

PROJECT UPDATE

Volume 39, March, 2002

Editor: George R. Babiak

Sailing Off Into a Foam-core Sunset

After ten years of teaching playwriting and having the time of my life as the Associate Artistic Director of The 52nd Street Project, it's time to pass the pencils and notebooks on to someone else. About three years ago, when I decided to go part time, I told the rest of the staff that I would stay on until the arrangement became difficult for the Project. With all the growth and expansion we are going through, it's the opinion of the staff (myself included) that the Project would be better served by a full-time Associate Artistic Director, and we're looking for one to replace me sometime this summer.



One of the most important lessons of my writing classes is that there has to be a change or transformation in the story. Although I would be happy to teach playwriting and Shakespeare to kids from the neighborhood till I'm well into my 80's (which some of the kids think I already am), that time has come. When I was hired to take over the playwriting classes, I neglected to tell anyone that I had done very little writing myself. Now that I spend most of my time writing and hope to make a career of it, I guess I can admit it. The truth is that in the twenty Playmaking classes, forty Replay courses and ten Playback programs I have led (not to mention the 25 plays he wrote! -Ed.), the kids taught me more about writing, honesty and bravery than I could ever have hoped to teach them, and my gratitude is enormous. Armed with this knowledge and strength I look forward to the next adventure.

Thanks to all the kids and volunteers who made the past ten years so great.

Michael

Here's Wha' Happen

Remember the last newsletter you got, way back in October? Remember that orange flyer? That, my friends, was your first indication that the theatrical sensation known as Playback was close at hand. The 2001 Playback show, *Wha' Happen? Plays with Two Sides*, began with a trip to the incomparably beautiful home (if you go for that sprawling oceanfront thing) of **Peter, Helen, and Christopher Randolph** in Wareham, MA. Inspired by the

crashing surf and amazing views, seven teens penned seven diverse short plays which, in turn, inspired seven adults to write their "answer plays." The double-play sets were subsequently presented at **St. Clement's Church** the weekend of November 2nd through 4th.

The evening peeled out with **Christina Ramirez's** *Acceptance Speech* and **Kim Sykes'** answer, *The Wonderful Adventures of One Rotten Banana*. This quirky pair followed the madcap exploits of a viral biologist/wanna-be soap star and her pet banana peel. Next up was the dynamic duo of **Zaida Natera's** *Double Take* and **Adriana Trigiani's** answer, *Mother Take*. Doubling as combative teenage pop stars and their equally combative mothers, Zaida and her partner **Lenore Pemberton** brought new meaning to the term "cat fight." In sharp contrast, **Jayme Rosado's** somber *The Spirit* and **Liz Tuccillo's** *The Spirit Part, II* dealt with a teenager watching his own funeral and regretting his suicide. In the answer play, the horror of his deed prevented a rookie cop who responded to his mother's 911 call from taking a similar way out. To round out the act, **Shevonne Hernandez** explored the inequalities inherent in assigning secret identities to FBI agents in the appropriately titled *Identity Crisis*. Shevonne and her estranged partner **Gus Rogerson** were then reconciled in *Clem 'n' Clementine* as father and daughter cowpokes with a shared affinity for griddle cakes, beef jerky and adventure.



J. WELLINGTON PICCADILLY

Good grief, is the Project training a mime troupe? No, this is the Playback cast enjoying a facial masque during their weekend away. L to R: Isaac Trujillo, Zaida Natera, Jayme Rosado, Yazzy Troche, Christina Ramirez, Shevonne Hernandez, and Michael Feliciano.

The second act opened with **Isaac Trujillo's** *Foul Play*, wherein a high school basketball star (Isaac) is seemingly undermined by a scheming team mate (**Keith Reddin**). Keith's answer play revisited the two players as grumpy old janitors mopping the Knicks locker room and arguing about what exactly happened, lo, those many years ago. The title of **Yazzy Troche's** *Dance, Dance, and Why Not Dance?* pretty much says it all. Yazzy and **Matt "Hot Feet" Saldívar** wowed the crowd with their moves, and to prove that they weren't simply dance sensations, tackled a touching parable about multi-generational friendship in **Liz Flahive's** *I'll Tell You Why Not!* The evening was brought to an emotional finale with **Michael Feliciano's** orphanage drama *That's the Way Life Is*, in which a young boy learns the harsh ways of the world when his older brother **Carlo Alban** goes off to college, leaving him alone in the orphanage. Years later, in **Michael Bernard's** *Life Is That Way*, the two (now a farmer and an astronaut, natch) are reunited and attempt to reconcile the past while raking leaves.

We owe a weekend of happy tummies to our chefs **Chris Randolph**, **Karin Schall** and **Mary Pat Walsh**. Helping the young geniuses to birth their masterpieces were dramaturgs **Seret Scott** and **Megan Sandberg-Zakian**. Lilted melodies for the kids' (and adults) snappy lyrics were provided by **Virginia Pike** while **Doug Nervik** tickled the ivories. Thanks to all. Let's do it again in the fall!

MS-Z

New Fork City

So we came to a fork in the road and we took it and we ended up at this old black box theater on 52nd Street (a.k.a. the Project's home-away-from-home, the ever-welcoming E.S.T., to whom we say, as ever, *muchos gracias*) and there were all these adults running around on stage singing about friendship and dreams of going to France. The place was packed.

First up in an evening titled, funnily enough, *Fork In The Road: Ten Choice Plays*, were **Larry Nathanson**, **David Zayas** and **Michael Bernard** in the roles of their lifetimes, as two zebras and a monkey named Crazy, respectively, in **Michael Velez's** *A So-Called Family*, which proved that it is, in fact, all happening at the zoo. The number two play, *Step By Step*, was written by **Madelyne Ross** and featured **Lizzy Davis** and **Michael Potts** as an angry teenager and an extremely understanding and benevolent, nay heroic, figure of authority. This was followed, after the super-speedy backstage crew worked their magic, by **Alex Tomas's** *Ruby and Buddy's Big Deal: Be Yourself* (a play noticeably shorter than its title). **Zabryna Guevara** was way too serious and **Ray Thomas** way too funny. **Dauids Eigenberg** and **Costabile** then took the stage in **Victor Ariel Cortes's** *The Crystal Hunt* and



The Fork In The Road Authors. The girls: Madelyne Ross, Johanna Vidal, Solangee Acosta, Lilli Coper, Katie Gullon. The boys: Alex Tomas, Spencer Lopez, Victor Cortes, Michael Velez, Zebulun Santiago.

changed the course of American theater history forever with their portrayals of a well-meaning but violent dragon and a shape-shifting slime demon. **Johanna Vidal's** thriller, *A Date For Mom*, brought screams from the audience, both of laughter and of fear, as **Niambi Nataki** and her mom **Phyllis Somerville** thwarted the wicked, bad, evil, and not-so-nice plans of villain **Christopher Randolph** (Norman Bates redux!).

Then we ate the best chocolate bars we ever tasted (since the last show), felt really happy, and settled back in for the second-act opener, **Solangee Acosta's** *To Sing or Not To Sing*. **Judy Kuhn** sang her way to stardom and **Lois Smith** tried to ride her coattails, only to end up back in the gutter. It was intense. Thankfully, the next play, **Katie Grullon's** *Sneezing Andrea*, had lots of foam-core animals in it as well as **Leslie Lyles** and **Abigail Lopez** playing two pals who are completely estranged by the end of the play. That was kind of heavy, too. Thankfully, **Lilli Cooper's** *One Night At The Heavenly Hotel* brought us **Mercedes Herrero** and **Phyllis Somerville** struggling with homesickness... oh, man. We were very impressed. **Zebulun Santiago** turned the corner into romantic comedy land with *Jack and Jill*, as **Phillip Christian** and **Anita Flanagan** worked out their differences on the way to marital bliss. Hooray. The last play had **Kevin Jackson** as an extremely understanding and benevolent, nay heroic, figure of authority and **Billy Crudup** as a troubled teen in **Spencer Lopez's** *A Classroom Breakout*.

The direction was mighty fine, thanks to dramaturg/directors **Rick Meese**, **Jessica Bauman**, **Angel David**, **Sascha Paladino**, **George Babiak**, **Lizzie Gottlieb**, **Kay Matschullat**, **Susan Vitucci**, **Glynis Rigby** and **Lee Wilkof**. The music composed by **Rusty Magee** was totally diggable, and everybody kept talking about how much fun they had on the playwriting weekend back in November at the home of these really cool guys **Mike Sell** and **Eric Karpeles**, who can both cook and draw, but apparently not at the same time. Anyway, we're sure glad we took that fork.

GR

Turning the Tables on the Two-on-Twos

There comes a time in every young Projectile's life when that young lad or lass must brave the proscenium unaccompanied by an adult. That time comes every year in the dark of winter, when we produce the much-feared, but much-revered **Two-on-Twos**. In this wild and woolly format, each of the six plays matches up two kid actors with an adult playwright and an adult director. Hence the name! This year's edition, *Table for Two: The Restaurant Plays*, put another ingredient into the mix: each play had to take place in a restaurant of some kind.



After a couple of weeks of rehearsal and a trip to beautiful Dutchess County, the whole smorgasbord was served up at the oh-so-convenient (right across the hall, amigo!) **Women's Interart Annex** on the weekend of February 1, 2, and 3.

For appetizers, *Crazy Larry's Squid Hut*, by **Susan Kim**, featured **Berto Rodriguez** as a restaurateur

obsessed by one food alone: squid! His long-suffering, squid-hating chef and wife, played by **Wendy Rivera**, contrives a plan to convince Crazy Larry of the folly of over-specialization. Director and new papa **Joel de la Fuente** juggled production and child-care schedules with the dexterity of someone with ten arms. Like, say, a squid.

Next on the menu was **Jerome Hairston's** *The King Ain't the Thing*. **Oscar Padilla** played King Diggity, a sausage-eating champion faced with the first defeat of his career, while **Akeem Frazier** portrayed his worldly-wise coach, Bubba. Both Oscar and Akeem were mercilessly coached by director **Gus Rogerson**.

Kathy Taveras and **Lizette Natera** ended the first half as a beguiling pair of angels who come to earth to get some good eats and redeem a mean and crusty waitress named Maria Coffeeshopolis (seasoned vet **Diana Rojas**). *Hungry for Heaven* was written by **Alexandra Gersten** and directed by **Megan Sandberg-Zakian**.

You'd think the audience would be full after such a repast, but no, the gluttonous crowd charged out into the lobby for root beer floats and coffee donated by **Boylan's Beverages**, **D'Agostino's**, and **Johnny Coffeeshopolis** (a distant cousin of Maria's who sometimes uses the alias Vassilaros) and then charged right back into the theater. We had no choice but to cook up three more plays.

Adrian Zambrano and **Frankie Ventura** opened Act II with *The Luckiest Men In the World*, a play by **Michaela Murphy** that treated us to the wonderfully surreal spectacle of baseball greats **Lou Gehrig** and **Babe Ruth** reincarnated as a knife and fork. Move over, Monsieur Ionesco. The level-headed **Ed Vassallo** kept a firm grip on reality as he directed the piece.

John Sheehy proved he is becoming a master of restrained elegance (who'd have thought it?) by writing *The Right Place*, our class act of the evening. **Tiffany Butler**

was a mysterious hostess in an upscale restaurant where **Allary Seda** hoped to dine with a gentleman. The blind date never appeared, but another friendship blossomed instead. **Nancy Giles** ably steered this particular vehicle.

Finally, our dessert arrived in the form of *Short-Order Crook*, a rare example of the most delicate of Project forms, the romantic comedy. In **Adam Felber's** charming script, **Jaymaree Rosado** played a tough diner waitress held hostage by desperado **Jeremy Butler**, who, it turned out, resorted to crime solely to get the attention of his long-time crush. Adam's fiancée, **Jeanne Simpson**, directed with her usual deftly daft touch.

In short, it was a delicious show that couldn't have happened without the generosity of **Maria Tucci** and **Robert Gottlieb**, **Derek McLane** and **Wendy Ettinger**, and **Stephen Perepeluk** and **Terry Fitzpatrick**, who all allowed us to traipse snow and strew crumbs all over their houses over the Martin Luther King Day weekend (Maria and her son **Nicky** even pitched in at the stove). And of course, a big bravo to **Deborah Abramson**, our newest composer, and pianist **Joe Rubenstein**, who seasoned our show with some very savory melodies. (Okay, are we all sick of the food motif by now?). **GB**

Teens on the Town

The 2001-2003 Teen Ensemble class got off to a wonderful start this fall. Besides playing lots of deceptively simple acting games, performing some scenes, and tackling a new and exciting solo performance unit, this lucky group has attended the theater together not once but four times! We had the privilege of seeing Project pals **Bruce MacVittie** and **Ed Vassallo** in **Eduardo Machado's** *Havana Is Waiting*, **John Leguizamo** in *Sexaholix*, the acrobatic spectacle *De La Guarda*, and *Contact* at Lincoln Center. As if this weren't enough, Proj vet **Nancy Giles** treated us to a private viewing of her solo show *Black Comedy: The Wacky Side of Racism* to kick off the solo performance unit. Many thanks to all those who made these outings possible. **MS-Z**

The Site To See

Been on the web, but can't find anything good? We know how you feel. Don't worry. Your friends at the Project are here to help. Check out the Project's brand new website, beautifully retooled by our graphic designer **Iris A. Brown** and her webmaster cohort **Lorraine Tobias**.

It has cool graphics, adorable snaps of the kids and all the latest info on the

Project's programs and productions.

There's even pictures of the Project staff, in case you haven't seen us in a while. Just go to www.52project.org. There's hours of fun in store. **JS**

Britney Castro, as seen flying through our website.

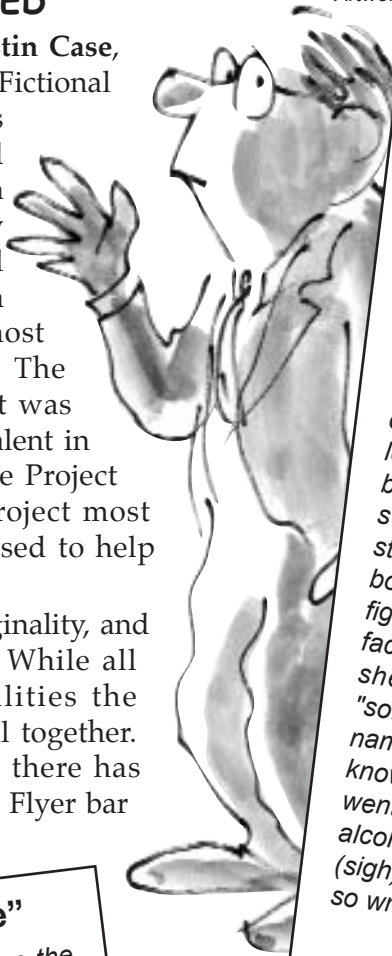


ALL EXCUSES ACCEPTED

Artwork by James Stevenson

Sorry, couldn't get a cab. It is I, **Justin Case**, Director of Exculpatory Explanations--Fictional Division, here to report on this year's Project contest. I would have reported sooner, but the **World Economic Forum** was in town, and you have no idea how busy they make me. You may recall that this year's fundraiser was an opportunity to share some of your most outrageous or entertaining excuses. The expert judging panel from the Project was thrilled with the range and depth of talent in this field -- what a slippery group the Project supporters turned out to be! The Project most appreciates the more than \$54,000 raised to help them continue their work with the kids.

Judges were looking for humor, originality, and a blithe disregard for believability. While all entries showed some of these qualities the following came closest to putting it all together. In fact, in the "Homework" category there has been a tie. Winners will each receive a Flyer bar gift box.



The Any Amount "Why I Never Showed Up"

I never showed up because I was traveling towards your house at rush hour on the Q train, the train got stuck in a tunnel, the lights went out, a lady fainted and as I was reviving her the lights suddenly came back on, the train lurched forward, we looked into each others eyes, blinked and knew it was love at first sight. It was totally meant to be, all our prayers were answered, we swore our love to each other and started discussing the names of our first born child but couldn't agree, started to fight and she sort of slapped me in the face which totally shocked us both, then she started to cry and said she was "sort of" sorry but really didn't like the names I liked, so we broke up and, you know, well, I needed time to reflect so I went to the Hilton Hotel and had a non-alcoholic beverage in the lounge area. (sigh) So I like the name Clem, is that so wrong?!

-- Alex Gersten & Johnny Coffeeshopolis

The \$25 "Why I was Late"

I was late because the F train became the V train, the 2 went local, I don't know what happened to the J, & my Metrocard expired anyway.

-- Rusty, Alison & Nat Magee

The \$50 "Why I Don't Have My Homework"

I don't have my homework, because frankly, I'm not very bright.

--Liz Tuccillo

I don't have to do homework. I'm fifty years old.

-- Lee Wilkof (& Connie Grappo)

The \$100 "Why That Thing Is Broken"

Hunh: When I kicked it yesterday it started right up.

-- John & Katherine Turturro

And the overall winner this year comes from the Any Amount "Why I Never Showed Up" Category. **Belle & Roger Kuhn** will receive a gift certificate for one of **B. R. Guest Inc.**'s restaurants for their excuse, which scales the very heights of boldness in New York City.

The Over-all Winner

I couldn't find 52nd Street.

-- Belle & Roger Kuhn

Honorable mention goes out to **John Slattery, Deborah & David Pursch, Willie Reale** and **Mary C. White** for their especially humorous attempts at justification.

JS

SMART PARTICLES

The Smart Partner Report
brought to you by Boylan's Beverages

Listen in on this strange Smart Partner dialogue between **Caroline Sharman** and 7th grader **Marilyn Sanchez**: Caroline: "What's this word Marilyn?" Marilyn: "Runidate". C: "Great! How about these two?" M: "Lupidoop and Trenfallove" C: "Excellent! What about this?" M: "Finterspockanglus". C: "Amazing!" What language is this adult volunteer teaching this innocent child? Has Caroline gone mad? Quite the opposite; it was teaching genius!

The story goes like this. "Tone-deaf" Caroline ran joyously to her Smart Partner meeting after experiencing a breakthrough in her singing class. For the first time in her life, she had correctly sung each note her teacher had playfully picked out on the piano. Her voice teacher gave her an insight: Caroline was not tone-deaf. This negative belief had simply gotten in her way. Caroline recounted the story to Smart Partner Marilyn, asking whether there was anything Marilyn believed she couldn't do. Marilyn said she just couldn't pronounce big words correctly and hated reading out loud. Inspired, Caroline jotted down some nonsense words, explaining that there was nothing to fear since there were no right or wrong pronunciations. They played with the made-up words, laughing at their crazy sounds. Then Caroline grabbed the dictionary, pointing out random words. And lo and behold -- Marilyn got every one right! What explains this? Marilyn sums it up this way: "Caroline opened up the fear that was trapped inside a chamber in me, and now it's loose." These days, she reports, she volunteers to read in front of the class!



JULIE FELDMAN-ABE

Marilyn's keen observations and poetic perspective on life constantly impress Caroline. When the pair are not learning vocabulary (real words now like "manticore" and "jejeune") they dedicate time to writing poems, then illustrating them with watercolors. An excerpt from one of Marilyn's poem: "He is like Puerto Rico. How the rain falls into my arms and kisses me and takes the poison away." Watch out for this blossoming poet. JF-A

Oscar, Schmoscar

Step aside, Jean-Luc, out of the way, Ingmar, forget about it, Federico. Budding auteur and Project alum **Zsuzsa Mysak** was honored for her first short film (currently untitled - no, not "Untitled." It just doesn't have a title.) with a **National Scholastic Award** for which she receives college scholarship money, a gold key (to what we don't know), and an invitation to a gala dinner at the Brooklyn Museum. The film now goes into international competition. Palme D'Or, Schmalme D'Or.

GR

Funkytown Project



The Project will get down and boogie, oogie, oogie at this year's very special gala **STILL STAYIN' ALIVE: The 20th Anniversary Disco Benefit**, on **Monday, May 13, 2002** at the Eyebeam Atelier.

Last year's bash, *52001: A Space Benefit*, was such an out-of-this-world good time we thought we'd do it all over again. This time we're going to break out the dancing shoes and polyester. The disco inferno ignites with cocktails and dinner, then we'll electric-slide into a tribute to the past twenty years of the Project. The honorary chair of the evening will be **Tom Cruise**. An invitation will cruise your way this April. Contact John "Dancin' Machine" Sheehy for details. JS

The following foundations, corporations and government agencies recently made generous grants to the Project. We are grateful to them for their support as well as to the many individuals who help sustain the Project's programs year-round.



The Dramatists Guild Fund	\$3,000
Dramatists Play Service	\$1,500
The Fan Fox & Leslie R. Samuels Foundation	\$5,000
JKW Foundation	\$25,000
James A. Macdonald Foundation	\$800
The Cynthia & George Mitchell Foundation	\$5,000
The National Board of Review	\$5,000
The New York Times Company Foundation	\$7,500
Newman's Own	\$5,000
The Vervane Foundation	\$3,000
The Wiener Family Foundation	\$15,000

Kids Get a Good Paddling

On February 20, the Project held the second annual Smart Partner's Ping-Pong Tournament. Sixteen kid/adult teams played for three hours to determine the champions. **Joel Lind** and **Kurt Mueller** took home the trophy for the second year in a row while **Mayleen Cancel** and **Carol Ochs** vowed sweet revenge. **Michael Feliciano** and **Derrick Widmark** got third place and **Oscar Padilla** and **Matt Sussman** came in fourth. GB



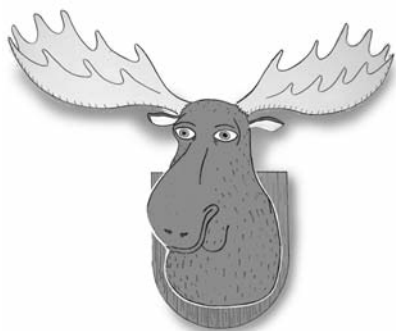
In Memoriam: Pat Walsh

We mourn the loss of our dear friend Pat Walsh. Pat and her boys **Aiden** and **Noah**, along with **Christina Biaggi**, have hosted us for years at their house on Block Island. Pat's spirit and passion were boundless and her love for the Project was unending. We miss her dearly and send our love to her family.



The 52nd Street Project
 500 West 52nd St., #2B
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This moosehead is hidden somewhere on the new Project website. Can you find it?
 (Clue: www.52project.org)



Cecilia Arana-Grant

Occupation: Actor, educator, puppeteer, wife, step-mom, HUMAN!
Place of birth: Fullerton, California. **Habitat:** "The Lower East Side."
Why you do what you do: "It makes me feel good inside."
Hobbies: Yoga, travel, playing poker, movies, karaoke.
Most recent accomplishment: "Learning to cook on more than one burner without being nervous."
Last Book Read: *American Chica* by Maria Arana: "I found out a lot about the early Aranas. It was interesting reading about the dynamic between a strict Peruvian parent and an American parent, just like mine were."
Best 52nd Street Project Memories: "Sunsets in Block Island and going to France with the teens."
Credo: "Life is short -- be good to yourself and to others."
Advice to kids: "The world is a big place. Travel to redefine yourself and learn about others...and it's FUN."
Favorite thing about the Project: "We laugh and accomplish great things together."
On Flyer Bars: "Yummy in my tummy."



JWP

12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

We're considering renaming this section The Baby Report because babies have been poppin' out all over. **Benjamin Isaac Shaffron-Davis** was born on August 18th and arrived in the home of delighted daddies **Robert Shaffron** and **John Steber** on October 3rd. On the West Coast, **Riley Addison Siegler** was born on October 30th to **Ginny** and **Ben** much to the delight of his brother and sister **Jesse** and **Dylan**. **Ruby Beatrice Baker** was born just in time to play cupid to **Adrienne Lobel** and **Mark Linn-Baker** on Feb. 12th.

But then there's been so much else going on that we thought that maybe it should become the Board of Directors Report. Long-time supporter **John A. Vassilaros**, (with the assistance of his wife, Proj. volunteer **Alex Gersten**), long-time Proj. stage manager and film producer **Noël Dawkins**, long-time project pal and events planner **Cathy Dantchik**, and long-time Proj. kid **Shirley Rumierk**, fresh out of Harvard and working at MTV, have all joined the board -- we hope for a long time. In fact, the only drawback recently has been accepting the resignation of **Heidi Ettinger**. We are very grateful for her many years of service to us.



Noël & Joe

But then there's all the wedding news. Soon after being joining our Board, Noël announced her engagement to the estimable **Joe Mihalow**. Fellow Board member **Jenny Wiener** got engaged to her pal and partner **Jon Steingart** despite having seen *The Mirror Has Two Faces* on their first date -- they must really be in love. We wish them all much happiness.

On the other hand, perhaps we should call it Staff Improvement. **Julie Feldman-Abe** is now demanding that we call her Doctor J because she finally finished that dissertation and scored the big Ph.D in Education from NYU. We were able to dodge that bullet when Julie realized that she'd have to address Production Manager **George Babiak** and his wife **Vanessa Valdes** as "Divemaster" since the two of them achieved that level of scuba diving.

But since this has to be so many things to so many people, we have decided to leave it at Megabits. CO