



The Student Newspaper of  
Murch Elementary School

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# The Blue and Gold

## From Country Girl to Assistant Principal

By MAIA BESTER and  
LUCY CHAMBERLAIN

She started out as a city kid like most of us. But our assistant principal spent much of her childhood as a country girl.

After spending the first four years of her life in D.C., Penelope Miller moved to a rural part of Washington State and lived there until she was 15.

Her neighbor's cows used to break the fence and get into her yard. She was an only child but had fifteen ducks, a dog and two cats -- not to mention a wild raccoon living in her backyard.

Her father was in the military and moved around so much that she went to more elementary schools than she can remember.

"I wasn't a very dedicated student, but I always loved to read and had a vivid imagination," she said.

When Ms. Miller was a kid, she fantasized about becoming a veterinarian, a goal inspired by watching "All Creatures Great and Small," a TV show about a rural British animal surgeon. However, she ultimately turned her sights toward teaching.

"Eventually, I learned to love reading and learning new and interesting things, and that was a feeling I wanted to share with others," she said. "So teaching came pretty naturally."

She earned a master's degree in early childhood special education from Catholic University and started teaching pre-

kindergarten kids in 1999.

Over the following years, she taught 2nd graders, completed her graduate degree and mentored new teachers before coming to Murch in 2013.

Ms. Miller began here by working with Michael Wilson as an instructional coach, helping teachers to improve their work in the classroom.

Instructional coaching, she said, "has proved to be a very effective way for teachers to learn new skills to make an even greater impact on student learning."

Ms. Miller and Mr. Wilson helped teachers to learn such methods as close reading and inquiry-based math.

Close reading requires students to focus more closely on what they read and ask why the author wrote it that way. Inquiry-based math encourages students to discover the principles of math for themselves, rather than relying entirely on teachers to explain them.

The goal, Ms. Miller said, was "to make taking risks and trying new things less scary (to teachers). It was so exciting to see the change in teaching and in learning."

Last year she applied for the position of assistant principal.

"I thought I could be helpful to the school...I knew it would be hard, but I still thought I could contribute," she explained.

And so far she believes she is "being helpful in a number of ways," such as helping kids learn from their mistakes and

(See MILLER on Page 2)



R McGhee & Associates, HCM Architects

The future main entrance to Murch, as seen from Davenport Street. Construction is expected to begin this summer and be completed in 2018..

## Architect: New, Modern Murch Will Become An 'Exciting' Place for Kids

By the staff of *The Blue and Gold*

Here are portions of our recent interview with Ronnie McGhee, chief architect for the Murch modernization project:

Q: What change are you most excited about?

A: The most exciting thing is the overall design of the building. It changes how you use the building and the site. The building will have more light, better air, better communications systems, brighter colors and so on. Every day you'll see something new about the building.

Q: What will the color scheme be?

A: The school colors (blue and gold) will

be there (but) we'll have a lot of colors. The classrooms will have a coordinated color scheme, but places like the media center and the cafeteria will have different colors.

Q: What will excite the kids most about the new classrooms and why?

A: The classrooms will all be brighter, a lot of light, more colors, new furniture. I guess it depends on what grade you're in. Pre-k and kindergarten classrooms will have their own bathrooms. There'll be new furniture appropriate for age. But I think the most dramatic change will be outside the classrooms. You'll have your own kitchen, your own cafeteria, your own gymnasium.

Q: What about the hallways?

A: The hallways are designed so you can even do things there. They call them extended learning areas. There are spaces along the hallways that are a little wider so if

I'm in a classroom teaching I can take them (students) outside and do something there.

Q: What will excite kids about the bathrooms?

A: All the fixtures will be new. A lot of them will have electronic flushes. We'll put color in the bathrooms, too.

Q: Does that mean you haven't chosen the colors yet?

A: No, we haven't. We have proposed a scheme ... but that would be a decision made by a group (of parents, faculty and administrators).

Q: Do you plan an atrium with skylights?

A: The front lobby (inside the main entrance) will have some light coming in that way. It will also be a gathering place.

(See MODERN on Page. 4)

## Secret Lives. Past and Present

By NAOMI REA  
and TESSA FURLow

We wondered what Murch teachers and other staff members do or used to do in their free time. So we asked -- and got some surprising answers.

Students might find it hard to picture any of them tap dancing, scuba diving or colliding with other women in a rough game of rugby. But here's what we learned:

Victoria Otten, the 5th grade reading and social studies teacher, took her daughter to tap-dancing classes years ago.

"I thought that it looked like fun, so I decided to gather some friends and take lessons myself," she said.

She stopped after getting a hip replacement. "But I'm seriously thinking of starting again," she said.

Before becoming a teacher, Ms. Otten worked on education laws for a U.S. senator from Illinois.

The scuba diver is 1st-grade teacher Wendy Cresswell. She remembered being "amazed" at seeing a hammerhead shark "up close."

Phillie Stallone, a student teacher until December, plays rugby, which is like American football but without pads or helmets.

Once, she said, "I snapped my ankle and had to walk on crutches for four months."

Karen Levy, the 5th grade science teacher, used to be a firefighter. Her most exciting day was "when a lady was choking at Christmas dinner and turning blue. But we were able to save her by using CPR."

CPR stands for cardiopulmonary resuscitation, which is used to save people whose breathing or heartbeat has stopped.

Ms. Levy now teaches CPR to firefighters and plays piano for a chorus.

Substitute teacher Priscilla Rope travels a lot and is fluent in the Mandarin and Cantonese languages.

"Once there was a new student from China at the school where I taught and he didn't know how to speak English. Now, years later, he is speaking fluent English," Ms. Rope said.

Instructional aide Andrea Chafetz owned an online store called Andrea's Beau, which sold headbands for girls and women.

Several Murch students own her headbands. Fifth grader Juliet Franklin has five of them. "They're pretty cool headbands. None of them are similar," Juliet said.

So the next time you're walking down the halls of Murch, ask staff members about their activities outside of school. They might surprise you, too.

*The Blue and Gold*

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Our First Commandment:  
Thou Shalt Not Bore the Reader



# OPINION: Too Much Homework at Murch

By RIGBY ZENTNER and MARY LOUISA LEOPOLD

Elementary school kids do get a lot of homework, but is there too much of it?

Fifth grader Jillian Fletcher thinks so. "Homework takes a lot of time away from being a kid," she said.

This is true for many students, who find that homework reduces their time for running around, playing in their backyards or just hanging out with friends.

Fifth grader Gus Confalone believes that homework is unnecessary, takes free time away from kids, and is stupid.

Homework is a common source of stress and anxiety, too.

"I usually have to do math pages and I also have to do something with the scholastic news I get," said 3rd grader Lily Carr,

"Reading is optional and I need to do flash cards. All this I need to do every night. It takes 1-2 hours. When I forget an assignment I get really frustrated."

Some kids say that homework may not be enjoyable, but it does have some benefits. It helps students review their schoolwork, they say, and it gets work done that is not completed at school.

In addition, many teachers think that homework enables kids to learn more and teaches them to be independent.

Some teachers and students think that Murch would have about the right amount of homework if kids had more time to do it. Others believe that elementary schools should require no homework at all.

If the school day was longer, "kids could get help with homework or have time to start it (during) the school day," 5th-grade teacher Sabrina Sanford said.

After-school activities do take a lot of time out of a kid's afternoon. Students who don't finish their homework get behind in class. This would not be a problem if kids could manage to complete all their school-related work in class.

Third-grade teacher Maria Samenga agreed. She believes that "everything should be done in class and homework should only be reviewing."

Principal Chris Czbrzynski thinks that teachers need to coordinate with each other so that students don't get too much homework.

Based on his experience, Mr. C wrote guidelines listing the approximate amounts of time that students should spend on homework in different grades.

Under the principal's guidelines, students would get about 10 minutes of homework per night in pre-k, 15 minutes in kindergarten, 30 minutes in 1st and 2nd grades, 35 minutes in 3rd grade, and 45 minutes in 4th and 5th grades.

Even though Mr. C's guidelines are being followed, we think that kids should get homework only to review what they did in class.

We also found that some homework is assigned at the last minute. Students who get an unexpected 30 minutes of homework at night find it difficult to plan their afternoons.

It's our opinion that there is both excessive homework at Murch and limited time to complete it.

"HOMEWORK TAKES A LOT OF TIME AWAY FROM BEING A KID."

-- Jillian Fletcher, 5th grade

# Her Key Word: Perseverance

(MILLER from Page 1)

making sure that teachers get everything they need to teach well.

When not at school, she and her partner, Ann Sweeney, are busy being the mothers of two adopted children, Teddy, 5, and June, 2.

"My family is everything to me," Ms. Miller said. Her proudest moments occurred when she met her kids.

"It's almost impossible to explain how it feels to see your children for the first time. I had no idea that I could love someone so much."

Watching her children grow and learn is "the greatest pleasure of my life," she said, and "I want to be a great assistant principal because my kids deserve a mom who tries her best at everything she does -- just like I want them to do."

When not working or parenting, Ms. Miller is an avid knitter and loves to run and read. She began running at a young age when she helped her dad train for marathons.

And Ms. Miller has a bucket list, too. At the top of it is a wish to have lunch with novelist Stephen King and "talk about the science fiction mystery genre."

What she loves most about King's many books is "the idea of people persevering in the face of incredible odds," she said.

And the idea of perseverance is the key to the assistant principal's advice for all students at Murch:

"Try to do hard things and never, ever give up! The most successful people are not those who are the smartest but the ones who challenge themselves, fail and do it all over again after learning from their experiences.

"The really good things in life are never easy, so just try!"

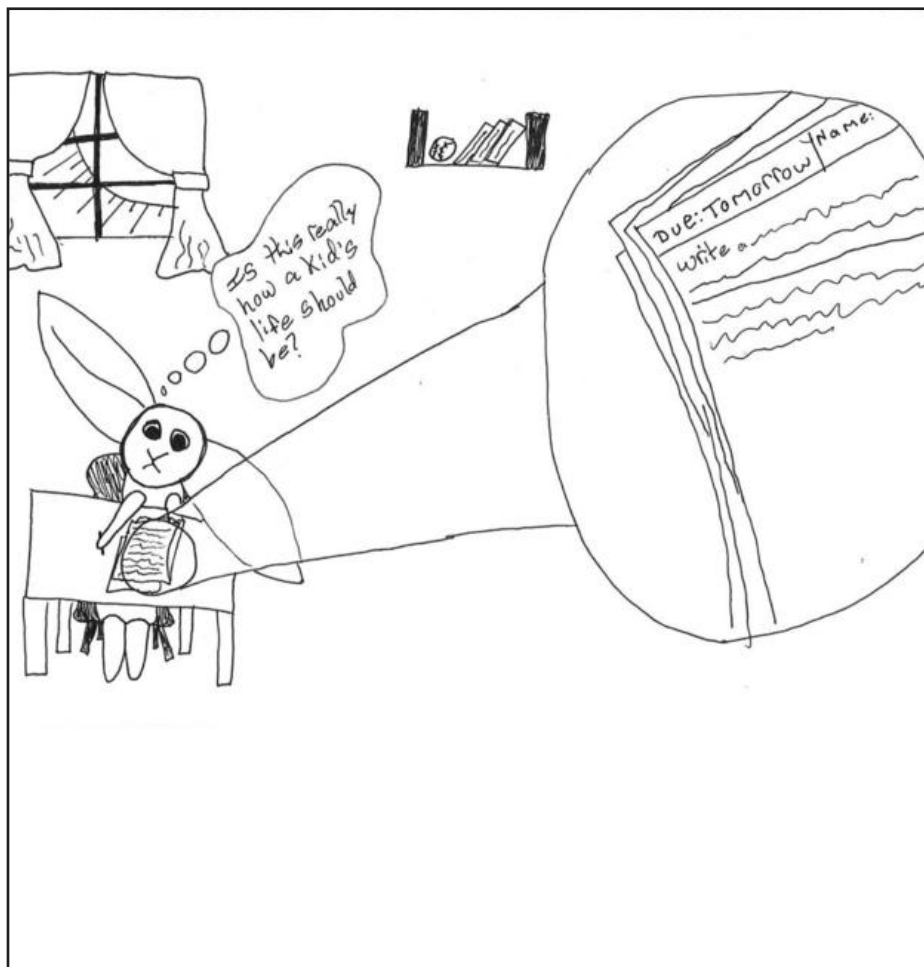
# A Morning with Ms. Miller



Photo by SIMON HOLLAND  
Story by LUCY CHAMBERLAIN

9:00 a.m.: I knock on Penelope Miller's door. She answers, "Hi Lucy! I totally forgot you were coming today." She is speaking with two teachers. "I love you, but I'm having a private conversation," she tells me. I step out.  
9:17: Reading specialist Charmaine Young comes in to see if Murch will be able to have a poetry night. Ms. Miller suggests April since it's National Poetry Month.  
9:30: She walks upstairs to teacher Kathleen Bergin's 1st grade classroom and converses with a student.  
9:48: Back in her office, Ms. Miller starts munching on breakfast.  
10:04.: Ms. Miller goes to Ms. Samenga's room to observe Rose Goudas, a special education teacher. She takes lots of notes.  
10:36: Back in her office, Ms. Miller

gets ready to work with a student. On the way to meet the student, she has a tickle fight with two 3rd graders.  
11:11: She pops into the student's classroom, but steps out to take a call. The teacher asks to reschedule. Ms. Miller agrees to come back later.  
11:35: She meets Christopher Lyon, the pre-K resource teacher, in his room. The kids are learning about fabrics. Today it's denim.  
11:43.: Ms. Miller leaves Dr. Lyon's room to chat with instructional coach Tashima Hawkins, "We're talking teacher talk," Ms. Miller says.  
11:55.: She and Daniel Hayden, special education coordinator, talk in a hallway about how he looks like a boy in an old photograph on the wall. Mr. Hayden isn't so sure.  
11:57.: "Do you want to stay with me for the whole day?" Ms. Miller asks me. Unfortunately, I say, it's time for me to get to science class.



A STUDENT'S QUESTION  
Cartoon by Mary Louisa Leopold



# Today's Kids May Be Tomorrow's Pioneers on Mars

By LILLY SHAW

WELCOME TO MARS: MAKING A HOME ON THE RED PLANET by Buzz Aldrin and Marianne J. Dyson (ages 7-12)

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Hey, all you Mars lovers and Mars haters who wonder if it's possible to live somewhere other than Earth: This book is for you.

It gives you as many facts as a college text book. But the authors put the facts in a fun way -- and they know a lot about space.

In 1968 Buzz Aldrin was the second person to walk on the moon. His co-author, Marianne J. Dyson, is a physicist and was one of the first female flight controllers for the National Air and Space Administration (NASA).

Scientists estimate that we would be able to go to Mars between the years 2030 and 2033. The shortest round trip would take anywhere from one year and six months to two years and eight months.

To draw young readers in, the authors write the facts this way: "Going to Mars is sort of like choosing to attend a college in another country or joining the military. Prepare to be gone from Earth for a long time."

I was surprised to learn that there's a lot of radiation on Mars so you might have to live in underground caves. And you can't breathe on Mars so you'd have to wear special spacesuits that have oxygen in them.

People who make spacecrafts and

spacesuits have a lot of hard work to do to get you to Mars and keep you safe after you land.

Think about it. You'd need enough food to last for six months -- plus fuel, oxygen, water, clothes and other personal items.

Everything you'd need would be heavy and take up a lot of space.

Scientists know that there once was water on Mars and, although scientists are not sure, there is a possibility that there still may be some water there. They do know that there is ice on Mars. What do you get when you melt ice? Water.

Mr. Aldrin and Ms. Dyson take you through the whole process of getting to Mars and living there. They even tell you what you may have for breakfast. Hopefully, you like potatoes because if you go to Mars, potatoes will be very popular. The soil there has the minerals needed to grow potatoes, scientists say.

"Welcome to Mars" also contains lively, hands-on activities that are educational and fun, not boring. My favorite is mixing flour and water in a pan, adding marshmallows and heating it. The result is a "Swiss cheese terrain," which teaches you what the craters on Mars look like.

And how about this fact: Scientists sent robots to Mars to test samples from the surface. One test did not find anything. The other found living bacteria.

So is it possible to live on Mars? Yes, it is.

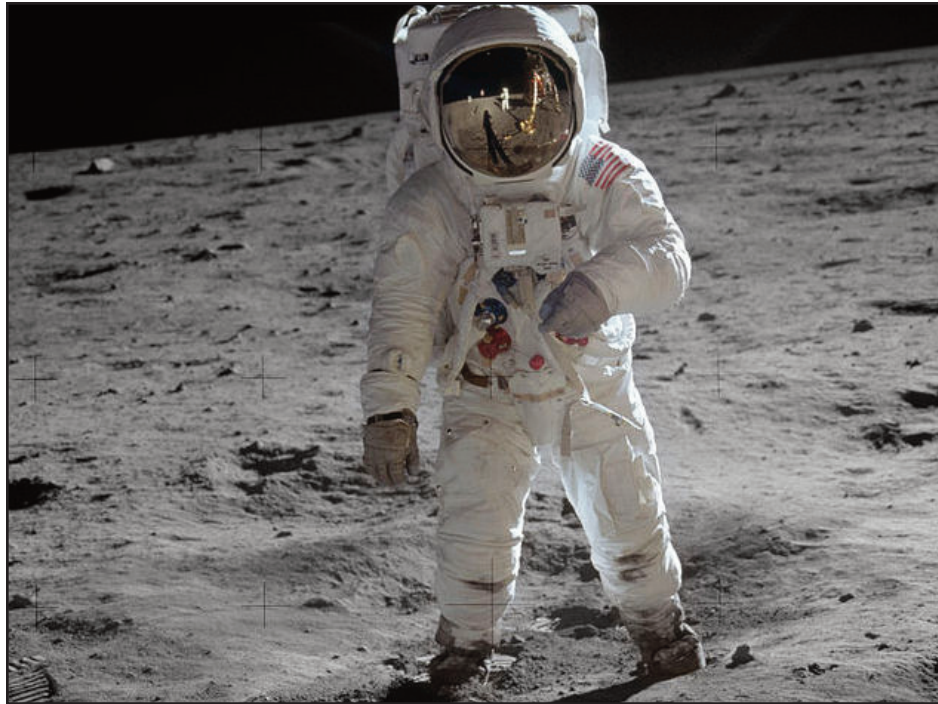


Photo by Neil Armstrong

Former astronaut Buzz Aldrin, now 86, walked on the moon July 20, 1969 in a historic event watched on TV by hundreds of millions of people.

## The Skunk Who Became a Hero

By ADRIAN BELMONTE

SKEETER SKUNK by Justin Johnson (ages 7 to 8)

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"Skeeter Skunk" is an easy book for kids to read. It tells how a skunk learns use his natural skunk ability, has a good time bonding with his father, and becomes a hero by saving his friend.

The book is funny, exciting and unexpected.

It's funny when Skeeter's friend, Ricky the rabbit, pees on himself because he's afraid that the fox would attack him.

It has other funny parts, too, as

when Skeeter accidentally sprays his friends, giving them a really long-lasting "deodorant." Can you imagine that?

It's exciting when Skeeter, who normally talks only to his mom about important personal issues of his life, finally opens up to his dad and admits that "I sprayed my friends by accident."

Another exciting part happens when Ricky gets attacked by the fox and the reader doesn't know if the fox is going to eat him.

Finally, there's an unexpected ending. Skeeter learns how to control his spraying abilities and, thanks to that, saves Ricky from being eaten by a fox.

I really enjoyed reading this book. I hope you like it, too.

## The Playdough Planets

By NAOMI REA

As you walk in, you see lumps of playdough scattered throughout the room and a giant map of the solar system.

Curious, excited 2nd graders huddle around science coordinator Scott Colman, learning about the different planets.

Later, the children mold the playdough into Jupiter, Saturn, Mars and the other planets. (For more about Mars, see the book review at the top of this page).

Each Friday after school, a group of 15 students from kindergarten to 2nd grade journey to outer space without leaving Murch. Mr. Colman guides them through a program called "Exploring the Solar System."

"We start with the sun and work our way across the galaxy and visit each planet," said Mr. Colman, who is teaching science at Murch for the first time this year.

"My favorite part of teaching here is when the kids become very curious and ask me questions," he said. They ask him about the characteristics of each planet and he does his best to answer each question thoroughly.

His favorite lesson was "when we explored the sun and realized how big it actually is."

How big is it? So large that 1.3 million Earths could fit inside it.

## An Adventure Tale of Good vs. Evil

By SIMON HOLLAND

RANGER'S APPRENTICE (The Early Years): TOURNAMENT AT GORLAN, Book 1. By John Flanagan. (Ages 9 and up)

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The evil Morgarath is trying to take over the Arulen kingdom from beloved King Oswald. So he fires the king's loyal guards and huntsmen, known as the Rangers.

Halt and Crowley, the main characters in this prequel to the popular Ranger's Apprentice series, have to stop Morgarath. Halt is the Ranger of the original stories and mentor to Will. In this book, the focus is on Halt when he was a new Ranger, and Crowley, his friend and fellow Ranger.

They plan to gather a team of other fired Rangers to confront Morgarath at the Tournament at Gorlan and reveal his plot to the attending barons and other viewers.

This 368-page book is a standard tale of good vs. evil, but Flanagan makes it exciting, witty, and full of adventure.

There are fights aplenty with lots of details about weapons, and some funny conversations between the characters. Flanagan builds suspense, keeping the reader on edge.

But the book confused me by introducing too many characters too quickly, so I

think it deserves a rating of only 3 1/2 out of a possible 5.

The Harry Potter series, for example, did a better job of explaining its various characters and allowing the reader to get comfortable with them.

I still recommend it to anyone who enjoys fantasy/adventure books because it has a great storyline that really sucks you in. But don't forget to keep a list of the characters.



This 13th book in the Ranger's Apprentice series tells of events that happened before the earlier books.

actually be a ninth planet that does have its own moons?

Two astronomers at the California Institute of Technology think so.

They studied the distant parts of our solar system and announced just a month ago that they're "pretty sure" that there's another planet out there.

Mr. Colman said that he was excited by the news and planned to tell his class of young kids all about it.

Using their molded solar system, the students learn unusual and fun facts about our galaxy, including the asteroid belt on the far side of Mars and the 67 moons of Jupiter.

Do you know, for instance, that Pluto is no longer considered the ninth planet from the sun because it does not have enough gravitational pull to collect any moons?

But do you know the latest news from the solar system is that there may



## Two Teachers Together, In School and at Home

By LUCY CHAMBERLAIN  
and TAYLOR JACKSON

Imagine that a husband and wife -- maybe even your own mom and dad -- work at the same place doing the same thing.

Well, one married couple does just that at Murch.

Charles and Rachel Chalfant not only work at the school, but they teach the same grade: kindergarten.

That way, they said, they can help each other. "We're able to have much deeper conversations about student work," said Mr. Chalfant, 29.

He and Ms. Chalfant, 27, met a few years ago at a one-year University of Michigan graduate program for people who are interested in becoming teachers.

"We didn't talk that day," remembered Ms. Chalfant, then Rachel Goulet, "but I remember that Mr. Chalfant came in late because he had a flat tire!"

A few weeks later, she invited him to swim and relax at her parents' vacation home on Crooked Lake in Chelsea, Michigan. They soon realized that they enjoyed each other's company.

He moved to Washington, DC, first. She arrived later.

"I have friends here," Mr. Chalfant explained. "She essentially moved here to be with her love."

The couple got married last July and, shortly afterward, she began teaching kindergarten at Murch, which he had been doing since 2013.

Not only does working together help them to become better teachers, but it's convenient, too.

"I usually make dinner, and we bring the leftovers" to school for lunch, Ms. Chalfant said.

They take separate cars from home because Ms. Chalfant likes to sleep later. "She is a sleepy-head!" Mr. Chalfant said.

When they are not teaching, you can often find them tutoring separately, or babysitting, sometimes together, sometimes not.

In addition, Ms. Chalfant is training with a friend to run a half-marathon (13 miles). Mr. Chalfant coaches wrestling for St. John's College High School.

They also watch sports together, which can be especially exciting when rivals Michigan and Michigan State meet.

He is a Michigan Wolverines fan. She roots for the Michigan State Spartans. In fact, she used to drive the college mascot, Sparty, to and from events in a golf cart.

"There is always quite a bit of (friendly) teasing when our teams play each other," Ms. Chalfant emailed.

At the top of their bucket list is skydiving.

"It's just something I've always wanted to do," Mr. Chalfant said. And he wants to do it with his wife.

"If we could share the same parachute, we would," he said.



Photo by Simon Holland

Newlywed teachers Rachel and Charles Chalfant talk over the ABC's -- and XYZ's -- of kindergarten education.

## 21st century changes would improve safety through technology

(MODERN from Pg. 1)

Q: Tell us about the cafeteria.

A: Well, the design right now has it as a separate space. It will have furniture that you can fold and put away so you can use the space for other things. There will be a separate kitchen, as convenient to the cafeteria as possible.

Q: How can movable walls (walls on tracks, in classrooms) benefit the children in learning?

A: The idea is team teaching. Let's say there are two 2nd grades where there are students reading at higher and lower levels. So instead of moving them outside the classroom, why not just move the wall and team-teach?

Q: Is that in the plan now?

A: It's in the plan now but we have to make sure it meets the budget. Movable walls cost more.

Q: Will there be any new technology to make the school safer?

A: There will be completely new audio-visual equipment, completely new security and fire alarm systems. There will be communication between classrooms. Everything will be coordinated.

Q: Both the existing building and the new one will have two stories. Will there be an elevator?

A: There will be one or two elevators. Everything will be made accessible.

Q: Can the whole project be done for the \$68 million in the budget?

A: We're in the process of figuring that out now.

EDITOR'S NOTE: After this interview, city and school officials announced that the planned project would cost \$10 million more than the amount in the budget. The officials proposed cuts that would eliminate a separate cafeteria, shrink the library/media center and reduce play space. Community leaders opposed to the cuts are appealing to Mayor Muriel Bowser.

## Highlights of a Student's Holiday Trip to France

By TESSA FURLOW

When we got to Paris last November, the first thing we did was take a nap.

When we woke up, we walked past some stores. That part was creepy because there were many big Army soldiers with big guns because of the Paris attacks that had just happened.

The next day we went to the Louvre and saw a painting of the Last Supper (the last meal before Jesus was killed) but it was a "party" version. There were musicians and people dancing in the background. I didn't like that painting. The real Last Supper (by Leonardo da Vinci) was peaceful, not loud and crazy.

In the same room, there was the small but famous Mona Lisa, also by da Vinci. Her eyes were soft and gentle. She looked so calm, as if a famous artist was not painting her at that moment. If I was getting painted, I would be really excited and jumpy.

After the Louvre, we went to another museum, the Orangerie. It had two oval rooms with Monet's famous water lily paintings. They were beautiful. His brush strokes were so plain but when put all together, they looked perfect. When we came out of the museum, we could see the Eiffel Tower in the distance, with the sun setting behind it.

A few days later, we left for the Loire Valley. Our rental house was originally a 15th century chapel. It had high arched ceilings, and a fireplace so big I could lie down in it.

In a market, I saw dead rabbits that looked as though they had been killed only a little while before. We found a turkey and made a traditional Thanksgiving dinner, except that we had French bread.

The best things about the whole trip were the castles. My favorite was a chateau called Chenonceau (Shen-on-so). It was built across a river above the water. The rooms were very well decorated. There were flowers in every one of them.

## When strange things happen, can we blame the Ghost of Ben Murch?

By SIMON HOLLAND  
and ADRIAN BELMONTE

Fourth-grade science teacher Asha Mathur was about to leave school for home one day when she couldn't find her car keys and phone.

A few days later, "I found them in a small plastic bag on a bookshelf," she remembered.

Strange things have happened to others at Murch, too.

"Back when I used to work in kindergarten, I would keep my stuff in the closet with the door closed -- and one time my stuff went from a shelf to a corner on the floor," said Amy Bravo, a 2nd grade aide.

Another 2nd grade aide, Carolyn Bottelier, has heard odd sounds -- a soft, repetitive, buzzing -- in a classroom.

The school principal, Chris Cebzynski, reported a mysterious scent. He said he smelled a rose one day -- and there hadn't been a rose in the room all day.

What is going on? Is this coincidence? Or is

a mysterious culprit at work? Is someone playing jokes?

Or can it be a ghost? The ghost of Ben W. Murch, the school namesake, perhaps?

Some teachers and students have heard

stories about a ghost in the school.

"There used to be sleepovers at Murch," Ms. Mathur recalled, "and kids, adults, and the principal would tell" stories of encountering a ghost.

No one else has reported seeing a ghost,



Photo by Simon Holland

From a basement that few visit, Murch is warmed in winter.

and there are mixed opinions among the students. Some believe in ghosts, but others don't.

Kindergartener Ananda Benatar-Faranesh said she never even heard of a ghost at Murch.

But her brother Eli, a 4th-grade student, said he sometimes feels that he is being watched and believes that there is a ghost at Murch.

Where would a Murch ghost live? One possibility is the cupola, that odd structure at the top of the main building. After all, it is a solitary place, although some Blue and Gold reporters did explore it two years ago. They found nothing suspicious.

What about the basement? It is quiet and deserted. We decided to explore it, accompanied by an adult, of course.

When we got down there, we saw the school's heating equipment and some small, unnoticeable storage places where a ghost might -- or might not -- hide out.

So keep your eyes peeled and your ears open for possible clues.