



Good cause

A Vergennes wrestler has convinced supporters to give money to charity for every win. Page 11A.



Otters on top

Strong defense helped the host Otters against Middlebury on Tuesday. See Sports, Page 1B.



Desert fish

A local author ruminates on fishing for trout in America's driest places. See Page 2A.

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Lawmakers ready for tough choices

Budget, lake cleanup on 2016 to-do list

By JOHN FLOWERS

ADDISON COUNTY — As the Vermont Legislature returned to session this week, lawmakers agreed that a handful of issues will likely dominate the 2016 legislative session, including:

- Resolving an estimated \$58 million shortfall for the fiscal year 2017 budget,
- Reconciling the shortage of Medicaid funds to pay for the state's expanded health insurance programs, and
- Continuing the ongoing implementation of Lake Champlain cleanup measures.



AYER

the state's highest chamber. On the House side, Speaker Shap Smith and Appropriations Committee member Rep. Diane Lanpher, D-Vergennes, were polled on their expectations for the coming session.

As usual, much of the Legislature's agenda will hinge on funds, which, as usual, are inadequate to fulfill the wish lists of individual lawmakers. That means that successful initiatives will be the ones that garner a lot of political support and don't present a big drain on the state's coffers.

CHRIS BRAY

Sen. Chris Bray, D-New Haven, is beginning his second year as chair- (See Legislative preview, Page 12A)

VUHS board gets look at challenging budget

Drops in revenue, pupils spell trouble

By ANDY KIRKALDY

VERGENNES — The Vergennes Union High School board on Monday looked at a \$10.3 million budget proposal for next year that, despite a proposed spending increase of only \$37,000, could increase the VUHS tax rate by about 20 percent.

That is, it could see the rate increase unless the Legislature acts to remove or delay the Act 46

pending penalty.

This coming Monday, the board will look again at a budget that could call for cuts. The meeting will be at 6 p.m. at VUHS.

On this past Monday board members talked about the benefits of school governance unification as a selling point for a budget plan; by consensus did not consider seriously (See VUHS, Page 15A)



VERMONT STATE POLICE dog Vincent, a Belgian Malinois, keeps an eye on his partner, Cpl. Justin Busby, while hanging out in an interview room in the New Haven barracks Tuesday morning.

Independent photo/Trent Campbell

Vincent helps take a bite out of crime

By JOHN FLOWERS

NEW HAVEN — Under amicable circumstances, 7-year-old Vincent acts more like a teddy bear than an imposing 70-pound police dog. He leans against you for more pats and gives you a syrupy stare that he hopes will

convince you to toss a ball for him. He's a mixture of Winnie the Pooh and Fred Rogers.

But one command from his handler, Vermont State Police Cpl. Justin Busby, can turn Vincent into a toothsome tornado able to stop a suspect in his or her tracks. The inseparable pair has be-

come a formidable Addison County crime fighting team that is frequently called upon to search for missing persons and criminals, as well as track down contraband and evidence in investigations.

(See Vincent, Page 16A)

Bohjalian's 17th novel takes on sex trafficking

'The Guest Room' on shelves this week

By GAEN MURPHREE

LINCOLN — In his latest novel, which hit bookstores this week, Lincoln writer Chris Bohjalian takes on the devastating impact of sex trafficking and examines how one moment of weakness can send a man's well-ordered life spiraling out of control.

Bohjalian's "The Guest Room" intertwines twin stories — that of Manhattan investment banker Richard Chapman and that of Alexandra, a beautiful young woman from Yerevan, Armenia. Forced since age 15 into a life of prostitution, the now 19-year-old Alexandra has been trafficked from Yerevan to Moscow to New York City so her underworld handlers can make the big bucks.

Tellingly, we don't even learn her real name until 90 pages into the novel. "Alexandra," it turns out, is a name dreamed up by her captor/abuser, who find her Armenian name, Nevart, "Not European enough. Not glamorous enough. Not seductive enough." "I could have told her," says Nevart/Alexandra, referring to the thuggish madame who rechristens her, "that Nevart was the name for a beautiful, delicate rose, not some poor woman who was shot with her family by the Bolsheviks."

But like most of Nevart's true thoughts, these words go unspoken. Nevart's silencing is important to Bohjalian, as is giving her a voice. All other characters — Richard Chapman, his wife Kristin, and their daughter Melissa, along with a host of minor characters — are narrated in the third person. Only Nevart is an

(See Bohjalian, Page 15A)



AUTHOR CHRIS BOHJALIAN stands next to an Armenia map and icon painting in his home office in Lincoln recently. Bohjalian delayed the release of his new book so that he could spend time speaking about the centennial of the Armenian genocide.

Independent photo/Trent Campbell

ACSU schools rein in spending, tax impacts

By JOHN FLOWERS

MONTPELIER — Residents in six of the seven Addison County Supervisory Union towns this March will vote on proposed 2016-2017 elementary school budgets that reflect a decrease in their respective home-education tax rates.

The decreases, according to ACSU Superintendent Peter Burrows, are in large part a response to new state law.

Vermont's Act 46 prescribes per-pupil spending guidelines for all of

the state's school districts for the next two years as a precursor to school governance consolidation. The law also calls upon school districts to band together under a single school board overseeing a single budget.

Lawmakers are banking on these consolidations to help contain school spending at a time when Vermont's student population is shrinking. Act 46's per-pupil spending guidelines (if schools spend beyond the guidelines they will face a double tax) (See ACSU, Page 16A)

Middlebury asks VTrans for rail project concessions

By JOHN FLOWERS

MIDDLEBURY — The Middlebury selectboard on Tuesday voted unanimously to ask the Vermont Agency of Transportation to lessen the potential impacts of a plan to replace the two downtown rail bridges, including shortening the construction timeframe, shaping the work week in a manner that would minimize inconveniences to downtown merchants, and coming up with financial assistance for businesses that suffer losses as a result of disruption caused by the project.

The \$40 million project currently calls for work to begin this summer and potentially lapse into 2019.

Planners have cited a federal mandate to increase the bridge clearance from the current 18 feet, nine inches, to 21 feet, as a major reason for the lengthy duration of the project, which will consequently involve substantial drainage work and excavation of the rail bed and moving and replacing the rail bed each day to (See Bridges, Page 13A)



By the way

The deadline for Sen. Bernie Sanders' sixth annual State of the Union essay contest is noon on Friday. Sanders' essay contest calls upon Vermont's high school students to address what they view as the major issues facing the United States. A panel of Vermont teachers will judge the essays and select a winner. The 20 finalists will have their essays entered into the (See By the way, Page 13A)

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Bohjalian

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"I." Only Nevart gets to tell her own story, entirely in her own words.

That distinction is important to Bohjalian and is a key part of the novel.

"She's in the first person because often these girls and women are not given a voice. They don't speak. People speak for them," Bohjalian said in an interview with the *Independent*. "I thought, 'If you're going to do this, she's the only one who gets her own voice.' And I worked really hard to figure out what that voice is. I wanted it to be real, but I didn't want it to be in any way degrading. She's really smart, and I wanted her to be articulate."

THE NOVEL'S GENESIS

The inspiration for "The Guest Room," the best-selling Bohjalian's 17th novel, came from a 2013 trip he took to Armenia, accompanied by his wife, Victoria Brewer, their daughter, Grace, then 19, and Grace's 19-year-old friend, a young woman also of Armenian heritage.

Grace's friend was going home a day early and Bohjalian arranged to meet her in the hotel lobby very early and get her to the airport.

As Bohjalian tells the story: "I got down to the lobby at about 10 after three because I didn't want this young woman alone in the lobby in the middle of the night. And I witnessed a young woman, my daughter's age or younger, who was clearly an escort, as she was paying off the bellman to go upstairs and do her work.

"We've all seen high-end escorts in hotels in America or in Europe," Bohjalian continued, "but it really broke my heart to see someone this young in Armenia doing this. And I began to wonder if there was a novel in her story."

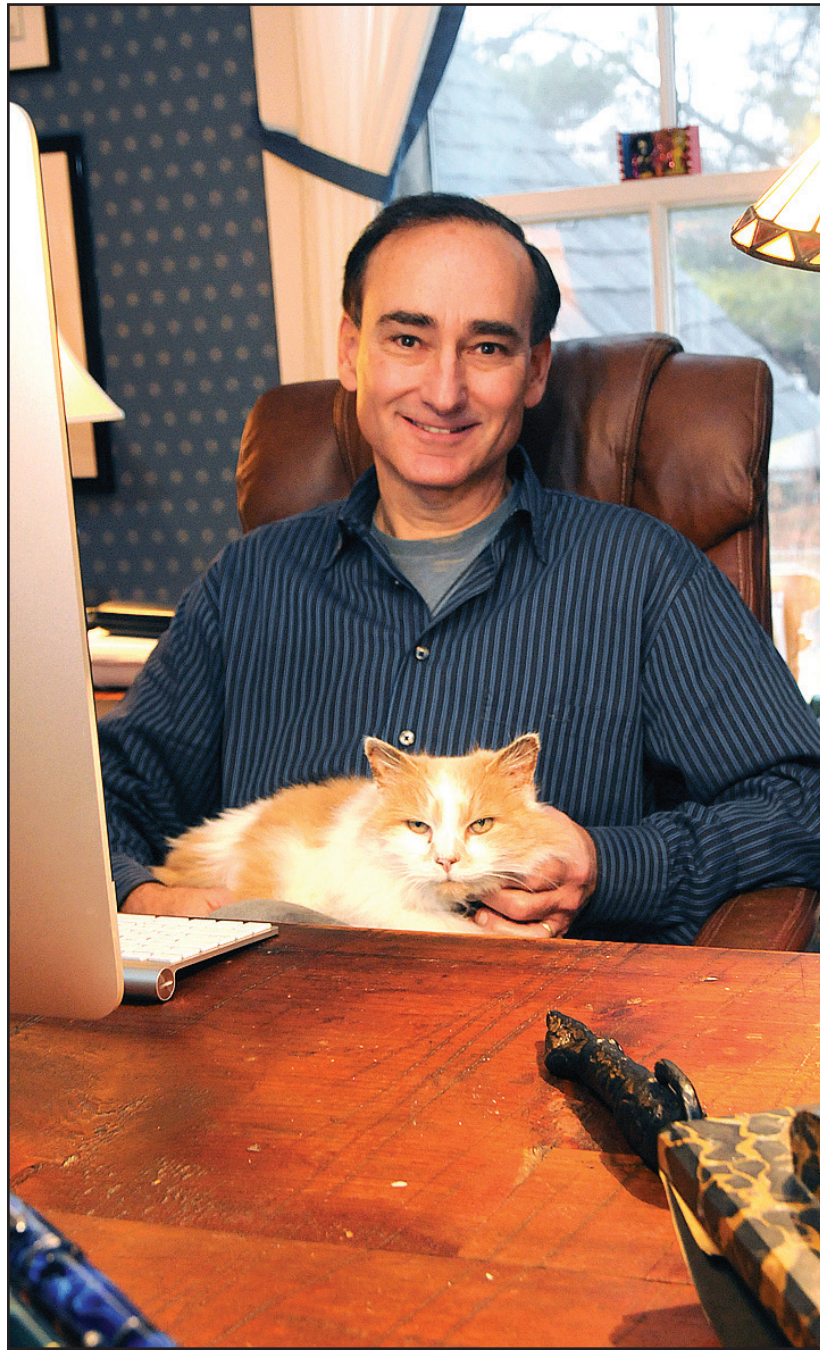
And so "The Guest Room" began.

As Bohjalian researched prostitution in Armenia, he learned that, as elsewhere, in the Caucasus region there's often a "razor thin line" between prostitution and human trafficking. He said the business exploded when the Berlin Wall fell, as many former Soviet satellites found their economies in shambles.

Bohjalian is a novelist drawn repeatedly to the kinds of traumatic events that cleave a person's life in two: surviving a brutal assault, piloting a plane that crashes into Lake Champlain and kills all but a handful of crew and passengers, midwifing a home birth that goes tragically awry. He's likewise drawn to historical events of great trauma: the Armenian genocide during World War I, refugees on multiple sides fleeing the carnage of World War II, the aftermath of nuclear disaster. And he's never been one to shy away from complex social issues: transsexual identity, cross-racial adoption. But alone among the novels displayed on his website, "The Guest Room" includes links and information about steps you can take to address a particular social evil.

Given that much of the novel is, necessarily, about sex — sex for money, girls forced into sex to make money for other people — Bohjalian was especially careful to craft the novel so that the sex scenes are not titillating.

"I never wanted the sex in the book to be erotic. It was really important that it's clear that hers is a life of



LINCOLN AUTHOR CHRIS Bohjalian, seen here at his desk with cat Horton, came out with a new book, "The Guest Room," on Jan. 6. Independent photo/Trent Campbell

violence and degradation," he said. "And so I wanted it to be clear that this is really, really horrific stuff."

NOT PREACHY

But, as Bohjalian himself is quick to point out, "The Guest Room" is a novel, not a social tract.

"I'm a novelist," he said. "I make stuff up. What matters to me most are characters that you really care about and a story that keeps you turning the pages. 'The Guest Room,' in my opinion, is a novel of suspense. It's a literary thriller about a marriage in crisis, two remarkable women and that one moment you wish more than anything you could take back."

And indeed, like so many of Bohjalian's 16 other novels, "The Guest Room" is a real page turner. And the reader is more than likely to stay up half the night zooming forward to see how it all works out for Richard and his family, and for Nevart.

The novel equally investigates Nevart's journey through the hell of sexual slavery, as it does Richard's own descent into purgatory as one dubious choice makes his life a nightmare. That choice — agreeing to host a seemingly harmless bachelor party and then accompanying Nevart/Alexandra into the titular "guest room" of his Westchester County home — sets the novel in motion.

With characteristic skill, Bohjalian interweaves Richard's story with his wife's, his daughter's, and Nevart's. And for many events the novel uses something of a "Rashoman" format, as we continually see the same event reflected through the prisms of different characters' experience.

NOT VERMONT

Unlike so many of Bohjalian's novels, this one is not set in the Green

Mountain State.

"I love to write about Vermont; living here is a great gift," said Bohjalian, "and I think it's important that sometimes my books aren't set here. Everything about 'The Guest Room' felt outside of Vermont. To me, when I was thinking about the book, I was always envisioning Moscow, Yerevan and New York City."

And indeed, the action of the novel moves seamlessly back and forth between those three locales, and Richard's upscale home just north of Manhattan in Bronxville, N.Y. Bohjalian remarks that he could have chosen any of a number of well-heeled Manhattan commuter towns, but chose Bronxville because it's where he grew up, the son of an advertising executive.

"I lived in Bronxville in high school, so I knew that topography," he said. "My father was Don Draper with less hair and no adulterous liaisons."

What's next for Bohjalian? He's well at work on his 18th novel, with the working title of "The Sleepwalker." It is set back on familiar turf in Addison County and shares the "Bartlett" — also known as Lincoln — setting familiar to readers of "The Buffalo Soldier" and other Bohjalian novels. The story concerns a woman who suffers from a sleepwalking disorder, who one night just disappears. Bohjalian describes "The Sleepwalker" as a suspense novel. It's due to come out in 2017.

First, though, he's off on his "Guest Room" Rock 'n' Roll Book Tour," with stops in Florida, Georgia, New Jersey, California, Colorado — and yes, Vermont — and many, many places in between.

Bohjalian speaks out during genocide's centennial

By GAEN MURPHREE

Chris Bohjalian's grandparents survived the Armenian genocide and emigrated to America. But like many a child of immigrants, his father, Aram, wanted to assimilate as much as possible.

"My dad grew up speaking Armenian, but I was 14 years old before I discovered he could speak Armenian fluently," Chris Bohjalian said. "He wanted to be as American as he could."

Chris Bohjalian, a Lincoln writer who just released the novel "The Guest Room," grew up in suburban New York, just north of the city. But his ancestral connections to Armenia were important — especially in 2015.

Doubleday had originally scheduled publication of "The Guest Room" for last summer. But Bohjalian asked them to hold the

release date until early 2016, as 2015 marked the centennial of the Armenian genocide. On the night of April 24, 1915, Ottoman authorities rounded up and executed a host of Armenian intellectuals, professionals, editors and religious leaders in Constantinople and the Armenian genocide began.

"In the years that followed," wrote Bohjalian in an opinion piece in the *Boston Globe*, "three out of every four Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire were systematically annihilated by their own government: 1.5 million people. The majority of Armenians alive today are descendants of those few who survived."

As a novelist, Bohjalian directly addressed those events in his 2012 novel "Sandcastle Girls."

For the 2015 centennial, Bohjalian spent much of the year speaking and making public appearances both nationally and internationally. He is especially proud that Vermont legislators passed a special resolution commemorating the centennial and held a special day of commemoration last March. Vermont officially acknowledged the Armenian genocide under Gov. Douglas in 2004.

For Bohjalian, 100 years later, it matters deeply that the Armenian genocide gain wider recognition and acknowledgment.

"It matters first of all because the last stage in any genocide is denial, which is the first stage in subsequent

genocides. There's a direct link between the Armenian genocide, the Jewish Holocaust, the Cambodian killing fields, Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur. It's a very, very long list.

"It matters because it is a great open wound for an awful lot of Armenians. A cataclysmic unpunished crime," Bohjalian said.

"And it matters because of justice."

VUHS

(Continued from Page 1A)

a proposal that would make \$1.2 million of cuts, including all sports programs; and agreed to look at scheduling a vote later than Town Meeting Day.

By delaying the public vote on the budget, school board members said, they would know for sure two things:

- If lawmakers had changed Act 46, which currently calls for a dollar-for-dollar penalty for school spending over a certain per-pupil threshold that VUHS is projected to far exceed because of declining enrollment. That provision is one of two main drivers behind the projected higher VUHS tax rate.

- If Addison Northwest Supervisory Union residents had on Town Meeting Day backed district unification, thus giving ANWSU towns a 10-cent tax break not this coming year, but the year after.

It was not immediately clear if holding a vote later than March 1 was feasible, said ANWSU Superintendent JoAn Canning on Tuesday in an email.

"The short story is that delaying the vote is possible but not without complication," Canning wrote. "We are researching if we can and what impact this would have."

VUHS board members hope that the unification spoonful of sugar

might help what could be a bitter tax pill go down a little easier this year.

"We're going to have to sell unification. We're going to have to sell this budget," said Board Chairwoman Laurie Childers.

"We're going to have to sell unification. We're going to have to sell this budget. It's going to cost a lot this year. But we can promise a significant reduction next year."

— School Board Chairwoman Laurie Childers

their legislators," said Canning.

TAX-RATE PRESSURE

On top of the Act 46 threshold, the other central problem facing the VUHS board members is two-fold: The school's equalized student count is dropping by 30, and the revenue VUHS will receive from the state is dropping substantially, leaving ANWSU taxpayers to pick up a larger share of the tab to keep the school running.

Because there are technically fewer "equalized" pupils — even though there will not actually be fewer students in September, according to Principal Stephanie Taylor at Monday's board meeting — the per-pupil cost will increase dramatically.

Officials said equalized students are based on a three-year average, and the school's enrollment has dropped by 82 students in the past five years, according to Taylor. That average has caught up to VUHS, Canning confirmed in an email, even though the actual student count is not projected to change in the 2016-2017 school year.

The revenue shortfall comes largely in special education. Although those costs are expected to drop by \$25,000 next year, projected state support for those services is projected to decline by almost \$444,000, according to Canning.

Therefore, according to a presentation made by Canning and Taylor to the board on Monday night, the only way to avoid Act 46's dollar-for-dollar penalty at VUHS for the 2016-2017 school year — unless the Legislature acts — would be to make almost \$1.2 million of cuts to the VUHS budget as it now stands.

They presented such a budget. Just the big-ticket items on the chopping block included:

- All extracurricular activities, including sports, clubs and school plays. The school's activities director would not be retained. (\$322,048 in savings).
- The Walden Program (\$157,047) and part-time choral position (\$40,000).
- The assistant principal job (\$110,000).
- Supplies and books (\$85,000).
- Cuts in operations and maintenance (\$75,000).

(See Pressure, Page 16A)

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