Salt Institute for Documentary Studies

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Thea Okonak returned to her hometown of Pittsburgh after finishing her semester at Salt. A graduate of Sweet Briar College with a degree in sociology, Thea is currently working at a bookstore while she applies to graduate schools in creative non-fiction writing.

Megan Dalrymple had taken some time off from her undergraduate studies to attend Salt. She fell in love with both photography and Maine and decided to stay in Portland. She is currently studying photography at Maine College of Art.

Kate Terrill lives in Cincinnati, Ohio where she is working as a freelance graphic designer and photographer. She is applying to graduate programs in photojournalism.

Eric Larson had just graduated from Willamette University in Oregon when he came to Salt. He returned to the other Portland after Salt. Eric is freelancing for the Willamette Week for the Arts and Culture section. He is also part of a weekly fiction writing group called Dangerous Writers.

Brea Walker, a native of New Hampshire, is completing her senior semester at Wheaton College where she is an Independent Photography major. Since Salt, Brea has presented her work at the International Visual Sociologist’s Conference two years in a row.

Christine Heinz was the first student from Oklahoma to come to Salt. Like many of our alumni, she’s had a hard time leaving Salt and has been working here ever since. She is in the process of applying to graduate schools for further work in photojournalism.

Heather Barnes is a graduate of Smith College who was working as a web designer in Virginia when she realized she wanted to learn documentary writing. It’s paid off—she is interning for the Empowerment Project in Chapel Hill, NC where she’ll be making social justice video documentaries.

Maria Schriber took some time off from Vassar College to hone her photographic skills at Salt. After Salt, she transferred to Brown University where she was the photo editor for the Brown Daily Herald. She is working on a photodocumentary of Ruth Simmons, the first black president of an Ivy League school and the first woman president of Brown. Maria will graduate from Brown in December 2002.

Megan Hanson came to Salt as a graduate of Connecticut College with a dual degree in Asian and Religious Studies. She is a freelance photographer specializing in weddings — documentary style.
Editor's Page
Spring 2002

With this issue of Salt we announce the return of a smaller (64 page) magazine, to be published twice each year. This is the last issue in which work from multiple semesters is presented. The next issue (Summer 2002) will highlight student work from the 2001 fall semester, and the one after that (Winter 2003) will focus on work from the 2002 spring semester, and so on.

This issue contains just three collaborative stories and three photo essays, selected from more than 30 works by students in three consecutive semesters – spring 2000, fall 2000, spring 2001. Several other pieces from these semesters will soon appear on Salt’s web site.

2001 was a year of change and transition for Salt. The new executive director is Samuel Eliot; the new academic dean is Patricia Erikson. Dr. Eliot is an educator who has taught at the University of Southern Maine and Mount Desert Island High School and who helped to start College of the Atlantic, in Bar Harbor. Dr. Erikson, a Maine native, is a professor of cultural anthropology with extensive field experience and familiarity with two key components at Salt, the Archive and the Gallery.

In addition to new leadership, Salt also has a new mission statement, crafted over a period of months by faculty, staff, and trustees:

The experiential education programs at the Salt Institute collect, communicate, and preserve non-fiction stories about Maine people that, as they relate to the larger world, foster community and celebrate the diversity and commonality of humanity.

We like this statement. We think it says clearly what we do at Salt, and why we do it. Fostering community, and celebrating our differences and similarities, have always been important parts of the fabric of Salt. After September 11 it seems more important than ever to highlight them.

Our magazine’s purpose is to communicate the non-fiction stories that our students discover and tell. That has been its purpose since its first issue, in 1973. We value this continuity and consistency: 29 years of story-telling, in Maine and about Maine. Please turn the page and meet the people at Marcy’s Diner.
It's the Sunday before Halloween, the first snow Portland's seen this year, and the line at Marcy's Breakfast and Lunch is out the door. For some folks, Sunday morning at Marcy's is ritual — like Sunday morning at church. Marcy's may not have name brand bacon bits, but God Loves Marcy's Toast, so much so that He scratched those words into the wood in the tiny men's room.
Marcy's is not a diner in any traditional architectural sense. It's not a prefabricated, freestanding structure. It's not a salvaged railroad car or a restored trolley — it's not even a restaurant built to look like a salvaged railroad car or a restored trolley. Marcy's doesn't boast decorative glass or stainless steel, bright porcelain or patterned tile, aluminum siding, or art deco decor. There are a number of these "classic" diners in Maine. The kind that get full-page glossies in coffee table books on Americana — the A1 Diner in Gardiner or Moody's Diner in Waldoboro. The A1 has a web site. Moody's has a gift shop and their cookbook is in its tenth printing.

Marcy's doesn't have a gift shop or a cookbook. It's one rickety wood-paneled room. It's five booths and eleven stools in a 19th century building on the corner of Portland's Oak and Free Streets. It's the cramped backside of Congress Street, the city's main drag. A woman on the street tells me that she used to wait for the bus right here — it's "the coldest corner in Portland," she says. But even when it's not packed with bodies, Marcy's is furnace-hot and buzzing. The hiss of the griddle generates heat, and the layers of noise rub up against one another. The sounds stack themselves like egg crates — fuzzy radio on small talk on sausage frying.

Water running on the clank of plate on plate, knife on plate, fork on knife. The people are stacked, too. Arm-to-arm in cramped booths, or knee-to-knee at the counter. The cook, the waitresses, the dishwasher, the runner — five bodies, ten elbows that navigate the two-by-twenty foot space behind the counter.

Kevin Smith calls Marcy's a diner. "It's the old greasy-spoon effect," he says. Kevin has been the co-owner and full-time cook for a little over six months. He and his wife, Heather, are what Marcy Litman calls "fresh blood." She sold the restaurant to the couple a few months ago — she wanted it in the hands of an employee or a regular. Heather was a waitress, a friend, an ex-regular. So Marcy's has been passed down; it hasn't been given up, hasn't been lost. Kevin and Heather — "they've kept it goin'," Marcy says. That's part of what makes it a diner, in Marcy's mind — the continuity, the familiar faces. She calls it a diner because it's ... "a local place that has good food, low prices," because ... "everyone knows each other, everyone jokes with each other." A diner, she says, is about a lot more than food. The joking, the good time, the knowing everyone — according to Marcy, "that's what makes a diner a diner."

Before Marcy's was Marcy's, it was Mike's. Before it was Mike's, it was Lou's. Before it was Lou's, it was Your Host. But when we're talkin' Your Host, Marcy says, "we're talkin' way back." Like fifty years. The place served ice cream and fountain drinks back then. Kevin found an old shake mixer in the basement and brought it upstairs. He put it on the shelf that runs the length of the wall above the booths. A shelf that no one really sees. It's right above the heads of the booth people and out of their line of vision; the folks at the counter, planted firmly on their stools, have their backs to it. The booth people look at one another, and the folks at the counter watch the cook, the waitress, and the dishwasher. But Kevin still decorated the shelf with memorabilia, new stuff designed to look old; Dennis the Menace lunch boxes, milk bottles and a wooden margarine crate.

Marcy's is a diner in spirit, if not in structure. But it's a diner that's changing, a diner trying to rediscover and display a past — new owners, new checkerboard ceiling panels, new tabletops on the way. The walls have fresh paint — either robin's egg or mint green, depending on who's talking. New items — both whimsical (chocolate chip pancakes) and trendy (iced mochas, hazelnut decaf). But you'll order these things with your elbows propped on a counter that's been propping up elbows like yours for 50 years. And the language is the same — "Havin' coffee?" still means "hello."

The left side of the griddle is still lost under a mountain of thick-cut homefries, and you'll struggle to mount your stool without looking silly. Especially if you take the last stool, the one nearest the grill, the one with the rattletrap seat.

If you stay long enough — for three fill-ups, maybe, or a piece of chocolate cream pie — the day will unfold around you in rushes and lulls. The four ceiling fans will circle drunkenly, and you'll run your fingers over the switchblade nicks in the ruddy wood. You'll watch the folks behind the counter slide past one another and pass checks and change like batons. They'll ask you "Howya doin?" and tell you whether or not to get the kielbasa. They might remember "Howya doin?" and tell you whether or not to get the kielbasa.
your name, or they might start calling you by your order. See the couple over there? He's "Three Scrambled," and she's "Black Decaf." The guy at the end of counter two? That's "Pancake 'n Beaters." They'll remember these things because this is a diner. Remembering is part of the job.

IT'S FOUR A.M. on a Thursday. The streetlights outside of Marcy's are on the blink, the air is electric blue, and the buildings are licked with Portland cold. No cars, an occasional street cleaner. Kevin slices another potato, his dishpan hands steady. "The only thing I hate," he says, "is choppin' potatoes." Kevin chops 350 pounds of potatoes every week. It's a lot of homefries. Kevin stares down the stack of potatoes he hasn't cut. He's got the Joker's tee-pee eyebrows and archer's-bow grin. He's got a prickly blonde moustache and a long elastic face. He does a great Johnny Carson and a better Ed McMahon. He chops with a little more fury and the potatoes stare back.
He takes a break from the potatoes, opens a Pepsi, and finds a straw. Sip. All of the waitresses get “whacked” on coffee. “I’ve never been a coffee drinker,” he says. And he doesn’t talk the choppy diner talk that the waitresses do. He wraps himself more deliberately around his words and pulls away at the end of his sentences — his speech is as loopy as his sense of humor. And Heather, his wife for seven years, says he gets “crazier” when he’s tired. He talks to the food. “Scramble, scramble,” he tells the eggs, wagging his finger.

There is exhaustion between his eyes this morning. Every morning. Kevin sleeps maybe four hours a night. He sets the alarm for one a.m., gets up at two. Marcy’s opens at six. Joey Sparks, the waitress with the whiplash hair and the Harley, the one who drinks three pots of coffee a day, will be here at five-thirty. By that time, Kevin will have smoked at least two Camel Lights, filled three stainless steel bins the size of small televisions with potatoes, and made a few dozen muffins from scratch. The muffins will swell over the cups, dense as scones, and later, Heather will cut them apart with a chef’s knife. Marcy’s doesn’t have a full-size oven — just a small toaster that sits on top of the microwave, which is balanced on the small white fridge. The new fridge. There are four fridges in Marcy’s, and the other three, as Kevin will tell you, are “old as the hills.” Most of the stuff in Marcy’s is old as the hills — or looks that way. The tape deck-radio is cock-eyed with a duct-taped antenna. It rests on the top shelf behind the griddle, and the wooden plank sags with its weight. The tape deck looks out of place, pressed against the rolls of English muffins. There are no exclusive spaces here. The men’s room sink isn’t in the men’s room — it’s right outside of the men’s room, caught between the booths and the back door. Marcy says that sometimes the street people try to wash their hair in that sink.

**SUNDAY MORNING** is a bad time for the dishwasher to slice his hand open on a broken plate. It’s bad timing but no surprise — Stan slams plates into the sink like he’s dishwashing to the tune of the 1812 Overture. He also slams into waitresses. “Stan is a walking worker’s comp case,” Heather sighs. “Stan is the danger zone,” Mandy adds. Days later, after the stitches are out, Stan will come mostly for coffee to go, maybe a muffin, she says. They don’t plant themselves at the counter, and they don’t watch Marcy through their eyebrows.

Marcy is in her late thirties. She’s wearing black tights with neon flowers and a halter-top that wraps at the neck. There are five gold hoops in her left ear and four in her right. There are no uniforms at Marcy’s; the waitresses tuck their checkbooks into their back pockets, clip their pens on belts and beltloops. Marcy wears a half-apron — sometimes. She’s a tall woman with long arms, sturdy wire-rims, and cut-glass features. She’s got a low-down cigarette voice. She doesn’t own Marcy’s anymore, but she still cooks on weekends. Every weekend she works is her last, and then she’s back the following week. For a while, Kevin and Heather were waiting for Marcy to tell them when she wanted to stop working, and Marcy was waiting for Kevin and Heather to tell her when they didn’t need her anymore.

Then Marcy realized. “That would be never.” Even though, Kevin tells me, his muffins are better. It’s something to rag her about.

Marcy struggles with the toaster tray, which is sticky, grease black, and bent. Marcy’s doesn’t have a full-size oven — just a small toaster that sits on top of the microwave, which is balanced on the small white fridge. The new fridge. There are four fridges in Marcy’s, and the other three, as Kevin will tell you, are “old as the hills.” Most of the stuff in Marcy’s is old as the hills — or looks that way. The tape deck-radio is cock-eyed with a duct-taped antenna. It rests on the top shelf behind the griddle, and the wooden plank sags with its weight. The tape deck looks out of place, pressed against the rolls of English muffins. There are no exclusive spaces here. The men’s room sink isn’t in the men’s room — it’s right outside of the men’s room, caught between the booths and the back door. Marcy says that sometimes the street people try to wash their hair in that sink.

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back with a blue plastic glove on his left hand, and he'll duct tape it at the wrist so the water won't get in. Around noon, the postman will stop by, see the glove, and grin.

“Hey, Michael Jackson,” he'll say. “Can I have your autograph?” And Stan will rush past him on his way to bus a table. “It’s Slash,” he'll say. Kevin will overhear and smile. “Stan the Man,” he'll rap. A few days from now, the whole thing will be funny. But today is Sunday and the place is packed and there isn’t a dishwasher. It’s the first time I’ve seen Mikey have trouble smiling.

Mikey is sometimes called Mike, and sometimes called by her full name, which is Michaelene. But Michaelene is a little long for a waitress. And a little long for diner talk, which spins on three-word questions and two-word imperatives. “How are ya, Mikey?” “Booth five, Mikey.” Mikey’s usually got it together. “I think I love Michaelene,” Marcy says, “because she always has a smile on her face.” Even, Marcy says, when things are going wrong – Mikey “can fake it no matter what.” But today Mikey has to help Stan stop the bleeding, and she looks a little worn.

The incident reminds her of the time her Aunt Mary nearly chopped her finger off. Aunt Mary cooked at another diner in the heart of Portland for twenty years. Mikey’s aunt and uncle co-owned the diner, but Mikey refers to it as her aunt’s because Aunt Mary was bossy. “Marty’s Restaurant,” she says. “It was right smack side th’ police station. Small little place like this, ‘cept for it had a kitchen out back. An’ it had a little pass-through window.” At first, they didn’t have a waitress. And the customers pitched in – bused tables, washed dishes. Her aunt “worked like a dog.” Twenty years of seven days a week. “Even,” she says, “when her daughter was little and just a baby, she’d have the baby in there, she’d be cookin’ away.” Even when she almost sliced her finger off – it was hanging by a thread. But Aunt Mary “wrapped it back up” – with duct tape – “and went right back to work like it was nothin’. She was wicked tough.”

Mikey says she’s been in diners all her life. She says that there’s nothing stressful about working at Marcy’s. But there are things that worry Mikey, and she wears them on her face, and she talks about them – hesitantly. “I’ll tell you the truth,” she says. She’s sitting at booth five, and it’s after hours. She’s tired. “The only thing that bothers me is I’m gettin’ older. And I don’t keep up as fast as the other ones. That’s what I’m thinkin’.” The “other ones” are Joely, who’s in her early thirties, and Mandy, who’s 24. Mikey is in her early forties. “I get a little stressed,” she says, “thinkin’, ‘Okay – how much longer am I gonna make it here?’ ‘Cause I know eventually I have to quit sometime.” Mikey has already quit two times. And come back two times. “I left only because I wanted to work closer to home.” Mikey drives in three times a week from Gray. “Plus I got burnt a little, burnt a bit, ‘cause I’d been here so long. She says that, after trying every job there was in Gray, she realized that she couldn’t work anywhere but Marcy’s. She says that the next time she leaves she’ll be too old to come back. “I can’t be here with gray hair and all that, ya know,” she says. “Purple hair, walkin’ with a cane an’ all that.” But Heather says she’ll only sell Marcy’s when Mikey retires, and she wants the restaurant for ten years. At least. “We’ll have ya in a walker,” Heather tells her. “I could get a walker with a tray on the front for you to deliver food.”

Mikey remembers her aunt, thinks about Marcy’s. “Y’know,” she says, “there’s no way I could sit in an office.” The ash on her cigarette is the color of her eyes. As soon as the place closes, the staff at Marcy’s pull out ashtrays from under the counter and light up. Mikey’s cigarette burns down and the ash gets precarious – she seems to have forgotten about smoking. She’s thinking. “I like to be around people and just yak all day. Once I get goin’ I don’t stop.” She has trouble putting her finger on exactly what it is that makes diners like these special, and why there’s no other place she’d rather work. She calls it atmosphere. “You see the same people comin’ in every day. That’s what I liked about her place, it was the same people come in everyday, just like Marcy’s.”

**JOELY CALLS HERSELF A TOMBOY.** “I love cuttin’ wood, I love climbin’ trees, ridin’ motorcycles, dirt bikes, three-wheelers, four-wheelers, all that kind of stuff. Yeah; yep. All of the above.” Joely used to work for Marcy’s dad at his sandwich shop. When that closed, Marcy says, “I stole her.” That was 11 years ago, and she’s been at Marcy’s ever since. “It’s my first and last waitressing job,” she says. “For all day long there’s hundreds and hundreds of people. Little tidbits of this ‘n that. You could constantly write a novel in here. Constantly. A novel a day, y’know?” Joely takes a drag from her Marlboro, stacks some bills. She’s counting the tips she’s dumped out of a brass vase. The waitresses at Marcy’s pool the tips, give Stan ten percent, and split the rest between them. She counts the bills with the speed of a bank teller – she’s a spinning top when she’s sitting still. “That’s how she stays so god-darn skinny,” Marcy grumbles. Like Kevin and Mikey, Joely has to keep busy. “The busier the better,” she tells me. “When it’s busier, you’re makin’ more money. And that’s the main
It's amazing that people will wait outside to be third, fourth, or fifth in line... for two eggs, toast, and homefries. If you're gonna be here, you might as well make a lot of money. Joely is the fast-gun waitress, sharp as her last name and her elbows, quick as her tongue. She's an artful dodger, a mind reader, has eyes on the back of her head. She's full of mischief — that's what Robert says. He's the older gentleman in the blue Maine hat who comes with his wife and gets the blueberry pancakes because they're the best blueberry pancakes in Maine.

Joely studies the wall and there are shadows under her eyes. It's amazing that people will wait outside to be third, fourth, or fifth in line,” she says. “For two eggs, toast, and homefries. I mean, that just amazes me. And they don't come just for the food. That's what I have to tell myself. They come for the whole atmosphere,” That word again. “And there's a lot of people that come in here, too,” she says, “that they almost feel like it's home.” Richard, who used to come three times a day. Or Rita, who comes twice a week. Or Ruth, who brings her family in every weekend. “We live here,” she's told me. Some people ask Joely if she remembers them from eight years ago. “And some of 'em you do,” she says, “some of 'em you don't. “Yes, I do,” or, ‘No, I'm sorry, I don't. And why should I?”
Marcy has said that Joely takes a little getting used to. Joely knows this about herself. She isn’t afraid to offend, and she won’t take anyone’s shit. She is half-excited and a little bit proud when she tells me about a bad exchange she had with a customer. Says it went like this:

“Hey YOU! I think I’d like some cocoa.”

“Oh – you think so?”

“I think I changed my mind.”

“Good answer.”

There are folks who have a sincere attachment to Marcy’s, and Joely doesn’t seem to understand. They call and ask if Marcy’s is open for Thanksgiving, and she has to tell them, “No. I’m sorry. I realize this is your second home, but, no. We don’t have turkey today.” There’s a giant question mark just above her eyebrows. “There’s more to life,” she says, “than two eggs, toast, and home fries.”

KEVIN’S ULTIMATE DREAM is still life as a modern-day pirate. He’d like to sail the South Seas in a yacht, pillaging ships for rum and gold. But if the pirate thing doesn’t pan out, he’ll find another way to get rich. He wants a 1971 Convertible Eldorado Cadillac. Hot pink with a vanity plate that says “ TICKLED.” All his friends are into sports cars, but Kevin likes luxury. And the Caddy is the best. For right now he drives a minivan. It’s a husband-father car. For right now he’s got a new son and a big old house in South Portland and a rachitic diner on the corner of Oak and Free. And while “it ain’t paradise,” it’s not so bad.

Kevin thinks about paradise, but he also thinks about how to drag the past into the present. He wants to “get that old-time diner effect going” at Marcy’s. He raps his red knuckles against the wooden counter, gives his thought some kinetic energy. Kevin is full of these idiosyncrasies; there’s diner in the way he moves. He draws in the space around him when he talks, ducks his head down. He uses his left sleeve to wipe his forehead and cover his smoker’s cough. His hair is short, fine, and flyaway. It’s playground hair, wild west hair, dreamer hair. He wants the diner “to be like a time capsule.” To have people – old people, pierced people, baby-boomers – nod in a way that means, “Wow. This must be what it was like in the ’50s or the ’60s.” Kevin lines up four sausages on the grill and presses them with a cast iron steak weight. He uses a paintbrush to butter the space around them. Flips a bowl and toys with the griddle scraper. He likes it when things are busy. Not just because of the money. “It’s a high – adrenaline,” he says. He pulls at the collar of his Camel Lights T-shirt like he pulls at his gold chain. He smoked his way through two cartons and sent away for the shirt – that’s how he gets most of his shirts. All of them have diner in their fabric – potato and grease and salted butter finger prints. These things don’t wash out.

Kevin is 29. He used to drink in cemeteries, mess around with a homemade Ouija board, and do Dali-style art. “I thought it was fun – at the time,” he says. But then he fell off of a graveyard wall with a fifth of Jack Daniels in his hand. He doesn’t miss the brawls or the drunk tank or the stitches, but he misses the art, and Heather wishes he’d stayed with it. “He does flying heads in love,” Heather tells me. “Floating heads,” Kevin corrects her. He looks at the floor, at the sink, at Heather. It’s three-thirty on a Sunday and tomorrow’s prep list has been written on a paper place mat. The griddle has been cleaned with grill cleaner, neutralized with vinegar, and seasoned with oil. Time to go home. Kevin doesn’t have to pretend he’s not tired, and Heather’s standing beside him. “Things fly and things float,” he tells her. “Things that float don’t always move.” Kevin’s kind of floating right now. He used to fly around in cars. Faster, faster, faster. He can’t remember how many cars he’s crashed. “So many I’ve stopped countin’,” he tells me. But Kevin says he’s slowed down “big time” since the baby. Bryce is three months old, has Kevin’s eyebrows and Heather’s eyes. Heather stops by with the baby, sometimes, and he grabs at the dense air, clutches his fists. Heather smiles. “The way those arms are goin’ around, he can start cookin’ eggs anytime.”

BEFORE MARCY BOUGHT THE DINER, it was a flop. The owner was an insurance agent who wanted his own restaurant. “So he was doin’ next to nothin’,” Marcy says. Meanwhile, Marcy was “puttin’ in, like, eighty hours, ninety hours a week” at three different jobs. She was doing breakfast at one place, lunch at another, prep at a third. She figured that she might as well be cooking for herself. She

Kevin’s ultimate dream is still life as a modern day pirate. He’d like to sail the South Seas pillaging ships for rum and gold.
told a friend that she wanted to get her own place and
he said, “I know the perfect place for you.” So he sent me
up here.”

Marcy owned the place for eleven years. It was eleven
years of being on her feet twelve hours a day, seven days a
week. It destroyed her back — she’s had two surgeries.
And when you work that much “you don’t have a lot of
time for friendships and a social life.” She taps the table at
booth five, and it teeters. “So I found it here.” Her friend­
ships are tied up with her idea of what she wanted Marcy’s
to be. Her mantra: “No bitchin’ in here.” That’s what she
said, years ago, to a bickering couple at booth five. And
then she threw a creamer at them. “We’ve been friends
ever since.” There is a proud history of throwing things at
Marcy’s. Mostly soft things, like towels and suds and
whipped cream. There is smacking and tripping which is
sometimes, but not usually, accidental. The staff seems
inspired by the black and white posters on the wall behind
the booths — the Three Stooges, Our Gang, The
Honeymooners. The smacking and tripping — it’s a way to
perform away tension, and the laughter has the kick-back
force of a machine gun.

Marcy’s got a new weekday telemarketing job selling
an herbal version of Viagra (for both men and women).
She’s trying to learn how to sleep — her body still wakes
her up in time for prep. So she plays computer cribbage.
Two of the booths at the restaurant are designed for crib­
bage, with pen-cap sized holes drilled in the center of the
cherry-finished pine. People used to sit and smoke and play
cribbage. You can still buy cigarettes at Marcy’s, but you
can’t smoke them in the restaurant — during open hours, at
least. And people stuff straw wrappers and pinkie fingers
into the peg holes. Kevin plans to replace the tables — they
teeter too much. Someday, Marcy is going to write a book
about that kind of stuff A book about Marcy’s. Things she
remembers, things about the past. The book will be a col­
lection of stories and it might be a little vulgar. Paul, who
does prep, says that there wouldn’t be enough room on the
cover for all the X’s. But Marcy thinks the book would be
funny, mostly. She would include the section on the guy
who ate a plate of French toast and then started stripping
for her. It was early — before open hours — and she was
by herself, but she let the guy in. She called the cops when
the man started to unzip his snowsuit and she saw that
there was nothing but skin underneath. She says she saw
“everything.” Marcy says it’s funny, in retrospect, but it
wasn’t funny at the time. The cops who responded to the
call teased her for years. “Anyone stripping for you lately,
Marcy?” they’d say. She laughs about it, now. She says she
loves absurdity. Absurdity — not stainless steel — makes
Marcy’s a diner.

MARCY’S IS OUT OF eggs and down a dishwasher.
Once a day like this has set itself into motion, there is no
breathing until the last customer leaves. The Sunday before
Halloween — it’s been a day of bad luck and accidents,
tricksters and masks — even the weather’s pulling a fast one,
sitting the fence, shouting “Fall” and making snow. There’s
a man in a court jester’s costume, standing at the counter,
looking natural, playing with the tassels on his cap. A guy in
a rented bear costume stumbles past the diner and waves.
Heather looks at the last four eggs. “This is funny,” she says.
“Funny ha-ha?” Mikey asks. Heather doesn’t respond, but
her face says “No.” She sends a gopher to the supermarket
with $40 in her fist. How many eggs? “Get as many as you
can get,” she says. The gopher dashes out the door, slips on
some ice. “I shoulda had her buy some beer while she was
at it,” Heather whispers.

Today is Heather’s first time at the griddle without
Marcy or Kevin. She has help from Allie Gray, the part-time
cook who will eventually take Marcy’s place. Neither
Heather nor Allie is as tall as Kevin or Marcy. Their arms
aren’t as long. Heather is perky, and the griddle is still an
exciting challenge, and the abbreviations on the checks still
amuse her. But it’s been a rough day. Later, Heather will
refer to it as “that day.” The day when the griddle was espe­
cially moody — food always jumps when it sizzles, but the
hash was relentless. Later, Heather will show me her hands
and point at the raw red spots where it bit her.

Heather has a bright moon face and a cheerleader’s
energy. She went to college and almost studied industrial
psychology because she believes that workers are more than
robots. She’s animated and articulate — she’d be a good
motivational speaker, or a coach, or a counselor. She’s 29,
but looks 24 when she smiles and 34 when she’s in a rush.
Four years ago, she was working in medical claims at Blue
Cross. She started coming in for coffee, talking to Marcy,
and then waitressing as a fill-in. That’s how Marcy did most
of her hiring, aside from Joely and Mikey — she picked
Stan, Paul, and Mandy from her crop of regulars. Heather
and Kevin have done the same. Cori was a customer — they
knew her as Black Decaf.

“I can’t imagine not working here,” Cori says. Next
Saturday, Heather will fire her. Cori will call Heather at five
in the morning and say she can’t come in because her
boyfriend’s in jail. Cori has only worked at Marcy’s for four
months. She only works weekends, and Heather argues that
she misses a day every other week. She’ll fire Cori because she’s unpredictable and undependable. She’ll fire Cori because Cori yells at Marcy and she yells at customers. It will bother Heather to fire Cori, because they’re friends. So she’ll allow herself a sigh, but then she’ll be a boss about it. “It’s the daily life of a restaurant,” she’ll say.

Heather and Kevin talked for years about owning their own place. When they were younger, they worked for Kevin’s parents – Heather as a waitress and a bartender, and Kevin as a cook. But then Kevin wanted out of the family business. He tried pipe-fitting, warehousing. Heather tried medical claims. They weren’t doing what they wanted to do. But Heather insists that Marcy had to pitch the idea of buying the diner three times before she caved. She was making good money at Blue Cross. She had benefits and paid vacation. But it was, she says, a dead-end job. She doesn’t take a paycheck from Marcy’s, and she says that “havin’ the business alone is rewarding enough.” Because, she says, “We actually achieved one of our goals.” Kevin’s parents always laughed at them. “Oh, you guys have all these pipe dreams,” they’d say. Marcy’s – like the new house, the house that reminds Heather of her Nana’s house – was a goal. Her goal, now, at Marcy’s? “Make a good life for Kevin and I. Hold on to it for about ten years or so. ‘Till Michealene retires.”

But it’s a Sunday at Marcy’s and there’s no time or room to think about ten years from now. There’s a woman on the phone who says there was blood in her food. Cori, who took the call, stands by the receiver looking nervous and waiting for Heather to take care of it. But Heather’s making an omelet. She adds bacon, nudges the egg with a spatula. Her hands are nearly as red as the chipped polish on her nails. “She must have been here [this morning] when that whole thing happened with Stan,” she says. Cori shifts her weight.

“She goes — she said that there was blood squirting into the food . . .”

“Are they on the phone right now?” Heather folds the omelet.

“Yeah. But they’re lying.” Cori sounds desperate.

“What?”

“I said, ‘Yeah but they’re lying.’ Because Mikey — she said Mikey had it all over her hands.” Cori can’t stop moving. Heather looks past Cori. “Can someone pass me an omelet plate?” she asks. Without a word, Allie takes the grill for Heather, and Heather takes the phone.

The thing with Stan happened just before 10 AM. He was bloody from his fingers to his elbow; no one could tell where the cut was. The woman on the phone didn’t see it happen — her friend was there to pick up the order. She saw the blood and walked away without her friend’s breakfast. The Styrofoam container sat by the register for an hour. And then Cori saw the woman walk past the window and ran out to chase her. Someone had to pay for the food.

Heather negotiates. She winds the blue cord around her finger. Cori sits on the counter beside her and picks at a cuticle. Heather sounds calm, but her face is tight. The phone is in an awkward place — half-hidden behind a ceramic jar of utensils, right between the small fridge and the hot plate where the orders are placed. Anyone on the phone is in the way.

Heather knows that Stan’s blood didn’t touch the food, and she tries to explain that to the voice on the other end of the line. But she’s nervous. It’s her first day without Marcy or Kevin, and they’ve already had an egg crisis, and the cold air almost defeats the heat every time the door opens. Which is frequently, because it’s Sunday, late October, the first snow Portland’s seen this year. And for all of these reasons, the line at Marcy’s Breakfast and Lunch is out the door.
As Jessica rides her horse John around the ring, Dr. Judd looks on, talking with the trainer to try to figure out the source of the horse's pain. Outside it's a cool, windy spring morning, so everyone is gathered inside the arena where, after a series of tests and exercises, the doctor has to tell the young rider that she can no longer show her horse. John is nineteen and, after many years of showing, he is developing arthritis in his shoulder. Dr. Judd gently approaches Jessie and explains the situation with kindness and positivity which visibly help to ease her pain. These are the moments that continue to inspire Dr. Tom Judd to practice large animal veterinary medicine. As a veterinarian he is determined to do his best for both his patients and their owners.

Part of every routine examination is the dental exam. In order to view all parts of the horse's mouth, Dr. Judd gently grabs the tongue and pulls it to the side.
Jessica’s horse, John, cannot be shown anymore because of an arthritic shoulder, but she will still be able to take him for leisurely rides.

A large animal veterinarian performs most procedures right on the farm. A horse castration takes about 90 minutes, during which the doctor has time to talk with onlookers.

After cutting an overgrown tooth, Dr. Judd reaches into the horse’s mouth to see whether he needs to float the tooth. Any rough edges could cause the mare pain which could affect her health.
Jordan Bay, a miniature horse, has all the creature comforts in his small shelter, including a night light and a radio tuned to country music. Like many minis, however, he has an ornery disposition, making the exam difficult to complete.

Dr. Judd practices mainly equine medicine; however, his patients includes goats, cows, and pigs, and even a few cats and dogs. He runs his practice from the driver’s seat of his Chevy Tahoe, which is equipped with two cell phones and a pager.

Behind the front seat is where the glorified “black doctor’s bag” begins. It expands all the way to the tailgate, and includes all the equipment he needs to cover his daily farm calls: routine examinations, vaccinations and blood tests, joint injections, basic surgery, x-rays, and acupuncture. And there is still room for emergency equipment, when necessary.

Dr. Judd’s territory covers about a 45-minute radius in any direction from his home base in Falmouth. Though he does have a few clients on the outer fringes, he prefers to stay within those limits so he can get to an emergency in timely fashion, to ensure his patients’ safety and provide the best possible care.

Dr. Judd confers with a farrier in the threshold of the stables as to how best to shoe Sam to ease a painful heel condition.

After a long day at the stables, Dr. Judd takes a break in his client’s tack room.
Six oclock. Half hour ‘til house, an hour ‘til places. Early October chill creeps into the Oddfellows Theatre in Buckfield, Maine. The only warmth will come from the 156 bodies that will fill the room an hour from now. The small stage is arranged in the familiar television talk-show style. Band equipment in one corner, desk and co-host chair in the other. The sign above the stage spells out the night’s event, The Early Evening Show with Mike Miclon. Kim, Mike’s wife, settles into her pre-show station at the box office to arrange a small mountain of tickets. The name-plate in front of her spells out her honorary title, “Kim Miclon: Box Office Queen.” Her hair is still wet from her royal shower, the few quiet moments she gets to herself before each show. It’s there that she prays, not for a good show, but for a safe show. Her work with the tickets is quick and precise as she periodically peeks around the corner to see if anyone has arrived.
Behind Kim, popcorn inches up the sides of an old circus style popcorn machine. George Dunn wears a permanent grin and a two-day stubble. He scoops the popcorn out and packs it into the red, white, and blue pinstriped boxes. He stops at 11 and arranges two neat rows on the countertop. He refuses to divulge his secret of making gallons of popcorn and admits that you can’t beat the volunteering gig. He smiles a small-town smile and reaches for another package of butter. His wife Betsy, outfitted in a red t-shirt, advertising “The Oddfellows Theatre: Now, A Theatre Near You,” palms a damp rag and wipes dust off the banisters. She has already swept the floors and will next assist Kim with the tickets.

This cast of locals gathers at the Miclon’s theatre and home on the first Saturday of every month to work and wander before a performance. It has all the personality of a play that some kids put together, invite the neighbors to, and charge them a nickel to see. Tonight the ticket line will run the length of the front walkway. It will begin to curl down the street before another sell-out crowd is invited inside to fill the seats and see some top quality family entertainment just as the sign in the yard promises.

In the cramped backstage area, Michael Miclon is decked out in his best suit – his only suit – and a Mickey Mouse tie. Jason Tardy, The Early Evening Show co-host, stands back to watch Michael run through the cigar box juggling routine he will use to warm up the crowd. It’s pre-show entertainment just like the “real” talk show hosts do it. The network’s cameras are only imagined here. The commercials for local businesses don’t really generate revenue, but the entertainment is quality, and better yet, it’s live.

Mike will jog onto stage at show time. From behind the lights, he will check to see if his mother and father are in their regular seats. He will glance up to see if his boys are...
perched in the small “mezzanine” that was constructed for them. He will seek out a young face that he can call onstage to embarrass for a while. He will loosen up when he’s seen that the 155 red cushions are occupied, including the lone green one.

The Green Seat has become Buckfield’s version of a treasure hunt. It has a new, undisclosed location for every Early Evening Show. People have been known to sneak in the side door to look for it or bribe one of the Miclon’s boys to tip them off before show time. While it does not possess supernatural powers of any sort, it does bring temporary fame and gifts to its occupant.

Mike will continue by saying hello, as if he hadn’t seen a handful of these people on the way to the post office earlier. He will mean it, in a way that Leno or Letterman never can, when he asks, “How is everyone doin’ tonight?” Like neighbors and friends, they will answer him. It’s the Oddfellows Theatre the way the Miclons want it. Clean. Honest. Good.

THE POSTCARDS they give away at the box office and the press packets they send off to 19 or so news publications around the state list no specific street address. They simply say, “Route 117, Buckfield.” Visitors from the south are told, “If you get to the market, you’ve gone too far.” It’s that kind of town.

As small theatres struggle to survive even in Maine’s bigger cities, an out of the way town like Buckfield, a town with less than 2,000 people, seems an unlikely place to find a theatre holding its own. As quickly as one questions how a theatre could possibly function in a town this size, Michael supplies the answers. Why Buckfield? “... Because it’s Buckfield.” What about Buckfield? Because it’s a Community. Capital C. “... Because that’s where my roots are and that’s a place that I can impact. I could try to do this somewhere else...some other little town, but I have no connection to it.”

The theatre has been open for only three years, but Michael’s connection with Buckfield is life long. He grew up down the street where his parents still live, went to all twelve years of school here, met Kim in kindergarten, worked at the market, and performed — unscheduled — at the pizza joint on the corner. It is a place that has shaped who he is as a person and has nurtured him as a performer.

“Once I got involved in theatre, I got even more connected to my community. Because their support is really what helped me continue. They hired me... for every kid’s birthday party... eventually to their Christmas parties or to their reunions or whatever. People were hiring me and giving me their support. And I just became more attached.”

He admits that staying near home isn’t the most respected choice in the minds of some of his performing colleagues, who assume that to be touring the world is the hallmark of success. But Michael has been juggling professionally and cracking up audiences in Italy, Germany, the White House, the Kennedy Center, and countless other venues for 17 of his 33 years. Nothing ever feels quite as right as coming back to Buckfield. “I’d never really lived other places, but I went to a lot of different places and I kinda went... I can’t get it to feel right.” Ya know? And then the more I got to travel and was going all the time it just felt that much more comfortable to come home to home.”

When George Dunn, who works cement for his daytime gig, and Betsy, a local kindergarten teacher, let themselves in and begin to work a few hours before every show, it’s clear that others believe in what the Miclons are doing. It is not a group of strangers haphazardly thrown together for the purpose of putting on shows, tearing tickets, and making a buck. All of the faces around the theatre are local. Jason, who is 21, began as Michael’s apprentice seven years ago along with his younger brother Matt, 19. They live just down the street. Morty and Michelle Hanson, the technical personnel, aren’t far up the road either. Paul Newton, The Early Evening Show band leader, and his fellow musicians are all from around here. Dan Allen, the show’s mock producer, teaches English at the high school. Even Virgil, Miclon’s old friend and owner of Tilton’s Market next door to the theatre, is in on it.

Toward the top of every Early Evening Show, Michael punches in the numbers to Virgil’s from the speaker phone on his desk and the audience listens as they make small talk and place orders for a Coke (Jason) and an iced tea (Michael). A few minutes later, Virgil — clearly a grocer and not a performer — saunters in through the back door and onto the stage for the delivery. He is routinely greeted with applause. The locals probably applaud because he sold them some good roast beef lately. The newcomers clap because they can’t quite believe it’s for real.

The 109 year old hall was put up for sale by the town in 1996. The Miclons saw an opportunity to fuse Mike’s performing experience and reputation with a business idea and give something back to their community. They felt reasonably sure that it would work, but it’s clear that Christian faith was their cue. “I do attribute it to God. Before I even made the decision to do it, Kim and I prayed like crazy. And
I said, ya know, I want this to be something that God would want me to do because I fully believe that without that, I'm not goin' anywhere.

And it went. One piece after another fell into place. They bid $20,000 - nearly twice as much as the next nearest bidder - to secure ownership of the building. They promptly found the money to pay for it. Beginning in January of 1997, it took them 17 months to gut the theatre, completely renovate the interior, add on to the back, and make the upstairs their home. Two photographs that hang next to the mirror backstage show just how much work needed to be done. The top photograph shows the once cavernous hall, cluttered with debris and construction equipment, looking more like an abandoned warehouse than any semblance of what it has become. It is labeled December, 1996. Below it is a photograph of the completed theatre, the same one they use for the postcards.

UPSTAIRS IN the office, Michael points to the posters that hang above the clutter on his desk. The room doubles as their living room, dining area, kitchen, laundry room, and sometimes classroom. The two tables that arbitrarily outline the work space are as much a place for paperwork as they are for school lesson plans, Star Wars action figures, and an accumulating collection of children's books that Kim finds at garage and rummage sales. The posters make up a virtual wall of fame for Michael's performing world. They advertise festivals, jugglers, magicians, "serious" comedians, clowns, as well as Michael's own stand-up juggling act. He singles out a poster they used to advertise a fund-raising/celebration performance for the theatre in January, 1997. "I remember back at that time, that energy of . . . " His voice fades, still trying to believe the outcome of the event.

Despite only two weeks notice and the relatively primitive advertisements, 190 people found their way to the old place during the frozen New England winter. The only bathroom facility was a rented Port-O-Potty plopped out on the lawn with an electric heater stuck in it. "And," he insists, "no one cared . . . it was just a big open hall with the old stage, the cruddy old stage . . . we borrowed all the seats from the Masonic hall . . . and we got up to 190 and then went, Okay, We can't fit anymore seats in here. There was no center aisle. Nothing. We just stacked the chairs in . . . and then we did the show . . . it was overwhelming because it was so many people and they were so happy. I mean, they were just so happy with the show. They were just tickled."

They compiled the names of nearly 80 families that night and began a mailing list. Since then, the list has accumulated over 2000 family names. Only 250 are listed as residents of Buckfield. A significant portion of the others are concentrated in towns near Buckfield, but a handful are from various locations throughout Maine. Over 50 from out of state. When people step into the Oddfellows Theatre, geography is obsolete. "There are people that only know each other from seeing each other here at these shows . . . One may live in Mechanic Falls, the next may live in Poland or Auburn, but they get so they know each other in this crowd. They may not even know each other

Tomorrow, he will learn to eat fire.
by name, but they’ll wave. They know each other.” They know the Miclons, too. Every show, Kim greets the audience at the door; Michael performs in or introduces the show; their boys, Shane, Collin, and Brian, help by handing out programs. It creates an identity for the theatre, which has resonated both in the town and in the minds of curious visitors from away. Meticulously written thank-you notes decorate the wall behind the box office. There are notes and the stories people tell. There’s the one about the woman who tripped on the front porch. Instead of making it a legal case, she only asked for a year’s supply of tickets. There was the elderly woman, unable to drive, whom they used to pick up before each show. Families routinely express their gratitude to the Miclons for running a place where they can bring their small children, teenagers, or aging parents. A place where they can all listen, watch, and laugh together. The stories have become the currency – more than the money – that makes the theatre worth it. “And again,” Michael reflects, “I think it’s because they think it’s inherently good. It’s for the good.”

The day after, he will learn to spit fire.
"Moto Hunchback" is Michael. Kind of.
MICHAEL BEGINS his day as Poppa. Talking over the crunch of breakfast cereal and slurps of milk, he and Kim situate themselves at the kitchen counter with the boys. They listen to nine year old Shane tell his fragmented stories while Collin, seven, explains his monster drawings; they watch Brian propel himself with four year old inertia into the furniture. Michael and Kim sometimes scold, sometimes laugh. The situation dictates.

Jason usually arrives early and ditches his dirt bike or car in the driveway. Sometimes he’s in time for breakfast, usually he’s a little late. After a while, Michael and Kim retreat to separate floors — Kim to do housework and home-school the boys, and Michael and Jason to improvise their way through a typical work day.

Work for Michael and Jason means rehearsals, and rehearsals are an indeterminate number of hours spent discussing this or that “cool” idea for a show and creating problems to solve. There is no directing. There is no script. There is no stage, no plot, no blocking, nothing that would indicate a fine-tuned performance. There is no schedule. There are no real breaks.

This month, they are writing a sketch that requires them to build a window for Jason to jump through. They begin the day backstage, brainstorm their way out to the backyard - which is a mess of scrap wood and Michael’s old carpentry tools - and then drive to the high school for a reel of white paper they will use as the window’s make-believe glass panes. Later, back inside the theatre, they build the window, build the window wrong, and build the window again. Their methods for putting together a show have less to do with preparing solid material than creating an outline that allows them to do whatever they feel like come show time. “For The Early Evening Show, you can be over prepared.” Jason explains, “You want to go into it with—you’re not really sure what’s gonna happen.” Tomorrow, he will learn to eat fire. The day after, he will learn to spit fire. They will eventually figure out a way to squeeze it into the show. They cannot plan for everything. “Right.” Michael complies, finishing Jason’s thought, “And that’s more important to us than anything, is having a certain component unknown.”

They have a tendency to finish off each other’s thoughts like that. It’s a connection that comes with time, and seven years of a mentor-apprentice relationship has afforded them plenty of that.

When Jason was 13, and his brother Matt 11, Michael asked them to apprentice with him. The Tardy Boys, as they were called, represent a fourth generation of variety performers in Maine. The lineage began with Tony Montanaro, a world-renowned mime who trained under Marcel Marceau in France. Tony moved to South Paris from New York in 1971 and opened the Celebration Barn Theatre there in 1972. The Barn is both a performing venue and a school where Montanaro and others still hold summer workshops. Tony’s influence, Michael brags, has yielded more jugglers per capita in the Buckfield area than New York and California.

“I could show you every single person in the Maine Arts book,” Michael explains. “With the exception of maybe one or two, they have all studied at the Barn.”

Much of what Michael knows about theatre comes from his own work at The Barn. It was there that he refined his stage skills and learned some of the technical aspects of theatre: lights, sound, directing, producing, advertising, and selling tickets. It was Michael’s version of college-or boot camp. He speaks as if Tony were somehow present to listen and judge. Careful. Considerate. The kind of respect you give to a master, a superior. Michael calls Tony his performing grandfather.

After Tony, there was Benny and Denise Reehl. The Reehls were a new-vaudevillian performing duo that toured their Buckfield Leather and Lather Traveling Variety Show around New England on a stage on the back of their 1928 REO Speedwagon. The material in their performances, like Michael and Jason’s today, combined juggling, slapstick sketch comedy, poetry recitations, and a wide variety of other performing skills. In the tradition of old vaudeville shows of the early 1900’s, the Reehls performed and sold their leather goods to help with travel expenses. Denise was the drama coach at Michael’s high school and they offered him an apprenticeship when he was 14. “They were into this whole thing of New Vaudeville. Which is basically what
the old vaudevillians used to do. Traveling around... that's what I was, when I say I'm 'raised' in it... How are you going to create characters and do crazy things and juggle? Juggle balls, juggle clubs, knives, rings, and torches. "You have a million skills and then you can put them into a big show... then I would travel with them and help them set up. A big part of my apprenticeship was to lug equipment around. But I would go to every show I could and just really started to see how it all worked." Michael considers Benny his performing father.

When his own paternal performing instincts kicked in, Michael did his part to create a fourth generation for his art form. "I'd always known that I should have apprentices... it's really a passing on of the thing. Ya know? Benny and Denise did it for me. And I thought, I knew I wanted to do it sometime. And I thought, 'gee, these guys are young and I might as well get 'em now... There's sort of more of a heritage in live theatre, too... Speaking of Tony, then Benny, then me, then Matt and Jason... This is a thing that has been handed down."

Part of Michael's training was what Tony called "personal style theatre." It means that the students absorb what they have learned from him and they are expected to turn it into something all their own. For Michael, this meant focusing on how he can use his skills and comedy routines to make a personal connection with his audience.

Fusion, the trio comprised of Michael, Jason and Matt is a testimony both to the benefits of a mentor-apprentice relationship, and to the personal styles each of them have developed. They perform all over Maine, mostly at elementary and middle schools, delivering a message called Tunnel Vision. Between their collaborative juggling routines, Michael's slapstick sketches, and Matt's more artistic approach to performing, they talk through...
ten steps which outline specific ways for kids to reach their goals.

Even though Matt recently moved to New York, and the elementary/middle school circuit in Maine is hardly their crowning achievement as artists, Fusion gives them the chance to perform collaboratively and reminds them why they do all this in the first place: fun. Their history together has made for a solid, lasting relationship. “It’s not about the apprenticeship anymore.”

KIM FUMBLES THROUGH the kitchen late on a Monday morning. Pajama clad and un-showered, she pulls dishes out of the sink, puts them in the drying rack, puts another load in. She is in constant motion. She is teaching laundry folding and math. She plays theatre receptionist every time the phone rings. She cleans. She cooks. She yells, tells, asks the boys to do something for her. Reminds herself to praise the good things. She keeps a cheat sheet on the door to remind herself of the most effective ways to communicate with children. Now she stops. “We’ve lived here for two years and I’m beginning to feel, think, decide, that it’s like living in limbo... In the beginning, when we were just a couple, we worked out some problems, and that was great. And then we had kids and so now we’ve got this second phase of our life. But we also have this theatre, this fourth baby that is so needy. Really demanding. More helpless than any child and any infant.”

On good days, both Kim and Michael reflect on the theatre as a blessing, an answer to prayer. But with three flesh and blood children, accumulating debts, a steady stream of ticket requests, mailings to send, and a month filled with home and away performances, there is a fine line between blessing and curse. “Sometimes I feel like it doesn’t work,” Kim says. “You know? Actually I have felt all along that it is working in every aspect except financially... we don’t want to be rich. We just want to be comfortable.”

In the year before they bought the theatre, Kim was making a good wage and excellent benefits working at a telephone company in Portland. Michael was reeling from his best year, financially, as a solo performer. Kim believes that the opportunity to be at home with the boys is better than a regular job, but with a business that sucks out $40,000 a year, and brings in only $30,000 (plus what Michael earns performing solo and with Fusion) she cannot help missing the comfort of a regular pay check.

With their new status as a non-profit organization, (The Oddfellows Performing Arts Series or OPAS) the Miclons hope that a board of directors – comprised of local people and friends – can relieve them of some of the decision making and rule enforcing that the theatre will require as it grows. They have learned that their position as a community oriented theatre brings with it certain expectations. There are cousins or siblings who don’t want to reserve tickets in advance, friends who don’t feel like they should have to wait in line. The Miclons are neighbors and friends, but just like Tilton’s and the pizza joint, they are a local business. It’s easy to forget.

Amidst their everyday struggles, they continually remind themselves that the theatre was never about making money. They never asked God for a minimum salary. Their business philosophy remains oriented towards the community they serve. “Life isn’t always easy,” Kim reminds herself, still tidying up the kitchen. “I know it won’t always be this way... a show will happen and I will come upstairs afterwards and be so pumped and so excited. And seeing people’s faces and people leaving, just amazed and blown away and it’s nice. It is worth it. There is going to be struggle. People struggle with new businesses and with new ventures and trying to get something off the ground. And I think that... we do this with the right heart. Looking to God, the more he’s gonna bless us and continue, keep making it better.”

Shane pulls up a chair to the kitchen counter and jokes that the coupon catalogue is his mother’s favorite book. She laughs a much needed laugh and disappears to get dressed.

“ONE OF THE THINGS I prayed for when we were gonna buy this place is I said I want it to be good for my family. And I don’t think it’s been the best thing in the world for my family. Because they suffer.” Shane, Collin and Brian look down over their father from the stairs leading from the upstairs ballroom to the backstage area. It’s a threshold they step lightly around. One day, they are greeted with Michael’s beaming smile and another they are scolded through clenched teeth for daring to enter the work space. Before every Early Evening Show Michael holds a production meeting in the ballroom, the boys ample play space, while they are quarantined in the doorway to watch. Michael knows that the line between father and theatre employee is virtually invisible. Especially to his children. “My kids, it’s like having this big bowl of candy they can never get to. Ya know? And I’m that bowl of candy for them. They wanna spend time with me, they wanna play with me... I’m always going, ‘Sorry. Can’t. Later.’ Later, later, later, later.”

The boys creep down the stairs, waiting for a signal. They are armed with oatmeal cookies and the message that
it’s their bedtime. Michael smiles and asks for hugs. They all bound to his lap, relieved. He watches them push and argue their way back up the stairs and then pauses for a long moment. “My relationship has changed with the boys over the last three years. I was the daddy that wrestled with them every day. Every day. I mean every day I wrestled with these kids, read ‘em books every day. But once this project came, I have embedded myself in work. And I have. And I don’t believe that that’s what I’m supposed to be doing. I’ve become the invisible parent. And it just seems to happen. And that’s been the hardest thing for me.”

It’s clear to Michael that they must move out of the theatre in order for him to be the father he wants to be. The original decision to move in was just another improvisation to a largely un-scripted few years. Now, the separation of work and home life has become their highest priority. Several weeks ago, another prayer was answered and they were approved for yet another loan, allowing them to close on a five-acre plot of land in North Buckfield. Michael can already sense the difference. “All of us went up there and we built a fort and it’s great. It’s the beginning. I kept telling the boys, ‘These are your trees.’ They didn’t understand. But I kept going. ‘These are yours. Do anything you want. We’re not just visiting. This is yours. We can come up here any time we can and you guys can build forts. You guys can, this is yours’. . . and it was very exciting to see them playing. Watch them playing outside, in the trees. Not watching TV, not playing video games, not playing in the driveway not . . . being kicked out of somewhere. It was blissful . . . it was pretty amazing. So that’s a done deal."

DRESSED IN one of his 14 new pairs of pants from the Goodwill store in Auburn and a well-matched sweater, Michael launches himself through the backstage door. He’s glad everyone is here. He has just come from a meeting with Maine Public Broadcasting and reports that they are interested in broadcasting The Early Evening Show live. Perhaps even weekly. Everyone—Kim, Jason, Morty, the boys—laugh at that impossibility. Michael fidgets with excitement, talks fast. Maine Public Broadcasting (MPB) is interested, and this looks very promising for everyone involved. It’s not only a way for him to perform more, earn extra money, and reach a wider audience, it’s a way to put some of the responsibility in the hands of others. Later, Michael explains how this will not take away from the community focus of the theatre. “Because I still can do my Early Evening Show here and then I can go do it somewhere else. I can do the same show. Ya know? I don’t have to write two shows to do that. I get to do The Early Evening Show twice a month. We get a first run here, and then go do it somewhere else. If we build a statewide audience for the show, great. That cannot be bad.”

This is not Mike’s only project outside of the theatre. He is working on two additional performance opportunities. One is with a friend from church, which will begin by taking Michael to Switzerland for a performance in January. The other is with Bruce McKenzie-Johnson, a friend and former performing partner who is beginning something he calls New Wave Vaudeville. Bruce will put together a database of variety performers in the area and, if all goes well, Mike will be at the top of the list of performers for hire.

Besides booking performances at the theatre, Mike has been acting as his own booking agent and setting up shows for Fusion. Since the theatre takes up a significant amount of his time and he is still learning about the business end of things, the responsibility of booking shows for himself is simply too much. These developments are a way for Mike to prioritize and organize his increasingly busy life. 2001 really could be quite a year as far as new developments in my career. Where, all of a sudden, I’m sort of right where I wanna be.”

THE PHONE RINGS. Michael answers it and rolls his eyes. It’s the business line on a Friday before the Early Evening Show. He explains to the caller that the show is appropriate for all ages. He reaches for a pen and the credit card receipts, confident that this information will seal the deal. He listens, then smiles. Sold. Six tickets. Two adults at $8 a piece, four children at $6. He scribbles the information down on the paper. “See you tomorrow at seven.” He carefully adds together the number of tickets still available here and those left to sell by Rossie down at the Fresh Cuts Flower Shop in town.

Each Early Evening Show is preceded by a minimum of 24 hours of Michael’s worrying. To sell out or not to sell out. It’s not that way for the Halloween show they put on
in October, which has four weekends to build an audience. It's not that way for the music shows every Sunday, which bring an entirely different crowd. The Early Evening Show has sold out 29 of 30 performances, making it the biggest draw at the Oddfellows Theatre. "The best thing I could have done was to build a consistent audience," Michael says. "Get a show that people can connect with and feel like it has an identity with the theatre." The Early Evening Show has done just that. It's what people stop him in the street to talk about. It's what people ask him about at church. It's what his mother calls him to talk about and what they discuss over Sunday lunch.

Besides just being a popular attraction, the show has satisfied Michael's creative urge. While his solo show has remained the same for several years, The Early Evening Show requires fresh material every month. "I look at the real late night talk show guys. They make millions of dollars. They don't write a damn thing. They show up, they're the celebrity, they're the person, they stand where they're supposed to stand, they do the thing . . . but, I mean, for the 200 bucks I make for the Early Evening Show, I earn every penny. And then there's something invested. So I have invested something before the audience gets. It's all about creating something and then giving it to them . . . and this type of art form is great because you can give the same thing to 156 or 1000 people at the same exact time. It's great. But it's still unique, I can't give the same exact thing to somebody else."

As a community member, Mike also believe it's a way for him to educate his community about the arts. In Buckfield, the blaze-orange-wearing hunters may not come to see a ballet dancer or a poet, but if it's in The Early Evening Show and Michael Miclon arranged it, they trust it. They are willing to watch and willing to listen. "We had a ballet dancer . . . This six foot two, leotard-wearin' ballet dancer. But to have people go, 'Ya know, that was pretty amazing.' A poet? Ya know? People just don't see that stuff on a general, on a regular basis. They're not gonna come and see a whole show, but I can give them that and they can appreciate it. And they loved this guy. They loved the poet. They loved it. And I wanna get more of that stuff in there. I wanna find more moments like that."

SHOW TIME. Dan Allen bounds towards the front doors. He checks Kim and the box office crew to his right. Ready. As he unlocks the front doors, he jokes with the sea of people waiting to flood inside. "Sorry. Private show tonight, folks." He laughs. They laugh - a little impatiently. Some want their regular seats. Some hope to land a spot in
the front. Some will look frantically for the Green Seat. Others wait to see if there are still tickets available. There aren't. They have come from Auburn, Gray, or Leeds. It's cold and it's November. They just hope they won't be turned away. They will. A few will take it all in for the first time, and wonder if they can actually take the popcorn and soda to their seat.

Dan cracks the doors and peeks out before he finally swings them open. People in flannels and T-shirts and work pants and sweat pants steadily march inside. The sounds in the lobby are friendly and lighthearted. Michael's parents flash a smile to Kim and the boys on the way up to their seats.

In fifteen minutes, most of the seats are occupied and people are well on their way to a second box of popcorn and another Moxie. Slurping and crunching are the cue for Moto to work his wonders with the crowd. Moto Hoonchback is Michael. Kind of. In the costume, as the character, Michael leaves himself behind. "It's my car, but Moto's drivin'." He calls Moto a classic clown. A full body mask. An alter ego. He emerges from the backstage — bald, hunched, bare-footed, rotten-toothed, British-accented, and kinda dumb — and they love him. No woman or bald man escapes the good-natured wrath of Moto. He flirts, rubs heads, asks names, and welcomes his audience.

The lights dim. Dan hops on to stage to explain that the cameras will be turned on in a few minutes and tells the audience when to clap and when to clap louder. A few people search the room for the absent cameras. After the audience absorbs the brief lesson, Dan counts down on his fingers. "Five, four, three," silent two, silent one. He points. Paul and the band take their cue. The Early Evening Show theme song blasts from the back stage right corner. Jason has positioned himself in the back row. He grips a microphone, checks his well-gelled hair and finds his authentic announcer voice. "Ladies and gentlemen, The Oddfellows Theatre proudly presents..." The audience takes their first cue a little hesitantly. Scattered applause.
Dan shakes his hands crazed conductor style. More, more, more! Over the arrangement of crashing cymbals and Blues guitar, Jason introduces the band and the guests. Daielma Santos. Applause. Fred Garbo. Applause. A slight build creeps into the music. “I’m your co-host, Jason Tardy. And here’s your host, all the way from upstairs – Miike Miclon.” Dan lowers his arms and the crowd takes it away. Jason joins Michael as he appears onstage for a little twirl, a guitar, Jason introduces the band and the guests. Daielma Dan shakes his hands crazed conductor style. More, more, more! Over the arrangement of crashing cymbals and Blues music, only a little louder. The kids in the audience race to meet the last downbeat of the song. The show is complete. Michael waves. Applause takes the place of the music, only a little louder. The kids in the audience race onto the stage to play with Garbo’s inflatable furniture. A small crowd of adults waits their turn to thank Mike, Jason, Ray, or Paul. People recite their favorite part of the show to no one in particular. They hum Ray’s songs. A woman stands up, embarrassed but smiling. Shirley Lovejoy. Michael calls her by name. They put in their phone call to Virgil. His voice, through the microphone sounds far away but he arrives in 3 minutes flat – grocer’s apron and all. He is hidden behind a cooler full of soda and an entire Thanksgiving basket for the Green Seat. The will leave it at the box office for Shirley to pick up after the show – it won’t fit in her lap. They give away some T-shirts, chat with the recipients, give away some jar openers, and a coaster that nobody wants.

Fred Garbo and Daielma Santos are the featured guests in the second half of the show. They introduce Buckfield to their line of inflatable performance props. A dog, a chair, a television, all about 6 feet high. Michael invites them out for a performance and then over to his desk for a few questions. Garbo played Barkly on Sesame Street and was one of the original performers at The Celebration Barn. Daielma, his long time performing partner, is a Brazilian born ballet dancer. She and Michael chat about her new American citizenship.

In the final sketch, Jason and Michael square off in a mock presidential debate. Moto Hoonchback vs. Ishnu, a character Jason has been developing. They hand out campaign flyers to each side of the audience. Moto for President on the right. Vote Ishnu on the left. Dan provides the questions. “What’s your plan for foreign policy? And taxes?” They each provide their ridiculous answers until the debate collapses into a stage fight accompanied by the Star Spangled Banner. A two stooges act. Moto circles around the podium, asks Ishnu where Ishnu went. They hit and miss and kick and fall. Ishnu cracks Moto with a folding chair. They both end up center stage, knocked out. Blackout.

Garbo and Daielma are ushered onto the stage again for the final bow. The band charges through the exit music and everyone on stage takes a uniform leap, timed to meet the last downbeat of the song. The show is complete. Michael waves. Applause takes the place of the music, only a little louder. The kids in the audience race onto the stage to play with Garbo’s inflatable furniture. A small crowd of adults waits their turn to thank Mike, Jason, Ray, or Paul. People recite their favorite part of the show to no one in particular. They hum Ray’s songs. A man just off the stage smiles, shakes his head, and tells Michael, “Wow!”

In the aisles, George and Betsy begin to sweep and pick up. Michael walks over and thanks them again and again. He reminds them that he could not do this without them. They nod, they’re happy to do it. Kim flicks the lights on and off to signal everyone to get moving. Her day is over and the relief of another safe show shines through. Her excitement will outweigh her exhaustion for at least a few hours. She wants everyone upstairs for sandwiches. Now. She’s starving and there’s leftover meat from lunch. She asks Michael if he noticed the MPB people and whether he got a chance to talk to them. “Nahh,” he says. He didn’t talk to them. But the guy winked at him on the way out, he assures her, “and they were all smiles.”
With support from Coach Bobby Russo, Liz enters the ring for the first female bout in the history of the Portland Boxing Club.

Liz Leddy: Portrait of a Boxer

PHOTOGRAPHY & TEXT BY CHRISTINE D. HEINZ

In syncopated rhythm, she weaves the wrap around her hands, swooping under and over and around each finger. She pauses to point out the open wound covering her swollen middle knuckle. “That’s what happens when I hit the bag just right,” she clarifies, looking at me with such gentle and harmless eyes. I notice the red chipped fingernail polish as I follow the lines of her fingers down to her small yet broad and powerful hands. She slides one easily into the first glove and her coach Skip helps her with the second. With a few quick punches to her own stomach, she prepares for the next round of her workout. The grit and sweat in the Portland Boxing Club tell the story of hundreds before her, reaching for the same dream.
As Liz wraps her hands, an anxious boxer awaits his bout.
The pulsating energy of the place seems to mirror the music playing overhead. As adrenaline fills the veins, the bell sounds, “Ding!” and she attacks the bag. She had told me that her day had been a rough one and that she had a lot of stress to work out. She squares up and dances her feet and shoulders toward the bag. Charging more and more aggressively with each swing, I begin to understand. Her life has not been easy. The road leading her to this day in the gym has been paved by many days just like it before. Yet now it is boxing that has become her release, her solace, her focus, her refuge, her house of worship, and on some days, even her reason for living. Once addicted and homeless, picking fights for fun, she is now sober with a roof over her head, juggling work, school, and the gym. She says that she does not want to be misinterpreted anymore, that her haircut or her defining tattoos are not what she is about. “I want to be known as a boxer,” she tells me definitively, “and as a strong f---ing woman.”
"Being in the ring is such a high. After a fight, if you know you fought well, you feel on top of the world. The first time I felt it, I knew that boxing was exactly what I wanted to do."
"I don't have a chaotic life anymore. I have structure and calm. Boxing has made me see that the spirit within you doesn't have to work towards chaos, that it can work towards good... You can embrace things that are positive and use your spirit of expression in that way. It's a myth that you need drugs to feel high, just to feel good or to be different. It's such a lie. I guess boxing gives me proof that I don't have to believe that lie."

Sparring with a teammate from the Portland Boxing Club.
Eyes intent on her target, Liz practices bobbing and weaving.
Cynthia Collins loves the ocean. She goes to the beach as often as she goes to the grocery store. Almost every other day finds her there, collecting sand for spell work. One morning in late October, I watch her stride barefoot across a chilled and empty beach in Wells. Wrapped in a black, fuzzy shawl, her long red-gold hair scattered around her softly weathered face, she kneels to scoop dry grains of sand into a plastic container. At home she will empty it into clay saucers and arrange sigils, small stones etched with symbols, in the sand. Before she leaves she thanks the ocean. “I always say hello to the lady before I take her sand.” I watch her crouch and lower a freckled hand to the shore.
When she was young, six or seven, Cynthia learned to do magick. A ditch that ran by the side of her house sometimes flooded during heavy rains. “I remember going down and just loving the water, and the movement, and I felt really connected to the earth. It felt like the water was going through to China, which was my picture of the other side of the earth at the time. And I remember feeling that energy coming through China and flowing around and through. I remember getting the white rocks out of the driveway, and holding them in the water so that they would have that energy.”

“THE WITCH IS IN,” claims a small wooden sign that tilts towards Cynthia’s front porch. Cynthia has invited me over for dinner at the house she shares with her partner, Harry. “Come on down. Do you like chicken and corn chowder?” It’s a small house, too small to fit everything they own, though they have tried. Each time my eyes circle the living room, I notice more “stuff”, as she calls it: cats, dragons, fleshy goddesses pregnant with the earth. In a teeming glass case: colorful orbs, and crystals, and carvings. A card box near the door offers business cards for “The Witch and The Dragon.” I know the Witch, but the Dragon? When I inquire, she tells me Harry, her partner, is part dragon. Mostly he’s quiet, perches on the arm of a chair as Cynthia talks. His dark hair is pulled back in a pony tail, and a colorful dragon appliqué: eyes me from a black sweatshirt. “Come sit over here,” Cynthia insists, grinning at Harry and patting the empty spot next to her on the couch. “Maybe later,” he says. He’s shy, hasn’t come out of his cave yet. Cynthia speaks carefully, articulately, smilingly after every sentence. The house is warm and I can smell the chowder that steams on the stove.

When they buy a new house, Cynthia and Harry will set aside a separate room for their shrine; right now, it claims a hutch by the front door. Across the shrine lies a ram’s horn for drawing coven circles in the earth, a candle snuffer extinguisher, a gold dragon with a thick, swirled tail, and a gray feather. Dragon’s take a myriad of forms throughout the room, from figurines to pen-and-ink drawings to wood carvings. From candles set around the room, light flickers and makes shadows. A polished brass urn reflects light from its place on the shrine. It holds the ashes of her husband, Chris, dead two years.

On her left hand, Cynthia wears a gold ring almost as wide as two of her tiny fingers. The ring bears a five-pointed star: a pentacle, one of Wicca’s most common symbols. It used to belong to her husband Chris. Now the ring starts conversations in grocery stores and copy shops. Noticing its size and shape, sometimes people ask if her husband was in law enforcement. No, she tells them, it’s a religious symbol - and waits for the inevitable questions. She admits, “It took me a while to be able to just say I’m a Wiccan.”

Witches practice alone or in small communities called “covens.” Silver Cauldron coven, which spans several states, forms the couple’s primary spiritual community. In Wells, Cynthia and Harry host open rituals with some friends who aren’t coven members. The two couples follow different traditions, but feels it’s important to support one another in their practices.

In Wicca there are the four directions, the spirits, the gods and goddesses, to call on - no single God to define or agree on. Witches honor nature through the changing seasons and moon cycles. They “draw down,” or call upon, ancient gods and goddesses. There are gods and goddesses for everything under the moon: laughter, mischief, wisdom, love, birth, death. Baubo, Isis, Minerva, Venus, Anubis. And so on.

The deities Cynthia honors are real. “In grade school I read something by C.S.Lewis, called the Narnia Series. Do you know it? Oh, it’s beautiful. It’s so yummy. And that made a very deep impression on me. I really like the way that Aslan was portrayed as a part of the world, not only as Creator, but as sustainer, as redeemer, as an integral part, a part that interacted on a very personal basis. You could touch him. He wasn’t just a spiritual being.”

Growing up, Cynthia wanted to be a Catholic priest. “They wouldn’t let me.” She decided being a nun would suffice; at least they got to dress up in long, black dresses. She stopped being Catholic after a priest enjoined her congregation to contribute to the church’s debt reduction fund. She remembers, “That’s when my hypocrisy meter went into the red.” After high school she tried Zen Buddhism and even Judaism. During the feminist movement of the 60’s and 70’s, Cynthia was a hippie, studied art, and reveled in the goddess images in textbooks. Gradually, her love for the Aslan image grew into a fascination with nature-based goddess religions. In Wicca she found a faith that lets her create her own traditions and beliefs, even her own gods and goddesses. A religion made in her own image; a women’s image. “I became aware that there was a god like me. And she was a girl.”

A witch’s magick is everywhere. Common salt cleanses; sage leaves purify. Wicca is a religion of myth and symbols. It’s also a religion of natural elements: earth, air, fire, and water. Myth and nature weave together in ritual and in magick. Essentially, magick is the movement of energy.
Wiccans often spell magick with a “k” to differentiate from magician-type magic. There is magick in simple acts like breathing, baking, or making love, not only in holiday rituals or structured spells. Cynthia performs rituals and spell work to raise, focus, and ground power - to bless a new object. During Witch Camp one of his roles is to protect the positive energy of the group.

Cynthia’s son, who is 24, says Cynthia has a black belt in religion. She’s armed with thirty years of religious study and Masters degrees in Divinity and Family Counseling. Playfully honest about the extent of her knowledge, when “door-to-door Christians” stop by her house to proselytize she gives them twenty minutes for a conversation. On one condition: first they have to listen to her talk for ten minutes about Wicca. Often the canvassers become curious and start to ask her questions. She enjoys their stories, but hasn’t heard any that caused her to question her own faith.

“I’ve done a lot of study in that area,” she says, “and where I am I’m pretty firm about. It’s not the path for everyone, at all, but it is for me.”

I find an empty spot on the carpet. Students from Sanford High School are already encamped on the couch or the floor. Jason and Laurel, a couple in their early twenties from Massachusetts, arrive a few minutes later. Denise, a woman in her thirties, runs in breathlessly. Cynthia welcomes us from her rocking chair in the corner. “Come on in,” she yells, not getting up to open the door. To the latecomers: “There’s tea in the kitchen, help yourselves. You know where the candy is.” The candy is easy to find; it overflows from the glass pumpkin by the door, and spills from a Shop ’n Save grocery bag by the couch. Cynthia proclaims, “The candy pumpkin is like the Cauldron of Cerridwen. It’s never empty.” I smile and pretend to understand the joke.

The living room is awash in sunlight. Enthroned on her rocking chair, Cynthia fidgets with the remote control for her back massager. Cartoon cats on orange and black socks peek out beneath a long green skirt. Effective magick requires a clear focus and a sacred space to perform it. Witches call it “casting a circle.” Negative thoughts, emotions, and energies are dispelled as long as the circle is closed. Witch camp begins with the casting of the circle. Cynthia recruits callers for the four quarters. “Who’s gonna be calling east? The area of new beginnings, creativity? I assign if you don’t volunteer,” Cynthia warns.
In the tiny room, the novices stand in a misshapen circle. They glance at each other and Cynthia to double-check their movement. Am I doing this right?

After a minute of hesitation from her students, Denise, an unsure woman with a constant giggle, tentatively raises her finger - offers a disclaimer. “I don’t know how, but I’ll do it.”

“How about somebody for the south? Noon-time, power, passion, journey, path, dragons.” Steffan, one of Cynthia’s students from the high school group she sponsors in Sanford, raises his hand.

In the tiny room, the novices stand in a misshapen circle. They glance quickly at each other and at Cynthia to double-check their movements. Am I doing this right? They seem to say. Can we really invoke the goddesses and gods? Arms raised to shoulder level, pointer fingers extended, they carve pentacles in the space in front of them.

Denise and Laurel look at each other, and stumbling a bit, manage to whisper, “Spirits of the east, please join us. Help us and give us creativity. Be here now.”

Cynthia doesn’t notice their hesitation, or maybe it’s part of this lesson. There is no right or wrong way to cast a circle.

Jane, Cynthia’s friend and guest speaker at Witch Camp, invokes the south. Her bright red hair catches sunlight as she confidently requests, “Spirits of the south, give us passion for what we do today and in our lives. Be here now.”
When the directions have been called, we join hands in an inward-facing circle. Cynthia leads as the students follow along haltingly. She chants in her loud, rich voice, “By the earth that is her body, by the air that is her breath, by the fire of her bright spirit, and by the living waters of her womb, this circle is cast. We are between the worlds.”

As Cynthia gathers her notes to begin her lecture, Denise teasingly asks her, “So can you teach me how to turn someone into a toad?”

“I’ll tell you what I tell everyone who asks me that,” Cynthia offers, chuckling. “Anyone you dislike that much is probably already a toad on some level.”

Cynthia has asked me to play guitar while the class sings a Wiccan version of “Old Time Religion.” I strum as she leads us in song:

Those of us that worship Isis
Know she’s helpful in a crisis
Leaves us to our own devices
And she’s good enough for me.
Gimme that old time religion,
Gimme that old time religion,
Gimme that old time religion,
It’s good enough for me.

The first lesson of Witch Camp is an exercise in ethics. Cynthia warns her students to be good witches. Ethical witches. How would the Wiccan Rede apply to everyday life? She probes the class. What if your high school teacher wants you to dissect a frog, and you believe all life is sacred, even animal life? What would an ethical witch do? She divides the class into groups, and we go off to other rooms of the house to discuss our ethical dilemma. My group finally decides that we would have a conversation with the biology class teacher, and tell her or him that we’d like to be excused from class on that day. Other groups differ. They decide it would be more harmful, in the long run, to take a failing grade on an assignment. Cynthia does not correct or cajole. The decision belongs to each witch, and isn’t derived from a hefty rule book.

After class Cynthia counsels Jason and Laurel, who are getting married next year. They want Cynthia to officiate, and they’re worried the ceremony will offend someone. Cynthia promises them she’s an expert at creating ceremonies that incorporate Wiccan themes, but that even the Catholics enjoy. She reassures them, “The phrases that I use are designed to allow people to hear what they expect and what they want.”

She suggests starting with something along the lines of, “Divine one, we ask that your presence be known...”

In her work as a therapist, Cynthia used to do the same: work in Wiccan principles but not explicitly. In a chemical dependency clinic, she used the Wiccan concept of the cast circle to teach drug-addicted patients to soothe themselves through withdrawal. She had them meditate and create an “inner circle,” a space where they could always feel safe. Most important, she says, it was a space they could always take with them.

Cynthia shows us crystal talismans she made for some women who were in domestic violence situations. They’re encased in tiny Ziploc bags with a mix of herbs and a small beach shell through which a hole has been drilled. She gives the talismans to women so they’ll have a physical reminder of a sacred, protected space.

Witch Camp ends by opening the circle. We join hands and chant, “By the earth that is her body, by the air that is her breath, by the fire of her bright spirit, and by the living waters of her womb, this circle is open but unbroken. The peace of the goddess go in our hearts. Merry meet, merry part, merry meet again. HO!”

A FEW DAYS before her birthday, I tag along with Cynthia as she does her errands: grocery shopping for Samhain, or “sow-in”, the Wiccan version of Halloween. And there’s sand to collect from the beach. I notice that the urn with Chris’ ashes has been moved from the shrine to the bedroom. I wonder to myself if Cynthia has changed her mind about the urn being in the living room, a spot that is more exposed, less private. I soon realize that it has been moved to make room for spell work. In place of the urn sits a clay saucer about least ten inches in diameter filled with sand and a dozen or so sigils. Cynthia and Harry plan to start searching for a new house in the spring. The sigils are part of a spell to help them find the “right house” and to bring in more income. Cynthia is on full disability and doesn’t work outside the home. Most evenings, soaking in the hot tub gives Cynthia some relief from fibromyalgia, a condition that causes chronic pain. Cynthia makes a small sum of money teaching Witch Camp. She does not charge full-time students to enroll, however, so this fall she will only net a few hundred dollars for the course. She and fellow Wiccan Jane Raeburn, the moderator of the Maine Pagan Internet mailing list, are writing a book on Wiccan relationship principles. Today Cynthia will model for a figure drawing class, which will make her about $100. Later she will work on a new tarot card spread for a pay gig at a hotel conference in New Hampshire. It’s donation-only, but she’ll suggest $60 a reading.

Casting a spell doesn’t require eye of newt, or a large,
"Mortal born but blessed be, a Witch I soon may hope to be."
Smoke of sage about us twines. Purify our hearts and minds.
bubbling cauldron. It requires sacred space, a clear intention, and a willingness to do the work needed for the spell to succeed. Herbs, stones, crystals, and other objects help to focus Cynthia’s intention and hold the energy of the spell. They’re symbols, reminders, and it isn’t so much what tools she uses as how she uses them.

Cynthia frames each step of spellwork as a question. What do I want to see happen? How will I know it has happened? Am I willing to do my part of the spell? For example, Cynthia tells me, she recently did a spell for more money. She didn’t specify what form that money should take. “My next three transactions, all my change came back in pennies. Then I found a shredded dollar bill! So I had ‘more’ money,” she chuckles.

Tarot cards are one of Cynthia’s favorite tools for determining what she needs to focus on in her own life. For other people, a tarot reading will give them specific advice they can interpret as they see fit. Sometimes they see it as evidence that they are not alone, “that their lives are not adrift, that there is meaning.” She says, “I think all people are looking for something beyond themselves. Whether they find that in a group, in a lover, in a religion, in a faith in science, or something, or all of the above.”

At the end of the day, Harry and Cynthia curl up together on the couch—“the bad couch”—so named because Cynthia can sink into it and fall asleep, forget to go to bed. The two have a nightly ritual: watch “Courage the Cowardly Dog” and “Dexter’s Lab” on the Cartoon Network. Harry stretches out on the sofa, and rubs Cynthia’s feet.

The couple has woven Wicca into their relationship. The way they communicate, make decisions, and deal with conflict honors the four directions. The first principle honors the east, the area of the mind: the principle of equals. The south represents the principle of consensus. The west symbolizes emotional honesty; the north, the concept of “freely given, freely received.” The fifth element, spirit, calls for balance.

Handfasting, not marriage, sets the framework for their relationship. Handfasting is a Wiccan custom that’s similar to marriage. For Cynthia and Harry, it does not require a lifetime commitment. They repeat their vows every year, and each time agree to live together for a year and a day. She won’t get married, most likely. No need. It’s just a legality. The handfasting is what counts, and their honoring of the five principles.

As the theme music for “Dexter’s Lab” plays, Cynthia falls asleep, her feet propped up on Harry’s lap.

SAMHAIN. The veil between the worlds of the living and the dead are thin. Samhain ritual participants honor their ancestors, commune with them, and prepare themselves for the new year. They journey to the Summerland, the place of the dead, and meditate on the past year and the year to come.

On Samhain Eve, October 31st, I stand shivering with the cloaked and costumed group that waits silently on the back porch of Cynthia and Harry’s house. Between the house and its eastern neighbor, a ring of glowing skulls bounds the sacred space of Summerlands, Cynthia and Harry’s backyard. Behind the porch, a circle of hay bales awaits the casting of the circles. A small bonfire burns from the circle’s center. An altar nearby offers mementos—dolls, faded pictures, dried leaves or flowers—to the beloved dead. A woman who arrived late stands back from the group. I ask her if this is her first ritual. It is; she’s nervous. I’m not nervous, just cold.

Tonight Cynthia presides in a heavy black velvet cape and black velvet dress. She guards the staircase leading from the back porch to the wide lawn. A hooded coven mate holds a heavy, silver sword across the steps. “Beware, if you are mortal dare you pass the sacred portal. The veil between the worlds is thin,” she chants. “I am Thea, I am crone, born a witch and aged grown.” Addressing each man or woman, she queries, “Art thou witch or mortal born?”

Each answers, in turn, in rhyme, “Mortal born but blessed be, a Witch I soon may hope to be.”

I cross the porch, start down the stairs, and say something that vaguely rhymes. Cynthia affirms as I pass her into the dark yard, “Enter then, and blessed be. Thou art goddess and god to me.”

Silver cauldron coven elders pace in orbits around the huddled circle. They wave smoking sage leaves as they chant a blessing, an invocation: “Smoke of sage about us twines.
Purify our hearts and minds.

Lanterns flare at the four directions. Facing each direction in turn - East, South, West, North - Cynthia raises her hands and the flame of the lantern outlines her cloaked shape. From crown to foot, Cynthia flashes light and dark. Electric hair shoots out from her head and showers down in red-gold sparks over her shoulder. Tiny hands send up sharp-nailed fingers in a "V" and call forth the spirits. The voice that emerges is cat-like, a shriek, a howl.

The circle cast, we hear the myth of Persephone. A pomegranate passes from palm to palm around the circle, and we all taste a few seeds. Pomegranates are the fruit Persephone ate while she was trapped in the underworld. It's a myth of the seasons. Eating the seeds bound Persephone to Hades for the winter months. Cynthia says quietly, "We all have eaten the fruit's seeds. We all need to go inside. We think of a time of reflection and quiet."

A moment's silence. "We're going to be journeying to Summerland very soon. We invite you to place whatever memento you wish on the altar. Look into the fire and consider your journey."

Harry takes the hand of a woman at the northwest corner of the circle, then slowly leads the group, hands joined, in the spiral dance. It's a silent, meandering path around the yard and back into the hay bale circle.

Silence. Then Cynthia's voice echoes: "You see the lights, you hear the breeze. The ocean is nearby. Soon you will be aware of your beloved dead coming through the mists, through the air all around you. Know that the dead wish to speak to you. They wish to encourage you. Hear their voices in the leaves." The leaves rustle, then still. "Feel the chill and the warmth. Greet your beloved dead and know that they are here for you." Each in turn remembers aloud a grandmother, an aunt, a father, a best friend, a dog or cat, a former spouse. Each tosses a few kernels into the popping fire. Cynthia honors her husband Chris.

Back in the warmth and light of the house, feasting begins. There's quiche, and pasta, and, of course, chocolate: the only rule for Silver Cauldron rituals is that the host must provide chocolate. And there's singing. "Little god Anubis, hopping down the Nile, scooping up the mortals and bopping 'em on the head..."

IN EARLY NOVEMBER, a few days after Samhain, Bill and Nina, Silver Cauldron elders, fly in from Pennsylvania to visit Cynthia. Bill is tall, gray-bearded, serious - a prolific science fiction writer. He's been invited to speak at the Witch Camp about Reiki healing. Witch Camp includes a session on healing: crystals, Reiki, chakras. Much of being a witch involves learning about different kinds of energy work and ways of healing that use natural elements. Cynthia and Bill have an easy, respectful relationship. Bill speaks quietly, intensely, about meeting Cynthia. He was going through some marriage problems and re-examining his atheism. He came to Cynthia for advice; she showed him "her rocks" - crystals and stones she uses to contain different energies. "Hold this one," he remembers her saying. After a minute of holding a large, heavy stone, Bill says he started sobbing. Couldn't stop.

It was Cynthia's "pain rock" - a stone into which Cynthia places her negative emotions, her sadness. Bill, who over the last couple of years has developed sensitivity to energy flow, tells us he was able to feel the painful energy the rock held.

Psychic intuition - noticing the energy movement in a room, in a person, or in material objects - isn't unusual, Cynthia teaches her students. Everyone has it. It's a matter of developing it. Practicing it. It's a constant for Cynthia: "I've always been aware of the world of the spirit." And she has encountered the difficult face of that intuition. In August of 1996, she decided to meditate. "And I was in a very light trance state, and I began thinking about Chris. And I began drawing his throat from about the top of the ear to the collarbone on the right side. I must have drawn fifteen or twenty pictures, just of that, with all this energy movement. I just drew and I drew and I drew and I drew. Could not seem to get away with that. About two months later, he was diagnosed with cancer of the tongue on the right side. It was just, I mean, that's a freaky one." She didn't think about the drawings until months later, didn't remember they existed.

Chris is still a member of the Silver Cauldron, if on the astral level. He has left behind his body, but in Cynthia's dreams, he talks with her, visits her on the day of their anniversary. And he has inspired Cynthia's new design for a tarot card. It's an image of a warrior. At first, she had trouble with the design. Then, in a trance state, she began to think about Chris, and the idea crystallized - the idea of Chris as protector, as strong and brave, seeking vengeance against those who harmed his loved ones.

Cynthia sits on a stool in her basement sketching with a black pencil. She makes wide, circular strokes in the shape of a musculous man holding a curved bow. Before Chris died, her coven performed rituals for him known as a "speeding," which is meant to help the patient move more easily into the afterlife. Her shoulders hunch a bit as she talks quietly, seriously, about Chris and the speeding.
“When we did his speeding, which was about ten days before his actual death - he was still in the hospital before they moved him to the nursing home - the coven got together and put a sign on the door. We checked with the floor nurses, and said, you know, we want to do a religious ritual. This is not open. We do not want people checking on fluffing pillows, we are not interested in having the paper delivered. If there is a medical reason for you to come in, we ask that you knock respectfully and allow one of us to open the door. And this was a big deal. Some of the nurses had fits because, ‘But you aren’t Christian!’ ‘Yeah, but I’m a fully qualified Chaplain, so get over yourself.’ You know, I wanted to be respectful, and yet I also wanted to draw a real clear boundary, and I was in a position of not being able to take Chris home. It wasn’t gonna happen... But we also needed as a coven to go together and to do the speeding for Chris. To process it with Chris. And the make-nice-for-the-interruptions did not do it. So there was an opportunity there for the people to get over their own problems with this.”

Now, looking back: where would she be without Wicca? “Dead.” Simply that. In explanation: “I need to have community around me...I know that when Chris was dying, if it had not been for my coven, during the time leading up to his death and the time afterwards, I would have probably suicided. So that was a very literal thing. I would be dead.”

CYNTHIA TURNS 50 in mid-October. Harry plans two parties for her, one in her hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio, and one in Wells, Maine. Friends from Mensa and from their coven arrive in Wells to help her celebrate. Mensa is a social organization for people with I.Q. levels in the top two percent. Every Silver Cauldron member is a Mensan.

The house is warm and full of Mensans and witches. I find a spot on the couch, feeling a bit intimidated by all of the Mensans. But they are some of the funniest people I’ve met, enthusiastically singing round after round of dirty limericks. Harry circulates, offering backrubs and helpings of “goose,” a rich fudgy dessert covered with nuts. During the party Cynthia bounces from room to room, showing off her present of serpent earrings, giving hugs, telling dirty jokes, nibbling on bread or chocolate.

Maid, mother, and crone: three aspects of goddess known as the Triple Goddess. In Wicca this goddess denotes the three phases of a woman’s life from young womanhood to old age. Cynthia has been both maid and mother. On this birthday, she has officially reached the age of the Crone, when “You get to tell everybody what to do. They have to obey every word you say!” Her friend Jane snorts at this. Cynthia grins at her. “Jane doesn’t believe a word of it, does she? She knows better.” Some Wiccan traditions count the age of the Crone from menopause. Cynthia went through menopause at 27. With no calcium replacement therapy available when she first needed it, her bones have weakened. She has three broken bones in her back that have not healed.

Tonight, Cynthia’s good humor upstages whatever physical discomfort she’s feeling. She and her friends find chairs around the living room, start telling stories about Mensa gatherings. Cynthia and Harry met each other at a gathering a couple of years ago. “Well,” Cynthia remembers, “I was told I have three problems when it comes to meeting men. I’m smart, I know it, and I show it.” And she’s mischievous - like Baubo, the goddess of her favorite myth. “She’s the Goddess of Female Laughter and Obscenity. She tells Demeter some dirty jokes and does a lewd dance and Demeter gets unstuck out of her depression. I love Baubo because she is so unexpected, so non-traditional - so good at asking surgically precise questions that lead the answerers to discover new truths for themselves.”

Like Baubo, Cynthia lets her Witch Camp students discover their own answers. Wicca lends itself to that. It’s a faith with freedom. For Cynthia, the freedom is what makes being a Witch seem “like coming home.”

The Circle Cast, we hear the myth of Persephone.
"When I first started working, the guys were pissed because 'she's always the first one there'. I'd always be sitting on the scales by the time they got there and they'd go 'Son of a bitch, this woman, she's driving, she's taking our work.'"
Mary Ann Cupero fizzes like a just-opened soda bottle. Eyes that sparkle. She and Paul Newman would make a great ride-off-in-the-sunset couple. She would wink one piercing blue eye, flash the most endearing gap-toothed grin, and the sun would hunker down. Short in stature, big in shoe size, Mary Ann loves to make people laugh. Talks to everyone.

"I got into trucking because I had no education and I had no way of getting an education. Worked for 10 years in a woolen mill and hated every minute of it. So why trucking? Probably it was something to do with not being tied down to the inside of a mill. More than likely because I was, plain and simply, a bitch to live with. I was one, exhausted, and two... hateful, because I hated doing what I was doing."
"Can you imagine when I was a kid I was afraid to even go into a store by myself? Ohhhh yes. My dad used to bribe me with candy, ice cream, and I never could do it."

Thirty-eight hours into a fifty-hour trip, Mary Ann stops to make a delivery in Westbrook.
After 25 years of mothering and 15 of trucking, Mary Ann made an attempt to slow down last spring and decided to teach. "I really had gotten to the point where driving for so long... I was... literally stuck in a rut of not having the opportunity to learn anything new." Rather than allowing her more free time, teaching, because of the lower pay, requires that Mary Ann now work seven days a week, five in the classroom and two on the road. "I get up and I get going, four, four-thirty in the morning, and I go straight through and never stop. Never stop. Just keep right on going."

Truck repair students watch Mary Ann finagle a repair from their reluctant teacher. "You oughta work for the DOT," one student teases. "She's tough, ya know. She's good."
Church and Sunday brunch overlooking Moosehead Lake are a ritual on the rare weekend Mary Ann isn’t driving.

"Slower! Slower! Slower with the clutch!"

Mary Ann instructs the novice driver. Gears grind. One minute she’s nearly spitting nails; and the next, laughing out loud.
Mary Ann explains the nuances of working with a temperamental clutch.
"I like to look at trees. I am engrossed by trees. I have one special tree. It is huge. It has branches as big as trees. You wouldn't think of a woman truck driver like that, but that's me. Get me out of my truck, put me in the woods, and I'm happy."

Eleven p.m. Having failed inspection that evening, Mary Ann waits to hear if her mechanic can get her back on the road the next day.
Mary Ann demonstrates the pre-trip inspection.