Sixth Grade Honors Student Arrested for Packing a Utensil
by Chrystine Hanus

Associated Press reports South Carolina pupil Charlotte Kirk was trying to help her mother pack her lunch, but ended up arrested and suspended. Eleven-year-old Kirk thought she was doing a good thing by packing her own lunch and included a knife so she could cut up her chicken. She packed the smooth-edged knife with her lunch because “Mom was busy, and dad had gone to work.”

But after a friend suggested the knife might not be allowed, Kirk asked a teacher if the utensil was permitted. “I never took it out of the box,” Kirk said, but that afternoon as she and her father were leaving school a deputy sheriff came and put her in his car and drove away—refusing to allow her father to ride along.

Now, how many Honors students do you know break the law—intentionally? Was this eleven-year-old girl really a threat to her classmates? She asked the teacher if the utensil was allowed; she didn’t walk through the cafeteria waving it around; she didn’t threaten anyone. Couldn’t the teacher have confiscated the “weapon” and phoned her parents? Was it absolutely necessary to further teach this girl a lesson by separating her from her father for the ride to the police station, where she was fingerprinted and arrested for possessing a weapon?

Perhaps you believe arresting Kirk was the right thing to do in order to protect her classmates (continued on page 4)

It Is Our Money, Isn’t It?
by Scot Laudenbach

It is no secret that we all pay too much in taxes. No matter the tax bracket we are in, it is too much to pay. We are well-aware the government overspends on many absurd things: $640 for toilet seats and $230 for hammers are prime examples provided nearly every time someone mentions government waste. We are appalled the United States has paid more than $10 million to study the flow rate of ketchup, but what else are your tax dollars paying for?

According to the IRS, using its own estimates of government waste, our tax dollars are going (continued on page 5)

A New Breed of Auction
by Kristin Kowynia

The auction—it’s a tradition of sorts. For hundreds of years there have been sales to the highest bidder, and with them came that high pitched, rambling, barely understandable (not sure if it’s an English-speaking) voice that you just can’t seem to rid from your head once it’s there:

“...and selling... eight eighty to eight six nine. Fair warning now. Three hundred nineteen is next. On the left at sixty. Eight thousand, I’ll take twenty. And to the room. The bid’s to this side and selling there at one hundred twenty. For you madam, 900, 120 thousand. Selling here then. (continued on page 6)
Have you ever noticed one of those crazy warnings on an item you've purchased? You read the warning label and say out loud, "Well, DUH!" Or, how about lawsuits about ridiculous occurrences that seem so remedial the reader wonders why any person, not to mention a judge, would even listen to the case in court.

These new legal issues are becoming a plague of our time. We are constantly hearing about ridiculous warning labels and lawsuits—some so "out there" we find ourselves dumbfounded by them. Because millions of dollars are spent on legal fees every year in the U.S. court system, there is a new trend appearing in response to these lawsuits. In an attempt by companies to protect themselves against lawsuits, companies are adding even more (ridiculous) warning labels to products—warnings that seem to warn the obvious.

The trend began in 1992 as a result of a case about a cup of hot coffee. Surely every reader has heard the story: Woman buys hot coffee—>Woman spills hot coffee—>Woman sues over burns suffered from spilling hot coffee. The result of this case: $160,000 in compensatory damages and $2.7 million in punitive damages ... and the addition of a warning label on every cup of hot coffee sold—"WARNING: HOT COFFEE!" It sounds quite ridiculous and a lot like common sense, huh?

But, there is the other side to consider in stories like these. When the facts of this case are closely examined, the woman, then 79-year-old Stella Liebeck, was not so frivolous in suing McDonald’s® over the accident. When the trial was over and the case was examined, I discovered that the cup of coffee served to Liebeck through the drive-thru window of a New Mexico McDonald’s was in the area of a scalding 180 degrees to 190 degrees Fahrenheit. During the trial, experts testified that a liquid at a temperature of 130°F causes third-degree burns on human flesh in only a few seconds. Now add that the coffee was spilled on the most tender piece of skin on the human body—the groin.

Liebeck spent eight days in the hospital undergoing surgery and treatment and will suffer pain for the remainder of her life. She requested $11,000 from McDonald’s to help cover the costs of her medical bills. McDonald’s reply: We’ll give you $800. This is when Liebeck entered into her legal battle with McDonald’s.

In the legal world, in order for Liebeck to collect from McDonald's for her injuries she must prove the company was negligent—meaning the company had knowledge the hot coffee was capable of injury, but it did not take steps to prevent or correct the issue. Thus McDonald’s would be liable for the injuries sustained as a result of the coffee’s temperature. During the trial it was proved that, during the previous 10 years, McDonald’s received more than 700 similar burn cases. Yet, even in light of this knowledge, it did not change its company policy to reduce the required serving temperature of coffee to a safe level. For this, the court awarded Liebeck $200,000 but held her 20 percent responsible for the accident, so she received $160,000.

As for the $2.7 million in punitive damages that sounds so ridiculous, this is not money to compensate Liebeck; rather, it is designed to punish McDonald’s for its negligence and to be a large enough sum to send the message to the company to adjust the temperature, and sway other companies to follow accordingly.

With this new knowledge of "frivolous" lawsuits, I realize these cases are not always as ridiculous as they seem on the cover. What may seem absurd and outrageous initially may actually be reasonable considering the circumstances and the legal justification behind them.

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**Wacky Warning Label Contest**

Michigan Lawsuit Abuse Watch has revealed the results of its seventh annual Wacky Warning Label Contest:

- **The top prize** went to this warning on a bottle of drain cleaner: “If you do not understand, or cannot read, all directions, cautions and warnings, do not use this product.”
- **Second place** went to this warning on a snow sled: “Beware: Sled may develop high speeds under certain snow conditions.”
- **Another award** went to the package for a five-inch fishing hook which told buyers it was “Harmful if swallowed.”
"They should make a (so and so) that does (this or that)."

Have you ever had this thought? And later you discover your invention has been invented? Then people tell you, "You should've had your idea patented because you'd be rich right now!" (Well, golly, thanks. That was useful information yesterday.)

It seems a slew of people have taken that advice and have had their inventions patented. However, just because your idea has been patented, that does not mean someone will buy your invention. Nevertheless, countless patents are issued every year. Here are some of my favorites:

**JACQUES FIDO**
- U.S. Patent Issued 2001

Many dogs love to swim, but who knew they could scuba dive with fish? Well, now they can with this canine contraption. The design includes a microphone and a speaker for interspecies communication. It looks like the dog has the better end of the deal with the 360-degree viewing bubble.

**DOGGY LUGGAGE**
- U.S. Patent Issued 1998

More for the dog-lover—if you own a dog, you know how easily dogs can get distracted; they love all those wonderful smells, and they tug you this way and that. Enter Doggy Luggage. It's not luggage for your dog, your dog is the luggage. Just pick up Fido using the handle and you have living luggage with four legs dangling. You say your hand is getting tired? No problem, simply use the convenient shoulder strap to sling your furry friend to your shoulder.

**BEERBRELLA**
- U.S. Patent Issued 2003

Many of you know someone who will appreciate the Beerbrella. Two of America's pastimes are baseball and beer. But, there's a downside to all that sun—the brewski gets warm. Fortunately there's a solution. The Beerbrella conveniently clips to the beer bottle, providing cool shade and a personal beverage oasis. You might be wondering how you'll be able to slurp the beer with that umbrella in the way. Don't fret yet. The Beerbrella pivots at its peak for easy bottle access.

**LEAF CHAPS**
- U.S. Patent Issued 2003

According to the inventor, "Collecting and gathering leaves that have fallen to the ground has proven to be a time-consuming lawn and yard chore, especially in the geographic locations characterized by preponderance of deciduous trees and shrubs that drop their leaves in the fall season." Well, then, it's time for all deciduous tree and shrub owners to stand up and unite and pull on a pair of fancy web-laced Leaf Chaps! Now you can scoot and shuffle your way to a clean yard. Hopefully they fit the kids!

**SNOWBOARD BUMPER**
- U.S. Patent Issued 2000

Learning to snowboard can be difficult. All those twists and turns necessary to control a snowboard can get lost in the chaos of staying upright. Falling down is part of the experience, but how do you keep from hurting yourself during the learning curve phase? Here comes the Snowboard Bumper to the rescue! This handy device wears like a vest but it's bigger, much bigger. When you start to fall down the Snowboard Bumper will keep you upright enough to recover your balance easily and quickly (or so the theory goes). Don't forget to remove your Snowboard Bumper before entering the lodge.

**ANTI-EATING MOUTH CAGE**
- U.S. Patent Issued 1998

Well, someone did it. If you've ever had to talk yourself out of another slice of pizza, you may have joked about needing this invention. The mouth cage is designed to allow you to breathe and speak but not eat due to the barrier that's mounted to your face. Just in case you think it's easy to remove this contraption to scarf that pizza slice before someone sees you, the mouth cage actually locks to your head! Eeks, I hope your name isn't Clareese.
Sixth Grade Honors Student Arrested for Packing a Utensil

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from harm. But consider this story reported by the Rocky Mountain Times:

Courtney Glowczewski suffers from cerebral palsy and as a result has a withered arm and leg. This has made her a target for harassment by students and she’s been taunted, threatened and had a knife pulled on her. She says the school never responded to her complaints. Finally, after another student set her hair on fire, the school acted.

Was the student with the knife arrested and sent to jail alone just as Charlotte Kirk in order to protect the students? Nope.

Glowczewski’s alleged attacker was neither arrested nor expelled, nor was there a phone call to the parents. Administrators confirmed to a local TV station that the boy had a knife, but the school did not call the police. So, what happened? Glowczewski was told not to come back to school for the rest of the year.

Two stories involving a knife at school, and two incongruent outcomes: a girl innocently brings a knife to school and is arrested; a boy threatens a disabled girl with a knife, and the attacked girl is removed from the school while the boy remains in school. It’s absurd that the underlying theme in both cases is the truly innocent ones are suffering as a result of inconsistent decisions.

I’m not suggesting the same decision or rule should apply to everyone. I believe rules can and should be broken, as needed. It’s impossible to expect us to be able to govern exponential situations by one rule. But—why can’t we get a handle on the ability to make sound judgments?

Does it make sense that Charlotte Kirk sits in a courtroom defending her decision to help her mom pack her lunch, while Courtney Glowczewski’s attacker continues to sit in a classroom? And does it make sense that this attacker never loses a day of education, while Courtney Glowczewski spends her summer days indoors making up for lost school time?

It doesn’t make any more sense than cheese whiz. Gee whiz. Geez Louise. Holy cannoli. We’re a living cliché: common sense is not so common.

Honors Credit Courses for Summer:

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<th>Schedule</th>
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Absurd News—Education by Chrystine Hanus

Fashion Police

Local clothing stores say pink is in season, but a school in Merrillville, Indiana believes wearing pink is a fashion faux pas. The school has added pink clothes to its list of unacceptable garments. School officials noted the pink color blossoming this season and fear wearing the color is related to gang activity. “There is no evidence of gang activity. But because of the growing use of wearing the color pink we decided to be proactive,” says associate superintendent Michael Berta.

Journalism 101

When an Italian driver called a parking attendant a “nobody,” a court ruled that is slander and fined the driver 800 Euros.

America—Land of the Free Cell Phone Use

The majority of American female college students own cell phones—you can hear the “beep-beep” of messages being received in classrooms across America. But in Saudi Arabia, if you are a female college student caught with a cell phone containing a camera, you will be fined and suspended for three years. Religious authorities believe females spread obscenities with such phones.

Follow the Rules and Keep Your Ears

A teacher in Thailand was following the rules when he snipped off half an earlobe from a 15-year-old female student. Her hair length was not up to the school’s dress code so the teacher cut it off, along with half her earlobe. Doctors were not able to reattach the appendix.
Absurd News—Travel by Chrystine Hanus

C’est le Bomb

During a training session for bomb-sniffing dogs, French police placed plastic explosives into real luggage at Charles de Gaulle airport. Dogs and humans missed their mark in one exercise and the bomb departed the airport in luggage cargo. French authorities have ceased using real luggage in such exercises.

Who Says Penguins Can’t Fly?

Pat and Penny Penguin were en route to their home in Sea World, San Antonio when Pat and Penny were stopped by security personnel. Apparently birds who cannot fly with their own wings are to be treated the same as humans. Pat and Penny were asked to independently waddle through the metal detectors unescorted.

Fortunately the penguins weren’t sporting metal belts or jewelry that day and they passed through the metal detectors without sounding the sensory alarm.

The penguins were unavailable for comment.

It Is Our Money, Isn’t it?

(continued from page 1)

for many different, interesting things. For instance, over-redundancy—there are 342 different economic development programs that, according to their mission statements, do the exact same thing. This goes for the 130 at-risk youth programs, and the 130 programs serving the disabled. As well, there are 17 trade agencies overlooking 400 international U.S. trade agreements. This is not 400 trade agreements divided among 17 agencies; seventeen trade agencies redundantly oversee 400 trade agreements.

One way the government tries to help college students is to grant student loans. There would be $55,000 more money available in student loans if the government didn’t provide loans to fictitious students. Last year, a British investigative news program not only made up three students, they also made up the school they attended. The three students were granted $55,000 in student loans without question. When the government found this out, it began an investigation. It discovered the news editor had a sense of humor—it seems one of the fictitious students was named Susan M. Collins, the same name as the senator who was in the position to block the funding, and the same senator who started the investigation.

The Heritage Educational Foundation, one of many watchdogs, searched through government records and found more than one credit card scandal. During a recent 18-month period, “U.S. Air Force and Navy personnel used government-funded credit cards to charge at least $102,400 for admission to entertainment events,” baseball and football games, and rock concerts (see www.heritage.org/research/budget/bg1840.cfm). They also charged $48,250 in gambling in Atlantic City and Las Vegas. Apparently the U.S. Navy does not have enough boats of its own because it paid more than $69,300 for cruises aboard Carnival Cruise Lines and Celebrity Cruises. To keep our soldiers, sailors and airmen happy, the Defense Department also charged $73,950 to credit cards for exotic dance clubs and prostitutes.

In another credit card abuse scandal discovered by the Heritage Educational Foundation, a recent government audit revealed employees of the Department of Agriculture diverted millions of dollars to personal purchases through its government-issued credit cards. Sampling more than 300 employees’ purchases during a six-month period, investigators estimate approximately 15 percent of the department’s staff abused their government credit cards at a cost of $5.8 million. Taxpayer-funded purchases included concert tickets, tattoos, lingerie, bartender-school tuition, car payments and cash advances. The department has pledged a thorough investigation.

However, there are about 55,000 department credit cards in circulation—including 1,549 active credit cards for people who no longer work at the Department of Agriculture.

Just remember—they get what we pay for.

For more information visit HeritageFoundation.com
A New Breed of Auction

(continued from page 1)


—Auctioneer transcript from Art Under the Radar

What was the starting price? What were the bids? And the final selling price? I’ll tell you one thing—even after reading it I have no clue!

The auction has definitely evolved with the creation and success of the computer auction, in particular eBay, The World’s Online Marketplace®. You can sell everything, anything and even nothing on eBay. Looking for that $200 textbook for a cheaper price? A roommate? A date? A rare antique? A new car? Or, even a house? eBay has it! You may be surprised at the wide variety of regular, strange and absurd items you can buy on the eBay market.

Often the very strange and peculiar items get passed into the media and make the news. In just the past four months, ABC 7 Chicago news has featured at least five stories about absurd eBay items. On Dec. 13, 2004, it reported a judge-for-sale ad that had recently been posted, and then removed. The ad for New York Housing Judge Gerald R. Klein received 6,400 views and 21 bids during the four days it was posted. The highest bid was $127.50.

On Dec. 28, 2004, ABC 7 reported the sale of water from a cup used by Elvis Presley during a 1977 concert for $455. The man who owns the Styro-foam cup (and previous owner of the water which was stored in it) claims he received the cup of water after the concert and froze it. He then thawed the ice and stored it in a vial. He is too attached to the white cup to sell it.

eBay also has indirectly sold the elusive “Duff Beer” from the popular FOX Television show, “The Simpsons.” The beer was actually made in Australia in the 1990’s, but was quickly taken off the market. The few cans that were produced are now worth more than $700 each. On Feb. 2, 2005, an Australian woman pleaded guilty for selling three non-existent cans for a total of $1,511.

Need a prom date? A teenager tried to sell himself as a prom date on eBay, as well. The ad successfully posted and he received an opening bid of $30, and the bids continued upwards. But then the buy-a-date, Nathan Carlson, violated an eBay rule—he offered to donate half his profit to charity. eBay pulled the ad.

In a successful sale, Golden Palace Casino purchased the stomach of a pregnant woman for $4,000. The Golden Palace Casino’s Web site address was temporarily tattooed on her belly as an advertisement. The casino also successfully won an eBay auction for a grilled cheese sandwich that bears the image of the Virgin Mary—for $28,000.

In my own recent search on Feb. 28, 2005, I discovered an entire eBay category entitled, “Everything Else: Weird Stuff.” And eBay is right; it is filled with weird stuff. I found a girl trying to raise money to start her own “personal” website; and a man selling a memory stick from his camera filled with random, undisclosed “priceless” pictures.

The best find, however, was the auction entitled, “160-Acre Homestead of Land on Mars.” Answer one question: how can someone sell land on Mars when no human has ever been there?
Graduation is almost here and many students will enter the corporate world for the first time. And for the first time, these students will understand the real world is not a television program. With this new-world discovery, these students will find some things never change. No matter where a person goes, he or she can find a stupid policy to regulate what should or should not happen.

Computers run much of our lives these days: people work with computers, they live with computers in their homes, and they drive with them using computer-guided systems installed in their cars. Inevitably computers break down, and when that moment happens most people will make a telephone call to a technical support department—often referred to as a “help desk.” At least three computer corporations—Gateway, Dell and IBM—have a policy in place to financially reward its “help desk” staff for how quickly they can get off the phone with the customer. Now, how helpful is that? This might be alright in the long run, though ...

These three companies also have policies in place in which its employees must routinely purchase or update their personal computers—some policies require a new computer purchase to be made every two years. The hiring sign that reads “Our best customers often become our best employees” may actually mean “Our best employees are our best customers.” The computer industry is not the only one that requires employees to purchase employer products; this also is a policy for many car companies, clothing stores and other retailers.

Do not think this is the only way corporations have found to spend employees’ money. Dress codes are standard in most industries. IBM requires its office staff to not only wear blue suits, but they also must wear white shirts and blue ties with a small paisley print. They are required to wear their cars. Inevitably computers break down, and when that moment happens most people will make a telephone call to a technical support department—often referred to as a “help desk.” At least three computer corporations—Gateway, Dell and IBM—have a policy in place to financially reward its “help desk” staff for how quickly they can get off the phone with the customer. Now, how helpful is that? This might be alright in the long run, though ...

One of the world’s largest corporations has a strict e-mail policy. If Wal-Mart receives an e-mail with a known virus attached, it automatically returns a copy of the e-mail with the attached virus to the sender with the sender’s name in the “FROM” line. A common virus attacks the address book of an e-mail recipient and automatically sends itself to all the contacts in the recipient’s address book. This means Wal-Mart is returning viruses to people who do not even know they sent the virus to Wal-Mart in the first place; and the virus will once again be sent to Wal-Mart. Therefore, returning the virus to the recipient is only sending the virus back to Wal-Mart. It is a vicious circle.

The New York Times is no better. It has a policy where every fact must be checked and rechecked to make sure it is accurate and factual. This must be done for every story, every day, every time. The problem with this is the proofreading must only be done by the person who wrote the article. Now, the first rule taught in Journalism 101 is to have someone else check your work to make sure you did not miss anything, right? Just checking.

On the bright side, these and other absurd corporate policies ensure people will always have jobs—because companies will always need staff to write the explanations of such policies.
Absurd News—Nation

Good thing Homer Sherlock faked his heart attack ... (see “Fakin’ It”)

Police officials in Bel-Ridge, Miss. say department officials are pressuring them to spend less time catching robbers and more time writing tickets. “When it comes down to it, money is what counts,” says a department memo obtained by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. “State cases do not generate money for the department, municipal tickets do.”

The newspaper says that theme is sounded in several internal department communications it has obtained.

Editor’s Note

This last issue of the spring 2005 semester’s The Challenger has a less serious focus than previous issues. As we approach the end of the school year, I hope this issue reminds everyone to laugh daily, play often, and never take yourself too seriously.

Word history: Absurdus in Latin means “silly” and “irrational,” just as absurd does in English, but its literal sense is “out of tune.” Historically, absurdus was used figuratively outside the realm of music and acoustics to mean “out of harmony with reason.”

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Honors Program Announcements

Honors Credit Courses for Fall:

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Fakin’ It

The Right Way
by Chrystine Hanus

Our previous “Fakin’ It” columns have focused on faking gone wrong. But sometimes the right recipe of “fakin’ it” yields a winning result. The Challenger’s last prize for “Fakin’ It” goes to seventy-two-year-old Homer Sherlock for faking a heart attack to escape from burglars.

On Wednesday, April 7, 2005, two burglary suspects forced their way into Sherlock’s apartment. The burglars slapped Sherlock with their fists and told him they were going to kill him if he didn’t tell them where the money was stored. In a rage for money, the suspects used a bandana to blindfold Sherlock and used an extension cord to tie up his feet and a telephone cord to tie his hands.

The two men destroyed appliances, dismantled file cabinets and trashed Sherlock’s apartment. But Sherlock out-smarted his attackers by faking a heart attack. He told them he was having a heart attack and to get his nitroglycerin pills.

The men fled using Sherlock’s cell phone to call for help:

Caller: It’s an older guy in St. Regis Apartment 210 having a heart attack.
911: Stay on the line, okay.

The suspects hung up and left the apartment building which has cameras installed both inside and outside the building, as well as a sign that says, “You are on camera.” As well, witnesses saw the men leaving and are helping police get a good description.

Elementary, my dear Watson!