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BAND CAMP

Annual music festival invades Chillicothe
PLUS: Check out the lineup in Cue, C1



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TEEN QUEEN

17-year-old Jordin Sparks becomes youngest singer to win 'American Idol'



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A life cut short too soon

Elmwood Marine remembered as 'scrappy' kid who was dedicated to serving country



TERRY BIBO

Her son may have been in Iraq, but Brenda Desilets faithfully received flowers and a phone call on Mother's Day.

Twenty-one-year-old Ben told his mother he had set aside some special savings. When he got home, he was going to take Brenda on a cruise to Alaska. He knew that was her dream trip.

"For as ornery and mean as he was, that was the way he really was," she laughs. "He just didn't want anybody to know it. He was an only boy, raised by a mom and two sisters. He had to be macho."

Mother's Day was the last time she



BEN DESILETS

spoke to Ben. The "ornery kid" who became a proud Marine was killed earlier this week, just hours after the younger sister who idolized him graduated from Elmwood High School.

"We went from a graduation on Sunday to Marines in the front yard on Monday," says Brenda.

Full disclosure: I was Ben's Cubmaster. I knew the sleepy-eyed boy with the sly smile even before he became a girl magnet in high school.

"One thing I can tell you about Ben: If there was an easy way and a hard way, Ben took the hard way," says his den leader, Sherida Houlihan. "Scrappy is a great word for him."

A Cubmaster tends to know the adults better than the kids, so there's a special place in my heart for Brenda. She probably wouldn't think this is important, but she was battling cancer during part of the time Ben was in Cub Scouts. Yet she was always there to back him up, never complained. When she asked me to tell the full story about a Ben I don't know, the one the U.S.

Please see **MARINE**, Page A9

HONORING THE FALLEN

► A candle-light vigil for Lance Cpl. Ben Desilets, 21, is scheduled to begin at 8 tonight in Elmwood's town square, located at Magnolia and Main streets. The 2004 Elmwood High graduate was killed Tuesday in Iraq.

Projects take toll on taxes

Average Peoria County homeowner will owe about \$90 more this year

BY JENNIFER DAVIS
OF THE JOURNAL STAR

PEORIA — Statistically, Brad Carter is pretty close to the average Peorian, fitting the age and income demographics.

He also probably has the average Peorian's response to taxes: He doesn't like them.

"I always think taxes are too high," said Carter, a 34-year-old warehouse worker who lives in the heart of the city in a small two-bedroom home on Peoria Avenue. But, knowing that he's only paying about \$175 more in property taxes than he was five years ago, he also knows "that's not too bad."

"With gas prices on the rise and utility bills going up, another \$30 to \$40 one-time pop on your tax bill may not seem bad, but, in the end, it all adds up."

"My fear is that I feel the next few years could change substantially."

Carter is referring to a number of expansions and new building projects in the works or planned — everything from the Peoria Park District's \$32 million zoo expansion to the estimated \$57 million new Greater Peoria Regional Airport terminal to the \$35 million planned Peoria library expansion and makeover, just to name a few.

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INSIDE

► Where is your money going? Chart breaks down how various taxing bodies' rates have fluctuated.

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COMING FULL CIRCLE



Warren Mitchell flashes a smile before entering the Richwoods High School gymnasium Wednesday night for commencement ceremonies. Mitchell, who survived Hurricane Katrina, received his diploma on time just 2½ years after moving to Peoria from New Orleans. All four District 150 high schools held graduations on Wednesday night.

ADAM GERIK
JOURNAL STAR

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Hurricane Katrina survivor graduates with other Peoria seniors, plans to make the journey back home to New Orleans

BY CLARE JELLIK
OF THE JOURNAL STAR

When Warren Mitchell and his family fled New Orleans and the path of Hurricane Katrina with nothing but two changes of clothes, he swore he would never return.

"It could happen again," he reasoned back then after transplanting to Peoria. Now, nearly two years later, he is moving back.

Mitchell, 17, graduated from Richwoods High School on Wednesday and leaves for Louisiana today. It's not because he hasn't enjoyed his life here, he said before graduation Wednesday. "I felt welcomed,"

he said of his Richwoods classmates.

It's because New Orleans will always be home. "New Orleans and Peoria are not the same, so I could never feel all the way at home (here), but I am comfortable in my environment," he said.

About 770 District 150 seniors graduated Wednesday at simultaneous ceremonies held at the four high schools. Peoria Alternative High School will graduate 21 students tonight at the Gateway Building.

Superintendent Ken Hinton spoke to graduates at Peoria High, and School Board members addressed graduates at the other three high schools.

Please see **GRADUATE**, Page A6



ADAM GERIK/JOURNAL STAR

Cynthia Johnson gives son Warren Mitchell a big hug after Mitchell graduated at Richwoods High School on Wednesday night.

MANUAL HIGH SCHOOL

CLASS SIZE: 103

SPECIAL CLASS MEMORY: "Our sophomore year stunt show was the most memorable. Can you imagine a book smart, hardworking, and caring girl embrace a completely opposite personality to make our stunt show a success? Renee Dow, our valedictorian, portrayed a character attending Peoria High School. ... At the time, we had no one else to fill the spot, so Renee stepped out of her comfort zone and became a girl rapper no one recognized. We will never forget when Renee walked on the stage with cornrows, hoop earrings and a basketball jersey." Senior Makaila Watson, 17

DID YOU KNOW? More than 10 percent of Manual's graduating class has suffered an injury because of athletic involvement.

PEORIA HIGH SCHOOL

CLASS SIZE: 200

SPECIAL CLASS MEMORY: "Last week at the end of finals for our seniors, they played a prank and put 2,007 forks in the ground which spelled out 'Class of 2007' on our football field. The neat part was they cleaned up their own prank and thanked us for taking their picture with their prank." Randy Simmons, Peoria High principal

DID YOU KNOW? At graduation, Peoria High took a moment to remember two special people that the school lost this year. Student Gerrick Porter died in September at 17, and former coach Dick Isaacson died two months later at 58. Gerrick's mother accepted his diploma, and the seniors picked Isaacson's favorite saying as the class motto: "There are no simple, easy answers to complex problems."

RICHWOODS HIGH SCHOOL

CLASS SIZE: 294

SPECIAL CLASS MEMORY: "We had our annual music assembly (this year). I rapped 'Grillz' in front of the whole school. While I lost my dignity, I built a lot of street cred. It was fun actually. I didn't think I would do it, but it was a good time." Senior Harita Shah, 17

DID YOU KNOW? Richwoods senior Drew Hanlon had an emergency appendectomy the day before graduation but was still able to muster up the strength to attend the ceremony.

WOODRUFF HIGH SCHOOL

CLASS SIZE: 174

SPECIAL CLASS MEMORY: "My favorite memory was the football games and senior year going to playoffs. Every game was nothing but fun. The crowd was always off the chain. We won most of our games, and we went to the playoffs for the first time in 20 years." Unknown senior, contribution for the senior edition of the school newspaper.

DID YOU KNOW? Woodruff senior Brian Wilder had perfect attendance throughout his entire high school career and was recognized for the accomplishment at graduation Wednesday. Wilder is a student in the school's "life skills" class. He works at the Community Workshop and Training Center, however, his dream job is to be on staff at McDonald's. His teacher at Woodruff has been working with him to achieve his dream.

Bottle holds more than water

Washington teen finds mold in drink she bought at school

BY KAREN McDONALD
OF THE JOURNAL STAR

WASHINGTON — When Washington Community High School senior Rachel Whitehurst sprang for a bottle of Deja Blue water from the school vending machine, so got a little more than she expected for \$1.

She got mold. Whitehurst bought the 20-ounce bottle May 7, opened the seal, took a few swigs and continued on her way to class. When she set the blue-colored bottle on her desk, she noticed something floating inside and screamed.

"It looked like brownish-green scum that you'd see floating on a pond," said Superintendent Jim Dunaan.

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