



Hopatcong grad aims for Olympic wrestling spot
 — Page B1

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A wild ride on two wheels



A GoPro camera captures the view from New Jersey Herald reporter David Danzis' mountain bike as he tries a trail at Mountain Creek in Vernon.

By DAVID DANZIS
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VERNON — Strapping on a full-face helmet and pads covering my elbows, knees and shins, I knew what I was about to do did not qualify as “just another day at the office.” To say I was nervous would be an understatement. The plan was for me to get a first-hand experience on Mountain Creek Bike Park's newest beginner trail, Greenhorn, which opened in July. How

appropriate that a greenhorn of downhill mountain biking would get his first experience on a trail that almost sounds like it was meant to mock my lack thereof. Case in point: I showed up wearing khaki shorts, a collared polo and sneakers. I was the very definition of a greenhorn. The crew at the bike shop fitted me for a 650b (tire size) mountain bike and some fancy riding shoes that help to

grip the pedals. Out of curiosity, I asked how much a bike like the one I would be riding costs. The answer was much more than I expected and did little to ease my anxiety. “Great,” I thought, “I’m going to be cruising down a mountain at possible speeds close to 30 mph on a lightweight bike that costs more than my 2010 Toyota Corolla.”

See RIDE, Page A2

Social services director sues county officials

Alleges retaliation, solar cover-up

By ERIC OBERNAUER
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NEWTON — The director of social services for Sussex County, in a newly filed lawsuit, has accused County Administrator Stephen Gruchacz of retaliating against her for advocating on behalf of a sickly patient at Newton Medical Center earlier this year against Gruchacz's wishes. The five-page complaint by Carol Novrit, which was filed in Superior Court July 31, alleges that Gruchacz violated Novrit's rights as a conscientious employee and later secured the county administrator's job over her based partly on his assurances to three of the five freeholders — Phil Crabb, Dennis Mudrick and Rich Vohden — that he would protect them from the fallout of a multimillion-dollar solar project settlement that the three of them voted to approve in February. The three freeholders and Gruchacz are all named in the lawsuit as defendants, as

are County Counsel John Williams and former County Administrator John Eskilson. Crabb, in a brief phone conversation Friday, acknowledged learning of the lawsuit early last week but said he would have no further comment for now. Phone and voicemail messages left for Gruchacz, Williams, and the other freeholders were not returned, and an attempt to reach Eskilson was unsuccessful. Novrit alleges in her complaint that she has been the target of retaliation by Gruchacz ever since she sent a letter on Jan. 13 to Newton Medical Center urging that a female patient not be released to the care of her husband, who was said in the letter to be incapable of providing that care. Her complaint alleges that ever since then, Novrit has been treated by Gruchacz “with disdain” and been the victim of a hostile work environment. Gruchacz — who was then

See LAWSUIT, Page A2

Fair veterinarian in touch with faith, family, all God's creatures

By ERIC OBERNAUER
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FRANKFORD — Still a country veterinarian at heart, Dr. Paul Tallamy has seen plenty of change in his long career. Since graduating from Texas A&M University's College of Veterinary Medicine in 1974, Tallamy, 70, has witnessed the growth of his profession from one of generalists to one that today, as with human medicine, encompasses numerous board specialties including cardiology, ophthalmology, dermatology and endocrinology. Along the way, he's also brought his skills to places like Kenya, where he did missionary work for a time. But for more than 30 years, Tallamy has been a fixture at the New Jersey State Fair/

Sussex County Farm and Horse Show — and to hear him tell it, his philosophy and approach remain unchanged from what they were when he began working the fair as a young man. “The technology of veterinary medicine has moved ahead by leaps and bounds, but the basic science hasn't really changed,” Tallamy said. “You still have to know the anatomy of a cow, of a horse, of a dog or a cat or a bird.” On Thursday, while making the rounds at the fair, Tallamy stopped to check in on a Texas Longhorn steer he'd treated for an eye infection a day earlier and couldn't help feeling pleased. Considering the animal's nearly complete recovery in the span of 24 hours, one

could hardly blame him for indulging in a little good-natured levity as he concluded the exam. “He's mad because you stopped taking pictures of him,” Tallamy quipped to a New Jersey Herald photographer as she angled for a good spot from which to get in a few more shots. Weighing in at a full ton, the steer — belonging to Richard and Jean Smith, of South Kent, Conn. — is one of several the Smiths have been bringing with them to the fair the last several years as part of an educational exhibit of oxen. Tallamy said he considers them, and all his clients, part of an extended family. “I don't treat anybody differently whether they come

See TALLAMY, Page A2



Photo by Tracy Klimek/New Jersey Herald

Dr. Paul Tallamy, veterinarian for the New Jersey State Fair/Sussex County Farm and Horse Show, examines a Texas Longhorn named Tex, owned by Richard Smith, of South Kent, Conn., on Thursday in Frankford. **MORE FROM THE FAIR, PAGES A9-11.**

TODAY 81 63 MONDAY 79 65 TUESDAY 77 61 WEDNESDAY 79 58 THURSDAY 78 56 More weather, Page A15

Sunday
 8 91317 00001 8
 Vol. 2015 No. 189

INSIDE

- Annie's Mailbox F11
- Bridge column F3
- Business B7

- Classified F1-10
- Crossword F11
- Drs. Oz and Roizen E2
- Health E1-2
- History E4-5
- Horoscopes F2

- Local A7, A9-11
- Lottery A15
- Movies F11
- Nation/World A4, A6
- Obituaries A14
- Opinion A12-13

- People's Pharmacy D1
- Puzzles F11
- Savvy Senior D5
- Sports B1-6
- State A3
- Sussex County Lost E5

- Sussex County Excursions E5
- Technology E3
- Today in History F2
- Vicki Johnson D1
- Weather A15

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Ride

Continued from Page A1

The expert crew at Mountain Creek Bike Park was not about to send an improperly dressed novice out on his own to tackle the trail without a teacher and a guide. They paired me with Jeff Anderson, the unofficial bike school manager at the park and an instructor certified by the International Mountain Bicycling Association. The guy has forgotten more about mountain biking than I could ever know, and his knowledge coupled with an easygoing demeanor helped calm my nerves.

We exited the Red Tail Lodge, where the bike shop is located, and walked up to a small field so we could practice some elementary technique, form and safety.

Anderson started with basics like pedal position, the proper neutral and attack positions, braking and turning.

Now we were ready hit the trails.

We got on the gondola and began our ascent. The breathtaking views of Sussex County and the Kittatinny Mountains were serene.

We pedaled over to Greenhorn and I hit "record" on the New Jersey Herald's

new GoPro camera. A minute or so in, Anderson pulled off to the side of the trail to explain how to navigate going over a "roller;" the first feature in this trail. It is a rather large rock in the trail that, if done correctly, you should just roll right over. After watching Anderson do it and explain the correct technique, I seamlessly conquered our first obstacle. It was a good confidence builder.

NEXT LESSON

Anderson jumped right into his next lesson, which contained two of the best pieces of information I got all day. He explained what was coming up on the trail and how best to hold the handlebars while maintaining control. A nice, loose grip is best because it does not transfer as much of the rumble and shock from riding. This is counter-intuitive, since the average rider will white-knuckle the grips and regret every second of it. The other tidbit was about head position and where to look while riding (stay focused down the trail, not directly in front) and coming out of a turn (your head should start looking out of the turn about halfway through).

Continuing our descent of Greenhorn, Anderson did everything a great instructor should. He offered encour-

agement when I did something well; he gave fair warning to what was ahead; he maintained a nice pace so I could keep up.

I began to really enjoy the ride. I was totally focused on what I was doing, but not missing out on how picturesque my surroundings were. The path twists and turns, weaves and winds through the forest. We picked up speed and I felt comfortable doing so. All the while, Anderson kept yelling back, "Good job," or "Awesome," and I felt like I was getting the hang of this.

We stopped again right before the final stretch and Anderson told me I needed to really execute the proper turning technique in order to make it through this part well. He said to take the turns early and wide, start looking out of the turn about halfway through and take the inside line at the end. I heeded his advice and we went through the series of tight turns perfectly. It felt great. I was sweaty, surprisingly fatigued and short on breath, but eager to go again.

Since the whole point of me, as a journalist, being here was to report on the new trail, we went down Greenhorn again. Only this time, we didn't stop. It had a nice, easy flow to it. The confidence gained from familiari-

ty with the trail had me feeling like this was a breeze. Either Anderson is the world's best downhill mountain biking instructor or I'm a born natural. It's more than likely the former, but I was willing to believe the lie that it may be the latter.

Tired, hungry and parched, I was ready to go again. I switched the GoPro from my helmet to my chest and headed back up. Like a small child clearly seeking approval, I asked Anderson how I was doing. He seemed genuine when he said I was doing well. At the top, we decided to take another trail called Breakout. It has a slightly higher degree of difficulty and Anderson said it's among seasoned riders' favorite tracks.

NEAR DISASTER

I made it through about half the trail before I had my first near disaster. It was another roller, only much higher and steeper than the first one we encountered back on Greenhorn. Anderson probably sensed I was close to spent, but he really wanted me to try. He demonstrated the proper technique before challenging me to.

I'm no wuss (or at least I'm doing my best to pretend I'm not) so I went right at it. Only, I wasn't going fast enough

and my momentum stopped me three-quarters of the way up the front and I slid off the left side of the roller.

I tried again. I was going a little faster but obviously not enough because I stalled with my bike straddling the top of the roller, before clumsily going over.

Anderson challenged me to do it again and I didn't want to disappoint him. I tried a third time. I pedaled four or five times, got myself into proper position, went right at the roller and just barely made it over. It was a small victory, but I'll take it.

The trails crisscross at several points, and we exited Breakout and merged onto Dombroo, another beginner trail that is still probably more complex than Greenhorn. It's on this track that the inevitable happened: I reached my limit.

Going around a high berm that turns sharply to the

right, I went into it too high and slammed on my brakes. The bike stopped almost instantly, but I was practically straight up-and-down and fell off the bike. I landed on my feet, but the seat managed to find a fairly sensitive area. I heard Anderson say, "Nice save," but nothing about it felt nice. I wasn't feeling so confident anymore.

We finished the run and called it a day.

Like a handful of other things in my life I never thought I'd enjoy but I can't now imagine living without — like golf and drinking whiskey — I think Anderson and the crew at Mountain Creek Bike Park just hooked me onto downhill mountain biking.

For pricing information, trail maps or to see pictures and videos of the Mountain Creek Bike Park crew building the new Greenhorn trail, go to mountaincreekbikepark.com.

Tallamy

Continued from Page A1

from a big farm or a little farm, or if they're from wealth or if they're a common person," Tallamy said. "They're all human beings and they're all God's creatures, and that's my foundation. I walk my faith, and I love my work."

While praising his technical skills as a diagnostician, Montague resident Althea Quigley — a longtime client who joined him for Senior Day at the fair on Thursday — said the intangible qualities he brings to his work, often referred to as bedside manner, play an equally important role in setting him apart.

Coming from a long line of Sussex County dairy farmers, Tallamy — who grew up on a farm in Frankford — enrolled after high school at the University of Kentucky with initial designs on becoming an electrical engineer. At the time, it seemed like a logical career path for him.

"I always loved to tinker," he said.

Among Tallamy's class-

mates at the University of Kentucky was Pat Riley, who played basketball there under the legendary coach Adolph Rupp and who later would go on to become a celebrated NBA coach in his own right.

Tallamy, meanwhile, found himself undergoing a change of heart regarding his career plans that, by his junior year, had him convinced that what he wanted most of all was to return to his roots in animal husbandry and agriculture.

Without all the prerequisites needed for veterinary school, Tallamy took a detour by first completing a master's degree in dairy food technology at Texas A&M, which allowed him to complete the missing coursework he needed.

Tallamy later graduated from veterinary school with not one but two advanced degrees — a doctorate in veterinary medicine and a Ph.D. in preventive medicine — and subsequently taught at the university level for five years. But in 1979, again returning to his roots, Tallamy decided to come home to Sussex County, where he built a house in Frankford and started the veterinary clinic where he continues to practice to

this day.

"We always had a busy practice, but every night we always had dinner and prayed together as a family," Tallamy said. "If there was a medical emergency, I would attend to it, but otherwise we were always together."

Tallamy's three children, now grown, include two educators — Jon Tallamy, principal of High Point Regional High School; and Jennifer Vander Groef, a longtime kindergarten teacher at Sussex Christian School. His other son, Duce Tallamy, is the owner of Green Valley Farms in Wantage who, in 2012, received New Jersey's Outstanding Young Farmer award.

Not long after Paul Tallamy began his veterinary practice, "I started helping out at the fair; and before long it evolved into the necessity of having somebody here all the time," he said.

As he's done every year since, Tallamy once again closed his veterinary clinic for the 10-day period of this year's fair, where he has spent every day working, sometimes as late as midnight. It's his job to ensure the animals at the fair are free of infectious diseases that, if unchecked, could spread rapidly.

"No animals are allowed to be in here without the proper paperwork," Tallamy said. "People sometimes think I'm a thorn in their side, but it's my responsibility to protect these animals."

To hear Tallamy tell it, veterinary medicine — like human medicine — is as

much an art as a science.

"I seldom have an animal come into my clinic and tell me what's the matter with him, but it's the same with a baby," Tallamy said. "A baby can't tell you what's the matter with him, either; so there's a parallel with pediatric medicine."

Over the years, Tallamy said, people have suggested he write a book about his experiences.

But, he said, "there's a lot of books out there about veterinarians. They don't need another one."

Instead, for him, the greatest reward is the satisfaction he gets from infusing his life's work with his Christian faith.

Asked what he loves most about the fair, Tallamy harked back to a comment his daughter made to him once about the importance of setting children with a good foundation in life.

"It's all about the kids," Tallamy said. "As you walk the fairgrounds, you find people from all walks of life, but it's about the kids most of all, and showing them this is where your eggs come from, this is where your milk comes from, and getting them a foundation through programs like 4-H that help them find their way."

As for when he might consider retiring, Tallamy joked, "I'm still practicing. When I figure it all out, that's probably when I'll retire."

For him, though, that time is almost certainly a long way off.

"I consider all of these people here part of my big family, and I love what I do," he said.

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ATTENTION HARDYSTON RESIDENTS

The Hardyston Township Council will be appointing a special committee to assist with next steps relating to final recommendations and development and implementation of a long-term solution relative to the delivery of emergency medical services.

Hardyston residents interested in being considered for appointment to the committee should submit a letter of interest together with a resume outlining their community involvement, leadership and experience or knowledge of emergency medical service to the

Township Manager, Marianne Smith via e-mail at msmith@hardyston.com, or by mail to the Municipal Complex no later than the close of business, Tuesday,

August 11, 2015. The Township Council will make official appointments to the committee at their meeting on August 12, 2015.

Interested parties should be aware that while the length of time of commitment to this effort will be less than a year, the committee will likely need to hold a variety of meetings for the balance of the year, which could even be on a weekly basis, considering the timeframes within which their tasks need to be completed in order to effectively implement a solution.

In addition there will be a link available at www.hardyston.com for residents who are interested in serving as volunteers on a future volunteer first aid squad to submit their contact information.

For more information, please contact the municipal offices at 973-823-7020.

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Lawsuit

Continued from Page A1

the administrator of the county's Department of Human Services, within which the Division of Social Services is housed — allegedly "became incensed" upon learning of what Novrit had done, "accused (her) of sending out confidential information," told her the hospital was "ballistic," and ended by hanging up the phone on her.

At the time, according to the complaint, Gruchacz was intent on building a relationship with Newton Medical Center, with which the county had partnered three years earlier on a transitional care program for which the hospital had provided seed money.

The program, which was established under Gruchacz and which mirrors incentives provided to hospitals under the Affordable Care Act, uses county staff to provide support services to Medicare patients following their release from the hospital so as to reduce their readmission rates.

The complaint alleges that Gruchacz, after being promoted to the county administrator's position in June, acted with the support of the three freeholder defendants to appoint "a less qualified individual with less experience" than Novrit to Gruchacz's former position as human services director.

Though not identified by name in the lawsuit, Sarah Balzano — who coordinated the transitional care program under Gruchacz — was approved by the three freeholders at their July 22 meeting to succeed Gruchacz as the county's new human services director — an appointment that the complaint, without providing details, alleges was influenced in part by John Eskilson.

The complaint states that because of Novrit's advocacy on behalf of the female patient at Newton Medical Center, who would have faced "an unsafe condition" as a result of being released to her husband, Novrit has suffered "a hostile work environment" and "adverse employment decisions" in violation of the Conscientious Employee Protection Act — also known as the whistleblower law — "by being deprived of the promotion to first, County Administrator and then, to Administrator of the Department of Human

Services."

The three freeholder defendants, it is further alleged, all chose Gruchacz as county administrator over Novrit based partly on considerations stemming from their support for a February settlement calling for the infusion of another \$6.7 million into the county's \$28 million solar initiative.

"There has been widespread criticism of the three Freeholders who supported the (solar) settlement," the complaint states. "Defendant Gruchacz was selected by the three Freeholder Defendants because of his commitment to keeping the settlement in place and his commitment to protect the three Freeholder Defendants from ramifications of having entered into the solar project settlement."

The complaint states that in the interim period between January and the end of June, the hostile work conditions encountered by Novrit were controlled and mitigated to some degree by the intervention of former County Counsel Dennis McConnell, who retired July 1.

Since then, it is alleged, the hostile work conditions have returned with the acquiescence of newly appointed County Counsel John Williams, who is said to have "consulted with ... Gruchacz and carried forward Gruchacz's hostile work environment" against Novrit.

The complaint specifically references a meeting Novrit held with Williams on or about July 20, where he allegedly told her he was unfamiliar with what had taken place previously but said he would look into the matter.

Subsequently, on July 22, Williams allegedly called Novrit to his office where he "berated her" and "told her she was suffering from anxiety," according to the lawsuit.

It is alleged that at that meeting, Williams also "criticized (Novrit) for 'shoving her resume in his face' and further stated, 'I thought there was something about you.'"

Novrit, who has headed the county's Division of Social Services since 2007, is seeking unspecified damages and demanding a trial by jury.

She is being represented in her lawsuit by Sparta-based attorney George Daggett.

Novrit declined to comment for this story and has advised that all inquiries should be directed to Daggett, who also declined further comment.

A trial date has not been set.

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