

Web Site Shows How To Build Your Vocabulary – and Feed the World

Charity Donates Rice to the UN Every Time You Choose the Correct Definition of a Word

By Caitlin Carpenter
Correspondent of The
Christian Science Monitor

It began as a way for John Breen to help his son prepare for the SAT. Today, some 500,000 people daily visit the vocabulary-quizz Web site the Indiana-based computer programmer set up. And while word-game fun is part of the draw, players get an extra jolt of "feel good" joy: Every time they get an answer right, they help combat world hunger.

Freerice.com, which debuted in October, donates 20 grains of rice to the United Nations World

Food Program every time a player selects the correct definition for a particular word. Paid for with advertising income, four billion grains have been won for the program so far. That's 160 metric tons, or enough to feed 200,000 people for one day.

"It's really caught fire," says Brenda Barton, a program spokeswoman. "More people visit our site from the link on Freerice.com than any other referral." It's the first site like this she's ever seen, she says. Given its success, however, no doubt copycats will crop up soon.

Two Housing Projects Get Approval on Mackinac Island

By Karen Gould

A new home on Cadotte Avenue and an apartment on Mission Street received variances from the Mackinac Island Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) Wednesday, December 5. The proposed home lacked the needed rear setback and the apartment lot did not meet size requirements.

The ZBA held public hearings on both variances.

Debra and Sandra Orr plan to build a two-story home on a vacant lot just south of Little Stone Church on Cadotte Avenue. The structure will be built between the church and a home owned by Debra Orr. The area is zoned high density, R3.

The proposed home will be built 12 feet from the rear lot line, but city ordinance requires it must be 25 feet from the line. The land behind the lot is owned by the Mackinac Island State Park Commission and

the Orrs have had a lease from the commission to use the land for more than 30 years, explained Debra Orr, who attended the meeting.

Letters sent to the ZBA from nearby property owners supported the construction. Of the 48 nearby property owners within 300 feet of the proposed construction, letters were received from Tom Largo and Buzz Waggoner representing Little Stone Church, R. D. Musser of Grand Hotel, Robert Chambers, Jim Chambers, and Victor Callewaert.

Betty BeDour plans to convert an existing unused area of a home she owns in the Mission into a third apartment without changing the footprint of the structure. The site is zoned high density residential, but the lot size will not accommodate three apartments under the ordinance.

The house was formerly owned
**Please turn to page 9*

Cartoons To Be Lilac Festival Theme

"Saturday Morning Cartoons" is the theme for the 2008 Mackinac Island Lilac Festival, from June 6 through June 15. Floats and shop window displays will feature American animated television programming at this year's festival.

Organizations and businesses entering floats in the Grand Parade or shopkeepers planning window displays are asked to consider television shows that aired on Saturday mornings from the 1960s to the 1990s, including Bugs Bunny and Road Runner, Casper the Friendly Ghost, Dudley Do

Right, Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids, Flintstones, Scooby Doo, Mighty Mouse, and Rocky and Bullwinkle.

To eliminate duplicate floats, the Mackinac Island Tourism Bureau is asking entrants to register with the bureau their cartoon choice and float theme. Choices for themes, reported the Tourism Bureau, are available on a first-come basis. To reserve a theme, e-mail Mary McGuire Slevin at director@mackinacisland.org.

The Lilac Festival Grand Parade will be Sunday, June 15, at 5 p.m.

When Mr. Breen first thought to create a computer vocabulary game to help his son prepare for the SAT's verbal section, he almost immediately realized he could use it to help raise money for hunger as well. That's because this isn't Mr. Breen's first online philanthropy effort. In 1999, he created thehungersite.com. Visitors can "click to donate" a cup of food to an impoverished person. Sponsors pay for the food; visitors are limited to one donation per day. The site averages nearly 200,000 hits daily and has brought in \$2.9 million for the World Food Program so far.

"We see an interest, especially among kids, in the issue of hunger," Ms. Barton says. "We need to talk to them at their level by using the Internet and video games. Freerice.com does that."

People from all walks of life and from around the globe have written in to express their appreciation for the game, she says. Secretaries admit to playing it during boring business meetings.

"We get messages from fourth-graders saying, 'I really enjoyed playing this game in my English class. My teacher has organized a spelling bee using it.'"

The layout of the site is simple: The left side of the page has a word with four possible definitions below. When the user clicks on a definition, a new page loads and indicates whether the answer was correct. If the user was right, a graphic of a wooden bowl on the right side of the page fills with 20 grains of rice. (The average adult

needs 18,000 to 20,000 grains of rice to eat for a day.) At press time, the site had received some 20 million hits.

The difficulty of the words range from common ones like "apt" to more difficult ones like "ruth" (compassion). The site ratchets up the difficulty based on how many definitions a player has chosen correctly. Players strive to work their way up to the highest level of difficulty, 50, but Mr. Breen says few players get above 48.

Viral marketing, the compelling game, and the cause it supports are key to the site's success, Ms. Barton says.

An ad is featured on the bottom of each page, and it is these advertisers who ultimately fund the checks Mr. Breen writes to the World Food Program. He is looking into Google ads and hiring an ad agency to run the site. Mr. Breen has specified that he wants the program to buy locally to support farmers in developing countries, rather than using imported food, which tends to depress local crop prices.

Mr. Breen has already sent \$113,000 to the program and will send more in increments of \$10,000 to \$15,000 as advertising dollars roll in, Ms. Barton says. Mr. Breen says he sends all profits to the program, and the site has no political or religious affiliation. He donates his time and pays the cost of leasing the site's servers himself.

"Some people like to give money to their colleges or what-

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Many Year-around Les Cheneaux Residents Favored Boathouse

To the Editor,

I appreciated Pennie and Mark Clymer's very informative letter last week concerning the boathouse issue in Hessel. I also wished the boathouse issue would have passed. I looked on it as a big plus for our town. Mr. Wallace and Mr. Malcho may have their opinion, but they do not necessarily represent the residents of Hessel. Many, many of us who are year-around residents were in favor of the building of the boathouse. We have been in favor of a lot of the improvements to our town, including to Mertaugh Boatworks, Hessel Grocery, the Neals' house, and many Les Cheneaux Advisory Committee's beautification efforts.

Sue Rye
Hessel

Film Suggested About Fur Trader

To the Editor:

Is there a more magical place in Michigan at Christmas than Mackinac Island? I don't think so. I have a Christmas wish. It is for a production company to make a full-blown feature film about fur trader Magdaleine LaFromboise, a remarkable woman, before much more time goes by.

In the December 13 issue of *The St. Ignace News*, on page 21, where Island news was written, I could not help but think of Madame LaFromboise, when the Ste. Anne's Church at Christmas was described so eloquently for Christmas Eve by Jeannette Doud: "The bells will announce the holy night as the sparkling white lights, garland, and wreaths with red velvet bows greet the parishioners. The altars will be adorned with gold lace dating back more than 100 years, red poinsettias, and lighted white tapers." All this, and with beautiful Christmas music. Pretty magical, indeed, and timeless.

Where is the production company?
Happy New Year, special people of the Straits!

Stan J. Woodard
North Muskegon

St. Ignace News Policies

Letters:

All responsible letters will be considered for publication and may be edited. They must be signed and a telephone number must be included for verification. Personal thank-you notes, personal attacks against other people, form letters, and letters promoting political candidates are not accepted, although letters for or against ballot proposals are welcome.

Obituaries:

The St. Ignace News maintains a policy of not charging for obituaries and we do often add information or rewrite them for clarity and reader interest. Obituaries that the family wants published exactly as submitted can be placed in the newspaper for \$75. Photographs are welcome at no charge.

Weddings:

Weddings with photographs are published without charge within 45 days of the ceremony. After 45 days, a photograph can be included for \$35.00.

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ever," he writes by e-mail, "and this I what I prefer to do with it."

Although Mr. Breen spent a considerable amount of time getting the site up and running (not to mention inputting more than 10,000 vocabulary words), he suspects the site can "pretty much run itself" once an ad agency can oversee the ads. He's also hiring a lexicographer to input in some more unusual words so that players won't run out of challenges.

He also operates Poverty.com, which is linked to and promoted by Freerice.com. Poverty.com is an informational site about hunger and includes a tally of the estimated number of deaths from hunger every day – an average he

puts at 25,000. Mr. Breen also encourages visitors to print and sign a form letter to their governments to encourage them to allocate 0.7% of annual income to poverty relief. (The United States, for example, currently gives 0.17%.)

Hunger is an increasingly difficult issue for Americans to identify with, Ms. Barton says, "with obesity getting so much attention in the media."

"People have this pent-up urge to help. They want to be active if you give them the opportunity," Mr. Breen says.

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Michigan Politics

By
George Weeks



Mega-stores: Big Boxes or Big Bullies

In communities across the land, one of the biggest debates is what to do about big box stores? Lure them? Shun them?

It's been a hot issue on occasion in Michigan, where, for example, one township near Hartland rejected a Wal-Mart, which, with 3,500 stores, is the world's largest retailer and has an image problem on some fronts. But a nearby township embraced the big foot of Meijer, the Michigan-based around-the-clock retailer with 181 stores in five states.

Currently, Meijer's politically charged quest to build a second store in the Traverse City area is "one of Michigan's biggest (development) controversies," says President Bill Rustem of the Lansing-based Public Sector Consultants, a think tank that spans the political spectrum.

Rustem is a former environmental aide to ex-Governor Bill Milliken and was the lead staffer on Governor Jennifer Granholm's Land Use Task Force co-chaired by Republican Milliken, Michigan's longest-serving governor, and Democrat Frank Kelley, who was longest-serving attorney general. Many of their recommendations languish in Lansing.

The controversy centers on Meijer's stumblebum stealth support of a failed attempt to recall Acme Township officials who opposed the project by the retailer that, in contrast, appears to have relatively easy sailing for other projects in Otsego and Emmet counties.

Rustem said, "Many communities are so desperate for anything" to expand retailing and jobs "they'll accept anything." Sprawl be damned.

(Stacie Behler, a Meijer veep, says it has plans this year to open seven new stores, and replace existing outlets in Grand Rapids and Battle Creek.)

This column has long lamented the lack of transparency in campaign finances. It's a problem at all levels of government. Michigan abounds with examples of mystery about sources of money for ads in races in all three branches of state government. Examples have been particularly egregious in Supreme Court elections.

Donors who evade disclosure of their support of candidates and causes should be admonished. Those who bring forth the bright light of public scrutiny, as the *Traverse City Record-Eagle* did December 23 in a detailed disclosure of the role Meijer's public relations firm played, are to be applauded.

The Grand Rapids Press, which also obtained documents pointing to the role of Meijer operatives in such activities as ghost-writing letters to the *Record-Eagle*, headlined a December 30 editorial: "Meijer's muddle; Allegations that retailer engaged in illegal campaign activities merit honest, thorough investigation from company, authorities."

That would seem in progress. Kelly Chesney, spokesperson for Secretary of State Terri Lynn Land, said Meijer's officials "are

working with us to assure compliance with Michigan's Campaign Finance Law." She released a December 26 letter from Meijer's general counsel, William S. Noakes Jr., to Land that said:

"We wish to advise you that we have recently become aware of information regarding certain financial contributions made by Meijer to a local taxpayers' group in Acme Township, Michigan. We are completing a review of the facts surrounding these contributions and will quickly meet any reporting requirement that emerges."

Big names with solid reputations in business and professions are involved. Meijer itself is widely admired for its philanthropy in West Michigan. (Full disclosure: I once served on the Clarke Historical Library at Central Michigan University with Meijer Chairman Hank Meijer, and wrote a cover blurb touting a guide to Michigan historical sites published by the Historical Society of Michigan with Meijer financial support.)

Meijer President Mark Murray, former state budget director and ex-President of Grand Valley State University, has a reputation, as aptly described by publisher Bill Ballenger of *Inside Michigan Politics* newsletter, as "the ultimate good guy."

The retailer's PR firm, Seyferth Spaulding Tennyson, is a major Michigan player and well-respected in a craft that is supposed to put out fires, not enflame them. A New York-based official of the Public Relations Society of America said it is looking into complaints that its Code of Ethics was violated. Sanctions are hard to come by, and Ginny Seyferth, founder of the firm, says it is "committed to ethical obligations" for its more than 90 clients.

Did Meijer violate the law? You'd think it would get good legal advice from its law firm, Dickinson Wright, which, by numbers of lawyers, is Michigan's second biggest. Its chairman is ex-Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer, former justice of the Michigan Supreme Court.

As I looked at this issue, with all of its prominent players, I was reminded of Shoeless Joe Jackson, the charismatic left-fielder of the Chicago White Sox who was accused of selling out to gamblers in a 1919 pennant race.

As he left a courthouse, as reported by newspapers of the day, a young fan was said to have said: "Say it ain't so, Joe." (Jackson insisted the papers had it all wrong, and no kid talked to him.)

Say it ain't so, Meijer.

Former Governor Milliken, who opposed the Meijer project and was the subject of a Meijer-inspired rebuttal letter, said he has long admired its founding family.

But, he said, "they went off the deep end on this one."

George Weeks retired in 2006 after 22 years as political columnist for The Detroit News. His weekly Michigan Politics column is syndicated by Superior Features.

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The quotation under the flag of *The St. Ignace News* on Page 1 is from the 10 triads written by Dr. Fred Newton Scott, creator and teacher of the first continuous course in journalism in the United States at the University of Michigan in 1890. The 10 triads are chiseled on the parapet of the Detroit News Building at 615 Lafayette Boulevard, Detroit. They were headed "Ideals of the Press" or "The Newspaper in a Free Society," and serve as a reminder of what a free press means to us.