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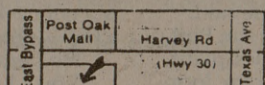


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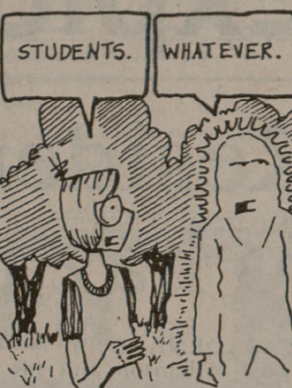
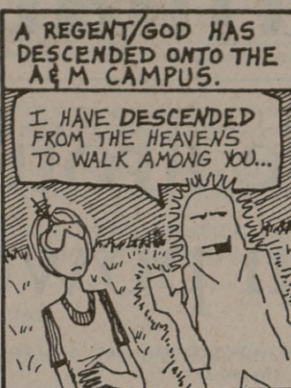
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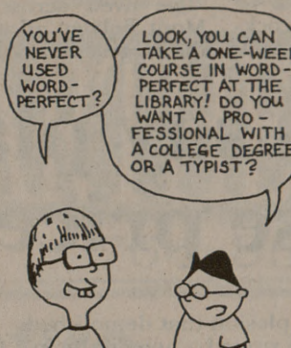
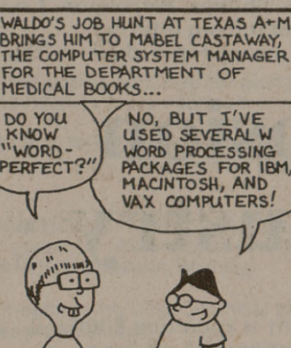
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WARD



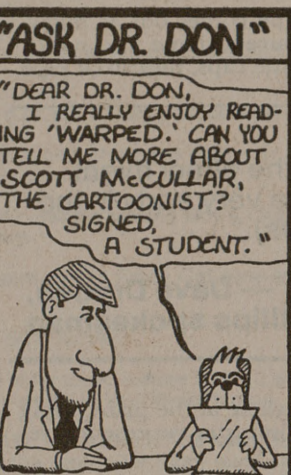
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Teacher's stuffed animals make learning 'bearable'

TEXAS CITY (AP) — Charlie Brown's happiness may be a warm puppy — but Olivia Cook and her "children" get their warm fuzzies from bears.

Hundreds of bears. Big bears. Tiny bears. Stuffed bears. Poster bears. Bear books and bulletin boards and combs and note pads and clocks and bookends and cookie jars.

Bears and bears and bears.

Cook believes the bears help her first graders at Roosevelt-Wilson Elementary School to enter the world of real learning.

In addition to creating a colorful classroom, the bears "help give the children positive self-esteem," Cook said. Of major emphasis in all the schools the past few years have been programs which make children "feel good about themselves."

"Besides all my bears, the children are also allowed to bring a bear of their own to keep in the back of a desk," she said. "They can take them home anytime, or keep them at school. Some of the bears go home fairly soon, because they are no longer needed. And some of the bears stay all year long."

In spite of having nearly 300 bears of her own, Cook

said, "I know all my bears. And the children know their bears." The classroom bears range in size from one inch to four feet tall — in every color.

People keep bringing her bears, and a friend has painted bears on many of her clothing items for school — T-shirts and jumpers and skirts.

"I'll either wear clothes with bears or a bear necklace or other jewelry to school every day," she said.

The bear decor began when her daughter Julie, 18, decided she didn't want stuffed animals in her room anymore.

About that same time, Cook said, "I decided I couldn't stand to look at Big Bird one more day." (Her classroom had a "Sesame Street" theme for 12 years.)

"I don't dare tell my husband I like something unless I am really serious," she said. "He began haunting the flea markets and garage sales, bringing home bears. Now he makes the antique malls in Pearland and Pasadena almost every weekend."

Her husband, John Cook, also teaches school, at Blocker Middle School, where his classroom is graced with "Super Heroes."

Texans in dark on work comp; favor fair payment for injuries

AUSTIN (AP) — Texas voters don't know much about workers' compensation but they do favor fair payments to injured workers, according to a lawyer-commissioned survey released Tuesday.

"Given a tough choice between cutting business premiums and ensuring fair compensation for employees, a strong majority comes down on the side of protecting fair compensation for employees," Paul Harstad, vice president of Peter D. Hart Research Associates Inc. said.

The firm polled 605 Texas voters for the Texas Trial Lawyers Association, a group of attorneys who represent injured workers, and Texans for Civil Justice, described as a victims' rights group.

"The bottom line is, yes, Texans by and large don't know a lot about workers' comp, but let me tell you, people bring fundamental values and basic priorities to this issue,"

Harstad told a news conference with Texans for Civil Justice, which released the poll.

The survey was dismissed as "worthless" by Dane Harris, president of the Texas Association of Business.

"They have picked emotional non-issues in an effort to put up a smoke screen to defeat true reform of the system," Harris said.

Lawmakers will try for the third time this year to pass workers' compensation reform legislation in a special legislative session that begins Nov. 14.

The system has been criticized as combining inadequate benefits for workers with skyrocketing premiums.

According to the poll, 80 percent of Texas voters said they had heard about workers' compensation problems. But only 30 percent said they either knew a fair amount or a lot about those problems.

When asked about workers' compensation goals, 80 percent said ensuring fair compensation for injured employees either was very important or the single most important aspect of the system.

Fifty-nine percent said injured workers should have a trial by jury option.

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