

**That's absurd:** In Absurdistan, Gary Shteyngart lets a 325-pound narrator document a civil war in a small oil-rich country...p.7

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# \$1 REAL CHANGE

VOL. 14, NO. 30  
JULY 18 - 24, 2007

## Pot Bust Leaves Strange Odor

**Medical marijuana patient** gets nabbed after police shakedown her child, even though Mom was following the law. ...see page 5.



Photo by Rosette Royale

Main Entrance 550 Cherry Hill Professional Building



Photo by Katia Roberts

## Responding to a "Sicko" System

**With millions uninsured,** doctors and nurses say: Dude, where's my universal health care? ...see page 4.

**24-hour vigil heats up NW Detention Center**



# RESPECTO

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Change Agent



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**Real Change** is published weekly and is sold by the poor and homeless of Seattle. Vendors receive 65¢ of the \$1.00 paid for this paper.

**Mission Statement:** **Real Change** exists to create opportunity and a voice for low-income people while taking action to end homelessness and poverty.

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The **Real Change** Homeless Empowerment Project is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization. Programs include the **Real Change** newspaper, the **StreetWrites** peer support group for homeless writers, the **Homeless Speakers Bureau**, and the **First things First** organizing project. All donations support these programs and are tax-deductible to the full extent of the law.

**Real Change** is a member of the North American Street Newspaper Association, the International Network of Street Papers, and the Greater Seattle Business Association.



## Let's face it: The way it is now, police don't have to be accountable for their actions

### It's the system's fault

By Paul Richmond,  
Contributing Writer

The Office of Professional Accountability (OPA) system, charged with monitoring complaints of police misconduct in the City of Seattle, has been shown in past weeks to have serious flaws. These flaws go far beyond the issue of the single odd arrest highlighted in the media, where Seattle Police Chief Kerlikowske overturned recommended discipline. At issue are questions about Kerlikowske's repeated behavior of ignoring OPA protocols. While Kerlikowske is allowed to overturn recommendations regarding discipline of the OPA Director, he can do so with two caveats:

1. He must have cause.
2. He must provide an explanation.

He has done neither. His conduct provides a window into why OPA, a badly constructed entity, is a broken system.

The current crisis involving oversight of the Seattle Police appears born of a police chief who chose to override

### The actions of SPD Chief Kerlikowske, documented in the July 2 report from the Office of Professional Accountability Review Board, appear to mirror that of the department in New York — a department more afraid of exposing problems than it is afraid of the problems themselves.

protocols to prevent bad publicity. Such failures are not localized to Seattle. Other cities before Seattle have undertaken comprehensive examinations of police misbehavior. Perhaps the most extensive was the Mollen Commission in the early 1990's in New York City. The commission examined

a police department whose corruption was institutional. Its officers would go to crime scenes and pocket valuables. Its officers went into a brothel, chased out the johns and then raped prostitutes. Its officers took drugs from drug dealers and gave these drugs to other dealers to sell. The Mollen Commission, most of whose members had worked in law enforcement, noted that the institutional mindset was to sweep corruption under the rug because of the demoralizing effect it would have. Hence misconduct, even of the proportion described, was buried. The commission wrote:

"...the (Police) Department allowed its own systems for fighting corruption virtually to collapse. It had become more concerned about the bad publicity that corruption disclosures generate than the devastating consequences of corruption itself. As a result, its corruption controls minimized, ignored and at times concealed corruption rather than the devastating consequences of corruption itself.... This reluctance manifested itself in every component of the Department's corruption controls from command accountability and supervision, to investigations, police culture, training and recruitment."

The actions of SPD Chief Kerlikowske, documented in the July 2 report from the Office of Professional Accountability Review Board, appear to mirror that of the department in New York — a department more afraid of exposing problems than it is afraid of the problems themselves. The report's authors, OPA Board members Peter Holmes and Bradley Moericke, note there were another 12 cases reversed by Chief Kerlikowske. Kerlikowske failed to provide cause or reasoning in any of these cases, including ones where:

1. An SPD Field Training Officer who appeared at Harborview Medical Center to transport an intoxicated man already in handcuffs, to jail. Video and at least six witnesses caught this officer striking the restrained man with both fists and batons. This training officer had a trainee with him at the time.

2. Another officer who jumped on the back of a man who had lain down on his stomach to surrender. The jumping officer popped the man's lungs and broke several of the man's ribs.

3. Another officer administered "serial spankings" to a juvenile.

4. Another officer used his authority to enter a private residence, attempting to recover nude photos of his sister-in-law and intervene in an affair she was having.

Kerlikowske intervened to stop the OPA Director's recommendation of discipline in these cases. In none of these cases did Kerlikowske provide cause. In none of these did Kerlikowske put his reasoning for overturning these decisions in writing.

A source of the problems with OPA goes to the structure of the Office of Professional Accountability itself. As former OPA Director Sam Pailca has frequently stated: OPA was not designed to do the job of overseeing police misconduct. OPA was formed and designed for the very different purpose of looking at employment related issues within the Seattle Police Department. Hence, it is not revelatory that this organization fails to perform its newly assigned task of investigating police misconduct, particularly when the investigations are done by the police and the ability to overturn investigators' findings is given to the Chief.

The issue of Kerlikowske's intervention in these examinations must be addressed. Beyond Kerlikowske's interventions, questions must be raised about the structure of the OPA itself. While OPA is far from the only vehicle interfering with issues of police accountability, a more independent structure would go a long way to correcting this inequity. ■

**Paul Richmond**, who has worked for more than 15 years on issues of police accountability, is the author of the report "Waging War on Dissent," a producer of the movie, *Urban Warrior*, and a *Washington* lawyer in private practice. He may be reached at [paul\\_richmond\\_attorney@yahoo.com](mailto:paul_richmond_attorney@yahoo.com).



I was first drawn to work on homelessness more than 20 years ago through the actions of Mitch Snyder, a visionary leader who understood the power of direct action. Snyder

built a militant movement around the criminal reality of mass homelessness in America and knew how to get average people to take personal risks in the pursuit of a just cause.

The anniversary of Snyder's July 5, 1990 suicide reminded me of a memorial we held in Boston at Park Street Church across the street from the Boston Common. There were the all too predictable eulogies and reminiscences of poignant or revealing moments. Then my friend Lisa Kuneman — a line-worker at Pine Street Inn and an activist with our Homes Not Bombs group — walked up to the pulpit. She broke down as she talked about how much we needed Mitch, and how angry she was that he'd done something so selfish. Hers is the only speech I remember. She was right. She still is.

A few weeks ago I was talking to poor people's lobbyist Tony Lee and he said the coop-

tion and management of homelessness by the White House ultimately wouldn't work, because they were about to be outflanked by the broader anti-poverty movement.

This week brings evidence that he is right. A consensus statement on the 20th Anniversary of the McKinney-Vento Act puts 10-Year Plan mania in its place. See [mckinney20th.org](http://mckinney20th.org) for more.

For daily posts by Tim Harris see [apesmaslamment.blogspot.com](http://apesmaslamment.blogspot.com)

## Just Heard...

### Taking trash out

It was unanimous: On July 16, the Seattle City Council voted to adopt a “zero-waste” recycling plan put forward by Councilmember Richard Conlin.

The plan, which will cap how much trash Seattle sends to a landfill in Oregon, includes renovating the city’s two existing garbage transfer stations to recycle more of the materials dumped there — removing the need to build a third transfer station that residents of Georgetown had fought. The city will also encourage builders to recycle more of their construction and demolition waste and, in 2009, will start a new service that will pick up food waste at single-family homes for use in composting.

The vote is “not only a victory for Georgetown because we won’t build a new transfer station there,” Councilmember Sally Clark says in a statement, “but also for every neighborhood in Seattle.”

### Are you in good hands?

Allstate Insurance poses the question in its TV commercials to get your attention. Now a Washington state referendum slated for the November ballot is getting the attention of the insurance companies.

Under Referendum 67, insurance companies who don’t lend a hand when they’re supposed to could get slapped with fees and fines — a measure the insurance industry has already poured \$1 million into the state to defeat, according to a July 16 report in the *Spokane Spokesman-Review*.

The referendum, which has been endorsed by the executive board of the Washington State Labor Council, would force insurance companies who illegally deny or unnecessarily delay payment of a claim to cough up attorneys fees, court costs and monetary damages for the policyholder who fights — provided, of course, the policyholder has money to hire an attorney to sue his or her insurer. If passed, the law would cover all types of insurance except for health plans.

It “will help make sure insurance companies do the right thing,” says Sue Evans of Approve 67, a business coalition that supports the measure. “People buy insurance, pay their premiums on time, and all they ask in return is that insurance companies honor their commitment.”

—Cydne Gillis

### Juvenile Detention

In a lawsuit filed July 12 in King County Superior Court, Imka Pope alleges that King County denied her medical care while she was jailed in 1997 on a trespassing charge. What’s unusual is that Pope, homeless at the time, told jailers that she was going into labor. But jail staff did not believe Pope, who suffers from an undisclosed mental illness, was pregnant. Only after she gave birth to a son in her jail cell did staff tend to her medical needs. It is unclear what damages Pope seeks in the lawsuit.

—Philip Dawdy

# Change Agent



Photo by Katia Roberts

A good measure of the health of a society, it’s been said, is how it treats its most vulnerable members. Jon Gould is working to ensure that Washington takes care of its most vulnerable — and valuable — of assets, its children. For the past 10 years, Gould has served as the director of the Children’s Alliance, an advocacy group based in Seattle now celebrating 25 years of service to Washington’s youth.

“Especially since welfare reform,” Gould says, “the state government has become the battleground for the rights of children.” Because of this, the organization’s primary goal is to ensure that the state government “follows through on its promises” to ensure that health care, foster care and early childhood development are more than just good political planks.

The most recent legislative victory of the Children’s Alliance was to ensure that all children in the state of Washington

receive medical health care—remarkably, this coverage will come irrespective of citizenship or immigration status. For Gould, that was the greatest part of this victory. Citing this most recent politicization of the immigration issue, Gould says, “Right now, I think it’s really important for social change advocates to speak up for that type of equality.”

Check out [www.childrealliance.org](http://www.childrealliance.org).

—JP Gritton

## Alaska Building deal gets messier

The Seattle City Council’s July 16 vote on the Alaska Building is either a hollow victory or a triumph. Either way, it’s unlikely to result in adding any housing units near Pioneer Square, as city officials had originally been promised.

Last Monday, the council voted 6 to 3 to cap any addition to the building at 100 feet. The building’s new owner, developer Kent Angier, had sought a taller addition in order to turn the building into a Marriott Hotel. According to the *Seattle Times*, he may now simply turn it over to an office developer who has offered to buy the building from him.

When the city sold the building at Second Ave. and Cherry St. two years ago for \$8.5 million, it was with the understanding that Angier would turn its 15 stories into workforce housing — apartments or condos at or below market rate. Otherwise, councilmembers say, they wouldn’t have agreed to sell the property for \$500,000 to \$1 million less than what they could have gotten from an office developer.

But a funny thing happened on the way to signing the sale contract — no one at the city got the promise of housing in writing. If they had, councilmembers say, the restrictions would

have forced the city to take even less for the building.

So they relied on Angier’s word and, as he recently stressed to the *Times*, the deal he made on the building had “no restrictions,” regardless of any discussions at the time.

The vote doesn’t prevent Angier from turning the Alaska Building into a hotel; it just forces him to put housing into any addition that exceeds 100 feet. UNITE/HERE, the hotel workers union, fought for the legislation in an effort to prevent the building from becoming a non-union Marriott.

—Cydne Gillis



Photo courtesy Seattle Municipal County Clerk

## Immigration officials are now targeting legal U.S. residents

# A tale of the American gulag

By CYDNEY GILLIS,  
Staff Reporter

**G**ena Mejia chose to buy a house in Monroe because it was a beautiful town and it had so many churches. Little did she know the lack of Christian charity that her next-door neighbors would show to a Mexican couple.

She and her husband, Francesco, had been legal U.S. residents for 30 years when they moved from the Eastside to Monroe in 2004. But trouble with the husband of the white couple next door started almost immediately.

In the past three years, Mejia says, the man has come at her husband with a

crowbar, spit in his face, and spewed racial epithets. She got a restraining order but says Monroe police never enforced it. Then in August 2005, the day after she filed for a new protection order, she says armed immigration agents showed up on her doorstep demanding to know where her son was.

Mejia cooperated, bringing her son, Ceasar Keymolen, then 30 years-old and the working father of two young children, to Monroe police headquarters. Hours later, she says, agents carried him out like an animal for transfer to Tacoma's Northwest Detention Center. It took six months to get him out, she says – and he

is a legal resident who's spent his whole life in the United States.

Immigration activists say Ceasar Keymolen isn't alone – one reason protesters held a 24-hour vigil outside the Tacoma Detention Center on July 13 and 14. In a press conference held prior to the vigil, members of the Church Council of Greater Seattle, Hate Free Zone and Washington Community Action Network

**In the wake of the U.S. Senate failing to pass immigration reform this month, the activists called for a halt to the type of workplace and home raids that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has conducted recently in Bellingham, Portland and across the nation.**

compared the center to a corporate run gulag – a private lock-up where people have no recourse to get out, other than a deportation hearing in which they are not entitled to any free legal help.

In the wake of the U.S. Senate failing to pass immigration reform this month, the activists called for a halt to the type of workplace and home raids that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has conducted recently in Bellingham,

Portland and across the nation. Instead of targeting criminals, says Tim Smith, chair of Tacoma's Bill of Rights Defense Committee, the raids are rounding up working families with children like Keymolen's.

"These workplace sweeps that go on have [a history] back in the 1920s, when we rounded up communists and homosexuals," Smith says. "Now we're rounding up people whose last name isn't Smith or Jones."

The recent raids in Oregon and Washington have resulted in hundreds of immigrants being detained in Tacoma and "caused widespread fear among immigrant communities throughout the state," says Shankar Narayan, policy director of Hate Free Zone.

After her son's experience, Mejia describes the 1,000-bed detention center as "a place to break people's spirit." Run by a private company called GEO Inc. – the new name for a former division of a private prison operator, the Wackenhut Corporation – Mejia says her son was given bad food, dirty laundry and put in a cell with a violent criminal.

ICE's reason for picking him up, she says, was an earlier domestic violence charge that Keymolen had pleaded guilty to after an argument with his girlfriend and mother of his children. The resulting sentence – 365 days probation – put him in a felony category for which ICE can seek deportation. So Mejia hired a lawyer and went back to court with the girlfriend's mother and aunt, who spoke on his behalf.

The judge dropped the sentence by one day, removing the legal grounds for Keymolen's deportation. In February 2006, he was finally released.

ICE, continued on page 6

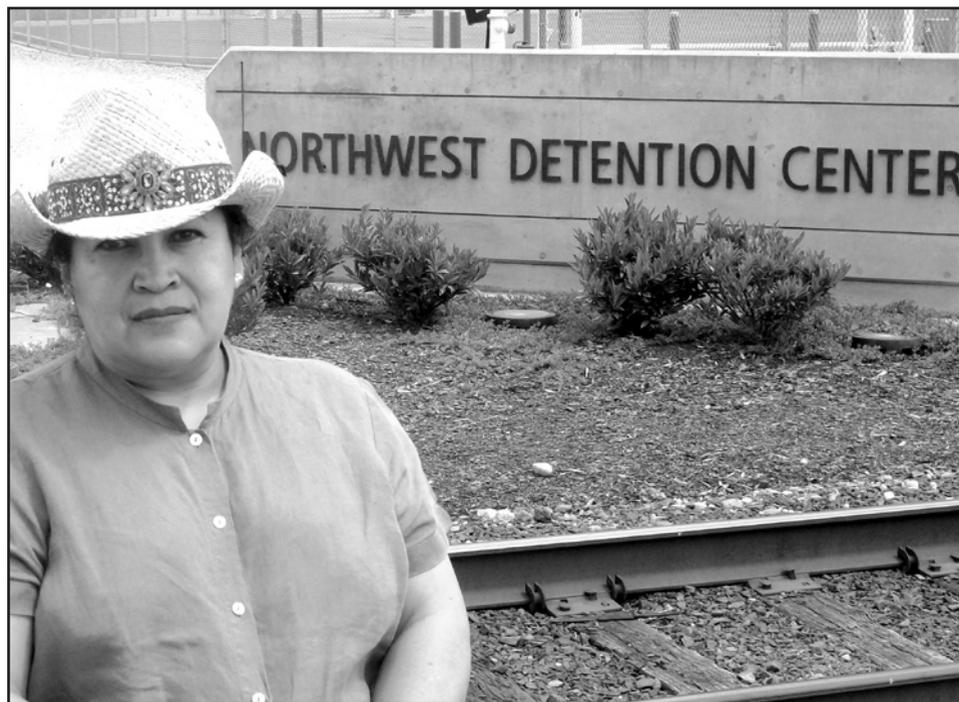


Photo by David Cahn

Gena Mejia says her 30-year-old son, a legal U.S. resident, was held by Immigration and Customs Enforcement for six months at this facility outside Tacoma. Cases such as this on led immigration activists to hold a 24-hour vigil there July 13.

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## Another strange medical marijuana bust where state law fails to protect patient from police

# Family runs afoul of medical marijuana law

BY PATRICK REIS,  
Contributing Writer

On July 10, Chandler Osman, 8, and her grandfather were driving to Montana when they experienced engine trouble at Snoqualmie Pass. While Chandler's grandfather, Larry Maurer, 63, was working under the truck, it rolled back over him, killing him instantly. What followed was even stranger. Chandler and her parents then ran afoul of Washington State's medical marijuana law. Her parents could face felony charges as a result.

After being taken from the scene by State Patrol troopers, Chandler told police that her parents, Bruce and Rainee Osman, grow medical marijuana in their home. Her parents both suffer from active cases of Hepatitis C and have written doctors' recommendations to treat their ailments with marijuana, as state law specifies.

The State Patrol sent officers to the Osman's home in Kent to investigate Chandler Osman's claim. Officers arrested Bruce and Rainee Osman despite being presented with the Osmans' doctor recommendations, say the Osmans. Officers searched the house, finding both marijuana plants and growing equipment. The officers left after confiscating the plants they found and, according to

**“[Marijuana] was something that [8-year-old Chandler] brought up, and when she brings it up, we have to take a look at what kind of home we're returning the child to.”**

—Bob Calkins, State Patrol spokesman

Rainee Osman, destroying the equipment and personal effects. The Osmans were not taken to jail, but were ordered to leave the premises while the house was searched.

The Osmans, after being reunited with Chandler at a nearby restaurant, returned home and found a mess. “They came and destroyed our house,” says Bruce Osman. “They had fun. Every expensive thing we had went down the drain.” The Osmans say that officers emptied containers of perfume and shampoo, for example, and also damaged artwork.

The Osmans, who are waiting to see if they will be charged by the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office, say they are furious over their treatment and the treatment of their daughter by the state patrol.

The Osmans and the State Patrol offer differing accounts of how Chandler

Osman told police that her parents grow marijuana. The Osmans say they feel that their daughter was interrogated while the State Patrol claims that she presented the information of her own volition.

According to State Trooper Clifford Pratt, a State Patrol spokesman, the troopers became suspicious after speaking with Rainee Osman. “Her mother said she was unable to [pick up her daughter] and sounded like she was having some difficulties herself, like she was on something,” Pratt says. “We asked her [Chandler Osman] if there was any reason why her mother can't come pick her up, to which she responded, ‘Mommy is sick and Daddy grows her medicine.’ This kind of set off some alarm bells.”

According to Rainee Osman, however, the work of the State Patrol was far less innocuous. She says that Chandler did not willingly offer information to the police. “They interrogated my daughter by pretending to be her best friend,” Rainee says. “They took advantage of a young girl in a very vulnerable situation.”

Douglas Hiatt, the Osmans' lawyer, says he believes that Chandler was interrogated because of a previous 2005 arrest of her parents for growing medical marijuana in their home before the family moved to Kent. “They knew who her parents were and they asked Chandler a long line of questions designed to establish that there was marijuana in the home,” Hiatt says.

The State Patrol denies that their intent in conversing with Chandler was to fish out information. “[Marijuana] was something that [Chandler] brought up, and when she brings it up, we have to take a look at what kind of home we're returning the child to,” says Bob Calkins, a State Patrol spokesman.

The State Patrol and the Osmans also disagree about the legality of the marijuana being grown in their home. State law, which provides legal protection for patients with medical marijuana recommendations, stipulates that a patient can possess no more than a 60-day supply at any



Rainee Osman's 8-year old daughter, Chandler, was with her maternal grandfather when he was killed in a truck accident. When held by State Patrol, Chandler allegedly told patrolmen that her mother is ill and her parents grow marijuana. The State Patrol seized 60 marijuana plants from the Osman's Kent home. Now they could face federal charges. Photo by Rosette Royale

one time. According to Pratt, the Osmans were well beyond the legal amount. He says he believes that possession and distribution charges will be filed. “They had way, way too many plants to be consumed for personal consumption,” Pratt said.

Bruce Osman says that he and his wife had approximately 30 mature plants and 30 immature — or growing — plants in their home. State law offers no definition of how many plants constitute a 60-day supply, a weakness in the law that puts medical marijuana patients at risk of jail time, medical marijuana advocates have long argued.

Hiatt says he disagrees with the State Patrol. “People that use marijuana as medicine use a lot of plants, they have to,” he says. “They use it every day like any other medicine. Bruce and Rainee [Osman] have never sold marijuana or given marijuana to anybody.”

Hiatt says he is skeptical that charges will be brought against the Osmans.

“In 2005 King County declined to press charges under similar circumstances,” Hiatt says. “I would be surprised if they decided to this time around.”

While waiting for a charging decision, the Osmans put their lives back together, dealing with the grief of losing a beloved member of the family. Chandler is coping with her loss, but says she still misses her grandfather.

For Bruce and Rainee Osman, their sadness is mixed with bitterness. Recalling the experience of watching his grief-stricken wife subdued and handcuffed and hearing that his daughter had been interrogated, Bruce Osman says, “It was the most inhumane thing I have ever experienced or witnessed.”

The State Patrol, however, insists that it acted within its duty and only in the best interest of Chandler Osman. “We have an obligation to investigate illegal activity,” Pratt says. “We were just trying to take care of this poor little girl.” ■

## Doctors and nurses lead call for national health insurance

# American health care reaches code blue status

By CYDNEY GILLIS,  
Staff Reporter

When the propane oven exploded in Karina Mackow's face, she was lucky. An emergency medical technician was on the scene and knew what to do — reduce the heat of her seared flesh by applying cold, wet towels.

It's what happened afterward, says Mackow, 21, that makes her a poster child for demanding socialized medicine in America.

She had spent four months in New Orleans volunteering with a group that's helping victims of Hurricane Katrina rebuild their lives. But everything in the house that served as the base for some 200 volunteers ran on propane — many parts of New Orleans still aren't rewired for electricity.

In early March, Mackow, the crew cook, opened the oven door to light its pilot. She had done so many times before, but, on this night, her head in the oven with a lit match, it exploded in

a blue flame that burned her face, neck and entire right arm.

She says she remembers screaming when the volunteer EMT who happened to be in the house took her out of the kitchen and started running cold water on her. Then she was wrapped and rewrapped in wet towels before an ambulance took her to Tulane University Hospital.

SICKO, continued on page 10

## Vendor of the Week



**B**efore I started volunteering at *Real Change*, I'd bought a few papers from Karen Norcross. It was kind of hard not to. When I interviewed her for vendor of the week, I kind of wanted to buy another one. She's a pretty nice lady.

After high school, Karen came to Seattle with her family from "a little farm outside of Lincoln, Nebraska." Karen has also made a brief sojourn to Texas, where she married, lived and divorced. Upon her return to Seattle, Karen worked with the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) as a typist.

Eleven years ago, however, Karen

was laid off. With no income and facing homelessness, Karen followed a friend's advice and began selling *Real Change*. Soon, she became one of the paper's top vendors.

"*Real Change* helped me keep my housing," says Karen, who now sells at Third Ave. and Union St. "Not many people realize that *Real Change* isn't just about finding housing, it also helps you keep [your housing]."

Asked what she wanted her customers to know, Karen says, "Just know how much I appreciate your patronage."

—JP Gritton

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## ICE, Continued from Page 4

"While his case was on appeal," ICE spokesperson Lori Haley writes in an

**"These workplace sweeps that go on have [a history] back in the 1920s, when we rounded up communists and homosexuals."**

—Tim Smith, chair, Tacoma's Bill of Rights Defense Committee

e-mail, "he received a sentence modification (reduction) that qualified him for relief from removal."

"ICE does not make the ultimate decision about whether an alien is, or isn't, deportable," she adds. "That responsibility rests with our nation's immigration judges."

Haley says she cannot provide details on how Cesar Keymolon came to ICE's attention in the first place, but notes that the agency relies on tips "from a multitude of sources – including working closely with local law enforcement." An inquiry with a spokesperson at the Monroe Police Department went unanswered.

Mejia says she is still in shock at the injustice – and now fears for her safety in Monroe.

"We are legal," she says, fighting back tears. "We're not terrorists. We're not criminals. We were just following our American dream and it became a nightmare."

"We're going to sell this house and move, and I don't think we'll ever set foot in this town again." ■

## Daybreak

A howling wind  
echoes through my soul  
discordant it seems  
yet harmonizing with  
the moments  
I call life

I lay in a doorway  
wrapped in a blanket  
which obscures the view  
of those who have no clue  
of hidden dreams gone sour  
in a world that dreads  
tomorrow

I smile at my lover  
and whisper her name  
"loneliness"  
as she dances on the  
stage of my need  
convincing me  
in no uncertain terms  
that self-medication  
is a proper remedy  
at least to a mind  
without understanding

Knowing that respite  
comes in undefined packets  
bought on the street corners  
of greed

I snuggle down against  
the chill  
which is no match  
for the chill in my heart

And pray for daybreak

—Jay Cornelius

Satirist Gary Shteyngart takes the world we live in and fattens it up with the truth

## Theater of the Absurd

Interview by ROSETTE ROYALE,  
Staff Writer

Inside a faux pas, an open door to a freewheeling discussion can be found. Or, at least it can when the faux pas is the starting point to a conversation with Gary Shteyngart.

Gary who? Shteyngart. For people who cast curious eyes at fiction bestseller lists, or at least the pages of *The New Yorker*, the name may be familiar enough to ignite a slight chuckle. But for those not in on the joke, or even those who are, how about a brief literary précis?

Shteyngart, who immigrated to the United States from Russia when he was a wee lad, burst onto the literary scene in 2002 with *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, a kooky, lyrically written fictional recounting of a Russian immigrant who dreams of capitalism and a girlfriend. Hilarity spills all over the page. This debut was followed, in 2006, by *Absurdistan*, a novel about 325-pound Misha Vainberg — aka Snack Daddy — who wants to live with his sexy Latina girlfriend in the Bronx. Standing in his way? He can't get a U.S. visa. The reason? His Russian father, a gangster extraordinaire, murdered an Oklahoma businessman. Desperate to see his hip-hop loving honey, Misha sneaks into the country of Absurdistan hoping to score the right documents. But a civil war begins, and Comrade Vainberg contends with bombs that seek to make shrapnel of his love life and an international media that could care less about death and destruction in some tiny nation near the Caspian Sea. Satire, oil wells and body parts splatter the pages.

Much like the detonations that flatten the country, *Absurdistan* itself — with its blend of politically incorrect humor, tightly plotted story lines, non-stop satirical flourishes — blew critics' minds. It was named one of the best books of the year by *The New York Times*, *Time*, *The Washington Post*, *The Seattle Times*, and nearly a dozen other publications. So, when Shteyngart took some time out for a chat during his paperback tour, the stage seemed cleared for an un-P.C. good time. But all didn't go as planned. A bit of misinformation had to be stepped over and around first, before the talk moved on to such happy fare as Haliburton, Hasidism, and imperialism.

**One of the plot points in *Absurdistan* is that Misha can't come back into the United States. You came from Lenin-grad (now Petersburg) and you weren't allowed to go back. Isn't that true?**

No, that's Wikipedia speaking there, ripping off of some interview I gave. I went to Oberlin College in Ohio, and I wanted to go to Moscow to study — this was '92, something like that — and my mother said, "There's no way in hell I'm going to pay for you to go back there." There was a lot of violence there. So that's Wikipedia's "I wasn't allowed to return." Yeah. By his mother. [Laughs.]

**What do you do when you see something on Wikipedia about yourself that isn't true?**

I'm like, whatever. It's the Internet. I would guess that a fifth of everything out there is wrong. Anyway, it's always fiction that's more truthful than the truth.

**How so?**

Well, so much of this book, it actually happened. I went to go visit these countries — Azerbaijan, Georgia — and I spent a lot of time just hanging out, absorbing everything. When I came back, before 9/11 actually, I had over 200 pages

**Good old Haliburton. Haliburton made it into the headlines before I started writing this, and already I could just sense the kind of awfulness and corruption in what was going on [in Azerbaijan].**

of notes, and the notes were better than any novel I could write. So I just started using a lot of them and created my own country — Absurdistan — with the oil wells in a country like Azerbaijan, the Christianity in a country like Georgia. But so much of it is based on the kind of things that happened to me and the kind of stuff that actually goes on. Fiction gets a bad rap these days. A lot of people are reading less fiction. I think in this country, especially after 9/11, people became scared shitless, they just needed to know what the hell was going on in the world in a very unadulterated way— just

the truth and nothing but the truth. But I think, in some ways, fiction gives you an even better look because it gives you an emotional context.

**There's a part in the book where Misha contacts his analyst and says, "I'm in**



Straight outta Petersburg: In *Absurdistan*, novelist Gary Shteyngart gives us a 325-pound Russian protagonist, who can't get back to his Latina honey when a civil war engulfs a tiny country on the Caspian Sea. The book's seemingly satirical events are based on happenings he witnessed in Azerbaijan and Georgia. Photo by Sherry Loeser.

**Absurdistan," and the analyst replies, "Where's that?"**

It's really funny talking to Americans about that part of the world—they have no idea where the hell everything is. Now Americans know where Afghanistan is and Iraq is, but it seems like we only know about a country after we do something there. And we haven't done anything yet in that part of the world, so it doesn't float on people's conscience so much. Although Azerbaijan and a lot of these countries have huge investments by the oil majors. Haliburton is something you encounter everywhere you look. Good old Haliburton. Haliburton made it into the headlines before I started writing this, and already I could just sense the kind of awfulness and corruption in what was going on [in Azerbaijan]. There were these hookers running around saying, "Galiburton, Galiburton" in this hotel that served a

lot of foreigners. I figured the guys were big tippers or something.

When the book came out, a lot of people were like, "Oh, my God, this is such an exaggeration of how the world is." But in some ways this is an understatement. And that's what's always been amazing to me— America is such a large country. It's like many countries put together, in a sense. So for some Americans, there's a lack of understanding of how the rest of the world functions, the degree to which we're complicit in world events. So that was one of the things I wanted to do in *Absurdistan*— create a character who claims to be this Western guy, this multicultural studies major, but [who], in essence, is as alienated as everyone else. And corrupt.

Breathe in...  
Breathe out...

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## The good, and the not-so-good

### ■ War by Candlelight

By Daniel Alarcón, Harper Perennial 2006, Paperback, 224 pages, \$12.95

### ■ Dancing to "Almendra"

By Mayra Montero (translated by Edith Grossman), Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2007, Hardcover, 261 pages, \$25

Review by ELLIOTT BRONSTEIN,  
Contributing Writer

We can save some time here. Read Daniel Alarcón's book of short stories, *War by Candlelight*. It's terrific. Okay, maybe you won't like it. The stories, after all, are brutal. In the opener, "Flood," a band of street toughs, including the heartbreakingly young narrator, migrate from trouble to prison and back before the real cataclysm strikes. In "City of Clowns," a young reporter whose father has died recalls the crimes and

**So give yourself (if you must) to *Dancing to "Almendra"* for its American gangsters and its Havana nightlife. But save yourself for Daniel Alarcón – for his is a relationship that will last through poverty, sickness, and war.**

deceit that shaped his childhood. In the title story, a revolutionary's short life unfurls before us like a set of postcards mailed-out-of-sequence from Hell.

Hell, in this case, has a local address: Lima, Peru, where in the 1980s and 1990s, crazed revolutionaries and bloodthirsty government troops tore the

country apart. Alarcón, who was born in Peru, and spent time there as a Fulbright scholar, gives you a pretty good taste of what that must've been like.

I'm trying to put my finger on how Alarcón does it – how he achieves his stunning effects. "In Lima, dying is the local sport. Those who die in phantasmagoric fashion, violently, spectacularly, are celebrated in the 50-cent papers beneath appropriately gory headlines: DRIVER GETS MELON BURST or NARCO SHOOTOUT, BYSTANDERS EAT LEAD. I don't work at that kind of newspaper, but if I did, I would write those headlines too."

When Hemingway was on, that was how he wrote – laying down perfectly honed sentences line by line. Alarcón's achievement is to lead us deep into the war zone and into the homes and hearts of the people trapped there. He forces us to reflect on the twists of fate that leave some of us hanging on every word, and some of us gasping for our last real breath.

I'll tell you what I should've done then – I should've read Alarcón's new novel, *Lost City Radio*. Instead I moved on to *Dancing to "Almendra"* a novel set in pre-revolutionary Havana by the Cuban-born writer Mayra Montero. "*Almendra*" weaves a fascinating tale of American gangsters, Cuban circus performers, hard-drinking journalists, revolutionaries and reactionaries. There's murder, mystery, love and lust. The American actor George Raft even steps onto the stage in a featured cameo.

I wanted to love this book. You know how that goes: open up to the first page, read the first paragraph, you squirm with the excitement that any new book provides. A few more pages – you're still excited, but already a shadow has crept across the book's spine. A seed of suspicion – a clammy fear. What if

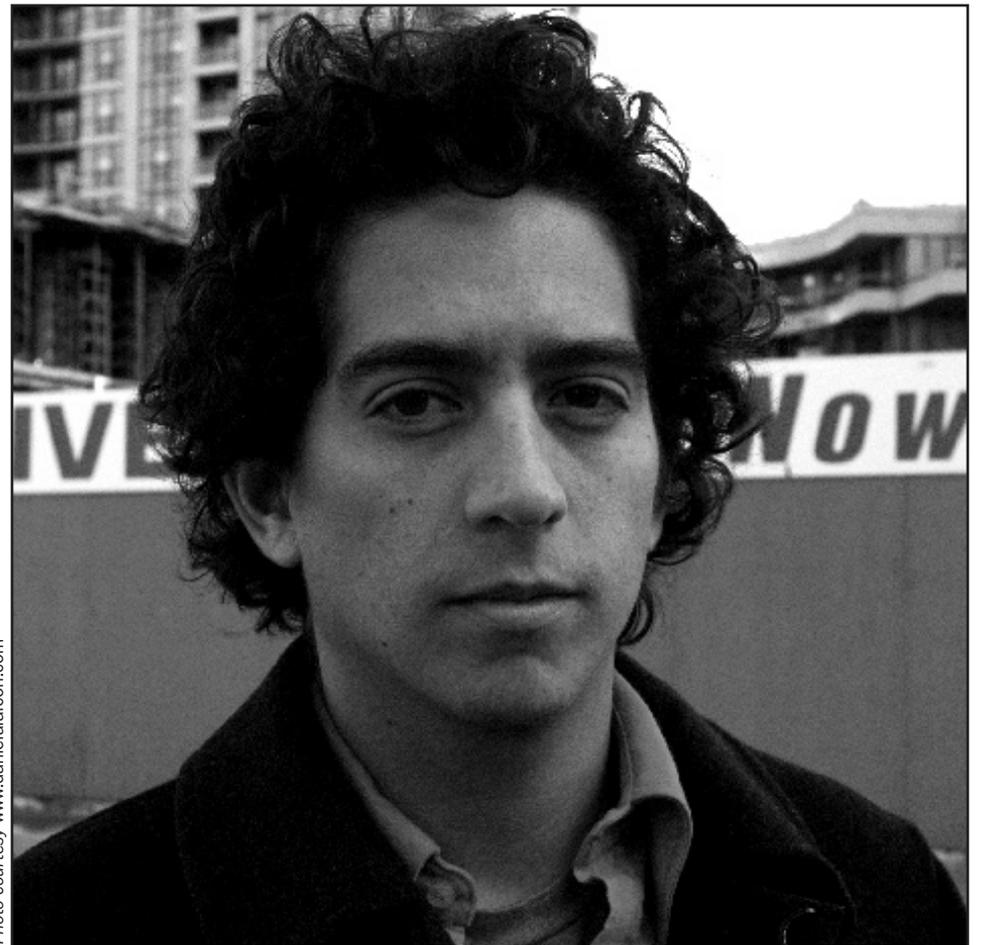


Photo courtesy www.danielalarcon.com

the flaws you've already spotted are not anomalous, but endemic?

The trouble begins in the first paragraph. "On the same day Umberto Anastasia was killed in New York, a hippopotamus escaped from the zoo in Havana. I can explain the connection. No one else, only me, and the individual who looked after the lions." The second sentence holds the rhythm, but that third – "No one else, only me" – destroys it. It's clunky, it's unmusical and it highlights the narrator's self-centeredness before we've even met him.

Sadly, Montero's tin ear shows up again and again in "*Almendra*." Sadly,

because her captivating tale and colorful characters kept me turning the pages even as the examples of off-key prose added up. Is it unfair to criticize a novel that's been translated from Spanish into English? Not when the translator is Edith Grossman, who has made music of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Cervantes.

So give yourself (if you must) to *Dancing to "Almendra"* for its American gangsters and its Havana nightlife. But save yourself for Daniel Alarcón – for his is a relationship that will last through poverty, sickness, and war. ■

Your book purchases can benefit *Real Change*. For more information, go to [www.realchangenews.org](http://www.realchangenews.org), click on the Powell's button, and browse the books recently featured in our pages.

### ■ Police Beat

Available on DVD

*Police Beat* reminds us that the world that we live in — actual events unfolding each day — makes David Lynch's material seem rather conventional. Anthropologists may someday look back in wonder on our capability to ballet through the daily social catastrophes of urban living. Some will see this insouciance as a biological adaptation, others a function of freely-prescribed anti-depressants, both plausible explanations of how we experience the malaise without collapsing into fear and grief.

Bicycling through his appointed rounds, African-born, Seattle police officer Z. (Pape Sidy Niang), displays little enthusiasm for wiping society's runny noses — the mostly nickel-and-dime crimes he encounters on a daily basis. He is much more focused on his obsession with a cross-cultural relationship that has slipped beyond his control. A conservative sort, the life of he and his partner, in and out of uniform, nonetheless blend well into the overall tableaux of dysfunction.

Underwritten by the Northwest Film Forum, *Police Beat* provides humorous commentary on city living. A co-writer, Charles Mudede, scribes the weekly crime blotter column for *The Stranger*. All the cases in the film are based on actual police reports. When strung together as mini-vignettes interwoven with Z.'s personal life, *Police Beat* provides a flirtatious walk between cogency and the surreal — sometimes disjointed, always fascinating and adventurous.

### ■ Cashback

Opens 7/20 in Seattle

In this light comedy, Ben (Sean Biggerstaff), having broken up with his girlfriend, finds himself in a tailspin. They attend the same small college and her everyday presence serves as a reminder that his old-used-to-be

ain't-no-more. A bout of insomnia, a byproduct of this recovery period, proves stubborn — no sleep, 24/7. So as to not waste these hours completely, he takes on a nightshift at the local supermarket.

There, working under a boss with severe delusions of grandeur, Ben stocks shelves, mops floors and attends to miscellaneous duties. His fellow grocers consist of three young adults, all in various stages of arrested development, a blessing of sorts, allowing them to amuse themselves in the otherwise monotonous world of bread, milk and toilet tissue. So these juvenile inventions of distraction, portrayed convincingly, render the most basic of shticks hilarious. Todd's fourth colleague, Sharon (Emelia Fox), the reserved checkout girl, provides

a counterbalance to the shenanigans and a salve for Ben's broken heart.

To sooth the glacial movement of time at a boring job, Ben discovers the ability to imagine the world in stop motion, as though he had a pause function for life. With this newly discovered ability, Ben, an art student, provides us with spontaneous tomes on the female anatomy that, as he points out, provided inspiration for some of the greatest painters in history. Disrobing female customers, frozen in time, he expands on his theories. The intended humorous irony of placing his lust in an academic frame proves a waste for anybody old enough to see the movie.

This film is best enjoyed by males in the company of same, who in the dark may covertly giggle and freely relate to their counterparts on the screen, avoiding the stigma appropriate to such behavior. *Cashback*, an average concept with decent performances, is watchable and forgettable, in this case a priceless combination. ■

## WORTH SEEING

NOW AVAILABLE ON DVD:

Reviews by LESTER GRAY, Contributing Writer



Adventures  
in Irony

©Dr. Wes Browning

The other day Pope Benedict XVI got a whole lot of people upset with him for saying, among other things, that Protestant churches aren't really churches. He said they're karaoke bars.

Ha, that was me having fun all by myself again. What he said was Protestant "organizations", or "dealies", "do not enjoy apostolic succession in the sacrament of Orders, and are, therefore, deprived of a constitutive element of the Church." So they can't be called churches "in the proper sense". If you don't have a constitutive element of a thing, you can't be that thing.

This is quite clear. So if you don't have a constitutive element of a trucker, such as a truck, say, you can't be a trucker. Or if you don't have a constitutive element of a world leader, you can't be a world leader. You can be a factional leader. Or, if you have a truck, you can be a trucker. But not a world leader.

Some popes, like the last one, just seem to be angling for a Nobel Peace Prize every step of the way, until we frankly get sick of them. I know I was. And some popes, like this one, are refreshingly free of that Nobel Peace Prize-groveling taint.

I mean, who needs world ecumenical leadership anyway? If you're going to have a church, shouldn't you think it's the best damn church ever? Even all the way to Hell? I mean, if not, what's the

## ©Dr. Wes: You think that's divisive?

point? Pope Benedict doesn't owe the Protestants any favors.

So I don't go along with these people who say Pope Benedict XVI is being divisive. I think what he's saying is just something on the order of, "You're baby is uglier

**I don't go along with these people who say Pope Benedict XVI is being divisive. I think what he's saying is just something on the order of, "You're baby is uglier than my baby. Ha, ha, look at your ugly, ugly, baby!"**

than my baby. Ha, ha, look at your ugly, ugly, baby! How can you stand having such an ugly baby? I'd drown that baby if it were my baby. DAMN, that is one butt-ugly baby!" What's wrong with saying things like that? I'll tell you who's being divisive. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki is being divisive.

Let's say I'm at a party with my wife. Not a current wife or any wife I've ever had, but a "wife" for the sake of illustration. Let's say she says we should leave the party while I'm just getting my groove on, if you know what I mean. I've only had, say, two beers. I've only flirted with two or three other women. I've only once done my patented, guaranteed-to-

win-comments lap-dance. Just getting STARTED. And she says, "It's time to go home, HONEY" with that Nancy Pelosi-ish emphasis on the honey that means it was time to go before I ever got here.

Let's say my wife and I are having it out over this, and I'm saying, "Oh, no I'm NOT leaving," and she's saying, "Oh, yes you ARE," over and over again, and let's say the host of the party comes over and says, "It's alright, Dr. Browning, we won't mind if you two leave early." You see what that is? That's divisive. He's about to be punched.

OK, maybe that illustration was too abstract. Let's try this. I'm having my soldiers duke it out in some foreign country with, um, belligerent sectarian factions, and I'm telling my people back home that I can't pull my troops out to safety because they have a mission to complete, and this jerk comes over and says, "We can handle this. You can go, anytime."

That is divisive behavior unbecoming of a puppet. In fact I would go so far as to say that man lacks a constitutive element of puppet-hood. He is not a proper puppet at all. How am I supposed to milk this conflict to the advantage of my friends while using it to distract the American people from the way I am ruining their country, if the so-called Prime Minister won't back me up?

What kind of satellite are we running there? ■

Sound off and read more:  
[drwesb.blogspot.com](http://drwesb.blogspot.com)



Fri., July 6. 3:54 a.m., 5500 15th

Ave. N.W. Radio reported that the subject had called from a payphone at the listed location and stated he was feeling depressed. They further said that subject, a white male aged 26, had just come down from the Ballard Bridge where he had threatened to jump off. Officers arrived and contacted the man. Subject stated that he has no family and admitted he climbed up onto the Ballard Bridge because he wanted to jump in order to kill himself. He also stated he had been drinking and was homeless. He did want to go to a hospital and have himself checked out and talk to a doctor. Subject was not injured in any way. An ambulance arrived and transported him to Ballard Swedish Hospital without incident.

Sat., July 7. 3:45 a.m., 300 block of

Second Ext. S. Victim, a white male aged 53, states that he was sleeping at the Union Gospel Mission around 3:45 a.m. He had his wallet with him when he went in, but it was missing before he left. Victim believes the wallet was taken from his pocket. No suspect information.

Sat., July 7. 6:37 a.m., Eighth Ave.

A white male reported he had fallen asleep on the sidewalk around 10 p.m. the previous night. He woke around 6 a.m. and noticed his wallet was missing from his rear pants pocket. He believes an unknown suspect took his wallet while he was asleep.

Sat., July 7. 8:56 a.m., 400 block

of Sixth Ave. N. Subject, a transient Black male aged 36, states that an unknown suspect entered his vehicle where he was sleeping, found his wallet and removed a \$10 bill from it. He stated that "they" have been harassing him for over 20 years and insisted that a report be made. He went on to say that he has been forced from his churches and work, which has forced him to live in his vehicle. Officer has had many contacts with the subject in the past relating to his claims of harassment and theft. Officer found no evidence to support the man's claim and suspects he may continue to suffer from mental issues. He offered to take the man to see a mental health worker, but the subject declined. Officer provided him with a case number and business card.

Sat., July 7. 9:05 p.m., Maynard Ave.

S. at S. Weller St. Officers spotted the suspect, a transient Black male aged 59, attempting to get money out of the pay-box on the northeast corner of Maynard Ave. S. He was stopped and officers ran his name via radio. When his name came back he was found to be active with the Department of Corrections and one of his stipulations was to not be in Stay Out of Drug Area (SODA) Zone 2. The officers contacted him in SODA Zone 2. The order was verified and suspect was arrested and booked into King County Jail.

Compiled from incident reports of the Seattle Police Department by Emma Quinn. Got your own experience to relate? Call us at (206)441-3247 ext. 207 and we'll get the scoop.

Bus Chick,  
Transit  
Authority

Carla Saulter



## Bus Chick: That's a wrap

sources of revenue. No, I don't like dark windows, but I'd happily endure them every once in a while (only 25 Metro buses are wrapped) for the sake of more transit funding.

Fortunately, Metro has proposed a compromise. From a recent Executive Office press release (<http://www.metrokc.gov/exec/news/2007/0621buswrap.aspx>):

"We always strive to be innovative and entrepreneurial to find revenues that help keep bus fares low while increasing our service," said King County Executive Ron Sims. "That is why I asked Metro to develop a modified wrapped-bus advertising program that still brings in critically needed revenue while addressing the concerns of our customers."

Under the proposal, only a portion of the bus side windows would be covered. This will provide potential advertisers with enough coverage to justify the premium rates for such advertising, while preserving unobstructed, clear window space along the entire length of the bus for improved passenger visibility and comfort.

There's currently one (window-obscuring) template for bus wraps, and all agencies who participate in the program use it. A new template requires

advertisers to create custom designs. Because of this, and because less of the bus will be covered, partial wraps won't generate as much revenue as full bus wraps. (Metro estimates a minimum of \$450,000 per year.) Still some revenue is better than none, especially if the dip is only temporary. I'm guessing that transit customers in other cities would also like to be able to see where they're going, and Metro's model will eventually become the standard.

The County Council will vote on the proposal sometime this month — maybe as soon as July 25 — and I bet they'd like to know what you think. Would you tolerate bus wraps if you could see out the window?

Me? Until we start investing in the kind of transit infrastructure necessary to end this region's car dependence, I'll happily sit in the dark. ■

Got something to say about public transportation in Seattle? Email Bus Chick at: [buschick@gmail.com](mailto:buschick@gmail.com) or [blog.seattlepi.nwsourc.com/buschick](http://blog.seattlepi.nwsourc.com/buschick)

Even if you're not a bus rider, you probably know what a wrapped bus is. They're all over downtown, covered from end to end, advertising everything from iPods to car washes.

If you are a bus rider, you probably know that bus wraps cover bus windows, which can be a problem if you need to look out for your stop or would just like to enjoy a little of our rare Seattle sunlight.

Last fall, reacting to some rider complaints about this lack of visibility, the King County Council decided to phase out the bus wrap program, eliminating them from Metro's fleet by the end of 2007. This decision made some riders very happy, but not this one.

The bus wrap program is managed by a vendor and doesn't cost Metro anything to administer. It also happens to earn the agency over \$700,000 a year in revenue. I don't know about you, I want more service, stops and shelters, so (at a time of rising fuel costs and increased service needs) I'm all about pain-free

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(206) 448-9646**SICKO, Continued from Page 5**

But Tulane turned her away – no burn specialist on hand, she was told, and, as it happens, no insurance. She was transferred two hours north to a hospital in Baton Rouge and spent a month recovering from her second-degree burns.

Mackow now works in Seattle as a barrista, a job in which it won't be easy to pay off the medical bills that she estimates will top \$4,000.

"I lost my brows, my lashes, and the front part of my hair," the chipper Mackow says. But "that immediate taking the heat out prevented scarring."

It's no coincidence that the organizers of a July 18 forum on the need for universal healthcare put Mackow forward to tell her story. Like other healthcare workers around the nation, the doctors and nurses scheduled to speak at "From Sicko to Sanity" have timed the event to tap the awareness being raised by Michael Moore's new documentary on the human tragedy of America's for-profit insurance system.

The main subjects whose stories are told in the film *Sicko* are a nurse, fireman and others who rushed to volunteer at Ground Zero after the 9/11 attacks and have lost years of their lives trying to get medical help for the respiratory, post-traumatic stress and other disorders they ended up with as a result.

Mackow says the incident in New Orleans puts her in the same boat. She was a volunteer who picked up the government's slack, only to get lashed by it.

"To me, it's a national disaster and the federal government should have been helping heal, recover and rebuild," she says. Instead, she adds, "ordinary people go down [to New Orleans and] put their health at risk because the government failed."

"So many people have sustained injuries helping out," Mackow says. "Any volunteer should have immediate health insurance."

Physicians for a National Health Program, one of the sponsors of the July 18 forum, believes all Americans should be covered by a single-payer government program. That would avert the suffering and high cost that Moore and the doctors' group say insurance companies and HMOs cause – for instance, by denying a medical procedure that could have saved the life of cancer victim Tracy Pierce, a husband and father whose passing is not an isolated story in Moore's film.

In June, Pierce's widow, Julie, testified before the U.S. House of Representatives, which is now looking at a number of healthcare proposals, including House Resolution 676, the United States Health Insurance Act backed by Reps. John Conyers, Dennis Kucinich, Donna Christensen and Seattle's Jim McDermott.

First introduced by Conyers in 2003, the act would expand Medicare, which currently provides care for all senior citizens, to the entire U.S. population – a long-overdue move that, says nurse Stacie Addison, would prevent the needless medical emergencies that beset the 47 million Americans who have no health coverage.



A patient outside of Swedish Medical Center. A forum, focused on the new film *Sicko*, will look at the state of American health care. Photo by Katia Roberts

While working as a public-health nurse in Colorado, says Addison, one of the speakers scheduled for the "Sicko" forum, "I came across a horrific case of parents not being able to afford a [child's] tooth extraction because they couldn't pay the \$80," she says, "and the tooth abscess went into the brain" – killing the child and sacking the parents with a quarter-million in hospital bills.

"I just feel the time has come where we really need to look at the kind of America where kids can die of ridiculous things, tragically absurd things, in what's supposed to be the greatest country in the world," she says.

"If there was a rollback on some of the tax cuts that were given to the wealthy people in this country, that alone would be completely sufficient to pay for healthcare for everyone," says Addison, who supports HR 676.

"Health can never be a for-profit system," says burn victim Mackow. "Just that fact is asking for corruption because the bottom line is profit, so you're going to sacrifice things like people's health for the dollar." ■

**[Events]**

The forum "From Sicko to Sanity: Doctors, Nurses, Caregivers and Activists Unite for Universal Healthcare" is scheduled Wed., July 18, 7 p.m., in Room 3202 at Seattle Central Community College at Broadway and Pine St. For more information, go to [www.pnhpwesternwashington.org](http://www.pnhpwesternwashington.org).



## ABSURIDISTAN, Continued from Page 7

### What were the circumstances around your arrival here?

Well, my parents were Russian Jews. They just wanted a nice job, and there was a chance and they took it. It was one of those things where you either get it or you don't, and if you don't, then you're screwed. It was quite a chance they took, but I'm guessing they had a feeling that everything was going to be all right. We came out [in 1979] and moved to Rome for a little bit and then the United States. But they didn't even tell me where we were going until we landed here.

I was a huge fan of the Soviet Union—I wanted to be a Red Pioneer, I wanted to join the Communist party. I wrote my very first book when I was 5 years old, about Lenin and his magical goose invading Finland. I was just in love with the system. But what the hell did I know?

### So what the hell does a 7-year-old Russian Jewish kid think when all of a sudden he's in Manhattan?

I wish we were in Manhattan. No, we were in the worst part of Queens — the Boonies — and it was horrific. Horrible. Concerned rabbis would kick my ass because one of us Russian kids would eat pork salami in the bathroom. And there were these kids who were just these awful—I don't want to say suburban, but narrow-minded, ridiculous, with the Mercedes— oh, I'm sorry, it wasn't Mercedes. It was Cadillac. They were Jews after all. It was just horrifying.

And one of the first satires I wrote was the Gemorrah— it was a take on the Torah. I didn't have friends, I didn't speak English well. And being Russian was the worst thing you could be at the time— all those movies: Red This, Red That— It really sucked. And then I went to [Bedford] Stuyvesant [High School, a large, diverse, highly academic school in lower Manhattan] and that was such a relief. I fell into this crowd of kids who weren't as bright as others at Stuyvesant, and they were just hanging around, getting high at the park. It was a really great. And then I went to Oberlin: more of the same.

### Just older.

Yeah, and Oberlin, it was a sweet school, but I don't remember what I learned there. It was more like a finishing school for me, because it was such a shock, being in this very over-privileged school. I think I only had one shirt, and that was a school where having one shirt was not good, not good at all. So, a lot of this stuff went into my work, this sense of being constantly discombobulated, never knowing.

### One of the other things which is so current in the book is that Misha is trying to get into this country, and here we have so many real people who are trying to do the same.

I go back to Russia almost every year, but on one of my first visits, in the late-90s, when Yeltsin was still in power, I was just shocked by the country. Russia

was at the lowest point in its economy. There is still a lot of poverty going on, but there has been a slight change now that there is oil money sloshing around, but a lot of people are still incredibly poor. And there was a very arcane procedure that if you were staying in a hotel, they put all these stamps in your visa, otherwise you have to pay a huge fine upon leaving the country. I was staying on a kind of fake visa, in the sense that I wasn't staying in a hotel. So I had this unbelievable feeling that I was going to be there forever, for the rest of my life. I remember being right next to this gigantic Lenin statue and couldn't breathe and had to hold on for support.

**I mean, my take on religion is a very skeptical one, generally, and Judaism is the only religion I know. It all stems back to this kind of hypocrisy that I felt in Hebrew school. There are all these laws that I had to follow, but in the end, people didn't behave well to one another. They treated each other like shit.**

My friends were saying, "What the hell are you so upset about? You'll get out. You're an American. You can go where you want."

### Have you encountered a lot of anti-Semitism in the Untied States?

Please. In New York? Everyone's Jewish.

### I mean other places that you've been to.

Not really, but maybe I'm comparing it to Russia. It's just not a part of my life.

### In the book, there's a lot about how Jews— Hasidic Jews — can't be trusted. When you're writing those things, does it make you nervous?

No, I don't care. I mean, my take on religion is a very skeptical one, generally, and Judaism is the only religion I know. It all stems back to this kind of hypocrisy that I felt in Hebrew school. There are all these laws that I had to follow, but in the end, people didn't behave well to one another. They treated each other like shit. At first, I really wanted to believe that maybe Judaism could be my new communism, this thing I would believe in. And, then, as I grew older, living in the community I did, I don't think I ever saw an Asian, a Hispanic, or a Black person. It was insane. At the time, I was saying, "Oh, life is great, because we were learning about being Jews." But in some cases, that was the worst experience I had.

One motif [I write about] is the way that people use religion for political ends, which I was writing before the

Bush Administration went hog wild, trying to demolish the separation between church and state. You know, former Communist elites tried to use religion and nationalism to cement their power. So I write about Misha, who basically does not leave his sofa, but he suffers the consequences. That really is a great explanation of the Russian soul: The urge to do well and the inability to get off his ass.

And I was a little fat when I was a kid. During my bar mitzvah, my grandma fed me like seven hamburgers a day. Her whole life was just feeding me. She grew up in [a poor part of Russia], so having access to unlimited American foodstuffs inspired her, and I just became huge. So in the back of my mind, I guess there is just a fat me, sitting there. But Misha's girth makes him a consumer. It consumes him. So I wanted all that stuff in the book. Not just American consumers, but also Russian and Third World elite consumers, because when I go back to Russia — a land tethered to culture in a way, where there was this

lack of freedom which still exists today — you see this endless consumerism.

### Where does it come from, this hyper-consumerism?

We are, in some ways, the origin. And it's spread to China, India.

### When you say "we," you mean the United States?

Yeah, absolutely. We're the ones that gave the world the idea that, through buying things and making one's hair bigger, one can accomplish big things. It's sad to see. ■

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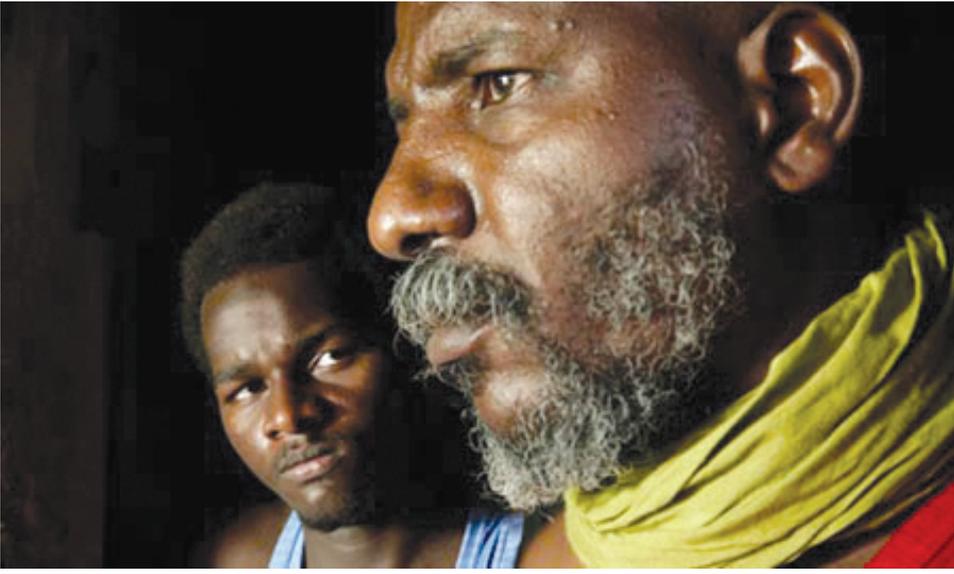
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**Darat** (Special Jury Prize Winner at the Venice Film Festival) is a **daunting portrait of postwar Chad**. The film delves into the social and political confusion of a society coping with the conflicted past of a civil war, forced to coexist with the war criminals who once terrorized citizens due to the inapt enforcement of government-issued amnesty. The narrative focuses on 16-year-old Atim who becomes intricately involved in the life of his father's murderer, Nas-sara, and even becomes his surrogate son. Running July 27 through Aug. 2. Daily: 7 p.m.. Saturday and Sunday: 2:30 p.m., 7 p.m.; McCaw Hall, Seattle Center, 321 Mercer St. Info: [www.seattlefilm.org](http://www.seattlefilm.org) or (206) 633-7151.

# Calendar

## This Week's Top Picks

### Wednesday 7/18

Hurricane Katrina stands as one of the most horrific disasters in recent American history. Spike Lee draws attention to the devastation wrought upon the New Orleans community and the ineptitude of the government with **When the Levees Broke: a Requiem in Four Acts**. Presented by The Community Coalition for Environmental Justice, viewers will watch Acts 3-4. Donation: \$10. 6:30 p.m., Columbia City Acupuncture and Herb Clinic, 4852 37th Ave S. Info: [melcarnay@ccej.org](mailto:melcarnay@ccej.org) or (206) 720-0285, ext. 4.

In response to the controversy over national healthcare instigated by Michael Moore's **Sicko**, a panel of Seattle doctors, nurses, healthcare workers and activists will discuss how to campaign for a viable, quality healthcare plan. 7 p.m., Seattle Central Community College, room 3202. Info: [jesse\\_hagopian@yahoo.com](mailto:jesse_hagopian@yahoo.com) or (206) 962-1685.

### Thursday 7/19

**Queer Parents Networking Dinner:** connect with other LGBT families and parents. Welcoming all LGBT parents, co-parents and others. Recurring subsequent third Thursdays. 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., at Seattle Young People's Project, 2820 East Cherry Street. RSVP: [gabriel@nwnnetwork.org](mailto:gabriel@nwnnetwork.org) or (206) 568-7777.

### Saturday 7/21

**Community Alliance for Global Justice** offers a dinner and public fair. The **dinner promotes sustainable practices by featuring Fair Trade foods prepared by local chefs and Seattle Culinary Academy students**. Rosalinda Guillen, founder of Bellingham-based Community to Community Development serves as keynote speaker and local farmers are seated at each table. Fair: 4 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. Dinner: 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. Polish Home, 1714 18th Ave. Info: [hrd99@igc.org](mailto:hrd99@igc.org) or (206) 405-4600.

### Tuesday 7/24

**EarthCorps World Night:** music, performances and foods from the countries and cultures of EarthCorps. Come learn about EarthCorps programs. 6 p.m. to 9 p.m.

Community Activity Center, Magnuson Park, 6344 NE 74th Street, Building 406. Info: [jenni@earthcorps.org](mailto:jenni@earthcorps.org) or (206) 322-9296, ext.204.

Support NARAL and attend the **Pro-Choice Pop Star benefit. A fun-filled event with cocktails, a karaoke contest and local musical talent** featuring Felicia Loud, Cristina Orbé and okanomodé aka SoulChilde. 6 p.m., Mainstage Comedy and Music Club, 315 First Ave. N. Tickets: \$20 to \$40. Info: (206) 624-1990 or [sashacousineau@prochoicewashington.org](mailto:sashacousineau@prochoicewashington.org).

### Friday 7/27

**Forbes** journalist Robyn Meredith contends that America should look to China and India as economic paradigms in **The Elephant & the Dragon: The Rise of India and China and What It Means For All of Us**. Learn why Meredith argues for pro-trade and anti-protectionist views of these economies and how America can benefit from them. 7 p.m., University Book Store, 4326 University Way NE. Info: [www.bookstore.washington.edu](http://www.bookstore.washington.edu).

### Saturday 7/28

**Fund the Wounded, Not the War:** join protesters outside the VA Hospital to end the Iraq War and fund the VA system. March: 12 p.m., VA Hospital, 1660 S. Columbia Way. Forum: 2 p.m., Jefferson Community Center, 3801 Beacon Ave. S.

La Familia Gallery presents **acclaimed artist Faustino** who explores the connection between urban and natural landscapes in a show titled, **Urban Dreamscapes**. Continues through July 28. La Familia Gallery, 117 Prefontaine Pl. S. Info: (206) 903-0627.

Calendar compiled by Ariel Snyder.  
Have a suggestion for an event?  
Email it to [calendar@realchangenews.org](mailto:calendar@realchangenews.org).

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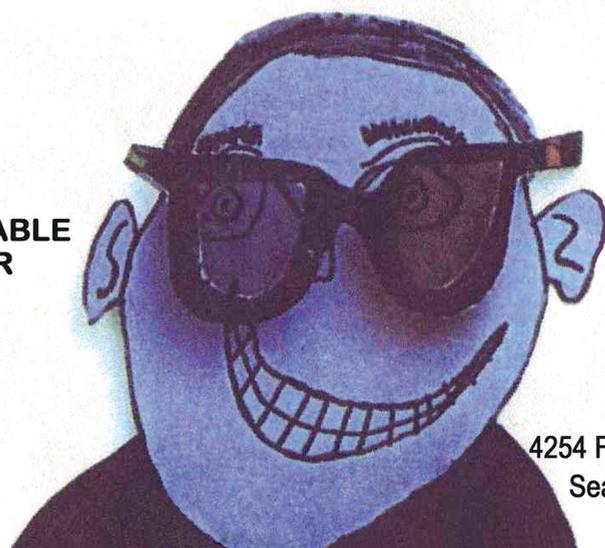
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