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People of the year

By Carole LaMond

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Once again, in the past year, Weston residents proved that their efforts make the world a better and more interesting place. Following are the stories of some of the people who appeared in the pages of The Weston Town Crier this year. We give them a tip of the hat and a thank you for sharing their talents and passions in ways that put Weston on the map as a great place to live.

Checkmate

It was only their second time to participate in a tournament at any level, but the four-man Weston Middle School Chess Team placed first among more than 40 players from across the state to win the Hurvitz Cup Massachusetts State Scholastic Team Championship for grades 6 to 9.

The Weston team – made up of Daniel Glauber, Jordan Gottlieb, Alex Kaye and Ernest Zeidman – won 13 out of the 16 games they played to win the title in a four-round United States Chess Federation (USCF)-rated tournament held at Natick High School on April 2. The suspense continued until the very last game the team played, and won, to defeat last year's champions – the Bedford BackRanks.

In addition, three of the team's members finished among the top six in the individual rankings.

The Weston Middle School Chess Club was founded in 2002 by science teacher Dan Taylor who was surprised to learn that there was no chess club at the Middle School when he started teaching there four years ago.

The club was launched with "a few cheap chess sets and a few students who would come once a week after school," said Taylor, who also was fortunate to have Todd Chase, a certified chess expert, as a parent adviser to the club.

"This was very helpful because he was a better player than I was and he was able to bring the club up to a slightly higher level than I could have done on my own," said Taylor.



Hurricane Katrina Committee members Lenore Lobel, left, and Sally Currier arrive in Pearlington, Miss., under a sign decorated with debris found after the hurricane disaster. The committee is trying to raise as much money as possible for a new community center in Pearlington. (Courtesy photo)

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Loose

The group soon caught the eye of the Weston Educational Enrichment Fund Committee (WEEFC), which helped it to purchase slightly better equipment and, even more importantly, a chess clock.

"This is because all the tournaments are timed," Taylor explained, "and our members needed to learn how to play under that kind of pressure."

The following year, a second WEEFC grant allowed the club to bring in Chess Master Lou Mercuri for special coaching sessions. Mercuri, who runs the Lou Mercuri Chess School in Newton during the summer, began to play chess himself when he was a Weston Middle School student in the 1970s.

Both Taylor and Mercuri agree that the secret to the strength of the Weston Middle School team lies in having four solid players across the board.

"A lot of teams have one or two players who are very good. But the Weston team all play at a fairly good level and they are fairly close to one another in expertise," Mercuri said. "If you want to improve, it's best to play with someone who's relatively close to your ability or a little better. Closer ability, in other words, leads to a very competitive team."

The team not only hopes to go back next year and defend their Massachusetts title, but to participate in a national junior high school tournament to be held in California in the spring of 2007.

Farewell to a baseball legend

Tom Skenderian, a former Eastern Intercollegiate Baseball League batting champ and one of the most popular baseball and softball coaches in Weston, will be honored when two new Major League-style dugouts at the High School field are dedicated in his name just in time for baseball season. He passed away in April.

Skenderian played every position except catcher while at Weston High School, and later, as a coach, "worked with the young kids to develop their skills and really just had a love and passion for baseball," said his oldest son T.K. Skendarian.

Skenderian played outfield at Brown University from 1964 to 1968 and led the Eastern Intercollegiate Baseball League in batting in 1966 with a .514 average.

He was first drafted by the Baltimore Orioles before being drafted by several other Major League teams including the Boston Red Sox.

However, an eye injury after his sophomore year at Brown University prevented Skenderian from having a full professional career, and he eventually moved on to coaching or volunteering in various Weston baseball programs for about 20 years.

"Tom was an extraordinary ball player, and when he could no longer play he turned to coaching," said Dusty Rhodes-Skenderian, Tom's wife. "Little League, softball, high school, anything you could think of he would be part of."

During Skendarian's illness, his family decided that they would try to do something to give back to the Little League in his honor.

"We started a fund quietly in the spring," said Rhodes-Skenderian.

The Thomas E. Skenderian Weston Youth Baseball Fund became dedicated to building a new set of dugouts, said Weston Little League President Adam Wisnia.

"It was something that had been lacking for a while at the High School field," said Wisnia.

"And when we had the opportunity to build the dugouts in honor of Tom we were that much more resolute about getting them built."

Through the Weston Little League, which had the requisite classification as a nonprofit organization to accept money and build the dugouts, over a dozen families or businesses made large contributions or volunteer efforts to the project, including contractors Ogilvie & Sons and Bay State Sand and Gravel.



"It's been wonderful how many people wanted to contribute," said Rhodes-Skenderian. "We approached (the High School and Little League) about what they really needed and they said a dugout. So everyone in the town, residents, local businesses, the Planning Board, the building inspector, the Recreation Department, all rolled up their sleeves and got this done."

According to Wisnia, construction on the dugouts began in October and will be ready for Weston High School, Little League and American Legion teams to use in the spring.

"I really think the new dugouts will bring a level of pride to the teams that play there and honor Tom," said Rhodes-Skenderian.

And when the Weston High School baseball starts playing again in March, Skenderian's youngest son, Tyler, who knocked in the extra inning run in the state tournament last year, will be one of the players who takes the field for the first time coming out of the new dugouts.

"This is such a great way to honor Tom and I know he will be smiling down from heaven when he sees the team come out," said family friend Gene Miller.

A business leader with a heart

When the director of the Irish Immigration Center in Boston informed Weston businessman Arnold Hiatt that his philanthropic work had merited him the Solas "Social Justice Lifetime Achievement" Award, he wanted to refuse the honor.

"I'm not big on receiving awards, frankly, because that's not why I do what I do," said Hiatt. Hiatt, former CEO, president and chairman of the Stride Rite Corporation, said he used his position at Stride Rite "to make a difference on behalf of working people, people who are vulnerable, and people who need support."

However, Hiatt explained that he has done only "what I feel is natural for me, and so to be singled out for recognition is something that doesn't seem necessary."

Hiatt was one of five modern-day luminaries to receive a Solas (Irish for "light") Award at a ceremony on Oct. 6.

Thomas Keown of the Irish Immigration Center said the awards honor those "who have been a light in the lives of others in our communities, our nation and our world.

"There are a great many quiet heroes in Boston and we want to recognize them," said Keown. "Arnold Hiatt has spent a lifetime making life better for people. The people who worked for him, their families, and the communities around his business have all benefited from the blend of compassion and competitiveness he brought to corporate America." Hiatt joined the ranks of 22 previous award recipients including Sen. Edward Kennedy, President Bill Clinton, Theresa Heinz-Kerry, and Mary Robinson, the former president of Ireland.

Hiatt joined the Stride Rite Corporation in 1967, and as the company prospered Hiatt decided it should "assume some responsibility" for the neighborhood of Roxbury, where it was then located.

"There were lots of children who were somewhat neglected," Hiatt said. "Many of them were children at risk. They were children of single parents. So I suggested that we start a child care center for those children, which we did, and that, in turn, became the first corporate child care center in America."

Under his leadership, Stride Rite was the first public company to have a clean air policy and a fitness center. He launched a number of programs providing inner-city children with medical care, psychiatric care and dental care.

He also implemented the first intergenerational center, which provided care to both the city's children and its elders, so that "the two different populations at either end of the life cycle" could intermingle.

A program Hiatt launched at Harvard University allows students known as "Stride Rite

Scholars" from lower-income families to pay for their education by participating in community service-oriented work, such as running homeless shelters or working with children in the city's housing projects.

"Instead of working, say, in the kitchens, or working in the libraries, they can work their way through school by being mentors," explained Hiatt.

In order to pay for each of these various programs, Hiatt founded – and, for a period of time, served as chairman for – the Stride Rite Philanthropic Foundation. The foundation took a percentage of profits from the Stride Rite Corporation and used them to fund the programs.

"Stride Rite became known as a very socially responsible company, long before those words were even invented," he said.

That social responsibility extended to employees of the company, said Hiatt, and resulted in loyal workers and a low turnover rate.

"People were proud to work at a company that cared about them and about the community.

They really felt part of it," said Hiatt. "We believe that companies will do better if they think of their employees as their partners. And if they're treated well, they are able to be more productive and become much more aware of quality and standards."

Hiatt is now involved in an organization called Business for Social Responsibility, which he and a few associates founded after he left Stride Rite Corporation.

Humanitarian effort, town to town

Weston residents Lenore Lobel and Sally Currier, members of the Weston Hurricane Katrina Committee, saw firsthand what devastation looks like when they visited Pearlington, Miss., a town badly damaged by the Aug. 2005 hurricane.

The visit renewed and focused their efforts to help the southern town.

The Hurricane Katrina Committee is raising money to help fund a community center for Pearlington that could accommodate 200 to 300 people. The center would serve as a place for residents to gather for public meetings and private get-togethers, to share information and time together.

A central meeting place like that is crucial, Lobel said, in a town where even the school and grocery store have been obliterated.

Though the committee originally planned to raise \$50,000, it is now hoping to raise as much as it can toward the preliminary estimated cost of \$400,000 to complete the structure.

The photos from their trip, said Lobel and Currier, can only show so much.

Their pictures show demolished homes, large boats grounded in backyards, boxy FEMA trailers, and roads only recently cleared.

What the lens could not pick up is what they saw, smelled and heard themselves: The pungent odor of mold eating abandoned houses in 120-degree heat; the asthmatic cough rattling in survivors' lungs; and the claustrophobia of living in trailers with no storage and children shelved on bunk beds at night.

"A conception I didn't have was how traumatized the people were from the experience," Currier said. "You think, well, a flood happened, but that's in the past and now they're moving on and doing something. The thing is, it's still very much with them. You knew they were in a different emotional place than you or I."

Before Katrina sent a 28-foot surge of water crashing through, Pearlington, population 2,200, was a lush but modest community of shrimpers, truckers and retirees living right on the lip of a bayou dotted with the stately homes of the Old South. Katrina left a garbage heap behind.

"If you saw a horror movie and heard these stories, you'd say no way, this is ridiculous," Lobel said. "But they lived through it."

Currier said the people of Pearlinton never tire of outsiders coming to their town to help and thank them profusely.

"They don't shake your hand, they hug you," she said.

Lobel and Currier say they will continue to retell the tales about people in Pearlinton and urge people in Weston to contribute to the town-to-town relief effort.

"I feel so grateful to everyone who is donating, whether it's \$25 or \$5,000," Lobel said.

"There are incredible heroes in the private sector."

Top of the world

Gravity poses no more resistance to Ross Kiser than water does to a fish.

Kiser, 16, is the second fastest climber of his age group in the country following his strong showing in national competition in Portland, Ore., this summer.

When he competes in the speed category, Kiser starts crouched at the bottom of a rock climbing wall until the buzzer sounds. Then he is a blur of movement as he zigzags upward, his hands and feet hardly grazing the wall's neon polyurethane holds. Seconds later Kiser is perched at the top of the wall.

Kiser can't quite explain how he does it.

"Honestly, I have no idea. It's just a gift I have," he said. "I can move quickly."

Steve Buck, one of Kiser's two coaches, can cite Kiser's upper body strength and hand-foot coordination, but beyond that, he said, "He's just fast."

In August, for the second year in a row, Kiser competed in the world competition, held in Austria, with the U.S. climbing team.

Kiser's history with rock climbing closely mirrors the history of the sport itself. He discovered climbing in 1998, four years after the first junior national competitions held in this country, when he accompanied a friend to a lesson on a Colorado vacation. At 8 years old, he was enamored enough to join a one-wall climbing gym when he returned home. In three years, his father had built a 27-foot climbing wall in the back yard for his son's birthday. That same year, Kiser started competing with the Boston Rock Gym team.

In his very first year of competition, at the age of 11, he qualified for national competition in the difficulty category.

"Everyone was surprised," he said. "I didn't know what to think."

In his first national competition, Kiser slipped off the wall, but he continued making nationals every year, and in his second year of national competition gave the speed category a try.

In the world of climbing, speed and difficulty require two entirely different approaches.

Difficulty is about precision; a climber has an allotted timeframe in which to work and is awarded points for how he uses holds to ascend the wall. Speed is about moving quickly without being reckless, about making split-second decisions to arrive at the top the quickest. One of the biggest tricks to speed, Kiser said, is being able to "see" the route. This is called sequencing. On the wall, it looks like gracefulness.

"You can be ten times faster than the other kid, but if he's better at sequencing, he can beat you," he said. "I want to make sure my climb looks as good as it can."

At first, Kiser was merely good at speed, routinely ranking in the top 20.

Then last year, he broke away from the pack and suddenly found himself fourth in the nation and on a plane to Beijing for his first world competition.

Kiser trains at least twice a week, sustaining pulled muscles, bruises and scrapes and taking 40-foot falls just for the rush. His forearms and fingers are so muscular he can do two-fingered pull-ups.

Though his natural talent is speed, Kiser's ambition is to make world competition in difficulty in which he is ranked 28th nationally.

He calls that goal "a stretch." But for a guy who can leap 10 feet off the wall to catch a hold with one hand, "stretch" doesn't have the same meaning as it does for ground-dwellers.

Top of the class

When R. Anthony "Tony" Nolan, a Weston estate planning attorney, began serving on the Weston School Committee in the spring of 1994, public education in Massachusetts was on the brink of major change.

Nolan, however, prefers to put his stint in different perspective.

"The children who entered kindergarten that year are graduating from Weston High School this June!" he said in April. "I had always wanted to participate in civic volunteerism, and I wanted to do it through politics. Serving on the School Committee achieved that for me."

Nolan stepped down from the School Committee in the spring after 12 years of service to devote more time to family and work. He was an active committee member during some of the committee's most exciting and challenging years.

"The biggest changes in the past twelve years occurred in two areas, one of which is obvious to the public – the renovation of the school buildings," he explained. "Probably 85 percent of the buildings have been renovated."

The other major initiative that took place was the 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act, a statewide effort to instill higher student achievement standards.

"It took a while to develop how the law was going to be put into practice," Nolan said. "From that time up to the present, the School Committee has been working that law into reality, which gave more impetus to structure and curriculum, and established standardized tests, like the MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System)."

The law meant that public schools had to refashion much of its curriculum – "The shoe had to be made to fit," said Nolan – and it led to scheduling changes in Weston.

"We went into block scheduling, which led to longer class periods, especially at the High School, and the High School day was extended," he said.

Nolan has two adult children whom he refers to as "lifers," because they were educated in Weston's schools from kindergarten through 12th grade. He has lived in town since he was 16 years old, except for a brief hiatus in Waltham shortly after he was married. He and his wife moved back in 1976.

Nolan noted that Weston was way ahead of neighboring towns in seeing the need for school building projects.

"We began the process in reverse, from the High School down to the elementary buildings, so students crossed renovations at only one point in time, and no class was burdened with 12 years of construction."

He is quick to spread credit around, praising the hard work of School Committee members and, especially, the school personnel.

"The teachers in Weston are just wonderful. There's been an unusual rapport in contract negotiations, and a shared vision," he said. "Similarly, the administrators have worked so tirelessly. They are truly civil servants. Their work and effort far surpasses their pay."

Club makes a green gift

The Weston Rotary Club celebrated the 100th anniversary of Rotary International with a birthday gift to Weston.

The steps and walkway on the Town Green received a facelift thanks to the Weston service club, which was founded in 1950 as a chapter of the international club and has completed many community service projects in Weston and neighboring towns.

The new steps and walkway make the Town Green even more inviting, the icing on the

birthday cake for the Rotary members' anniversary celebration.

"There's no Town Green on the face of the planet as nice as Weston. It's beautiful, so I think the addition of the steps just brings it all together," said Rich Devito, a member of the Rotary. About two years ago Rotary members Ward Carter, a former town administrator, and Bruce Lee came up with the idea and started the process to get approvals for the project. The Rotary even created a Web site with drawings and pictures of what the steps would look like after being renovated.

"Once it was all approved, we had to go through the process of raising the funds to be able to actually do this job," Devito said.

The Rotary Club held two Texas Hold 'em poker tournaments to raise money, he said. They also received private donations. About \$25,000 was needed to complete the renovation of the Town Green steps and walkway.

The Weston Rotary previously renovated the steps in the 1970s and Devito said it just needed to be done again.

"Everybody looked at it and said, 'How are we going to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Rotary?' The town wasn't going to spend the money to fix the steps, so we did," he said.

To Iraq with love

When Eileen Beaudoin asked her daughters' first- and second-grade teachers at Woodland School if they would be willing to have children write letters to soldiers stationed in Iraq as a portion of class discussions of Veterans Day, she thought maybe she would get a few letters from each class.

Instead, the idea quickly spread throughout the school, which goes from kindergarten to third grade. Beaudoin said many of the teachers felt this was a great expression of kindness for the Veterans Day and Thanksgiving holidays.

"I got over 200 letters. I was in tears. I was in shock. I expected to get a handful of letters to put in with our little package that we send over and I was just floored. I couldn't believe it. I was just so proud that they did it," she said.

Many of the 200 cards thanked the soldiers for what they were doing and expressed sorrow that they could not be with their families on Thanksgiving, Beaudoin said.

The letters were placed in care packages assembled at Hanscom Air Force Base and sent to the troops.

For the last couple of years, Eileen Beaudoin and her husband Andrew, who is stationed at Hanscom Air Force Base, have sent care packages overseas through the Web site AnySoldier.com

"It's been an ongoing thing. We periodically would send a package over," she said, noting that what is in the package varies, sometimes snacks or hygiene items or just cards.

AnySoldier.com was started in 2003 when Army Sgt. Brian Horn's parents wanted to help him through rough conditions in Northern Iraq by sending care packages. The parents then asked friends and family to send Horn packages for other soldiers in his unit.

"Now they have thousands of contacts for all of the different services, acting as distributors for mail and care packages for people who aren't necessarily getting mail or anything from home," Beaudoin said.

The Web site allows people to request the contact information for soldiers who are willing to accept care packages and then distribute them to their fellow soldiers who do not receive letters or other items.

"So many of them are out in locations where they don't have access to a place where they can get hygiene items, so a lot of times what they're asking for is snack foods, razors, soaps, things you would think they would have that they don't," Beaudoin said.

Beaudoin was preparing to send another care package, one that would arrive between Veterans Day and Thanksgiving, when she thought of talking to her children's teachers about writing letters to the soldiers.

"You can go on the Web site and read the requests and a lot of them love to hear from children, just as kind of a reminder of why they are over there," she said.

Stamp world honors volunteer

A volunteer who has spent endless hours volunteering at the Spellman Museum of Stamps & Postal History on the Regis College campus over the last four decades was honored with the museum's most prestigious award this year.

Weston resident Guy Dillaway was presented with the Spellman Award for his years of dedication to the stamp world and his willingness to share his knowledge freely with people who are interested.

"The award is to recognize people who have made significant contributions both to the Spellman Museum and also to the stamp world in general. Dr. Dillaway has done both," said Ned Sternick, executive director of the Spellman Museum.

The Spellman Award is reserved for the most deserving of people and not given out on a regular basis. Sternick said the last time someone received the award was at least five years ago.

"We had discussions and we felt it was time to appropriately award Dr. Dillaway for his many years of contributions to the stamp community," Sternick said. "We make sure that the award is given to someone who is worthy of getting it, so that's why it's not just given every year indiscriminately."

Dillaway, a resident and dentist in Weston, has been involved with the museum since the mid-1960s and said it is an honor to receive the award. He was on the museum's Board of Trustees for 20 years until recently and now does appraisals for them.

"I've always done volunteer work with them. We had a group that met on Wednesday nights back in the '60s and '70s and I worked on the specialized collections of the museum," Dillaway said.

In the 1970s, he ran an exhibit about the origins of the Penny Black, the world's first official adhesive postage stamp from Great Britain. It was used for little more than a year starting in May 1840.

"I do just about anything they want as long as I have time to do it," Dillaway said.

The Spellman Museum, with more than 2 million items, was founded in 1960 on the Regis College campus. It is one of only two stamp museums in the country, the other being the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

Dillaway's interest in stamps began in 1942 when his uncles went into the military and gave him their stamp collections.

Today Dillaway is well-respected in the stamp world and is known internationally as an expert in the field, Sternick said. Dillaway is also the president of the largest philatelic society in the country, the American Philatelic Society.

Drama kings and queens

The Weston Drama Workshop was honored for excellence this year with one of the New England drama world's top awards.

The 2006 production of "Ragtime" received the prestigious Moss Hart Memorial Award, an award given for outstanding artistic and creative growth in theater. The award is in recognition of the highest standards of excellence in theater production and honors the memory of theater legend Moss Hart.

Full-length plays of merit that portray human courage and dignity are reviewed throughout New England for the annual Moss Hart Memorial Award.

Christopher Brindley accepted the award at a ceremony during the Annual Meeting of the New England Theatre Conference on behalf of Weston Drama Workshop and the staff, cast and technical crew of "Ragtime."

This past season Brindley was stage manager for "Once Upon a Mattress" and played the role of Houdini in "Ragtime." He is currently a theater student at Emerson College.

More than 65 cast and crew members from 21 communities participated in the Weston Drama Workshop production of "Ragtime." Hollis Welch Sullivan of Wellesley, formerly of Weston, directed the production.

"One of the great aspects of Weston Drama Workshop is everyone strives to do his/her best to help reach the highest level of excellence possible. 'Ragtime' was a wonderful and challenging experience for all involved," said Sullivan. "It is one thing to know you have done your best. It is something else entirely to have the New England Theatre Conference agree with you and reward you for it with a Moss Hart Memorial Award."

Weston Drama Workshop is a summer program in all aspects of theater for participants entering sixth grade through age 23, and attracts youth from Weston and surrounding towns. Members of the "Ragtime" cast from Weston included Ann Barkin, Eliza Brooke, Brian Cowe, Katie Fitzgerald, Megan Leddy and Ellie McGuire. Participating in theater tech from Weston were Dalton Cowe and Brenna Perez.

Natasha Haradhvala, Stacey Hart, Gabriel Leiner, Katie Liesener, Cheryl B. Scaparrotta and Susan L. Wagner contributed to this story.

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