

Youngstown's regional culture magazine for life, liberty and the pursuit of reality

[the yo* magazine]

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Dear Readers:

Every story has a surface. On this surface lay the main ideas, the common knowledge. But every story has something more built in ... something below the surface that explains why the rest exists.

Our instructors have been trying to instill the importance of this for as long as we've been journalism students. We are taught to favor the "why" over the "how" and the "what," to get to the humanity of our stories ... to see what is beneath and behind.

That's what we've tried to do in this issue. The subjects of these stories are nothing new, nothing we haven't all heard about before. But all too often, reporting the news can get in the way of reporting human truth ... the stories behind the events.

It is important to remember that fact, that stories are not just a regurgitating of chronology. We have an obligation as people to try to understand one another better. When a person tells his or her story, it transforms into something else. It can be a window, a door, a mirror ... looked into or gone through to take us somewhere new.

Consider an addict finally letting out the details of her indiscretions, roller skaters reliving the glory of their youth at the disco, mothers of autistic children sharing their simultaneous love and frustration, or even twins revealing how they really see each other. Everyone's story is compelling in its own way, and we all want to tell ours. We all need to get it out ... we all need to be listened to.

We will come away from this issue remembering to dig deeper, to listen more carefully, to look into and beyond the events that move our lives ... to get "Behind Closed Doors."



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TRAPPED

Lily white UNREMITTING

By
Doug Livingston

Looking back at the photographs of her youth, Sara Martin recalls always having a broom in her hand. Her little fingers fervently strummed the bristles, anticipating the coarse twang of a bronze guitar string. She got her first acoustic, a mere toy she remembers, when she was 7 years old. "It's just something I've always been good at. The first time I picked up a guitar, I figured out how to play a few chords, and I was just infatuated with it," she said.

She's owned a dozen guitars in her life yet none remain. Martin wrote bad checks to purchase them from independent music shops. She sold them to anyone she could, pawn shops if she had to. She needed the money to buy wax paper dime bags filled with heroin.

"The more I got high, the less involved in music I became," she said. Heroin use started around 15 years old. It came as natural as playing guitar; it's something she will always be good at. Martin, 24, has been addicted to heroin since 2004. The drug is part of her now.

"Me being high is normalcy," she said. "I had to do it just to get through my day. It wasn't really about being sick either. To talk to people, I had to do heroin. To go to work, I had to do heroin. To have sex, to eat, to take a shower, to brush my teeth, to go to bed, I had to do it. That was the only way that I knew that was normal."

Normal ... A brunette, a brown-eyed girl, a high school cheerleader, a daughter, a sister, a heroin addict ... normal.





“They have the fear of God to go through that withdrawal.”

-Amy Zellers ✨

Cotton ball clouds patch an otherwise lucid blue sky. A man leans from the narrow slit of a capsule-shaped airplane. Ashen smoke pours from the plane's engines, scratching the sky and leaving trail marks that linger on forever. The man spreads his arms out like a kite frame. A moment of clarity transpires.

He jumps.

Wind rushing against his face, he spirals downward, grinning in ecstasy, cheeks flapping hysterically. A collage of emotions captivates him. Fear, exhilaration, solace. As he breaks the lower cloud cover, the ground swells up toward him and the fleeting moment of weightless euphoria dissipates. A gripping realization of eminent demise directs his heavy hand toward the ripcord. A comforting tug ripples through his

body as the chute unfurls. In this moment he gawks at the earth and its trite complications. Liberated, he comes down with the capricious grace of a dandelion seed carried along on a wisp of unpredictability.

Most people revel in the act of skydiving, in that momentary loss of control. For many, a single jump is enough. For others, a death-flaunting plummet from an airplane with only the security of a nylon chute is too frightening to endure. For an addict, there is always another jump, demanding the airplane's elevation increase. Higher each time, waiting longer and longer to release the parachute, coming ever closer to not pulling the cord at all.

Every year, 282,000 Americans battle heroin addiction, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

The ubiquitous nature of heroin use makes determining a specific demographic impossible. So often the addict is assumed to come from a poor family or a bad neighborhood. The veracity of the disease is startling.

“It's anywhere from the ages of 20 years old to 74,” Amy Zellers concludes from the cases she deals with every day. “All different socioeconomic backgrounds, all different histories.”

Zellers has known addiction for 10 years as a registered nurse. In the emergency room, she has witnessed sickness and death.

As a chemical dependency counselor and director of medical services for Meridian Services, a substance abuse and addiction treatment facility in Youngstown, she has witnessed overdoses and withdrawals — runny noses, watery eyes, trembles, agonizing muscle aches, joint pains, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea.

“They have the fear of God to go through that withdrawal,” she said.

The usual smell of stale coffee and listlessness permeates Zellers' waiting room, as an array of addicts impatiently sit in padded chairs along three walls, nervously bouncing a knee or incessantly fidgeting with a cell phone. A steel door swings open and a middle-aged woman walks in, returning

from behind the closed doors of controlled rooms. She is here for a scheduled treatment.

Her methadone-laced smile smoothes back the wrinkles of her weary face; her head oscillates in elation. She staggers up to a little girl across the room and happily professes her clean drug test.

Addicts seeking treatment are required to pass a drug screening and are denied their methadone regiment if benzodiazepines like Xanax, which multiply the effects of opiates, turn up positive in their test results.

In combination with heroin, the use of benzodiazepines clearly denotes drug misuse and extended abuse. The little girl looks up shamefully. Under different circumstances, it would be the youth bragging to her mother about a math test that she had passed. The older woman seems to realize this incongruous reversal and nods, motioning towards the door. “Let's go to school,” she says on the way out. The little girl follows, eyes fixed somewhere between the floor and disillusionment.

The addicts waiting at Zellers' clinic are young and old, mostly poor. Absent from the clinic is the affluent addict. He is being ushered surreptitiously through the rear entrance of a private, undisclosed doctor's office.

Addicts do share some characteristics, Zellers said. They're intelligent and resourceful, college students and construction workers ... and they're 85 to 90 percent Hepatitis C positive. When the needle leaves the vein and the euphoric state wears off, they have the rest of their lives to deal with — at least until they get high again.

Martin wishes she could hold that sleek black Ibanez acoustic she traded for heroin.

She was arrested and convicted for writing fraudulent checks in 2008. As part of her sentence, a judge ordered her to undergo counseling. While attending therapy, she could not open up to her counselor. She wasn't ready.

"There was no real healing going on," she said.

After leaving a particularly uneventful morning counseling session in January 2009, Martin felt worse than ever.

"Living the way I was was worse than dying," she concluded.

Later that morning, she waited for her grandmother to leave the house. Then, Martin sat down and wrote a suicide note, telling her grandmother that she was sorry, telling her family that she loved them. She had purchased 12 bags of heroin with a street value of \$120 and a handful of Xanax.

"I bought enough to where I was positive I wouldn't wake up from it," she said.

Her grandmother made an unexpected return home for a forgotten cell phone. Martin was found face down on the bedroom floor and declared dead when the paramedics arrived.

After she was revived, admitted to a psychiatric ward and later released, she continued to use for another eight months, spiraling downward into emptiness.

When the syringe plunger seized, chapstick or earwax eased the mechanism forward.

When the spoon she used to cook heroin singed to charcoal, she filled the crooked, worn needle — the manufacturer's print smudged from overuse — and tattooed a septic spider web in the crescent of her elbow. When Martin's sister pushed her away, not wanting to be around when the drug would eventually take her life, Martin pushed down the safety cap to open a bottle of prescription meds. When her grandmother, the strongest woman Martin knew, wept over her granddaughter's affliction, she prayed through her tear-soaked lips to a God she never believed in. When her addiction tore apart the fabric of her family, Martin pushed open the door to a trap house.

• • •

A syringe or needle is also known as a rig. It consists of two pieces, the plunger and the container, or barrel, which holds the liquid. The cap covers the plunger top and is used as a bowl to mix the heroin and water together. Every user has his or her signature amount of water used in the mix: 15, 20, 25, 30 cc's. Water is pulled into the needle, pushed into the cap and mixed with the dope. A piece of cotton swab or extracted cigarette butt is used to filter the mixture as it is pulled back into the needle.

When a user "mainlines," the needle is inserted into an artery or vein. Many addicts find this to be the only suitable way to inject the drug. Some tie off with a belt, elastic band, cell phone charger



cord or shoelace. An admirable characteristic of almost any addict is resourcefulness. People with less defined veins or extended use have a harder time finding a vein. Some try as many as 20 times before success, but the needle always finds the vein.

• • •

On the morning of Aug. 21, after a summer of weeklong stints in detox, followed by repeated drug use, followed by a week in jail, only to get high again, Martin reached her breaking point. For years she had known her addiction and lived with her addiction, slowly discarding the things that make us human: love, self-respect, compassion. Several times she had unsuccessfully tried to quit. She

would quit today, but first she had to get high.

"I kind of kicked around the idea of just going in and telling my probation officer that I needed help," Martin recalls. "I was just like, 'F--- it. This is the day.'"

She would need the support of a fellow addict to muster up the courage. Martin drove to her friend's house in a quaint, rural town.

"We were always very poisonous friends to each other," she said.

With little argument, they agreed to take a trip to the ghetto where a trap house waited for them.

• • •

On one of many Youngstown streets, a man loiters, his facial features concealed under a dark

hood or masked by the scarce, faltering light of a lamppost. He's a foot soldier, a dealer, a mobile pharmacy. He's also a marker, like the sight of a wayward seagull to a weary sailor; a trap house is within crawling distance.

You follow the man's skittish walk, his eyes chasing shadows over a hunched shoulder, every noise alarming his senses. Up a gravel driveway, you notice a single-story house rising out of obscurity.

You're caught off guard as the porch light is tripped by a motion detector.

He raps on the door then takes a step back in an awkward stagger, tilting his head upward. You follow his stare toward a surveillance camera tucked inconspicuously under an overhang jutting out over the stoop. Suddenly realizing you're being watched, you avert your gaze, noticing the window shades rustling back into place.

"Who is it?" a booming voice demands.

Eternity follows the response. The door, cracked at first, slowly swings open, hinges creaking. You briefly make eye contact with a disconcerting figure, then lower your head and force your leg over the threshold.

In the foyer, a hallway angles into darkness. Each step is a leap as you find yourself propelled by an urge to turn and run. The living room is furnished with a frayed antique couch, a dysfunctional recliner and a slender coffee table, littered with syringe caps and pieces of cotton taken from cigarette butts that have been balled up and discolored from the dope. A menacing tan and white dog looms in a cage. You click your tongue against two front teeth, getting the pit bull's attention, and are immediately reprimanded by your host. The

animal isn't here for your pleasure.

You notice a row of empty liquor bottles over the fireplace: Crown Royal, E&J, Grey Goose. Out of a corner, cords snake from a massive plasma TV and disappear into a gaming console.

In another corner, an odd collection of merchandise is heaped together: store-tagged clothing, unopened cartons of Newport cigarettes, Black & Milds, DVD players, laptop computers, boxes of Nike shoes and Timberland boots, cell phones, food stamp cards, gift cards (traded 50 cents on the dollar), video cameras, anything that can be stolen, boosted or sold. If you're lucky, you may find an antique McDonald's coffee spoon. The plastic utensil is ideal for measuring out your baggies. They're a rarity, but you can score 30 to 50 bucks for one, though most people rarely leave a place like this with money in their pockets.

Posters adorn the wall, an unusual ensemble featuring Tupac Shakur, Tony "Scarface" Montana and President Barack Obama.

The coffee table is lined with strips of scotch tape and cluttered with lottery tickets, cut neatly into squares, folded into origami pouches and filled with a spoon full of heroin.

In another room, a light flickers, fades. A single semen- and blood-stained mattress is arranged in the middle of the floor, like a deranged still-life painting. The springs are shot from the numerous favors traded for smack.

The soles of your shoes hold fast to the linoleum as you make your way through the kitchen. Two pans sit atop a grease-caked stove. A couple of communal clear plastic cups are stacked on the counter.

The bathroom is filthy. There is no

toilet paper on the roll, if there is any at all.

You get what you came for and make your way toward the front door. In your hastiness, you reach for the doorknob. Your sweaty palm rolls over the brass fixture; it's locked. You are told to wait there, not permitted to leave on your own accord. A man walks toward you, releases the dead bolt and opens the door. As you step out into the cool night air, your muscles relax and your nerves unwind. Stepping off the concrete porch, you hear the door lock behind you.

"We got our dope, and I was the type of junkie, I guess, that I couldn't wait to get home to get high," Martin recalled. "As soon as I got in the car, it was spoons out, rigs out, get high."

With the synthetic courage to face her demons, Martin left herself in the custody of a probation officer, where she professed her urge to stop using. She later stood in front of a judge, not being able to recall her last shower. This was different than the last 10 times she had stood there, promising to get better, being sentenced time and time again, swearing to herself, lying to herself.

"You know how they talk about hitting your bottom ... Anytime I'd been to rehab or jail before that, I knew I hadn't hit my bottom yet. I knew I wasn't ready to stop getting high, but this time I just felt like I was lower than dirt. I just literally felt like I would rather die than go on living the way I was living," she said.

There was no going back to rehab, no going back to detox. No going back.

And so recovery ensues.

"I think that anyone that wanted it that bad," Martin said, remembering her desperation,

"deserved it."

The people I have spoken to are drug addicts and dealers. Many wish to remain anonymous as much as I wish to keep it that way. Sara had the courage to tell her story. But her story, like that of every other addict, is one of terminal addiction.

When I spoke with her last, she was proud to be of the 1 percent of addicts who cannot only admit they have a problem but also seek help. The fact that she was part of a smaller percentage of addicts that remain clean after six months scared her to death.

Sara was eight months clean then. In her Narcotics Anonymous meetings, they told her to avoid relationships, get a sponsor and try not to be overwhelmed; she was living with her girlfriend and quit her job at a nearby animal shelter because of a "stressful" relationship with her employer.

I spoke with an acquaintance of Sara's not too long ago. She said she saw Sara at Home Depot. She was selling used tools. Where she got them from didn't bother me half as much as where the money might go.

The trap house scene in this story is a compilation of the author's investigative reporting and accounts from Sara Martin and other addicts. Doug Livingston is the author of "Broken Lives," a seven-part Vindicator series on addiction.

A BEASTLY SCENE

Local veterinarians and authorities tackle the grim realities of animal hoarding

MCT Campus Photo

By Christine Darin

A chorus of 162 scared, barking dogs greeted Dr. Rufus Sparks and about 25 other volunteers on a cold winter morning this February. The group walked through rows of makeshift dog cages, each containing three or more dogs.

Sparks, a veterinarian at Howland's Town & Country Veterinary Hospital, didn't want to participate in the removal of more than 200 animals from the Humane Sanctuary Inc., owned by Kathy Witzman of Kinsman, when Dr. Harold Firster from the Trumbull County Sherriff's Office called. But during a meeting prior to the removal, Sparks saw pictures of the facility and quickly forgot his reasons for not wanting to help.

Sparks said puppies were frozen onto the ground, some half-eaten by other hungry animals. Numerous dogs were chained to poles across the property. A blue barrel that Sparks didn't want to look into sat next to some of the cages. He knew what it likely contained: animal carcasses and bones.

"It was horrible. I didn't want to be there. We did the best we could," Sparks said.

The smell inside the house made it hard for volunteers to breathe when they entered. About 25 dogs roamed freely in the two-bedroom, ranch-style

house where Witzman lived with her elderly mother. The floor was covered with an inch of wet stool and urine that caused the floorboards to soften and rot. One room had three mattresses stacked up for Witzman's mother, who is more than 90 years old.

"The bottom mattress was brown, the middle was kind of a pea green and the top one was yellow and tan. The top mattress was covered in rat stool," Sparks said.

The elderly woman was transferred to a nursing home after being found in Witzman's home during the raid. A few days later, the nursing home called the volunteers to ask about bite marks found on the woman. Sparks said he believes Witzman kept her mother at home to collect Social Security checks and that the bites were from rats.

The volunteers set up an assembly line to process the dogs and transport them by truck to a temporary shelter located nearby. Also found on the property were 20 cats, 14 chickens, five ducks and two horses.

On March 11, Witzman was found guilty of a second-degree misdemeanor cruelty to animals charge. She paid a \$150 fine, received five years probation during which she can't own animals, was responsible for paying back \$2,500 of the money spent collecting the animals and was ordered to undergo a psychiatric evaluation.

As a police officer, Firster said he was initially emotionless, but after being around the animals he felt some empathy toward them.

"The law is really underwritten, and the penalties are not severe enough," he said.

Sparks considers Witzman an animal hoarder. In his 42 years working in Trumbull County, Sparks has been involved with two other animal hoarding cases. He said animal hoarders are commonly unemployed and live in substandard conditions.

He recalled a similar hoarding case in Leavittsburg where a chicken coop contained approximately 30 beagles. The 7-foot high building contained 6 feet of dog stool, and the dogs' heads touched the ceiling.

"Some people hoard junk, some people hoard animals," Sparks said, adding that he believes something is psychologically wrong with people who hoard.

Sparks said Witzman started a "no-kill" animal shelter seven years ago with good intentions, but the shelter became too much for one person to handle.

Animal Charity employees also deal with hoarding cases every year. Humane agent Kyle Ziegler said most people who hoard animals will hoard objects too, and that hoarding usually stems from mental health problems. Animal Charity humane agents

earn Certified Crisis Intervention certificates to assist them in dealing with mental illness.

Ziegler said houses where people hoard are usually dirty, cluttered and bug-infested. On three occasions, Ziegler had to wear a full Hazmat suit just to walk into the residence.

“You can’t begin to put into words or picture it until you have been in one of these houses,” said Nikole Baringer, Animal Charity chief executive director.

Often, urine and fecal matter cover every surface, including beds, stoves and counters, Baringer said. Bugs, including cockroaches, crawl everywhere.

“It’s uninhabitable. I wouldn’t even think to walk through a place like that,” Baringer said. “You are just constantly thinking, ‘How can people live here?’”

Baringer said animal hoarders think they are doing a good act, but they can’t afford to take care of the animals. It’s not a normal living situation. Sometimes there is no running water or electricity.

Ziegler said some humane agents fear for their health when working and often contact the health department in hoarding cases. They know it could become a dangerous situation. Some houses have even been demolished as a result of hoarding.

About one hoarding house per month has been discovered this year in Youngstown, Baringer said.

Ziegler disconnects from his emotions when he

encounters animal hoarding. It’s not something he wants to remember, and he said he feels frustrated with animal hoarders.

“Emotionally, you have to be professional, and you can’t let them know they are getting the best of you,” Ziegler said.

Ohio has some of the weakest animal laws and ordinances, Baringer said.

“We can only take it so far. Basically, Ohio law says no food, no water, no shelter and don’t abandon your animals as well as a few others,” Baringer said, adding that she’d like to see harsher punishments for animal cruelty violations.

Those guilty of animal cruelty and neglect can receive a misdemeanor with a maximum penalty of one year in jail and a maximum fine of \$1,000. Some are ordered to undergo psychiatric evaluations and probation, as well as not owning pets for a set amount of time. The judge decides punishments, but Baringer said they can be pretty lenient.

In September, Animal Charity humane agents confiscated approximately 90 cats from the Cat Ladies Society after neglect allegations.

Founded in 1868, the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals-Angell Animal Medical Center is the second-oldest humane society in the U.S. The group supports and participates in activities with the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium, a group that

researches animal hoarding.

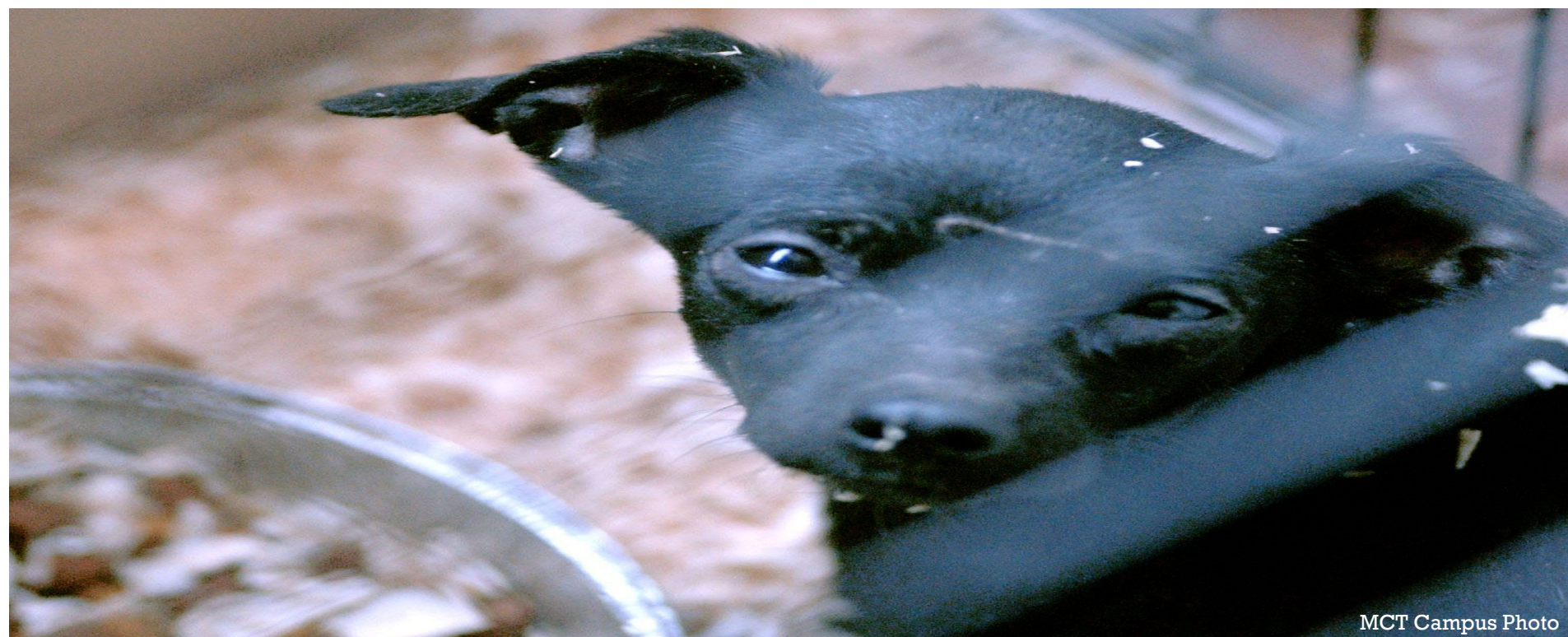
MSPCA-Angell spokesman Brian Adams said research points toward a mental or cognitive dysfunction as the root of animal hoarding, but that many secondary reasons contribute.

“Animal hoarding is being continuously studied as we look to further understand its complex nature,” Adams said. “Even if there was a single disease, there may very likely be the presence of comorbidity.”

According to research conducted by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, between 900 and 2,000 animal hoarding cases occur each year. Nearly 250,000 animals fall victim to hoarders annually. Many times, hoarders pose as nonprofit entities, according to ASPCA research.

The ASPCA, along with other animal rights groups, maintains that animal hoarding is not clearly understood, but that new studies and theories link attachment disorders with personality disorders, paranoia, delusional thinking, depression and other mental illnesses. Some animal hoarders start “collecting” animals after experiencing a traumatic event or loss.

“Animal hoarding has a greater recidivism rate than other forms of animal cruelty,” Adams said. “It is best to require a mental evaluation as part of a sentence to assist in evaluating the mental dysfunction that is present.”



WHAT ONCE WAS

By
Bianca Robinson



Under an inky night sky, a family travels through the woods. Hunger rips through the stomach of a child as sharp branches scrape her knees.

The family hides among the bushes as angry footsteps become clearer within the rustling of the leaves. If they are caught, the consequences could be horrific. Such is the plight of an African-American slave family escaping to

freedom in the 1800s. The legend of the Underground Railroad, a means of escape for daring slaves, has been told many different ways. But it just so happens that Ohio was the heart state in the average slave's journey north.

"Ohio played a major role," said Donna DeBlasio, associate professor of history at Youngstown State University.

The state's prime position between West Virginia,

Kentucky and Canada (the objective for most escaping slaves) made it a frequent stop on the railroad.

The term "Underground Railroad" started with the advent of railroad culture in the 1800s. Escaping slavery was viewed as a marvel, so an explanation circulated that an "underground railroad" must be taking the slaves north.

A common misconception about the railroad is that

it was a complete system.

"It really wasn't all that well organized," DeBlasio said.

No one knows exactly where or when it started. Both slaves and the abolitionists helping them were committing a crime.

"If they're captured before they get to freedom, the punishment could be dire," DeBlasio said.

She added that punishments could include death or being separated from family members.





Avenue, and the building is the historic Strock Stone House, built in 1831. William Strock built the house and owned the land for 20 years, and it flourished. There have been four owners since Strock.

Today, Austintown Historical Society tour guides Harry and Joyce Shood offer an informed glimpse into the past. Many of the land's farmhouses and barns that sat on the original 177.5 acres have since been torn down. A hidden staircase in the main house, located in a second floor closet, still remains, however.

But the true gem of the house is the original limestone basement, where slaves were rumored to hide on their journey. While the Strock Stone House itself has no documentation of its involvement with the Underground Railroad, a chart of Ohio's underground trails proves a point.

"The Underground Railroad actually ran through our area here," Harry said. "I would say yes, myself [about the Strock Stone House's involvement]. I can feel it."

The frequent use of underground tunnels in the railroad is one of several disputed myths. Questions remain about the functions of buildings involved in the journey to freedom. Another myth is the showing of quilts on the window to welcome slaves.

"That one spread like wildfire," said Trumbull

County historian and former teacher Wendell Lauth.

Another signal theory is the lighted window. However, lights in the windows didn't necessarily mean a house was open to the harboring of slaves. Lauth added that not all escaping slaves ended up in Canada.

An old yellow house on Hopkins Road in Youngstown sits on a foundation of mystery. Red and white flowers complement the open country-style porch. Few have heard of its supposed involvement in the railroad. Rumored to have hidden staircases and rooms, along with separate maid's quarters, the house defies all doubts of an organized system.

The century home was built in 1808. Sitting on 3.4 acres, the land boasts a small stable and maid's quarter, along with a pond and gazebo. The original limestone basement still has tree trunk supports. Because the Underground Railroad was illegal, many were not quick to broadcast their involvement.

Therefore, without much documentation, a lot is left to theory. Nevertheless, a handful of places scattered throughout the state still stand that boast their history and possible involvement with the Underground Railroad. Although the line between theory and fact is sometimes muddled, Ohio's contributions to the Underground Railroad to helping slaves reach freedom are indisputable.

"This is wrong, we're going to change it and we're going to put our butts on the line to do it" is the kind of attitude DeBlasio assumes those involved must have had. It is that brazen approach that pushed slaves north on the Underground Railroad.

Poland, Ohio, is home to an alleged stop on the railroad that still stands today after 206 years. In 1804, Jonathan Fowler built the Old Stone Tavern.

By day, his tavern was a stagecoach stop between Pittsburgh and Cleveland that entertained travelers with dinner and a drink. But by night, legend has it that slaves trekked through a tunnel from Yellow Creek into the basement of the tavern to find shelter on their long journey. Today the building is an antique shop owned by Jack Shetler.

"I wanted to preserve the building from total

**"I wanted to preserve the building from total destruction."
-Jack Shetler**


destruction," Shetler, a lover of stone construction, said.

Inside Old Stone Tavern, one can almost hear the hearty laughs from past travelers at the bar. However, both Shetler and DeBlasio admit that the tavern's part in the Underground Railroad is hazy. The supposed tunnel has since been filled up, and no documentation has been found to prove the tavern's role.

Travel up a hill on a skinny brick road to a stone building hidden by trees overlooking the Meander Reservoir. That old road was the original Mahoning

Overcoming autism

*Photos and
story by Dan
Pompili*



From a young age, Carson Ellis did not play with traditional toys. Instead, he was fascinated with odd things, like spinning bowls on end. He was a fretful child, too. He would not sit still, and he would cry for no apparent reason.

“I was the only one who could calm him,” said his mother, Jennifer. At 1 and 2 a.m., she would put him in the car and drive him around the neighborhood until he quieted.

Jane Rozinski has two twin daughters. They’re 16 now, but when they were younger, they liked to play pat-a-cake. Her son, Daniel, however, did not. Daniel would not even talk.

Carson also has oral sensory issues. If he doesn’t like the texture of something, he won’t eat it. He is, in fact, very picky. His favorite food is cheese puffs. He eats them like candy.

For nourishment, Jennifer feeds him baby food mixed into soy, rice or almond milk, since he won’t do dairy products. She calls it his “power shake.”

Daniel is picky too. He won’t eat meat, except chicken nuggets. On the upside, he loves fruit. Noodles and cheese are OK too. He insists on ketchup with everything. Like a normal kid, he’s not big on vegetables.

Carson is 10 years old. Daniel is 14.

The boys share behavioral similarities, and both of them spend part of their day under the same roof at the Rich Center for Autism on the campus of Youngstown State University.

According to the Autism Society of America, one in 110 children are born with some form of autism spectrum disorder. The rate among boys is one in 70.

“I could not walk in these parents’ shoes,” said J. Georgia Backus, director of the Rich Center.

There are 70 children at the Rich Center. Of those, Backus said 10 are typically developing, or high functioning. They have cognitive and language skills comparable to a child without autism.

For the other 60, Backus said, success comes with small progressions, like a child sitting still for longer than three seconds or fastening clothes (such as zipping or buttoning their coats).

Jennifer said buying clothes for Carson is a fiasco. She can’t take him to the store. He’s hard to handle, and she said she’s tired of people staring.

She has to shop alone and guess at what will fit, and what he will tolerate wearing. When she bought him a new winter coat, he simply refused to put it on and threw one hellacious tantrum.

“It was very cold outside,” she remembered. She led him outside, hoping that the bitter cold would convince him to put on the coat. No such luck.

She took Carson and the coat to school that day at the Rich Center. By the time she picked him up that afternoon, he was wearing the coat.

Backus said much of what the Rich Center does is try to teach autistic children “how to express so they have a quality of life.”

Daniel now speaks to convey his wants and needs, but still doesn’t like to answer questions, something Jane said they are working on at home.

Daniel can dress himself, and he partially showers “but not very well,” Jane said.

She has to motion to him to wash under his arms, and he will mirror what she does. He uses the bathroom on his own, though she has to remind him to wash his hands.

Jennifer must brush Carson’s teeth for him. She has to take the oral sensitivity into account and can use only a little bit of toothpaste. She has to count it out too. One side of his mouth, count to 10. The other side, count to 10. And so on.

“He has to know there’s a beginning and an end to it,” Jennifer said.

If she doesn’t count, Carson will lose his composure. She has to



“We don’t know what the long-term side effects will be,” she said. “But either everyone in the house goes insane or you try something.”

-Jennifer Ellis

Jennifer buys generic brands because the family’s insurance provider covers them.

She pays for the vitamins out of pocket. Her last order from Kirkman Labs in Oregon cost \$120 for a three-month supply of the vitamin and enzymes.

The Ellis family lives on the one paycheck Jennifer’s husband, Drake, earns from driving for FedEx. They pay for the premium insurance, but it still doesn’t cover everything.

For example, insurance will not cover all therapy hours. They tell her that speech therapy for Carson is not recuperative in nature.

Occupational therapy is covered to a great extent, though. For the past two years, the therapist has been working on Carson’s oral sensory problems. Besides being picky, some foods trigger Carson’s gag reflex immediately, and pose a choking risk.

The sensory treatment involves probing pressure points in Carson’s mouth with a gloved finger, something he has only recently begun to tolerate. This desensitizes these points, reducing the gag reflex.

Carson will now lick an ice pop, but still won’t suck on candy. Progress with autistic children is often slow and painstaking. For some, the costs may heavily outweigh the rewards. The ASAF estimates that the lifetime cost of caring for an autistic child ranges from \$3.5 million to \$5 million.

“Don’t tell my husband that,” Jennifer said, only half-laughing.

Like Jennifer, Jane can’t take Daniel out in public much either, though he rides with her when she takes twins Lauren and Katherine to school and to their various extracurricular activities.

“I just won’t take him where I know he will be disruptive,” she said, naming places like the girls’ concerts and plays.

Unlike Jennifer, Jane said she finds other people kind and patient, and doesn’t mind anymore when she sees the occasional dirty look.

“The girls’ friends all know him and they are wonderful,” Jane said, adding that she feels her daughters are kinder, sweeter kids because of their brother. “He’s brought us all closer together.”

It’s not the same story for Jennifer. She said her husband has a difficult time with Carson’s condition, and it has caused trouble in their marriage, though she gave no details.

“He still thinks Carson will grow out of it,” she said.

do this every morning and night.

The challenges vary from child to child and from family to family, but the mold fits almost the same. Constant vigilance and sacrifice are the norm.

Carson would awaken at random hours, wanting to be on the computer watching cartoons or playing DVDs of his favorite Disney movies. Jennifer said that now he will usually sleep through the night. If he does wake up, she feels comfortable letting him play downstairs because the alarm will sound if he opens any doors. She also wakes up every half hour on those nights.

Daniel did the same. From 1 to 3 a.m., 2 to 4, or 3 to 5, he would be up. With Daniel, though, illness was the result. He frequently had colds. Now Jane said he takes a low dosage of Risperdal, a drug commonly used to treat schizophrenia.

She said he has no side effects, and he now sleeps better and has not been ill since.

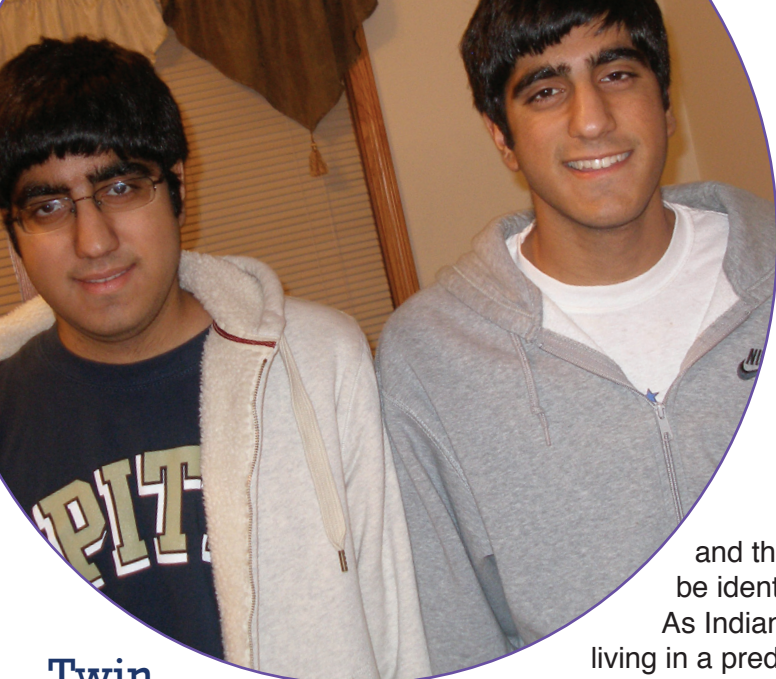
Medication is another issue for Jennifer, and the concerns range from the long-term side effects to the financial costs.

“We don’t know what the long-term side effects will be,” she said. “But either everyone in the house goes insane or you try something.”

In some cases, Jennifer said they try meds for six months or so to determine the side effects. On one medication, Carson gained 20 pounds in three months. She took him off it.

Carson now takes two medications and a two different vitamin supplements. One medication is Sertraline, a generic form of the anti-depressant Zoloft, to treat Carson’s obsessive compulsive disorder. The other is Guanfacine, a pill that can be used for high blood pressure or, in Carson’s case, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

The vitamins treat a variety of disorders. One vitamin is a potent supplement that Carson takes because his diet lacks proper nutrition, a result of eating only certain foods. The other supplement is a digestive enzyme. Carson suffers from chronic diarrhea because his body cannot process many of the foods he does eat.



Stuck together; torn apart

By Jared Buker

Twin brothers Ryan and Zubin Teckchandani were identical in virtually every way, from their appearance to their lives. That is, until one day when an illness changed everything.

They lived identical lives for 19 years, playing the same sports, taking the same classes, having the same friends, driving the same car, eating the same meals, enduring the same struggles.

When Ryan Teckchandani went to a friend's house, his brother, Zubin, followed. When Zubin had soccer practice, Ryan did too. When Ryan got sick, Zubin sat by his side for nearly 30 days.

Ryan and Zubin are now 21,

and they used to be identical twins. As Indian-Americans living in a predominately white town in Ohio, they stuck out. They each stood around 6 feet tall and weighed roughly 120 pounds. Their legs and collarbones were prominent and fragile, and they both endured severely broken bones while growing up. They always mirrored each other, sometimes even switching classes to see if their teachers could distinguish between them.

This is how twins spend their early lives, always together, as if they are playing with their shadow. They may share the same clothes, the same toys, the same punishment and, for Ryan and Zubin, the same unbreakable bond.

In April 2009, chest pains, fatigue and a cough that occasionally brought up blood interrupted Ryan's studies at the University of Pittsburgh. He barely finished the school year and went straight to the hospital.

Doctors initially told Ryan his symptoms seemed typical of cancer.

"I never thought I would die. Either I was in shock or just thinking about getting better," said Ryan, who waited 10 days to

hear that the doctors had made a mistake.

He was later diagnosed with Wegener's granulomatosis, a rare autoimmune disease that inflames almost every organ and forms painful lesions on the lungs.

He was immediately prescribed a cocktail of pills to combat the disease. His health began to improve until doctors realized Ryan was allergic to one of his medications and had to quit taking it. In the absence of this drug, his disease returned.

A lung infection called aspergillus then infected his already dangerous lesions, changing his doctors' course of treatment. Now, his lesions are

"It is tough sometimes because his disease is always in the back of my mind,"

-Zubin Teckchandani

growing, and even with a team of doctors, they cannot figure out why.

Zubin never thought twice about putting his life on hold for his brother.

"My brother always helped me," Ryan said. "On many occasions he stayed home with me when I didn't feel like going out, just so I wouldn't be lonely."

Just as they always did everything together, they were, in a sense, sick together too.

"It is tough sometimes because his disease is always in the back of my mind," Zubin said. "My mom gets pissed when I do anything that leaves him out, but I gotta live my life sometimes too."

This sounds like the dedicated love of any sibling, but Ryan and Zubin's relationship is special. For the first 18 years of their lives, they slept side by side in a queen-size bed. They were inseparable, both mentally and physically.

But Ryan's medication has swelled his face and laced his skin with stretch marks and acne. His legs were always skinny, but

they now shiver as they adjust to his fluctuating weight. He no longer has the stamina his brother has, nor the strength and build, and his dark complexion is now light and blotchy. Ryan has grown self-conscious about his new inadequacies, but the disease that has changed his appearance has brought him emotionally closer to his brother.





Ryan's disease has also led the Teckchandani family closer to their Hindu faith. They pray nightly and attend temple regularly. Ryan and Zubin's parents don't eat beef, and now neither do their children.

Watching Zubin continue to excel has motivated Ryan to beat his disease and resume a normal life.

"We used to play tennis against each other all the time, and we wouldn't get bored because I would win half the time and Zubin would win half the time," Ryan said. "Unfortunately, this isn't the case anymore. Zubin is much stronger and better than me at sports, but I am confident that once I get rid of the disease, I will catch up to him."

Ryan's disease can come back from stress, so he must keep his college workload lower than most students'. He switched his major from chemical engineering to accounting because he said it's easier to maintain.

Zubin is part of a selective five-year pharmacy program that

keeps him busy. Ryan has had to deviate from the path he once thought he would travel, but said he believes that he and Zubin will someday be the equals they used to be.

Loren Lease, professor of sociology and anthropology at Youngstown State University, said the relationship between twins is important to her because she has twin sons.

"There have been studies of twins who grew up separately from birth and still show similarities," Lease said. "They often say the same things, wear the same clothes, drive the same car, even though they never knew each other."

Most studies attribute this phenomenon to twins spending their first nine months in the exact same maternal environment. Biologically, identical twins like Ryan and Zubin develop from a single sperm that splits into two zygotes.

Scientifically, their connection seems obvious.

After hearing Ryan and Zubin's

story, identical twins Emily and Sylvia Grdina agreed that they wouldn't know what to do in the brothers' situation. They may have the same bond, though it seems to go unspoken.

"I would probably get mad if she stopped her life for me," Emily said. "She's the type of person who likes to go out and have fun, and my being sick shouldn't change that at all. And we'd probably run out of things to talk about if neither of us are living a fulfilling life."

Emily and Sylvia expressed the angst and conflict expected in an identical life, the kind of problems Ryan and Zubin didn't mention.

"We aren't in each other's hair by choice, but being around anyone that often will create conflict," Sylvia said. "I hate being 'clumped'; people treat us like the same person."

Society wants each set of twins to have a number one, Sylvia said, but no twin wants that label, at least not openly.

For better or worse, the link between twins transcends the bonds between other siblings. Both sets of twins — Ryan and Zubin, Emily and Sylvia — share an unshakable chemistry, a kind of synergy that normally would take decades to develop, but that seems to have existed naturally from birth.

For the rest of his life, Ryan will worry about a 50 percent chance that his disease could return at any time, for any reason. That means that for the rest of his life, Zubin will worry about having to watch his brother undergo chemotherapy again and physically change, like watching himself through a haunted house mirror.

Ryan's illness fills Zubin with the harsh reality that life is fleeting. For him, seeing Ryan sick is like watching himself be sick, and he asks himself every day why he remains healthy when his brother, his other half, his identical twin, is not.

Zubin is a constant reminder to Ryan of what it was like to be healthy and strong. But what Ryan and Zubin now know is that being a twin is not something you can see in a photograph.

It is a connection they share in their minds, not their faces.



MARRIED TO THE MILITARY

By Alicia Pattillo

Growing accustomed to living alone isn't typical for most newlyweds. But when Monica Hannah's husband, Arnold, began military service in Iraq before their first wedding anniversary, it was a necessity.

She got used to very few phone calls and e-mails from her husband. When friends and family asked how Arnold was doing, she frequently replied, "No word yet." Sometimes, she'd have to stare at the wedding band on her left hand to remember that she was married.

But she held on.

On July 8, 2008, Arnold called from Iraq. Monica remembered being in shock and barely able to stand up; his last phone call had been four months ago.

"I just remember feeling as if I was dreaming," Monica said. "His voice literally gave me chills."

Arnold told her that the phone lines had been down, that the Internet was shot, that it was so good to hear her voice. Monica could hardly speak.

"Baby, I can't believe it's you," she said to Arnold. "It's been so long."

Then Arnold admitted he had sex with someone else, a woman

in Iraq. He quickly confessed that he didn't love this other woman, that military service was stressful, that he had missed Monica so much, that the sex meant nothing. And then he begged for Monica's forgiveness.

Monica waited a while to respond. She very quietly said, "I can't forgive you. My heart won't let me." Angry, hurt and frustrated, Monica screamed through the phone.

"Do you know how many days I have stayed up late and cried out that God will bring you back to me?" she said to him.

Monica hung up the phone. The next week, she met with a divorce lawyer. Although she eventually forgave Arnold for the affair, Monica said she left the marriage for other reasons.

"I never wanted my husband to be in the military. I never thought he would actually be away this long. That's not how I pictured our marriage," she said. "To put your life on hold for a man is just stupid. Without trust, what do you have?"

According to Pentagon statistics, the overall military divorce rate has leveled off this year after consistent increases in the past five years. However, since the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom, the divorce rate has risen from 2.6



Christol Brown and her husband, Eric Brown.

percent in 2001 to 3.6 percent in 2009.

"I loved Arnold, and, looking back, I could have stayed," Monica said. "I know I would have put [the affair] behind me, but the worrying and him being so far away, I just couldn't take my mind through it anymore."

Sometimes Christol Brown will go for days without hearing a word from her husband. On those days, her body is numb. But she doesn't worry. She can't.

It's a scary feeling for her. It's uncertainty. One thing is certain, though. The next few weeks will mark the return of a soldier, a pastor, a father of four, a husband: Eric.

"There's a process coming back that he has to take," Christol said. "But I know it's so soon and it's so close. I'll have my husband home."

By now, Christol ignores the TV screen's distorted images and news broadcasts from foreign locations. Every day she awaits the e-mail she hopes to receive from her husband, who has served in the military for 23 years.

Eric and Christol were married shortly after 9/11. He was activated soon afterward, but returned home after just a few weeks of service. Christol recalled the feeling of her husband's leaving as "like part of you had just been ripped away."

"Nothing prepares you for it. It's a shock," Christol said. "It's hard to be placed in that situation where you have no control. There's nothing you can do. When they got to go, they got to go."

Eric, a chief in the U.S. Navy, is also a pastor at Community Church of God in Campbell. While Eric is away, Christol still maintains her duties and responsibilities as First Lady of the church, including Bible studies on Sundays and Tuesdays. Her faith in God carries her through the worst times.

"Part of me has to stay strong because we have kids that look at me," Christol said. "My faith comes in the Lord. I lean on the Lord. I confide in the Lord every day. That's who I talk to, I pray with."

Although he's in Afghanistan, Eric remains involved with his faith, Christol said.

"He ministers while he's over there," she said. "Some of these soldiers, they want to give up. They want to come home. They don't want to be there. To have a pastor among them to be able to minister to them is a blessing."

Eric prays for his enemies, as well as his fellow soldiers. At that point, Christol said, "they're not your enemy. They're just another person."

"Praying for the enemy that's trying to kill you is something to be able to do that," she said.

And, at home, Christol continues to pray for her husband's safety and for "the others that are over there because now I know what it feels like as a family." She knows she's not alone.

"It's many families out there that experience the same thing I experience," she said.

Boogie wonderland

**Skaters keep it rolling
every Thursday night**

By Jessica Valsi

If God is a DJ, life is a disco ball, love is a Bee Gees song and you are on roller skates.

Lights flash in a retro fashion as the familiar sound of “Night Fever” surrounds you. You notice the methodical sound of roller skate wheels touching the floor with each beat as they spin past. Without realizing it, you have started to shake your hips as you glide along.

There go your shoulders. You can’t resist any longer as you let your head bob left and right. You are certain that you have entered a different time. If you checked your cell phone or wristwatch (depending on which decade in which you

were born), however, you will discover that it is still 2010, and disco is dead. Or so you thought.

The tradition of roller disco is alive and thriving at Youngstown Skate every Thursday night.

There are the conservatives of the floor, skating slow and straight, daring anyone to change their course. Inside the inner circle are the liberal skaters, zigzagging and spinning their wheels. The speed skaters along the outer lane swiftly curve around each turn, a line of four focused on the head of the pack. “Left!” they yell as an unaware novice

crosses their path. That was a close one.

Then there are the lovers, skating in pairs, hips swaying in unison to the music. Their hands are clasped loosely, and their smiles are wide. There are leaders and followers, the latter copying a synchronized series of movements initiated by the enthusiastic head of the group. The dreamers, to avoid initiation into one of the groups, skate with no particular conviction, simply enjoying each stride.

Some are dressed in bell bottoms, others in business casual. Roller derby girls, complete with knee pads, skate

seriously, weaving in and out of the crowd, paying little attention to rhythm. No party is complete without the creepy old guy attempting to beckon a dance partner without success.

Both young and old congregate to relive the glory years of roller disco. Some come for the music, others for the exercise. All come for memories, whether they are making new, reviving old or both.

Joni Lance, a new grandmother, has lost 56 pounds. She credits her return to the roller rink as the main catalyst for her weight loss. She’s been skating since the



“Coming here makes us feel like we’re kids still.”
-Denise Naples

age of 5, but took a 15-year break as she became busy with her children and career. Lance’s daughters, ages 21 and 24, come with her to the rink when they can. Lance smiles when she thinks about her new grandson.

“I can’t wait until my grandson gets old enough to wear skates,” she said.

Dave Lynn, 66, comes for the exhilaration.

“It’s the best thing going,” Lynn said. “There’s a good floor, good music, good people.”

Lynn has skated since he was 4 years old. He has made the trip to Youngstown from Pennsylvania every Thursday for longer than he can remember. He hurries his speech as he laces up his black skates, a classic pair with four orange wheels; he’s eager to get out on the floor.

“Some people like boxing, some like horse racing. I like roller skating,” Lynn said

Michael Shetler, 55, has been skating since he was 1 year old. He has pictures of himself in a pair of skates from around the time he learned to stand. Shetler’s skates are white and worn. The rubber stops attached to the front of Dave’s skates are missing from Michael’s.

“Brakes? Who needs brakes?” he said.

The skates on his feet cost him about \$850. He buys a new pair every two years due to wear. He comes for the atmosphere, and to reminisce. Shetler rates the place as a nine and a half.

“It isn’t a 10 until *she* gets here,” he said.

She is Denise. The Bee Gees song “More Than a Woman” must have been written with Denise in mind. Tan, fit, with long golden hair, she rules the rink. Denise Naples has been coming to skate every Thursday for 30 years. At different times in the evening, you can see her on the outskirts of the rink, intensely speeding around the curves, grooving to a free skate or holding together a group during the trio skate.

She said tradition is what keeps people coming. The skating rink arranges special songs to uphold the customs of the original roller discos. Patrons return week after week to join in the foxtrot, waltz and trio skates. In true ‘70s fashion, a whistle blown during one of the couple skates signals the skaters to switch partners.

“This place does all the skates they used to do. Coming here makes us feel like we’re kids still,” Denise said before she whizzed away. She can’t miss Prince’s “Raspberry Beret.”

Chantelle Endicot, 17, and Rachel Shonce, 22, are likely the youngest faces in the crowd.

“We both love to skate. We’ve skated all of our lives,” Shonce said over the roaring music. “It’s pretty cheap for \$5. It’s a fun night.”

For Endicot and Shonce, adult skate on Thursdays is a stress reliever. Shonce likes the freedom of going as fast as she can, while Endicot likes to forget her problems. The two remember their parents and grandparents bringing them to skate when they were younger, and join together to make new memories to the sounds of Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive.”

With a push from the table next to them, the girls disappear onto the skate floor. There are no outsiders in the circle. They are all in it together.

Linda Rust has worked at Youngstown Skate since 1996. She’s pleased with the turnout, but said that “crowds aren’t nothing compared to what they used to be.” With remorse, she explains that roller skating has lost its popularity over the years. She thought that the blaring speakers and flashing lights would be attractive to younger people who look to night clubs and bars for entertainment.

“Unfortunately, I think

everyone sits in front of their TVs and computers nowadays,” she said.

Newcomers are few and far between, and the regulars are what keep the adult skate night going. The local rink has started advertising at Youngstown State University, hoping to attract the college crowd. They now offer a discount with a valid college ID.

The diehards of the rink, however, are the heart and soul of Thursday nights. Youngstown Skate even remains open on Thanksgiving to not disappoint the regulars who look forward to the fun of Thursday nights.

“If Christmas fell on a Thursday, some of the regulars would just die because were closed on their night,” Rust said.

The famous Roxy nightclub in New York City started as a roller disco in 1978. Located in the Chelsea section of Manhattan, it served the roller skate enthusiasts of the city until it closed its doors in March 2007. The building has been turned into a storage facility. Similar fates have met many roller rinks since skating began to lose its popularity in the mid-1980s. The local roller rink in Youngstown, however, is somehow — you guessed it — “Stayin’ Alive.”

Sixth Sensitivity

BY CHELSEA MILLER



**“It’s about being
silent no more.”**

**-Mary Ellen
Rodrigues**

Mary Ellen Rodrigues’ home is a shrine to her family. Pictures of her children line the walls, and drawings by her grandchildren hang proudly on the refrigerator. On first glance, Rodrigues looks like any other grandmother and parent. Her childhood, however, was not the picture of a normal home life, and her life is far from ordinary.

“It’s been kind of a single journey so far,” Rodrigues said, staring off into the distance in silence. A victim of incest and abuse, Rodrigues is now an advocate for those who have been through similar situations.

It was through these hard moments in her life that her paranormal powers began to emerge.

“When I was 13, I had been taken to a cornfield by an uncle that was a child sex offender ... and in that cornfield, in the middle of 20 acres, he attempted to violate me again,” she said. “And so I jumped out of the truck and ran through the cornfield to the other side to the woods ... and I sat on a stone wall listening for him.”

While sitting on the wall and hiding in fear from her uncle, Rodrigues experienced one of her first paranormal encounters. More than an acre away, Rodrigues could hear her uncle snapping the corn, a sound that should have been impossible to hear from so far away. Rodrigues’ next paranormal experience would not occur until she was 24.

Her uncle, who is no longer living, was never charged for his crimes. When Rodrigues was growing up in the 1950s, the blame was typically placed on the woman or the child, she said.

Rodrigues grew up without the support of her parents. Her father, she said, was a busy man and absent for much of her life. At home, her mother abused her.

“I believe my mother was either schizophrenic or bipolar. She had bouts of rages ... but when she blew, there was nowhere to hide,”

she said. “She was a physical abuser. She would really beat me until the energy was gone.”

Rodrigues doesn’t remember a lot of her childhood. She suffers from blackouts due to emotional trauma and is a recovering alcoholic. After going through therapy, however, she became a spokeswoman for those who’ve been through physical and sexual abuse.

“It’s about being silent no more,” Rodrigues said. “You become as sick as your secrets, and I definitely had my secrets.”

Rodrigues’ next brush with the paranormal occurred during another traumatic moment in her life.

Early one morning, her son was outside with his father on the lawnmower. Rodrigues was sleeping in her bed when the accident that injured her son occurred. Shortly afterward, her husband came to wake her up and told her of the accident. She awoke suddenly, after the accident, realizing her husband wasn’t there.

“He said he never came down the hallway ... and I had a breakdown ... and talking to the psychologist, he’s the one who said it was a phenomenon,” she said.

From then on, a variety of unusual experiences would occur.

There were times when the phone would ring and Rodrigues would instantly know that her husband was calling. She can also hear the phone ringing before it actually does. These experiences aren’t consistent, however. If the energy levels aren’t there, or the information is not to be known yet, the information won’t come to her.

Rodrigues said spirits also visit her frequently. Sometimes she can see them. Sometimes she can only hear them. Rodrigues said she believes they began coming to her, in part, to help her through the hard moments in her life.

One of her frequent visitors from the afterlife is St. Therese of Lisieux.

“At one time in North Jackson,

there's a shrine down there ... I had been having these awesome and beautiful experiences with St. Therese. I said to her one day when I went down there and brought her a rose. I said to her, 'May I see you?' and she walked right through the statue and smiled and bowed her head and then she just stepped back," Rodrigues said, smiling.

Rodrigues said St. Therese sends her roses frequently as well. It's her way of knowing that a prayer has been answered whenever she sees one.

"I've had roses sitting on my TV where it was cool on the bottom, and I sat there and watched a rose just unfold. And the water [it was in] was actually bubbling," she said.

"Another time, a silk rose came floating down the street as I walked out of church with a girlfriend, and it came actually right around the corner and stopped at my feet. My girlfriend said, 'Look at that,' and I smiled and said, 'Yes, look at that.'"

Now, Rodrigues uses her gift to conduct spiritual readings from her home. Rodrigues' good friend Sharon McKinney attests to Rodrigues' talent as a psychic. McKinney, who said she's experienced paranormal encounters as well, has been friends with Rodrigues for more than 10 years. Although she can't recall where they met or exactly how long they've been friends, she said they always have fun together.

McKinney said she's been

with Rodrigues when she does readings for other people.

"We were at Perkins after one of the meetings we were at and a friend of mine came ... and I introduced them and she just started giving them information," McKinney said, laughing. "And I'm like, 'How does she know all that?'"

Although Rodrigues makes her living off psychic readings, McKinney said she keeps her integrity during it.

"If she doesn't get something, she won't say it. She's not out for the show," she said. "She really gets the information and these people are blown away."

Rodrigues was featured on the Women's Channel in Canada, A&E, Court TV and the Biography Channel for helping the police solve various cases. Rodrigues is using her expertise to help the Bazetta Township Police Department solve a cold case that has baffled them for months.

The bones of a black male, who was thought to be about 50 years old, were found in a marshy area on the north side of the Mosquito Lake dam along State Route 305.

The body, which had been there for a couple months, was reconstructed to help identify the victim. No one has identified the man, however. Detective Joe Sofchek, who was assigned to the case, was approached by one of the sergeants he works with who had met with Rodrigues. With no leads, Sofchek



Bazetta police hope the facial reconstruction of a man found beside Mosquito Lake will lead to more evidence. It is the first time the Bazetta Police Department have used this method.

decided to give her a shot.

"I said, 'I'm at a dead end now, I might as well go with it,'" Sofchek said, shrugging.

According to an article in The Vindicator, after reviewing the case, Rodrigues said she believes the man came from Detroit, or somewhere near Canada. She also said the man expressed concern over his missing shoes. Although Sofchek said he does not believe in psychics, he believes that Rodrigues may have a gift.

"She has told me some things that makes you believe," he said. "When we were walking away [from the crime scene] ... she said, 'You hurt your knee.'"

Sofchek originally thought nothing of the statement, although he had injured it two years ago. Later, however, he thought differently.

"About two hours later ... she came back. She was talking to

[another officer], and she looked around the corner and said, 'Oh, by the way, you hurt your knee playing baseball,'" he said.

Sofchek originally injured his knee at the age of 10. He had never told anyone about the injury and was shocked that she knew.

Police use of psychics is not a common occurrence, but it is becoming more widely accepted. According to a study completed by Neal McNabb, assistant professor of criminal justice at Buena Vista University, 14 percent, or seven, of 49 counties surveyed in Oklahoma have used psychics in police investigations. Of these, only one law enforcement agency felt the information provided by the psychic was beneficial to the case and more accurate than information offered by other sources.

However, six of the seven would be open to using psychic services in future investigations. McNabb, though, said that he believes using psychics in a police investigation is a waste of valuable resources and recommends more tried and true methods.

"In my opinion, the use of psychics in police work is completely unfounded and unnecessary. There is absolutely no proof whatsoever that any psychic has ever helped in an investigation by using psychic ability," he said.

For Sofchek, though, the use of Rodrigues has provided beneficial so far.

"Some of the things she was telling us at the scene, the only person that knew about it was me. There were indicators that she knew stuff," he said.

Keep an eye on the sky

By Chris Cotelesse



Karrie Reynolds is a pseudonym used by one student at Youngstown State University. In most other respects she is unremarkable.

She is certified as a medical assistant and phlebotomist, and is studying emergency medical technology. She has been on the receiving end of these services and said she understands the value of emergency pre-hospital care.

"I want to help people," she said.

She is close with her three children and her mother. She smiles easily and apologizes even for imagined indiscretions. She has a fondness, to varying degrees, for Ed Hardy gear and lip gloss.

Oh yeah, and she has had direct contact with extraterrestrials.

Reynolds is a dedicated ET investigator, hosting an Internet radio program and a YouTube channel under the username TheAlienAgenda2012. She uses the pseudonym Reynolds (in honor of a major crush on actor Ryan Reynolds) to avoid ridicule in her professional life and to protect her children from "creepy Internet stalkers."

The database for the National UFO Reporting Center holds thousands of sightings of unexplained objects. From January to August of this year, 2,749 firsthand accounts have been reported. Ohio claims 76

of those reports. Seven sightings occurred in the area between Youngstown and Akron.

"It's a phenomenon that is very difficult to study. It's like studying the other side of the moon," said NUFORC Director Peter Davenport.

Out of 20,000 photographs of alleged UFOs, he said maybe one might be legitimate.

"80 to 90 percent of stories that come to me have nothing to do with UFOs," he said.

He has devoted his life to the rest, the fraction that isn't "nonsense."

To Davenport, the most compelling account in the NUFORC database is his own.

He was 6 years old in the summer of 1954. He, his mother and older brother were watching a movie at the Airway Drive-in Theater near the airport in St. Louis.

According to the report, "People started walking in front of our car, and they were looking, and perhaps pointing, up to our right. I looked out the right passenger's window and immediately witnessed a generally oval shape, extremely brightly luminous red object hovering virtually motionless in the sky."

He is aware of mainstream criticism and unfavorable press coverage.

"It's always accompanied by that god-

damned music from 'X-Files,'" he said.

Some imaginative people and "publicity junkies," he said, have ruined the credibility of his pursuit.

"I'm not mentally ill, and I'm not dumb," he said in a raised voice affirming his conviction.

For her radio show, Reynolds has interviewed Stanton Friedman, nuclear physicist, and Travis Walton, whose abduction story was made into the movie "Fire in the Sky."

Her dedication is also born from experience.

She was 6 years old at the time of her first otherworldly incident. She was sleeping in between her mother and snoring father. The bed faced a window that let in fractures of light from a halogen bulb mounted on a neighbor's garage.

She awoke sharply, alert but unable to move. At the right side of the bed stood an unfamiliar figure. Slowly and with direct, purposeful movements, it walked toward the window.

"It wasn't swaying its shoulders when it moved ... It was very soldier-like," she said. Despite the intrusion into her home, she said she was unafraid.

The figure made its way to the foot of the bed, stopped and turned in a precise

and rigid fashion. The outside light shone through the glass portal in clearly defined rays.

"As it stepped into the light, I saw it was an anorexic, very thin person," Reynolds said.

Whatever it was, its bulbous head was disproportionately large for its frame of what Reynolds guessed was less than 5 feet. The darkness of the room obscured its face — for which Reynolds is grateful — but she was able to see a mostly bald head with just a few wispy strands of hair.

Growing up, her parents made it very clear that aliens, monsters and ghosts were only stories.

"I came to the conclusion in my mind that it was a little old man because little old men are very skinny and frail and they're bald," she said.

Once her young mind had made that deduction, she said a voice not her own came into her mind and said, "That's right. He's a little old man. You don't need to be afraid. He's silly. He's funny."

As the being approached the left side of the bed, it began to lower its face to her level.

"It's like a black cloth gets dropped over my eyes," she said.



“I was under the false sense of security that if I stayed up all night until the sun came up, then I was safe, they couldn’t get me. And that was wrong.”

-Karrie Reynolds



“It sounds so science fiction. It sounds so crazy. I know it does,” she said.

Steve Graf, professor emeritus in the department of psychology at YSU, said telepathic experiences like Reynolds’ are common with extraterrestrial encounters.

At five times in the past few years, Graf has taught a class at YSU titled Extraterrestrials, Meditation and Free-energy. The course was designed “to present information and to get the students to explore and find information on their own,” Graf said.

He has performed research and attended retreats led by Steven Greer, a ufologist who has developed methods for contacting extraterrestrial life called CE-5

protocols, signifying close encounters of the fifth kind, or human-initiated contact.

“Direct contact is usually through a higher consciousness or remote viewing [because ETs] are spiritually evolved to a higher consciousness,” Graf said.

Remote viewing is the practice of envisioning a faraway person, place or object with “the mind’s eye.”

Graf said his experiences with Greer involved telepathic contact, opening up oneself to “the realization that there is just one great consciousness.”

Graf said he believes these beings to be benevolent. He attributes most stories of alien abduction to military agencies

framing a potential enemy from outer space, “using psychotronic devices or programmed life forms.”

He said that a psychotronic device is a weapon of a “scalar” nature that “can affect a person’s mind at a distance.” He believes government forces “have been able to manufacture what looks like an ET.” He described programmed life forms as biological puppets. He added that “eventually this will move to a ... war of the worlds.”

He has never had a close encounter — an experience of extraterrestrial presence within 500 feet — and admitted that these events could just be a product of imagination.

Davenport encourages skepticism.

“The only thing that really counts on this planet is evidence,” he said, adding that he urges people to “go outside. Keep your eyes open and keep a camcorder handy.”

His 16 years of experience as the director of NUFORC, combined with his education and training as a scientist, have led him to approach all stories of paranormal activity with a healthy skepticism. He compared these bizarre reports to someone claiming to have seen a Tyrannosaurus Rex.

“Would you believe it?” he asked.

In 2007, Reynolds moved back to Ohio to stay with her mother in her childhood home. She laughed at this point in the story.

“It’s funny ... a grown woman afraid of the dark,” she said.

She sleeps with the lights on most nights.

“I was under the false sense of security that if I stayed up all night until the sun came up, then I was safe, they couldn’t get me. And that was wrong,” she said.

Around 4 a.m., when the birds started chirping and the sky began to shed its dark cloak, she went to sleep in the same bed from where she witnessed her first encounter more than 20 years earlier.

That night, she remembers being placed gently into her bed by another bulbous and thin figure. Her impression of this figure was of someone exuding the nervous insecurity of mid to late adolescence. She was reminded of a discharge nurse in the emergency room, relaying the doctor’s orders.

“I even thanked him,” she said.

His skin was white with a glow about it and bluish-grey blotches. The being made an effort to put her at ease. But not all of her experiences have been so benign.

One night the next fall she went to bed with an uneasy feeling.

“I can sense when they’re about to show up,” she said.

The dead of night found her paralyzed, except for her eye muscles, in a supine position. She focused her vision on the doorway. It was cracked open about 4 inches. In the space between was an eerily familiar silhouette.

This being attempted to fool her into believing he was her mother. “It’s like a glamour” where the illusion is only superficial, she said.

“A witchcraft sort of thing is the best way I could put it,” she said.

At first, she fell under the spell, yelling in her mind to what she thought was her mother: “Lock the back door. They’re here.”

Eventually she saw through the trick and became combative.

“I felt threatened because my son was in the room. I was going to fight him,” Reynolds said.

She sat up, breaking free of his control. She was able to stand up and face the door, but was again overtaken by the hypnotic immobilization.

The door swung open, revealing a dark brown figure with veiny limbs. It was “anorexic” like the other beings she witnessed, but this one stood about 5 feet 9 inches tall.

He approached her with a calm sense of confidence, leaning his face only a few inches from hers. She said the event was traumatic, and she believes she blocked out the image of his nonhuman countenance.

Three extraordinarily long, clawed fingers traced her right cheek and down beneath her chin a few times. She said it seemed like “a veterinarian petting an animal,” and described his fingers as “rubbery like eggplant.”

The being lifted her chin and placed something on her neck near the carotid pulse. She felt an intense but painless pressure. She heard a loud pop before she went unconscious.

“That was the last time I seen one,” she said. But she doesn’t believe she could stop them from returning. “If they want, they can come and get you.”

Davenport is not convinced that all events like these are vivid dreams or active imaginations. Despite derision and disbelief, he continues to gather and investigate reports. He considers the subject more important than anything the human species has encountered.

“We’re being visited by UFOs,” he said gravely.

WINTER

EVENTS IN THE YO

Mondays

Karaoke at Irish Bob's
Ages 21+

Open Mic and Karaoke at Club
Dejavu
Ages 21+

Bring Your Own Album Night at
The Lemon Grove
All ages

Tuesdays

Karaoke at The Horseshoe Bar
Ages 21+

RockBand Tuesdays at Slim's
Bar and Grille
Ages 21+

Wednesdays

Wild 'N' Out Wednesdays at
Utopia
All Ages

Flip Night at Barley's
Ages 18+

Thursdays

Ladies Night at Pal Joey's
Ages 21+

Tarot and Astrology Night at The
Lemon Grove
All ages

Fridays

Striptease and Zumba at Club
Gossip
Ages 18+

Saturdays

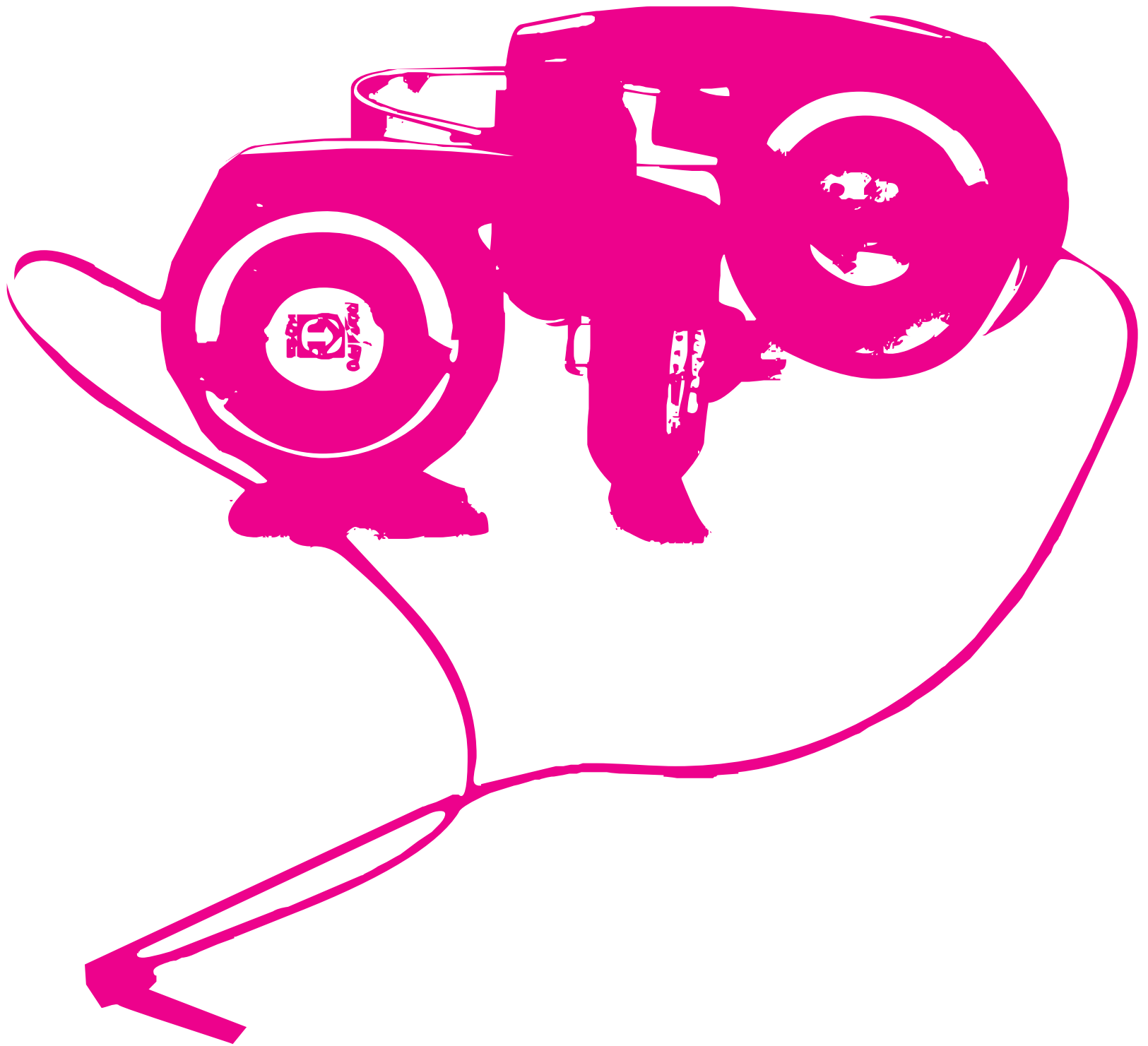
Seductive Saturdays at The Love
Lounge
Ages 21+

Smooth and Sexy Saturdays at
Somewhere Else
Ages 18+

Sundays

Karaoke with Shadow at Sammy's
Ages 21+





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