



Surprise, surprise: Flanders Elementary School secretary Lauren Okopyn can't believe it when Farmington schools personnel administrator Larry Lobert presents her with the District Support Person of the Year Award, not to mention a bouquet of flowers.

Okopyn honored as 'One-of-a-kind'

As well-liked by her colleagues as she is dedicated, Lauren Okopyn rode a crest of praise to her selection as winner of the Farmington school district's Support Person of the Year.

With her award, Okopyn, secretary at Flanders Elementary School since 1991 and in her 23rd year with the district, becomes eligible for consideration in Oakland Schools' Betty Campion Distinguished Service Award Program.

Larry Lobert, the executive director for human resources for Farmington Public Schools, presented Okopyn with her award and a bouquet of flowers during a surprise reception Friday, Feb. 16, at Flanders.

Also on hand at the media center were a number of friends,

family members, colleagues and students.

In addition to her work in the front office, Okopyn is a member of the school's crisis team, helps with coordinating social activities and helped form the districtwide Secretariat Technology Advisory Committee.

Okopyn's nomination included 40 letters of support from staff, students and parents.

"She's one-of-a-kind, perfectly suited to her job," wrote Flanders teacher Anne Hommes.

"Her professional competence is unequalled."

Parent Cappi Marshall's assessment of the ultimate team player, Okopyn: "She gives new families the 'red carpet' treatment, complete with a tour of the building and playground."

CABLE CONNECTION

Road Runner high-speed access has arrived

At the beginning of February, we marked the fifth anniversary of the Telecommunications Act which promised consumers more choice and lower prices. Today, five years later we still have only one choice for cable in Farmington, Farmington Hills and Novi. And across the county, cable rates have risen nearly three times as fast as inflation, according to the Consumers Union. This year, we experienced a 5 percent increase on our Time Warner Cable bills.

After years of waiting, Time Warner Cable customers are finally getting access to the Internet via cable. BUT, the process has just begun, so you may have to wait just a little bit longer for it to come to your neighborhood.

What can you do to speed up the process? Get on the "early bird" list. Just log on to www.twcablemi.com and sign up. General Manager Bob McCann

tells us that when the RoadRunner service becomes available in a neighborhood, those on the early bird list will be the first ones hooked up. At the March 6 SWOCC meeting, he announced that this service is now available in eight neighborhoods and they hope to have it everywhere in Farmington, Farmington Hills and Novi by mid-summer.

So, why don't they just flip a switch and turn all of us on now? It's not that easy, explains McCann, because the Internet service is now two-way interactive, whereas you originally had just a one-way link.

At a statewide forum of cable operators in Lansing last week, system managers of cable companies in Michigan reiterated that they must test each node (or neighborhood link) before they turn on the service. They indicated they want to be sure there are no problems BEFORE you receive the service so that

you'll be happy.

Another reason the cable guys want to be sure you are happy before you turn on, (other than the obvious customer satisfaction angle) is that customer calls for computer problems and analog are a lot longer than those for a basic television cable complaint or concern. As a result, the cable giants are hiring more phone reps with more specialized technical knowledge.

Time Warner Cable is also rolling out another service that's now available in more than half the Michigan market here. It's called digital cable. It allows Time Warner to send you more channels and some interactive options (like pushing a button to order a Pay-Per-View movie).

You get more, but you also pay more. And that's the catch. If you want to continue to receive your premium services (like HBO and ShowTime; anything you pay extra for) you'll have to

switch to digital. If you wish to continue receiving only the basic channels (2-65) then you don't need digital.

We have received some calls in the SWOCC (Southwestern Oakland Cable Commission) office from those protesting this move. However, your local authority has no jurisdiction over this arena. This is purely a business decision by the cable company which is allowed by the FCC.

Caren Collins is the executive director of the Southwestern Oakland Cable Commission. The next SWOCC meeting is at 7 p.m. Tuesday, May 1 at Novi City Hall. The next Cable Access Committee meeting is at 7 p.m. Tuesday, March 13 at SWOCC. The next open Q & A session is at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, March 13 at SWOCC. The next Orientation for those interested in Access TV is at 7 p.m. Wednesday, April 4 at SWOCC.

Police arrest nine in months-long crime spree

BY MATT JACIBIAN
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Nine people face criminal charges in what police say was a months-long spree of vandalism, burglary and theft at local golf courses and building sites.

The suspects, many of them recent Stevenson High School graduates, are accused of breaking into construction trailers and stealing tools, playing demolition derby with heavy equipment and trashing golf courses, including two in Livonia.

The theft and damage estimate in the communities affected by the spree totals \$400,000, said Lt. Ben McDermott, supervisor of the Livonia Police Department's detective bureau. Eight communities other than Livonia were hit, including Farmington Hills and Canton and Plymouth townships, he said.

"It was just their idea of fun," McDermott said Monday at a press conference following the 16th District Court arraign-

ments of eight of the nine suspects. "This was the way they got their kicks."

Police say two tips and the arrest of one of the suspects late last year, when stolen tools were found in a vehicle he was driving away from an unfinished subdivision off of Seven Mile, began the investigation and helped detectives Officer Tim Larson and Sgt. Patrick Moug piece the case together.

The Fox Creek and Whispering Willows golf courses, both city owned, were vandalized in August, and Whispering Willows was also hit in June.

Break-ins and vandalism took place also at several construction sites, including Millennium Park on Middlebelt and Victor Corporate Park on Victor Parkway, McDermott said.

Police on Monday displayed photographs of allegedly stolen and vandalized goods, some taken as evidence photos and others, including some of nighttime joy rides in heavy machinery, taken by someone acquainted with the suspects.

In one photo, a piece of equipment is taken through an impromptu car wash - the spray from a fire hydrant it had smashed into, police said.

"They were really brazen," McDermott said.

One of the suspects allegedly stole a front-end loader, during daylight hours, from Commerce Township and parked it behind his brother's house in Canton, McDermott said.

Another joy ride nearly turned tragic when one of the suspects was almost decapitated by a bulldozer, he said.

Some of the stolen equipment and tools have been recovered, but not all, police said.

The suspects face a range of charges, including malicious destruction of property, breaking and entering, receiving and concealing stolen property and vehicle theft.

Charged Monday were George D. Dimovski, 18, Brent M. Hoye, 20, Brett J. Redington, 18, Eric Eickhoff, 20, and Charles T. Kaier, 21, all of Livonia. Also

charged were Erin Praveto, 20, of Farmington Hills, Steven M. Holden, 18, of Commerce Township, and Brian T. Williams, 22, of Garden City.

Judge Kathleen McCann entered not-guilty pleas for the suspects. Approached after the arraignments, several refused to answer reporters' questions.

A ninth suspect, though informed of the pending charges, is vacationing in Cancun and will be charged later, police said.

Not all of the suspects are charged in each Livonia incident. Williams faces a single charge of property damage stemming from the June vandalism at Whispering Willows, while Dimovski, described by police as one of the ringleaders, has 23 charges in 13 different incidents.

Seven of the eight suspects arraigned Monday posted bonds; Dimovski is in a Wayne County juvenile facility on an unrelated matter.

McCann scheduled a preliminary hearing for Tuesday, May 1.

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