

IN MY OPINION



Danyne Romine Powell

## No heroes in McKown's sad story

It's the stuff of a novel. But we must decide: Who's the villain? Who the victim?

Early Saturday morning, a jury acquitted former York County coroner Doug McKown on three of his four drug charges.

The one conviction – the unlawful possession of half a Viagra, a misdemeanor – gets him 100 hours of community service, a year's probation and a \$743.75 fine.

It also gives him a chance, should he want it, to reclaim the elected office he vacated two years ago when he was charged with three felonies: cocaine possession, cocaine distribution and conspiracy to distribute cocaine.

Former state football champ, medical investigations expert and respected public figure rides again.

So how did McKown get himself into this miry mess?

According to his lawyer, through his involvement with his former live-in girlfriend, Erin Jenkins, a younger woman who dealt drugs. A woman McKown has said he urged to kick her daily cocaine habit.

Good boy. Bad girl. McKown, 39, is the victim-hero. Erin Jenkins, 29, the natural villain.

### One version of the story

Yet Erin Jenkins told police that the night of the felony drug charges – May 4, 2006 – McKown was the one who cut, weighed and bagged the cocaine for the deal that got her arrested outside a convenience store in York.

McKown's lawyer, Jack Swerling, told jurors the only reason Jenkins said that was because she'd been promised dismissal of her charges in exchange for testimony against McKown.

Swerling went so far as to say, "That Bible, if she put her hand on it again, would burst into flames."

Meanwhile, Swerling held up the evidence bag containing the fragment of a Viagra pill found in McKown's home, and argued that the state wanted to "embarrass and to punish" Doug McKown.

### Simple truth is anything but

But let's complicate the plot a bit more.

Casting McKown as the hero-victim and Jenkins as the villain is too pat, too predictable.

Let's suppose that Erin Jenkins was indeed telling the truth and the jury refused to believe her.

Refused to believe her because they knew she'd used and dealt drugs.

Refused to believe her because she was a young woman with a sullied reputation testifying against a respected, older public figure.

And refused because perhaps she was saying something nobody wanted to hear about someone they respected.

I've been there. I've made judgments against people I thought were irresponsible, casting my vote for power, establishment and the short upper lip of respectability.

I also know that sometimes people like Erin Jenkins really do tell the truth, and that we are the poorer and less responsible for not hearing.

Maybe our novel wouldn't have a hero. Maybe it wouldn't even have a villain.

But for those of us who are plot-minded, it'll be interesting to see how the story down in York County continues to unfold.

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"It's depressing. I can't afford to fill up," said Marsha Finch, of Charlotte, as she pumped gas at the Citgo station on Albemarle Road, where a gallon of regular unleaded gas cost \$4.01 on Monday.

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# GASP: \$4 PER

## Regular unleaded crosses threshold

BY AMY BALDWIN

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No need to wonder anymore if a gallon of regular unleaded gas in Charlotte could actually hit \$4.

It already has.

At the Citgo station on Albemarle Road at East W.T. Harris Boulevard, regular unleaded jumped to \$4.01 a gallon, up from \$3.89 on Friday night. It stayed there all through the holiday weekend. It won't move – up or down – until owner Ash Patel places his next order tonight.

"It's crazy," said Marsha Finch, a 24-year-old teacher, who didn't notice the price until after she'd prepaid for \$11 worth of gas for her 2002 Ford Taurus. "If I had seen it before I purchased, I would have tried to find someplace else to go."

Charlotte-area gas prices revved up in tandem with those across the nation over the long Memorial Day weekend. The average price for regular unleaded in Charlotte was \$3.916 Monday, according to AAA. The national average Monday: \$3.936.

Joe Fields put \$10 of regular into his 1999 Pontiac Grand Am on Monday at the Citgo in East Charlotte. He chose that station because it is closest to his house. "It's going to cost me another 30 cents to find another station," said Fields, 30, who is self-employed in construction.

Less than a mile away, other stations had regular unleaded for 6 to 7 cents a gallon cheaper.

So why the even pricier gas here?

It all depends on when the station owner has to place an order and where prices are at that

### A hit to holiday travel?

Holiday weekend travel was expected to remain unchanged from last year, said Tom Crosby, spokesman for AAA Carolinas. In 2007, about 1.3 million people in the Carolinas traveled 50 miles or more from home over Memorial Day weekend. How does that compare to a banner year for travel? Down only about 50,000 to 75,000 travelers, Crosby said.

"Prices don't necessarily adversely affect summer vacations, especially Memorial Day," he said. "People just want to go. They have been working since Christmas and New Year's. It is like a must-do vacation."

point, Patel said. He paid \$3.94 a gallon for his latest shipment, which arrived at 11 p.m. Friday. For his previous order, he paid \$3.84 a gallon and charged \$3.89.

While a steady stream of customers filled up at Patel's Citgo on Monday afternoon, he said business has been very slow since September. Monthly sales have declined 35 percent, to about \$52,000 from about \$80,000, he said.

Monique Browne paid \$59.81 to fill up her 2007 Suzuki SUV there Monday. Between teaching first grade in Union County and fetching her daughter from high school in Charlotte, Browne, 32, has to fill up once a week.

Normally, she drives to Atlanta to see family over Memorial Day, but she stayed home this year. As for this summer, "I don't plan on going anywhere."

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## DISORDERS AFFECT MOTION, BALANCE, POSTURE

# Cerebral palsy trials spark hope

*In UNC program, patients make progress through water exercises*

BY THOMAS GOLDSMITH  
(Raleigh) News & Observer

A groundbreaking treatment at UNC Chapel Hill offers adults with cerebral palsy more strength, mobility and hope, re-

searchers say.

As cases of cerebral palsy increase nationally – as many as 350 children are born with it each year in North Carolina – improvements in treatment for adults will be crucial to keeping as many as possible active, independent and employed.

In the trials, adults with cerebral palsy exercise in water, providing more intense workouts and less physical wear.

George Kourtsounis, 31, a Ra-

leigh credit counselor who is participating in the trial, said he puts maximum effort into his 45-minute exercise sessions in a swimming pool three times a week so he can stay strong and mobile. He's resisting the usual course for cerebral palsy, in which adults can go downhill quickly after they turn 21 and no longer qualify for programs funded by federal and state tax dollars.

"I understand the wolves are

coming – I am going to do whatever I can to keep them at bay," Kourtsounis said. "If I've got 45 minutes to exercise, I'm like, 'Let's go hard, let's push it to new levels.'"

Cerebral palsy is an umbrella term for disorders that affect motion, balance and posture. Caused by an injury to the brain at or near childbirth, it's often, but not always, accompanied by one or more other disabilities, in-

SEE EXERCISE | 3B

## Why did Mr. Joy cross the road? To help folks re-coop

*Therapy chicken cheers nursing home residents*

BY AMBER VEVERKA  
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He's the size of a softball and never is going to lord it over a barnyard. He's got a soulful sort of cluck and never is going to wind up on a plate next to the potato salad.

No, Mr. Joy has a higher calling. Mr. Joy is a therapy chicken.

Everyone's heard of dogs that cheer the sick or comfort the lonely. But these golden retrievers have nothing on the three-quarters-of-a-pound Old English game bantam rooster owned by Alisha Tomlinson of east Charlotte.

"Oh, it's just precious," whispered Kathryn Black, 81, as she cuddled a quiet Mr. Joy on his recent visit to the Golden Living Center in Charlotte. Mr. Joy settled himself onto Black's lap and closed his eyes. "You going to sleep?" she murmured, and made



DAVIE HINSHAW - dhinshaw@charlotteobserver.com

Beulah Huntly gently rubs Mr. Joy during his visit with folks who live at the Golden Living Center on East 5th Street in Charlotte.

a low, humming sound as she petted him.

Mr. Joy came to the Tomlinsons from an elderly gentleman, who as Alisha puts it, "raised him

from an egg." It soon became clear that he was destined for a career beyond the coop.

One day Alisha, a pet sitter, SEE MR. JOY | 6B

### Online Extras

Watch Mr. Joy work the nursing home circuit at [WWW.CHARLOTTE.COM/news](http://WWW.CHARLOTTE.COM/news)

## WILL OPEN TODAY

# Blaze causes damage to school

*Albemarle Road Elementary fire said to be intentionally set*

BY PETER ST. ONGE  
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A Sunday night fire at Albemarle Road Elementary School was intentionally set, a Charlotte Fire Department investigation has found.

The school, however, will be open today.

The fire, which caused \$5,000 in damage at the school on Riding Trail Road, was reported about 8:30 p.m. Sunday. It was set outside at the rear of the school, said Charlotte Fire Department spokesman Capt. Rob Brisley.

Brisley urged anyone with information on the fire to call Mecklenburg County Crimestoppers at 704-334-1600.

He also said Charlotte Fire officials likely will release new information this week on a Saturday night fire that damaged Harbor Baptist Church in northwest Charlotte.

Fire officials have traced that fire, which caused between \$500,000 to \$1 million worth of damage to the church's sanctuary, to the rear of the church. Officials have not released a cause.

The church held services Sunday in its gymnasium/fellowship hall, which was not damaged by the blaze.



PHOTOS BY DAVIE HINSHAW - dhinshaw@charlotteobserver.com

Owner Alisha Tomlinson hands over Mr. Joy, an Old English game bantam rooster, to Juanita Gilliard. "He brings so much joy, literally, to everybody. I couldn't keep him all to myself," Tomlinson said.

# Chicken cheers nursing home residents

## Mr. Joy from 1B

had to visit a client in an assisted-living center to care for the woman's cat. Mr. Joy had ridden along, and Alisha didn't want to leave him in the car. She brought him in and put him in her client's lap. Chicken magic.

"He stretched his neck out and she just stroked him," she said. The elderly woman, crippled with osteoporosis, lit up in a way Tomlinson had never seen. And Mr. Joy's mission of mercy was born.

Now the tiny rooster makes rounds to nursing homes, riding in a basket lined with chicken-print cloth, delicately pecking corn out of people's palms. Wherever he goes, people are moved to share their own chicken stories. That was true at the Golden Living Center.

"Chickens are like everybody else: They have their own personalities," said Jerry Crosby, 72, as he petted Mr. Joy. He recalled life on a mini-farm in Florida, and told about the hen his family had who "would adopt anything that moved."

He also related the tale of his father attempting to butcher a renegade rooster and accidentally nabbing the wrong bird, a saga which ended with "but we still had chicken for dinner!"

This generally is not the sort of story Tomlinson likes to hear, although she understands that many of Mr. Joy's new friends grew up with a different relationship to poultry than the one she



Kathryn Black cuddles Mr. Joy in her lap. The tiny rooster often moves people to share their own chicken stories, his owner says.

has. In addition to his therapy gig, Mr. Joy also has been known to show up at fast-food parking lots sharing a subtle message of vegetarianism. She simply waits by her car with Mr. Joy basket. "People come over and say 'Is it

real?'" Tomlinson quietly hands them a brochure about factory farming while they stroke the chicken.

The Web site Tomlinson created for him (mrjoy.net) carries the motto "Just say 'No' to the nugget!" But, she says, she keeps this part of Mr. Joy's resume low-key. "It's not a hard-core agenda," she

said. "You catch more flies with honey."

Back at Golden Living Center, Mr. Joy took a stroll on the center's lawn, relieving himself and enjoying a fluffing of the feathers ("Shake it out!" Tomlinson said.) Then it was time to head home and return to his wives, Ms. Joy and Mrs. Joy.

## Give him a cluck

E-mail Mr. Joy at [headchicken@mrjoy.net](mailto:headchicken@mrjoy.net)

## AT FORMER MYRTLE BEACH AIR FORCE BASE

# Tests: Toxins remain in groundwater

Associated Press

MYRTLE BEACH — Environmental tests over the past three years show high levels of contamination remain in groundwater at the former Myrtle Beach Air Force Base.

The findings, reported Sunday by the (Myrtle Beach) Sun News, come more than 15 years after the military left the site. Environmental reports indicate it could take another two decades for officials to bring the contamination under control.

The chemicals in groundwater are at levels far above what the Environmental Protection Agency considers safe for drinking water.

Regulators require the military to reduce pollution on the site so that the groundwater is safe for drinking, even though the water there hasn't been used for consumption since 1999. The military has spent more than \$53 million on cleanup efforts since the base closed in March 1993 and expects to spend \$10 million

more before the job is finished.

Tests show the contamination is largely contained. Government agencies say the toxicity likely does not pose a threat to people who live in the area.

But the contamination levels have fluctuated wildly. One site, for example, recorded its highest-ever level of trichloroethylene in 2006, five years after a series of cleanup pumps were installed, the Sun News reported. The levels were 42,200 parts per billion, far more than the five parts per billion that the EPA considers safe. Trichloroethylene is a toxic solvent commonly used to remove paint from airplanes and to clean aircraft and missile components.

"It took a long time for this contamination to happen," said Ken Taylor with the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control, one of several agencies charged with overseeing base cleanup. "It takes a long time to clean it up."

Environmental reports show it

could take 20 more years to contain the contamination, and the Air Force has recently signed a fresh contract with Shaw Group to continue the cleanup.

The military says contamination has only left the base boundary at one site. A nearby property owner sued in 2002 over the contamination and the military is now cleaning up the adjacent site, which was contaminated with arsenic, trichloroethylene and pesticides, including toxaphene and chlordane. The EPA banned those pesticides more than 17 years ago because they can cause cancer.

Although the contamination is largely contained, the groundwater is slowly flowing toward a culvert that empties into a lake near a new residential complex. State officials are monitoring the area.

"We'll certainly have time to react if there is contamination getting closer to the lake," Taylor said. "It's something we're keeping an eye on."

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