

Joni Hubred, editor
2481 477-5450
Fax: 2481 477-9722
jhubred@homecomm.net

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Women share special friendships

"Friendship is a sheltering tree..." — Samuel Taylor Coleridge

In one fell swoop, my cadre of close women friends will be reduced by half this month, and it's gotten me thinking a great deal about the special kind of friendships women share, the kind I think men will never really understand.

Don't start writing e-mail, fellas. Just admit you don't get it. And you don't really want to.

Guys hang out together and talk about Stuff. Sports Stuff. Car Stuff. Work Stuff. Lawn Stuff. Fishin' and Huntin' Stuff.

Women form an emotional bond and share Thoughts and Feelings and Frustrations and the

Thousand Joys and Sorrows that are a part of everyday life.

Guys listen to a problem, then immediately form and relate a logical solution.

Women discuss every imaginable angle of said problem, come up with several possible scenarios for resolution, run each past our four closest friends and realize no one solution will make everyone happy. We then do what our heart tells us is best or nothing at all, depending on how brave we're feeling, and we keep talking about how we feel until we feel better.

Generalization is the columnist's way, so please understand I know it's all a lot more complicated than this, and there are exceptions to every rule. But we still have the rule. And the rule is, women's friendships are vastly different from men's.

No two men would ever have the kind of friendship I share with Alice, my best girlfriend. She's moving to Colorado in a few days, and we still haven't found a way to talk about it.

She came into my life at a time when I really needed a best friend and brought me balloons for my birthday, even though she hardly knew who I was. But that's Alice.

I haven't had a best friend like her since my college days, someone my own age who shares so many interests. We've cried together and laughed until the tears rolled and given each other a safe place to vent emotions that might otherwise have stayed bottled up inside.

You can be yourself with your best girlfriend, because chances are whatever you've been through, she's been through worse.

Alice bought me my very first massage, in the form of a gift certificate to the Center for Therapeutic Massage in Plymouth. It is, without question, the best gift I've ever gotten, even better than the two-foot-tall bride doll who threw a bouquet (Christmas, 1966).

She taught me practical things, like the value of a good deviled egg plate. No good Southern woman keeps a kitchen without at least one, and Alice believed I needed at least the viceroy of Southern gentility.

"Now thanks to her I own a thousand-eye glass deviled egg plate, which is good, because deviled eggs are on the list of things I can cook. And that's a very short list." Okay, just don't give each other massages like that. Well, maybe.

PLEASE SEE HUBRED, C6

Observer Life

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Monique Conrad gets a kiss from son Christian. Christian was diagnosed at age 2 as autistic, and his family is encouraged by his progress during therapy.

Early intervention

Local youngster's battle with autism made easier by early detection

Christian Conrad wasn't really talking much, and he didn't play with his toys the way his mom thought kids did. Rather than push a toy car or truck along the floor, for instance, he'd tip it upside down and spin the wheels endlessly.

He didn't talk, and didn't respond when mom and dad talked to him. At first, Monique worried her son was deaf. Her friends and family all told her the same things. Don't worry, he's just a late talker. Boys develop slower than girls. Maybe you're doing too much for him.

Christian had seizures after receiving his first immunizations, which include the drug thiomersal. At 18 months, Christian cut his finger and had a tetanus shot. That's when his mother first noticed regression in her son's talking.

Finally, Monique and her husband, David, residents of Farmington Hills, decided to seek outside help. They took Christian to a friend of the family, speech pathologist Lorraine Zaksek at Speech, Language & Sensory-Motor, Inc. in Plymouth.

For the first time, the Conrads got a clinical look at their son outside the home environment, and it frightened them.

FINDING OUT

"When we took him there, that was the first time I really saw him in a place other than home," Monique Conrad recalled. "He just wandered around the room and cried, and he couldn't really focus on anything. (Zaksek) felt like there were some other issues going on."

At first, doctors and therapists told the Conrads Christian had some sensory integration problems. He took classes at Speech and Language for almost a year. Then the family went to see Dr. Rick Ng at the Center for Holistic Medicine in Bloomfield Hills.

Ng's diagnosis only confirmed what the family had come to fear: Christian was autistic.

"I had been doing some reading and was just needing it to be confirmed," Monique said. "We had a feeling, but we were sticking with pervasive developmental disorder. But Christian was doing

some of the specific behavioral traits of autism, so we couldn't stick with PDD anymore."

Though the diagnosis didn't surprise them, it still obviously had an effect. But the Conrads decided not to just mope. They took a positive attitude.

"We were very sad, but we turned it right around, made lemonade out of lemons," Monique said. "He's young (28 months old at the time), and even Dr. Ng told us, 'we're not just going to have a little boy who can read and write, but we're going to have a scholar when this is all done.'"

So, while everyone is optimistic about Christian's

chances for recovery — mom says he's already making huge progress — the medical bills have begun piling up. Applied Behavior Analysis, an intensive, structured teaching program where lessons to be taught are broken into their simplest elements, is expensive, and not covered by health insurance in Michigan.

When Michelle Brown heard about, she decided to help, and since then friends have been hurrying to the Conrads' side. Brown, who is Monique Conrad's best friend and Christian's godmother, is helping organize a fund-raiser to help defray the costs of Christian's treatment.

"As a pediatric nurse I know there aren't always cures, but I have faith that with the necessary support and therapies Christian will be able to live a normal life," said Brown, a registered nurse who works at Mott's Children's Hospital in Ann Arbor.

RAISING MONEY

The benefit takes place in Hines Park at Northville Road and Hines Drive in Plymouth from noon to 4 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 10. The benefit picnic takes place at the Wilcox picnic pavilion, west of Northville Road east of Wilcox Road.

And, while raising money to help the Conrads afford the therapy is certainly one aspect of the fund-raiser, Brown, a Westland resident, and Monique Conrad are also turning the benefit into an informational seminar on autism.

"Obviously we're gearing it toward raising money, but also toward raising awareness," said Brown, Monique Conrad's best friend since ninth grade. "It seems like everyone we talk to knows someone who is autistic. It's amazing."

Ng, the doctor who diagnosed Christian's autism, will speak, as will the dietitian who has Christian on a gluten- and casein-free diet that appears to be working wonders for the youngster. Monique Conrad will also man an informational table where she'll have "tons of books to read ... and all kinds of literature."

With her son diagnosed with autism, the benefit



Christian Conrad contemplates his shadow.

PLEASE SEE AUTISM, C7

By Brad Kadrach ■ Staff Writer | Photos by Bill Bresler

Former Hills resident brings percherons to the Festival

BY PAUL B. PACE
STAFF WRITER

Farmington Area Founders Festival goers may want to partake in a special experience as part of the many festivities. Former Farmington Hills resident Chris



Rides in this horse-drawn carriage will be available for a small fee during the Farmington Area Founders Festival.

Bonnell along with her husband Duane run Whispering Meadows Percherons & Carriage Company on a farm north of Grosse Pointe.

For a fee, they will be offering horse-drawn rides in a special carriage on Friday and Saturday, July 18 and 19. They will also be offering wagon rides for a mini-version of the festival's Magical History Tour.

But the star of the rides are the horses themselves — the dark gray Percherons that are known for their good looks, flashy action and mild temperaments, said Chris.

The draft horses stand 6-feet tall at the highest point on their backs and each weighs about 2,000 pounds. The elegant horse originated in France and were imported to North America as early as 1839, Chris pointed out.

Chris, who attended Farmington schools as a child, said she and her husband got into the carriage ride business about five years ago as a way to help pay for the animals' upkeep. So far, the busi-

ness has taken off, she said. "I've had horses the majority of my life," she said. "When I met my husband, he wanted to have a larger horse."

Chris said the couple mostly rent their horses and carriages for weddings, but also participate in other events and functions.

She said festival goers are more than welcome to come and pet the horses and ask questions about them.

The carriage is a dove gray Vis-à-vis, which means "face-to-face" in French, due to the seats facing each other, said Chris.

Either a single horse or a pair can pull the Vis-à-vis. It seats up to four passengers and is usually seen with a formally

dressed driver, she said.

Chris said they will be giving carriage rides to the public on a first-come basis from 4-10 p.m. both days.

"We are departing from the front lawn at City Hall in Downtown Farmington," she said. Rides cost \$35 for the carriage for a 20-minute ride through the residential areas near City Hall.

The couple will also be providing a wagon, which holds 16 passengers and is pulled by a team of matched Percheron horses, for the Magical History Tour, which runs from 1-6 p.m. on Friday and Saturday.

Tickets can be purchased for the History Tour at the festival's History Booth at Grand River near Grove. The wagon will depart from a parking lot directly across Grand River from T.J. Maxx.

Farmington area historian Brian Golden has designed a mini-tour with the horses through several neighborhoods and a more comprehensive tour by shuttle bus.

pace@homecomm.net | (248) 477-5450