

The Providence Journal

THURSDAY
DECEMBER 21, 2006

SOUTH COUNTY
EDITION

projo.com

MILD SNAP
Partly cloudy today with
highs near 50; turning much
chillier tonight.
Forecast, F10
50¢
\$2.40 per week by carrier

2006 New England Newspaper of the Year

SEASON'S GREETINGS



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / BILL MURPHY

Susan Featherstone, left, of North Attleboro, a member of the Rhode Island National Guard, hugs her daughter Nicole Bragga, 9, at T.F. Green Airport yesterday as she returns home from Iraq for two-week Christmas break.

Back in the nick of time

Two area families will enjoy the holidays with loved ones who are home on a two-week Christmas break from the war in Iraq.

BY TOM MOONEY
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

WARWICK — Jennifer Andrade, 10, and Nicole Bragga, 9, were strangers to one another yesterday, but they wore matching camouflage pants and had been drawn to the same gate at T.F. Green Airport by their shared Christmas wish.

It started coming true just before 5 p.m.

Nicole had pledged to her mother's lifelong friends, standing with her, that she would not cry when she saw her mom. She would hold the "Welcome Home, Mommy" sign that her teacher at the Falls School in North Attleboro had made and present her mother with a red rose.

She broke her promise the instant Staff Sgt. Susan Featherstone, a

nurse with the Army Reserve's 399th combat support hospital, came into view.

Nicole ran toward her mother, leapt into her arms and clung to her like bark on a tree — all the while her tears ran down the front of her mother's fatigues.

"My God, look at you," crooned her mother, wiping away her own tears from her red cheeks. "Oh, I missed you a lot, too, dear."

Nicole planted another kiss on her mother's lips and showed her the sign.

"I saw that," her mother said. "I hope you save that for when I come home again in September."

They are coming home for Christmas. The lucky ones. Soldiers and Marines, nurses and other Reserve and National Guard members who for two or three weeks can put the war in Iraq behind them.

For days they have filtered through the airport; a few at a time, many dressed in their camouflage uniforms

SEE HOME, A2

A reflective Bush ponders next step

The president says he has yet to decide whether to send more troops to Iraq, a move opposed by some in the military.

JOURNAL WIRE REPORTS

WASHINGTON — The debate over sending more U.S. troops to Iraq intensified yesterday as President Bush signaled that he will listen but not necessarily defer to military officers, and Army Gen. John P. Abizaid, his top Middle East commander and a leading skeptic of a so-called surge, announced his retirement.

At an end-of-the-year news conference, Mr. Bush said he agrees with generals "that there's got to be a specific mission that can be accomplished" before he decides to dispatch an additional 15,000 to 30,000 troops to the war zone. But he declined to repeat his usual formulation that he will heed his commanders on the ground when

SEE BUSH, A2

Tribe seeks slot parlor on its land

Chief Sachem Matthew Thomas wants a repeal of a federal law that blocks gambling without state voter approval on tribal lands in Charlestown.

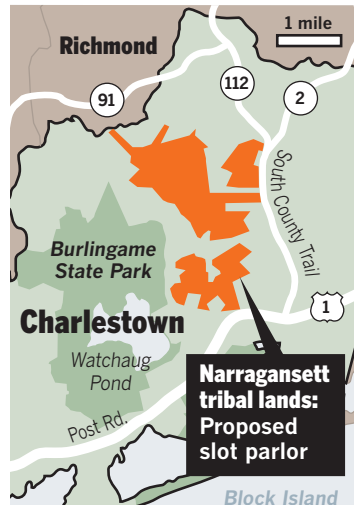
BY KATIE MULVANEY
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Less than two months after voters roundly rejected its casino bid, the Narragansett Indian tribe is continuing its gambling quest — this time in pursuit of a slot parlor on its land in Charlestown.

And the tribe has approached state congressional leaders about repealing a federal law that could block its efforts.

"We don't want table games. We don't want roulette. We want what the state has," Chief Sachem Matthew Thomas said yesterday.

Thomas has requested a meeting with members of Rhode Island's delegation about overturning the Chafee amendment, a law introduced by U.S. Sen. John Chafee in 1996 that bars the tribe from federal Indian gaming privileges on its 1,800 acres. It requires the Narragansetts, unlike most tribes, to seek voter approval for any gaming on their land.



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / GEORGE SYLVIA

"I believe it's been utterly unfair. It's time for justice," Thomas said. The tribe, in many respects, is coming full circle since plans for a bingo hall on tribal lands

SEE TRIBE, A12

For some, state pension payments continue after death

A report shows that \$11,962 in payments was made to four deceased state and municipal pensioners who died in 2005.

BY KATHERINE GREGG
JOURNAL STATE HOUSE BUREAU

PROVIDENCE — For seven months after she died in November 2005 at age 98, the state continued to pay retired social worker Hazel A. Meyers \$939.94 a month in pension benefits.

More than a year later, the state retirement system is still trying to recover the \$5,612 that went into the late Meyers' account, by electronic deposit, before an audit brought her case — and three others like it — to light.

In a report late last month, the state's auditor general put the

spotlight on \$11,962 in payments to four deceased state and municipal pensioners who died between Jan. 3 and Nov. 7, 2005, to whom the state continued making pension payments for six to seven months after their deaths.

The finding is not entirely new: the Employees Retirement System of Rhode Island pays a California company, Pension Benefit Information, \$1,139 every quarter to match the state's pension payroll against death records from across the nation.

The quarterly matchup routinely brings to light deaths that state retirement officials, who rely on death benefit applications and Providence Journal death notices, might otherwise miss.

But what is striking in these

SEE PENSIONS, A15

Overweight? Scientists put blame on bacteria

Obese people, scientists say, have more of certain microbes that are very efficient at extracting calories from food.

BY ROB STEIN
THE WASHINGTON POST

The guts of obese people are teeming with a distinctive mix of bacteria that seems to make them prone to gaining weight, a startling discovery that could lead to new ways to fight the obesity epidemic, researchers reported yesterday.

Obese people have more gut microbes that are especially

efficient at extracting calories from food, the researchers said, and the proportion of these super-digesting organisms ebbs as they lose weight. Moreover, when the scientists transplanted gut bugs from obese mice into lean mice, the thin animals started getting fat, providing more support for the provocative theory that the bacteria that populate the gut play an important role in regulating weight.

"There appears to be a link between obesity and the type of bugs in your gut," said Jeffrey I. Gordon of Washington University

SEE OBESITY, A8

IT'S WINTER OUT WEST



AP / DAVID ZALUBOWSKI

While New England has enjoyed a mild December so far, Robert Bigelow of Denver can attest to the fact that winter has indeed arrived as a major snowstorm yesterday paralyzes travel across the Rockies. More on winter's arrival, B1

Tempers flare between senator, Town Council

State Sen. Stephen Alves and West Warwick councilors get into a shouting match after a recent meeting.

BY TALIA BUFORD
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

WEST WARWICK — A shouting match between state Sen. Stephen D. Alves and members of the Town Council erupted when a disagreement regarding an agenda item escalated after Tuesday's meeting ended.

News of the possible replacement of District Court prosecutor Brenda E. Carcieri with state Rep. J. Patrick O'Neill brought protesters to the council meeting. Resi-

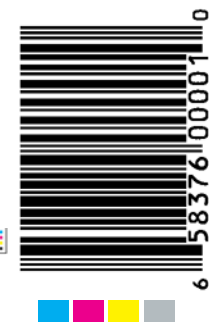
dents voiced concern about the appointment, suggesting it was a result of political favoritism. The council went on to vote 3 to 2 to appoint O'Neill. Council members Angelo A. Padula Jr. and David Gosselin Jr. voted against the appointment.

"If it's not broke, don't fix it," Padula said yesterday. "It's not anything against O'Neill, but we had a prosecutor everyone was satisfied with. I didn't think we needed a change."

After the exchange, the town's chief of police had Alves driven home, saying the senator was "too upset to drive."

O'Neill, a Democrat representing

SEE ALVES, A14



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A total of \$18,737.81 has been donated.
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ELECTRIC RATES CUT

The Public Utilities Commission approves a 6.6-percent cut in electric rates, saving the typical residential customer about \$5.11 a month. F1

SEARCH ABANDONED

Rescue teams give up any hope of finding two missing climbers alive on Mount Hood and abandon the search in Oregon. A4



BISHOP PAYS A HOLIDAY VISIT

With Christmas just days away, the Most Rev. Thomas J. Tobin, Roman Catholic Bishop of Providence, travels to Zambano Hospital to celebrate Mass and meet patients at the chronic-disease institution — the first time a bishop has visited the facility in almost 15 years. B1

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