



Eric Zorn

Catching up with early departures

No single local story of 2007 excited as much attention, as much sanctimony and as much arm-chair sociology as the Amy Jacobson story.

To refresh: Jacobson, a veteran reporter for NBC-Ch. 5, accepted a last-minute invitation July 6 to a back-yard gathering at the Plainfield home of Craig Stebic, whose wife, Lisa, had vanished April 30.

Jacobson said she was on her way to take her kids swimming in Chicago when she got the invitation. Sensing an opportunity to get better access to the reclusive man at the center of the mystery, she drove them to Plainfield instead.

When a crew from CBS-Ch. 2 videotaped her in a bikini top “partying” near Stebic’s back-yard pool, Jacobson lost her job and became the focus of an intense debate about journalism ethics, sexism and even parenting.

“It still seems surreal,” she said Wednesday when I called to update her story.

Those who predicted that a competing Chicago station or a cable-news network would hire Jacobson if for no other reason than publicity were wrong: She said she’s interviewed only with local TV news outlets in Los Angeles, St. Louis, Phoenix and Tampa.

She said reports hinting she was pursuing an entertainment career were “misleading.” She said that when she taped a Fox News Channel pilot in October with Erich “Mancow” Muller she was not serving as a co-star, but “just helping out a friend by being the member of a panel. I eventually will come back to TV news reporting.”

The silver lining of this career crisis? “I get to be with my children [ages 2½ and 4] a lot at a great time during their lives,” she said.

The older child is vaguely aware of what happened, Jacobson said. She said that, at a restaurant, when a waitress asked, “What do you want?” the boy answered, “I want my mommy’s job back. She got fired for taking us swimming.”

She said she has not spoken to Craig Stebic since her visit to his house became national news and that she still lives on the North Side.

Jacobson said she briefly took a part-time job with a not-for-profit agency that assists low-income families with tax problems, but now she volunteers at that agency and at a homeless shelter.

Regrets? “Sure, I’d do things differently” given the benefit of hindsight, she said. “But I don’t want to go there. I’ve got to move forward.”

A local story that got considerably less attention this year was the quixotic bid for the presidency by Chicago businessman John Cox.

Cox began campaigning in Iowa and New Hampshire in early 2006, visiting both states dozens of times and spending at least \$1 million of his own money trying to become a contender in the crowded Republican primary field.

When I interviewed him for a column in August shortly after he finished 11th out of 11 candidates in an Iowa straw poll, Cox vowed to “stick it out” through the early caucuses and primaries.

But when I called him for an update Wednesday he said he’d closed his campaign offices late last month after having been excluded from yet another Republican debate.

“What’s the point anymore?” he asked. “I always knew it was a long shot. But when the media made their decision not to include me, I figured it was a total lost cause.”

After I wrote a column in October about how a portion of folk singer Steve Goodman’s ashes were scattered on the warning track at Wrigley Field, I heard from a number of readers who admitted to having surreptitiously leaned over the outfield wall to scatter cremated remains at the Friendly Confines.

Several got in touch with me again when they read of the massive post-season excavation and rehab of the playing surface at Wrigley: What had become of their loved ones?

Not to worry, said team spokesman Jason Carr: They continue to rest in pieces.

The warning track—where most ashes, including Goodman’s, end up—was extended but otherwise undisturbed during the landscaping project.

Read the original columns and leave comments at chicagotribune.com/zorn

Duncan: 50 grade schools could close

Chief defends plan as CPS’ best course

By Carlos Sadovi
Tribune staff reporter

Chicago Public Schools Chief Arne Duncan indicated on Wednesday that about 50 underutilized elementary schools could be closed within the next five years under a plan designed to address declining enrollment.

Duncan defended the proposal as the best option for students, who he said would lose educational and extracurricular options if their schools’ enrollments became too small.

The closings would be the most dramatic moves in a review of 147 of the district’s most underutilized schools, all of them with fewer than half the students they are designed to handle.

Under the plan, district officials would go before the school board every year for

the next three to five years, with recommendations that could potentially mean closing or consolidating 10 to 15 schools each year. The program must be approved by the board each year.

“While generally I’m a fan of small schools, you have to have some critical mass to run a viable school. When you get down to 150 or 175 students, you don’t have enough students in each grade to run a full menu of activities,” Duncan said. “Educationally [con-

solidation is] the right move.”

The Tribune on Wednesday reported that 122 schools are at 30 to 50 percent of their enrollment capacity. An additional 25 are below 30 percent capacity, and are at the greatest risk of closing.

The majority of the underused schools are in areas that have experienced demographic changes on the Near West and South Sides, with smaller pockets in lakefront

PLEASE SEE **SCHOOLS**, PAGE 6



Fourth-graders at Columbia Explorers Academy on the Southwest Side do schoolwork Tuesday in the midst of several empty desks. Some of their classmates already had left to spend an extended Christmas vacation visiting relatives.

Empty desks are a sign of the season

Hispanic students pay a steep price for taking monthlong Christmas vacations to their homelands, school officials say

By Alexa Aguilar
Tribune staff reporter

Martha Padilla-Ramos and Jose Barrera fondly remember the long car rides south to Mexico each December when they were children. At the end of the trek awaited their cousins, delicious food, trips to church and days of parties to celebrate Christmas.

It was a beloved part of their childhood, so the Chicago-area school administrators understand why families make the annual trek to their homelands. But they can’t understand why so many families—an estimated 10 percent of the Hispanic students in Waukegan, for example—plan these trips to last a month or more, far beyond the tradi-



Juan Carlos Camarillo (from left), 5, as Joseph; Valeria Gomez, 6, as Mary; and Angel Camarillo, 4, as an angel, are ready for a procession in St. Nicholas Parish in Aurora.

tional two-week holiday break Illinois schools allow.

Although most local schools are holding classes through Friday, many of these families already have been gone a week or more. In addition to falling behind in their schoolwork, educators said, the students are in danger of being labeled truant and could perform poorly on standardized tests that help

determine if their schools meet federal No Child Left Behind guidelines. Other students can expect extra class time with teachers to catch up.

Some districts threaten to fail students who miss too many days or force them to re-enroll, repaying registration fees and possibly losing

PLEASE SEE **VACATION**, PAGE 6

Beds, help lacking for homeless youth

By Karoun Demirjian
Tribune staff reporter

Hector Castro was 13 years old when his parents kicked him out of the house.

Castro, now 20, made his way to downtown Chicago to find a way to live on his own. What he found were limited options: He could prostitute himself for money and shelter or simply sleep on the streets.

Though he tried repeatedly to get into shelters, Castro said, he was routinely met with closed doors.

“It would take three or four months each time before I

could find a bed,” Castro said. “I didn’t have money for the phone, so I had to go from place to place, but it was always the same ... waiting lists.”

It’s a common problem, according to the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, which released a study Thursday that said more than half of the state’s homeless youths, those who are 14 to 24 years old and unaccompanied, are turned away from shelters because of a lack of space.

The report states that there

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Birds of a feather on the North Side have lost one of their own



Tribune file photo by Bob Fila

Pigeon-bedecked Joseph Zeman was a familiar figure for years in Lincoln Square.

Pigeon man’s story at end

A newspaper clipping helps police identify a man killed in an accident, drawing Tribune reporter **Barbara Mahany** back into the world of the ‘Pigeon Man of Lincoln Square’

Police didn’t know who he was, the old man killed Tuesday by a van near Devon Avenue and McCormick Road.

They found newspaper clippings—about a half-dozen laminated copies of the same story—tucked into one of his many Jewel bags.

Cut, copied, pressed between plastic, the clipping showed the man in full color, feathered with pigeons, and told a piece of his story. And except for that clipping, the cops and the doctors who pronounced him dead at the hospital had no clue who he was.

The pigeon man’s life was like that. Barely a soul had a clue who he was.

That’s why the cops called me, just an hour or two after he died. They knew I knew a bit of his story. I wrote the one they found in his possession. Two years and three months had passed, and he still carried it wherever he went.

After the old man died an hour later, the cops needed someone to call, needed to know if there was a soul in the world who might care to know what happened to Joe Zeman, who most everybody called “the pigeon man of Lincoln Square.”

Here’s just a bit of the pigeon man’s story, the one he carried:

“Except for the lips, you would think he was made out of stone, the man who sits, hours on end, on the red fire hydrant on Western Avenue, just north of Lawrence, pigeons by the dozens perched on him.

“Pigeons on his head. Pi-

PLEASE SEE **PIGEON**, PAGE 5



Tribune photo by Abel Uribe

Hector Castro, 20, stops by the Night Ministry’s van on a recent Friday night. Castro, who was homeless from age 13, said he was often turned away from shelters due to lack of space.