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METRO & virginia

Richmond Times-Dispatch • SECTION B

Teen takes his cancer fight to court • B2

/ www.TimesDispatch.com /

Let's get a few things straight

The young woman, among a group attacked beneath the Boulevard Bridge on the night of July 4, choked back tears.

"I'm just getting worked up over it because it's turned into something totally different than what it was," she said. "We all thought we were going to die."

She resents police characterizations of the event as a verbal confrontation that escalated into a robbery and assault.

MICHAEL PAUL WILLIAMS

"We feel like we're getting blamed for an extremely terrifying experience," she said.

Richmond Police Sgt. Gary Borges said Friday that the case remains under investigation.

"At this point, we have no reason to believe that this is a hate crime. Upon completion of the investigation, if there are additional crimes other than robbery, they will be dealt with."

Meanwhile, I'm catching flak from readers who don't care for the police version of events and prefer to shoot the messenger.

In a column Friday, I reported that police did not believe race played a substantial role in the attack, in which the victims were white and the assailants black. I also quoted two of the victims, who said that the attackers used racial slurs.

Given the divergent takes, I played it down the middle. This infuriated some readers.

"It certainly did not take long for the Crime-Disgrace to get their pet negro apologist on the case to make it sound like the White victims were the cause of it all," wrote Walter Ring.

Verlan Phillips was more circumspect and respectful, but still concerned.

"If this had been a white-on-black event," he asked, "would you or the paper have called this a 'hate' crime, and how much national news would this have gotten?"

I can't say. But can the life scripts of blacks and whites be flipped so easily? Is there any white analogy to the generations of terror that black Americans have experienced at the hands of members of the white majority?

Or look at it this way: Perhaps the mother of a black homicide victim is wondering why this newspaper has published a front-page article and two columns on an assault and robbery with no serious injuries, when her son's slaying ran inside the paper.

Let's get a few things straight:

There is no excuse and no worthy provocation for one group of people to assault and rob another group. None. Period. The act was loathsome. The perpetrators need to be punished.

You should know, however, that in my interviews with three victims, two recalled seeing one baseball bat, or batlike object, and one cited "one or two" — not a dugout's worth, as some reader e-mails suggest.

It would be nice if readers got as worked up over all acts of violence. When we stop basing our reactions to crime on the pigment of the perpetrator or victim, who knows what might happen?

Finally, it has been suggested that my Friday column was blinded by racial bias. And that city police will sweep this under the rug because the force is headed by a black man.

That suggestion must sound laughable to the black folks who have accused police officers under Chief Rodney Monroe of excessive force and abuse.

But mostly, it's insulting. No one anguishes over crime more than law-abiding black people, who cringe and dread the fallout of black-on-white violence when not being victimized firsthand.

Who has a more vested interest in curbing crime than the community most afflicted by it?

• Contact staff writer Michael Paul Williams at mwilliams@timesdispatch.com or (804) 649-6815.

What's the speed limit on I-85? B3

Gayle Danley makes the crowd laugh, then cry B5

Road deaths up 13% in Virginia

Richmond area has a 40% rise in traffic fatalities in first half of year

BY BILL WASSON
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Virginia traffic fatalities rose nearly 13 percent during the first six months of this year when compared with the first half of 2005.

If a 13-percent increase seems grim, consider the dramatic increase in road deaths in the Richmond area. They are up 40 percent.

From Jan. 1 through June 30, Richmond and the seven surrounding counties recorded 56 traffic fatalities, compared with 40 during the same period last year, according to the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles. All 2006 figures are preliminary.

Statewide, there were 438 traffic fatalities during the first half of 2006, compared with 388 for the same period last year.

"I'm really disappointed," Col. W. Steven Flaherty, superintendent of Virginia State Police, said Friday.

He had spent the day in western Virginia helping kick off a four-day, state police crackdown on speeders on Interstates 81 and 95.

Flaherty said Virginia's road-death total, which had shown a steady, overall decline over the past several years, has begun to increase.

Last year, Virginia recorded 941 traffic deaths, compared with 837 in 2004.

If the 13 percent increase through June 30 holds steady for the rest of 2006, the state's highway death toll will exceed 1,000 for the first time since 1990, when Virginia recorded 1,071 traffic fatalities.

Flaherty said inattention, excessive speed, drunken driving and failure to wear seat belts — "the same old problems" — account for most of the state's road deaths.

One thing that puzzles Flaherty is that seat-belt-use surveys show an 80 percent compliance rate, but about 60 percent of those who have died this year in vehicle crashes are not wearing seat belts.

"Sixty percent of them are not buckling up," he said.

SEE FATALITIES, PAGE B3 ▶

Death on the road

Vehicle fatalities for the first six months of this year are up 13 percent, compared to the first six months of 2005, based on preliminary figures.

	First six months 2005	2006
Statewide	388	438
Locally		
Charles City County	0	2
Chesterfield County	16	10
Goochland County	2	6
Hanover County	9	4
Henrico County	8	20
New Kent County	1	3
Powhatan County	2	1
Richmond	2	10
Other (included in total)		
Motorcyclists	27	29
Bicyclists	6	6
Pedestrians	30	36
Restraint usage*		
Restraints used	132	152
Not used	196	208

*Restraint usage excludes vehicles not equipped with safety restraints, such as motorcycles, mopeds, bicycles and buses.

SOURCE: Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

BOB BROWN/TIMES-DISPATCH

Summer Schultz, gallery education director of the Science Museum of Virginia in Richmond, displays a corn snake, one of the nonpoisonous reptiles on display at an exhibit there.

Connecting with nature

Trip to Thailand inspires new ideas on conservation

BY JILL SAKAI
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Inspired by Thai monks and schoolchildren, Summer Schultz is full of ideas for bringing science and conservation closer to home for Virginians.

The gallery education director of the Science Museum of Virginia recently visited Thai villages and schools to learn how they increase personal and community involvement in conservation.

The trip to northern Thailand was part of a class through Earth Expeditions, a partnership between Miami University in Ohio and the Cincinnati Zoo that promotes science and conservation education.

Environmental issues in Thailand, like loss of animal species and forest land, often mirror those in the Western world, said Dan Marsh, education director at the Cincinnati Zoo and one of the instructors of the Thailand class.

"Environmental degradation is happening there as it is here," for many of the same reasons, Marsh said. "It's a different culture. . . but there's some really strong similarities."

For Schultz, the visit was a chance to see first-hand how some Thai communities incorporate science and conservation issues into people's everyday lives.

"Everyone in the villages, everyone in the forest . . . they all had a very ingrained feeling that everyone needs to do a part," Schultz said.

While in northern Thailand, Schultz spent time with Buddhist ecology monks who protect threatened forests by ordaining trees to emphasize connections between people and nature.

She also worked with schoolchildren who devoted their free time for a whole school year to studying a local sacred cave, designing their own experiments to learn how it formed.

Thai conservation efforts draw heavily on the spirituality of the predominantly Buddhist culture. Such efforts work by increasing personal involvement with the environment, Schultz found.

"For conservation efforts to work anywhere. . . they've got to resonate personally on some level with you," she said. "Otherwise it's just the scientists telling you to do something."

Schultz will put her newfound ideas into action at the Science Museum.

The second floor of the museum houses labs where anyone can use the equipment to study fossil specimens or materials they bring in. The museum will add aquariums to the labs with species related to those in the fossils.

"[People] can design their own things they want to discover," Schultz said.

In these labs, and at the Belmont Bay Science Center in Woodbridge, the public can actively study ecologically relevant issues such as water quality.

Public awareness of all the water in the area is especially crucial, Schultz said.

"That river right out there is what we drink," she said of the James. "That alone should make people realize we have some stake in the health of our watershed. You turn on the tap and there's the watershed pouring right out into your cup."

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Broken bolt caused park ride to stall

Kings Dominion officials have now reopened the roller coaster

BY TIFFANY HSU
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

A broken bolt was what caused a roller coaster to stall on its tracks on June 23, Paramount's Kings Dominion a park spokeswoman said yesterday.

Park officials reopened the Volcano ride yesterday at 1 p.m. for the first time since the incident.

The ride had remained closed while park maintenance workers and Hanover County's assistant chief building official, Brian Gentilini, investigated and repaired the roller coaster, said park spokeswoman Susie Storey.

Gentilini, who also represents Volcano's maker — Intamin AG of Zurich, Switzerland — visited the park again Saturday night for a final assessment of the ride and OK'd its reopening, Storey said.

Gentilini could not be reached for comment yesterday. Storey said the broken track bolt caused one of the coaster's cars to brake, stranding passengers 12 feet above ground for two hours.

> Spokeswoman Susie Storey said the broken track bolt caused one of the coaster's cars to brake, stranding passengers 12 feet above ground for two hours.

One rider, a Utah man whose identity was not released, was hospitalized at VCU Medical Center and released on June 28. Park officials said he was treated for a cut above his eye.

Park officials shut down the ride and isolated the damaged bolt as the cause of the malfunction, Storey said.

"There was nothing wrong with the ride itself," she said. "We tested and retested it. It's one of those unexpected things that just happen."

She said the park's rides undergo annual inspection and certification by the county's building inspector's office, as well as daily, weekly and monthly checkups by park staff members.

"All rides have multiple layers of safety systems," Storey said. "For Volcano, we're going to keep an eye on the replacement schedule on all the bolts, just to help prevent anything in the future."

Yesterday, parkgoers lined up for a trip around Volcano, causing at least a 90-minute wait throughout the afternoon, Storey said.

Volcano has drawn more than 5 million riders since it opened in 1998, Storey said.

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