

San Francisco Chronicle

455-752222 40¢ plus tax

Printed on recycled paper | FRIDAY, APRIL 25, 2008 | sfchronicle.com

F 1

LEAH

GARCHIK

Public eavesdropping

"I'm not surprised she didn't call you back. She has that lazy-faire attitude."

One woman to another, overheard on the L-Taraval by MAUREN KNOLL

Lynne Newhouse Segal, who knows the ways of politics (and is a Hillary Clinton supporter) was amazed that just behind the televised image of Barack Obama speaking in Evansville, Ind., on Tuesday night were three young men wearing very legible Abercrombie & Fitch T-shirts. The placement of people behind candidates giving broadcast speeches usually is not accidental, observes Segal, who noticed that the one in the middle seemed particularly uninterested in Obama's remarks and looked down at his hands a lot, as though he were text-messaging. Was he a living ad, part of a new kind of product placement?

A poem from Joel Koosed, who calls it "Letter Home to Cleveland": "Did you hear there's a shortage of matzoh?/When usually this season there's lotsa;/ But resourceful as Jews is/ The Bay Area news is / We're all making do with focaccia."

As to other local notes, after reading herein about the ducklings rescued by the Mill Valley Fire Department, Charles Greene complained that they wouldn't come out to rescue his treed cat, Spencer. His call for help, he says, was turned down by firefighters, who told him they don't rescue cats. According to Greene, they also told him to call the Tiburon Fire Department. Are all things that quack getting preference to all things that meow? Are feathers better than fur, webs better than paws?

And as to still other local matters, The Chronicle's Shirley-Anne Owden came across Patrick Carman's "Rivers of Fire, the Second Book of Atherton," which seems to be science fiction. Nonetheless, citizens of that leafy community down the Peninsula might be warned:

"Atherton is a made world," writes Carman, "forged by the mind of a madman. It is inhabited by volunteers from the Dark Planet, a future Earth ravaged by pollution and overpopulation. Every in-

habitant . . . has undergone a kind of memory retraining."

► Tommy Lee had dinner in a party of 10 at Scala's last week, making several trips outside to smoke and being perfectly accommodating to autograph seekers. And the Warriors' Baron Davis had lunch at Left Bank Brasserie in Larkspur.

► Spies say that Jennifer Siebel has been making a movie this week near Alamo Square.

► E-trade, which told Ella Driscoll it was updating information on her account, asked if her birth date had changed.

The Delancey Street Seder always takes place a few days after the official religious celebrations of the rite so Jewish visitors get to spend a round of seders with family and friends before one that might be called institutional.

Ironically, it's the most personal of all. Passover, as defined by seder mistress/emcee/cheerleader in chief Mimi Silbert, is about freedom from oppression of all kinds. Most of the residents of Delancey Street are there to break their personal bonds, most often addiction, alcohol, crime. And the seder is an echo of biblical history — the Jews leaving Egypt and setting out for a new life without knowing exactly

what was ahead — a celebration of the bravery of the decision to leave the past behind. This was its 37th year at Delancey Street.

You walk into the large dining room, and the tables are set with flowers and cutlery, platters of chopped liver, horseradish, traditional relish and piles of matzo (among the many miracles, Delancey Street had matzos during the shortage). The residents are in ties and starched shirts, suits or sport coats. They look scrubbed, clean, like family members lovingly dressed up to go to church. Many have tattoos, and it's startling from the back to see a gang logo marked on the neck of a man with a traditional skullcap perched on his head.

In past years, I've described the dramatic highlight: testimonials from residents about what the word "freedom" means to them. At the end of the two talks, even residents — most of whom have a similar story — are dabbing at the corners of their eyes. At the head table, when Silbert reaches up to pat the shoulder of a speaker sobbing over a life reclaimed and redeemed, it's a gesture from everyone present.

But this year, throughout the ritual, I gazed away from the podium, watching the listeners more than the speakers. When Silbert told them that it was imperative that they take the story personally, they hung on every word with universal concentration.

Moses was a man with imperfections, she said, like every other person in the room. When he led the Jews out of Egypt, there were those who hung back, frightened of a new life with an unknown future. "Read the story," she said. "Take the risk. Go forward."

Prayers were read in Hebrew and in English, and all over the room, lips were moving as residents read along. And when the choir sang "Go Down Moses," voices in every corner joined in: "Let my people go."

Open for business at (415) 777-8426 or e-mail lgarchik@sfcronicle.com.