

Program brings healthy living to church

HEALTH - PAGE C6



Homecoming's a special time at John Glenn

LOCAL NEWS - PAGE A3



Volunteers make a difference the United Way

HOMETOWNLIFE - SECTION C

9/24
SUNDAY

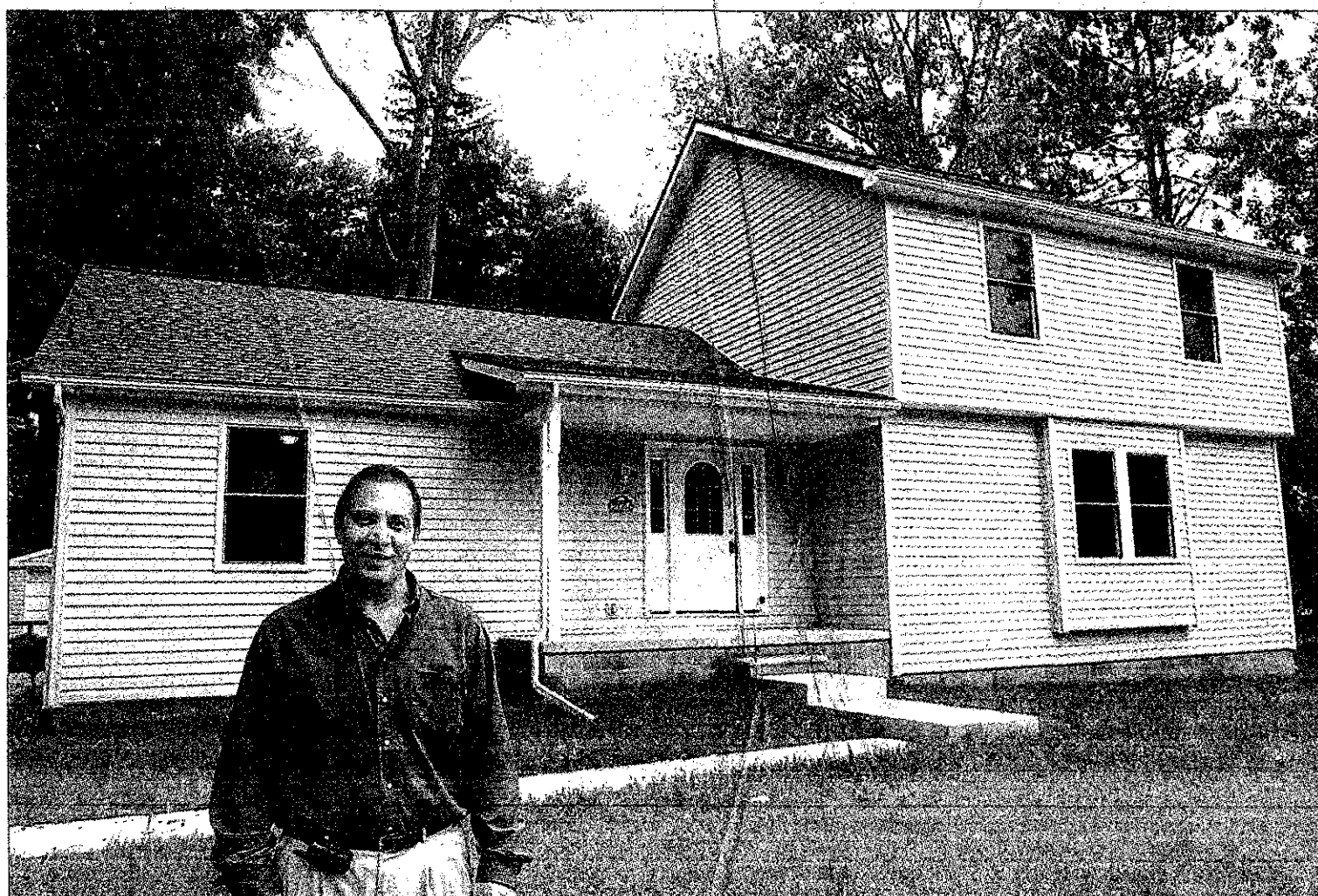
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PHOTOS BY TOM HAWLEY | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Lou Toarmina is hoping someone will buy the 2,400-square-foot home he built on Ravine Drive. The original deal fell through even before the four-bedroom, 3½-bath home was finished. It's been up for sale for a year.

Weathering the downturn

Curb appeal, creativity help buyers, sellers in today's market



According to Realtor Noel Derr, there's one buyer for every nine homes up for sale in today's real estate market.

BY SUE MASON
STAFF WRITER

Lou Toarmina wonders what it will take to sell three new homes he's built in Westland in the past few years.

Two sit on lots in the Wayne-Palmer area of the city and are priced to sell at \$199,000, down from the original asking price of \$229,000. The third home is on Ravine Drive, a tony neighborhood in the north end. It sits on a one-acre parcel and while Toarmina had hoped to sell it for \$315,000-\$320,000, he's asking \$286,900.

"I've gotten very few nibbles and those that I do get, they have to sell their homes before they can buy," Toarmina said. "The temptation is to keep lowering the price."

Toarmina isn't alone in trying to sell a home these days. In Westland, as of Sept. 5, there were 731 homes, 220 condominiums and 35 multifamily residences listed for sale with real estate companies.

Those numbers don't include 94 homes that are bank properties, 36 HUD properties that are under contract or available, 41 vacant parcels and an unknown quantity of homes that are for sale by owner.

"It does seem like a large number," said Realtor Noel Derr, who is marketing Toarmina's properties through Century 21 Dynamic in Westland. "Homes aren't selling for what they were a year ago and they're on the market longer. Three years ago, there

What do you think about this story? E-mail your responses to smason@hometownlife.com.



weren't a lot of homes to live in under \$100,000. That's possible today."

According to Derr, 1,491 homes have been sold in Westland since January. The summer months, traditionally a busy time when parents look to relocate before school starts, has been sluggish with only 299 home sales.

BUYER'S MARKET

Derr has been a Realtor for nine years. When she started in 1997-98, homes were on the market a few hours, maybe a day, and sellers were getting multiple offers. Now, on average, homes can be on the market for 88 days before getting a deal. There's one buyer for every nine homes.

"In the first-time buyer market, things are selling, but not as quickly as they used to and for not as much," she said. "People are nervous. Until they know what's going to happen with the Ford plants in Wayne, they're staying put."

For some people, the reality of home ownership is hitting with a big thud. Those who used adjustable rate mortgages to buy high-end homes are now facing refinancing at

PLEASE SEE DOWNTURN, A5

Judge orders trial in child porn case

BY DARRELL CLEM
STAFF WRITER

A Westland man was ordered Thursday to stand trial in Wayne County Circuit Court on charges of downloading child pornographic images of young girls from his laptop computer.

John Kevin Spry, 50, faces trial after he waived his right to a preliminary hearing in Westland 18th District Court — a move that averted testimony.

As he awaits trial, Spry has been released from custody after he posted \$10,000 of a \$100,000/10 percent bond, police Sgt. Debra Mathews confirmed.

Spry was charged Sept. 9 with one count of child sexually abusive activity, three counts of having child sexually abusive material and one count of marijuana possession.

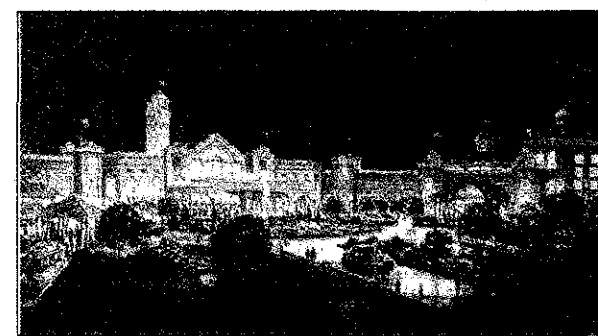
If convicted, he could face penalties ranging up to 20 years in prison.

Spry was arrested after police raided his home on Glen, near Wayne Road, and confiscated child porn images that he is accused of burning onto CDs.

Police haven't disclosed how they learned of the allegations against Spry, a single man who is employed as an electrician.

A not-guilty plea has been entered in his court file as he awaits trial in circuit court.

Spry wasn't at home when officers went to his house, rammed the door, went inside and seized what Mathews has described as numerous pornographic images, including some of prepubescent girls.

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George Marvaso's Electropolitan has glitz and glamour in this artist rendering.

Businessman still wants his Electropolitan

BY DARRELL CLEM
STAFF WRITER

Worried that Michigan continues to lose jobs, a Westland businessman has revived hopes for a huge entertainment complex that he said would employ 400 workers.

George Marvaso still hopes to build a \$50 million business, Electropolitan, including such attractions as restaurants, bars, an arcade room, a dance club, a comedy club, a theater, a billiards hall and private suites.

Marvaso wants to build a multi-story, 140,000-square-foot facility along the I-275 or I-96 corridors, but he said economic development officials in the Chicago area have shown more interest than

PLEASE SEE ELECTROPOLITAN, A4

Deadline nears for voters to register

Westland residents who want to vote in the Nov. 7 election — and who aren't yet registered — face an Oct. 10 deadline, said City Clerk Eileen DeHart.

Residents may register at the clerk's office at Westland City Hall, on Ford Road between Newburgh and Wayne, or they may go to a Secretary of State office, DeHart said.

Those wishing to register must turn 18 by Election Day and be a resident of the city in which they're voting.

They should take a picture identification to the place where they register, DeHart said.

In other election-related news, anyone who wants an application for an absentee ballot should call the clerk's office at (734) 467-3188

or (734) 467-3187.

Voters who think they might not be able to make it to the polls are encouraged to ask for an absentee ballot.

DeHart's office will start sending them out the first week in October, but voters who need them may start calling anytime, the clerk said.

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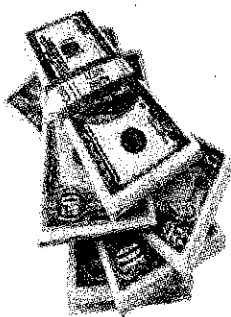


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Coming Thursday in Filter



Tiger Trivia and Tiger fun, catch it in the next issue of Filter.

Mobile caterer comes to rescue of annual dinner

BY SUE MASON
STAFF WRITER

For John Glenn High School football boosters, Dale Lockwood and his rolling barbecue grill are a godsend for preparing and serving 100 people at the annual Homecoming dinner Tuesday evening.

"He came through in a pinch," booster member Cathy Thorne said.

For Lockwood, the boosters' request to help with the meal is an opportunity to let more people know about his fledgling mobile catering business.

"I can use this to get graduation parties and even team parties," Lockwood said.

Lockwood brought his 16-foot smoker grill to the high school Tuesday evening to serve the traditional Homecoming dinner to the football team, cheerleading squad, their respective coaches and school administrators.

"It was wonderful," said

booster Mary Konopka.

"Everyone loved the food and Dale was just great. The kids ran off the field, all you could smell was the food."

Lockwood filled in for the culinary arts program at the William D. Ford Career Technical Center, which because of the late start of school and an earlier than usual Homecoming couldn't accommodate the dinner at this time.

He started cooking at 10 a.m. Tuesday at his Westland home before relocating to the high school for the dinner. He's donating his time and effort, while the booster club is pretty much covering the cost of the "materials" — 11 slabs of ribs, 10 chickens and 30 pounds of pulled pork for sandwiches as well as cole slaw and baked beans.

Thorne and Lockwood are neighbors. Initially, she asked if he'd buy an ad in the football program for his Hickory Barbecue Grill, a mobile cater-



John Glenn football players Dennis Dillard (from left), Yannick Thompson, Blayne McCormick and Jesse Taylor enjoy the food at the annual Homecoming dinner.

ing business, and thought of him when the boosters ran into problems with the dinner, a long-standing tradition at the high school.

"The boys needed their dinner, they've been getting it for years, so I went across the street and asked him," she said. "I don't know him that well, but I saw his sign on his truck."

For Lockwood, it offers a chance to grow his business. He went to vocational school to be a chef, but shelved it when he got married "and had to get a real job."

He's owned a fireplace installation business for 12 years, and at the urging of his friends decided to fill the slow summer months with cooking.

"Every time I would do a barbecue, 50 people would show up," he said. "They kept telling me I should do this. I've catered parties for years."

Because of Lockwood's efforts, the crowd of more than 100 is getting two meals — the barbecue dinner that was served in the school cafeteria and the more formal sit-down steak and potato dinner at the Career Technical Center in October.

The dinner is just one of many things the boosters provide for the football program at John Glenn. They also are providing a dinner and sign night



Caterer Dale Lockwood replenishes serving trays at the John Glenn Homecoming dinner.

next week for the junior varsity squad, do the souvenir programs, provide the team with pop after the games and handle picture day.

Through fund-raising like a planned casino trip and 50/50 raffles — the Homecoming raffle tends to produce a large pot, as high as \$800, according to Thorne — the boosters raise about \$28,000 a year that goes back to the team, paying for any equipment it needs.

"It's a lot of work, but it pays off," Thorne said.

That's what Lockwood is hoping about the dinner. In

addition to the food, he gave each person who was there a \$50 gift certificate that they can use with Hickory Barbecue.

"I hope by this time next year, I'm doing just catering," he said.

Information about the John Glenn High School Football Boosters and Hickory Barbecue grill are available online. The boosters' Web site is www.rockettfootball.com. Find Lockwood's business at www.hickorybbq.net.

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INFORMATION CENTRAL

Banned Books Week

The world is full of controversy, and even a free society like the United States is not exempt from the scrutiny of literature. Throughout American history, various pieces of literature have come under attack for a multitude of reasons and are eventually removed from establishments such as schools and libraries.

Such titles are recognized during Banned Book Week, Sept. 23-30 as a celebration of intellectual freedom regardless of controversial subject matter.

Quite a few books that are now considered an essential part of the American canon of literature were at one time highly controversial and banned from a variety of institutions. James Joyce's *Ulysses* was barred from the United States for years but is now a recurrent member of countless college reading lists.

Familiar titles such as *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley and Eliot's *Silas Marner* have been

removed from schools by school officials due to "inappropriate" content. Ironically, Orwell's *1984* has also experienced a precarious existence with respect to U.S. censorship, and can frequently be found on many "Most Censored" lists of books.

Banned books are a hot topic in the area of children's and young adult literature as well. Laura Ingalls Wilder may be shocked to learn that her classic children's book, *Little House on the Prairie*, was once removed from a classroom in South Dakota for allegedly fueling racist tendencies. Even the childhood favorite *Little Red Riding Hood* came under attack and was banned in two California schools as late as 1989.

In the young adult scene, Judy Blume is no stranger to controversy; *Blubber*, *Forever*, and *Deenie* are just several of her works that have been subjected to restrictions for sexual content.

Visit the library to view specific examples and displays of banned books from Sept. 23-30. Because the Westland library promotes intellectual freedom, most titles that have received a "banned" label are available for check-out. Call us at (734) 326-6123, or remotely search our catalog twenty-four hours a day at www.westland.lib.mi.us.

Mary Beth Fixler

Introduction to Scrapbooking: 7 p.m. Sept. 27.

Join Kristin Nutt, Independent Consultant for Creative Memories® as she demonstrates how to create a Short Story Card. Bring two or three related personal photos. All other supplies will be furnished. Seating is limited, so register for this free program at the Reference Desk, or call (734) 326-6123.

Science Fiction and Fantasy Book Discussion: 7 p.m. Sept. 27.

Join in for what will prove to be an exciting discussion about Speculative Fiction. All adults with interests in the genre are welcome. Visit our blog, too! <http://sfwestlandlibmius.blogspot.com>
Internet 201: 10:30 a.m. Sept. 28.
Learn about search engines — which ones do what, how to evaluate them, how to pick good Web sites. No registration is required. Walk-ins are welcome.
Internet 101: 2 p.m. Sept. 30.
A beginner's guide to the Internet — how do I get around a website, what is a website. No registration is required. Walk-ins are welcome.

The William P. Faust Public Library, is at 6123 Central City Parkway, Westland. For more information, call (734) 326-6123.

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1:20, 3:25, 5:30, 7:35, 9:40
FRISAT LS 11:45

THE ILLUSIONIST (PG-13) 12:00, 2:20, 4:40, 7:00, 9:20, FRISAT LS 11:40
1:00, 3:30, 5:40, 8:00

ALL THE KINGS MEN (PG-13)
1:00, 3:30, 5:40, 8:00

LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE (R) 12:25, 2:35, 4:45, 6:55, 9:05

BRIDGES AND GO (PG-13)
12:00, 2:30, 5:00, 7:30, 10:00

EVERYONE'S HERO (G) (11:10) 1:10, 3:10, 5:10, 7:10, 9:10, FRISAT LS 11:10

THE BLACK DAHLIA (R) (11:00) 1:30, 4:00, 6:30, 9:00, FRISAT LS 11:30

WICKER MAN (PG-13) FRISAT LS 11:15

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Loss doesn't dampen homecoming

The red, the white and the blue ruled the day as students at John Glenn High School got pepped up for the annual Homecoming.

From tug of wars to tricycle races, students at Westland John Glenn High School, they packed the football stadium for some healthy competition.

While many of the contests had a clear-cut winner like the juniors winning the new obstacle relay race. The tug of war was undecided after the rope broke in both the freshman-sophomore and junior-senior tugs. However, true to upperclassmanship, the seniors were claiming victory.

But the rally wasn't enough to lift the Rockets to victory in the gridiron meeting against Walled Lake Central.

The highlight of the evening was the crowning of the Homecoming king and queen. The honor went to seniors Lindsay Bies and Frank Toarmina.

Members of their court also included Natalie Bower, Michelle Gutowski, Kayla Montague, Kija Colts, Robert Jones, Matt Kukulka, Angelo Brown and Shamir Garcia.

For more Homecoming photos, visit the Photo Gallery on our Web site at www.hometownlife.com.



Senior Frank Toarmina is crowned homecoming king by last year's queen, Amanda Eck.



Her face painted in blue and white, sophomore Amelia Clark joins classmates in yelling in support of their team.



PHOTOS BY TOM HAWLEY | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

John Glenn senior Lindsay Bies (left) is all smiles Thursday evening after being crowned homecoming queen by last year's queen, Amanda Eck.



Seniors Cameron Couch (left) and homecoming king candidate Shamir Garcia show their true colors at the rally.



John Glenn junior Daris Smith finishes the last leg of the obstacle course relay to win the event over the other classes at the pep rally.

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2nd 'Body by God' challenge set to start

BY BRAD KADRICH
STAFF WRITER

About a week before his first "Body by God" makeover challenge in June, Dr. C.J. Trupp figures he had about 10 people signed up.

About a week before he gets ready to start the second one Thursday, some 60 people had already registered.

Trupp figures that's a testament both to the popularity and the success of the first challenge, held in partnership with the Livonia YMCA. And this time, he's vowing even more fun.

"We wanted to make this one even better," said Trupp, a Livonia chiropractor. "We're giv-

ing away more money and better prizes.

Body by God, as explained by Trupp, isn't a diet plan or a health plan. To Trupp and, he hopes, to the program's initial participants, it's a "change your life" program designed to work on the total person.

For his part, Trupp is excited about the prospect. "By the end, I know we'll have changed some lives," he said.

Body by God was developed by Dr. Ben Lerner, an author and doctor who has served as the team doctor to the U.S. Olympic team. His program, brought to Michigan by Trupp, who calls Lerner his "mentor," following the "Extreme

Makeover God's Way" manual, is a 40-day exercise aimed at making changes that allow participants to live a better life.

It uses "food by God" (more natural foods like grains, fruits and veggies) vs. "food by man" (processed foods. Students also learn time- and stress-management techniques.

This time, Trupp wants to help participants make even better changes. He's using some of the more successful students from the first group as team leaders this time around. He's going to use more technology - computers, movie clips, etc. - and has added a financial expert to the team to help participants straighten out their finances.

"I'm going to try to find ways to attack every aspect of people's senses and spirits to try to get them to change their life," Trupp said. "We're creating a 'buddy' system, so people can meet with others just like them and maybe work out together, so people don't feel like they're going through it alone."

That drive to help people improve their lives doesn't surprise Trupp's partners at the YMCA.

"(Trupp's) mission in his office is to change people's lives, not just from a physician's standpoint," said Jamie Stepanian-Bennett, director of marketing and membership for the YMCA. "He wants to make a



BILL BRESLER | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Livonia chiropractor Dr. C.J. Trupp hopes to have more than 60 people at his second 'Body by God' makeover challenge, which starts Thursday.

difference in people's lives. It's a partnership between a local physician dedicated to changing people's lives and the YMCA, which believes in the same things."

They've added blood pressure checks to the weekly accountability sessions, trying to get as much physical improvement as possible. Participants will also get a spa night to "give them

some pampering," Trupp said, and there's even a tailgate party for the Michigan-Michigan State football game.

"Now that we know how important it is to people, it's going to be a whole lot better," Trupp promised.

For more information on the program, call Trupp's office at (734) 261-5677.

bkadrich@hometownlife.com | (734) 459-2700

AROUND WESTLAND

Flu shots

The Village of Westland at 32001 Cherry Hill will offer flu shots to seniors age 62 and older 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Thursday and Friday, Oct. 5-6. Call (734) 762-8895 to schedule an appointment.

Westland Maple Drugs also will be offering flu and pneumonia shots and sponsoring a Diabetes Day 4-7 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 17, at the store on Ford Road at Hunter. A second round

of shots will be offered 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 9.

The shots will be available on a walk-in basis and cost \$25 for the flu shot and \$40 for the pneumonia shot. For people with Medicare Part B, there will be no co-pay.

As part of Diabetes Day, the store will be giving out free meters and free samples as well as providing education and answering questions about the disease.

For more information, call

Chuck or Danielle at (734) 729-2200.

Euchre returns

Friday Night Euchre/Pinocle Card Parties are back at St. Bernardine Parish in Westland.

Doors open at 7 p.m. and play starts at 7:30 p.m. No partner is needed.

Admission is \$5 admission includes refreshments, snacks and cash prizes. A 50/50 raffle also is available.

The scheduled dates are Sept.

29, Oct. 6, 13, 27, Nov. 3, 17, Dec. 1, 15, Jan. 7, 5 12, 26 and Feb. 2, 9, 16. Call (734) 427-5150.

Fall seminars

Barson's Greenhouse is offering a series of free fall seminars on winterizing ponds.

The winterizing seminar, which focuses on preparing the pond for cold weather, will be offered at 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 30 and 11 a.m. Sunday, Oct. 1. Call (734) 421-5959.

DOWNTURN

FROM PAGE A1

higher interest rates, in some cases putting their current mortgage payments out of reach. Derr recently had a client leave her big house in Canton and buy a smaller home in Westland because her mortgage payment jumped \$400 a month.

"I like to ask people what they're comfortable with," Derr said. "They need to know what they're comfortable with and use it as a stepping stone. If you qualify for a \$130,000 mortgage, don't buy a \$130,000 home, if you can't afford the \$950-a-month payments."

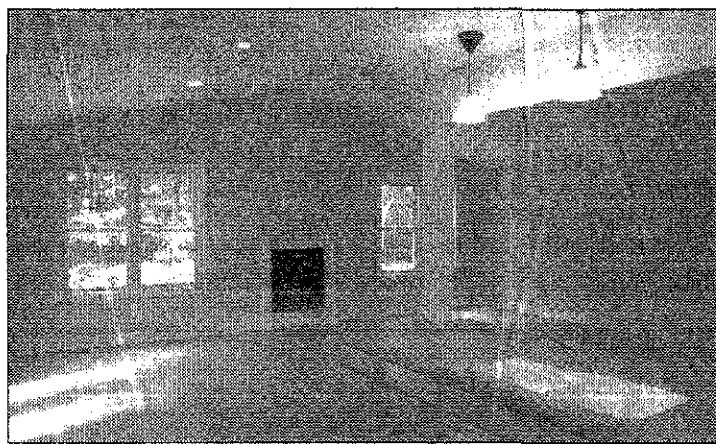
How many properties in the city are in some form of foreclosure is hard to pin down. According to RealtyTrac.com, Wayne County foreclosures have climbed by 143 percent over the past year and the state's rate has jumped 141 percent. The national rate is up 38 percent.

As of Sept. 15, the Web site listed 435 properties available in Westland, with more than half - 277 - owned by the lender, meaning the final phase of foreclosure.

For homeowners who are on the verge of losing their homes, creative financing is helping them escape financial ruin. If a home has been on the market for four months, some banks look at its trend and entertain an offer instead of doing a foreclosure.

Called a short sale, the homeowner is able to sell the house for less than what is owed and the bank forgave the rest of the debt. While it doesn't look good on a credit report, it does look better than a foreclosure, Derr said.

"I sold one on a short sale in Wayne where the owner had never lived in it," said Derr. "She mortgaged it at \$95,000, the bank took \$63,000 and netted \$59,000. She'd been refurbishing it for seven years and it was about 90 percent complete. It was her childhood home and she bought it from her mom. She worked at Ford and lost her job."



TOM HAWLEY | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Toarmina's Cape Cod style home has an open floor plan with a first floor master suite and laundry room.

Creative financing
Another technique is 80-20 mortgages, where the buyer actual carries two mortgages - one for 80 percent of the price and another for the remaining 20 percent. The idea is to avoid private mortgage insurance which is tacked on to the interest rate for mortgages with less than 20 percent down.

A buyer has to have a good credit rating and the interest rate is typically higher on the 20 percent mortgage, but the plus is that the extra cost is an income tax deduction, Derr said.

Another market trend is multi-listed leases.

Homeowners who find themselves stuck with two mortgage payments because they haven't been able to sell their old home are turning the property into a rental.

Derr gets two to three inquiries about buying and a like number about rentals each week. Rentals "are huge right now," and maybe two a month turn into actual buyers.

However, "because of the price range and seller concessions, it's still cheaper to buy," she said.

While those things can help get buyers into a new home, Derr said sellers also need to do more. In this housing market,

curb appeal is a must. In fact, it has to be outstanding, she said.

The home's exterior should be "as neat as a pin," and inside, she recommends getting rid of any flaw that attracts the buyer's eye.

"Small things make a difference," she said. "Buyers have so many choices, you have to get them out of the car. You have to make sure your home looks its best from the road."

"Curb appeal and price gets them interested, then you get them in the house."

For Toarmina, she's recommending he consider some landscaping to give the homes curb appeal. She wants to have a broker open house to get word out about the homes and has begun advertising them in several newspapers.

"I built nine homes before these, four in Wayne and five in Westland," said Toarmina. "The ones in Wayne sold quickly, the ones in Westland at Wayne and Palmer took two months and that seemed like a long time then."

The slow home sales have led Toarmina to make a decision about his future.

"I'm not doing anything until the market comes back," he said. "I'm putting it totally on hold."

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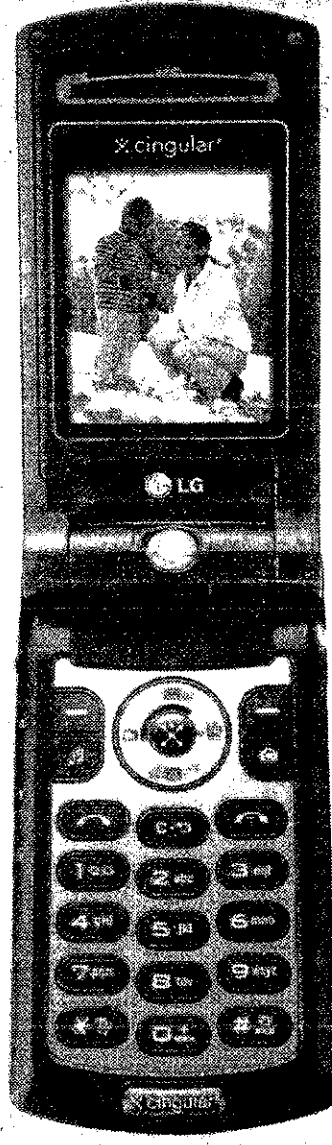
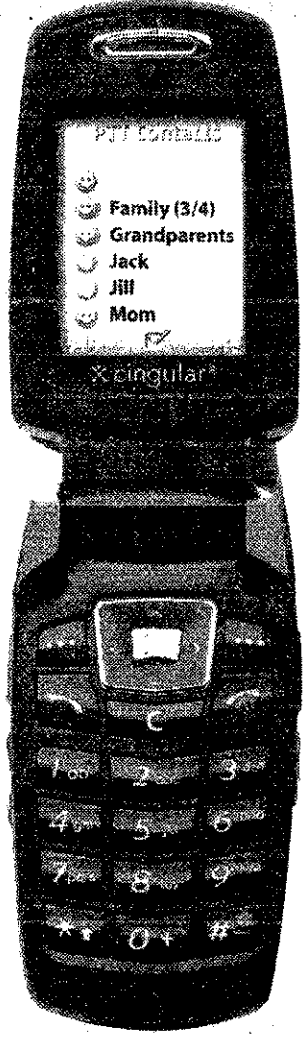
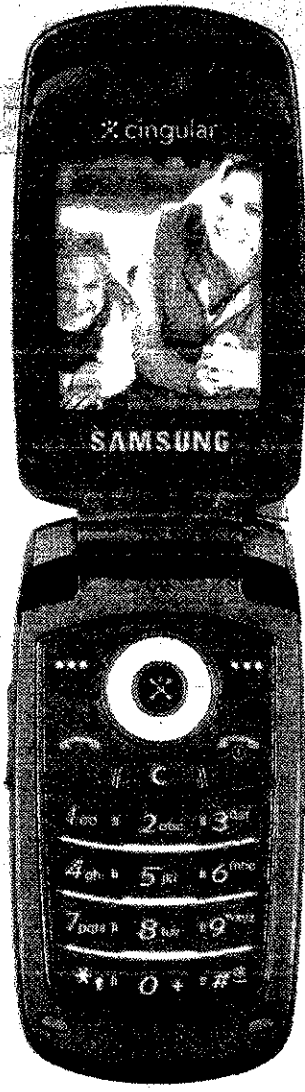
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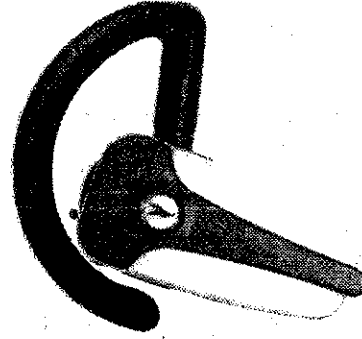


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Internet can be wonderful, but children are vulnerable

Whatever happened to don't talk to strangers?" Redford 17th District Court Judge Karen Khalil posed that question to Detective Wade Higgason of the Michigan State Police Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force and Keith Clark, assistant prosecuting attorney for the Wayne County Prosecutor's Child Abuse Unit. Judges Khalil and Charlotte Wirth invited Higgason, Clark and *Observer* community life reporter Linda Chomin on Sept. 11 to talk about the dangers of the Internet to children to members of the local clergy and educational community.



Hugh Gallagher

As Higgason and Clark told the assembled group, strangers can now come into your home and work their way into the confidence of vulnerable children looking for love and acceptance in all the wrong places.

Every new technology has presented a challenge for parents. For every positive the technology offers, there is also a negative. Movies brought the world to the neighborhood theater. The finest dramas, funniest comedies and travelogues from every corner of the globe seemed to shrink a once vast world. But they also presented disturbing images, radical ideas and general naughtiness that was once a lot harder to find.

The radio was another technological wonder. The voice of the president could now reassure and rally a weary nation. The finest music from everywhere could be had free for the simple inconvenience of listening to a sponsor's pitch.

But the radio also brought sounds that made some people uncomfortable.

Perhaps the biggest intruder was the television. This wonder of sight and sound seemed to have a hypnotic effect on children. If not monitored properly, children were likely to become too enthralled in the television (TV zombies) and less interested in outdoor activities, schoolwork and family life.

It has been blamed, with some justification, on increased obesity in children, increased attention deficit and a decline in reading.

Computers first made their inroads on children with video games. But now the technology has advanced exponentially with iPods and Blackberrys and phones that do everything

but think for you.

Then there's the Internet.

The crucial difference between the Internet and television is that the Internet is a two-way street. And unlike the telephone, it can mask the person on the other end of a chat room or instant messaging conversation. And as Higgason and Clark made clear, predators have become extremely adept at manipulating information so they can tailor their come-ons to teenagers and younger children and they can find those children.

MySpace.com is usually the Web site that draws the most attention as being a potential danger for teenagers. The site itself began benignly enough as a way for people with common interests in music to hook up to discuss their passion. It grew as a way for young people to connect with each other across the street or around the world.

It has, like all those earlier inventions, an enormous potential for opening positive communications (despite its commercial, profit goals). But when young people (some of them technically too young to be using the service) begin giving out too much personal information, it opens the doors to predators. It also opens the door to youthful indiscretions that can cause problems for teenagers too eager to share their binges or sexual escapades (real or imagined).

Higgason and Clark are the experts and they say the same thing, the same thing that could have been said to parents about all those earlier inventions and their impact on children — know your child.

"Know what they're doing online," Higgason said. "Understand what they're doing online. Educate yourself on the Internet."

There are practical tips about limiting a child's time online, keeping your computer in a common area (no bedroom computers) and monitoring what they do on the computer.

It's often a shock to parents — it was to me — when the child who once screamed at you, "You don't understand. You're too strict," grows up to be an adult and says, sadly, "You just didn't get it, you didn't know, you weren't strict enough."

Since you can't win anyway, protect your children.

Hugh Gallagher is the managing editor of the *Observer Newspapers*. He can be reached by e-mail at hgallagher@hometownlife.com or by phone at (734) 953-2149.

Former congressman tells how to talk to your representative

Sometimes, you just have to get in touch with your member of Congress. Perhaps Congress is taking up an issue — the minimum wage, say, or a bill to promote medical research — that would make a difference in your life. Maybe some matter is embroiling your community, such as growing drug problems at the high school or a proposed urban renewal project that will destroy a neighborhood.



Lee Hamilton

Or you might just want to suggest that Congress start acting like the independent branch it is supposed to be, rather than a rubber stamp for the White House.

Whatever the case, you can always write a letter or send an e-mail — the more personalized, the better. This is the most common form of communication with Congress. But there are times when a letter doesn't seem enough. So how do you go about getting your Congress member's attention? Isn't that something only wealthy donors and Washington lobbyists can manage?

Hardly. Remember, Congress is there to represent you. For our system to work, you need to be willing to share your thoughts with members of Congress, and they need to be willing to listen.

In some ways, the easiest step is actually getting in touch. If you call, for instance, it's unlikely you'll get your member of Congress right away, but you can certainly pass on a message; most members set aside time each week to call back constituents.

Members also make time on their schedules to meet with constituents, so if you're going to be in Washington, set up an appointment in advance. It's even more likely that you'll be able to schedule a meeting back home, in the district office or even at a local coffee shop, where the distractions of the Capitol are far away.

There are other avenues, too, besides one-on-one conversations. Members regularly hold public meetings in the district, and their times and places are usually listed on the member's Web site. Just show up, and don't hesitate to say what's on your mind.

Members also hold "virtual forums" now — online discussions in which they and their constituents can share their views. You might also take the bull by the horns and invite your member of Congress to speak to a local group to which you belong; it's a good way to get a conversation going, and you may feel more

comfortable having friends and acquaintances alongside you.

Finally, is it always worth getting to know a member's staff, either in Washington or in the district. These men and women often have expertise that can resolve your specific problem. If only speaking to your elected official will do, that can help smooth the way.

Once you're on the phone or face to face with your lawmaker or a staff member, there are certain things you can do that will help you be more credible. Do enough research beforehand to be knowledgeable about the issue, and definitely do not overstate your case or try to mislead. If you can make your case with facts and figures instead of spin, and know the arguments on the other side, you will be far more convincing.

Since you have limited time, be sure to stick to the most important points in your position. Do what you can to be as personal as possible: Explain how a given issue will affect you or your family, and if you can, appeal to your member's own experience or background to make a point.

Finally, mention who else in your community — a church group, labor union, neighborhood association — shares your views, especially if they're from a different background or hold different ideological beliefs from you.

Perhaps the most important advice I can give, though — and I speak from experience — is that how you say it is as important as what you say. It helps to be constructive, to find a way not only to raise a problem, but then help your legislator find a way to solve it. It's important to listen as well as to speak — to learn more about your lawmaker's position and gain some insight into how this issue might be playing in Congress.

Be patient, since some issues demand time for deliberation and consultation before your legislator can make a commitment, and be unfailingly courteous; knowing how to disagree without being disagreeable is the surest way I know to earn an elected official's respect.

Above all, be open to compromise. Making some progress toward your goal is better than none at all.

And, finally, relax! Say what you want to say, and enjoy your exchange with your representative. We live in a democracy, and my experience has been that participating in it is both a privilege and a pleasure. I hope that's what you discover, too.

Lee Hamilton is director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University. He was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for 34 years.

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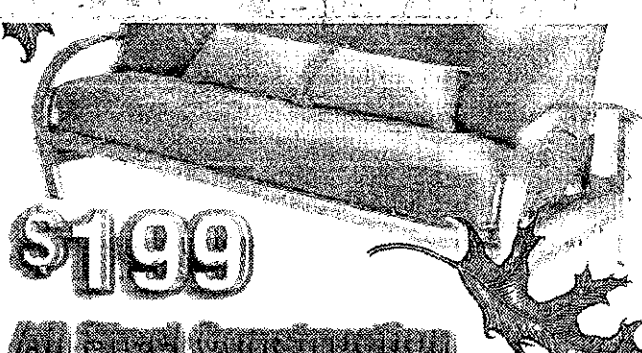
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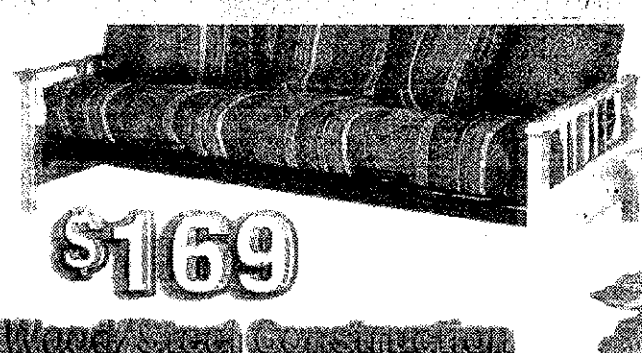
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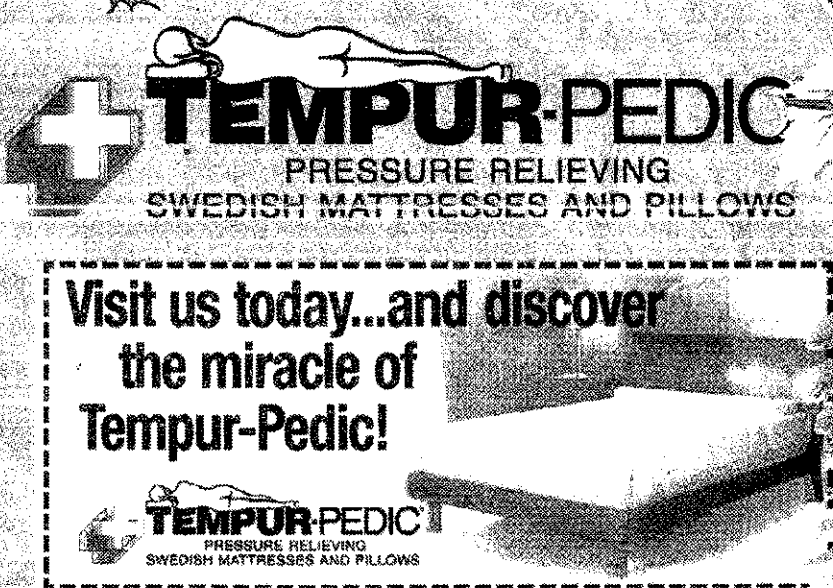
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