are normally 12 to 15...
inches tall but can be more than 30 inches tall, by using an overlay technique. This technique involves laying materials such as ribbons, bows and additional pieces of glass on top of glass, giving each piece more depth. Fisher often fills the angels' outstretched hands with objects, such as butterflies or doves. The figures are so detailed that they look as if they actually are flying through the air, their colorful robes flowing behind them.

Dana Hanks, the arts coordinator for the Whatcom County Parks Department, manages the Roeder Home and took classes from Fisher. Fisher's stained glass classes and angels piqued Hanks' interest after Fisher helped Hanks use the craft to deal with her own personal tragedy. Hanks, whose friend died in a hang gliding accident, originally wanted to purchase one of Fisher's angels for herself. "I wanted to buy one that reminded me of my friend," Hanks says. "But instead, Nona chose to help me build my own. She helped me with the process of dealing with the loss of my friend. Her work touches people in a deeper way through her angels."

The technique Fisher uses to create her angels, and most of her work, is a foiling technique, which she learned as an apprentice from her stained glass teacher in Omaha, Neb. Louis Comfort Tiffany, founder of the Tiffany Glass Co., invented this technique, which involves wrapping the edges of each piece of glass with foil and soldering, or melting, them together.

Aside from the foiling technique, a lead technique also can be used. This involves using lead between the pieces of glass instead of foil. Fisher says she uses the foiling technique instead of the lead technique because the flexibility of the foil allows an artisan to make a greater variety of shapes.

Fisher is a stained glass artisan, which is different than an artist, she says. She doesn't consider herself an artist because she doesn't design the patterns herself. Fisher selects patterns from pattern books, photographs or other objects like carpet designs. Her classes, which are two to two-and-a-half hours long, focus on stained glass foiling.

Fisher fine-tuned her process for 10 years in Nebraska until she moved to Bellingham in 1997, after visiting her daughter, who was attending Western. She says she immediately fell in love with the area.

"It probably saved my life. It's the best therapy in the world."
- Nona Fisher

What I actually told my daughter," Fisher says, "is this is where I want to die. It's the most beautiful place I've ever been."

Because of the unending inspiration Fisher draws from Bellingham's beauty, she has created so many angels that she has at least one in every room of her home except the bathroom, for which she's currently creating one. Fisher also makes angels to give to friends. She makes an angel pin for mothers who have lost children.

Patty DePasquale, a friend of Fisher's for 10 years, also has taken classes from her. After Fisher made a stained glass bear for DePasquale, DePasquale decided to try her hand at the art of stained glass. She says Fisher's interest in angels is fitting.

"I recently had a knee replacement," DePasquale says, "and she would sit by my side to keep me company and keep my spirits up. Her interest in angels is very suiting, because she's an angel herself."

The beauty that radiates from these angelic forms may go beyond the materials from which they are made. Maybe the root of their inspiration lies within the artisan who invests herself so deeply in her craft and in those most in need of its power to heal.

— Emily Krahn
Design by Liz McNeil
"Waiting on people makes you thankful for your mental health once you realize how incredibly crazy most people are."

-Sara Thompson
Filling up water to the brim of the glasses, I smile and greet the customers who settle in at the table for their dinner. The dark-haired toddler grows restless as I inform his parents of the specials, and he proceeds to spread crumbs of bread all over the table. He then pulls at my apron as I take his parents’ drink orders. At no point during this ordeal has the mother or the father made any motion to reprimand their son’s behavior. As I walk away, I take a deep breath and prepare myself for another night’s work.

"If going out to eat and tipping 15 percent is too expensive, don’t do it at all. Use the money to buy groceries and give the server a break.”

It should be a requirement in life for everyone to wait on tables, much like the legal standard for kids to stay in school until they’re 16 years old.

The job teaches you real life lessons, such as having to work hard for customers you don’t particularly enjoy. A couple came in to dine the other night and right away I could sense their demanding nature as it permeated into the restaurant. When I asked them how their evening was going, the woman with dyed blonde hair curtly answered in her raspy voice with one word: “Fine.”

When someone tells you they’re fine, they really mean their day is operating on a below-average level.

Her “fine” began the unstoppable flow of questions regarding the substitution of salad for soup, the portion size, what has onions, what doesn’t, what fresh means, can salad dressing be on the side, what type of bread comes with dinner and so forth. She then had me fetch all sorts of things for her over the course of the evening, such as a tissue, toothpick, straw, lemon and complementary candy we have sitting at the front desk. I felt like I was training for the world’s most random scavenger hunt. She even had me open and shut the door for her when she went out to smoke.

After ordering, eating and finishing her meal, she wanted the remainder of her Pepsi in a to-go cup. And how was I rewarded? With a $3 tip on a $65 tab — 4.6 percent, baby.

If going out to eat and tipping 15 percent is too expensive, don’t do it at all. Use the money to buy groceries and give the server a break.

Waiting tables also teaches you to deal with awkward social situations. An elderly man orders a whiskey and Squirt from me. What restaurant actually carries Squirt? I thought this soda was a fad that went away with stirrup leggings. I make him the next best thing: whiskey with 7-Up and a splash of sour. I take it over to his table and he says he likes it. He enjoys the drink so much that after the meal he approaches me out of his wife’s earshot. He looks at me and says: “That reminded me of having sex on the beach.”

I can’t speak, let alone vomit words. Dumbfounded, I politely tell him that he probably shouldn’t finish that story. He agrees and then sits back down with his wife.

Tolerance is another value you learn from the restaurant business. Once a week, you will be at work all night waiting on two tables in four hours. You’ve finished practically all of your closing procedures — then that last group of people walks in at 9:17 p.m. The place closes at 9:30 p.m. Forget those plans you had to meet with your buddies at the Beaver Inn for some air hockey. You have a table to serve. Between refilling drinks, bringing food and clearing plates, you stand in the back watching the National Spelling Bee Championship with the cooks, working up the strength to paste that smile on your face and walk back out to the table to ask: “Did you save any room for dessert?” I hope not.

Waiting on people makes you thankful for your mental health once you realize how incredibly crazy most people are. One time a man became upset over the price of a bottle of Kendall Jackson chardonnay. He took a pen, wrote “TOO EXPENSIVE!!!” on the label and left with his wife after paying for a bottle of wine he deemed heinously priced. They then proceeded to pull their car to the front door and steal our large stone ashtray that stands in front of the path leading to the doors. The insane action left me and my co-workers confused. We decided to call the cops. The next morning our ashtray was back in its place. I guess the couple didn’t want the trophy that bad.

Don’t get me wrong, the job does come with benefits. The regulars are wonderful people. When working the night before my mass media law midterm, a middle-aged, retired radio announcer who lives across the street from the restaurant kept quizzing me every time I went by him, asking me legal definitions and different case decisions. He is almost as anxious as I am to find out my test results.

So I’ll stick with this job until graduation. And for anyone looking to improve their social skills, I highly recommend the public service industry. Where else can you experience such amusing anecdotes every week? It’s a beautiful thing.

— Sara Thompson
I-5 Graffiti Rock:
Peeling Back the Paint

Alumni from Bellingham High School's class of 1968 paint the I-5 rock for their 35th reunion in August 2003. (PHOTO COURTESY OF RAY MOORE)
On the right side of the northbound lane of Interstate 5, just past the North Lake Samish exit, a 10-foot-tall graffiti-covered rock has served as a billboard for local high school and college students and alumni for nearly 40 years.

How else would the thousands of people who drive north on I-5 to Bellingham know that the Bellingham High School girls' soccer team was the 2006 Northwest Conference champions? Or that the Sehome High class of '86 is having a reunion? Or that some kid likes the Insane Clown Posse so much that he had to buy a can of spray paint and tell the world?

The rock is whitewashed and repainted every few days during the school year and nearly every few hours during the summer when graduations and reunions are frequent. As a result, the rock is completely covered in a coat of paint that is inches thick except in the back. If one could peel off the layers of paint one at a time, the rock would tell a story of generations of youthful expression.

Sandy Sutterman, library/archives paraprofessional at Western's Wilson Library and Bellingham High School class of '68, says her generation started the tradition of painting the rock right after that portion of the freeway was completed in 1967. Although she never painted it herself back then, Sutterman says she helped her reunion committee paint the rock for their 30th class reunion. They painted 'BHS class of '68 turns 50,' she says.

"People usually paint the rock for graduations and special birthdays, stuff like that," she says. "It is not unusual for the rock to be painted almost immediately after you paint it."

Jim Wallace and Ray Moore, also BHS class of '68, say their reunion committee has made a tradition of painting the rock before all of their high school reunions. They have painted the rock for their 20th, 30th and 35th reunions, and they say they intend to paint it again for their 40th.

"For our 35th class reunion, we actually had to paint it three times in three days," Wallace says. "Because other people kept coming and painting over it. No kidding."

Wallace says they painted the rock on August 13, 2003, the Thursday night before the reunion, because they wanted to make a nostalgic sign for any alumni coming from out of town. They loaded 11 members of their class into a large van that dropped them off on the shoulder of the freeway. They painted the rock white, then painted the words "BHS '68 35th Rocks" in big, red letters.

But later that evening, Moore says one of the members of their class drove by the rock and saw that it had been painted over.

"It looked like somebody very special was having a birthday," Moore says. "We hated to paint over it, but we really wanted our sign to stay."

They went back to the rock and painted it again on Friday afternoon, Moore says. But that evening, the BHS class of '83, who was having their 20th reunion on the same weekend, painted their sign over the rock.

So on Saturday morning, Moore says, the class of '68 went back out and painted a compromised sign that read "BHS '68 35th," with "'83 20th," added to the side.

"The rock is a lot taller than it looks from the road," Moore says. "The second and third time we painted it, we brought a little 4-foot ladder to reach the top. But it was really a blast. We had such a good time painting it."

The freeway and any boulders located within its corridor are property of the State of Washington, says Trooper Curtis, an 18-year veteran of the Washington State Patrol. He says he is familiar with "Graffiti Rock," and says it is not illegal to paint it as long as people stay off the side of the freeway.

"The only thing we request is for people not to leave their paint cans and brushes," Trooper Curtis says. "And not to park on the shoulder of the interstate unless it's an emergency."

To get to the rock legally, Trooper Curtis says one could park on the side of Samish Way and walk along the on-ramp, staying on the other side of the ditch from the road. The rock is just a few yards after the on-ramp merges with the freeway.

Tracy Goheen, BHS class of '84, says she used to look forward to seeing the rock as a child when her family would drive back into town from vacation and always wanted to paint it. She got her chance to paint the rock with a group of friends from Sehome High School when she was 19.

"The thing to do was to park on the old Samish Road and run across both sides of the freeway," she says. "I can remember how thick the paint was. It's one of my favorite memories."

Goheen says her group wasn't sure what they were going to paint, but puppy love took over and the young couple in the group convinced them to paint "Skeeter (heart) Ducky" on the rock. Goheen's son is currently a BHS freshman, and she says he intends to carry on the tradition and paint the rock someday.

George Mustoe, geology research technician at Western, says the rock is a glacial erratic that was carried down from the mountains of British Columbia during the last ice age around 20,000 years ago. A continental glacier 5,000 feet thick covered this area, and it trapped stray boulders in the ice as it expanded to the south.

"I can remember a time when the rock was not so covered in paint, and I believe it's a chunk of granite," Mustoe says. "It probably came from the B.C. coast range, which contains a lot of granitic bedrock."

Around the back of the rock, a small area of chipped paint reveals that it is indeed granite. When the continental glacier began to recede around 10,000 years ago, Mustoe says it deposited the rock in its current location as the ice melted.

Today, Graffiti Rock is covered in this week's slogans and doodles like a well-used high school text book. Its highly visible, yet forbidding location continues to make the rock an attractive canvas for wandering thoughts, and a sign of the lives of those who are carefree enough to paint it.

— Mike Curtis
Design by Liz McNeil
Separation of church AND HATE

Churches throughout Whatcom County are joining a national movement and opening their doors to the LGBT community. Willow Rudiger visits local churches that have adopted open and affirming resolutions and talks with church members. Photos by Taylor Williams. Design by Candace Cusano.

"Never place a period where God has placed a comma. God is still speaking," beckons a giant red banner hanging against the sky blue-painted frame of the First Congregational Church to passersby on Cornwall Avenue. It's a dreary, rainy Sunday morning, but the parking lot is overflowing and people are flooding through the doors for the 10 a.m. church service.

Members congregate in the foyer exchanging smiles, handshakes, hugs and pleasantries, catching up on a week's worth of gossip. Soon the church bell rings and families and friends find their ways to seats and settle in for the service to begin. The choir members rise and sing a song of welcome, which is followed by the reverend's announcements, a call to worship and a prayer of confession.

It looks like the beginnings of a typical church service on any given Sunday morning at First Congregational, or any number of other mainstream churches, but a quick look at the front of the program reveals that today's service is a special one. Today is Diversity Sunday – an event that happens once a year at First Congregational to reaffirm the belief that all people are called upon to accept and understand our humanity and diversity as gifts from God.

After a few more hymns and a quick reception welcoming new members, the congregation becomes silent and still. A petite frame rises quietly from a seat in the front row of the choir and walks with confidence and ease to the pulpit at the front of the church.

"I first came to this church because I wanted the chance to sing some hymns," Dr. Kristen Larson says to an attentive congregation. "That's about it. Just sing some hymns. Which, when I look back on it now, was a fairly modest expectation for my first foray back into the house of God after so many years away."

Larson, who has been a member of First Congregational for about a year and serves on the church's Open and Affirming Committee, which organized Diversity Sunday, says she did find the chance to sing, but she found something else, too.

"It's not – as you might suspect – that I found the support group for the married, bisexual, female, physics professors without kids that meets on Tuesday nights," Larson says with a smile as people erupt in warm, friendly laughter. "No, what I found was a place, perhaps the first place in my life, where I can be my true self. Where I am accepted for my whole self."

First Congregational is just one of a growing number of faith communities throughout Whatcom County, Washington state and the nation at large that is "open and affirming" (ONA), or welcoming to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) persons.

TAKING A STAND

On March 14, 1999, the First Congregational Church of Bellingham United Church of Christ adopted an ONA resolution in an effort to welcome and affirm every person into the full life and ministry of the church, without regard to gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status or sexual orientation. Every member had an opportunity to vote, and the final total was 200 to 10 in favor of adopting the resolution.

Adopting an ONA resolution is a means by which churches within the United Church of Christ (UCC) can recognize that the institutional church historically has judged persons based on their sexual orientation and has excluded LGBT persons from the community of faith.

According to the United Church of Christ Open and Affirming Office, 627 congregations out of approximately 5,700 have drafted their own official ONA resolution in the past 26 years, which is about 10 percent of all UCC churches. This is among the largest percentages for mainstream denominations, although the UCC is not the only
church involved in this movement. Unitarian churches also are active, as well as some Episcopal and American Baptist churches, to name a few.

The process of adopting an ONA resolution at First Congregational lasted more than two years and featured two series of classes in an effort to engage and educate people and provide a space for anyone to share their feelings.

The Rev. Jennifer Yocum, an openly lesbian interim pastor at First Congregational, says many members felt that the church didn’t need to spend all that time on the ONA process because the resolution would have passed anyway. However, she believes that creating healthy, open dialogue for awareness and education was needed in order to fully understand the issues.

According to the Rev. Rick Pribbernow of the Seattle-based Open Door Ministries, which offers pastoral care for AIDS patients and counseling services to members of the LGBT community, the ONA process that UCC churches go through to become inclusive involves four steps. The first step is conducting a study on homosexuality and the Bible.

"Until the issue has been brought up, people don’t have to budget," Pribbernow says. "They can just avoid dealing with the issue. When we do these studies, that's when change comes about."

The second step is to take church action, such as drafting a resolution and voting on it as a congregation. The third step is to become registered with the national UCC church as an "open and affirming" congregation. Last, the resolution or designation must be printed in church bulletins or newsletters to make it known to the church community and church visitors.

**CREATING A SAFE SPACE**

Tucked away on the northwest end of Western’s campus, across the street from the Ridgeway residence halls, sits the Shalom Center, a place that provides opportunities to Western students and community members to engage in worship services, ecumenical Bible studies and community service.

Those who pass through its doors are greeted with a heart-shaped rainbow sticker with a cross in the center and a welcome sign with the Western safe zone emblem – a circle encompassing two overlapping triangles – which symbolize the center’s commitment to providing an atmosphere of acceptance. The colors and symbols that grace the entrance to this center convey a message of understanding, non-judgment and knowledge of LGBT needs and concerns.

The Rev. Christopher Berry, Lutheran campus pastor and director of the Shalom Center, says that as an "open and affirming" community, everyone is welcome at the center and no one experiences discrimination, especially regarding gender and sexuality issues.
"Our whole attitude on being open and affirming is based on the fact that we don't believe that there's any place for tolerance in the church," Berry says. "The church is not called to be tolerant. The church is called to be absolutely accepting. There's none of this 'love the sinner hate the sin.' We accept people for who they are. We love them for who they are."

"There's none of this 'love the sinner hate the sin.' We accept people for who they are. We love them for who they are."
— The Rev. Christopher Berry

**REGAINING TRUST**

The First Congregational ONA committee, which is responsible for making sure that the ONA posture of the church is kept alive and visible, helped sponsor and support the 2006 Bellingham Gay Pride event this year. The reactions they received while working at the event ranged from surprise and genuine appreciation to the cold shoulder.

"Some people were not that happy to talk to us, but I understand that," Larson says. "I think a lot of people have really been hurt by the church, not just in a public way, but in a very private, personal way."

Based on her own experiences growing up in a religious community and then walking away from it when she came out, Larson says it's hard for many LGBT persons to trust the church.

"Telling someone who has a close relationship with God that who they are is an affront to God is such an injurious thing," Larson says. "When someone says God hates you, you don't need to hear that very many times before you don't want to be in the same room with a church person. That's one of the reasons why I left the church."

Larson says she is proud to be a member of the UCC because of its commitment to social justice and because it is working to regain the trust of a minority community that has been hurt for so long.

"It's the church's responsibility to fight our way back into a position of trust, and even with the UCC, it's trust we have to earn," Larson says. "You don't get to just have a resolution in the late '90s and say 'we're all good now.' The resolution says we welcome people into the whole life of the church, and that's an ongoing process."

Berry says that he feels honored and privileged when students come out to him, because they're placing trust in someone who typically isn't regarded as safe for LGBT people.

"I'm always really humbled when that happens because they're trusting someone that they've been taught they shouldn't trust," Berry says. "To come out to a clergy person is taking an incredible risk in this society. It shouldn't be that way. The church has turned its back on so many people, and to me that's just a tragedy."

Yocum says the most consistent message Christians receive from Jesus in the New Testament is to love one another, which includes the emancipation of the poor, the despised and the outcast.

"For any of us who have experienced what it's like to be on the outside, Jesus says we are beloved as children of God," Yocum says. "If there is a Christian message about homosexuality, what that is for me is first, you are beloved. Second, it's expected out of your knowledge that you are beloved to treat everyone as beloved themselves."

**BEING AN ALLY**

Ten years ago, Berry decided to take off his liturgically colored stole and replace it with a rainbow-striped one in support of gay and lesbian clergy who were being hounded out of the Lutheran church. He has performed same-gender marriage blessings for more than 25 years and has made it a point to put the safe zone symbol and Lutheran Campus Ministry rainbow label on everything that comes out of the Shalom Center, such as letters and brochures.

"So many people have said that because we are so open and accepting of one group of people, they feel very safe being here because it means that everyone is accepted," Berry says. "That's the whole idea of the Shalom Center — to be a place where everyone can find peace and justice and acceptance."

The Rev. Doug Wadkins of Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship, an openly gay minister, says one thing that he loves about his congregation is that it probably has as many straight allies as it does members of the LGBT community. He says it is important for there to be allies that are not part of the group itself.

"I think that any group that's in the midst of understanding themselves and working toward some sense of a greater equality and justice have to know themselves and know what they want," Wadkins says. "But it's so much more powerful to have a community where people who don't have the same vested interest also walk that journey with you as best they can."

**THE MOVEMENT CONTINUES**

The Rev. Robert Rieke of Blaine United Church of Christ says it was only natural that his church would undertake a study and begin the ONA process because the national UCC has been at the forefront of gay rights advocacy. Blaine UCC initiated the process over a year ago and began drafting a resolution in December 2006.
Rieke says this movement has not been without cost. Over the years, some members have left “open and affirming” congregations and some churches have even pulled out of the United Church of Christ altogether. In spite of this loss in church numbers, Rieke says this “open and affirming” movement has initiated a conversation that needs to take place regarding Christianity and homosexuality.

“No one can say there hasn’t been an opportunity for education,” Rieke says. “Education is such a significant component. Many people who have not been in dialogue have entered into dialogue and change has happened within the structure of that dialogue.”

In a church of about 100 members, 11 have come to speak with Rieke privately regarding their concerns or disapproval about the ONA resolution, and one couple even decided to take time away from church for a while.

“Some people have identified it as a political issue,” Rieke says. “It’s not. It’s a peace and justice issue for all the people of God.”

However, major political parties have made LGBT issues a matter of politics, not a matter of peace and justice. As the national debate continues to rage over equal rights for members of the LGBT community, such as same-sex unions, more and more people from faith communities within Whatcom County and the nation at large are continually taking a stand for LGBT people out of a commitment to peace and justice, but also out of a commitment to celebrating human diversity as a gift from God.

What does the Bible Say?

Dr. Stephen T. Jones of Seattle First Baptist Church points out that the Bible actually says very little on the topic of homosexuality. Here’s his analysis of common citations:

**Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13**

If you accept the ancient law’s condemnation of homosexuality as an abomination, are you willing to live by the rest of the Levitical code? Also condemned are anyone who blasphemes the Lord’s name, cuts his beard, or associates with a menstruating woman.

**Romans I**

This scripture condemns prostitution — not homosexuality, and primarily refers to pagan ritual. Homosexuality is not listed in a list of 21 sins in Romans 1:28-31.

**Genesis 19 and Judges 19**

The story of Sodom deals more with cruelty toward visitors than the specific type of sexuality. In Luke 10:10-13, Jesus equates the sin of Sodom with inhospitality.

Translating ancient Greek is not an exact science. Definitions of many terms are unclear and depend on context. Some references appear to refer to sexual sin in general, not homosexuality specifically.

However, this statement is explicit: Jesus and Paul condemn judgmentalism (Matt. 7:1-5, Romans 2:1; Romans 14:4-13). Jesus advocated a love ethic and we must each apply this love ethic to our values today.

“It is possible to interpret the Bible as condemning all homosexual behavior. But it is also legitimate to reach a different conclusion. We must interpret the Bible according to the dictates of our own wisdom and conscience, in dialogue with our own community of faith, and according to the leading of God’s spirit in our lives. We can all be proud of the gift of sexuality God has given us: heterosexuals, gays, lesbians, transgendered persons and bisexuals.”

The Rev. Scott Opsahl, interim lead pastor at First Congregational Church, gives a sermon on a Sunday morning.

JANUARY 2007 13
Western alumnus Ryan Chicovsky went missing in Laos in March 2006. Ciara O'Rourke retraces his last known steps and speaks to his family and friends about their continuing search. Design by Liz McNeil.

As David and Judy Franc Chicovsky packed to meet their son in Hong Kong, their first reunion since Western alumnus Ryan Chicovsky left for China 10 months earlier, they received a telephone call from the U.S. Embassy in Laos. Their son was missing. All of his belongings were still at his Xiengkok guesthouse in northwestern Laos, but he hadn't returned to it in two weeks.

Horrified, they left their home on Lopez Island and flew to the U.S. ambassador's home in Laos to retrace Ryan's last steps.

David and Judy learned through interviews conducted by a U.S. embassy team of investigators in Xiengkok that Ryan had planned to travel down the Mekong River with two other travelers on March 14, 2006.

On the evening of March 13, 2006, the guesthouse owner watched Ryan leave his room with his camera. When his travel companions knocked on Ryan's door the next morning, he still hadn't returned.

On April 7, 2006, members of the Akha tribe, an ethnic minority that lives in stilted bamboo houses surrounding Xiengkok, stumbled across Ryan's camera, room key and Western volleyball jersey 4 kilometers north of the village. Ryan was wearing the jersey the night he left the Khem Kong Guesthouse.

Despite weeks of heavy rain, the camera wasn't waterlogged, the room key hadn't rusted, and his shirt was clean.

The Akha regularly comb the Mekong riverbank and surrounding Xiengkok area for shells and treasures, but didn't find Ryan's belongings until April 7, 2006, leading the Chicovskys and authorities to believe someone recently had planted the missing possessions on the shore.

When the guesthouse owner first realized Ryan had left all of his belongings in his room, she waited until March 15 to report Ryan's disappearance to local police in case Ryan had abandoned his possessions to trek around the surrounding hills for a few days.

On March 17, the local police notified the provincial police, who traveled to Xiengkok to collect Ryan's belongings. They returned to the
Luang Namtha province on March 24. On March 29, they notified the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The U.S. Embassy called the Chicosky family on March 31 — three days before they were supposed to leave for Hong Kong.

"It was horrible and shocking," Judy says. "It was just so hard to believe."

Nearly 10 months have passed since the Chicoskys learned of their son's disappearance, and Ryan is still missing. They haven't seen him in a year and seven months — since before he left to study abroad in China with Western Chinese associate professor Janet Xing.

As a political science major, Ryan had not studied Chinese, but had enrolled in an introductory course as an elective during his senior year. After a year of classes, he secured a job teaching English in China, where the Modern and Classical Languages Department allowed him to travel abroad after only one year of study, Xing says.

Ryan was almost fluent in Chinese by the end of the eight-week program, she says.

"Ryan was so good," Xing says. "He was so smart. He did so well. He was one of our best students in the last few years."

At his sister Tasha's graduation dinner on June 10, 2005, Ryan broke the news to his family that he had found a job and would start working after his study abroad program finished.

"He told us at dinner," Judy says. "He said, 'I got a job teaching English and I'll be staying in China when classes are over.' We thought it was wonderful."

Ryan's friend and former roommate, Western alumnus Kris O'Hare, says it was one of "Cheeks" — Ryan's friends' nickname for him — dreams to visit rural Asia.

"He wanted to see people at their barest and get back to the basics," O'Hare says.

When O'Hare learned Ryan hadn't returned to his room on March 13, he made the same assumption as the guesthouse owner — that Ryan had decided to travel around Laos by himself for a few days. When the U.S. Embassy issued a missing person report, O'Hare realized it might be more serious, he says. But Ryan's friends are still hopeful.

"He takes risks, but they're always calculated," O'Hare says.

"He doesn't get in over his head."

The Chicoskys have traveled to Laos five times since
There are people all over the world trying to help. We think he'd be amazed by what we have to tell him. All the people who are looking for him.
- Judy Franke Chicovksy

March, the most recent trip in December 2006. But even when they're at home, they continue to search for their son and brother. They've offered a $5,000 reward in Laos for information leading to Ryan's whereabouts. They've printed fliers to distribute overseas. Judy e-mails the U.S. Embassy frequently and spends several hours corresponding with anyone trying to help her find her son.

"There are people all over the world trying to help," she says. "We think he'd be amazed by what we have to tell him. All the people who are looking for him."

Kurt Jacobs and Richard Tétu, Ryan's friends from his home on Lopez Island, created a blog to communicate news concerning Ryan's disappearance to his friends and the community. The blog, "Help Us Find Ryan Chicovksy," also allows friends to contact the family.

Western senior Brian Hames, who traveled to China with Ryan and Xing, posted a message to the Chicovskys on May 3, 2006:

"To the Chicovksy Family,

I studied with Ryan in Kunming, China this last summer. Those of us who studied with him know him as "Sun" (Sun is his Chinese name, pronounced "swin"). I was devastated to hear of his disappearance and my thoughts and prayers are with you. I have told our Chinese professors about the situation and we are doing all that we can to help in any way. I truly admire Sun's passion for travel and knowledge. These past few days, I have been reflecting on all the great times we had together in China. Sun is a great person and I hope and pray for his safe return to his family and friends.

Sun, zhu ni sheng ri kuai le,
Gao Bo-hong."

"Zhu ni sheng ri kuai le" means "Happy birthday."

May 3, 2006, was Ryan's 25th birthday.

In Laos, Xingkok residents are dismayed by the attention Ryan's disappearance is receiving, Judy says.

Above: A picture Ryan took of himself in Laos with rice fields in the background.
Bottom: Ryan's mother, Judy Franke Chicovksy, holds a photo of Ryan.
"It’s the most significant disappearance that they say they can remember," she says.

The U.S. Embassy told the Chicovskys Laos’ provincial police didn’t know how to respond to Ryan’s disappearance because it’s such an unusual crime in the province.

Besides its inexperience, the police force also lacks supplies. Most officers traveled by foot because the force owns only one truck for the entire province. The Chicovskys paid for the force’s food, gas and lodging when they traveled to Xiengkok to look for Ryan.

Even though his family and friends still haven’t heard from Ryan, they refuse to give up their search.

“You’d never count him out until you knew for sure,” O’Hare says. “He’s just one of those guys.”

Using the photographs they recovered from Ryan’s camera’s memory card, the entire family — David, Judy, Tasha and Ryan’s brother Keenan — has been able to visit some of the villages Ryan captured before his disappearance. David and Judy have interviewed local residents in the photographs, many of whom are reluctant to talk.

“They have said they don’t know anything, but it’s hard to believe,” Judy says. “Someone knows something.”

Others, such as the girls Tasha and Judy met in the Hmong village, remember Ryan fondly.

“Some of the little girls said they remember Ryan because he went to their school and gave them pencils,” Tasha says. “They were pretty excited.”

As Judy sifts through a stack of photographs she stops at one of Ryan attending a market that takes place on the full moon, leading up to the Buddhist New Year. She visited the fair, buzzing with activity, on one of her trips to Laos.

The next picture Ryan took of himself, a wide smile on his face, his head wrapped in his Western volleyball shirt.

“When we traveled to Laos we realized why he went there,” Judy says. “It’s a beautiful country and the people are wonderful. The air is clear and there’s practically no industry. Ryan wanted to experience Southeast Asia as it might have been 40-50 years ago.”

From Lopez Island to Laos, Ryan’s family and friends echo the same message. Help us find our missing son. Help us find our missing brother. Help us find our missing friend. Help us find Ryan Chicovsky.

Editor’s note: As of December 8, 2006, when this issue went to press, Ryan’s family was still in search of his whereabouts.

March 6, 2006

First impressions of Lao. The bus ride. On the way down from Mengla I’m wondering how much it’s really going to change after we cross the border. I figure not much, but in fact it’s a stark difference. From dress to environment to dwellings and vehicles it’s obviously not China. The border itself is extremely chill, you can tell they’re not stressed about letting anything into Laos. The actual border check is an old military guy in a shack who looks as if he’s reluctant to stop me as I stroll by. The road was rough; they’re building some kind of super highway from Kunming to Thailand, and there’s construction stuff everywhere. Then we come out into a valley of rice fields and I am stopped for just a moment. There are shack on stilts dotting the area as if set there by God himself. The paddies fall away into the misty hills under the clear sky. Nam Tha is beautiful – the whole load of it comes down like a bomb and it’s as if I get all of a sudden - what these travellers are doing here humming around. It’s paradise and although it’s not, it’s a simple society where people live without much care - it’s not perfect, I’m sure, it has it’s vices, but they’re genuinely friendly, uncaring and just living. There’s nothing here, but that’s the point! I actually keep expecting to walk out onto a white sandy beach but it’s not there, there’s no focus, no center, no place you want to be. I’m interested to see how these impressions change over the next few weeks. The smell of the fried rice is too much -----------

HOW YOU CAN HELP

• Contact Michael Sweeney, U.S. Embassy Consular Chief in Laos, at SweeneyMD@state.gov with information, or to encourage the U.S. Embassy to continue devoting resources to the search for Ryan.

• Visit the “Help us find Ryan Chicovsky” blog at ryanchicovsky.blogspot.com to post any information or find updates on the search.
Geocaching combines the age-old intrigue of treasure hunting with modern technology for the perfect weekend adventure. **Lincoln Smith** talks with enthusiasts about this increasingly popular international adventure and hiking trend.

Photos by **Chris Huber**. Design by **Kyra Low**.

Western senior Brad Thomas, 22, marches through a parking lot off U.S. Highway 11 near Larrabee State Park. Thomas is wearing a colorful knit stocking cap that lets his dark hair hang on each side of his face. He sports a red backpack and a clipboard with Global Positioning System coordinates to a site known as "Bloody-Mary-Poppins' Treasure Cove." On the paper along with the global address are clues to where this particular treasure can be found. It reads, "Aarrrrrr!!! Ye scurvy dogs be needin' a clue?!?!!? Look ye under where the masts be crossed. The X be markin' the spot. Aarrrrrr!!!" A pirate theme suited for modern day pirates.

"Aarrrrrr!!! Ye scurvy dogs be needin' a clue?!?!!? Look ye under where the masts be crossed. The X be markin' the spot. Aarrrrrr!!!"

- Clue for a geocache hunt

Upon finding the cache, Western student and geocacher Brad Thomas examines the contents of the plastic box before signing the cache log book, which keeps record of who has found it and when. This cache was hidden in October 2004 and has 89 recorded finds.
Thomas searches for clues in his surroundings while on the hunt for the Bloody Mary Poppins' Treasure Cove cache near Teddy Bear Cove in November.

The essentials: Geocachers bring a printout of the directions and clues to the hidden cache, as well as a GPS device to read their location coordinates as they get closer to their find.

due to a slight margin of error within the GPS device, as well as crafty hiders who place the cache near the coordinate location instead of at the coordinate location. The booty is often mere plastic toys, trinkets or an occasional coin. But for most, the reward is more than what lies in the cache. The ability to escape to the outdoors for the rush of a scavenger hunt with state-of-the-art technology fuels this community of modern-day treasure hunters.

At www.geocaching.com, users can create free accounts, store and comment on the various caches they have found, upload photos from different hunts and search for new adventures in their area, Thomas says. “It’s that whole Internet craze right now,” he says. “It’s like a Facebook for parents.”

Adventures suit the needs of nearly everyone. Difficulty and terrain ratings offer various types of adventures that appeal to young and old alike. Thomas says different types of hunts accommodate different types of hunters, such as traditional caches,
are the product of one specific GPS coordinate. A multi-cache is more like a scavenger hunt, with various checkpoints and multiple coordinates to follow in order to locate the booty.

Thomas says webcam caches include locations with fixed cameras that broadcast on the Internet for purposes other than geocaching. For example, Western's campus has a webcam in Red Square that broadcasts to Western's website on the Internet. Because of the camera, Red Square has become a cache destination. The object for the cachers is to be in the image projected on the Internet and have a friend at home save the image as proof of the hunt. Mystery caches generally contain puzzles that must be solved in order to get treasure coordinates.

Western junior Stead Halstead, 21, started geocaching six years ago with his family in Maple Valley. He says geocaching brings people together to enjoy the outdoors and provides a way to get people off the beaten path.

"It's pretty much just treasure hunting," Halstead says. "Except the map is digital and you've got satellites helping you out."

He says the rules and ethics behind caching are important to maintain and follow. The main rule of thumb is to exchange a treasure for a treasure. It's the honor system to the fullest extent, and as long as cachers abide by the rules, no one goes home empty-handed.

"We went to one that was a DVD swap," he says. "I think I got 'Master & Commander' out of it."

Ingraham began geocaching in 2004 when he and his father went out on his birthday.

Ingraham, with 282 caches under his belt, tries to go every weekend with his girlfriend Kendal Hancock, 22. Usually, he and Hancock try to tackle 10 different caches in a weekend, but depending on the weather and the difficulty, that sometimes doesn't happen.

"We've got Bellingham pretty much cached-out," he says.

Ingraham says that for the most part, geocaching is a cheap hobby. After purchasing a GPS unit, which can cost around $100 for a basic model, virtually no other costs are involved. Geocaching can also take a person to various locations to specifically go caching, such as the Olympic Peninsula, where Ingraham and Hancock spent time this summer. Documented caches exist locally as well as internationally and can be located at www.geocaching.com.

Growing up fantasizing about buried treasure might have something to do with Ingraham's involvement in the activity. He says geocaching makes him feel like an adventurer, but unlike traditional pirates, he is able to live it the high-tech way even though the treasure is of little to no value.

Nearly 40 minutes after the commencement of the hunt, and 40 feet from the exact coordinates of where the cache was supposed to be, after multiple second-guesses, backtracks and a few glances of defeat, Thomas locates the cache hiding under an enormous fallen tree. The much desired treasure is in a black Tupperware container smaller than a shoebox.

"This is the best part of geocaching," Thomas says as he sets the container on the fallen tree.

The contents of the container look like a random assortment of toys in a 6-year-old's play chest: a pink plastic bracelet fit for a princess with beads to match, a red toy car and a few scattered ink pens.

"It really changes your outlook on dumb trinkets," Thomas says as he exchanges a paper Chinese lantern for a key chain that reads, "I'm one of America's most wanted." "You definitely keep more crap so that you can put it in a geocache."

Inside each cache is a log book for finders and keepers to log their journey, an important part of the geocaching practice. The record book shows when the specific cache began and who has embarked on the journey to find it. Thomas proudly signs his name to the log and comments on the adventure. He then replaces the box in the exact spot where he found it.

No longer does finding a buried treasure take a lifetime to find. An afternoon facilitated by modern technology will do the trick. So, ye aspiring pirates be warned, adventure is merely a pace away. But remember, follow the code and exchange a treasure for a treasure, for a happy pirate is a pirate with some booty.
Back to Basics

Adult Illiteracy in Whatcom County

One in six Whatcom County residents is illiterate — unable to use reading, writing or computational skills in daily life. The Whatcom Literacy Council helps change that. Shawn Query talks with executive director Rachel Myers about the Council's goals and history. Photos by Jared Yoakum. Design by Kyra Low.

A middle-aged man waits in line at the grocery store, rumbling around in his wallet to find his debit card to pay for potato chips and beer for this weekend's game. He panics when he realizes he's forgotten it at home and when the checker suggests writing a check, he turns red and quietly puts the items back. He doesn't know how to write.

As she sits in her comfortable recliner, a grandmother of five watches with pride as the children play on the living room floor. Just then, the youngest jumps up on her lap with book in hand. "Read me a story, Grandma," he says. She opens the book and looks at the colorful pictures. She can't read the words, but conjures a story about the little puppy on the page.

For the one out of six United States residents who are functionally illiterate, these situations are an everyday reality.

Those who are unable to use reading, writing or computational skills in everyday life situations are functionally illiterate, says Rachel Myers, executive director of the Whatcom Literacy Council.

"Someone who can't read the paper, who can't read a job application, who can't read a medicine bottle, that kind of thing," Myers says.

Myers and her partners at Bellingham Technical College and Whatcom Community College say illiterate adults are a forgotten population in the community, but the Literacy Council provides programs to help individuals take charge of their education and personal lives.

The Whatcom Literacy Council started in 1978 as a place to for students who didn't have sufficient skills to enter community college, Myers says. Today, the council is a 317-square-foot office where Myers and four other staff members pair tutors with the more than 500 students they serve each year. Myers says about 70 percent of these students speak English as a second language, and the other 30 percent are native English speakers the council refers to as "basic literacy" students. Myers says recently the council has seen a jump in the basic literacy student enrollment.

"We're starting to get a lot more students, which is good because people are asking for help, but it's been a change from recent years," Myers says. "Sometimes these things go word-of-mouth. Maybe we helped a couple of people who have kind of spread the word."

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 12.5 percent, or approximately 23,000 Whatcom County residents over the age of 25 did not graduate from high school. Roz Spitzer, coordinator for basic academic skills at Bellingham Technical College, says a high school diploma is the bare minimum needed to survive financially.

"The tipping point for getting a living wage job in Washington state is one year of college and a vocational certificate," Spitzer says. "So until you get to that stage or the equivalency of that, you're looking at minimum wages as a worker."

Jason Woolsey, 17, of Bellingham, works from a book during class.
The Learning Center program at Bellingham Technical College works with students of all ages, Spitzer says. The youngest is 16 years old and the oldest is around 70.

At about 10:30 on a Wednesday morning, students at the Learning Center sit at round blue tables listening to a classmate read a paragraph from her essay. Teacher Marcia Leister sits in front of the class with her glasses on the end of her nose, listening intently as the reading draws to a close.

"What a perfect paragraph," she says, pointing out to the students the flow and structure of their classmate’s prose.

The students are sitting in a small, intimate classroom in a relaxed setting. At other tables around the building, tutors work one-on-one with students sounding out words and reading materials aloud.

B.J. Newmon, 48, is in the center practicing for his GED test. Newmon worked as a certified nursing assistant for almost four years until one day he injured his back moving a patient from a chair to a bed. Since he can no longer perform the physical labor demanded of a nursing assistant, he is working toward becoming a phlebotomist, a person who draws blood. He says his ultimate goal is to become a radiologist. Frequently, middle-aged physical laborers will injure themselves on the job and are no longer able to work, Spitzer says.

"If they never finished high school, they are all of the sudden faced with the fact that any job they can do requires more education, so they have to go back to school," Spitzer says.

Newmon, a father of twin 6-year-old girls, says these days it’s hard to find a job if you don’t have a high school diploma. Newmon says the Learning Center has helped improve his math and writing skills. Newmon also works toward his career goal with the Bellingham Technical College “Bridge to Health Occupations.”

Jason Woolsey, 17, wears a navy blue work jacket with his name embroidered on the front as he sits near the white board at the Learning Center. He works about 12 hours per week at an auto shop called 76 Car Care Center, but he spends most weekday mornings in the center studying for his GED test. Woolsey, who was expelled from high school, says he eventually wants to start his own auto shop, and the Learning Center is a comfortable and familiar place to begin working toward that goal.

"It's really hands on and group-oriented," Woolsey says. "They help you through problems you're stuck on and it's just a really friendly environment. You don't feel awkward."

Spitzer and the Learning Center staff emphasize breaking down "barriers to learning." A barrier is anything that prevents the student from learning, such as not having a car to get to class or a babysitter to watch the kids during class time. Both Spitzer and Myers say a main barrier to a proper education is a lack of income. Spitzer says most of the students in the Learning Center are low income workers, and this factor can sometimes put a damper on their studies.

"Even getting to class and taking care of their housing needs is

Facts about illiteracy

- 12.5 percent, or approximately 23,000, Whatcom County residents over age 25 did not graduate high school.
- 1 out of 6 adults in Whatcom County is functionally illiterate.
- 3 of every 4 food stamp recipients are functionally illiterate.
- 7 in 19 adults in prison are functionally illiterate.
- Three-fourths of Americans with chronic physical or mental health problems scored in the two lowest skill levels in a national literacy survey.
- American businesses lose an estimated $60 billion in productivity each year due to employees’ lack of basic literacy skills.

Source: 2005 Annual Report, Whatcom Literacy Council
an issue, so that can often be a cause for interruption in their learning process,” Spitzer says.

Bellingham Technical College helps students with these barriers by providing students with bus passes and counseling, Spitzer says.

According to the Whatcom Literacy Council’s 2005 report, three out of four food stamp recipients are functionally illiterate. Myers says the connection between poverty and lack of education is strong.

“It’s very hard to get out of poverty if you can’t read and write well,” Myers says. “It seems like it’s getting harder and harder because our society has such a high-skilled level of workplace across the country.”

Myers says tutors at the Literacy Council cater lessons to the individual needs of the student.

“Some students are trying to get their GED,” Myers says. “Other students might come in and they’re trying to pass a forklift exam, so that’s a little bit different path. Whatever it is, we work specifically on that piece.”

About 9 percent of the students at the Literacy Council last year were 60 years and older. Myers says with older students, the reasons for seeking help at the center are much more personal.

“Several of them come because they want to read to their grandchildren,” Myers says. “We had one woman who came in and said, ‘My husband has passed on, and I’ve worked hard in the house my whole life and I’m just ready. I want to learn how to read before I die.”

“It’s really hands on and group-oriented. They help you through problems you’re stuck on and it’s just a really friendly environment. You don’t feel awkward.”

- Jason Woolsey

One of Myers’ favorite success stories involves a man who worked with a tutor and eventually started his own contracting business.

Myers went to check the mail one day at work and found a letter. She says the handwriting on the envelope looked like a student’s, a little unsure and unpracticed. When she opened the envelope she found a check for $2,000. No note accompanied it, but in the “notes” section of the check, the writer had scrawled the words “thank you.”

“I ran back upstairs and looked this person up in our database, and it was one of our former students who had been with his tutor for something like four years,” Myers says. “He had gone from a very low level to getting his GED and starting his own business and becoming very successful, so much so that he was able to donate $2,000 to the Literacy Council.”

Myers and Spitzer say society as a whole tends to be unaware that many English-speaking adult residents are functionally illiterate.

“[Functionally-illiterate adults] don’t advertise that their skills are deficient,” Spitzer says. “They’re trying to cover it up, so they’re highly invisible in the community, so that is a problem because a lot of people go along thinking this doesn’t exist because they don’t realize how many people are struggling with these issues.”

Myers says regardless of the reasons a functionally illiterate person did not get an education earlier in life, the community needs to embrace those who are looking for help.

“There are a thousand different reasons why they didn’t learn in high school,” Myers says. “The good thing is they want to learn now, and it’s so important to be there and help people when they’ve made that decision. Helping someone improve their literacy skills is one of the most important hands up you can give somebody.”

While getting a GED and owning a business happened to be the goal for one student, something as simple as writing a check was the ultimate goal of another, Myers says. He’d had many good jobs and was the bread winner for his family, but struggled with reading and writing and had never written a check in his life at age 41. He and his tutor worked toward this goal, and when he was finally ready he went to one of his favorite stores with a brand new checking account and a book full of checks.

“He said the moment he signed that check was the most empowered he has ever felt in his adult life,” Myers says. “Having control of your finances is such a huge part of being an adult, and he’d just never had that feeling until that moment.”

Myers says it is important to remember that functionally illiterate adults don’t look any different from any other person in Whatcom County. That middle-aged man at the store and the grandmother in her recliner are among 17 percent of Whatcom County residents without basic skills, but programs like those at Bellingham Technical College and the Whatcom Literacy Council continue to help students toward their literacy goals.
Boisterous college students and deafening rock music fill the Rogue Hero Public House bar at 11:15 p.m. on a Friday. Patrons shout at each other, competing to be heard above the local band screaming into microphones. The tables at the Rogue are sticky tonight, despite the bartenders’ repeated attempts to wipe off the remnants of spilled alcohol. Drinkers cluster around the bar, vying for the bartenders’ attention and a chance to order that next tequila shot or 16-ounce can of Rainier.

Doug Szolek stands behind the Rogue’s heavy, swinging, wooden door, checking the identification of everyone who enters. A slight nod from Szolek grants entrance to the bar. At 11:51 p.m., he pulls out the cigarette that rests behind his ear and joins the crowd of smokers that nearly spills onto North State Street. Neon signs advertising Corona and Coors buzz in the front windows, illuminating the street.

A thick, silver S hangs from each of Szolek’s ears. Tattoos coat his arms and the top of his shaved head. Szolek says he constantly answers questions about the tattoo that stretches from his forehead to the tips of each of his ears and to the back of his head. This tattoo is based on the golden ratio, a geometric concept that intrigues Szolek.

The ink artwork that covers Szolek’s right arm includes the vajra, a Hindu symbol Buddhists later adopted that represents spiritual power. The linking lines and depictions of eyes that envelop his left arm signify Szolek’s view of the spirit world and the interconnectedness of all life.

“A lot of people look at it as weird,” he says. “I just look at it as ideas that have helped shape me into who I am and who I’m becoming, and so why not have them remembered forever on my body? That, and the fact that ink is addictive.”

On a quieter Monday evening at the Rogue, Szolek sits on a tall stool next to a maroon wall near the pool table. He drinks from a small glass filled with warm Wild Turkey Bourbon, which he says is perfect for warming up on a cold day. Szolek’s voice is calm and soothing, which complements his laid-back personality. He recalls the night he discovered the Rogue, which was a few months after he moved to Bellingham three and a half years ago.

“Every bar I went to in town had interesting flavors, but the first time I stepped in here. Slipknot was on the jukebox and it was blasting really loud, and everybody was having a ball shooting pool,” he recalls.

“It was just another side of Bellingham that I had no idea existed.”

Szolek, now 26, quickly became a regular and got to know many of the Rogue’s employees. On St. Patrick’s Day in 2003, a fight broke out that resulted in two employees with broken noses. The bar’s owner decided to hire a bouncer, and the next time Szolek came in bartender John McConnell offered him the job. He accepted right away, and began working two weeks before Cinco de Mayo.
"I chart my year by drinking holidays," Szolek says with a smile. Szolek moved to Bellingham from Pennsylvania to follow his coach, Scott Sonnon, with whom he has practiced strength training and a Russian form of martial arts for eight years. He says working as a bouncer has tested his training — not a test of whether he can hold his own in a bar fight, he is quick to add, but a test of whether he can stay calm when people are aggressive with him.

Dan Chomycia met Szolek approximately 10 years ago, when Chomycia traveled to Pennsylvania from Texas for a martial-arts seminar Sonnon conducted. He moved to Bellingham to continue training with Sonnon at the same time as Szolek. He and Szolek were roommates when they first arrived in Bellingham, and Chomycia began working as a bouncer at the Rogue shortly after Szolek got the job.

Chomycia says neither he nor Szolek knew exactly what to do when they started working as bouncers. They discussed ways to communicate with patrons without having to physically remove them from the bar. He says he resolves the majority of the conflicts he encounters when working by talking, but his and Szolek's martial-arts training provides important background for the job.

"If you don't know how to deal with someone physically, everything you say is just a game if you can't back it up," Chomycia says. "They won't respect you. And once you've got that handled, people can feel the weight in your words. Even if you're not in a conflict with someone, they know you're serious."

During Szolek's second week as a bouncer at the Rogue, a patron who was being disrespectful to others in the bar spit in Szolek's face when Szolek asked him to leave. Szolek says he ignored his initial impulse to react. He realized the patron was out the door and not affecting the patrons in the bar anymore, so he got a bleach rag, cleaned the spit off and returned to his post at the door.

"The muscles he uses most are his mouth and his brain. He's probably one of the strongest people I know physically — he's studied martial arts for 10 years. I've wrestled him and he's a tough dude, but most of what he does is just talking to people." - Soheil Ward

Soheil Ward, 32, has worked with Szolek as a bouncer at the Rogue for more than a year. He says he did some martial-arts training with Szolek, but what he learned most from him is patience. Szolek's tolerance and ability to stay calm in confrontations distinguishes him from the stereotype of meathead bouncers, Ward says.

"The muscles he uses most are his mouth and his brain," Ward says. "He's probably one of the strongest people I know physically — he's studied martial arts for 10 years. I've wrestled him and he's a tough dude, but most of what he does is just talking to people."

Although it is not in his job description, when the bar closes Szolek will help patrons get cab rides home. He says he feels responsible for the Rogue's regulars and patrons who seem like decent individuals who just had a bad night and drank too much.

One of the few similarities between a Monday evening and a Friday night at the Rogue is Szolek's interaction with the patrons and his fellow employees. His comfort in the setting is apparent. Ward stops by the table and jokes with him. He has a discussion with one of the bartenders. A familiar patron shakes his hand before entering the bar.

Szolek has developed a few long-standing friendships as a result of working at the Rogue. As he sits in the bar on one of his nights off, Szolek smiles and says he was a regular before he got hired and remains a regular to this day.

— Molly Jensen
Design by Kyra Low

"A lot of people look at it as weird. I just look at it as ideas that have helped shape me into who I am and who I'm becoming, and so why not have them remembered forever on my body? That, and the fact that ink is addicting." - Doug Szolek

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Szolek has developed a few long-standing friendships as a result of working at the Rogue. As he sits in the bar on one of his nights off, Szolek smiles and says he was a regular before he got hired and remains a regular to this day.

— Molly Jensen
Design by Kyra Low

"A lot of people look at it as weird. I just look at it as ideas that have helped shape me into who I am and who I'm becoming, and so why not have them remembered forever on my body? That, and the fact that ink is addicting." - Doug Szolek

Soheil Ward, 32, has worked with Szolek as a bouncer at the Rogue for more than a year. He says he did some martial-arts training with Szolek, but what he learned most from him is patience. Szolek's tolerance and ability to stay calm in confrontations distinguishes him from the stereotype of meathead bouncers, Ward says.

"The muscles he uses most are his mouth and his brain," Ward says. "He's probably one of the strongest people I know physically — he's studied martial arts for 10 years. I've wrestled him and he's a tough dude, but most of what he does is just talking to people."

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Sawatch, the name of Sebastian Degen’s drum-making business, is written on the side of every drum he makes. PHOTO BY TAYLOR WILLIAMS

A mid a collection of unfinished wood blocks, soaking goat hide and scattered tools, Sebastian Degen works to perfect his craft. The scent of sawdust lingers in the air as he uses the method of trial-and-error to see if this time he can make his envisioned dream a reality. Trace. Cut. Scrap. Trace. Cut. Scrap. Finally, the artist transforms his vision into a harmonious work of art: a smooth, sturdy conga drum. It’s an age-old method that makes his work stand out in modern times.

Degen, a laid-back man whose eyes and body language seem to give away a stress-free, “don’t worry, be happy” attitude, has been selling his drums in the Bellingham area for 15 years. The tuning system he uses for his drums is one of a kind and allows him to draw customers from all over the country.

The first drum Degen made was a conga drum that took him three months to craft. For this first drum and several after, he used wood and rawhide and bought the hardware. The hardware is used around the top of the drum to tighten and create tension on the drumhead. It was a tuning technique that cost Degen $110 to $120 per drum.

“So I tried to get away from it,” Degen says. “The hardware was too expensive and also too close to what was already out there on the market.”

Through his own experimentation, Degen devised a non-hardware tuning technique that involved tuning blocks.

Degen strings a cord all the way around his drum, from the drumhead to the wooden dowels near the bottom of the drum. On this cord, he strings wooden blocks. When these blocks are pushed toward the bottom of the drum, they force the string around the corner of each block, creating more tension. This tuning system lends the drum a softer, drawn-out sound.
"We were like gypsies. Traveling all summer long on the road, seeing the country with our camper." — Sebastian Degen

The blocks have the same effect on the drum as hardware, but it gives the instrument a less-modernized look.

"It gave my drums more of an African appeal," Degen says. "It was something tribes could have done 1,000 years ago."

This foreign appeal catches the eyes of customers who are in the market for something other than a standard drum.

Degen’s wife, Beate Degen, helps sell the drums at craft shows. She says her husband’s tuning system is what reels in the customers.

“I like selling the drums,” Beate says, “because once I show them the tuning system, even after 20 years, they’re still oohing and ahhing.”

Just like with his craft. Degen has applied the process of trial-and-error to his entire life. When he finished school at Freiburg Technical College in Germany, Degen did not want his life to be planned out by the society he grew up in.

“Germany is a very structured country,” Degen says, with a thick German accent that still lingers after 25 years away from his homeland.

“When I finished with school, I was expected to continue on and make a career. I didn’t want to be boxed in like that. I was like, ‘this can’t be all there is.’"

In 1981, shortly after finishing school, Degen bought a one-way ticket to New York and eventually ended up in Salida, Colo. There, he worked for a bronze sculptor who ran a foundry.

“We made all our own machinery,” Degen says. “Working with our hands, melting metal, pounding the shit with sledgehammers, it was a trial-and-error thing.”

It was here Degen filled his spare time by making his first drum, something he’d been interested in since 1979 when his friends in Germany brought drums back from the African country of Ghana.

In 1987, Degen combined his products with his wife’s silver and stone jewelry to form Degen Studios, currently located at their Bellingham home. After creating their studio, the couple traveled around the country every summer to sell their items.

“We were like gypsies,” Sebastian Degen says. “Traveling all summer long on the road, seeing the country with our camper.”

The Degens moved to Washington in 1991. Sebastian now makes conga drums, djembe drums and snare drums to sell to customers. He attends craft shows, hands out pamphlets, gives demonstrations and consigns his drums at Harris Music in downtown Bellingham.

Ron Bello, the owner of Harris Music, says he’s been selling Degen’s drums since Degen moved to the area.

“The drums are quality,” Bello says. “They are beautiful, sound great and they’re local. If they are being made locally and I have an opportunity to sell them, I like to do that.”

Degen says the craft shows give him a broader customer base than he would have if he only sold in music stores. The shows and local stores allow him to have more contact with the customers.

“The corporate stuff is so impersonal,” Degen says. “You walk into a common store to buy an instrument and it’s just an item. It’s got a barcode on it and there it is. There’s a nice market for hand-made quality things.”

Trace. Cut. Scrap. It’s a method that has paid off, not only with Degen’s drum making, but in his life as well. Here is a man who will try something new, and if he doesn’t like it, he’ll move on. Just like a musician who sits down to jam on one of his drums. Degen improvises with his craft and his life and doesn’t miss a beat.

—Emily Krahn

Design by Candace Cusano

Beate Degen plays a drum she made 10 years ago. PHOTO BY TAYLOR WILLIAMS
Klipsun is a Lummi word meaning “beautiful sunset.”