

Mblem

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View from a Southern Porch
RVC Column
By Mike Seigler

Members are always telling me reasons they like being in Mensa. "The conversations are interesting." "I met my wife in Mensa." "I don't have to pretend to be stupid." are examples. Invariably though each statement is followed by a "but". "But, what do I get from my membership that has real value?" (Hopefully, the guy is not saying that in front of his Mensa bride.) The following is a list of benefits that you are eligible for as a Mensa member without having to turn 50. (If this is too much like an advertisement, skip on down to the bottom. You won't hurt my feelings.)

- Alamo Car Rental - Members receive unlimited mileage and year-round discounts.
- Association Cruise Club - Cruise Club rewards, benefits, and savings on cruises.
- Capital for Knowledge - Education funding and refinancing education loans.
- Choice Hotels International - A 20 per cent discount off the regular room rate at Comfort Inns, Clarion Hotels, Econo Lodge and several other hotel chains.
- Edmund Scientifics - Save 15 per cent on everything in their catalog.
- GEICO - The auto insurance program offers members quality insurance.
- Hertz Rental Car - Discounts are available on a wide variety of rental needs.
- Long-Term Care Quote - Get online policy comparisons for long-term care from sound insurance companies.
- Marsh Affinity Group Services - Members can save on several types of insurances including life and accident insurance.
- MBNA - American Mensa credit cards and CD and money market accounts are available to qualified applicants.
- Mental Floss - Members get 18 percent off the subscription price.
- MyHomeBenefits - Provides members with a simplified moving process and group discounts on professional moving services.
- National Car Rental - Mensans receive unlimited mileage and year-round discounts.
- Personal Vacation Club - Mensans can research, design and reserve vacation travel through an incredibly easy-to-use website.
- Popular Science - Mensans can subscribe for a special rate of \$10 a year.
- VPI Pet Insurance - The name says it all. This can help pet owners pay for their best friends treatments without taking out a second mortgage.

These aren't the only benefits. There are many short-term specials that can save you real money. Go to American Mensa's website (www.us.mensa.org) to get all the details on these and other member benefit programs. It's always a smart choice to save money.

Finally, I want to remind everyone about two of the RGs that are coming up in the near future. Piedmont Area Mensa will be hosting the AMC meeting at the Carolinah RG March 24-26. Central Alabama Mensa will be holding the Owlabama RG May 5-7. Both are great parties and are real benefits of being a Mensan.

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At the liar's club official recruitment office, also known as reception desk of a clinic or a hospital:
Receptionist: "How are you today?"
Patient: "fine"

SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- *Really nothing interesting in this issue*
- *Well, try the puzzle/article on page 3*
- *There are so few articles I have to use large fonts*
- *Large fonts are good for elderly*
- *Submit your articles*

The little things mean so much by David Skaar

A whole year has gone by, and it is St. David's day again (at least it is the day that I write this, March 1; it will be well past that date by the time these words see print, if they even do). As those with good memories may recall, it was the subject of St. David's day that inspired the first column I wrote for the MBlem. As I stated then, the key theme of David's philosophy was "do the little things", and I am a big one for the little things. Those who know me best know this is true, as the smaller and less significant the subject, the more agitated I can become over it. I have a good explanation for this, as I have decided that the large things are completely out of my control, so there's no point in worrying about them, I only try to deal with the things that I might actually have some power over.

I have therefore spent the last year (more or less) writing a series of pointless articles, mainly on subjects that I have no expertise in, for the purpose of relentlessly shilling for Culture Quest and the glorification of trivia. Several times I have been tempted to tackle a meaningful subject, say something profound, and try to change the world. But I stuck to my principles, maintained my standards, and have tried to write only articles that will have no lasting effects on those who choose to use their valuable time to read them, and leave the world essentially unchanged. In fact, at this very moment, I could be working on actual scientific papers, but my better nature prevailed.

And now, the little things.

One of the biggest little things around is the electron. Our modern electronic world is based on electrons (hence the adjective electronic), after all, electricity is the

movement of electrons. And anyone who's been hit by lightning, been defibrillated, or been shocked by 110ACV house current and 2000DCV current from a laboratory power supply (that last person would be me) has a healthy respect for the power of the little electrons moving along. The glowing red hot burners on an electric stove, or red hot wires in a toaster are the result of high resistance to the movement of electrons. The vacuum tubes that made up the earliest electronic equipment, radios, TVs, and the first computers, operate by generating beams of electrons. Another kind of vacuum tube is the cathode ray tube, that, until recently, was the basis for television screens and computer monitors. Even after the retirement of vacuum tubes in electronics, the transistors and integrated circuits that came along depend on the movement of electrons for information storage and processing.

Another way that I've dealt with electrons in a potentially unhealthy manner is in handling radioactive elements. The beta particles emitted by the radioactive decay of unstable elements are fast moving electrons. Molecular biology owes a great deal to beta particles, as whenever biologists want to learn about DNA, RNA, or protein, they radiolabel it. The original methods for sequencing DNA used beta-emitting phosphorus-32 or sulfur-35 to make DNA segments detectable by x-ray film. But there are so many more uses. In protein studies, beta-emitters are always being thrown around, and a great deal of what is known about enzyme activity has been learned by attaching beta emitting labels to things.

Another current application of beta particles is in luminous paint. Most glowing watch dials use fluorescent chemicals that absorb energy from light, and gradually release it.

However, the glowing wears out over time once out of the light. The traditional solution to that was radium, which glows of its own volition, all the time, as it emits alpha, beta, and gamma particles. This somewhat hazardous method was replaced by the much less energetic tritium, which emits very (very, very) low energy beta particles (they are so weak that they can not even penetrate the surface layer of dead cells on your skin). In tritium's case, the release of these low energy electrons also produces enough light that a capsule containing tritium attached to the hands of a watch will glow well enough to be seen clearly in the dark. As the tritium decays (with a 14-year half-life), the glow diminishes, but this is a matter of years, not hours.

Another terribly important function of electrons is in chemical reactions. As everyone learns (or ought to) in basic chemistry, the reactive properties of elements are defined by their electrons. The number of electrons, the shells they occupy, and the number of empty spaces to be filled in an electron shell all determine what sort of compounds that element can make, and how energetically it can do so. One particularly interesting example is fluorine. Fluorine is the most electronegative element, meaning that it is the most "electron-hungry" element, desperately wanting one more electron to fill out it's outer orbital shell, making it just about the most reactive element. The high electronegativity of fluorine also means that it draws in its existing electrons much more closely relative to other elements, giving it one of the smallest ratios of electron shell radius to atomic number. Therefore, the very small size of fluorine is part and parcel of its unique properties, and so in this case the little thing is, once again, terribly important. (Conti. to P 4 "little")

The high electronegativity of fluorine makes it tremendously reactive, in fact, it is fluorine that formed the first compound with an otherwise unreactive noble gas, to make xenon hexafluoride. Isaac Asimov wrote an essay about the process required to create this compound, as the preparation of pure fluorine gas was incredibly complicated. Fluorine compounds are corrosive to most things they come into contact with, and as soon as fluorine gas is generated, it reacts with the first thing it touches, making it very difficult to hang onto. One of the first scientists to create a transient cloud of fluorine gas leaned in to get a look, and it fogged his glasses. The fog didn't wipe off, as the glass had been etched from where the fluorine had partially dissolved it (lucky man, it could have been his eyes that were etched). It reminds me of the old brain-teaser about the ultimate solvent that will dissolve absolutely anything, and here's a sample of it right here in this flask. Fluorine reacts with the silicon in glass, so the gas, and hydrofluoric acid, can not be kept in glass containers (at least not for long). Hydrofluoric acid also reacts with titanium, a metal notorious for its passivity and unwillingness to participate in chemical reactions.

Another famous property of fluorine is its great toxicity, again, due to its high reactivity. Fluorine aggressively and irreversibly binds to magnesium, which is required for a great many enzymes, including ones for the generation of energy from sugars. It also binds up calcium, which is also involved in a number of processes, one of which is the conduction of nerve impulses. This is another reason for extra handling precautions when dealing with hydrofluoric acid. Because fluorine is such a small atom, hydrofluoric acid can penetrate straight through the skin to muck things up, instead of

giving nasty burns, like most common acids.

It is these unpleasant effects that cause the controversy over fluoridated drinking water and toothpaste. Too much fluoride is definitely bad, with chronic exposure to elevated levels resulting in decalcification of teeth and bones. The argument for fluoride is that the low levels in drinking water, and the topical application to teeth inhibits growth of cavity causing bacteria, binds the calcium in the tooth enamel and prevents it from being demineralized, and can help fill in spots that have been acid-damaged, and prevent further deterioration. The jury is still out on whether low levels do any good, and whether they may actually be harmful, and probably will be for quite some time. A big fuss over a little thing.

And now, the little questions.

- 1 – Saybolt Universal Seconds and Stokes are used to measure what property of liquids?
- 2 – The Rockwell scale measures what property of metals?
- 3 – What element was first discovered off the planet earth?
- 4 – Marie Curie named an element for her home country, which one?
- 5 – What fluorine compound was important for the Manhattan project?
- 6 – What is the name of element 93, usually overshadowed by its more famous neighbors on the periodic table.
- 7 – What is the English name for the element wolfram?
- 8 – What do the alkali metals do when put in water?

See answers on P. 6 "Little"

Greensboro Coordinator's Corner

by Ellen Muratori

Can't tell you too much about what happened in Greensboro for the last few weeks, because I've been visiting my daughter who lives in Key Largo, employed as a park ranger for Florida's John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park. Speak of dying and going to Paradise? Why not live in it!!

Anyway, that's not what you want to hear, is it? So let me tell you about a Mensa event that has been happening every Second Thursday of the month, right here in our own North Carolina, just across the border in Winston-Salem in the Charlotte/Blue Ridge Mensa group. In keeping with Mensa tradition, it's called Thecond Thursday, a supper occurring on April 13, 6:30pm, at Lucky 32 restaurant, 109 S. Stratford Road in Winston-Salem. Because usually between 12 to 14 members and guests show up, we are requested to RSVP to Byron West at bwest3@earthlink.net no later than Monday, April 9.

Need a change of scenery? Try us out at Lucky 32!
Ellen....summerellen@mymailstation.com

Delancey Street by Ed Williams

One of the most interesting places I visited during my 16 year "career" as a State Department interpreter (Spanish) was Delancey Street in San Francisco. I went there twice in the early '90s with Latin American visitors whose interests included the rehabilitation of criminals and drug addicts. Delancey Street is a unique organization. It was founded 35 years ago by a lady named Mimi Silbert as an informal support group for drug addicts in her apartment. It steadily expanded and is now a successful business - or series of businesses - which is mostly self-supporting, though it gets private donations. It does not receive government funds, except for a grant to Silbert's foundation.

Delancey Street operates over a dozen businesses, staffed entirely by present and former clients - including the top executives. How does it work? They accept applicants and even recruit some. They go to prisons and seek out people they think would do well in rehabilitation, and persuade judges to parole

them into their care. Homeless people and drug addicts who have heard about Delancey Street come to them. They accept some - they can't, of course, accept all. They have very strict criteria and rules. The applicants must pledge to stay for at least two years in housing provided for them, and to take the treatment and training they will receive. Violence, threats, and drug or alcohol abuse will get you thrown out. The first thing they do on arrival is spend a couple of months getting off drugs or alcohol, if necessary, and start doing little jobs, like sweeping and cleaning up.

In about 1990, Delancey Street was given a city lease on a full block of what used to be a run-down warehouse district in the Embarcadero. This crummy area has been turned into a beautiful residential and retail center (including an elegant restaurant) which houses the 1,000 participants who are there at any one time. Over 14,000 people have passed through, and have gone out into the world. The new arrivals, after the first couple of months are started on the road to getting a high school equiva-

lency certificate and to learning a trade or skill. The organization operates at least a dozen businesses, including a moving and trucking company, an automotive service, a high-tech print shop, a catering company, a company which makes college and institutional souvenirs, a cafe and bookstore, and others. These businesses are also training schools. All the employees and executives are residents. Many stay well beyond the 2-year minimum. I was amazed to learn that the top executive of one of these companies, who was showing us around, was a paroled murderer. He looked and behaved like any other business executive. Their "graduates", especially those in Culinary Arts, are much in demand in San Francisco. There is a very low rate of recidivism. They have an extremely impressive record of turning the dregs of society into successful, tax-paying citizens.

And, by the way, there are a few other Delancey Street locations around the country, including one in Greensboro. I forgot to ask Mimi Silbert why she named it after that street in New York. She deserves some major prize.

VOLUNTEER TO BE A STORYTELLER By Marion Gaskins

When I was a child, I had a wonderful collection of books with stories ranging from those for beginning readers up to near-adult. There were fairy tales, stories about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, and Tales from Uncle Remus.

I still remember The Nightingale, where the plain little bird sang so beautifully but which the Emperor replaced with a glittery, mechanical creature. Almost too late, the Emperor realized his mistake, but the little bird forgave him.

The collection of stories told by the fictional Uncle Remus show the intelligence and imagination of a strong people, held in slavery in the United States and forbidden to learn to read and write. They were part of an oral tradition until at some point the stories were written down. I felt great respect for the cunning rabbit who outwitted his enemies, the fox

and the bear, and tricked them into throwing him into the briar patch, where he was able to escape.

Probably because of the stories in the books of my childhood, I have had a lifelong interest in the many peoples of the world. Many of those books I loved are no longer available, but hopefully the folk tales remain within their respective cultures. Wouldn't it be great if these stories could be shared at the MENSA World Gathering? Not only would they entertain, but they would give insight into the people of the many cultures who created them.

Come share with us those facets of your cultures that created those folk tales. Perhaps we can find a way to preserve them as well as to plant the seeds in our children that will grow not only into fascination but also into respect.

Let Volunteer Coordinator Kay Klasen know if you'd like to volunteer to share your stories for Kids Trek or in the adult program or maybe even to entertain us in Hospitality.

Voting and Ballots

Since the editor neglected to give a closing date for voting, and since it is unfair for the procrastinators who depend on reminders for doing things, including breathing, the election chair decided to extend the deadline to April 8 to send in your ballot that was on the last page of last month's Mblem.

Three Dimensional Animation

LG News

by Shiangtai Tuan

Movie making used to be real people, real animals, and real things in front of cameras. Even quite early in the movie history, cartoons came into existence though they show us what is not in existence. It was a long time before cartoon characters appeared in a real people movie. In the meanwhile, computer animation was gradually developed. In the 70's, you truly used to be the Duke University technical contact to the four National Science foundation supercomputing centers and used to go there for technical trainings. That was the time weather forecasting models were "the thing". In the Cornell center, a researcher was known for his growing Mandelbrot graphics. He sold a lot of postcards too. When North Carolina Supercomputing center was built, yours truly was one of the team with people from the other universities in the area to search for the most suitable computer. In 1980, NCSC was setup. In the 80's, in one of our LG's theme was computer animation

Art Buchwald

At Large Column

by Shiangtai Tuan

For me, for years, the only two enjoyment of read the morning paper were the comic's page and Art Buchwald's column. The former was for entertainment and the latter was serious reading! For years, I have not seen Art Buchwald's name. I thought the paper got too conservative to carry his column. Only recently I heard he was sick. I found that out by chance. I was listening on the radio in the car one day and I was listening to Diane Reems show. It was an interview of Art Buchwald by Diane Reems. He told her that he was not to continue his dialysis treatment. That, for a person with kidney failure, is nothing but a quick death. It was very surprising news to me and I was really sad for that.

Art Buchwald makes satirical comments on politics and on our society. He puts everything in a humorous way. He would make statements so outrageous it is obvious he meant the opposite. This technique is often used in Chinese too. There is even a name for it: "suo fan hua" (talking backwards). In general, I think the Americans have more sense of humor than Chinese but not used to this technique. I remember once I wrote an article when the then president wanted to make a constitutional amendment to make burning American flag a crime. In the article I wrote: "while we are at it, we might as well make a constitutional amendment that everybody should eat spinach but not broccoli." People even wrote me to argue about why we should not propose constitutional amendments about spinach!

presented by a researcher from NCSC. After Star Wars pictures, Computer created animation has been the common place for "high-tech" pictures. Young adults probably do not remember even the first Star War movie was mostly mechanical trick, not many computer generated scenes, if any.

Our guests, Darryl and MaryAnn Freedman, have been involved with photography, movie making, theater, and computers technology for a long time. They helped their son start a business on animation software. No, they are not competing with Spielberg or any Hollywood firms. However, the 3-d animation software they develop can be used by common people like us. In May, we are fortunate to have them to talk to us about their 3-D animation. Not only that, they are even inviting us to their house. This way they can show us their "blue background" in their filming studio.

It is April 15, the usual time.

Date: 2006. 4.15, the third Saturday.

Time: 7:30 PM.

Contact info, place and directions: See back of calendar page.

In a family, when the children were growing up, they started to teach them to pray. The children were very excited about it and started to teach their pets to pray. It was a great sight to see the cat and the dog put their cute little paws at the side of the bed to say their prayers. One night, the parents decided to listen in. They heard the cat says: "Oh my Lord, after I die and when I go to Heaven, May I have my claws back?"

Answers to "Little" on P. 4

- 1 – viscosity
- 2 – hardness
- 3 – helium, discovered in the sun (helios) from its spectrum line
- 4 – polonium (surprise, she was Polish, remember?)
- 5 – uranium hexafluoride, which, as a gas, can be separated into the U-235 and U-238 forms.
- 6 – neptunium, falling between uranium (92) and plutonium (94)
- 7 – tungsten
- 8 – They generate hydrogen, and explode.