

WRITING SAMPLES

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"Educational Organizations Debate How to Handle 'Three Cups of Tea' Scandal,"

The Chronicle of Philanthropy

At Elgin Community College, in Illinois, students were planning to stage a play in early May based on the book *Three Cups of Tea*.

The idea was to raise money for a charity founded by the book's author, Greg Mortenson, to build schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan. But the students quickly reversed course after a scandal broke out over the author and his nonprofit. Instead they produced a play based on *The Kite Runner*, another popular book about Afghanistan.

Across the country, plenty of other fund-raising efforts have also been transformed or stopped altogether by the controversy over the Central Asia Institute, a charity in Bozeman, Mont., founded by Mr. Mortenson.

Dozens of schools and organizations nationwide have raised money for the group in recent years, many of them through the institute's Pennies for Peace fund-raising campaign designed for use in schools and promoted by the National Education Association. Pennies for Peace raised \$2.3-million in the United States last year, the Central Asia Institute says. Since its founding in 1994, more than 9,400 schools, organizations, places of worship, libraries, and businesses have registered Pennies for Peace campaigns in 62 countries.

Those efforts were jolted after the news program "60 Minutes" reported that Mr. Mortenson may have reaped undue personal benefits from donations to the charity and that the institute might not have built as many schools as he said.

Mr. Mortenson has denied that he misused any charity money, but an investigation by the Montana attorney general is under way and two donors are trying to organize a class-action lawsuit against the institute, charging that they were misled about where their money was going.

Withholding the Money

The mistrust and uncertainty produced by the scandal has prompted some schools to withhold the money they have raised for the Central Asia Institute.

"Our kids were a little taken aback when they saw the '60 Minutes' broadcast," says Betsye Sargent, head of the Phoenix School, a private elementary and middle school in Salem, Mass.

Now the fourth- through eighth-graders have begun a project to investigate the charity's work overseas and examine what they should do with the jar of pennies that the school collected, which amounted to about \$160.

"It was too much of a teachable moment not to do anything with it," Ms. Sargent says. The school has scheduled a Skype call with a nonprofit organization in Pakistan, she says, and will soon decide where to send the money.

Ocean Shore School in Pacifica, Calif., which raised \$600 by collecting pennies in little pails, is taking the same approach.

When Laura Shain, the school's principal, was alerted about the controversy, her first thought was: "Oh my God, have we sent the check in yet?"

Fortunately, it had not. "It was a relief. There were a lot of issues for us to talk about. When people donate to a cause, you can't then use the money for something else."

She also tried to use the controversy as a learning experience. Students discussed the accusations and were allowed to decide what should be done with the money they had helped raise.

"I wanted them to use their own critical thinking," Ms. Shain says. "The kids were concerned. They really loved having a role in making a decision."

In the end, the students agreed to give the money to the Pennies for Peace campaign. One reason, she says, is they were reassured after the Central Asia Institute sent an e-mail message to the school promising that all donations collected for the program are restricted to building schools, she says.

The kids also thought that the controversy was a minor issue compared with the "good that was being done" overseas, she adds. "An important need was being met." The school sent the \$600 check last month.

No Refunds Requested

The National Education Association, which has promoted Pennies for Peace by creating a reading curriculum that integrates the book and the fund-raising project, has urged schools "to hold on to the money," says John Wilson, the association's executive director. "Let's see what transpires as the investigation is done."

He adds: "If the money that the kids collected was not spent 100 percent on helping the schools, or helping build the schools, then I think we would have been misled," he says.

Anne Beyersdorfer, who serves as interim executive director of the Central Asia Institute while Mr. Mortenson is on a medical leave, says that none of the schools that have raised money for the organization have asked for the money back.

But, she says, the group is willing to give back contributions to donors who are upset.

She says schools have no reason to worry about the Pennies for Peace campaign. "Every penny goes to educational projects overseas," she says, "every penny."

'Kind of Sad'

Even so, some teachers now regret bringing Pennies for Peace to their schools. Others no longer want

anything to do with Mr. Mortenson or his organization.

"I wouldn't have done it if I had known," says Lolene Gifford, a reading specialist who came up with the idea of raising money for Mr. Mortenson's work from her students at the Hurricane Intermediate School, in Hurricane, Utah.

In March the students presented a check for \$2,400 to Mr. Mortenson when he visited nearby St. George, Utah.

"The kids were just great," says Ms. Gifford. "They opened their piggy banks and their hearts."

When the allegations about the Central Asia Institute came out on television and elsewhere, she says, "everybody was devastated."

So, too, were students at North Oldham High School in Goshen, Ky., which raised \$7,300 last year with the help of students at the local middle and elementary schools through penny wars, homeroom talks, a pep rally, and a pajama movie night.

In addition, a group of Pakistani doctors in the town matched what the students raised, and the high school sent a check to the Central Asia Institute for \$14,700. Everyone was thrilled with the amount, says Steve Rauh, an Oldham English teacher.

Oldham High doesn't have any interest in getting the money back from Mr. Mortenson's charity, he says, but "everybody's kind of sad. We know that it's going to diminish his ability to raise money for the future."

"Entrepreneurs Strive to Turn Buzz Into Loyalty," *The Wall Street Journal*

Companies With Cult Status Push Array of Giveaways and Contests to Build Long-Term Business From First Rush of Success

Some small companies win instant fans, often because their products or services strike a nerve or generate buzz. But turning those followers into loyal customers can be a challenge.

Take Threadless.com, an online T-shirt retailer in Chicago, which launched in 2000 and quickly built a following through a simple approach: allow anyone to design a T-shirt and upload it to the site, where people vote for favorites each week and get to buy them.

Threadless, a unit of skinnyCorp LLC, has signed up a million registered users on its Web site, and now has about 860,000 Twitter followers and more than 70,000 Facebook fans.

It can be hard to sustain such interest, especially amid a recession. So, Threadless is keeping customers engaged by tweeting gift codes and tickets to music festivals and uploading videos on Facebook, where it gives away products.

"Now, we're being deliberate about finding out who our customers are and what products are going to incentivize them to buy," says Jeffrey Kalmikoff, skinnyCorp's chief creative officer.

Other small businesses that have enjoyed sudden popularity are actively reaching out to the national media

to tell their story, putting more salespeople on the ground to give out freebies and getting celebrities to try their products. Done right, these strategies could prolong the initial rush of success.

"As you grow, you have to maintain that quality and specialness," says Stephen Burnett, professor of strategic management and associate dean of executive education at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. "It's an interesting challenge because what happens a lot of time is that when you become too large, you ruin that kind of mystique."

Larger companies with a big loyal following such as In-N-Out Burgers, the Irvine, Calif., fast-food chain, are always careful about nurturing that emotional connection between their customers and their brand, says Stacy Perman, author of "In-N-Out Burger."

The burger chain's cult status among customers wasn't planned, she says, but the company has been careful not to commercialize its image since 1948. It rarely advertises, letting the heavy lifting of promotion be done by its customers, which include celebrities, top chefs and politicians.

That's a good lesson for any small business trying to keep its spotlight bright. For the past six years, Dogswell LLC of Los Angeles has spread word about its natural pet-food products to pet owners by giving away samples at sporting events. In mid-March, Dogswell received a note from a customer who said that her aging dog had arthritic problems, but the dog is now able to walk because of a two-year diet on the company's products, which have added vitamins and supplements.

Marco Giannini, its chief executive, immediately pitched the story to NBC's "Today Show," where in May viewers got to meet Chanel, a dachshund-mix. At 21, she is the world's oldest living dog (120 in human years), as certified by the Guinness World Records. After the show, Dogswell received more media attention from about a dozen local outlets.

Having loyal fans can make it easier for small businesses to do well in tough times but star power can sweeten that hold. Crumbs Bake Shop Inc. got New Yorkers hooked on its \$3.75 cupcakes six years ago when it opened its first store in Manhattan, and it works hard to make a Crumbs cupcake an addiction by building a celebrity following.

Crumbs says it recently appeared as the featured business in a "Celebrity Apprentice" episode and counts Katie Holmes, Leonardo DiCaprio and Uma Thurman as some of its regular celebrity clientele.

Now with 22 stores across the U.S., Crumbs sells 200,000 cupcakes each week in the city alone. Foot traffic is "just as strong as ever," says Jason Bauer, president and chief executive. "The fact that it makes people feel good helps us in this economy."

Getting customers excited by doing more local events can be key to keeping fans. Batter Blaster LLC of Austin, Texas, which started in 2005, created an immediate buzz in 2007 with the launch of its organic pancake and waffle batter in an aerosol can. Customers blogged, created Facebook groups such as "The Church of Batter Blaster," and posted YouTube videos.

Now, the company is dispersing street teams to various cities to hand-out samples at fairs, schools and parks as well as sponsoring pancake breakfasts for charities. In May, Batter Blaster teamed up with a local charity in Atlanta to break Guinness World Records' "Most Pancakes Cooked in 8 Hours," serving 76,382 pancakes.

"We were able to go down there and build a following," says Sean O'Connor, founder and chief executive.

But a little restraint in product promotion can go a long way to hold on to customers and prevent overexposure. Since 2003, Skullcandy Inc., a Park City, Utah, maker of specialty headphones, has targeted a niche market by giving away free samples to the skate and snowboard crowd. Now it's trying to back off from that practice by giving away other freebies, such as spray-painting its skull logo on beach-goers at surf events.

"It's not so much as seeding the market as it was in the early days," says Rick Alden, founder and chief executive. "Now, it's just maintaining a great vibe."

"Start-Ups Share Space to Shave Costs in Slump," *The Wall Street Journal*

'Co-Working' Rental Deals Find Fresh Impetus as Entrepreneurs Enjoy Both Lower Overhead and Networking

For three years, Tobias Roediger and a friend spent their spare time in Mr. Roediger's basement working on a dream: starting a small digital-film and visual-effects company. When Mr. Roediger lost his full-time job as a computer-lab supervisor in June, the friends decided it was time to launch the company -- and move out of the basement.

They were able to afford the move by "co-working," a rental arrangement in which the tenants -- usually small-business owners and professionals -- share space and office equipment, and pay short-term leases, usually month to month. Some co-working spaces feature groups of desks positioned in open rooms; others have individual offices. Many provide certain amenities such as a receptionist, kitchen or game room.

For entrepreneurs, it's a cheaper and more flexible alternative to renting or buying space of their own. The 32-year-old Mr. Roediger and his partner contracted with Qwirk Columbus Corp., a recently opened co-working space in downtown Columbus, Ohio, to pay \$500 a month for two desks in an office, computers with Wi-Fi, use of conference rooms, a shared printer/copy/fax machine, espresso maker and more. Mr. Roediger estimates he's saving \$300 to \$400 per month on utility bills and not having to rent space he doesn't need.

It's also a much more social setting than Mr. Roediger's basement. "The thing that really drew me was the ability to work with a lot of other creative people," says Mr. Roediger, who adds that the shared space is good for networking, too: He says he's been talking to an advertising company on the premises about a possible deal.

Sharing office space with other businesses isn't new, but the tanking economy has prompted many small-business owners to consider it as they look for any practical way to lower overhead costs.

Some providers of co-working space are also offering reduced rates and even giving entrepreneurs opportunities to barter their services in return for paying no rent at all.

In February, Office Nomads LLC of Seattle started giving a "Pink Slip Special" to customers who were recently laid off, offering a free one-month membership worth \$375. Overall, a dozen people took advantage of the offer, which ended last month, says Susan Evans, co-owner of Office Nomads.

Winnie Fung, a manager of the Change You Want to See Gallery, a nonprofit co-working space in Brooklyn,

N.Y., says she sees a lot more bartering than she did a few years ago. At least three or four people from the 10 in her co-working space have partially or fully bartered their services for desk space, she says.

Ms. Fung says a few months ago she made a deal with one of her members, a tech start-up owner, to look after the building's computers and Internet service in return for free space.

Glenn Okun, clinical professor of management and entrepreneurship at New York University's Stern School of Business, says that the co-working environment presents an opportunity to tap into the collective expertise of the group and create business deals with other business owners, who are just a cubicle away.

Other experts, though, say small-business owners should be wary about the loss of privacy in such a workplace.

Sara Beckman, a senior lecturer who has taught a course on workplace design issues at the Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley, suggests that entrepreneurs should consider these drawbacks: "Am I sharing the space with people who are direct competitors? How do I draw boundaries around the information I can and cannot share with people who don't work in my organization?"

Michael Patino of Fairfax, Va., who was laid off in October from an executive-search firm, started his own firm, Patino Associates LLC, and says he saw co-working as a better alternative to working from home. It's a more professional place for clients to visit, and a businesslike environment in which to make calls and conduct interviews.

But he didn't want a work space that was airy and open. "I needed four quiet walls," he says, to evoke the image of confidentiality, especially when he needed to interview candidates for executive positions.

For six months he worked at home, while also taking care of two kids. But "in a field where you spend most of your time on the phone, [home] is not the best dynamic in the long term," says Mr. Patino.

He started looking for a suitable co-working space for his company and found one in McLean, Va., owned by Preferred Offices LLC, which has nine locations in the Washington area. Mr. Patino signed a 12-month lease in June. He says he spends \$2,000 a month, which includes the lease, utility, telephone and Internet charges, and a receptionist, who works for all the businesses on the floor.

"It's wonderful so far," he says. "There's an extra layer of credibility when there's someone picking up the phone for you."

"Planting Fund-Raising Seeds," *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*

Just a stone's throw away from the biggest oak tree at Washington's National Arboretum, a group of cyclists gathered this fall around a four-foot sapling to perform a ritual to make the young tree grow.

The riders rubbed their hands together, performed several chants, then threw their hands toward the ground where the newly planted hybrid maple sat.

"The roots, the roots, the roots are on fire," they sang before breaking up into laughter.

Such lighthearted moments during tree dedications were common on a 500-mile fund-raising trip 65 cyclists took this fall through some of the most scenic routes in the mid-Atlantic region.

The Stihl Tour des Trees, as the cycling event is known, has raised more than \$5-million in the past two decades for the Tree Research and Education Endowment Fund, in Naperville, Ill. That money accounts for almost three-quarters of the budget of the charity, which is dedicated to financing studies on the best ways to care for trees in cities and then spreading the word about the findings.

Tree lovers from across the United States and Canada volunteer for the annual trip, which since 2001 has been sponsored by Stihl, the German outdoor power-equipment maker of hedge trimmers and chainsaws. Participants must raise or provide at least \$3,500 in donations to the charity to join the ride; corporate sponsors cover the costs of the ride itself.

Tour des Trees was first conceived in 1991 at the International Society of Arboriculture conference, which ran a charity that eventually merged with another group to become the TREE fund.

The next year, 13 riders set off from Seattle on a ride that ended 800 miles later in Oakland, Calif. The inaugural ride raised \$89,000.

As the event has matured, it has grown into a more ambitious and more lucrative trek. The annual trips have been conducted in other regions of the country as well as in Canada and in Britain. At the event that wrapped up last month, the cyclists and sponsors raised more than \$460,000.

"We've exceeded last year's total goal," says Janet Bornancin, executive director of the TREE fund.

"We're so excited about the efforts of the riders. As we all know at this time, it's very difficult to raise funds."

Why Trees Are Important

Many of the participants in the bike tour are far more interested in promoting trees than shaking money from them.

"I do this because I love trees and it's very, very important to get the word out why trees are important not just to me but to everybody," says Thomas Ordway, a 52-year-old forester from Indianapolis who has ridden on the tour in each of the past eight years.

Meeting the requirement to raise at least \$3,500 to participate is the tough part, he says.

"For me, personally, fund raising is probably the biggest challenge," he says. "Especially in today's economy, some people may be a little bit more hesitant to give. But there's always a lot of people out there in the [tree-care] industry that are willing to help."

So far, he's raised about \$3,200, with more coming in, he says.

While most riders raise money from relatives and friends, others do tree work and landscaping to garner donations or write personal checks.

Not Easy Raising Money

Because it is so challenging to raise money in this economy, the group has been taking steps to diversify its fund raising.

"As we all know, we can't rely on events exclusively to support our organization," says Ms. Bornancin.

The organization has long held an annual auction fund-raising event, but now it is also expanding company and regional sponsorships and seeking donations by text message.

The TREE Fund has reached out beyond the tree-culture industry to obtain other corporate sponsors, such as cyclist suppliers, a spark-plug maker, and the Ford Motor Company. Additionally, “we’ve increased the dollar amounts that we have received from some of our sponsors,” she says. Sponsors for the tour increased by 13 percent in 2011 from the previous year, with cash commitments garnering 32 percent more than last year.

Teaching Children

This year’s tour kicked off in early October at the Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center in Virginia Beach, Va. They were joined there by riders who wanted to participate for one day in a 30-mile tour called “Ride for Research” around the Virginia Beach area.

Then the riders took off, making stops at colonial Williamsburg and Monticello, Thomas Jefferson’s estate.

The visit at Monticello’s Kemper Park marked a special moment for some of those who had planted an American beech when the tour rode by in 2000. They took pictures in front of it and admired how tall it had grown.

Along the way, these cyclists planted about 60 trees in Virginia and Washington. And as part of the tour’s outreach and education programs, they stopped by elementary schools to teach young kids about trees and the science of growing them.

“We’re able to impact the next generation,” Mr. Ordway says. “It’s very important to educate them.”

'Deep Passion' for Trees

The final stop on this year’s trip was a tour of Washington: the National Mall, where the riders stopped and snapped pictures; the National Arboretum, where they planted a hybrid of the paperbark maple and sycamore maple; and American University, where the tour finished with a concert featuring Chuck Leavell, the Rolling Stones keyboardist. He’s also an award-winning tree farmer.

“This is my third Tour des Trees,” Mr. Leavell said in an interview. Raising money to conduct research on ways to keep trees healthy, he said, has “become a deep passion for me, just as music is.”

Among the 65 cyclists, about 20 riders were new to the tour, like Michael McCoy, a Fort Lauderdale, Fla., consultant who specializes in providing advice on tree care. A colleague told him about the ride at a conference. “He said I won’t be sorry, and I’m not,” Mr. McCoy says, smiling under the midday sun at the National Arboretum after he helped bless the tree.

“My profession deals a lot with trees,” says Mr. McCoy, 36. The money raised from the tour has benefited tree researchers in Florida, with products and research that have aided Mr. McCoy professionally, he says. “So this is really an opportunity for me to give back.”

"A Tour of America's Thrift Stores Puts the Spotlight on Giving."

The Chronicle of Philanthropy

MILWAUKEE — Jenna Isaacson was lost. She was about an hour from her destination, a Goodwill thrift store in a Milwaukee suburb. Directions from her iPhone had led her to Waukesha, instead of Wauwatosa.

With a long sigh, she turned her 19-foot camper around and found her way to the thrift store, where her mood quickly brightened when she came across a black T-shirt with words in green: "Sponsored by ... Your Mom." She bought it for \$2.99.

The 32-year-old former newspaper photographer is on a cross-country road trip this summer to visit thrift stores in 32 states. Her goal? "To show people that thrift stores are not just places you go and donate stuff," she says. "You're saving money, you're helping people, you're helping your community, but you're also saving things from your landfill."

Footing the Bill

To pay for her 9,000-mile seven-week trip, Ms. Isaacson received \$6,400 from Goodwill and raised another \$7,600 on a Web site that helps new charitable efforts get off the ground. Even though she's visiting stores run by a variety of charities, Goodwill hopes that the project will show the rich array of people who buy donated goods and call attention to the money its thrift shops bring in for job-training programs.

Ms. Isaacson says she wants to turn her journey into a book, a short documentary, or a traveling exhibit. Along the way, she's blogging about it on her Web site called All Thrifty States.

The idea for the project came to Ms. Isaacson at 3 o'clock one sleepless night last year when she was down on her luck. After she was laid off from her newspaper job in Sarasota, Fla., she moved to be with her husband in Washington, D.C. But freelance photography gigs there were scarce.

Ms. Isaacson thought hard about her passions in life—thrift, travel, and photography—and combining those helped the project take shape in her mind. A friend suggested she use Kickstarter, a fund-raising site that enabled Ms. Isaacson to announce her project and seek contributions online.

A Search for Sponsors

By April, 90 days after she announced her idea, she had raised \$7,600 from 193 supporters, friends, and strangers. Before going on the road, Ms. Isaacson tried everything she could to attract sponsors, even brandishing her bright yellow All Thrifty States sign outside the "Today" show in New York.

She also marched down to the offices of O, Oprah Winfrey's magazine, to deliver information about her project.

She even contacted Snapple, the company that makes her favorite drink, but Goodwill was the only one to bite after Ms. Isaacson pitched her idea. After a series of conference calls, Ms. Isaacson and the charity drew up a contract. Goodwill said it would pay for her recreational vehicle's rental fee as long as she agreed to put its logo on the RV and visit and blog about at least a dozen Goodwill thrift stores.

Goodwill is also helping to promote the project through social networks and traditional news-media outlets.

"We felt a lot of synergy with her project," says Lauren Lawson-Zilai, a Goodwill spokeswoman. "Jenna wanted to promote the fact that there are limited resources, and with the financial crisis, people are feeling that. Jenna's served as a walking advertisement."

The bad economy has been good to Goodwill, whose stores have seen foot traffic rise. The organization opened 83 stores in the first six months of this year, and in May total sales were 10.5 percent higher than a year earlier.

Frugal Childhood

Ms. Isaacson is one of the millions of Americans who have long shopped at thrift stores. She turned to them when she needed an outfit for a job interview, when she gained or lost weight, or when she needed furniture.

Life on the road is nothing new for her. Growing up in Kansas City, Mo., she and her family often took trips across the country, not stopping at hotels but sleeping in the car. It was a no-frills way to see America, she says.

In addition, she has what she calls “trucker blood.” Her 97-year-old grandfather, whom she credits for her thirst for thrift, was once a long-haul trucker. Using his senior-citizen discount, he often took her to thrift shops when she was young.

While thrift stores have become a valued resource for hard-pressed families in the economic downturn, Ms. Isaacson says she can’t help but think about how her grandfather’s generation would be aghast at everything today’s generation throws out.

“You didn’t just throw something out because you didn’t like it anymore,” she says. “You gave it away or you used it. We have become this throwaway culture.”

Friends as Hosts

The All Thrifty States project has had its ups and downs, Ms. Isaacson says.

She’s constantly worried she won’t have enough money to finish the trip. This summer’s high gas prices have eaten up much of what she raised online. She sometimes asks readers of her blog to contribute, but she is reluctant to overwhelm them with constant appeals. (She’s selling some of the items she bought, though: The “Sponsored by ... Your Mom” shirt, for instance, is now on eBay for \$40—or best offer). Before the trip ends, she will probably need an additional \$1,000 to \$2,000 to pay for RV parking fees and gas, she says.

On the road, she’s battled the wind-tunnel effects that wind farms in the Northwest created, driving for miles with white-knuckled restraint, steering far to the left in order to go straight. And during a stormy night at an Iowa RV park, she huddled in the camper as strong winds, thunder, lightning, and pelting tree limbs buffeted her vehicle.

Physically, the demands of driving 250 miles a day have meant a lack of exercise. And avoiding fast food is hard since she doesn’t want to venture too far from the Interstate.

Ms. Isaacson feels safe—though she did buy some pepper spray at a farmer’s market in Cheyenne, Wyo. But she says she can get lonely sometimes, even though she’s relied on friends, former classmates, and ex-co-workers for a place to stay, park her RV, and do laundry. She describes them as “driveway hosts” and “hot-shower providers.”

A Learning Experience

On many occasions, she’s left a town smiling because of her thrift-store finds and because of what she’s learned from her stops.

Utahns, she says, make lots of handmade garments, and Boise, Idaho, has the best handcrafted sweaters. “It shows that they invest time and money to create something useful,” she says.

In Centralia, Wash., the Visiting Nurses Thrift Shop, which helps support hospice nurses, carefully puts

stained clothes through a washer and dryer in the back room. In Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, the Women's Center Thrift Store helps victims of domestic violence, providing money for women's shelters and crisis counseling.

Thrift stores, Ms. Isaacson says, retain the milieu of small-town America, good customer service, and courtesies often missing from big-box stores. There's a certain attitude that makes shoppers of all types feel welcome, she says.

"I never hear people talk and joke and laugh like that when I'm shopping anywhere else," Ms. Isaacson says. "Thrift stores just sort of seem like we're all in it together. They're very inviting places."

Capturing Stories

What's given her even more pleasure has been capturing the stories of people whose eccentricities she loves.

Why do they go thrifting? "A lot of people say it's just the thrill of the hunt," Ms. Isaacson says. "They love not knowing what they're going to find."

In Barstow, Calif., she met Tom, a former Marine, who scours thrift stores for Korean War officers' silverware. In Madison, Wisc., she met Mary, who had never thrifted until she lost her job but is now a "new regular."

And in Seattle, Beautiful Existence (yes, that's her real name) found out about Ms. Isaacson's journey on Facebook and gave her a tour of the city and a heads up on great thrift shops all over the state.

Along with her sons, Epic and Edge (their real names), Ms. Existence took her to Seattle's flagship Goodwill store, the highest-grossing Goodwill store in the country, with \$8-million in sales last year.

In Fort Collins, Colo., Ms. Isaacson met with Tony, who runs Eco-Thrift and was putting a price sticker on a cattle-branding iron when she showed up. At his side was Blaze, an Australian shepherd mix donated by a customer who didn't want the dog anymore.

Perhaps the most emotional visit was in Salt Lake City, where she did a video interview with K.C. Owens, manager of a Methodist-run charity shop, about a teenage girl being treated at a nearby hospital.

The girl came into the store during the holidays and took home a Christmas blanket that Ms. Owens gave her. Ms. Owens thought nothing of it until she was told a year later that the girl had died and asked to be buried with the blanket.

"This is exactly the kind of human connection our donated goods can make a difference with," Ms. Isaacson wrote in her blog. "To us, it's just stuff, but to so many people it's so much more than that."

Thrifty Anniversary

Ms. Isaacson's husband Ed joined her in Las Vegas and left 17 days later in Denver. In St. George, Utah, they celebrated their fourth anniversary by finding gifts for each other at a thrift shop.

Ms. Isaacson bought her husband a leather belt with his name on it and a Western shirt, and he gave her a few tops and a Route 66 wall sign that hangs in her RV.

Her two-day stop in Milwaukee was just past the halfway point of her trip.

She got a good night's sleep at her sister-in-law's house while her four-year-old nephew Liam played in the

RV. She even managed to visit her grandfather, Jack, who showed off his latest thrift find, a red sweater for \$1.49.

She left for Chicago later that night. Only 4,000 miles left of roads for getting lost and found.

"A Tribute Band Singer Takes a Net Shortcut In Journey to Stardom,"

The Wall Street Journal

Check any karaoke bar's list of offerings and you'll find a healthy selection of songs by Journey -- '80s-radio stalwarts such as "Don't Stop Believin'," "Faithfully" and "Open Arms" might have been written with future generations of karaoke belters in mind.

So maybe it was destiny that Journey, which has sold more than 43 million records in the U.S. alone, didn't find its new lead singer through a rigorous audition process. Instead, the band found him via YouTube.

Guitarist Neal Schon saw clips of Arnel Pineda, a 40-year-old Filipino who leads a Journey tribute band called the Zoo, in which Mr. Pineda nailed the band's signature songs, inviting comparisons to former lead singer Steve Perry's inimitable vocals.

"I've been digging the idea behind YouTube," writes Mr. Schon in an email. "There's so much live footage, which does not lie."

A live clip, Mr. Schon says, gives "a real sense of the artist's talent as opposed to a demo that might have been doctored up. … And in Arnel's case, he sounds amazing."

Journey, which began in San Francisco in 1973, was thrust back into the spotlight last summer, when "Don't Stop Believin'" closed the finale of "The Sopranos." But in recent years Journey has whirled through a revolving door of lead singers: Mr. Pineda takes over for Jeff Scott Soto, who left in 2007. And if you're keeping score, Mr. Pineda will be Journey's sixth singer. Mr. Soto took over from Steve Augeri, who left for medical reasons after replacing Mr. Perry in 2006. Mr. Perry took the vocal reins in 1977 from Robert Fleischman, who'd shared lead vocals with Gregg Rolie, Journey's keyboardist and original lead singer.

One afternoon last August, Mr. Schon was taking a break from writing music when he wondered if the Web might help with Journey's search for a new singer. That led him to YouTube, and to Mr. Pineda.

"When I first saw Arnel's videos on YouTube, I thought he sounded too good to be true," Mr. Schon says, adding that "I even had to walk away from the computer for a few hours, then go back to hear him again."

But Mr. Pineda ignored Mr. Schon's email via YouTube -- he thought it was a hoax. He was eventually persuaded by the friend who'd posted the YouTube videos to connect with the guitarist.

Journey decided to fly Mr. Pineda in to audition; he performed for three days in three- to four-hour rehearsals with the band, and won them over. "He just kept getting stronger each day," Mr. Schon says.

"It was hard to imagine that after dreaming about this for over 20 years, I was actually having the chance to sing and play with the band I've loved and respected since I was a child," Mr. Pineda says.

As for Mr. Schon, he's bullish about YouTube as talent sieve.

"I think the days are over of major record companies flying around A&R guys to major cities to listen and find new talent," he says. "Wouldn't you think it's a plus to find what you want for your band, as opposed to 'someone else's opinion' of who would sound and be right for you?"

Journey and its new frontman are working on an album to be released later this year. Still, it remains to be seen whether Mr. Pineda will prove a long-term success, or just another name on the band's lengthy roster of singers. Fan-to-rock-star stories don't always last: In 1996, British heavy metallers Judas Priest hired Ohio-born Tom "Ripper" Owens, a veteran of the tribute band British Steel. Mr. Owens' story inspired the 2001 movie "Rock Star," starring Mark Wahlberg, but his spot has been reclaimed by original singer Rob Halford. And another Journey tributeer has a rather different story -- one of a YouTube fairy tale that ended in rags.

As with Judas Priest, Journey will have to wait and see whether their new lead singer is embraced by its die-hard fans. But whether or not Mr. Pineda succeeds, serious karaoke singers should work on their chops: In the YouTube era, the distance between a band and its dedicated fans can be bridged by a mere mouse click. Love a band with a vacancy and think you've got the pipes or the guitar licks? As Mr. Pineda's journey shows, don't stop believin'.

"Blind Pedestrians Say Quiet Hybrids Pose Safety Threat," *The Wall Street Journal*

For blind people, crossing the street is becoming even more of a challenge.

Michael Osborn, a blind marketing consultant from Laguna Beach, Calif., and his guide dog, Hastings, were in the middle of an intersection one morning last April when the yellow Lab stopped short. Mr. Osborn took the cue and halted -- just in time to feel the breeze from a car passing right in front of them.

"Half an inch and it would have hit us ... it wasn't making any noise," says Mr. Osborn, 50, who has been blind for 12 years. Witnesses say the car was a Toyota Prius, a hybrid vehicle.

Hybrids deliver better mileage and less pollution than traditional cars by switching between a gasoline engine and an electric motor. But when operating on the electric battery, especially when idling at a stop or running at low speeds, the engine in a hybrid is almost silent. A hybrid vehicle is generally quieter than a vacuum cleaner.

"I'm an environmentalist, and I'm all for quiet cars," says Mr. Osborn. "But it poses a particular problem for somebody who has no vision."

Blind pedestrians using a guide dog or cane are largely dependent on the sounds of traffic to cross streets safely. For a blind person, "it's very important to be able to gather auditory and tactile cues from the environment," says Sumara Shakeel, of Toms River, N.J., who is a rehabilitation teacher for the New Jersey Commission for the Blind.

Hybrid cars became commercially available to mainstream consumers in 2000 and are gaining in popularity. Nationwide, registrations for new hybrids more than doubled to 199,148 in 2005 from 83,153 in 2004, according to R.L. Polk & Co., an automotive research firm. At least a dozen states and several cities are encouraging drivers to buy fuel-efficient hybrids by offering tax breaks and other incentives, and the vehicles are being added to municipal fleets. Still, the total 392,000 hybrids on the road reflect just over 1% of all new vehicle registrations in the U.S.

The National Federation of the Blind, an advocacy group, says all hybrid vehicles should emit a sound while turned on and is calling on the auto industry to make changes. The group says the sound should be loud enough to be heard over the din of other ambient noise.

Members of the NFB's Committee on Automobile and Pedestrian Safety have discussed sound cues that hybrids could use to alert pedestrians, including a device built into the axle that could make a sound as the wheels rotate, or a sensor that blind travelers could carry that would indicate when a hybrid is in the vicinity. The committee has yet to have a formal meeting with auto industry representatives.

Quiet cars pose a problem for not only those with limited vision, says the NFB's Debbie Stein, but also for sighted pedestrians, cyclists and the elderly who rely on sound to gauge the position and speed of cars.

While there are no national data on pedestrian injuries or deaths related to low-noise cars, the NFB argues that a link will be more discernible as quiet vehicles become more common. Police reports often don't record what kind of automobile caused a pedestrian-vehicle collision, and the insurance industry says it doesn't have those figures. In 2005, 4,881 pedestrians were killed nationwide, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, an increase of about 2% since 2000.

"We want to get ahead of this and not have to wait until five blind people end up seriously hurt or dead," says Gary Wunder, who is on the NFB's Committee on Automobile and Pedestrian Safety.

Some businesses are taking action. Several guide dog schools are planning to use hybrid vehicles when training animals to acclimate them. Guide Dogs for the Blind Inc., with campuses in Oregon and California, uses electric golf carts to simulate the quiet cars.

So far, advocacy groups' pleas for louder hybrids have failed to generate much noise in automotive circles. A spokesman for the Alliance of Automotive Manufacturers, an industry group, says he wasn't aware of the issue. "We're interested in hearing about the concerns of the blind community, and we'll work with them to ensure that they're addressed," says alliance spokesman Charles Territo.

Sev MacPete, founder of the Toyota Prius Club of San Diego, dismisses the idea that hybrids pose a safety threat. He says blind pedestrians are easy to spot because they usually have a special white cane with red tip. "And if you could say anything about hybrid drivers, they are more aware of their surroundings than other drivers," Mr. MacPete says.

Toyota spokesman Bill Kwong says he wasn't aware of the issue and believes that the responsibility lies with drivers and pedestrians to watch out for each other. Mr. Kwong adds, "One of the benefits of the vehicles is that they don't contribute to traffic noise."

"Entrepreneurs Take to 'Big Easy'." *The Wall Street Journal*

Tax Breaks Help Lure Firms to New Orleans Four Years After Katrina

Four years after Hurricane Katrina's devastation, New Orleans is experiencing a rebirth of entrepreneurship.

Small-business owners who left are now coming back, driven by a sense of mission to help the struggling city and to take advantage of generous tax breaks. Young professionals have moved to the Big Easy to help with its recovery, enjoy its cultural offerings and start businesses. Surviving companies entered niche

business lines as competitors folded or left.

Kenneth Purcell, chief executive of iSeatz.com, uprooted the travel-and-entertainment booking company to New York after Katrina. He returned the company's headquarters to New Orleans in January 2008.

"We moved back to New Orleans so that we can be involved with the redevelopment of one of America's greatest cities," says Mr. Purcell. He was also lured by tax incentives, such as the 6% wage rebate on payroll when he imported about a dozen out-of-state employees. He says the tax breaks have saved the company about \$200,000 over the past three years.

Last year, revenue topped \$28 million for iSeatz.com. This year, because of new product initiatives and expansion overseas, Mr. Purcell projects \$50 million to \$60 million in revenue.

Since Katrina, an influx of talent and new businesses has transformed the city's business community. In the past, New Orleans relied on old-world industries such as oil, hospitality and tourism. But now, the city is seeking to diversify its economy, even embracing technology start-ups. For-profit entrepreneurial centers have popped up to support and connect business owners.

"This place, which was rooted in tradition, has now become a place of innovation," says Michael Hecht, president and chief executive of Greater New Orleans Inc., a nonprofit economic-development agency.

As the Aug. 29 anniversary of Katrina looms, the city's transformation as a burgeoning hotbed of entrepreneurs isn't so hard to imagine. New Orleans is the fastest-growing city in the country, with population up 8.2% last year from 2007, according to the U.S. Census. Visits rose to 7.6 million in 2008 from 7.1 million the previous year, as tourism spending increased to \$5.1 billion from \$4.8 billion. Plus, the New Orleans metro area has recovered about 86% of its pre-Katrina employment. Last year, the region tallied 526,600 jobs, up from 426,000 immediately post-Katrina but down from 610,000 before the storm.

In October 2006, McKenzie Coco, 33 years old, and her husband Kirk, 41, moved to the city from San Diego and saw opportunities immediately. They each started a business -- an advertising agency for her and a microbrewery for him called Nola Brewing Co.

Ms. Coco, owner of FSC Interactive LLC, saw an untapped niche in online marketing as the city's small businesses increasingly depended on online sales for growth. Her company became profitable three months after it opened in May 2007 and now has 34 clients.

"New Orleans is truly a wonderful place to do business right now," Ms. Coco says.

At least \$20 billion of construction projects are under way, according to Mayor C. Ray Nagin in a "State of the City" address in May.

To be sure, the city is still navigating its recovery, and is plagued by high crime statistics. New Orleans had the worst crime rate in the country last year, according to an annual report by CQ Press. The city was also the nation's murder capital in 2008, with 64 murders per 100,000 residents, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

"New Orleans is not an easy town to live in," says Mr. Purcell of iSeatz.com. "The infrastructure is still getting back together. It definitely is challenging."

And native small businesses are struggling to reinvent themselves. Carmen Sunda, director of the Louisiana

Small Business Development Center, says existing businesses have been reluctant to redo their business model and take advantage of new market opportunities, such as establishing a presence online.

But for others, the Big Easy is ripe with opportunities. Kyle Berner, 28, started a flip-flop sandal retail company, Feelgoodz LLC, in April. This year, Feelgoodz is set to reach \$80,000 in revenue as the company expands.

"It's a very special time in New Orleans," says Mr. Berner, a native New Orleanian. "There's just this entrepreneurial feeling that's happening right now in the city."

"Family Company Finds Gold in Olympic Torch," *The Wall Street Journal*

Ignition Inc. Competes With Cold, Darkness and Other Hassles to Create Party-Like Atmosphere for Relay

If everything goes according to plan, blustery winds and frigid temperatures won't snuff out a Grecian flame that began traveling across Canada last week in the 106-day kick-off event for the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympic Games.

The responsibility for the relay's success falls on Ignition Inc., a small family-owned business that has found success by making itself an expert in an unusual niche: The Atlanta company has organized six Olympic torch relays since 1998, often battling elements that make the event a challenge befitting the Games themselves.

For last year's Beijing Olympics, Ignition had to manage China's bumpy roads and poor infrastructure. In Turin, Italy, in 2006, the company resorted to scooters to travel steep and narrow roads. And for Athens's international torch relay in 2004, the company shepherded torch bearers through 27 countries in 35 days, dealing with the logistical hassle of securing visas, clearing security and dealing with a multitude of languages nearly every step of the way.

"They have found a nice little niche," says Ken Bernhardt, a marketing professor at Robinson College of Business of Georgia State University, who says the company's strength lies in its ability to pull a part-time work force. "Ignition is the poster child of how to do it well."

The marketing company, which has 53 employees and \$23 million in annual revenue, manages the often-chaotic event for Coca-Cola Co., a main sponsor of the Olympic Torch Relay. In 1996, the International Olympic Committee opened up the traditional touring of the Olympic flame as a commercial property that could be sponsored; since then, Coca-Cola has sponsored the event for every Olympics except the 2000 Games in Sydney.

Ignition's co-founder, Susan McWhorter Driscoll, was a marketing director at Coca-Cola and directed its first sponsorship of a torch relay for Atlanta's 1996 Games. A year later, she and husband Mark Driscoll founded Ignition to host future sporting events, eventually turning over day-to-day operations in 2007 to their nephew, Mike Hersom, who is Ignition's president, and his wife, Cindy-Ann Hersom, who serves as Ignition's chief marketing officer.

Coca-Cola says it works with Ignition because of the company's "specialty expertise." The Olympics torch relay is one of Ignition's largest businesses, but the company also provides event-based marketing for a few

corporate clients like BlackBerry maker Research In Motion Ltd.

Ignition's main task is to engineer a party-like atmosphere throughout the communities that the torch travels. In past Olympics, that's been difficult because of language and cultural barriers, or because of rules imposed by the host country. In China, for example, Ignition wasn't permitted to hand out Coca-Cola products, shake people's hands or distribute flags—its usual methods of firing up crowds. Instead, Ignition's staff hired locals to engage Chinese fans by singing, cheering and dancing while riding on the relay's caravan of vehicles.

Ignition's biggest challenge in the Canadian relay is expected to be the weather—snow, blizzards and 50 mile-per-hour winds are anticipated—and the sheer distance of the event, which will require 40% of the relay to be run at night. By day, Ignition, which hires hundreds of local workers along the way, must rally crowds and host two community celebrations daily.

And that will be tough, says Mr. Hersom. "This will be bloody cold," he says. "It's incredibly difficult to keep these people motivated."

The weather will also make it difficult to keep the torch lit. The entourage will carry several backup flames in a truck that follows the runner—all of which were lit from the mother flame in Olympia, Greece.

The Vancouver Olympics is the longest torch relay that Ignition has managed in a single country. To counteract torch-relay fatigue this year, Amanda Daniels, Ignition's vice president of global projects, has set up a team whose main job is to motivate employees, from evening massages and movie nights to helping with laundry and giving a huge Christmas celebration. "It's quite a logistical challenge for sure," Ms. Daniels says.

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