

Inside the Observer

# Tip led to DWI investigation

It shouldn't surprise us that someone charged with drinking and driving would fail to show up in court.

But it may astound you to read on the front page of today's Observer that hundreds of DWI suspects go unpunished in Mecklenburg simply because the officers who arrested them don't make it to court.



Rick Thames  
Editor

On Monday, you'll read another alarming finding of this ongoing Observer investigation: Most DWI suspects who skip their court dates are never tracked down and forced to face a judge.

No, these rogues are literally back in the driver's seat, threatening you and your loved ones. Maybe sober, maybe not.

These problems aren't unfamiliar to police and prosecutors. But even public officials didn't know how seriously they corrode the



PHIL HOFFMAN - STAFF PHOTO

Gary Wright, Ames Alexander and Ted Mellnik (from left) worked on the investigation.

criminal justice system until now.

Reporters Ames Alexander, Ted Mellnik and Gary Wright spent months documenting what actually happens to drivers suspected to be under the influence of alcohol. In all, the three analyzed more than 1,000 files by hand, and an additional 147,000 cases by computer.

It all began with a tip from you, the public. A year ago, several concerned citizens met with our staff to voice concerns that DWI defendants routinely escaped any form of punishment.

That tip led Gary to leaf through several months of calendars in Mecklenburg's District Court. He was surprised by the

frequent references to DWI suspects with the notation "NG (not guilty)."

"I was skeptical at first," Gary said. "But the longer I looked, the more clear it became that there was a pattern."

In fact, he and his colleagues would go on to confirm several patterns.

In August, we published "DWI: Sobering Acquittals," available at [www.charlotte.com/mld/charlotte/news/special\\_packages/dwi/](http://www.charlotte.com/mld/charlotte/news/special_packages/dwi/). Those stories revealed that N.C. judges dismissed the cases of more than a third of defendants who had tested over the legal alcohol limit but fought the charges.

Stories today and Monday point to how suspects manage to evade the system before they even reach a judge.

The stories also point to possible solutions in other communities that concluded it doesn't have to be this way.

I believe you'll conclude the same.

## People

### 'Sorry women' stay, S.C. survivor goes

The latest victim on CBS's "Survivor: Vanuatu - Island of Fire" is S.C. drill sergeant Lea "Sarge" Masters, and he isn't happy about it.

Masters was voted off the island by an alliance of six women in Thursday's show, a week after the same group voted off another male player, Rory Freeman. "I can say a lot of hateful things," Masters said Friday. "In my mind, it's just a way of saying, 'a group of sorry women.'" He referred to the six women as the "estrogen city" alliance.

Incidentally, in his biography for the "Survivor" series, Masters, 40, listed Lowe's Motor Speedway in Concord as one of his favorite places to visit. — ASSOCIATED PRESS



Masters

### Schiffer gives birth to girl in London

Supermodel Claudia Schiffer gave birth to a girl Thursday in London. The baby weighed 7 pounds 2 ounces, and mother and daughter were reported to be doing well. The couple didn't announce her name. She is the second child for Schiffer and film director Matthew Vaughn, who married two years ago. They have a 22-month-old son, Caspar.

— KNIGHT RIDDER



Schiffer

### Really!? 4th 'Surreal Life' under way

VHI is getting a new "Surreal Life."

Another batch of not-so-A-list celebrities moved into a Hollywood mansion this month to have their lives together taped for a fourth season of the reality show, the network said.

The latest cast of "The Surreal Life" includes former WWE wrestler Joanie Lauer, aka Chyna; pixie-haired guitarist Jane Wiedlin of The Go-Gos; actor Christopher Knight, who played Peter Brady on "The Brady Bunch"; shaggy-haired model Marcus Schenkerberg; sassy rapper Da Brat; Mini-Me actor Verne Troyer; and Adrienne Curry, winner of the first "America's Next Top Model."

The fourth season will premiere Jan. 9. — KNIGHT RIDDER

## Section H | Arts & Books

### S.C. LOTTERY

Here are the winning numbers selected Saturday in the S.C. lottery. Powerball numbers were drawn too late for this edition.

**PICK 3:** Midday: 8-9-0 Evening: 4-0-3  
**PICK 4:** Midday: 1-9-9-6 Evening: 6-8-4-9

# News2Use

YOUR GUIDE TO EVERYDAY LIFE

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## Yardwork

# Why bag leaves? Try mulching

Knight Ridder

If your yard is covered in leaves, you have two choices: Bag them or use them to provide your landscape with nutrients. Here are some ways you can use the leaves in your landscape:

- Avoid mowing more than a tiny amount of leaves into the lawn. The pieces can smother the grass, especially right now when grass in the Piedmont is growing vigorously.

- If you have lots of leaves, rake or blow them onto the driveway and mow over them several times. Use the shredded leaves as mulch under shrubs, in ground cover, flower beds and your vegetable garden. Use 3 to 4 inches or more. The leaves settle after watering to about half the height.

As mulch, the leaves will protect the plant roots from cold temperatures and help hold moisture evenly in the soil. The shredded leaves will continue to decompose and provide the plants with essential nutrients.

If the rough look of the leaf mulch is unattractive, cover it with a thin layer of pine bark mulch

- If you're preparing a new flowerbed, ground cover area or vegetable garden, add shredded leaves to the soil by rototilling or turning the shredded leaves into the soil with a garden spade. By spring, the leaves will have decomposed enough to plant.

Finished compost is about one-tenth the original volume. The clay soil in this area greatly benefits from the organic matter. Do not worry about using too much.

- If you have more leaves than you can use as mulch, start a compost pile. The debris will compost in a few months with no turning. If you turn the leaf pile, it will become compost faster.

Or buy or make a compost bin. A large trash can with the bottom removed would work. Put a rough layer of debris, including twigs, stems and small branches on the bottom of the bin to allow air to circulate.

Then add a thick layer of leaves and top it with a thin layer of high-nitrogen fertilizer or soil. Keep building layers. As leaves settle, add some more. Keep the pile slightly damp and stir it to hasten decomposition.



KNIGHT RIDDER/TRIBUNE ILLUSTRATION

In the spring, work the finished compost into your flower beds or vegetable garden. — OBSERVER GARDEN EDITOR NANCY BRACHEY CONTRIBUTED.

## Glad You Asked

# Horror stories from restaurant inspector

**Q.** I was at a snack bar in Huntersville recently that had a sanitation rating of 102. How is that possible? Are the germs scared away or something? — Walt Johnson, seventh grade, Fort Mill Middle School

You know how kids today can get a grade point average of more than a perfect 4.0 by taking advanced placement courses? Same thing's going on here.

If a restaurant owner has no violations, AND attends a course for extra-credit, the joint can get one whopper of a sanitation score.

On the flip side of the burger, if numerous violations knock a score under 70, authorities close it down.

Environmental health supervisor Lynn Lathan has been inspecting restaurants in Mecklenburg County for 20 years. She describes it as "the most interesting job I've ever had. I walk in and people regularly say, 'Oh no! Not you! Not today!'"

What's the worst thing she's seen? "I went to check out one place, and ..." She pauses, trying to describe the scene. "Someone had been hunting. There was a whole skinned deer lying on top of cooked rice that was to be served to customers."

Another time one of Lathan's colleagues was inspecting a meat market when he came across a frozen raccoon.

Please, hold the mayo ... and the rabies. "A LOT of people are doing a VERY good job out there," she says, looking to quell fears of a Bambi delicatessen near you.

What should people know about restaurant inspections? Two things, Lathan says. First: "We're not the clean police. Cleanli-



COURTESY OF WALT JOHNSON

Nice shirt, kid. Walt Johnson of Fort Mill, S.C., dressed in an official Glad You Asked T-shirt, points out an exemplary sanitation rating.

ness certainly factors into it. But we're looking at sanitation issues. How do people handle the food? Is it cooked to the right temperature?"

Second: You can check it all out for yourself. Go online to [www.charmeck.org](http://www.charmeck.org), then click on "health" and "food service and restaurant inspections." You can look up inspections reports by restaurant or even by neighborhood.

### Buck dodgers in the 21st century

**Q.** When was a dollar worth a dollar? — Nancy Smaragdus

Whenever you got your first paycheck, because that's how you'll always think of money. In other words, it's all relative. There is no baseline for the actual worth of a sawbuck. That's what Federal Reserve economists told me.

But if you wonder how much a dollar from

your youth would buy in goods and services today, you can easily find out. There's a cool consumer price index calculator at the Federal Reserve site online at [tinyurl.com/55q6w](http://tinyurl.com/55q6w). Just punch in an amount, a year from the past, and 2004.

Here's what bucks from past decades would be worth today:

- \$1 in 1920 = \$9.47 today.
- \$1 in 1930 = \$11.34 today.
- \$1 in 1940 = \$13.52 today.
- \$1 in 1950 = \$7.85 today.
- \$1 in 1960 = \$6.40 today.
- \$1 in 1970 = \$4.88 today.
- \$1 in 1980 = \$2.30 today.
- \$1 in 1990 = \$1.45 today.
- \$1 in 2000 = \$1.10 today.

### HAVE A QUESTION?

E-mail Jeff Elder at [glad@charlotteobserver.com](mailto:glad@charlotteobserver.com) or call him at (704) 358-5032. (E-mail is preferred.)

## Corrections and Clarifications

The Observer strives to be accurate and fair. Those values are crucial to our relationship with readers. We are committed to correcting our mistakes promptly. Corrections from all main Observer sections are published here. Errors on Opinion and Viewpoint are corrected on those pages. Errors from our regional publications are corrected on page 2 of those sections.

A photo of a woman in Saturday's Business section with a story about a former Enron employee's acquittal was misidentified. The woman in the photo was the former employee, Sheila Kahanek.

If you see a mistake, please call us at (704) 358-5040 or e-mail us at [corrections@charlotteobserver.com](mailto:corrections@charlotteobserver.com).

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