

NEWS OF THE WEIRD

BY CHUCK SHEPHERD

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Government in action

• Servicemembers Legal Defense Network activists told reporters in June that at least 59 U.S.-trained Arabic speakers have been ejected from the military because they're gay (and in each case despite being a native English-speaker who completed intense, expensive military language school). But a month before that, as symbolic of the government's shortage of Arabic speakers, an official of the U.S.-funded Al Hurra Middle East television service admitted that it had recently, inadvertently, broadcast several pro-terrorist programs (including an hour-long tirade encouraging violence against Jews), attributing the error to the fact that no senior Al Hurra news manager speaks Arabic.

• Britain's Home Office said in April that the country's 1,500 most "disruptive" families could soon be moved into special communities by themselves, with 24-hour supervision, if they didn't stop causing trouble

(trouble which the Home Office figured has cost taxpayers the equivalent of more than \$1 billion to deal with).

• Among the tax sweeteners offered by states to welcome relocating businesses is Texas' easy-to-get farmland benefit. When the huge Fidelity Investments company bought a 300-acre plot near Dallas for a new office, it made sure to put 25 head of cattle on the land, which the Boston Herald found reduced its real-estate tax bill by about \$360,000 a year under what it would pay without the cattle. Also, federal farm subsidies continue to be skewed, as well. In May, a coalition of Washington groups unveiled a searchable computer database listing agriculture subsidies by recipient, which revealed that such "farmers" as David Letterman and basketball player Scottie Pippen receive federal funds for incidental farm uses of their land. ■

Democracy

• In May, a jury in Weld County, Colo., declined to hold Kathleen Ensz accountable for leaving a flier containing her dog's droppings on the doorstep of U.S. Rep. Marilyn Musgrave, apparently agreeing with Ensz that she was merely exercising free speech.

• Jenny Bailey was elected mayor in Cambridge, England, in May, and her companion-partner Jennifer Liddle (a former Cambridge city council member) became the equivalent of "first lady"; both Bailey and Liddle were born males and became women as young adults. ■

Great art

University of Western Australia artists Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr blend art with science, extracting living cells from animals and growing them on top of biodegradable scaffolds so that when the scaffolds disappear, a living entity remains, in the shape of the scaffold. At the Israeli Center for Digital Art in Holon, Israel, in April, they unveiled "Vic-

timless Leather," or actual animal skin cells that grew into leather without harming an animal, but their previous work has included growing steak from lamb muscle cells and the preparation for growing wings on a pig (though, in the final stage of that project, they were turned down by the exhibitor, who was apparently grossed out). ■

Latest religious messages

In May, "more than 300 people" in Augusta, Ga. (according to the Augusta Chronicle), assembled at the Municipal Building explicitly to pray for the city, following weeks-long controversies on the city commission. In June, "more than 300 people" in Destin

(according to the Northwest Florida Daily News), assembled at the Destin Worship Center and raised their hands in joyful prayer for a rebound in the real estate market in the coastal communities in the Florida panhandle. ■

Fine points of the law

Thomas Wimberly, 74, was arrested in July 2006 for stealing two hot dogs (value: \$2.11, including tax) from a Quik Trip convenience store in Wichita, Kan. (though he said he had merely forgotten to pay). Because it was Wimberly's third misdemeanor theft charge, Kansas law required that the count be upgraded to a felony. Wimberly could not immediately

make bail, and in fact was incarcerated for 71 days before his trial (once being subject to a bond of \$100,000), but prosecutors insisted on a trial. In April, a jury of 12 people (reportedly angry at having been called to such an insignificant case) found Wimberly not guilty. (The penalty, according to state law, if he had been convicted, was 12 months' probation.) ■

Crime waves

• In May, a woman in Jacksonville, Ill., reported the theft of a bong from her house; she told police that she valued it because it belonged to her son, who is in prison, and it is all she had to remember him by.

• The sheriff's office in Clyman, Wis., reported that a man called 911 on April 21, alarmed that he had just paid \$20 to a woman at a club after a lap dance and then realized that she was not the one who had danced for him. ■

Least competent criminals

In May, the inept Christopher Emmorey, 23, was sentenced to two years in prison for robbing a Peterborough, Ontario, bank, from which he had intended to take \$2,000. However, the teller said she could only give him \$200 and

must take out a \$5 fee because Emmorey is not a regular customer. Emmorey stood stoically while she did the paperwork and then handed him \$195, which he took and walked away (only to be arrested a short time later). ■

Undignified deaths

• A 54-year-old man was killed while running to catch his bus in Greater Manchester, England, in May; he accidentally ran smack into a lamppost and fell into the street, where the bus ran over him.

• Police in Los Angeles said in May that they

believe a 21-year-old man deliberately parked his car on railroad tracks, with his girlfriend inside and a train approaching. However, the girlfriend survived (with serious injuries), and the man was killed by shrapnel from the collision as he was fleeing. ■



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