

NEWS OF THE WEIRD

BY CHUCK SHEPHERD

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The Republic of Brinkle

► Donna and Joel Brinkle of Deltona, raised a family and held respectable jobs until, in the 1990s, they declared themselves a sovereign nation and stopped paying taxes. Subsequently, the county took their home, and they now appear to be living on the handouts of their son and their church. But they have become irritations by filing property liens against government officials (including, once, President Clinton) who

fail to recognize their independent authority. Once, they tried to buy a \$700,000 house with a "money order" drawn on their home-made currency. Even though the Brinkles' game plan has failed on every single point (and Joel even did some jail time), the couple remains chipper, according to an October Orlando Sentinel report, certain that some higher official will soon vindicate them. ■

Recurring themes

► Buddy, the German shepherd trained to punch 911 on a special phone and bark, came through in the clutch in September when owner Joe Stalnaker of Scottsdale, Ariz., had a seizure. (Stalnaker said it was the third time Buddy had saved him.)

► Cash, a German shepherd, remained at the side of his 25-year-old master, in the Colorado prairie, for six weeks this summer after the man's suicide, until the body was found in August. Cash apparently strayed only to catch mice and rabbits for food but then returned. ■

The entrepreneurial spirit

► Street-begging has become so sophisticated that some Web sites and blogs offer "market research" for panhandlers, with tips from wizened "pros," according to the Summer 2008 issue of City Journal. Current begging techniques (which apparently spread nationally, at least for those non-homeless, non-mentally-ill beggars) suggest

humor (e.g., "I won't lie to you. I need a drink") and specificity of amount (e.g., "I need 43 more cents for a cup of coffee"), which often produces a larger donation. Local TV reporters in Memphis, Tenn., and Salt Lake City, among other cities, have found panhandlers to routinely earn \$10 an hour and sometimes substantially more. ■

Science on the cutting edge

► An August conference presentation by a University of Central Florida researcher touted the frolicking, profligate mating of male South African squirrels, enhanced, the researcher hypothesized, by the fact that "they're hung." The typical proportional equivalency for human male genitals, she said, would be 13 inches.

► Indiana University researchers reported in September that male Australian dung beetles differ from U.S. dung beetles in that evolutionary diversion of nutrients has given the Australians small horns but large penises and the Americans the opposite. Thus, noted the researchers, big-horned American males tend to fight each other for females, while Australians rely more on sneakiness.

► British engineer Ken Walters became disabled from an auto accident and was living on government assistance to persevere through pain and long-time depres-

sion when, in 2003, he suffered a stroke. After a lengthy recovery, Walters discovered, while doodling, that he seemed to have a newfound gift for art. After drawing up some demonstration software, he was hired by the giant Electronic Arts company and is flourishing, according to an August Daily Mail story. His doctors said the brain typically rewires itself for protection after injury and that previously untapped consciousness can emerge.

► In September, scientists at Emory University's primate research center reported that chimps seem to remember other chimps through "whole body" integration. That is, seeing part of another chimp causes them to envision the entire body. The researchers came to this conclusion because chimps shown photos of an acquaintance-chimp's butt could, more often than random chance would predict, identify the face that went with it. ■

Leading economic indicators

► Unlike their American counterparts, debt collectors in Spain are legally allowed to humiliate deadbeats in front of relatives and neighbors, and are thus quite successful, according to an October Wall Street Journal dispatch from Madrid. One collector's employees make flamboyant house calls in "top hat and tails" and another's are dressed as Franciscan friars, and yet another collector sends bagpipe players to announce the debt to the entire neighborhood. One debtor hurriedly paid off his daughter's wedding tab when the collector found

the ceremony's guest list and began billing each attendee for his or her "share" of the debt.

► Though laid-off workers in the U.S. do much grumbling about their high-flying CEOs, some dispatched employees in India are apparently more hardcore. Two CEOs of international firms' Indian subsidiaries in the city of Noida were beaten up (one fatally) in separate incidents shortly after announcing mass layoffs in September. Sixty-three people were charged with the murder, but no suspects have been arrested in the other incident. ■

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