

OAKLAND

Boa constrictor in mailbox no joke to postal worker

STATEWIDE

Michigan loses 2 more soldiers in the Iraq War 7B

MACOMB

Selfridge event honors Tuskegee Airmen

Inside
Roadwork 2
Notebook 2
Death notices 6
Obituaries 7

MORE COUNTY NEWS INSIDE ►
PAGES 3-4

LOCAL

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Protesting Unger sent to prison

'Jury has spoken,' judge says in handing down life sentence

By FRANK WITSIL
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

MANISTEE — Proclaiming his innocence to the end, Mark Unger was sentenced Tuesday to life in prison without parole for killing his wife,

Florence, nearly three years ago while vacationing in Benzie County.

"I was wrongfully convicted of this crime and I am innocent," the 45-year-old Huntington Woods man said in court Tuesday.



Mark Unger said the verdict against him in his wife's murder was ridiculous. He received a mandatory life sentence.

Just before the sentencing, Unger's attorney, Robert Harrison, asked Benzie County Circuit Judge James Batzner to overturn the jury's June

21 guilty verdict on the basis that there was no evidence to support it.

Batzner said that would not be appropriate. "The jury has spoken," Batzner said.

A widespread blackout in Benzie County, where Florence Unger was killed, forced officials to move the sentencing, which was set for the 19th

See UNGER, 7B

What's next for Mark Unger

Mark Unger likely will spend the rest of his life in a Michigan prison after being sentenced Tuesday. He is expected to be transported soon to the Charles Egeler Reception and Guidance Center Annex in Jackson.

The center serves as the main intake office for new male prisoners.

Once Unger arrives, he will be

evaluated to determine the appropriate facility for permanent imprisonment.

He has been incarcerated at the Benzie County Jail since being charged with first-degree murder.

He was given credit Tuesday by Circuit Judge James Batzner for 132 days served.

- FRANK WITSIL

IT'S SHOWTIME



Photos by STEPHEN MCGEE/Detroit Free Press

Starkesha Brown, 21, of Detroit auditions Monday for a position on Automotion, the Detroit Pistons dance team. Brown was part of the team last year but had to audition again with other women who want a shot at making the team. About 150 women attended the tryout.

Women line up to join Pistons dance team

Only 18 to 20 are likely to get invite

By NAOMI R. PATTON
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

They wore mostly black spandex, several with belly rings that sparkled from afar, and the occasional set of thick, false lashes that could be seen from a luxury suite.

They stretched, preened and waited, and stretched again. Then, it was showtime.

Nearly 150 local women showed up at the Palace of Auburn Hills this week to au-

dition for the upcoming season of the Detroit Pistons dance team Automotion. But only 18 to 20 of them are expected to get calls on Thursday inviting them to join Automotion for its 11th season.

Despite their odds, they came in droves with a resume, a headshot and \$20 to give it a shot. Some applicants were veterans trying out as they must every year for the team. Others, like LaDonna Tennant, 21, of Detroit



Bethanie Amann, 20, of Superior Township, wearing No. 53, looks for her number Monday to see whether she made the first cut. She did.

were newcomers.

"I just want to give her my support," said Paulette Bedgood of Detroit. She had driven Tennant, her daughter, to the audition.

Tennant, a former cheerleading captain at Mumford High School and current

cheerleader for Ferris State University, was eager to give Automotion a try.

"I'm excited and nervous at the same time," Tennant said. "I don't know what to expect."

See CHEER, 7B

Calls for help bombard metro Detroit charities

By SHABINA S. KHATRI
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Many of metro Detroit's charities are reeling this summer — and not just because of the heat.

Rising temperatures and joblessness have hit at a time when many local charities already struggle with a soaring demand for basic needs like clothing, food and shelter.

The problem is one that James Barrowman — once a helper, but now seeking help — is still coming to terms with.

"Last year, I was making a good living," said Barrowman, 25, who was laid off from his roofing and siding job two months ago. A missed mortgage payment cost him his Warren home, but Barrowman

said it wasn't until his girlfriend recently became pregnant that he decided to request assistance.

"It was extremely hard for me to ask for help, but I told myself I'm not the first one," he said while waiting Tuesday at the Roseville headquarters of the Macomb County Rotating Emergency Shelter Team (MCREST). "And now it's not just about me."

But charitable groups in the state — be they large or small — are feeling the crunch.

At United Way for Southeastern Michigan, calls to its 2-1-1 help line reached 6,700 last month — double the number of calls received in June 2005.

"This isn't just an urban/

See CRUNCH, 7B

Authorities seek abuser of bald eagle

By TINA LAM
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Wildlife investigators want to know who captured a bald eagle in the Upper Peninsula, clipped its wing and tail feathers so it couldn't fly and spray-painted its head brown.

The mistreated, emaciated adult eagle was found in the woods near a house June 30, but how it got there is still a mystery.

"It was abused and near starvation," said Todd Bruntjens, who picked up the bird the day it was found, hopping in dense woods. "It's a total disgrace."

Bald eagles are protected as a threatened species by state and federal laws, and no one is allowed to possess them without a special permit.

Bruntjens and his wife,

Reward offered

There is a \$1,200 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of whoever had the bald eagle, and the person or people could face fines and prison time. Anyone with information on the eagle or wildlife poaching can call 800-292-7800, 24 hours a day.

Gayle, run a rehabilitation center for raptors at their home near Brampton.

When the eagle was found, it was weak and emaciated because it hadn't eaten in days. It couldn't fly and could only hop a few feet.

"When we got it, it kind of hung its head like it was depressed," Bruntjens said Tuesday.

See EAGLE, 7B

A juror questioning a witness? It's possible

Maybe you've dreamed of bringing an arrogant witness to his knees — think of Tom Cruise breaking Jack Nicholson in "A Few Good Men" — but never got around to graduating from law school.

Maybe you long to visit the scene of a notorious murder — or the supermarket aisle where your neighbor slipped and broke her hip.

Or maybe, like a certain middle-aged newspaper columnist, you just remember things better when you write



BRIAN DICKERSON

them down.

If you're a prospective juror in search of a more proactive, participatory courtroom experience, Michigan's highest court wants to help.

In an initiative that could empower jurors to query

witnesses or request field trips to the scene of significant events, the state Supreme Court has proposed more than a dozen reforms that could dramatically alter the experience and impact of juries throughout Michigan.

The proposals range from minor changes, such as allowing jurors to consult their own notes during deliberations, to significant innovations, such as allowing judges to moderate debate-style panel discussions in which opposing expert witnesses could ask one another questions or answer those posed by jurors.

Chief Justice Clifford Taylor, who was appointed to the high court by then-Gov. John Engler in 1997, told me he

asked Justice Stephen Markman, another Engler appointee, to develop a list of proposed rule changes after hearing colleagues at a conference of chief justices extol the benefits of a more participatory jury experience.

"Many of these changes, such as allowing jurors to discuss testimony among themselves during breaks in a trial, strike the ear of an American lawyer as quite suspect," Taylor conceded in a phone interview. But judges whose states have implemented similar rules report that they "work wonderfully."

Taylor says he and his colleagues will seek input from the lay public as well as lawyers and trial judges for

six months before deciding whether to implement any of the proposed changes in Michigan. But "if they enhance the truth-seeking function," he adds, "we should look hard at them."

Critics often complain that the state Supreme Court's incumbent Republican majority has made it too difficult for ordinary citizens to bring their cases before a jury, and some plaintiffs' lawyers I spoke to Tuesday are suspicious of the court's interest in juror empowerment.

But state Supreme Court spokesperson Marcia McBrien says justices are only looking for ways to make jury service a less-daunting obligation.

"We don't ask people to go into a physics lab and conduct an experiment without knowing anything about physics or being allowed to take notes or ask any questions," McBrien notes. "Ought we not be trying to make this process as easy as we can?"

McBrien says justices are particularly interested in hearing what Michigan residents who've served on juries think of the proposed changes, which can be viewed at www.courts.michigan.gov/supremecourt/Resources/Administrative/2005-19.pdf.

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