

Man denies he beat baby girl to death. Page 17

Bikini tops still a must on beach in Asbury Park

City council sticks with topless taboo

By Bob Considine
 STAR-LEDGER STAFF

The idea of topless sunbathing in Asbury Park has been buried in the sand.

After a local resident asked the City Council to consider allowing women to sunbathe topless at the Eighth Avenue beach, Asbury Park counsel Frederick Raffetto deemed such action would violate two local ordinances.

"It should be noted that prior case law says that exposure of the female breast, i.e., partial nudity, is sufficient to satisfy the definition of public nudity, or indecent exposure and the municipality prohibits that," Raffetto said during last night's council meeting.

After Raffetto read his findings, Councilman Kevin Sanders said the issue was now moot. A crowd of about 30 residents applauded the decision.

"I think it would be a disgrace for your children to be on the boardwalk and have to see body parts that don't belong there," city resident Stephanie Miller-Dekle said. "I'm proud of Asbury Park today."

The council was considering a request by Reggie Flimlin, an Asbury Park resident and owner of a yoga studio who says women should have the option whether to wear bikini tops on the beach.

Flimlin, who did not attend last night's meeting, has said she had been surprised by the attention the matter has generated.

"I think it's kind of telling of the times," she said earlier yesterday. "I think a lot of women feel like if they want to sunbathe topless, it should be their choice. For others to kind of get emotional about it, it's almost like it's still a taboo subject and not really representative of today's mentality for women."

Flimlin could not be reached after the council's decision. But earlier she said that if the city took the issue off the table, it would "be a pity and a missed opportunity for women's rights."

Flimlin noted that Asbury Park, with its sexual and racial diversity, has long been a progressive community and an "appropriate" place to introduce a topless beach.

While Flimlin and other advocates have noted that topless sunbathing is the norm at European beaches and at Miami's South Beach, the practice has been also accepted closer to home. National Park Service beaches in Sandy Hook and on Fire Island are federally run — and there is no federal law

SEE **BEACH**, PAGE 16

PARENTS' WISH LIST FOR KIDS WITH AUTISM



PHOTOS BY ROBERT SCIARRINO/THE STAR-LEDGER

Kim Cristo, right, watches as her 2-year-old daughter, Ava, receives occupational therapy from Michelle Doonan, an applied behavioral analyst. Ava was diagnosed early on with autism and receives regular therapy at her home in North Haledon.

Families ramp up lobbying in Trenton

By Susan K. Livio
 STATEHOUSE BUREAU

Parents raising children with autism need help. This much, the family advocacy group Autism New Jersey understood.

But when the group launched an unprecedented survey interviewing hundreds of families about what kind of help they needed, Autism New Jersey got a surprising response.

The survey, to be released today, showed more than 60 percent of the families said the group should become a force at the Statehouse to fight their cause.

"In order to make meaningful change, they told us to change Trenton," said executive director Linda Meyer.

Parents in New Jersey — where the autism rate is highest in the nation — are often too consumed with looking for therapy or educational or vocational programs for their child to solve the red tape of government-funded services, Meyer said. "So often, families are very negative and frustrated and challenged by the system," she said.

Starting today, Autism New Jersey will distribute the report to the Legislature, to members of Gov. Chris Christie's cabinet, and to local elected leaders. It's a parents' wish list, minus angry finger-pointing to keep the message positive, Meyer said.

"We are looking to improve the future. We wanted to hear what part of the system works," Meyer said. "You can't throw away an entire system."



Kim Cristo, with daughter Ava

"If you know there are services for your child, it's comforting."

The group conducted in-depth interviews with 537 people, nearly 70 percent parents or grandparents and the rest teachers, doctors or other professionals. Every county was represented; nearly half the participants live in Bergen, Mercer and Middlesex.

Kim Cristo of North Haledon, whose daughter has autism, said the report "outlines every worry a parent has about a child on the autism spectrum. It's such a puzzle, so enigmatic. If you know there are services for your child, it's comforting."

Cristo said she watched her chatty, engaging 16-month-old daughter, Ava, transform into a withdrawn "zombie child" — all within about a month. When she and her husband began researching therapeutic options, they struggled to find credible information. Their first deal-ings with a speech therapist who quit "devastated me," she said. "She said Ava was too difficult a case for her."

The quality of people who work with autism — including special education teachers — was cited most often by parents surveyed. The report said they need to be experienced and well-trained — and "respectful of the individual with autism and the family," "loving," "engaging," "unflappable," and "positive."

Jodi Grillo of Rockaway Township said she fought for years to get a more inclusive educational program for her daughter, Jillian, 9, but

SEE **AUTISM**, PAGE 16

Writing the definitive story of a surprising law school

The story of the Rutgers Law School in Newark is odd. Not exactly a legal thriller a la John Grisham or Scott Turow, but still a narrative with unexpected twists and an ambiguous ending. Just about right for a New Jersey institution of higher education.

It was founded as a private, profit-making operation and admitted students who didn't even have a high school diploma. For a while, it was known — pervasively, if informally — as the "People's Electric Law School," a nickname that sounds quaint now but, in the early '70s, was a thumb in the eye of the state's political establishment.

Paul Tractenberg of Millburn, who has taught at the law school for 40 of its 100 years, wrote a book as an homage to the school's centennial. It has the decidedly creaky title of "A Centennial History of Rutgers Law School in Newark."

Bob Braun
 nj.com/braun



"The publisher wanted that title," says Tractenberg, whose preferred title is now the subtitle, "Opening a Thousand Doors."

The reference to doors is from an interview with one of the most powerful women in American finance, Elizabeth Warren, a Harvard professor who chairs the Congressional Oversight Panel, the agency overseeing the expenditure of bailout funds. She graduated from the school in 1976 and said her schooling there opened "a thousand doors" for her.

Unlike many of the nation's oldest law schools, the Rutgers Law School in Newark was not

SEE **BRAUN**, PAGE 16



TONY KURDZUK/THE STAR-LEDGER

Breaking the silence

Assemblywoman Linda Greenstein (D-Middlesex) and Assemblyman John Wisniewski (D-Middlesex) at a news conference at the Statehouse yesterday, where they criticized groups that allow undisclosed and unlimited political contributions. See story, Page 16.

Deadly blaze in Jamesburg claims another family member

By Tom Haydon
 STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Last Thursday, sisters Jayme Lowenberg and Michelle Gonzalez were making plans for family vacations, including a camping outing and a trip to Wildwood for next year.

One week later, their relatives are planning a double funeral.

Lowenberg lost her life early Saturday morning when a devastating fire engulfed her Jamesburg house, and Gonzalez, who was critically injured in the blaze, died yesterday in an Old Bridge hospital bed, surrounded by her family.

"We didn't want Michelle to be alone. All of us were praying," Gonzalez's stepmother, Mary Horvath, said yesterday evening. "She went home to be with the Lord."

Relatives had kept a vigil at Raritan Bay Medical Center's Old Bridge division, where Gonzalez, 25, of Triangle, Va.,

was taken after the fire that claimed the life of her sister and left several children hospitalized. Family members were at Gonzalez' bedside yesterday morning when she died, Horvath said.

Despite the sadness at losing her second stepdaughter, Horvath related the news that Gonzalez's children, 2-year-old Alyssa Gonzalez, her 11-month-old brother, Adam, and Lowenberg's 10-month-old son, Derrick Lowenberg, were all improving at Saint Barnabas Medical Center in Livingston, where they were taken after the fire.

"They're off ventilators. We're hoping they may come home in a week. That's our miracle," Horvath said.

Michelle Gonzalez and her children were visiting at Lowenberg's home on Gatzmer Avenue in Jamesburg. The fire broke out in the house shortly

SEE **FIRE**, PAGE 16

Braun

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

founded because law is considered central to any university's curriculum, but because its founders, Richard Currier and Percival Bernard, wanted to make a buck.

Initially, it was to be part of the now defunct Upsala College, then located in Kenilworth, but was established as an independent institution in Newark, a place that in 1908, writes Tractenberg, "had a booming economy."

The school, the New Jersey Law School, was "distinctive" because it made an effort to admit women "on an equal basis" with men. Tractenberg notes:

"Although the causal connection is unclear, several women were named as stockholders of the proprietary school." Equal opportunity can be profitable.

By the mid-'20s, the school was booming, with an enrollment of more than 2,300 students, compared with fewer than 900 today.

As often happens in New Jersey, obvious success becomes a target for predation. Rutgers University, then a smallish school in New Brunswick, wanted to swallow the University of Newark.

It failed initially. But in 1956, with Rutgers formally the state university of New Jersey, the University of Newark, with its law school, became the Newark campus of Rutgers by legislative act.

The once scrappy school began to take on airs, dropping its part-time program in a bid to seem more like traditional law schools that viewed night students as second class. The

Legislature finally forced it to resume part-time instruction in 1975 — and Warren, by the way, was one of its faculty members.

The Rutgers Law School remained committed to civil liberties and activist ideas. The picture of one of its faculty members, Arthur Kinoy, graced front pages throughout the nation when he was forcibly ejected from a session of the Commie-baiting House Un-American Activities Committee in 1966.

Although university officials in New Brunswick caved in to some political pressures, faculty members at the law school stood up courageously to Red-baiting.

Later, in the wake of civil disorders in Newark, the school became a leader in admitting large numbers of minorities — again.

Tractenberg ends his book by raising the contemporary problem of funding in an age of state budget cuts and worldwide recession.

But the professor is an optimist and, like his school, a survivor — at 72, he rode his bicycle more than 100 miles to the 50th reunion of his undergraduate college class this year to raise money for cancer research.

"This will hardly be the first serious challenge the economy and world events have posed for Rutgers Law," Tractenberg concludes. "It has survived, although just barely a few times, two world wars, other wars hot and cold, the Great Depression, and other fiscal reverses and urban upheavals in its own backyard."

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Autism

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

needed to hire an attorney to make her case.

"They were trying to fit round peg in a square hole, and it wasn't my daughter," said Grillo. After much discussion, the district agreed to send her daughter to a private school, "where she is doing 'phenomenally.'"

Meyer said she knows the wish list lands at time of unprecedented budget-tightening. State Human Services Commissioner Jennifer Velez, who got a copy of the report, said its "valuable personal perspectives of families" will help guide the department as it plans to create an Office on Autism.

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TONY KURDZUK/THE STAR-LEDGER

Democratic State Committee Chairman John Wisniewski and Linda Greenstein, both Assembly members from Middlesex County, said yesterday they want funding disclosure from an advocacy group that supports limits on property taxes.

Dems want 'shadow' group to disclose its funding

By Lisa Fleisher
STATEHOUSE BUREAU

Democratic State Committee Chairman John Wisniewski yesterday called for an advocacy group run by Republicans close to Gov. Chris Christie to disclose its donors, calling it a "shadow arm of the Republican Party."

The group, Reform Jersey Now, has run radio ads, ordered so-called "robo calls" and sent mailings to advocate for property tax limits.

It has not disclosed where its funding comes from.

Wisniewski, an assemblyman from Middlesex County, called the group "one

of New Jersey's newest and most politically connected shadow organizations which has been established solely for the purpose of bullying elected officials into enacting public policy."

Mike DuHaime, a spokesman for Reform Jersey Now, said the group will go "above and beyond the law" and will disclose its donors this year.

"We will be fully transparent," said DuHaime, a top political adviser to Christie.

"We're out there to promote public policies in a way we believe will bring businesses back to New Jersey" and make it more affordable for families.

Wisniewski said the group, as a 501(c)

(4) organization, was exploiting a loophole in federal laws that allowed it to hide its donors.

The group sent literature to people in five districts, Wisniewski said. DuHaime said the group has spent about \$150,000 to promote a property tax cap that was the centerpiece of Christie's plan to rein in the nation's highest property taxes.

Assemblywoman Linda Greenstein, who represents parts of Middlesex and Mercer counties, said she was working on a bill to force disclosure by these types of groups.

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Fire

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

after midnight Saturday.

Lowenberg, an English teacher in Hillside, was able to lower her son from an attic window to a rescuer standing on the roof of a room below. But police say she died

of injuries suffered when she tried to jump from the window to the same roof, but missed and fell to the ground. Her husband, George Lowenberg, was in Virginia at a relative's house at the time of the fire. Gonzalez and her children were trapped in the house and had to be rescued. "She did her job. She protected the children," Horvath

said of her stepdaughter Gonzalez. "She's a hero," Horvath said. The cause of the fire has not yet been determined. Relatives are making arrangements for a double funeral for the sisters, Horvath said. Plans are also being made for a fund to help the children and their fathers.

Horvath said the family

recovered some items from the burned house, including Lowenberg's wedding photos, and her cell phone, which contained the latest portion of a book she had been writing and was planning to send to a friend.

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Beach

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

against nude sunbathing.

But Gunnison Beach at Sandy Hook is far more isolated and distant from the well, naked eye. At the northern end of Asbury Park's Eighth Street Beach, where the boardwalk ends and a small parking lot sits adjacent, there are no obstacles to the nature in front of you.

This didn't sit right with Lisa Spiegel, a science teacher at Asbury Park Immediate School, who was taking in some rays from that spot yesterday.

"I have an issue that it is possibly visible from the boardwalk and it's very visible from the parking lot," Spiegel said. "When I think about the kids, and who they are, you don't need that. Because this will draw kids. They will want to come down here."

There's also the matter of a high-rise senior citizen apartment building that sits on the north end of the beach.

"Personally, it makes no difference to me if someone



ARISTIDE ECONOMOPOULOS/THE STAR-LEDGER

"I have children and I don't want them to be subject to that," said Asbury Park resident Denise Richardson at the meeting.

wants to sunbathe topless, but do it in an appropriate place," Spiegel said. "I don't think this is an appropriate place."

Others whose livelihoods are based on boardwalk business were not so offended by the possibility of a topless scene.

"I think the human body is natural and all too often in our country that natural thing is suppressed when it shouldn't be," said Marilyn Schlossbach, owner of Langosta Lounge. "In

other countries, where topless is allowed, it's no longer about perfection, but about allowing people to be comfortable and who they are. So why not go topless?"

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