

File now to declare residence

March 1 is the deadline to send your city or township assessor an affidavit declaring your home is your principal residence. Most homeowners should have received personalized affidavit forms by now. Take one minute to fill it out and return it to your assessor, preferably immediately.

It's best to wait for the mailed form because it will contain your PIN (property identification number), an essential piece of information.

If you don't get a form by (say) the end of this week, this newspaper will send you one for a \$4.95 service charge. Call toll free at 1-800-967-5904 from anywhere in the U.S. Ask for item 0301. Have your Visa or Mastercard charge card ready.

You may choose delivery by:

- Fax (give the complete number with area code).
- Mail (give complete mailing address with ZIP code).
- Federal Express overnight (for an additional \$20).



Slaying gives life to litigation



BY LARRY O'CONNOR
STAFF WRITER

Aside from the criminal case, Jackie Ponke's slaying has sparked a flurry of litigation.

Legal proceedings have begun over guardianship of the couple's 9-year-old daughter, Ashley, as well as con-

The wheels of justice are turning in the Jackie Ponke slaying case — and they include civil suits as well as a first-degree murder trial. One of the considerations is the guardianship of Ashley Ponke, 9-year-old daughter of Jackie Ponke.

servatorship of assets held by Raymond Ponke and his wife.

Also, a separate lawsuit has been filed in circuit court by Jackie Ponke's relatives against Raymond Ponke, who is charged with first-degree murder in her death Jan. 8 in a Farmington dental office.

Raymond Ponke is scheduled to be arraigned at 1:30 p.m. today before Judge Jessica Cooper.

An attorney representing the victim's family won't say if other suits will follow in the wake of the slaying. Jackie Ponke's brother, Dennis Lutz, didn't want to comment.

"That (the suit against Raymond Ponke) is the only one we have going at this time," said attorney Robert Gagnik, who represents the victim's family.

A hearing over Ashley Ponke's guardianship has been adjourned un-

til Monday, Feb. 28, before Judge Jean Young in Oakland County Probate Court.

A separate hearing is scheduled Wednesday, Feb. 23, before Judge Rudy Nichols in circuit court in the suit against Raymond Ponke.

The two-part suit says that Raymond Ponke is responsible for his actions in his wife's murder, and, if found to be mentally ill, that he was negligent in not seeking help. Gagnik said.

See LITIGATION, 4A

Kennedy fires up area Dems

BY LARRY O'CONNOR
STAFF WRITER

The old joke might have gone like this: How many Oakland County Democrats does it take to screw in a lightbulb?

Only one, but try finding him.

Those still in the dark about the clout of Oakland Dems would have found 650 on hand, ready to illuminate a new era at the 34th Annual Phil Hart Dinner Sunday.

Overshadowed by the Republican juggernaut of the 1980s, county Dems were displaying newly found moxie during their annual fund-raiser at The Adlai Shalom Synagogue in Farmington Hills.

"We're getting there," said Michael Silver of West Bloomfield. "You'd be surprised how many Democrats that we have out here."

Buoyed by an impassioned speech by keynote speaker U.S. Rep. Joseph Kennedy, son of the late Robert Kennedy, the party brethren has two targets well in sight and plenty of arrows.

Several contestants for Don Riegle's soon-to-be vacated U.S. Senate seat attended as well as gubernatorial hopefuls.

"They're (Republicans) going to throw everything into this Senate election," said Frank Garrison, president of the Michigan AFL-CIO. "They're going to throw everything but a good candidate."

Contenders on hand

Democratic U.S. Senate contenders in attendance included state Sen. John Kelly, former state Rep. Bill Brodhead of Bingham Farms, state Sen. Lana Pollack of Ann Arbor, U.S. Rep. Bob Carr and Macomb prosecutor Carl Matting.

They only received encouragement — not an endorsement — from Riegle, who spoke after receiving an honor for his public service.

Riegle is not seeking a fourth term, in order to spend more time with his family. He told of the difficulty in making his decision, recalling a visit to the grave site on Mackinac Island

See KENNEDY, 3A

IN THE PAPER

TODAY

One year later: Leads are few in the case of a fatal arson fire in Farmington Hills back in early 1993. A man died and a historic home was destroyed. /2A

Funeral services: Brian McCarthy, Farmington Hills businessman who was found shot to death in Mexico, was buried Monday. The circumstances of his death remain under investigation. /3A

OPINION

Litigious society: The Legislature and the courts can help solve this problem. /14A

Decision nears: With the March 15 vote on school financing less than one month away, we're suggesting how to vote and why. /14A

SPORTS

Swimming event: Farmington High and Harrison competed in a dual meet Tuesday. /1B

Wrestling tourney: Farmington had two champions in the Western Lakes tournament. /1B

SUBURBAN LIFE

Across the air waves: Guest columnist Bill Kalich of Farmington Hills writes about how amateur radio operators help in emergencies. /1C

INDEX

Building/Business 1F	Creative Living . 1D
Classifieds . . . D-G	Crossword . . . 3E
Auto G	Entertainment . . 5B
Index 2E, 2F	Obituaries 5C
Employment . . . F, G	Opinion 14-15A
Real estate . . . E, F	Police, fire calls . 8A
Cable 8B	Personal Scene . . 4G

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Unfazed in Phazer-Land



SHARON LEVIN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Zap-Zap! Mark Dull of Birmingham chaperones the combat at Phazer-Land in Farmington, where patrons zap friend and foe alike. For more photos and a story about Phazer-Land, please see the Suburban Life Section, 1C.

Gulf War vet dies in bizarre accident

BY BILL COUTANT
STAFF WRITER

A Farmington Hills resident and a Gulf War veteran died Sunday after apparently inhaling helium gas in his apartment.

Farmington Hills police said Robert Helminiak, 28, probably died from asphyxiation after inhaling helium from a tank sometime between 4-6 p.m. in his apartment at the Mulwood Apartments, Drake and Nine Mile.

"There was no note or any signs of suicide," said police inspector Tom Godwin. "And there were no signs of

a struggle. At this point we believe it was just a tragic accident."

Helminiak worked in maintenance at the giant apartment complex, Dick Williams, manager at Mulwood, said it was against company policy to comment on the case.

Godwin said a gate security guard told police that Helminiak talked to him and then filled up a garbage bag with helium from a tank in the guard house that is used to fill balloons for open houses and other functions at the complex.

The security guard told police Helminiak then said he was going "to get high," Godwin said.

Helminiak's roommate, Robert MacDonald, 23, came back to his apartment at about 6 p.m. and saw that Helminiak's bedroom door was closed. Since the maintenance man was on call and sometimes worked unusual hours, MacDonald did not disturb him, Godwin said, until he heard Helminiak's beeper go off several times without a response.

He then entered the bedroom and saw Helminiak with the bag over his head. MacDonald, who had lived with Helminiak for about three months but had been a longtime friend, ripped open the bag to find his roommate had stopped breathing.

Farmington Hills EMS and firefighters from Station 1 responded to the call.

"He had a black plastic bag over his head and was obviously dead," said Hills fire Chief Richard Marinucci.

Helminiak was pronounced dead at the scene. A preliminary autopsy report states that Helminiak died from a lack of oxygen, Godwin said. Police are still waiting for a toxicology report.

Marinucci and Godwin said they had not come in contact with any similar cases in the area.

What's TWYKAA all about?

TWYKAA (Talking With Your Kids About Alcohol) is a nationally recognized course designed to teach parents what to say to their teens and pre-teens about alcohol — and how to say it so they will listen.

The information is new and many Farmington-area parents have invested hours in learning the course. More parent volunteers are needed.

Morning and evening sessions on TWYKAA are planned in the near future at East Middle School on Middlebelt Road. They will be 9:30-11:45 a.m. Tuesdays, March 1, 8, 15 and 22; and 7:30-9:45 p.m. on Wednesdays, March 2, and Thursdays, 10, 17 and 24. Cost is \$10 per family for materials. For more information or to register, call Instruct-

FARMINGTON FOCUS

tor Linda Enberg at 476-2303, or Farmington Families In Action at 851-8665 before Friday, Feb. 25.

Art competition planned

High school students residing in the Farmington School District are invited to submit works of art — original in concept and production — for consideration at the Farmington Area Arts Commission's ninth-annual Art Competition.

Works will be judged 5-7 p.m. Wednesday, March 16, at East Middle School on Middlebelt Road between 10 and 11 Mile roads.

Separate prizes will be awarded in the categories of two- and three-dimensional work. First prize is \$250, second is \$150 and honorable mentions are \$50 each.

Entries must be accompanied by a statement of design to tell if the work is an original idea or if reference materials were used. Awards will be presented 3-5 p.m. Sunday, April 24, at the Farmington Community Center.

Items for Farmington Focus may be mailed to the Farmington Observer, 21858 Farmington Road, Farmington 48336, faxed to 477-9722 or dropped off at the newspaper office.