

“Dr. Wizard’s” Blog creates online magic

All eyes on

Joe Webb

“I suppose there is nobody else really doing what I am doing.”

BY CASSANDRA MCCARTY
Assistant Features Editor

In a lecture hall at the beginning of the fall 2008 semester, organic apples found their champion.

Joe Webb, an associate professor of English at Saint Louis University, gave an impromptu speech about the horrors of pesticides found on fruits and vegetables. Webb’s unrehearsed lecture about Gala apples spurred the creation of a blog which provides advice to college students.

Webb, a 28-year-old doctoral student in the SLU English department, posted the speech about organic apples under the alias, “Dr. Wizard.”

“Dr. Wizard’s Advice for College Students” has hosted numerous other columns covering subjects such as learning Chinese, the differences between drugs, how many shots people should take celebrating their 21st birthdays and the benefits of being the student third most often to speak in class.

Webb attended Truman from 1998 to 2001, but the experience of traveling with his three-man band precluded the completion of his degree. However, this deviation did not ultimately hinder Webb and today serves as a supplementary life lesson for his students.

“I really like teaching college, I really like the students and that’s the whole point [of] the blog,” Webb said. “I am trying to help. It started out just being things I was telling to my class. I would stop for five or 10 minutes a day in which I would deliver a lecture on something. And I would be like, ‘You guys need to know this and nobody is telling you this, and I need to tell you before I get old and frazzled.’ Because by the time I am 50 I am not going to remember what it is like to be 18 years old.”

Webb’s enthusiasm for teaching and helping the younger generation stems from his earlier experiences as a college undergraduate. At Truman, Webb studied as a political science major,

but with 18 credit hours until graduation he left school to spend time traveling.

“I was political science, pre-law, and I was speeding towards this cliff, and I knew that I was nine months from law school and having to go and graduate and grow up,” Webb said. “And I wasn’t ready.”

After what Webb calls his “disastrous years,” writing a 70-page novel in the basement of a fraternity house and working as a used car salesman, his reflective writings on the Internet have gathered attention from the literary world as well as from his University’s community. In the fall of 2009, “Dr. Wizard’s Advice for College Students” will find its way onto the shelves of bookstores. Webb attributes his success to his unique position as a young teacher among college students.

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English instructor

“I suppose there is nobody else really doing what I am doing, which is you have a lot of students writing about being students and you have a lot of older professors talking about how students should be,” Webb said. “But one of the things that makes me different is that I am 28, I still watch the same shows and listen to the same bands that my students do. But the difference is I have the experience from having lived such a crazy life, and I am a teacher now, so I do see what the students need to do.”

Webb’s columns includes open and frank passages dealing with numerous subjects in a college student’s life, hence the topic dealing with the right amount of alcohol to consume when turning 21, but Webb said people sometimes disagree with his discretion in covering certain subjects.

“There is disagreement on things,” Webb said. “I say some things that are moderately controversial. I differentiate between the levels of drug usage. I am like ‘OK, this is probably worse than marijuana.’ ... Some professors are like, ‘You shouldn’t be talking about that.’ So who is going to talk about that?”

Webb’s musings might provoke controversial feelings through strong language use and



Photo Submitted by Joe Webb

Joe Webb, an associate professor of English at Saint Louis University, spun an original twist on blogging by advising college students about controversial topics.

hot topics, but the columns are full of current, pop culture allusions which attract a certain type of reader. Webb was influenced by television shows such as “Arrested Development” and “Entourage” and even the alias “Dr. Wizard” was originally used by Paulie Bleeker, a young character from the movie “Juno” who muttered “wizard” instead of “cool.”

“Every time Paulie Bleeker tries to say ‘cool’ in the movie, he says ‘wizard,’” Webb said. “That’s his word for cool, and I think it must have stuck in my head and I think wizards are really funny anyways, the whole concept of them. It took me eight seconds. I was just signing up for blog names when I had this thing I

wanted to type up about organic apples.”

The Internet mutterings of a young teacher at a university have caught the attention of the college-aged generation through the blog’s creative and original approach toward providing advice. Webb said he gained a book deal through his lectures, and that the ultimate goal for the blog was to help students through their college experience.

“What I want the Dr. Wizard thing to do, I want it to turn into a book, and I want people to read it and use it and be excited about it,” Webb said. “I don’t care if it makes any money. What I want is the idea that people are getting advice from it.”

Retail bankruptcy worries gift card owners

BY STEPHANIE HALL
Features Editor

Although gift cards might seem like catch-all gifts, unknown restrictions might inhibit shoppers.

Retail stores including Circuit City, Linens ‘n Things, Sharper Image and Goody’s have filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, meaning those companies are not required to redeem gift cards.

In June of 2008, Goody’s filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, closing 69 stores in 18 states as of October, according to a Goody’s press release.

Store Manager at the Kirksville Goody’s Wayne Walker said Goody’s has stopped selling gift cards.

“We do honor pre-existing gift cards, but we are just not selling them.”

Walker said.

He said they will close but that he does not know the exact date.

David Overfelt, president of the Missouri Retailers Association, said the beginning of the gift card worries began with a false e-mail about companies going into bankruptcy.

“Remember, just because a company is in bankruptcy does not mean it is going out of business,” he said.

Chapter 11 bankruptcy means that Circuit City, Linens ‘n Things and Sharper Image are trying to rehabilitate their companies. Chapter 7 means they are going out of business, Overfelt said.

“[Even] when things are good, companies go out of business,” Overfelt said. “Some of the [companies] are closing a couple of stores. [Companies] close and open stores all the time.”

Overfelt said the important thing is to use gift cards wisely and avoid leaving them locked in a wallet or cupboard.

“Most problems I’ve seen are with independent restaurants,” Overfelt said. “Customers didn’t use cards on a timely basis.”

In Missouri, unredeemed gift certificates are listed as abandoned property after five years, according to the Missouri treasury Web site. Five years after a gift card is activated and not used, companies must hand over the abandoned gift card money to the government. The law changed from seven years to five years in 2000.

Overfelt said that although many individual stores’ cards usually do not have fees or expiration dates, cards that can be used by multiple vendors can cause trouble.

“Bank gift cards, like loaded MasterCard or American Express [cards], and many store cards, like mall gift cards, often have fees with them,” Overfelt said. “You have to be careful being that they are similar to a credit card.”

Travis Ford, Missouri consumer educator attorney, said Missouri has no consumer protection laws.

According to Consumer’s Union, a consumer protection law in Illinois prohibits expiration dates and fees on gift cards for five years. The consumer protection law in Kansas also prohibits expiration for five years but prohibits fees for only one year.

“There have been bills sponsored [for Missouri] that haven’t passed,” Ford said. “But we have a new governor that has been friendly toward consumer protection in the past.”

Consumers who have problems redeeming gift cards can file claims against businesses through the Missouri attorney general’s office.

“We get several hundred complaints a year,” Ford said. “We had 250 in 2007, and that was before the economy got bad.”

Ford said occasionally they get a rash of calls about a specific business that has gone under, like Spa 151 in St. Louis.

“We got 700 complaints about gift cards no longer being honored,” Ford said. “[We] took legal action and got them a refund of 100 percent.”

Ford suggested giving cash or checks this year.

“It’s hard to tell which businesses are in trouble,” Ford said. “It’s hard to predict.”

Asthma attacks all ages

Asthma affects nearly 20 million Americans, both young and old. In both pediatric and adult-onset cases, asthma symptoms can affect quality of life or restrict activity. However, with proper treatment, individuals with asthma can lead a healthy, normal life.

Asthma is characterized by a swelling of the airways leading to the lungs, which makes it difficult to breathe. An excess of thick mucus can clog the airway passage or it can become constricted because of contracting muscles. When people with asthma experience a major flare-up that includes extreme difficulty breathing, it is called an asthma attack. Asthma is often ac-

companied by wheezing, coughing, shortness of breath, tightness in the chest and difficulty sleeping.

Asthma is associated with allergies, but there are several other factors that can lead to an asthma diagnosis. For children, asthma can be genetic. If several family members are diagnosed with asthma, it is important to have children examined by their physician even if they are not showing signs or symptoms. Pollution, cleaning products and other environmental and household irritants can cause asthma or make the condition worse.

Adult-onset asthma might be caused by environmental irritants, a virus or illness such as the flu,

obesity or hormonal changes during pregnancy or menopause. Both children and adults can experience exercise-induced asthma, a type of asthma in which symptoms become worse due to physical labor or exercise. Although both pediatric and adult-onset asthma function similarly, adults tend to experience symptoms more frequently, whereas children’s symptoms might come and go. This is due to a lower lung capacity in adults caused by changes in the muscles in the chest walls after middle age.

Diagnosis for asthma can be as simple as a lung capacity evaluation. There are several classifications that determine the severity of the asthma



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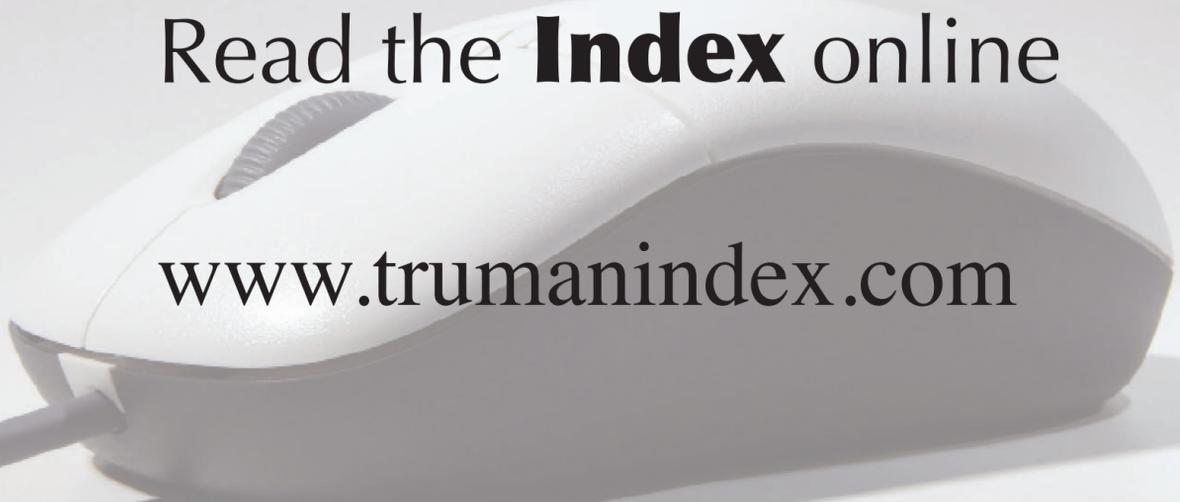
diagnosis. Cases can range from mild intermittent, in which symptoms only occur once or twice a week, to severe persistent, in which symptoms are continuous.

Although there is no cure for asthma, it can be controlled with proper medication and precautions. Depending on the severity of the diagnosis, medications prescribed by a physician might only be used during a flare-up or might require a daily maintenance dosage. In severe cases, an asthma attack that goes untreated

can be life-threatening. It is important to seek immediate treatment from a physician when experiencing asthmatic symptoms or asthmatic episodes, such as shortness of breath or difficulty breathing. A physician might prescribe an inhaler to be used during physical exercise to reduce breathing difficulties.

Along with proper medication there are ways to improve quality of life, reduce symptoms and return to normal activities.

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