

Chemidlin Tells Rotarians Of Captivity In Sierra Leone

By NORDETTE N. ADAMS
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

SCOTCH PLAINS — Last April, Michael Chemidlin, 58, of Scotch Plains went to Africa, snapped a picture and landed in a Sierra Leone prison. He saw no signs posted saying he couldn't photograph the United Nations (UN) Courthouse. "There were no laws against it," Mr. Chemidlin told members and guests of the Scotch Plains-Fanwood Rotary Club last Wednesday at its luncheon, at which he was the guest speaker. Nevertheless, he spent two months eating bread and water in the company of murderers and thieves, threatened with a possible 15-year prison sentence.

"He thought he was going to die over there in Sierra Leone. I thought he was, too," said Fred Chemidlin, Mr. Chemidlin's brother and a member of the Rotary Club. He introduced his younger brother to the club at its luncheon, which took place at Pantagis-Renaissance in Scotch Plains.

The guest speaker said, "I guess it was 37 years ago today that I left for Vietnam. Prior to that I had not been out of Jersey." The Army National Guard sergeant also served in Iraq, returning last October.

"After two wars, I thought this would be easy, but it wasn't," he said, referencing his visit to the countries of Liberia, Ghana and Sierra Leone. He said while serving as a guard for food services facilities in Iraq last year, he met African men who worked in the kitchen. Soon they began meeting for Bible study, and he promised one day he would visit their country.

Mr. Chemidlin, who'd taken a course in missions through the Terrill Road Bible Church in Scotch Plains earlier in his life, left for Africa April 13. He anticipated spending two weeks in Ghana and two weeks in Sierra Leone. Coincidentally, he also would attend a weekend religious conference in Ghana sponsored by a ministry with which he is affiliated, he told the audience.

In Sierra Leone, about two days before his planned departure, he went sightseeing with Felix Rogers, whom he'd met during fellowship meetings. Like any other tourist, he brought his camera and photographed people and places in Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital.

However, after he photographed the UN courthouse, his life unraveled. The building housed former Liberian president Charles Taylor, accused of the war crimes of supporting rebels who murdered and tor-

tured thousands of people during Sierra Leone's civil war that ended in 2002.

Recalling the furor after he snapped his photo, he said, "The Mongolian UN force instigated the whole thing. They called and blew the whistle on me and had me brought in by the police."

In a July interview with *The Star Ledger*, Mr. Chemidlin said, "They feared Charles Taylor because of what he did to them. There are people walking around in Sierra Leone with no hands and feet because of what his (militias) did to them."

He told *The Westfield Leader* that he saw the maimed walking around the country. He met some of them in prison. Before being sent to Freetown's Pandemba Road Prison, Mr. Chemidlin stayed in Freetown's police lockup for 10 days without being charged and slept on the floor, suffering symptoms of malaria. Authorities accused him of being a spy and conspiring to free Taylor.

The African newspapers broke the story with headlines like "Man Held as Spy." Mr. Chemidlin told *The Leader* that afterward, officials brought him before the magistrate again and said, "We were about to free you, but..."

He said police felt pressured by media coverage to officially charge him with espionage. Once charged, he ended up in prison, where hardened criminals tormented young boys upon arrival by stripping them naked.

"Everything was forgotten about but my faith. This whole ordeal turned one world upside down," he said. "The legal system is very good but only good as pertaining to law. God, to me, is higher than all that. Getting through this ordeal, there was nothing, really, anyone could have done. There was nothing — the government, the FBI, the State Department, the family, the church people, my magistrate, no one, my solicitor — there wasn't anything that anyone could have done. The bottom line, to get my freedom, I have to say, was really an exercise of faith."

On July 4, the Sierra Leoneans dismissed all charges against him and on July 7 returned his passport. He arrived in America two days later. Having given up his apartment before he left for Africa, Mr. Chemidlin stays with a relative in West Harlem.

He told his audience the experience affected him profoundly. "I don't have the set times to go to lunch, have breakfast, go to sleep, what to wear, things that we accustom ourselves to in everyday living. You have to see pretty much what's important in life. I felt all of these people's fears."

"After several months, I have to tell you, I'm still unsettled as to where to live. I'm almost afraid to settle down again. And the fear of malaria, fear of lack of food, it's almost, I guess, like something that prisoners of war go through...It was a trying experience to say the least," he said.



Fred and Michael Chemidlin



LET THEM EAT PIE...Two contestants tied for first place in the Fanny Wood Day pie-eating contest. Dino Caminiti and Ed Sheaffer with hands behind their backs ate their way through each pie, leaving a tin can alley. Lynda Moore was closing in but savored that last bite long enough to place second; COUPLE OF THE DAY...Mrs. and Mr. Fanwood (June McCarthy, left, and her husband, former borough councilman Bob McCarthy, right) join Fanwood-Scotch Plains Rotary Club past President Joe Qutub at the Fanny Wood Day festivities on Sunday; HOT RIDE...Fanny Wood Day festival goers enjoyed a classic car show among the day's festivities.

Westfield Town Council

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acknowledging that they) have been informed of our requests."

Second Ward Councilwoman Vicki Kimmins said, "Some people will be inconvenienced, but most of the time this is a fun event for Westfield." She said the same production company cooperated with Westfield during the filming of "Ed" and that it would contribute \$5,000 to the Caring Neighbor Fund. Any hassle caused by the filming, according to Ms. Kimmins, would be "short-lived."

"It's short-lived until it comes to your block," Mr. Caruana replied. "Then it's not so short-lived. I got an e-mail from two Sylvania (Place) residents who said 'our block has been used six times in the last three years. It's not fun anymore. We don't want to support this project for that reason.'"

Ultimately, the council reached a consensus to have Mr. Gildea negotiate with the Thursday and Friday deadlines of 11 p.m. and 12 a.m., respectively, in mind. Mr. Caruana said he "wanted to go on record as opposing any offer beyond what's permitted in the code."

In Fourth Ward Councilman Jim Foerst's Code Review and Town Property Committee report, he spoke about the "limited right" Westfield has in requiring neighbor notification on a demolition permit.

Attorney Bob Cockren said the council has "no legal basis to deny any application." Therefore, he said, it isn't "reasonable" to have any pre-permit notice because the body cannot address any objections, should they arise. The goal, according to Mr. Cockren, is to reach an agreement whereby the

town wouldn't "hold up the property owner, while giving notice to the neighborhood and not putting burden on the town administrative staff."

Mr. Foerst said, "Our hands are tied by state law and we're trying to work in the framework to provide the best means to promote good neighbors."

Third Ward Councilman David Haas said any eventual notification should come with a caveat to neighboring residents that the demolition "will come up for review and as long as it meets the state's review, the council anticipates it and has no authority (to deny it)."

SP Resident Drops Civil Rights Complaint; Suit Possible

By PAUL J. PEYTON
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD — A Scotch Plains resident has dropped a civil rights complaint against Westfield but is pursuing the matter in Superior Court. William McMeekan alleged that his civil rights were violated when he applied for a volunteer firefighter position with the Westfield Fire Department, *The Westfield Leader* has learned. The town's policy requires paid firefighter applicants to first serve as volunteer firefighters.

Lee Moore, the public information officer for the state's Department of Law and Public Safety, which includes the attorney general's office, told *The Leader* that Mr. McMeekan filed a claim with the

POLICE BLOTTER

Westfield
Tuesday, September 12, Marcus Rawls, 38, of Newark was arrested at the Bergen County jail on an outstanding Westfield warrant for \$50.

Wednesday, September 13, Michael Bonilla, 32, of Jersey City was arrested during a motor vehicle stop at Mountain Avenue and North Chestnut Street on an outstanding Wildwood criminal warrant for \$185. He was released after posting bail.

Thursday, September 14, a resident of the 500 block of Hillcrest Avenue reported that her home was burglarized and jewelry taken from the residence. There were no signs of forced entry, police said.

Friday, September 15, Thomas Roche, 4th, 21, of Westfield was arrested at

Westfield police headquarters on outstanding traffic warrants out of Beechwood and Fanwood. He was released after posting bail.

Scotch Plains
Friday, September 15, a resident of Lamberts Mill Road reported being the victim of online fraud. The victim told police that one or more unidentified individuals made unauthorized purchases via the Internet using the victim's credit card.

Friday, September 15, a Fanwood resident reported that his bicycle was stolen from Park Avenue. The value of the bicycle is \$150.

Friday, September 15, Juan A. Serrano of Plainfield was arrested on an active warrant out of Plainfield after a motor vehicle stop for a violation.

Fanwood
Monday, September 11, Arthur D. Frink, Jr., 53, of Middlesex was arrested and charged with outstanding warrants out of Metuchen and Bridgewater after a motor vehicle stop on South Avenue.

Monday, September 11, Michael G. Steirman, 33, of Scotch Plains was arrested following a motor vehicle stop on South Avenue, which revealed an outstanding warrant out of Clifton.

Tuesday, September 12, Christopher B. Borgess, 35, of Cranford was arrested following a motor vehicle stop on Terrill Road, which revealed an outstanding warrant out of Fort Lee.

Tuesday, September 12, Richard J. Kutney, 43, was arrested for an outstanding Watchung warrant after a motor vehicle stop on South Avenue.

Tuesday, September 12, Colin E. Reid, 34, of Jacksonville, Fla. was arrested and charged with an outstanding Mount Olive warrant after a motor vehicle stop on Terrill Road.

Wednesday, September 13, Lakeisha M. Jackson, 33, of Fanwood was arrested and charged with interfering with a police investigation. Jackson was also charged with providing a false identity, police said.

Thursday, September 14, Lawrence M. Dicks, 38, was arrested and charged with an outstanding Plainfield warrant after a motor vehicle stop on North Avenue.

Thursday, September 14, Loretta M. Cabbie, 43, of Plainfield was arrested and charged with credit card theft and receiving stolen property. She was transported to the Union County jail. Bail was set at \$4,500.

Friday, September 15, Rasheem M. Ailes, 27, of Elizabeth was arrested on outstanding warrants out of Newark and Elizabeth after a motor vehicle stop on LaGrande Avenue.

Friday, September 15, a manager of a South Avenue gas station reported that an unidentified customer paid with a counterfeit \$50 bill.

Saturday, September 16, Raed M. Alasmir, 26, of Howard Beach, N.Y. was arrested and charged with possession of suspected marijuana and controlled dangerous substance (CDS) paraphernalia. He was also charged with an outstanding warrant out of Jersey City.

Saturday, September 16, Christopher D. Cassett, 18, of Westfield was arrested and charged with possession of suspected marijuana. Jarez L. Baron, 18, of North Plainfield, a passenger in the vehicle, was also arrested and charged with possession of suspected marijuana. Shaun R. Mason, 18, of Plainfield was charged with possession of suspected marijuana and hindering apprehension.

Sunday, September 17, Jamal W. Hester, 31, of Dunnellen was arrested following a motor vehicle stop on Midway Avenue for outstanding warrants out of Dunnellen and Piscataway.

Sunday, September 17, seven juveniles between the ages of 14 and 16 were brought into headquarters for trespassing on an abandoned property. The incident is under investigation.

Tuesday, September 19, Wilver Valdez, 29, of Plainfield was arrested and charged with an outstanding Springfield warrant after a motor vehicle stop on Terrill Road.

Tuesday, September 19, Jesenia V. Gonzalez, 23, of Jersey City was arrested and charged with an outstanding Newark warrant after a motor vehicle stop on North Avenue.

GW BOE

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Although Mr. Brown said the overtime was within budget, local resident Mike Hajduk asked the school board to provide the actual cost of this overtime at the October meeting "to see if there are other options" for reducing expenses.

Also on Tuesday night, Mr. Murphy announced final plans are "in the works" for a children's after-school program at the district's Lincoln School building. However, the superintendent said the program, to be run by the Westfield YMCA, would not begin "until Oct. 1 or even later." He said officials haven't had time to put the finishing touches on the program due to the busy start of the new school year.

School board officials announced that next month's meeting would likely include a presentation on the district's standardized test scores, as well as an appearance by Assemblyman Jon Bramnick.

Mr. Bramnick is sponsoring legislation that could adjust the Garwood and Mountainside school districts' budget caps and surplus limits, given payments both districts are expected to receive as a result of the Union County Regional High School District's 1996 dissolution.

The Garwood school board approved a resolution supporting this legislation Tuesday night.

MS Council Works to Assuage Parking, Traffic Issues

By KIMBERLY A. BROADWELL
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

MOUNTAINSIDE — At Tuesday's meeting, the borough council introduced three ordinances on first reading.

The first ordinance would establish limited parking time on Birch Hill Road, Bridle Path and Appletree Lane.

Last week, members of the governing body discussed the parking problems on these streets. Police Chief and Borough Administrator James Debbie said there are too many commuter cars parked there, making it hard for other vehicles to navigate the streets.

The ordinance states that a four-hour parking limit would be issued for the three roads.

The second ordinance amends a two-year-old ordinance prohibiting parking during school hours on Woodacres Drive.

The amendment, according to Chief Debbie, includes a limited-parking rule during school hours on the west

side of Meeting House Lane.

He said "cars were parking on both sides of Meeting House Lane during the recent opening of school, making the road impassable."

The third ordinance amends borough commercial and business permit fees for renovations, repairs and alterations. According to Borough Clerk Martha De Jesus, the fees have increased from \$24 per \$1,000 worth of work to \$30 per \$1,000.

In other business, the council approved a \$364,425 contract with Jenicar Builders to make final paving improvements on various roads within the borough. Mayor Robert Vigilanti said this would conclude the \$5-million bond project for street repairs.

Finally, the governing body proclaimed the week of November 13 as "Band Appreciation Week" for the Governor Livingston High School Highlander Band. Mayor Vigilanti said the band was "very good" and "a very snappy-dressed band."

The next council meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, October 10, at 8 p.m.



ROUSING FUN...The 2006 Westfield High School Band stirs the crowd to cheer on the gridiron boys during the football game with Linden two weeks ago.

Diner, 7-11 Robber Pleads Guilty, Faces 20 Years

MOUNTAINSIDE — Moments before his jury trial was set to begin in at the Union County Courthouse in Elizabeth on September 6, a Union Township man pleaded guilty to two armed robberies that took place in Mountainside and Scotch Plains in August 2005.

Julio Clusan, 44, swore under oath before State Superior Court Judge Joseph Donohue that he brandished a toy handgun he had painted to look like a real firearm when he "rifled" the cash register from a diner on Route 22 in Mountainside on August 24 at around 12:30 a.m.

Clusan also told the judge he forced an employee of 7-11 on Park Avenue in Scotch Plains to hand over the money from a register, according to the prosecutor's office.

Scotch Plains Police Detective Lieutenant Brian Donnelly told *The Westfield Leader* that Clusan was wearing all black when he displayed a "small black hand gun" and demanded cash from the register from the employee shortly after 3 a.m. on August 23.

"(Clusan) left with an undetermined amount of cash," Lt. Donnelly said.

Lt. Donnelly said police later viewed the surveillance video of the Echo Diner robbery and were able to link the two robberies due to the black facial makeup Clusan was wearing.

"We said 'wait, that's our guy,'" Lieutenant Donnelly said.

"At this point, we think he was acting alone," he said, noting that 7-11 employees did not observe the car Clusan left in or of if anyone was with him.

The 7-11 is located on Park and Mountain Avenues, a block from Route 22, and two miles west of the Echo Queen Diner, Lt. Donnelly said.

As reported in *The Leader/Times*, the Echo Queen Diner's register contained \$93 in cash at the time of the robbery. Clusan then reportedly demanded the manager to lay face down on the floor and instructed her not call police.

"An alert Mountainside officer just happened to be on patrol nearby and spotted the defendant driving off in his getaway car with no lights on," Union County Prosecutor Theodore Romankow said.

According to *The Leader/Times* story, Clusan's vehicle was observed

behind the diner by an officer patrolling the area. The vehicle that pulled out of the lot with its lights off and entered the parking lot of an office building on Mill Lane. At this point the officer received the police dispatch call that the diner had just been robbed.

The officer pulled the vehicle over and parked behind Clusan while another officer parked his patrol car in front of Clusan. Police said the officer approached the passenger side window of the car and told Clusan to put his hands in view.

At that point Clusan drove his Volkswagen Passat directly into the patrol vehicle of Mountainside Patrol Officer James Urban and disabled his car. A backup officer, Michael Pasquale, followed the Volkswagen from the crash scene along Route 22 for more than a mile and along residential side streets before the compact car crashed into a grassy area in Springfield, according to Assistant Prosecutor James Tansey.

Mr. Romankow said Clusan faces up to 20 years in state prison when he is sentenced on Friday, October 27.

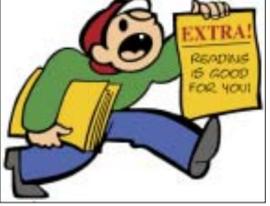
Mountainside Police Corporal Kenneth Capobianco and Patrol Officer Michael McNany captured Clusan, with his face still covered with black makeup that he wore during both armed holdups, hiding in bushes near the Volkswagen, according to the prosecutor's office.

Mr. Tansey said Clusan was found with the cash from diner robbery in his pants pocket and the makeup container and phony handgun inside the crashed car.

"Clusan, who was remanded back to the Union County jail in Elizabeth after his guilty pleas, has two prior robbery convictions from Manhattan in 1984 and the Bronx in 1991 and was paroled from a New York penal institution in 1998," said Mr. Tansey, a former New York City police officer.

Erratum:

In last week's Westfield Recreation Commission article ("WSA Seeks Extended Half Hour for Houlihan Lights," Sept. 14), Recreation Commission board member Bill Palatucci was inadvertently referenced as Jim Palatucci. We regret the error.



Let the Hayrides Begin!

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Free Hayride
with Can of Food
Sept. 23rd & 24th



Our Fall Festival begins this weekend. Saturday and Sundays we will have our pumpkin picking, ponyrides, hayrides, and our haunted house. Bring in a can of food for our food drive this weekend and receive a FREE hayride.

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