

Our Town

[snip] **Bush legacy watch.** From David Charter, writing in the *Times* of London: "The unprecedented number of troops who are returning from Iraq with missing limbs has given the US Paralympic Team an unexpected recruitment boost and the chance to become 'unbeatable' at the next Games in Beijing in 2008. More than 60 potential recruits have already been identified in sports as varied as powerlifting, archery and table tennis." —Harold Henderson | hhenderson@chicagoreader.com

Actions

What Can You Do With 8,000 Plastic Soldiers?

Sallie Gratch hopes she can make people talk about the war.

By Kabir Hamid

Sallie Gratch was on a mission. She walked into Flowers Flowers, a floral shop in Evanston, gave a quick wave to the cashier, and made her way over to the tulips sitting in the storefront window. As she leaned in for a closer look she dipped into her purse and pulled out a two-inch green toy soldier, gun raised and at the ready, and planted it beside a flowerpot. She wandered around the store for a few more minutes, nonchalantly poking at the other plants, then sauntered back over to the window and quickly placed another soldier on the ledge.

Gratch, a 70-year-old retired social worker, leaves her house in Evanston each day with four or five Ziploc bags full of the little green men. On the base of each one is a label printed with the words BRING ME HOME. She leaves them wherever she goes—supermarkets, bookstores, coffee shops—and even gives away bags to friendly looking strangers. Gratch has gone through more than 8,000 of the toys since she started passing them out in September.

"These soldiers are an incredible bonding tool," she says. "In this world of ours where we all keep so closed to others, this provides an opening for people to begin to talk." One time, for example, she left a soldier in a restaurant in Coal City, Illinois. "The waitress picked it up," she says. "And I



Sallie Gratch, toy soldiers at Thee Fish Bowl and Pick a Cup Coffee Club in Evanston



STEPHEN J. SERIO

heard her go back and talk to some other people. She said, 'Will you look at this? What do you suppose they're talking about?' And they were figuring the whole thing out, and it really prompted a conversation. They weren't sure if this was the Iraq war—'Is there another war going on that we don't know about?' So it is about people stopping. It doesn't matter how they understand what it means."

The project was started in early 2005 by Merry Conway and Katt Lissard, members of a New York-based political action collective called

Mouths Wide Open. "Lots of men have had a really strong response when they see [the soldiers], because it reminds them of being kids," says Conway. "It reminds them of when they loved soldiering, when they had all sorts of romantic notions about it. And you can see in their eyes this kind of shuddering, of flashes of the past meeting the present." The phrase "bring me home" is intended to be similarly resonant. "There could have been much more strong or literal messages," says Conway. "But we went for the one that was the most evoca-

An Afternoon to Wage Peace

WHEN Sun 1/29, 2-5 PM

WHERE Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation, 303 Dodge, Evanston

INFO nsawc.org

tive, because we really thought that it opened conversation and would engage a relationship, rather than just 'I'm telling you what I think.'"

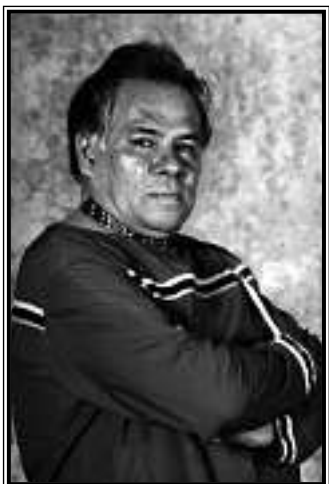
Gratch overheard Conway talking about the idea during a performance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music last March, and struck up a conversation with her to find out more. Back home she went to the collective's Web site, mouthswideopen.org, to order soldiers and download labels, but felt nervous about providing her credit card information

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Winter: A Time of Telling



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[snip] **It's not a conversation if only one side has to give up its assumptions.** Georgetown University Press just released Anglican bishop Kenneth Cragg's new book, *The Qur'an and the West*, and the press's blurb reads: "Cragg argues that the West must put aside a 'spiritual imperialism' that draws on western prescriptions alien to Muslims and 'learn to come within' Islam. Only then can a conversation begin that can relieve the misunderstandings and suspicion that have grown between Islam and the West since 9/11." —HH

Our Town



Soldier with a message

continued from page 14

online. She sent an e-mail saying she'd send a check instead but didn't hear back until the summer, when she got an apologetic reply from Conway, who promised to ship as many soldiers as she wanted, free of charge. Gratch asked for four gross—that's 576—and soon began leaving them everywhere.

Political activism was nothing new to Gratch. She'd been involved in the nuclear disarmament movement in the 80s, participating in cross-country marches in both the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and was arrested twice for trespassing on government property while demonstrating against nuclear testing in Mercury, Nevada. She's also the founder of Project Keshet, a nonprofit devoted to issues like domestic violence, sex trafficking, and women's political involvement in Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, and Georgia. But the soldiers had a more immediate appeal. "Sometimes these global things make you feel like you're just all about ideas, and not about really *doing*," she says. "And these little soldiers gave me something to really do."

When she'd run through that initial shipment Gratch took matters into her own hands. "I thought, this is crazy, I can get them here," she says. "So I went around to all the toy stores and I said, 'Who supplies your toy soldiers? Let me get in touch with them.' And here I am, a social worker. What am I getting obsessed with these toy soldiers for?" Toys Etc. in Evanston put her in touch with their supplier, Best Toys in Lisle, and she called them to ask for a free sample. "I didn't want to get a bunch of strange-looking soldiers," she says. "Merry's group had a soldier lying down, and there was no place to put the label. Such detail!

That's when you know you're going a little crazy." Gratch eventually ordered 12 gross, then another 40—nearly 7,500 toy soldiers altogether, at a total cost of \$90.

Hoping to get the new shipment ready for the High Holidays, Gratch went to her synagogue, the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation, and asked for help with the labeling and bagging. By Rosh Hashanah she and a team of 40 had put together about 600 bags. "*Wshht*—they all went like that," says Gratch. "It was amazing, just amazing." A man at the synagogue told his wife, an editor at WBEZ, about the project, and in November Gratch was profiled by Chicago Public Radio reporter Catrin Einhorn. Later that month she was featured on NPR's *Day to Day*. After the broadcast, she says, her e-mail inbox was flooded with sympathetic messages from across the country. "Some of the e-mails drove me to tears," she says, "because it was people expressing how they finally could do something." Some had even begun constructing their own versions of the soldiers. "They were making their own labels, my god!" she exclaims. "Handwriting them. They didn't think of the sticky stuff. And they were stapling them to little soldiers. But what it demonstrated was the determination people had out there to bring the troops home, to stop this craziness."

Gratch has just ordered another 40 gross for "An Afternoon to Wage Peace," which will be held Sunday at her synagogue in Evanston and is sponsored by the North Shore Antiwar Coalition. She plans to fill a tin bucket with 2,500 unlabeled soldiers as a symbol of the number of coalition troops who've died in Iraq. She did have to go through a new supplier, Oriental Trading Company,

for this batch because she and Conway had both been told their previous outlets had run out. At one point they began to suspect that some cabal was sabotaging their efforts. "We actually got a little paranoid for a while there," Gratch says.

Handing out soldiers is "the gentlest kind of peace activism" Gratch says she's ever done, but she thinks that's the key to its effectiveness. One of her friends, Happie Datt, says she thought going to war was the wrong choice, but doesn't consider herself the type to "get up on rooftops and shout out how you feel about things." So Gratch encouraged her to take a bag and try leaving a soldier someplace. Soon after, while out shopping with her daughter, Datt decided to do just that. "We were at Banana Republic or J. Crew or one of those stores," she says. "So when it came time to sign out, I took a soldier and I put it on the counter. I felt very brave doing it."

"Probably two weeks later I got an e-mail from her," says Gratch. "She was excited. She felt like she had broken down this wall, and she was now able to say, 'I've done my first antiwar action.' And she was empowered." ■

STEPHEN J. SERIO

Public Displays

Now That's Edutainment

A turtle that breathes once every half hour—and the man whose job it is to make you care.

By Jessica Hopper

Rusty Reed is a bit disappointed in how little Chicagoans know about turtles. "People keep saying they've never seen a turtle like Crunch," he says, "but there was an even bigger one at the Brookfield Zoo for 45 years!" Reed is the owner of Crunch, a creamy green, 165-pound alligator snapping turtle who is over four feet long and somewhere between 150 and 200 years old. Crunch is in town as one of the hot attractions at the 2006 Chicagoland Outdoor Show in Rosemont, where he's sitting motionless on the rocks at the bottom of his illuminated travel aquarium. Three men with mustaches, obviously coworkers, pass by holding plastic beer cups on their way to the animal-jerky mega booth

What Are You Wearing?



Eleanor Balson

Full-Body Fishnet

Eleanor Balson plays music, teaches yoga, and runs her own children's entertainment company, making balloon animals, painting faces, and occasionally dressing as the Sugar Plum Fairy. She's about to move to San Francisco; her final performance as the techno-noise act Soft Serve is January 28 at Heaven Gallery, and her final appearance with Lovely Little Girls, a performance-art band she drums in, is January 30 at Schubas (see the Treatment in Section 3).

Where did you get the hot-pink mesh shirt?
I collect fishnet. Any time I see fishnet I get it.

It's kinda slutty.

Well, I'm kinda slutty. I saw a 70-year-old lady at the mini putt-putt in Lincolnwood and she had on fishnets and big blond hair and she looked sexy. You can expose your entire leg and feel completely confident because all the Xs cancel out any flaws you have. Everyone's the same under fishnets.

What about exposing yourself makes you more self-confident?

I want to be spontaneous and unafraid to say the wrong thing or to look ugly or to appear stupid. When I was a child, at the school I went to boys would always take off their shirts and run around and play and the girls could too. It just feels good. You feel more like an animal.

That's an interesting way of looking at it.

A couple days ago my friends had me over so they could show me these cheesy, terrifying Diana Ross, Trina, and Vanity 6 videos. I thought, here are some amazing women and they're not going crazy trying to synchronize all these instruments or do everything themselves and show how prolific and strong and competitive they are. They were just allowing themselves to be themselves, to be openly sexual. I used to think that was a crime.

Why?

I always resented women that didn't seem like they were doing anything. But now the music I try to make is always over my head. Everything is always fucked-up. I can practice it really good at home but when I'm performing shit's either broken or I can't remember what I was doing or the sound is off. So when I wore this outfit [for a Soft Serve performance on January 18] I decided I just wanted to have a strong presence. . . . I only did what I really know how to do, really stripped-down, simple stuff. Mostly what I did was just stand up on an amp and sing to people. And sometimes I'd stop singing and just flap my arms.

How did that feel?

For the first time I put aside the feeling of being nervous, the feeling of "I hope they like me." Instead I just gave this little thing that I have, just a simple thing that's really natural and kind of retarded. I gave sweetness. It felt so good because there were a lot of people looking back at me and smiling, instead of trying to figure out what's going on.

What did you learn from your performance?

I learned that if you like to set yourself apart you don't have to be competitive about it. Be happy that you've done something unique. Just revel in knowing you had the energy to do it. —Liz Armstrong

date locally



Matches

www.chicagoreader.com/matches
section two

[snip] **Double standard.** Veteran local conservative commentator Tom Roeser writes in his blog that Kathy Salvi, a Republican candidate for Congress from the northwest suburbs, ought to drop out of politics because "a mother should be home with her kids; gender roles are not switchable." Funny, I don't remember him condemning welfare-to-work programs on those grounds. —HH

around the corner. Noticing Crunch, one of the men teases his friend: "Hey, you're just like that turtle!" The other man, laughing, joins in: "Yeah, it takes you three hours to paint the line!"

Reed runs the Blackwater Turtle Refuge in Churubusco, Indiana, a small town near Fort Wayne. He used to have over 60 turtles but is now down to four, having sold most of them to zoos over the last few years. He purchased Crunch in 1989 from a man who had rescued him from a cannery ten years before. The largest freshwater turtles in North America, alligator snappers were hunted for their meat and brought to the brink of extinction by the 1970s. Today they're a protected species in their native states, and Reed spends five weeks a year on tour with Crunch to promote conservation efforts.

But Reed is more than Crunch's keeper: he's his hype man. He switches off his headset mike and explains his strategy. "It's a studied statistic at zoos: people only look at each exhibit for 11 seconds," he says with a smirk. "Lions, tigers, whatever—only 11 seconds. So, now, the shock value of Crunch may lure people in—you know, some people have never seen a turtle like this—and my job is to add the entertainment value. My job is to use that minute to let them know that this turtle is *amazing*. You gotta be in their face, because if you get them listening, they will stay around until you are done talking.

"You know, [America] doesn't have elephants roaming around," he adds, "but we do have the largest freshwater turtles in the world."

Just then Reed overhears a little boy asking his father if the turtle is dead, and springs into action. Turning his mike back on, he announces that Crunch only moves to come up for air every 24 to 30 minutes. If they want to stick around, he assures, the turtle will be up for a breath in a couple minutes.



Then he checks his watch. "I make sure never to say 'last breath,'" Reed says with his microphone still on, "but he last came up at 3:46, so he could breathe again anytime now."

Two high school seniors, Nick Olsen and Andrew Grzelak of Deerfield, decided to wait around for Crunch to surface. They're both avid fishermen and decided to hit the outdoor show after they finished exams earlier in the day. "I've never seen a turtle like this—it's awesome," said Grzelak, who was entranced. "I'm not leaving till he breathes."

Six minutes later the faithful are rewarded: Crunch, using his front claws and tail, lifts himself toward the surface *very* slowly. Poking his nostrils up so gently they don't even make a ripple on the surface, he takes a breath, then returns to his previous spot at the bottom of the aquarium.

Reed switches off the headset again. "See, somebody's gotta do the talking," he says, laughing. "He's a little boring otherwise." **E**



Rusty Reed and his 165-pound alligator snapping turtle, Crunch

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