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Magazine

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Edwin D. Custer*

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Essay

Flint tradition: "bullboards" and EVM

By Bob Thomas

During a conversation with my wife about the perversion of language in advertising and propaganda, the word "bullboard" popped out as a slip-of-the-tongue mispronunciation of billboard. In an attempt to correct the mispronunciation, "bullboard" slipped out again. After the laughter subsided, the arrival of a new word demanded consideration. We began to define our new term.

A bullboard, we decided, is basically a public exercise in critical thinking. Bullboarding is critiquing the message and the message. What are they trying to tell me and why?

Having existed as long as humans have gathered to separate the wheat from the chaff of the human condition, bullboarding has always been part of the conversation. "That's a bunch of bull!" is a bullboarder we can all recognize as our own.

American journalistic bullboarding has a lively history. Teddy Roosevelt called bullboarders muckrakers. While the term suggests Spiro T. Agnew's "nattering nabobs of negativity," it became a badge of honor conveying honest investigative journalism at its finest.

My favorite muckraker was Isidor Feinstein Stone (1907–1989). I.F. Stone's *Weekly* was a very modest, four-page, black-and-white, self-published bullboard. With his wife Esther, Izzy Stone self-published the *Weekly* out of their home for eighteen years from 1953 – 1971.

Izzy's standard investigative approach was to hoist the hypocrites by their own petards from close readings of public records. His primary source was the Congressional Record. "By their own

words ye shall know them" was Izzy's retort to the myriad deceptions emanating from the District of Corruption.

Izzy understood the essence of bullboarding to be gathering the pertinent information and promulgating it to the people. About his style, Izzy said, "I made no claims to inside stuff. I tried to give information which could be documented, so the reader could check it for himself."

Since Independence Day of 1976, East Village Magazine has provided reportage and commentary on public matters that deeply affect Flint's neighborhoods. Gary Custer's creation and legacy speaks Izzy Stone's language. In the editorial of the very first issue, Gary set the standards for his village bullboard:

"We will do everything within our power to bring you fair, relevant and factual information about your neighborhood. It is up to you to join your neighbors in determining what is fair and proper for your community and then fighting to get it After all, you are doing nothing more nor less than defending your home."

As East Village Magazine enters its thirty-ninth year of publication, and the first year without Gary's direction, all of us will do well to keep that first editorial in mind as we attempt to separate the truth from fiction in Flint's public discourse about what happens to our neighborhood villages.

Bob Thomas is an EVM board member. He disappeared in San Francisco for thirty-five years, only to reappear a decade ago as a retired resident of Flint's Central Park village where he found true love and a new home.

Mayor's race: ready for Hollywood?

By Paul Rozycki

When the State of Michigan eliminated the movie tax credits this year, the official reason was that it cost too much in lost tax revenue, and the credits didn't produce the economic benefits as promised. Maybe that's true, but I suspect there's another reason why they scratched the movie tax breaks no one would believe the kinds of stories we cook up in Michigan.

Would any Hollywood screenwriter or producer ever buy into a story like this?

Consider the following conversation between a prospective Flint movie maker and a Hollywood producer.

Flint Movie Maker: I've got a great idea for a new movie that I want to run by you. I

think you'll love it!

Hollywood Producer: Great. Let's hear it.

Flint Movie Maker: Well, it starts off with a city that's having its first real election in years. It's been in lots of financial trouble and now they're ready to elect a mayor who might have full power over the city. But as the election gets underway, a highly respected city official makes an error and it looks like everyone will have to run as a write-in candidate — leading to much confusion for voters.

Hollywood Producer: OK, go on.

Flint Movie Maker: Then they try to correct the mistake with a new law in the state capitol. But in the midst of all this, someone



Photograph by Edwin D. Custer

“Playful” Flint receives national attention

By Nic Custer

The city of Flint has earned an honor not often associated with its reputation, a national “Playful City USA” designation, for the second year in a row.

The recognition is given to cities that commit to providing opportunities for kids to have active lifestyles. This is measured through infrastructure investments, partnerships between organizations promoting physical activity and support for these issues from community leaders.

KaBOOM!, a national nonprofit focused on providing active play for kids, awards the designation. It is funded through the Humana Foundation.

Crim Fitness Foundation staff collected data and submitted Flint’s applications

both years.

As part of the award, Flint will receive two highway signs that read “Playful City USA.” Crim will work with the city to determine where the signs will be placed. Crim Programs Director Sandra Selby said the designation will provide positive media attention for the city nationally but also opens up doors for future grant opportunities around active living.

Selby cited several programs used in the city’s application. One is the Flint Community Schools’ Community Education Initiative at Brownell/Holmes STEM Academy. Another is the Flint Police Activities League’s work with youth sports at the Haskell Center. A third is the Safe Routes To School grant for a

“walking school bus” program through which a volunteer walks a group of students from the bus stop to their school.

An example of infrastructure supporting active living in Flint is the recent completion of the Genesee Valley Trail, which extends the city’s bicycle trail network west of downtown.

“More than anything else we are excited to be a part of the trend for a healthier environment for people to live and work here in Flint,” Selby said.

Holly and Grand Rapids were both awarded the designation for the fifth time this year.

Nic Custer, East Village Magazine managing editor, can be reached at ncuster@umflint.edu.

Planning Commission approves daycare request

By Nic Custer

A conditional use request to expand the number of children allowed at a daycare in Fairfield Village east of Lapeer Road was unanimously approved at a Flint Planning Commission meeting June 23. Applicant Monique Hendrix said she has been running a state-licensed childcare business for the past 15 years.

Her business has been located out of her home at 801 E. 9th Street for the past seven years since she moved from the

north end. She was previously allowed to have one to six children at a time but requested to increase that to 7 to 12 children. The conditional use can only apply to the property while Hendrix lives there; if she moves away, the conditional use disappears.

She said she only watches children from three families currently and has a van that picks up and drops off most of the kids. She collected signatures from neigh-

bors in support of her request but Commissioner Denise Smith-Allen said she was concerned that the petition did not include the language residents were agreeing to at the top of the page.

Hendrix said she forgot to bring the cover sheet with the specific language people agreed to but she spent four days going door to door gathering signatures and explaining what she wanted to change. Some neighbors had misconcep-

In new headquarters, M.A.D.E. Institute supporting at-risk youth

By Nic Custer

Since being released from prison five years ago, Leon El-Alamin, 34, founder and CEO of the M.A.D.E. Institute, not only has made good personally, but also has been working to support young people in north Flint and keep them from landing in jail.

Now, under his leadership, the institute, a nonprofit corporation supporting at-risk youth and ex-offenders through mentoring and job skills training, is taking a new step forward.

The M.A.D.E. staff recently began cleaning up their new headquarters in the former Sylvester Broom Center, 4119 N. Saginaw St. The center will be renamed the Sylvester Broom Empowerment Village.

M.A.D.E. stands for Money, Attitude, Direction and Education.

The program is currently centered around offering professional and trade skills to ex-offenders and young people they work with.

Since his release after seven years in jail on gun and drug charges, El-Alamin has established a successful housing rehabilitation business and has been running M.A.D.E. out of his own funds and donations. He and his staff are attempting to pass on rehab skills – and life skills – to the 30-plus participants in the programs.

“We can give them knowledge of self, knowledge of history and knowledge of God,” said El-Alamin, “but they need to be able to sustain themselves.”

The group plans to use the first floor of the new space for their programs and hopes to rent out the top two floors to businesses and community groups. The building was purchased by board members of Insight Institute of Neurosurgery and Neuroscience and given to the group to use.

His previous organization, Refine, Reform and Rebuild the Social Identity of our Urban Reality (3Rs), had a similar mission of reduc-

ing recidivism. After creative differences with other founders, El-Alamin said he left the 3Rs and formed M.A.D.E. The title is meant to emphasize how job opportunities are needed for a community to function properly.

Craig Samuels, 49, is the director of mentoring programs and has been working with the group since February. Part of his work is to involve parents in their kids’ lives. He said many inner city kids seek that parental attention elsewhere in negative role models like gang members or drug dealers. He tries to reach them and their parents before that occurs. It is also important to teach the young people about having self-respect and being good citizens at home and in school, he said.

He said he would like each individual to build a personal foundation of morality, respect and other positive character traits. He also tries to get young people to value their education and realize not everyone can plan to be a professional basketball player so they should have a Plan B in life.

The organization has been teaching clients how to rehab blighted homes and a separate property management company was started to employ ex-offenders who have trouble finding job opportunities. El-Alamin has certifications in Green Construction and as a Recovery Coach.

He said people who return from jail have a hard time being employed because they are judged based on their criminal past.

“This keeps economic development in the inner city where it is needed. People need a paycheck to pay for basic food and shelter,” he said about the program.

El-Alamin said he hopes ultimately to expand the program into a one-stop shop for community members and include an ex-offender reintegration program, job placement program, entrepreneurship training and business mentoring.

M.A.D.E. has held free bottled water giveaways over the past few months and given up to 25 kids at a time opportunities to beautify their neighborhood, including cleaning up a park. The program brings together young people with ex-offenders who serve as positive role models.

The program has offered three rehabbed houses to clients in need – one house donated, the other two purchased by El-Alamin through proceeds from his business.

Demetrius Pettis, 34, and his fiancée Natasha Smith, 27, were given a house on East Alma Avenue two months ago. Pettis said he grew up in the streets, was in a gang and sold drugs when he was younger. But he changed

his life and decided to be a role model for his own children.

Through M.A.D.E., Smith has worked on rehabbing houses and taught video filming skills and how to dress professionally to the group’s clients. Pettis and Smith also run Black Intellectual Media (B.I.M.), a newscast through the M.A.D.E. Institute that focuses on issues in the African American community.

El-Alamin said the group accepts donations of computers, basketball equipment, houses, tools, a passenger van and a truck. He has been paying out of pocket for many expenses.

Visit www.madeinstitute.org or call 810-835-8304 for information on space rental and services.

Nic Custer, *East Village Magazine* managing editor, can be reached at ncuster@umflint.edu.

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Four-bedroom second-floor apartment on Crapo St. just off Kearsley St. Recently remodeled featuring hardwood floors, AC, newer appliances, sunroom, smokeless fireplace, laundry and garage. Can be furnished. \$725 per month includes water. Pictures available. E-mail ecuster@sbcglobal.net or write Apartment, 720 E. Second St., Flint MI 48503.

Chippewa burial ground in Carriage Town safe for now

By Andrew Keast

As the Carriage Town Historic District continues to evolve, the American Indian burial ground discovered on Stone Street near University Avenue (formerly Third Avenue) in 2008 stands protected, but the future of this and similar sites will always depend on current attitudes and behavior, according to archaeologist Dr. Beverly Smith.

An associate professor at UM-Flint, Smith was among those responsible for the recent excavation of ancestral remains buried at the site centuries ago, and for the proper return of those remains to the earth – sifted and cleaned, with detritus of more recent manufacture removed.

In a recent interview, Smith explained that regulations imposed by the State Archaeologist's Office require the supervision of an archaeologist whenever major disturbance is to be made on public land. Further, she expressed gratitude for "the goodwill of the Genesee County Land Bank," that was in possession of the site and has now turned it over to the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe of Michigan. "The Tribe is a very sophisticated organization," Smith

added. "They know what they're doing. They are taken extremely seriously and have a very good relationship with the Genesee County Land Bank."

The first indication of the ancient cemetery was unearthed in January of 2008, when ground was broken for a public housing project on Stone Street, near University Avenue. As they started digging, a crew encountered what were later proven to be ancestral remains from a community that lived in this area as many as 1,200 years ago. Construction was halted; in its place, the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe of Michigan began the Stone Street Ancestral Recovery and Repatriation Project.

Working from August 2009 to November, 2011, and assisted by teams of volunteers, the tribe and Dr. Smith identified the remains of 109 individuals, all of which have been settled with appropriate ceremony back into the earth. Investigation showed the site to have been a burial ground for a local community, and those buried here seem to have died in ordinary ways – not in battle, as no weapons were found, and as the diversity of the remains in terms of sex and age is just

what scholars would expect to find in the deceased of such a community at that time.

Although there was some apprehension because the site is outside the historic district's new boundaries, the security of the site itself is assured, according to the Land Bank's Doug Weiland, now that it rests in the hands of the Tribe.

Yet such remains and material culture are always in danger, threatened by ignorance of their presence or a lack of appreciation for what they mean in both historical and human terms, Smith cautioned. "What we're most concerned about is private ownership," she said.

Just as she teaches her students and others that what has been left by the past may be found in "anybody's backyard," Smith suspects that burials in this area were not limited to the property now under the Tribe's protection, so that adjacent land might be likewise sacred – and vulnerable.

Staff writer Andrew Keast can be reached at akeast@umflint.edu.

New Whaley Park rain garden protects Flint River naturally

By Nic Custer

After a false start, the Flint Master Plan Infrastructure and Community Facilities Implementation Task Group created a demonstration rain garden in Whaley Park at the corner of Leith and Lewis streets.

The site at the southern most end of the park is located along a sloping hill next to the Flint River Trail. The rain garden, which is designed to retain and filter storm runoff water before it reaches the river, has a variety of native plants that attract butterflies and pollinators. Storm water runoff can contain motor oil and other chemicals it washes off the streets. This project can help filter the chemicals out before they reach the river.

The master plan task group originally picked a vacant Land Bank-owned lot on Lewis Street to use for the demonstration garden but on the day of the installation, a landlord who owned a rental house next door claimed he had purchased and been maintaining the property for the past nine years. So the group moved the project up the street to the nearby park.

City Planner Kevin Schronce said the six-inch deep garden has a layer of sand and compost soil at the bottom and mulch on top. On the riverside of the garden is a small semi-circle of dirt that helps keep the runoff water near the garden. Around \$800 in federal Community Development Block

Grant funds (CDBG) were used to fund the project. Schronce said the idea was that neighborhood groups could replicate the project and create their own gardens using small beautification grants from local foundations.

The volunteer task group has been planning the project over the last year and wanted to show that naturalization of the parks and vacant land isn't about abandoning them but finding creative ways to maintain them.

A trifold brochure about rain gardens was created to distribute to the community. Schronce said they went through hundreds of strategies before deciding they wanted a project that would provide education on capturing rain water, could reduce maintenance costs and clean water through natural filtration.

Mayor Dayne Walling said this kind of demonstration project enhances the corridor and allows residents to think about new ways to beautify city parks and reduce long-term maintenance costs by lessening the amount of grass needing to be mowed.

Flint Neighborhoods United donated shovels, rakes and other equipment. Mulch and compost soil were purchased from Environmental Wood Solutions.

Chris Frye, representing Flint Neighborhoods United, said when FNU

formed three years ago, their goal was to do what they could to help the city. He said, due to a lack of funds, they knew they couldn't solve the big problems but they have been focusing on reducing blight and maintaining vacant lots in Flint.

"The implementation teams have done a good job of finding new ideas that don't cost a lot of money and can impact the community without impacting the city's budget," Walling said.

Nic Custer, East Village Magazine managing editor, can be reached at ncuster@umflint.edu.

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... Hollywood

(Continued from Page 3.)

nominates a pig to run for mayor. The pig is led down the street in a wagon, squealing its head off. It gets national news coverage and some of the candidates claim nominating a pig is racist.

Hollywood Producer: This is getting pretty weird, but tell me more.

Flint Movie Maker: In the end the law is changed and four candidates make the ballot to run for mayor (the pig drops out). It's a great cast of characters!

Hollywood Producer: Who are they?

Flint Movie Maker: The first candidate is the incumbent mayor. He's a Rhodes Scholar, very well informed about the workings of government, administration and budgets. He's worked with the mayors of other large cities. He's been mayor for a number of years, and has a substantial list of accomplishments. But he hasn't had much real power, so he also gets the blame for much of what went wrong with the city – especially a nasty water issue where residents showed up at meeting yelling at him and waving bottles of dirty water in the air. He's also the only white candidate in a largely African American city.

Hollywood Producer: So who's running against him?

Flint Movie Maker: One candidate is a woman, with a Ph.D. in psychology. She has a long history with the city and has led several organizations dedicated to aiding troubled children. She's currently running a small business in the city. She has major support from both the black business community and some of the city's best known black political leaders. Though she's come across well in public forums, she's never run for office before and has minimal experience in politics.

Hollywood Producer: Sounds like it could be a good plot. Who else is running?

Flint Movie Maker: Here's where it really gets interesting. The next candidate is a convicted felon. He killed a guy who was assaulting his mother and he served 19 years in prison for that. You'd think that would eliminate him right off the bat, but he's on the city council and he has dealt with the criminal conviction openly and honestly and really has turned his life around. He's a dynamic speaker and has done a lot for those who've gone through the same thing he has. Even though he's new to politics, a lot of what he says gets a great response from the community.

Hollywood Producer: Wow! Is that everyone?

Flint Movie Maker: No. The last candidate has been around for a while. He's often called a 'gadfly' because of the many causes

and issues he has pursued over the years. At one time or another he's run for almost every office in sight and finally got elected to the city council the last time around. He's been tossed out of council meetings several times and has an old felony conviction as well. He's currently dealing with a bizarre drunk driving charge that followed his city council election. But he's probably the most entertaining and energetic speaker of the batch. He has proven to be very articulate and informed on some important issues and always has a great response from an audience and may have a significant following among the voters.

Hollywood Producer: Let me get this straight. First, the election almost gets cancelled, then a pig is nominated for mayor. Then the pig drops out. Then, after everything is corrected, you've got a Rhodes Scholar, a PhD psychologist, a convicted murderer and a guy who gets tossed out of his own council meetings running for mayor of this town? You want to make of movie of this? Are you nuts?

Flint Movie Maker: It really could be a great movie!

Hollywood Producer: I don't think so. Instead, we're going with a movie about mutant dinosaurs that escape from a theme park and terrorize the planet. That's a lot more believable than this crazy story.

Flint Movie Maker: It looks like Flint voters will have to write their own script.

Hollywood Producer: That might be a good idea. Meanwhile, I'll stick with the rampaging Velociraptors and Tyrannosaurus Rex.

Paul Rozycki is a retired professor of political science at Mott Community College. He has lived in Flint since 1969 and has been involved with and observed Flint politics for many years. He is author of Politics and Government in Michigan (with Jim Hanley) and A Clearer Image: The History of Mott Community College.



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... Neighborliness

(Continued from Page 8.)

ty of neighborhood was passionate and unparalleled. Those few blocks were Gary's whole world – his neighborhood. He loved it. When I'd go over to proof my columns, on summer evenings he'd often open the front door. We'd sit there with our chairs facing outward, and Flint in the evening light was beautiful – a place where I've made a life, and where I belong. I'm still trying to fall in love with L.A., but here's the big surprise: it is Flint that has captured my heart.

Who would have ever guessed? It's where I've found my neighborhood.

Jan Worth-Nelson is the editor of East Village Magazine and can be reached at janworth1118@gmail.com.

... Daycare

(Continued from Page 4.)

tions that she was starting a group home for teenagers, she said. Commissioner Phyllis McCree said she believed Hendrix but even if the group had the cover sheet it wouldn't prove that the people who signed at the time agreed to the specific language.

Andy Ellard, president of the Fairfield Village Neighborhood Council, said Hendrix was a wonderful neighbor but asked for clarification about how a conditional use works. He said he has been hearing a lot of feedback from other neighbors who were unsure of whether this request would change the character of the single-family neighborhood in a negative way.

Secretary Judy Hovey, Fairfield Village Neighborhood Council, also said she was glad to see more young faces in the neighborhood and Hendrix had been a good neighbor. She recommended Hendrix attend the neighborhood council's July meeting to speak with other neighbors about concerns. Hendrix agreed to attend. Commissioners David Jackson, Robert Jewel and Carol-Anne Blower were absent.

Nic Custer, East Village Magazine managing editor, can be reached at ncuster@umflint.edu.

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Father/Son

By Grayce Scholt

Damn! This wax burns hot!
The feathers stink!
But I will fashion
wings for us and Crete
will be below us,
far behind.

Now help me, boy,
assemble what I've
made and then together
we will catch an upward draft
and fly!

*(And when the West wind blew,
it lifted them with joy
that comes when son and father
soar together upward,
toward an open sky.)*

We rival every bird
that's ever flown!
And Icarus, we're free!
Stay close, my son,
stay close to me!

But father, with wings
that you have made for me,
I dip and dive and glide
through clouds so easily!
Look, father!
Look at me!

Stay close, my boy,
I beg you, *close*!

Why, father, why?
You're old,
your feathered arms
are slow,
but mine are strong.
Just watch me, father,
I am young!
Watch me, father!
Watch!

I'll touch the sun!

Grayce Scholt is a retired English professor from Mott College who wrote art reviews for the *Flint Journal*. Her book of poetry, *Bang! Go All the Porch Swings*, is available online from Amazon. A personal narrative of the poet's life in Europe in the early 1950s, *Vienna, Only You*, is available at gscholt09@comcast.net. The author's new book of poems, *Night Song*, is available from Friesen Press (www.friesenpress.com) and Amazon.

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Village Life Flint beats L.A. for neighborliness

By Jan Worth-Nelson

I'm sitting at the kitchen table this Saturday afternoon in the upstairs hillside apartment in San Pedro, California, where my husband and I live for four or five months a year.

It's a small, bright space – there's a skylight over my head pouring in that sparkling coastal light – and to my left is a sliding glass door beyond which stretches a sweeping expanse of the Los Angeles Harbor.

Today it appears quiet out there – no container ships or cruise ships coursing through the wide channel. It's windy, the U.S. flag fluttering vigorously at the Air Force base on Pacific Avenue and the thick leaves of a tree I can't identify down the block sensuously shimmying. There's a helicopter noisily circling above our hillside, a common event and annoyance.

The neighborhood is dense. On our level of the hillside it's mostly apartments built cheek by jowl and progressively taller up the hillside to capture the harbor views. Below us between Carolina Street and Pacific, it's bungalow territory – tiny old houses that cost upwards of a half million each and are obsessively tended like bonsai trees or toy poodles.

Our apartment is part of a triplex. There's an electronic gate to let us into the property and we all cram our cars into an awkwardly tight garage. We share the back steps with another family and wrangle our trash barrels out a narrow driveway every Tuesday.

The view is spectacular, blessed. At night the lights of the Vincent Thomas Bridge flick on and in the morning, fog romantically blurs the three palm trees on the hillside we call Fred, Ethel and Einstein.

But it gets lonely.

While I've been staring at this vista for more than 10 years now, and while the details of this landscape have been enshrined into numerous poems and essays of mine – and while my husband and I continue to have many wonderful times together here, it still doesn't feel like a "neighborhood" to me.

That's because I'm a Midwesterner – more particularly, a longtime resident of Flint, and more particularly than that, a resident on one specific block in Flint that I have come to love. That block is home. That set of blocks, the canopy of silver maples, the architecture of brick, slate, intersecting rooftops, are in my bones. It comforts me. That landscape, with trees I can identify, birds I feed and neighbors whose daily lives I know almost as well as my own – all that is

what seems to nurture me and provide solace to my spirit.

Here, the only way I know my neighbors' names is through clipped and legalistic emails from our landlady. There is no presumption of intimacy even though we are within feet of each other's decks – far tighter proximity than on Maxine Street's lush summer lawns.

If we accidentally bump into each other, as we inevitably do in these close quarters, there is no lingering over the trash barrels, no jawing about the price of water or the crime up the hill. There's just a quick hi – the averted eye, the rush to get back to our own protected spaces.

People seem suspicious here, guarded, tense and uneasy in the huge metropolis. My husband says it might be because there are so many undocumented people around – nobody wants to be known, nobody wants to be found out. L.A. is a place where you can be anonymous. Being part the four million packed into the arid zone between ocean and mountains can be, for some, a comfort and relief. And whoever can afford those minibungalows down the hill are likely in debt up to their eyeballs – it makes them hang on to every inch like little Lichtensteins.

And then there's the drought. It sometimes feels as if the four-year-long dry spell has permeated our spirits, sucking up essential generosity, desiccating the sweet anointments of neighborliness and closing us up with worry and fear.

The people in the back apartment, with whom we share a dozen narrow steps to our respective back doors, have an adorable little girl. I found out her name once and keep forgetting it. One day her family and I ended up going up the stairs together.

"This is MY house," the little girl squealed accusingly at me as I wrestled my grocery bags around them. "I know," I said, "and it's a really great house, isn't it? I live here, too," I said, trying to strike a mild, kind tone. My sudden sharp urge to defend my territory to a four-year-old came as an unpleasant surprise.

While I'm writing this I keep thinking about Gary Custer, our recently deceased publisher and my great friend. At the end of his life he was spectacularly reclusive, staying to himself in that disheveled office on Second Street. He slept there on a palette in the back room the last few years, only leaving to ride his bike to his place on Avon Street for a shower, or to hang out on his brother's back deck for a couple of beers.

Yet his devotion to the concept and reali-

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