



GUIDE FOR BAND PARENTS

Buy, rent or borrow? How to decide what's right for your budding musician. Carolina Living, 1E



PANTHERS' LINE TAKES BIG HIT

Player retires, cites arthritis, Sports

The Charlotte Observer

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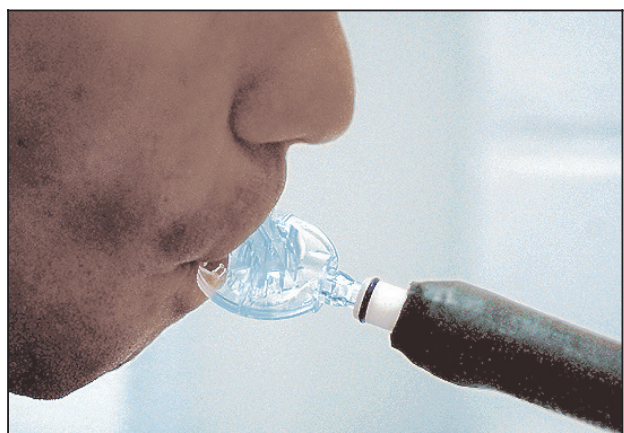
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Observer Investigation

Third in a three-day series

DWI: SOBERING ACQUITTALS

It's a crime to refuse alcohol tests in 11 states. That's not the case in the Carolinas.



JEFF SINER - STAFF PHOTO

Under N.C. law, drunken driving suspects who decline to take the Intoxilyzer test lose their driver's licenses for a year. But they often avoid conviction.

Declining the Intoxilyzer test often pays off

BY AMES ALEXANDER, TED MELLNIK AND GARY L. WRIGHT
Staff Writers

Drunken driving suspects in North Carolina are discovering a way to improve their odds of getting off: refuse to take alcohol tests.

The strategy often works, an Observer investigation found.

In roughly three quarters of North Carolina's 39 judicial districts, suspects who refuse to take breath alcohol tests are convicted less often than those who submit to the test.

In Mecklenburg County, about 60 percent of drunken driving suspects who go to trial after blowing into the Intoxilyzer were convicted, according to an Observer study of cases handled from 2003 through February 2004. For those who decline the test, the conviction rate dropped to about 50 percent.

Most of those who refused the alcohol test failed or performed poorly on field sobriety tests. Some staggered or stumbled getting out of their cars. One told police he was over the alcohol limit. Another, asked for his vehicle registration, handed over the wrong paperwork three times.

Under N.C. law, those who decline the test lose their driver's licenses for a year, even if they're later acquitted. In South Carolina, refusal means a 90-day suspension. But it's not a crime in the Carolinas for suspects to refuse alcohol tests.

SEE REFUSALS | 8A

Risky Roads

Three of every 10 Americans will be involved in an alcohol-related crash. In the past decade, such accidents killed more than 5,500 people in North Carolina and more than 4,000 in South Carolina. This three-part Observer special report begins an occasional series examining what happens when people drink and drive in the Carolinas.

INSIDE

8A | Edge often goes to veteran defense attorneys.

8A | N.C. task force takes on drunken driving.

9A | Citizens made a difference in Guilford County.

5 dead in S.C. fire; arson suspected



LAYNE BAILEY - STAFF PHOTO

An arson investigator tours the scene near Rock Hill. A neighbor reported an explosion "like soft thunder" at the house early Monday.

3 children among victims at house in York County

BY DAN HUNTLEY, SARAH JANE TRIBBLE AND HEATHER VOGELL
Staff Writers

ROCK HILL — Police suspect arson and homicide in a house fire in which five people died early Monday.

"We are now considering these deaths as potential homicides and the fire as suspicious," Capt. Glenn Williams of the York

County Sheriff's Office confirmed Monday. "One of the (police) dogs found an accelerant inside the main bedroom where the bodies were found."

Authorities were withholding identities of the five removed from the home, pending the completion of autopsies late Monday. York County Sheriff Bruce Bryant would only confirm the dead as being three chil-

dren and two adults.

"We think we know who they are, but we just can't say until the autopsy results are back," Bryant said as he surveyed the exterior of the rental house about a mile south of Lake Wylie. "It's a bad scene in there."

The single-story house at 4053 Crestview Drive was rented to Jose Denis Meza, 39, according to landlord Lou Zike. Meza was

charged July 16 with fondling his eldest daughter and had been ordered to move out of the home. He worked as a landscaper.

Rock Hill school officials identified the three Meza children as son, Jairo, 5, and daughters Denise, 8, and Denia, 14. The two youngest were enrolled to attend Mount Gallant Elementary and the eldest at Rawlinson Road

SEE DEATHS | 14A

'THIS HELPS US COMPETE'

Neighborhoods invest in entries

Older subdivisions shell out for new walls, fancier landscaping

BY MICHELLE CROUCH
Staff Writer

Everyone knows that first impressions count, and some Charlotte neighborhoods are putting that to a brick and mortar test.

Inspired by the increasingly elaborate entryways of new subdivisions, older neighborhoods are investing in brick walls, fancy lettering and high-end landscaping to enhance the first thing that visitors and potential homebuyers see:

The neighborhood entrance. The face-lifts can be expen-

sive, ranging from a few hundred dollars to a couple hundred thousand. Occasionally, they've sparked fierce neighborhood disputes.

The city even helps pay for the upgrade in neighborhoods that qualify based on household income. Over the past five years, 28 neighborhoods have received money to build new entrances or improve their existing ones.

But, when the city won't pay, homeowners are often willing to.

"It took us a year, but we finally persuaded everyone to participate," said J. Sam Daniels, president of Johnston Hall, a

SEE UPGRADES | 6A



Daniels

BATTLE IN NAJAF



TYLER HICKS - NEW YORK TIMES PHOTO

Members of the Army's 1st Battalion of the 5th Cavalry Division conduct operations in a cemetery in Najaf, Iraq.

Cleric vows to fight to 'last drop of... blood'

BY DOUG STRUCK
Washington Post

BAGHDAD — Defiant Shiite Muslim cleric Muqtada al-Sadr on Monday rejected an appeal by Iraq's prime minister to end fighting in Najaf, rallying his supporters to fight with him "to the last drop of my blood."

Meanwhile, U.S. and Iraqi forces encircled a shrine in the Shiite holy city where he was

holed up.

Speaking publicly in the Imam Ali Shrine for the first time since clashes erupted in Najaf five days ago, al-Sadr said it was "an honor for me to fight the Americans."

Referring to his militia force, which battled U.S. and allied forces in the south during much of April and May, al-Sadr said: "I

SEE NAJAF | 4A



Fay Wray dies

6B | Actress who was apple of King Kong's eye was 96.



161 life sentences

7A | Oklahoma City bombing conspirator Terry Nichols asks forgiveness.

Sunny and mild

High: 85. Low: 59. Partly to mostly sunny this afternoon. Milder tonight with a few patchy clouds. Full forecast, 8B

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