

# The Regional Reporter

www.rra.org

MAY 2002



## National Spelling Bee

# It's Bee week again

*Regionals brace for that dreaded annual assignment*

BY JAKE THOMPSON  
Omaha World Herald

Quick. What is a regional reporter's favorite spelling word?

Journalist? Scoop? Paycheck?

Nope. It's whatever word your kid misses at the Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee. We who have covered the spelling bee know it's true and we feel guilty and we hope the child's family doesn't suspect.

Suddenly, we're transported, quietly elated. The stoic suffering through inter-

minable hours of listening to young, very smart people slowly spell five syllable words you never use in conversation is over. Hearts racing, we watch our contestant leave the spelling bee hall and head to what they label the "comfort room." We know it as the crying room.

Now comes the hard part. We put on our game face, think about a sick pet, a bad golf game, or a rough day at work and park outside the comfort room door with a concerned visage. When the contestant and

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## MEETING MINUTES

MAY 6

**Present:** Kevin Goldberg, Rachel Smolkin, Susan Roth, Jessica Wehrman, Angela Greiling, Lisa Friedman, Marc Heller, Carl Weiser, Jake Thompson, Jeff Miller

Friedman opened the meeting by saying the Web site redesign is approaching completion. She passed out a hand-out of the redesign, and said the front page would be revamped. She said the addition of the PayPal program to the site, for paying dues, would help in collecting dues in the future.

Greiling said some dues have not come in because of an erroneous ZIP code on the mailings. The ZIP code is 20044-0254. She said about half of the dues have been paid, and she will follow up on missing dues.

On behalf of the RRA, Goldberg said he joined the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the Society of Professional Journalists and several other journalism groups in a letter regarding Section 204G of the farm bill.

The letter protested a provision of the bill that could limit reporters' ability to get environmental information. The letter was sent late in the process, but Goldberg said that a congressional aide did call and clarify the intent of the law.

Friedman said the RRA annual meeting must be scheduled for June. The next RRA board meeting will be its annual lunch at America Restaurant. Wehrman volunteered to arrange the lunch. Board members Weiser, Smolkin and Roth do not intend to return to the board next year, and those positions must be filled at the annual meeting.

Friedman also said two newsmakers with Federal Emergency Management Agency officials are set. One - on hurricanes - is scheduled for May 21. The other, a general newsmaker, is slated for June 27.

**Next meeting:** June 3.

## PRESIDENT'S REPORT

By Lisa Friedman ■ Oakland Tribune/ANG Newspapers

# RRA offers more places to turn for on-line help

## *At least 3 seats open on 2002/2003 board*

Dear Regionals:

Thanks for making this a great year for the Regional Reporters Association. RRA is stronger than ever, with many new members and a brand new Web site!

The site (which can be found at the same URL, [www.rra.org](http://www.rra.org)) should be up and running by the time you read this. In addition to providing easy access to the RRA Guide to Covering Washington and our monthly newsletters, the new-and-improved page includes a bunch of great original features, including:

- Links to every RRA member newspaper. If you don't see your news organization listed, please contact me at [president@rra.org](mailto:president@rra.org).

- A chat forum to discuss story ideas and reporting tips.

- Online dues payment. If you have trouble remembering to mail in your annual dues, this is for you! We're currently negotiating with some different services and trying to find one that is free or will be of minimal extra cost to users. RRA will continue to accept dues by snail mail.

- A "Featured Story" page. We're really excited about this one. It's a space we'll use to regularly highlight kick-ass regional stories. Currently you'll see the pieces that won New Orleans Times-Picayune reporter Bill Walsh the David Lynch Regional Reporting award. I'll be going through newspapers somewhat routinely to find stories, but if you write something you're proud of, please don't

be shy and e-mail me!

- An "events listing" to highlight upcoming workshops, newsmakers and board meetings.

Which brings me to news about our upcoming annual board meeting! It will be at noon June 10 in the Zenger Room of the National Press Club. In addition to unveiling the Web site, we will be holding our 2002/2003 board elections. So, if you are now or have ever considered getting more involved with RRA, please attend.

We will have at least three board openings that we need to fill. Membership on the RRA board offers great opportunities to help out fellow regional reporters by organizing workshops and newsmakers, writing newsletter articles and working on solutions to issues or problems that affect us all.

Board membership requires a time commitment of about two hours each month. Meetings are held at 1 p.m. the first Monday of every month at the National Press Club and you don't have to be a board member to attend!

I really hope to see a lot of you on June 10, and thank you again for a great year.

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Find us on the Web: [www.rra.org](http://www.rra.org).



## WEB LINK

It's another Web variety show this month – state-by-state health and insurance data, scientific and social research, consumer info and celebrity activists.

[www.statehealthfacts.kff.org](http://www.statehealthfacts.kff.org)

Health and insurance information for all 50 states from the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. The information is based on census data.

<http://www.stats.org/>

The Statistical Assessment Service (STATS), a non-partisan, non-profit research organization in Washington, D.C., always publishes interesting stuff. STATS is devoted to the accurate use of scientific and social research in public policy debate.

<http://www.eco-labels.org/home.cfm>

What does "hypoallergenic" on a label really mean? How about "recycled?" The Consumer's Union publishes a Web guide to let you know.

<http://activistcash.com/>

Here's a site that tracks consumer activist groups and celebrities involved in causes. (Credit for finding this one goes to Al Tompkins at the Poynter Institute, who may have gotten it from someone else.)

—Jeff Miller  
Allentown Morning Call

## *Regional acclaim*

# AJR lists Puzzanghera among "unsung heroes" of D.C. journalism

BY SUSAN ROTH  
Gannett News Service

San Jose Mercury News writer Jim Puzzanghera has done it again.

The National Press Club regional reporting award winner was listed among 21 "unheralded" reporters toiling "in the shadows of Washington celebrity journalism" in the May issue of *American Journalism Review*.

"For the most part, these are the stars who don't get noticed," writes author Nina Easton, who said she came up with the list from interviews with "leading reporters and editors," as well as press sources.

But many of the reporters are "so good that the majors liberally 'borrow' from their work." Despite all that, Easton gushes, "they stubbornly love what they do. They're a tough bunch, scrappy and competitive and determined to be the best, despite the odds."

Though the list also includes regional reporters Glen Johnson of the *Boston Globe* and Sabrina Eaton of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Puzzanghera, 38, was the only one noted for his regional work, not national reporting.

Cited for his focus on high-tech money's role in the political process during the 2000 presidential campaign, he



**Puzzanghera and the 20 other honorees "stubbornly love what they do. They're a tough bunch, scrappy and competitive and determined to be the best, despite the odds."**

— Nina Easton  
in *American Journalism Review*

modestly said the listing "seemed somewhat arbitrary, though it's nice to get some recognition."

"I think they were trying to find people with certain niches here in Washington, and the tech-related stuff I do falls into that category," he said.

Puzzanghera said the AJR piece was noticed both in the Knight-Ridder Washington bureau where he works and in San Jose, but it led mainly to "a lot of good-natured ribbing."

Like most of us, Puzzanghera has changed his focus since Sept. 11. He's done lots of stories on terrorism and national security, recently covering the John Walker Lindh case because Walker is from the San Francisco Bay area. He also had to cover energy issues because of the California electricity crisis and California Rep. Nancy Pelosi's election as minority whip.

Since the beginning of 2002, he's gotten back to

some tech-related enterprise, but the most fun story he did recently was a feature about a documentary film that Pelosi's daughter made about the Bush campaign.

"Journeys With George" highlights Bush's attempts to charm the traveling press corps and chronicles his

# Education Writers' conference provides good fodder on higher ed

BY JESSICA WEHRMAN  
Scripps Howard Newspapers

With a membership that ranges from the dinkiest papers to the biggest powerhouses, the Education Writers Association is a must-join for those who want to cover education well.

It's got a sometimes over-active listserv that is always good fodder for sources and story ideas. But best of all, it puts together conferences that are spectacular for reporters who want to get a better grasp on issues in higher education, school testing and other issues of the day. It also, by the way, sends out the mother of all sourcebooks, called "Covering the Education Beat."



**Rod Paige**  
Education Secretary

The group's most recent conference, held April 25-27 at the Wyndham City Center, focused on implementation of the new Leave No Child Behind Act, but also had workshops on higher ed that were illuminating and drew the likes of Ted Kennedy and Rod Paige.

Here are a few of my personal highlights from the seminar:

■ **Meet the Higher Education Associations:** I cover education, but it seems I can never get an adequate handle on all the associations out there. I'm also always fishing for story ideas. This session, which featured representatives from the American Council on Education, the American Association of State Colleges, the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, helped me do both.

A couple of ideas tossed around: the 1965 Higher Education Act is up for reauthorization next year, so Congress is beginning to lay the groundwork on it now. And, in the lifestyles department, colleges are increasingly contending with mental health issues on campus.

■ **Making Sense of Data on Your Schools:** My big tip from this one was, get to know Craig Jerald of the Education Trust. One of the provisions of the education bill will give us all sorts of data on how schools are doing. Jerald helped us understand how to break it down and analyze it. He also offered some good questions to ask of schools.

■ **Changing College Attendance and Course Patterns:** I

went to this one simply to hear Clifford Adelman of the U.S. Department of Education talk. He's a number cruncher, and he talked about data coming out this fall on college students that tracked them for a number of years.

A couple of expected findings include students transferring more during their college careers, moving around for academic reasons or romantic ones, and greater numbers attending more than one college simultaneously.

Also, the increase in pre-college credits is meaning that, yes, more people are capable of graduating in four years or less, even though most take five years to do it. Look for the longitudinal study of college students in September.

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**One of the provisions of the education bill will give us all sorts of data on how schools are doing.**

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## HEROES

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evolution as a candidate, Puzanghera writes.

"But perhaps most interesting, it gives a rare glimpse of what Bush is like out of the public eye, a persona that often was more suited to president of a fraternity (which he was in college) than of the United States. Bush is shown bowling oranges down the aisle of the campaign plane during takeoff, mugging for the camera, talking with his mouth full, impersonating Elvis Presley and even spelling out the letters of 'Victory' with his body after winning the California primary."

Puzanghera, a Boston native who came to Washington four years ago after spending three years reporting for the paper in San Jose, fits Easton's depiction of unsung stars who love their jobs.

"On days like last Wednesday, when I have to sit through eight straight hours of Senate hearings on Enron, I'm not so sure," he said. "But I've got great editors, lots of flexibility and California deadlines. You can't beat that."

# BEE

Continued from Page 1

family emerge we interview them, buck them up a bit and run.

Has anyone ever won any journalistic award for his or her spelling bee coverage?

Well, it's time to prepare to try again. Scripps

Howard's 75th annual spelling bee technically begins May 26 and runs through May 31. The spelling rounds kick off May 29 and finish with the championship round on May 30.

Thanks to the Internet, it's not as difficult as it was just a few years ago to monitor the progress of a contestant. You don't have to sit forever in the back of the basement ballroom at the Grand Hyatt at 10th and H streets.

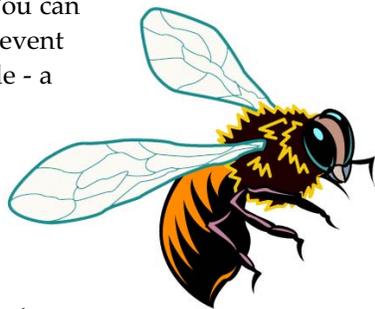
Check out <http://www.spellingbee.com>.

The Web site has useful information, such as bios of the 246 contestants, past winners and winning words, contact numbers for bee staff, how to request interviews and, best of all, postings of the results of each round in real time. You can actually keep tabs on the event from your desk for a while - a great improvement. The final spelling bee rounds also are broadcast live on ESPN.

It's helpful to make contact with your contestant and family as the event gets underway. Let them know that in the event the contestant doesn't win you'd like to interview them immediately after they miss antediluvian or xanthosis (winning words of 1994 and 1995). Give them cell phone and office numbers, and ask for their hotel room number.

In recent years, the Nebraska contestants have had mixed results, but one girl made it as high as ninth place. Over the history of the bee two Nebraskans have won, the last in 1967, so we haven't worried too much about the post-win media circus that envelops the winner.

But it can be risky to take your eye off the contest as two stories from regional reporters attest.



**"The kid wasn't saying anything and the father was chewing him out for not studying enough."**

– Steve Tetreault,  
Stephens Media

When 12-year-old Wendy Guey from Palm Beach County won the spelling bee in 1996 Larry Lipman of the Palm Beach Post was out mowing his lawn. It was the first or second year ESPN broadcast the event, and his editors in Florida were watching and, of course, going crazy.

After the spelling bee winner is crowned it is customary for a reporter from the sponsoring newspaper to ask the first question. They called for the Palm Beach Post. No one answered. Lipman's editors shouted at their TV: "Where's Lipman!?"

As it turned out, Cox's national reporter was covering the event for all Cox papers, but because of a cliffhanger finish he had been outside the comfort room waiting for Wendy to tearfully emerge. He was in the back of the ballroom when they called out for the Palm Beach Post and didn't pipe up.

Lipman's editor, now in a lather, reached him and demanded: "Get on a plane to New York. Wendy's going on the talk show circuit tomorrow morning." Lipman decided to try to find the family, his first attempt in a dozen years in Washington to cover the spelling bee at all, and he reached them at their hotel room.

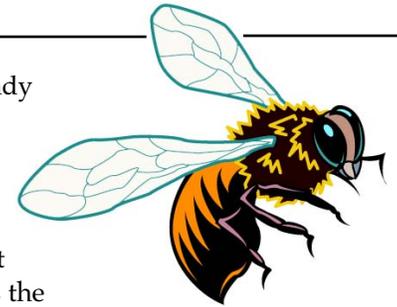
Luckily, he was able to tag along the next day as Wendy made the rounds of the networks and CNN. He noted that this year he's sending an intern to the bee with strict instructions to call if any local contestant makes it into the final 10.

Brett Lieberman of the Harrisburg Patriot-News in Pennsylvania also tried long distance coverage several years ago – from an Orioles game. He knew he had to cover the bee but accepted an invitation to the game because his vague marching orders were to write a story if his contestant did "really well."

He felt a little guilty, but what were the odds that the kid would do well?

Throughout the game he kept calling the bee to track the contestant, who, as fate would have it, with passing innings kept advancing into later rounds.

Lieberman made it back to Washington - after the game -



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Please see [BEE](#) on Page 6

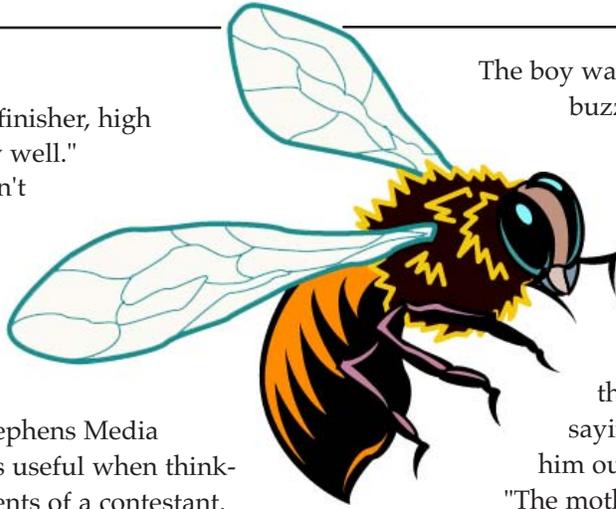
# BEE

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to interview his 15th place finisher, high enough to qualify as "really well." Sunburned because he hadn't planned to go the game and scrambling a bit, Lieberman says he put together a decent story that ran on A1 the following day.

And Steve Tetreault of Stephens Media provided an anecdote that's useful when thinking of approaching the parents of a contestant.

One year a boy from Nevada was the first kid to get knocked out, on a word he probably should have known.



The boy was on stage for all of 10 minutes when the buzzer sounded. Tetreault waited outside the ballroom for the usual post-bee interview.

In this case, the father was angry! Tetreault says the guy marched his wife, daughter and the contestant down the hallway with him in pursuit. "I had to jump into the elevator with them," Tetreault recalled. "The kid wasn't saying anything and the father was chewing him out for not studying enough.

"The mother was embarrassed, explaining there had been some friction back home over the time the boy was spending playing football versus studying for the bee. "The story called for some tactful writing..."

## MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Please fill in the following information and return it with your \$20 dues payment to:  
The Regional Reporters Association, Ben Franklin Station, P.O. Box 254 Washington, DC 20044-0254

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Organization: \_\_\_\_\_ DOB: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City,State: \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP code: \_\_\_\_\_

Office Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Home Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Fax: \_\_\_\_\_ email: \_\_\_\_\_

New applicant     Renewal

Please list the publications or stations that you work for, including city and state:

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