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Kitsap Sun

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‘Not the kind of people that give up’



Tom Rogers, of Poulsbo, walks around the concrete base of what will become a peace pagoda at Ground Zero Center for Nonviolent Action in Poulsbo. MEEGAN M. REID/KITSAP SUN

40 years after arson, anti-nuke protestors are building peace pagoda in Bangor’s shadow

Josh Farley Kitsap Sun USA TODAY NETWORK

The fire ripped through the cedar planks of the dome, melting stucco as a flammable liquid spread the blaze near the barbed wire fence bordering Naval Base Kitsap-Bangor. • By the time firefighters doused it, the dome was a pile of embers and scattered sacred relics, including a shattered bronze statue of Buddha and a crucifix. No one was found in the dome, a relief to the organization of nuclear weapons protestors that own the Clear Creek property.

The property became known as Ground Zero and was where a coalition of Buddhist monks, Catholic nuns and activists came to protest and build a peace pagoda, just miles from one of the world’s largest stockpiles of nuclear weapons.

Though the activists did not know it, those responsible for the fire may have been the guardians of the weapons.

Investigators determined that the blaze on May 28, 1982, was the work of an arsonist’s “incendiary device” and that the incident included the smashing of symbols used in prayer. Though the case made headlines around Puget Sound, no one was ever arrested even though a trail of evidence led to the Bangor base, according to a now-unclassified FBI file.

“Check out the two twins at the Marine barracks,” an anonymous caller told 911 dispatchers shortly after the fire.

“Where?” the dispatcher asked. “Bangor,” the caller said before hanging up.

Investigators involved 40 years ago, recently contacted by the Kitsap Sun, have different accounts of what happened. But the FBI file reveals that someone in the Navy, Kitsap County government — or both — wanted to keep it quiet.

“Any implication that Department of Navy personnel were involved in the burning of the geodesic dome is seen as being potentially embarrassing to the Navy,” the 1982 FBI report, released to the Kitsap Sun in a Freedom of Information Act request, reads. “At this time nothing has been reported by the press to indicate (Department of Navy) personnel were involved.”

The blaze was a flashpoint in a conflict

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Loved ones mourn students killed in car crash

Nathan Pilling Kitsap Sun USA TODAY NETWORK

BAINBRIDGE ISLAND – Their volleyball season over, Marina Miller, Hannah Wachsman and Hazel Kleiner had been on their way out for a celebratory round of ice cream — teens enjoying life during a trying year.

Wachsman’s mother, Emily, recalls being at the final game of the Bainbridge High School junior varsity team’s shortened season – a win in three sets over North Mason High School – bringing the girls back to her home for a vehicle, then leaving.

The three teens had been driving south on Sunrise Drive on March 16 when their car went off the roadway and crashed. The teens were pronounced dead at the scene. Bainbridge Island Police Chief Joe Clark said Friday that a crash report is being finalized but

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Hospital settles lawsuit with disabled inmate

Andrew Binion Kitsap Sun USA TODAY NETWORK

Without admitting fault, Western State Hospital settled a lawsuit Monday from a disabled, mentally ill man who sat for weeks in squalid conditions in the Kitsap County Jail awaiting treatment so his two DUI cases could proceed.

After being lodged in the jail on March 15, 2018, Barry Weger, 59, was housed in solitary confinement for nearly 50 days following a mental evaluation that found he was not competent to stand trial. Weger, who spent a total of 111 days in the jail for the two misdemeanor charges for impaired driving, suffers from severe mental illness, has one leg and uses a wheelchair. The amount of time he spent in jail is likely longer than the sentence he would have received if convicted.

Weger had managed his illness with medications and help from his daughter, his attorney wrote in documents.

“He was a loving, providing father for a number of years,” attorney Ryan Dreveskracht wrote, alleging Weger decompensated “due to the state’s failure to

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Pagoda

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between anti-nuclear weapons activists and supporters of what was then the nation's newest atomic weapon: the submarine-launched Trident missile.

That August, protesters were mounting progressively larger demonstrations in the run-up to the arrival of submarines armed with the Trident.

"Tension in Kitsap County," the Naval Investigative Service's threat assessment after the arson found, "continues to build."

The Navy's multi-billion-dollar Trident submarines would come to live in the tides of Hood Canal despite opposition. But many protesters, including Buddhist Monks who had relocated around the world to Kitsap, suffered a demoralizing blow the night of the fire.

Their goal was to build a peace pagoda, a symbol to the objection of nuclear weapons. The smashed statue inside the dome was to go in the new pagoda.

But repeatedly over decades, the effort to build it has been rebuffed by county politicians and in arguments on local opinion pages. Or, in the case of the fire, through violence.

Only now, through perseverance and a new generation of protesters, is a pagoda rising near the ashes where the dome burned.

'Pure land for a peace pagoda'

In August 1945, the same week the Army Air Force's Enola Gay dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, the Navy commissioned a railroad line from Shelton to a new ammunition depot at Bangor along the banks of the Hood Canal. The base, which became an assembly and storage plant for nuclear missiles as the Cold War heated up in the 1960s, was ultimately selected to become home to a new generation of Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs).

In the 1970s and '80s, Trident transformed Silverdale from a farming town with one stoplight into Kitsap County's bustling commercial center. Most residents seemed to welcome the trade-offs of growth, enjoying the benefits of a wider Highway 3, new schools and fire departments, and a feeling the Navy was putting Kitsap on the map as a critical military outpost. In a time of an ailing economy and in which interest rates reached 21.5%, some \$105 million was spent by the federal government getting Kitsap ready for its new fleet of ballistic missile submarines.

Anti-nuclear activists and others across various religious lines, including the archdiocese of Seattle, came to see the base as a place that could annihilate the world. The especially vocal archbishop of Seattle, Raymond Hunthausen, began referring to Bangor as the "Auschwitz of Puget Sound."

It got the attention of 23-year-old Katsumi Suzuki, a former engineer at a Japanese nuclear power plant who dedicated his life to Buddha. In 1979, he went to Vancouver, British Columbia, collected a statue of Buddha from a friend and traveled to Poulsbo. He planned to stay just a few days.

He remained far longer, telling the Bremerton Sun in 1982 that he was "looking to find pure land for (a) peace pagoda."

Suzuki belonged to a sect of Buddhism called "Nipponzan-Myohoji." It was founded by Nichidatsu Fujii, a man who met Mahatma Gandhi in 1931 and began to build peace pagodas around the world after the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan. The pagodas were to serve as symbols of peace and the resistance of nuclear weapons. On the day Ronald Reagan was elected president for his first term, Fujii came to Clear Creek Road, declaring that a 74-foot pagoda would be built on the border of the Bangor base.

He returned to Kitsap less than a month after the geodesic dome burned to the ground for a dedication of the pagoda, calling it "an ardent wish to eliminate nuclear weapons."

"Its erection is a direct challenge to the power and authority that has established a nuclear submarine base," he said. "Time will eventually come when the government will be compelled to admit the wrong. We will wait."

A polarizing pagoda plan

To address the growing alarm over protests, the Navy summoned Kitsap County Sheriff Pat Jones in the summer of 1982. Jones, a 32-year-old sheriff at the time, said he kept quiet as the Navy brass discussed possible defensive stances. Should they call for snipers on rooftops? How could they best assess the threat?

Finally, they asked Jones for his opinion. "Have you tried calling them?" Jones recalls saying. Silence. It appeared to Jones they hadn't thought of that.

"You could hear a pin drop," said Jones, who offered to open a dialogue.

Jones maintained a good rapport with Jim and Shelley Douglass, two leaders of the nonviolent protest movement that led to the forming of the Ground Zero Center for Nonviolent Action off Clear Creek Road.

Sheriff's deputies were frequently called to arrest protesters on the train tracks that carried the nuclear weapons for the submarines. But those deputies only knew when the trains were coming because they talked with Ground Zero.

Jones had an agreement with the Douglasses and Ground Zero: Tell me how many will cross the federal government's line of criminal interference.

"We always told the sheriff's department what we were going to do," Jim Douglass said. "The government didn't tell the sheriff's department when the trains were coming. We were always conspiring together to make sure no one got hurt."

Few did get hurt during the protests, including on Aug. 12, 1982, when the USS Ohio came into Bangor for the first time, greeted by more than 9,000 protesters.

Coast Guard cutters played escort, firing water cannons at the "ragtag fleet of anti-nuclear blockaders," UPI reported. Only one vessel was able to buzz the sub, and Coast Guard members boarded others preemptively. Seventeen were arrested; none were convicted



A geodesic dome on the site of the Ground Zero Center for Nonviolence was burned to the ground on May 28, 1982. Investigators never found the perpetrators, but an FBI file on the case says to have done so would have been "potentially embarrassing" to the Navy. SUBMITTED PHOTO

of any crime.

"The nation's first Trident submarine docked on time at its Bangor berth, no more troubled by a protest blockade than an elephant is by a gnat," the Sun reported.

There are still those in the Ground Zero community who believe the effort to stop Trident was a real possibility. Yet Jim Douglass says the goal has always been to raise awareness.

"We didn't think the USS Ohio was going to turn around and go back where it came from," he said. "But we hoped to begin a process whereby people in these objects (submarines) would begin to rethink things. To raise a question of consciousness."

The peace pagoda was seen as a way to raise that consciousness, and they've been built all over the world. But none exist on the West Coast.

To some Navy supporters, the pagoda went beyond a dissenting view — it was offensive, possibly even traitorous. Rumors spread that the structure could be used to spy on the base.

Patricia Peat, one of the leaders of the group "Concerned about the Pagoda," said in a letter to the editor published by the Sun that Fujii's teachings instructed that the United States is a "cursed nation." She argued that support for the Navy in Kitsap was about "pride, not paycheck."

"Can you wonder why the average, logical residents of this county are concerned about the pagoda?" she wrote. "...Russian children are taught to accept possible war as a sacrifice for Mother Russia. American children are being terrified by threats of nuclear holocaust — misinformation leads to an imbalance of terror."

The base enjoyed broad support within Kitsap County, a place where the community and Navy had a "happy marriage," according to former U.S. Sen. Henry M. "Scoop" Jackson, the only politician who is the namesake for a Trident submarine. The rest are named for states.

Former Kitsap County Commissioner Bill Mahan, who served during the years the submarine base was built and when Ground Zero was attempting to build the peace pagoda, said the vast majority of the peninsula's residents supported the base and mission.

"Most of the protesters were outsiders," he said. Douglass and others bought the Clear Creek property in part to become ensconced in the community. Some supported becoming neighbors; some did not.

Longtime Ground Zero member Al Drinkwine worked at Bangor in the lead-up to the arrival of the USS Ohio. His wife, Jerry, had suggested they join a Ground Zero leafleting one day after church; the idea of protesting at first appalled him.

But Drinkwine watched as tempers in his office flared toward protesters, and he couldn't take it anymore

The day the USS Ohio entered Hood Canal, he gave his notice and walked out.

"Traitor!" a supervisor yelled at him.

He turned to respond.

"What is America's motto? In God we trust," he said, and then walked out the door for the last time.

At least one politician faced voters' wrath during the unforgiving time. Clyde Caldart, elected mayor of Poulsbo in 1977, was invited to Ground Zero for a groundbreaking for the pagoda a month before what looked to be a cruise to his re-election in 1981. But when evidence surfaced of his attendance — a picture that landed on the front page of a local paper — Caldart faced immediate condemnation.

"Clyde was a really nice guy. But when he turned that shovel of dirt, that was the beginning of the end for him," said Larry Dibble, Poulsbo's fire chief from 1979 to 1985.

Caldart was soundly defeated weeks later.

The fire's legacy

The fire destroyed the geodesic dome at Ground Zero in the early morning hours of May 28, 1982. A resident Buddhist monk found the flames shooting from two doorways and a skylight "like a big Trident," clashing with the cold morning air.

At 11 p.m. the same day, the 911 tipster reported that two Marines set it.

To date, no document has surfaced that they were ever investigated.

The FBI file, unclassified in 2003, says the fire was non-criminal in nature, despite it being declared an arson — that is, caused by someone. But the document goes on to say that at the time, it was more important to let the fire investigation extinguish.

The Kitsap Sun tracked down investigators from the fire marshal's office, Kitsap County Sheriff's Office, Naval Investigative Service and a former Marine who served in the barracks. Most said they were unaware of any leads in the case. But David Maulding, an assistant fire marshal, said he knew of the story that the Marines had started the fire — though he'd not seen the FBI file before. He added that he believes someone on base or in the Navy had told Kitsap County it would be handled internally — despite it being a prosecutable crime off-base.

"They were emphatic that they were their guys and

said, 'We'll deal with them,'" Maulding said.

The Kitsap Sun sought records of discipline for the fire, but neither the Navy nor National Archives had any record of reprimands or punishment.

Others cast doubt on the idea that Marines would set fire to the dome. Mike Allison, a retired Marine based at the barracks after the fire, said they were focused on external threats like the Soviets attempting to secretly pilot a mini-submarine into the canal. They were "ready for combat," and "took a lot of pride in that."

Allison said leaders of the Marines would never have stood for someone committing arson.

"If somebody did that, it would've been a big deal," he said.

Whoever was responsible, Jim Douglass, the Ground Zero leader, wondered if the arsonists believed they were somehow "upholding the security of Trident" while taking revenge on a group — the Buddhists — they perceived as a World War II enemy. In that way, some Ground Zero members contend the arson was a hate crime.

"Ground Zero opponents said their rancor toward the pagoda went back to Pearl Harbor," he said. "That kind of thinking is contagious. The Marines may have been victims of it."

Douglass said there was no sympathy for Ground Zero even after the blaze. But without an arson trial, the Navy likely avoided "potentially embarrassing" publicity, as the FBI file points out.

In the late 1980s, Douglass asked Glen Milner, who joined Ground Zero in 1984, to make a series of Freedom of Information Act requests to see what information the government accumulated about figures within the organization, including Seattle Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen.

Over time, a foot's worth of stacked documents was released. Hidden in them was a short report identifying possible suspects in the arson. It took years before the document was found in the stack, but in the time since, Milner has continually sought further information from authorities, including the names of any suspects and investigators, whose names were redacted. Ground Zero would "like the truth to come to light," Milner said.

"As far as I'm concerned, it was a cover-up in 1982 and it's a cover-up in 2021," he said. "The Navy knows who did it and they could give us the names today."

After the fire, the peace pagoda project stalled. The Kitsap County commissioners, citing "compatibility issues," rejected permitting for it. Ground Zero sued in the courts to get it built, and despite favorable rulings, ultimately backed off on the commissioners' second permitting rejection in 1985, the same year Buddhist leader Fujii died at age 100.

The remains of the Buddha and the crucifix destroyed by fire were placed and memorialized within a smaller stone "stupa," built on the property in 1987. A few years later, the Berlin Wall fell, the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War seemed at its end — along with plans for the pagoda.

The Ground Zero Center also appeared to be disbanding. The Sun printed an obituary for the organization in 1992.

"No more rallies will be held, no more leaflets distributed, no more Trident-bound nuclear weapons trains will be blocked," the story said. "At least not until and unless some committed new volunteers come forward to breathe new life into the organization."

Ground Zero, pagoda rise

But Ground Zero's planned last meeting turned out to be Brian Watson's first. An artist from Colorado, Watson said that, growing up, he was troubled to learn about the Rocky Flats nuclear weapons facility fire in 1955, which spewed plumes of blazing plutonium into the air near Denver.

"I was young, fired up and revolted by nuclear weapons," Watson said. "I was bound and determined that no, this would not be my last meeting."

Ground Zero has continued its protests at various times throughout the years, drawing attention through arrests and court cases as well as legal advocacy aimed at shedding light on Navy activities in the Pacific Northwest. Possible dangers in the construction and placement of Bangor's second explosives handling wharf, for instance, spurred a lawsuit by Ground Zero that ultimately led to the release of tens of thousands of government records.

After the 1982 fire, the Buddhists received a donation from a Bainbridge Island couple for land near Lynwood Center to build a temple. Monks used twisting Madrona for the beams, and, until 1988, the chants of

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Pagoda

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Na-Mu-Myo-Ho-Ren-Ge-Ky — the sutra for the Buddhist order — were a constant among the quiet woods.

But after the pagoda effort ceased, the Monks left. The Bainbridge temple sat empty for 15 years.

That is, until Senji Kanaeda, son of Japanese activists against the atomic bomb, came from Japan to restore it. There were trees growing on the roof when he arrived.

“We revived the relationship,” Kanaeda said.

It would not come easy. Plans for a pagoda, this time on Bainbridge Island, were rejected by the city government.

And then, another fire broke out in 2005.

This blaze, at a home on the Ground Zero property, was ruled to have been caused by an electrical baseboard heater that went up in flames. It was another setback.

However, with Ground Zero and the monks back together, the organization returned to Kitsap County in 2015 to get the permits to build. A new, smaller pagoda measuring 30 feet tall was proposed. County officials at first demanded a much more rigorous permit for the pagoda. But following two more years of discussions and public records requests, the county approved the project on May 17, 2019.

County Commissioner Rob Gelder, whose district includes the Ground Zero center, said there are no reasons for the county to oppose it. He said plans for the pagoda, which began when he was in high school, are “illustrative of the tenacity and perseverance” of the core group of volunteers who refuse to give up.

Former county commissioner Mahan said he’s not surprised Ground Zero hasn’t stopped its effort.

“They’re not the kind of people that give up,” he said.

The Navy said it has no jurisdiction over the peace pagoda construction process.

“Ground Zero is a non-Federal entity and as such Navy has no position or opinion on this particular project,” J. Overton, a Navy spokesman said.

At a ground purification ceremony for the pagoda in August 2019, Shelley Douglass reminded the 150 or so gathered that Ground Zero, and similar organizations across the country, continue to resist such nuclear weapons. The pagoda’s journey, she said, helps advance its movement.

“We are part of the whole, but the whole is built kind of the way the shoveling process happened, where I move a shovelful and you do a shovelful.

“Everybody moves their shovelful and it comes together,” she said.

The pagoda project perseveres: a timeline

Feb. 1, 1977: The Trident submarine base, today known as Naval Base Kitsap-Bangor, opens. The same year, a protesting group called the Ground Zero Center for Nonviolent Action buys land on Clear Creek road bordering the base.

Nov. 4, 1980: Nichidatsu Fujii, founder of the Nipponzan-Myohoji sect of Buddhism, declares Ground Zero should be the site of a peace pagoda.

March 19, 1982: The Kitsap County Commissioners reject a permitting application for the pagoda on neighborhood “compatibility” grounds.

May 28, 1982: Arsonists destroy a geodesic dome and smash symbols inside it.

Aug. 12, 1982: The USS Ohio, the first of 18 Ohio-class ballistic missile submarines armed with Trident missiles, traverses Hood Canal to its new home. More than 9,000 protesters greet it; 17 people are arrested though no charges were ever filed.

Jan. 28, 1983: A King County Superior Court judge rules Kitsap County must issue the permits for the peace pagoda. But in ensuing appellate cases, the permit application is ultimately returned to the county commissioners.

Jan. 9, 1985: Nichidatsu Fujii dies at 100.

Feb. 25, 1985: The county commissioners once again reject permits for the pagoda project.

Feb. 25, 1987: A “Gendai Hoto,” or stone stupa, is built to house the remains of the Buddha and crucifix destroyed by fire.

Sept. 7, 1992: An obituary for the Ground Zero Center on Clear Creek Road is written in the Kitsap Sun.

July 2003: The Rev. Senji Kanaeda, a member of the Nipponzan-Myohoji sect, moves to the temple on Bainbridge Island and starts efforts to revive the peace pagoda project. An attempt to move the project to Bainbridge is rejected by the city’s planning department.

April 6, 2005: A fire badly damages another building at Ground Zero; it is ruled an accident caused by the building’s baseboard heater.

June 16, 2016: The revamped efforts to build the peace pagoda encounter problems with permitting once again, as the county at first insisted on a lengthier process.

May 17, 2019: Kitsap County issues the permit necessary to build the peace pagoda. Its construction continues.

Aug. 24, 2019: A ground purification ceremony is held and construction begins on the peace pagoda.

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Crash

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noted what police had said initially: that speed appeared to be the primary factor in the wreck.

“I think it was unfortunately just a case of teenagers being teenagers, and I hate that,” Emily Wachsman said.

Over the last few days, Bainbridge Island has mourned in-person and online, on Facebook pages teeming with condolences and memories and in messages of support that have flooded in to the families of the girls. The night after the crash, hundreds of people packed into Bainbridge Island’s Waterfront Park to remember the students.



Bainbridge High School students Marina Miller (upper left), Hazel Kleiner (lower left) and Hannah Wachsman were killed in a crash on Sunrise Drive on Bainbridge Island on March 16. SUBMITTED

“It’s a pretty small community, we’re all pretty connected,” said the mother of a student who was a teammate of the three girls, as she looked out over the large gathering. “And so this doesn’t surprise me at all, because it’s a very small-town feel. I think it’s good for everybody, and the kids don’t have to be alone.”

Brighton Whittlesey, a Bainbridge High School student, reflected on memories of going out for pizza after a volleyball game, of playing with the three girls when they’d been students at Woodward Middle School: “They were really funny and always supportive and sweet,” she said. “They wouldn’t judge you if you messed up on something.”

“My heart is broken,” said Brighton’s mother, Dawnae. “As a mom, you can’t imagine. She texted me this morning of what had happened before she knew who. I almost threw up in the car just thinking about it. Can you imagine anything worse?”

In a Facebook post addressing the Bainbridge

Island community, Marina’s mother, Nicole, described her daughter: “Marina was many things, she was a student, an athlete, a daughter, a sister, a cousin and a friend to many. It was my lifetime’s greatest privilege to be her mother, but I did not raise her alone. We want to thank every single one of her Bainbridge Island teachers, coaches and friends who helped shape her into the incredible person she was. We love you all.”

The three girls had played volleyball together both at the high school and through the Olympic Premier Volleyball Club. In memories sent to the Kitsap Sun by the club, coaches described women invested in their sport and full of life.

Natalie Barringer-Mullins recalled time spent with Miller and Kleiner: “My favorite memories of the two young ladies was when we were at a tournament and in between games they would ask if I could make TikTok dances with them and they would try to teach me but I was so uncoordinated and very pregnant and my belly was always getting in the way. They would always say they couldn’t wait to meet my little baby girl and teach her dance moves and volleyball and it is sad that because of the pandemic they were never able to meet her in person but they did over Zoom. When my daughter grows up, I hope she gets a lot of the qualities from these two girls. They taught me a lot and I can really say I am going to miss them in my life.”

“My heart is broken. As a mom, you can’t imagine.”

Dawnae Whittlesey
Mother of Bainbridge student Brighton Whittlesey

could. For many kids, volleyball is just one activity or sport, but for Hannah, volleyball was life itself.”

Hannah’s parents, Emily Wachsman and Jeff Logan, described their daughter as a confident, nurturing, compassionate girl. In between a busy sports schedule and a focus on her schoolwork, she already had a vision of what was to come after high school: a career helping patients as a nurse practitioner. The family enjoyed season tickets to University of Washington volleyball matches together and navigated busy club and school volleyball schedules.

“She was kind of bigger than life,” Emily said. “She lit up any room she walked into, she had a beautiful smile, a very infectious laugh and she was just kind of that bright light for everybody. She was known as the mom of her group.”

Emily described the days following her daughter’s death as an “utter hell” but said her family has received a massive response of support from the community. The family launched a college scholarship fund (CelebrateHannah.com) in Hannah’s memory this week and within a few days support had topped \$50,000.

“We wanted to keep her name going,” said Logan, Hannah’s stepfather. “The flowers are going to stop, people are going to stop coming by, and we just want to keep her name out there so people don’t forget Hannah. We just wanted to do good, and I’m sure by the time that we’re all set and done and all the people that have given that possibly can give, we’ll have a lot of money to help other people.”

Nathan Pilling is a reporter covering Bainbridge Island, North Kitsap and Washington State Ferries for the Kitsap Sun. He can be reached at 360-792-5242, nathan.pilling@kitsapsun.com or on Twitter at @KSatePilling.

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