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Sunday Gazette-Mail

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THE SHAPE WE'RE IN

POUND Punchers

1 year, 555 pounds, 555 balloons



CHRIS DORST | Sunday Gazette-Mail photos

Lincoln County's Pound Punchers celebrate as they watch 555 balloons that represent the 555 pounds they have lost rise high into the sky. From left are Shannon Hager, Karen Harris, Kevin Ferrell, Michelle Egnor, Linda Harris and Annie Toney.

National TV crew films Mud River weight warriors' celebration

By Kate Long
Staff writer

ALKOL — Late Friday afternoon, deep in rural Lincoln County, inside the Mud River Volunteer Fire Department, 26 adults and children were furiously blowing up and tying off 555 helium balloons, praying the rain would stop.

For months, they had looked forward to sending balloons up in the air to celebrate the one-year anniversary of the Mud River Pound Punchers, one balloon for every pound they have lost.

Faced with diabetes and heart problems, six determined Lincoln countians — all associated with the Mud River VFD — have walked the

"If we could get communities all over West Virginia to do what you're doing, this state would be in much better shape. We need to find a way to spread this statewide."

DR. RON STOLLINGS
Senate HHR Committee chairman

back roads together each morning for a year, exercising and dancing in the fire hall in the evenings.

"We wanted to celebrate with our kids in a way they would remember," said Melisa Ferrell, who has lost 123 pounds. "We got our hearts set on balloons. Then it rained."

In midafternoon, they floated a test balloon in the rain, to see what would happen. It sank right back down to earth. "We went on faith that it would quit raining long enough for us to get these balloons in the air," she said.

They have a lot to celebrate. In the first eight months, the original six lost an average of 71 pounds apiece. By June 1, they had 11 regular walkers, 40 "sometimes" members and 555 pounds lost.

SEE **555, 8A**

SLAIN KELLEY'S MEN'S SHOP EMPLOYEE

Community remembers Kathy Goble

'She was the most positive person'

By Megan Workman
Staff writer

The collage of pictures at Cavalry Baptist Church showed how Sheila "Kathy" Goble's hairstyle changed over the years but her wide, lively smile never did.

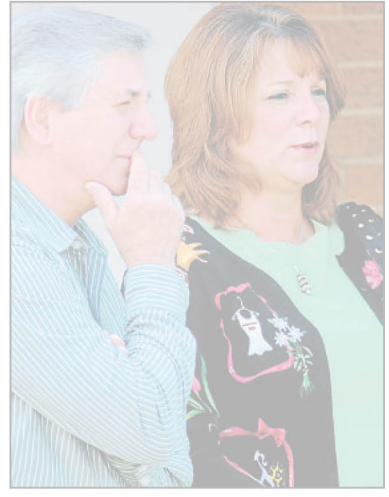
Nearly 100 people gathered at the church on Charleston's West Side to remember the former Kelley's Men's Shop employee during her 11 a.m. funeral.

Goble, 64, was last seen at Kelley's on April 24, 2010.

Interim Pastor Archie Snedegar told the group of family, friends and co-workers how he was grateful to have known Goble — she used to help him pick out ties, shoes and shirts at the men's shop.

Goble's best friend of 26 years, Mary K. Bradley, said Goble was a fanatic for clothes and shopping.

Goble always had a job in retail and loved it, Bradley said. Prior to working at Kelley's — where she worked for 10 years — she was an assistant manager for eight years at Talbot's, a women's



LAWRENCE PIERCE | Sunday Gazette-Mail

Mary K. Bradley and her husband, John, attend the funeral of Bradley's best friend of 26 years, Kathy Goble, on Saturday.

clothing, shoes and accessories store.

"We loved going shopping together," Bradley said on Saturday.

SEE **GOBLE, 9A**

Morgantown tries again: City will try zoning laws to keep gas drillers out

By Vicki Smith
The Associated Press

MORGANTOWN — This city learned the hard way that it couldn't ban shale-gas drilling and hydraulic fracturing within its borders, but it has a new plan that would render most of the city off-limits.

On Tuesday, the City Council will introduce six zoning ordinances that would effectively limit drilling to 600 acres surrounding the Morgantown Municipal Airport.

"In West Virginia, you can't use zoning to ban any type of use," said Chris Fletcher, director of development services. "You have to identify some area where it's appropriate. So that's what we did."

If the measure limiting drilling to designated industrial zones is introduced as expected, a public hearing would be held July 3, Fletcher said. A final vote could come that night.

SEE **DRILLING, 9A**

Bluefield State faculty: Political catch-22 hinders presidential search

By Amy Julia Harris
Staff writer

More than a month after Bluefield State College faculty members gave the school's provost a vote of no confidence, the Mercer County school's interim president hasn't formally acknowledged or commented on the vote.

Several faculty members say that's because the interim president, Tom Blevins, and the provost, Lewis Jones, are vying for the president's job — and

any action Blevins takes would be seen as politically motivated.

On April 16, Bluefield State's Faculty Senate gave Jones the no-confidence vote by a 32-18 margin, with two abstentions. The vote accused Jones of "coercive" behavior that included threatening to fire faculty members without cause, promoting academic policies that directly flout rules by Blevins, and unlawfully upending the university's core academic structure, according to the letter that accompanied the no-confidence vote.

"Dr. Jones has coercively and continuously threatened numerous faculty and classified employees with termination for unspecified reasons without just cause," said the Faculty Senate letter. "Dr. Jones has enacted numerous detrimental academic policies in contravention of direct orders of the Interim President of Bluefield State College ... has attempted to change the structure and composition of the Bluefield Faculty Senate in contravention of the laws of the State of West Virginia ... and

has through intimidation and coercion caused a severe crisis in the morale of both Faculty and Staff such that large numbers are exiting the institution to our detriment."

Yet, more than 40 days after faculty members voiced their concerns with Jones' leadership, they say the administration still has not formally acknowledged or commented on the vote, despite its significance — inaction they say is rooted in internal politics.

Blevins, as interim president,

is the person with the power to act on the Faculty Senate's no-confidence vote. A provost or academic vice president is a will-and-pleasure employee who can be let go or fired at the president's or Board of Governors' discretion.

But faculty members say Blevins is caught in a political catch-22. They say he and Jones have submitted applications to become Bluefield State College's permanent president. They say any action that Blevins could take to reprimand Jones or act on the vote of no confidence could be construed as a political move to torpedo his candidacy.

SEE **BLUEFIELD, 9A**

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Panetta: There is no China threat from U.S. military in Asia

By Lolita C. Baldor
The Associated Press

SINGAPORE — From this island nation in the South China Sea, U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta sent a message Saturday that America's new military focus on the Asia-Pacific is not intended to raise tensions in the region or threaten Beijing.

The Pentagon chief appeared to offer an olive branch to the communist power and said often feuding rivals must learn to work better together for the benefit of the entire region.

Delivering his most extensive thoughts to date on the fragile state of U.S.-China relations, Panetta said neither side is naive about their disagreements.

"We both understand the differences we have, we both understand the conflicts we have, but we also both understand that there really is no other alternative but for both of us to engage

and to improve our communications and to improve our [military] relationship," Panetta said at a security conference in Singapore.

At the same time, however, Panetta said Asian nations must find a way to resolve their own conflicts because the U.S. cannot always come charging in to help.

Tensions between the U.S. and China reverberate across the region, and are often focused on America's support of Taiwan, which China regards as a breakaway province and threatens to use force to block any Taiwanese bid for formal independence.

Another area of dispute is the South China Sea, which Beijing claims almost entirely as its own. But Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and the Philippines also have territorial claims.

More recently the U.S. has been vocal in blaming China for cyberattacks that emanate from the country and steal

critical data from U.S. government agencies and private American companies.

On that front, Panetta said U.S. and Chinese leaders have talked about developing teams that can work together on difficult issues. That could involve how to exchange information on computer-based threats and whether they can agree on standards for the use of cybercapabilities.

The goal, Panetta said, is for the U.S. and China to develop the ability to communicate when disputes arise so that they can be resolved peacefully.

Defense experts attending the conference questioned Panetta extensively about China, with one query coming from a member of China's People's Liberation Army. But officials also noted that Beijing did not send any of its senior leaders to the conference. It was not clear why, although some officials suggested that China's leaders were busy with internal issues.

Questioners asked whether adding more U.S. military to the region might embolden some smaller nations and risk triggering more conflicts. They also wondered aloud whether China's leaders boycotted the conference in protest over America's new strategy for the region.

"I don't think we should take the attitude that just because we improve their capabilities that we're asking for more trouble," Panetta said.

Panetta also issued a strong call for Asian nations to set up a code of conduct, including rules governing maritime rights and navigation in the South China Sea, and then develop a forum where disputes can be settled.

"It isn't enough for the United States to come charging in and try and resolve these issues," Panetta said, adding that the Asian nations must develop ways to peacefully solve their own problems.

Panetta's speech was designed to give a more detailed explanation about

the new defense strategy. It puts more focus on the Asia-Pacific, including plans to increase the number of U.S. military personnel, warships and other assets in the region over the next several years.

Specifically, he said that by 2020, about 60 percent of the fleet will be assigned there as part of a new strategy to increase U.S. presence in Asia. Currently, the Navy has about 285 ships, with roughly half assigned to each coast, but that total may decline a bit as some ships are retired in the coming years and may not be replaced.

The current fleet includes 11 aircraft carriers, with six assigned to the Pacific. The West Coast total is expected to go down to five, but Panetta said he will maintain six carriers in the Pacific over the long term.

While noting it might take years to complete the transition, Panetta said that U.S. budget problems and cutbacks would not get in the way of changes.

555

FROM PAGE 1A

In March, they were featured in a Gazette-Mail article. A few weeks later, the Lincoln County Commission gave them \$1,200 to buy sturdy exercise equipment for their fire hall to replace the flimsy ab-loungers they had at the VFD. "We went to the commission meeting, showed the [Gazette-Mail] article, and asked if they could help us get some real equipment," Ferrell said.

At about the same time, Marshall University contacted them, offering to come to the fire hall and teach a class on healthy eating and other ways to prevent and control diseases like diabetes. "That's been great," she said.

Then in April, they heard from a New York television production company interested in filming them for a national show about people who are successfully attacking obesity.

On Friday, that production company was filming at the fire hall. They filmed the Pound Punchers blowing up multicolored balloons while rain drummed on the roof. They filmed the kids running back and forth with balloons on strings, tying them down. At about 4, it stopped raining. By 4:30, the sun came out. Soon after 5, two generations of Pound Punchers burst out of the fire hall, holding hundreds of multicolored helium-filled balloons on strings.

In an adjacent field, they stood in a tight circle, holding the balloons aloft. After a prayer, they opened their hands, and 555 balloons went floating up. Everyone cheered, and Melisa Ferrell and several others burst out crying. They piled into a group hug, laughing and crying, while the film crew circled them. The balloons floated up past the treeline, above the firehouse, then beyond the steep mountains.

"I can't explain how good it feels to see them float away," Annie Toney said, wiping away tears. She has lost 101 pounds now and is completely off her blood pressure medication. "It's been a lot of walking. I never in this world thought I could do that," she said.

"We have a lot to be thankful for," Kevin Ferrell said. A year ago, he was taking seven to nine shots of insulin a day. Now he takes two.

Sen. Ron Stollings, a doctor and chairman of the Senate Health and Human Resources Committee, made a short speech. "If we could get communities all over West Virginia to do what you're doing, this state would be in much better shape," he told them.

"We need to find a way to spread this statewide."

Thinking about healthy food

The Pound Punchers signed an agreement not to tell the name of the national show that came to film them. The Gazette-Mail agreed to honor their agreement. The March Gazette-Mail story led them to the Pound Punchers.

The production company filmed the Pound Puncher kids playing ball and walking with their mothers in the rain. They also filmed the doughnuts and cakes in the fire hall and honey buns and candy bars in the fire hall vending machine.

"We're kind of in transition, where food's concerned," Toney said, grinning and shrugging. "We've come a long way with exercise, but several of us have hit a plateau, so we know it's time to think about what we eat, too, if we want to keep losing."

They are taking steps in that direction. Thursday, the production company filmed the Pound Punchers and other fire department members taking the nutrition class at the fire hall,



KATE LONG | Sunday Gazette-Mail photos

Marshall University is teaching a 5-week class at the Mud River fire hall on healthy eating and control of chronic disease. A national TV crew recorded Thursday as Sally Hurst, Marshall instructor (right) led the discussion.



In March, the Lincoln County Commission gave the Mud River Volunteer Fire Department funds to buy sturdy exercise machines to replace their flimsy ab-loungers for workouts. "One commissioner said he was afraid for us to be using what we had before," says Kevin Ferrell, seen here working out with Shannon Hager.

taught by Marshall University's Sally Hurst.

"We want to teach these classes in fire halls, churches and senior centers, and they're a perfect group," Hurst said. "Good on physical activity and just starting to think seriously about nutrition."

During the class, they listed obstacles to healthy diet: the

cost, a junk food habit and the fact that no store within a half-hour's drive sells healthy food such as dried beans, brown rice, fresh vegetables or fish.

They brainstormed things they could do: raise gardens, can food, carpool to the grocery to save money. "We could set up a little farmers market," Toney said.

The film crew recorded the class. They filmed them cutting up tomatoes for lunch. They filmed Kevin Ferrell injecting his insulin. They interviewed them for hours.

"It's sort of scary to have people following you with cameras for two days," Melisa Ferrell said Friday. "If this show helps people, I'll be happy, but

I'll be glad too when things get back to normal."

Step by step, they're improving

The film crew left Friday evening. "We'll have to wait to see what they make of us," Ferrell said. Meanwhile, "we'll just keep doing what we do."

They are better equipped to do what they do, now that the

Mud River VFD has a small, first-class gym. "It's there for anybody in the community who wants to use it," Toney said.

In early May, Commissioners Thomas Ramey and Dr. Charles Vance came to the gym opening.

"So many West Virginia areas have lost their schools, so sometimes fire departments become the center of the communities," Ramey said. "These exercise machines will be another way for this community to come together in a healthy way."

Parks and Recreation gave the fire department money to buy two basketball nets for the kids.

"It's such a positive thing for kids to see their parents enjoy exercising and keeping at it," Vance said. "They're learning healthy habits."

"We've got to address childhood obesity, and there's no better way to do it than in families." He likes the nutrition class. "Step by step, they're gradually improving their diet and, with the exercise, achieving things they wouldn't have achieved otherwise."

"We have a big problem with diabetes and hypertension in the county, and these people are addressing it right here, without having to spend a lot of money. That's impressive."

Friday, Melisa and Kevin didn't get home until late. They live in a tornado-damaged house. When it rains, they move pots from place to place to catch the leaks. "We're back to reality," she said. "But today, we're forgetting our problems. Today we're celebrating."

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