**Washington University in St. Louis**

**Scratch no more:**

Gene for itch sensation discovered

**By Gwen Ericson**

I

**ching for a better anti-itch remedy? Your wish may soon be granted now that School of Medicine scientists have identified the first gene for the itch sensation in the central nervous system. The discovery could rapidly lead to treatments directly targeting itchiness and providing relief for chronic and severe itching. The “itch gene” is GRPR (glutam-"in-releasing peptide receptor), which codes for a receptor found in a very small population of spinal cord nerve cells where pain and itch signals are transmitted from the skin to the brain. The research, led by Zhen-Feng Chen, Ph.D., found that laboratory mice that lacked this gene scratched much less than their normal cage-mates when given itchy stimuli.

The laboratory experiments confirmed the connection between GRPR and itching, offering the first evidence of a receptor specific for the itch sensation in the central nervous system. The findings were reported in late July in the online version of Nature.

A wealth of problems, chronic itching can be caused by skin disorders like eczema, or it can stem from a deeper problem such as kidney failure or liver disease. It can be a serious side effect of cancer therapies or powerful painkillers like morphine. For some people, chronic itching can be very time consuming, interfering with sleep or giving rise to scratching that leads to scarring. Effective treatment options for itchy patients are limited. Historically, scientists regarded itch as just a less intense version of the pain sensation. As a result, research on itching has been somewhat neglected.

“Many genes have been identified in the pain pathway,” said Chen, associate professor of neurosurgery, of psychiatry in Arts & Sciences and of molecular biology and pharmacology. “But itch research has lived in the shadow of pain research, and so no one knew which gene was responsible for itching in the brain or on the spinal cord until now.”

In fact, Chen’s team became interested in GRPR because it was looking for genes in the pain pathway. Among potential pain-sensing genes the team identified, GRPR stood out because it was present in only a few nerve cells in the mouse, which is known to relay pain and/or itch signals to the brain.

So the team began to study some mice that were missing the GRPR gene to find out how they were different from normal mice.

“The research was a little disappointing at first,” Chen said. “The knockout mice seemed to have the same reactions to painful stimuli as normal mice.”

But when post-doctoral fellow Yen-Gang Sun, Ph.D., injected the spinal cords of normal mice with a substance that stimulates GRPR, the knockout mice started scratching themselves as if they had a bad itch.

“That’s when we thought the gene might be involved in the itch sensation,” Chen said.

The team studied scratching behavior in two sets of mice — normal mice and GRPR knockout mice. Normal mice scratched vigorously when exposed to a variety of itchy-producing substances, but the knockout mice scratched much less.

“The fact that the knockout mice still scratched a little suggests there are additional itch receptors,” Chen said. “We know of some proteins that are similar to GRPR, but so far, we have not been able to identify a receptor that is specific to itch.”

Researchers inspect a Lahar flow — picture a mix of water and rock fragments that looks like moving concrete — near the Tungaruhua volcano close to Banjos, Ecuador.

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**Reading program gives incoming students a head start on homework**

**By Neil Schoenheir**

Members of the Class of 2011 have just arrived on campus today but they’re already completing their first assignment.

The students have all read Alan Lightman’s book “Einstein’s Dreams” in preparation for discussion with faculty and peers and a semester of programmatic exploration of visual, physical connections.

The students have all read Alan Lightman’s book “Einstein’s Dreams” in preparation for discussion with nearly 70 faculty members and a couple of German scientists and a mixture of Ecuadorian politicians and citizens comprised the committee, which is called the Ecuadorian Volcanic Hazard Assessment Group. Its task is to develop an emergency plan in case of an eruption, which could happen again soon because magma temperatures are rising, according to Buchwald.

“Dealing with the threat of a volcano is not an uncommon problem,” Buchwald said. “In North America, we have Seattle, which is adjacent to Mount St. Helens and two other volcanoes. They are less active, with eruptions every 150-200 years, while in Ecuador, we have Banjos, which erupted in 2001 and in 2008.”

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**Be prepared**

Geologist plans volcano safety for Ecuadorians

**By Tony Fitzpatrick**

A

University geologist is doing his part to make sure that the small Latin American country of Ecuador follows the Boy Scout motto: Be prepared.

Robert Buchwald, Ph.D., lecturer in earth and planetary sciences in Arts & Sciences, is the only American who sits on an international committee that is working to address the volcanic threat in Ecuador, especially in Quino, a city of 5 million nestled against a volcano, Guagua Pichincha, that erupted just two years ago.

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Researchers inspect a Lahar flow — picture a mix of water and rock fragments that looks like moving concrete — near the Tungaruhua volcano close to Banjos, Ecuador.
School of Medicine Update

Adverse housing conditions contribute to diabetes risk

BY JON DEYTON

South America, Central America originally built as an oil tanker, is geon while the ship was in Panama, Nicaragua and El Salvador.

"We looked at several risk factors to see if we could explain why some African-Americans were more likely to develop diabetes," explained Mario Schootman, Ph.D., assistant professor of epidemiology and of medicine and chief of the Division of Health Behavior Research. "And we found that housing conditions somehow contribute to the development of diabetes."

The study looked at many risk factors for diabetes including weight, smoking, exercise, alcohol use, marital status and education. But when the researchers adjusted for all of those factors, housing conditions still influenced diabetes risk.

"So far we can't explain why that is," Schootman said. "It could potentially be related to lead. Lead is associated with the development of diabetes, and we know that in some poorer housing conditions, there's likely to be lead exposure. But it also could be related to other, unknown environmental contaminants."

Schootman also said stress might be involved. Individuals who live in poor housing conditions may be more likely to be under stress because of where they live, and there are known links between stress and diabetes that could help explain the increased incidence of diabetes in this population.

"But a counter-argu- ment against that would be that diabetes risk was associated with housing, but not neighborhoods," he said. "We would have expected that if stress was playing a role, the neighborhood conditions also would be involved."

The researchers found that although there are no neighborhood effects, said sen-

lor author Douglas K. Miller, M.D., the Richard M. Fairbanks Professor in Aging Research and Regenstrief Institute research scientist at the Indiana University School of Medicine, "But it is clear that it won't be possible to reduce disparities in health sta-
tus among subgroups in the population without understanding how a person's envi-
ronment can affect that person's health."

This study grew out of a larger health study involving African-Americans. In the original study, researchers looked at several factors responsible for the higher incidence of health problems experienced by about 1,000 African-Americans living in St. Louis, who were born between 1936 and 1950. At the time the initial study was con-
ducted, more than 25 percent of this popu-
lation had diabetes. The new study found that over the next three years another 10 percent developed diabetes.

"I think that's a huge finding and of itself," Schootman said. "Think about how many middle-aged African-Americans live in a place like St. Louis, and if our sample is at all representative of the larger communi-
ty, you can see that the number of people with diabetes is growing very rapidly over time. I also think it's likely that we would find comparable results if we had done sim-
ilar research in Detroit, Atlanta or New York City."

Schootman said more studies will be needed to determine what specifically in-
fluenced the risk of diabetes in poor housing conditions, but many factors have already been ruled out.

Jeffrey Lowell, M.D., (left) and Eric Shirley, lieutenant commander in the U.S. Navy, perform clubfoot repair surgery on a child while on board the USNS Comfort.

Lowell uses surgical skills on military hospital ship in Central America

BY BETH MILLER

In late July, Jeffrey Lowell, M.D., was in Salvadoran operating as a Salvadoran soldier who had been injured by a grenade explo-

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Lowell, known at the School of Medicine as professor of surgery and of pediatrics, was deployed on a mission in service to the U.S. Army's Joint Task Force Medical Support, Command-
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"Some drugs that lack ERR alpha and that were exposed to pressure overload, the research-

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**School of Medicine Update**

**Recycling program grows at the School of Medicine**

**BY BETH MILLER**

Project ARK receives $6.7 million to provide HIV care to women, children

Project ARK, the St. Louis area’s only organization that coordinates care, support and prevention services for children and families living with or at risk for HIV infection, has received a $6.7 million, five-year grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The grant, the largest that supports Project ARK and the foundation of the program, was awarded through the Ryan White HIV/AIDS Treatment Program.

Modernization Act Part D, allowing Project ARK to continue to provide HIV care to children, youth ages 13-24, and women through a family-centered approach.

Project ARK, of AIDS/HIV Resources and Knowledge, is a collaboration among the School of Medicine, St. Louis Children’s Hospital and other area health care providers, including the Washington University School of Medicine.

The grant will provide primary care, case management, mental health and substance abuse evaluation and treatment, counseling, support groups and primary prevention education.

Washington University in St. Louis has an estimated 4,700 people living with HIV/AIDS. Up to 40 percent of them are unaware they have HIV, which disproportionately affects minorities and the poor. In 2006, Project ARK provided services to 1,906 new HIV-exposed or infected clients, of which about three-fourths were African-American.

In 2007, the project expects to serve 2,200 clients.

"We are very happy to receive this grant as it will allow us to address the needs of newly enrollees and their families while continuing to provide optimum services to existing clients," said Gregory Storch, M.D., medical director of Project ARK and the Ruth L. Steinman Professor of Pediatrics.

"Last year, we had more than 100 new HIV-infected clients in the program. These individuals often have a high level of need. The new funding will allow us to provide critical support services when they enter the program," Storch said. Storch also directs the Division of Infectious Diseases at St. Louis Children's Hospital.

The federal Ryan White program is named after an Indiana teenager whose own struggle with AIDS and AIDS-related disemination helped educate the nation. Ryan White died in 1990, the same year the program was enacted.

For low-income, uninsured AIDS patients, the Ryan White Act also provides access to HIV drugs, including protease inhibitors that are known to prolong the lives of HIV patients and improve mental health services, case management and dental care.

Project ARK also receives funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Ryan White Parts A and B and private foundations. It has been funded by the Ryan White Act since 1995.

**Gena Scibelli**

**A$5.7 million grant will establish a center of Excellence in Medicine that will investigate the underlying causes of kidney disease and support new treatments.**

The grant, directed by Marc R. Hamme
erman, M.D., the Chaimson Professor of Renal Diseases in Medicine, is funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH).”

Kidney disease is a devastating illness, and the goal of this grant will be to understand the molecular mechanisms that contribute to kidney disease and test new treatments,” said Hammond, who also directs the Division of Renal Diseases and is a staff physician at Barnes-Jewish Hospital. “The grant will establish cores within the renal division to focus scientific efforts to discover why kidneys fail.”

WUSTL was one of only three institutions to receive the funding to establish a comprehensive research center within the school of medicine. It was a testimony to the depth and breadth of our research program,” said Hammond.

An estimated 19 million Americans have chronic kidney disease, a condition that has developed in the United States and worldwide. “Our overarching mission will be to understand the basic biology of the kidney diseases, including the role that particular genes play in the structure and function of the organ. The investigators also hope to determine how abnormalities in genes and their expression increase an individual’s risk of developing kidney disease,” said Hammond.

In addition to Hammond, key investigators in the center include Daniel Brennan, M.D., professor of medicine and of cell biology and genetics; and Scott Miller, M.D., professor of medicine; Raphal Koon, M.D., professor of genetics; Michael Shin, M.D., professor of medicine; and Mark Schnitzer, M.D., Ph.D., associate professor of medicine and of biology.

The school is also collecting several types of tip recycling program began, the effort has kept nine tons of discarded tipper outs of landfills. Recycling is not a cost sav-
ing, it’s expensive, but it’s the right thing to do,” Evans said.

"The success of this program starts at each employee’s desk."

**Kidney research center launched with $5.7 million grant**

By Caroline Arrabas

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The grant brings together a tour de force of 48 basic scientists and clinical researchers at WUSTL, and 12 investigators at several other academic medical centers in the United States and worldwide. Their overarching mission will be to understand the basic biology of the kidney diseases, including the role that particular genes play in the structure and function of the organ. The investigators also hope to determine how abnormalities in genes and their expression increase an individual’s risk of developing kidney disease.

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F. years, John and Penelope Biggs have supported the classics department in Arts & Sciences. Now, they have extended their generosity to the economic sciences with a major gift to establish the John H. Biggs Distinguished Professorship in Economics in Arts & Sciences.

David K. Levine, Ph.D., became the first to hold this distinguished professorship in a ceremony April 12 in Holmes Lounge.

"Horse Series." University Events lists a portion of the events for expanded calendars for the Danforth University Lofts development. Sheraton St. Louis City Center, 4950 Children's Place.

The project also received a Design Award from the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and was chosen as one of 2005's top 10 green buildings by the AIA's Commit-tee on the Environment.

Bruce Lindsey appointed E. Desmond Lee Professor

Lindsey, who arrived at the University in fall 2004, has also developed low-income housing as well as environmentally sustainable projects. He previously served as head of Au- burn University School of Architecture and led its ac-credited Regional Science Program, which allows students to design and build innovative "charity hous- ing" and other affordable and environmentally responsible facilities.

Lindsey's design for the Pittsburgh Glass Center (with David Coalson, Architects) earned a gold rat- ing under the Green Building Council's Leadership in Environmental & Energy Design (LEED) guidelines. He is the first professor of Arts & Sciences to hold the endowed chair. For the past three years, Lindsey has been an Associate Professor of Architecture and the Graduate Program in Sustainable Design at the University of Pennsylvania, where he is the graduate program director.

In addition, he has served as co-chair and membership chair of the Pennsylvania chapter of the AIA; as an advisor to the University of Pennsylvania's Sustainable Design Initiative; and as an advisor to the CoreNet Global Green Networking Group. He also has served as a faculty advisor to the University of Pennsylvania's Sustainable Design Initiative, which is a national leader in sustainable design education and research.

Lindsey received his bachelor's degree from Brown University in 1989 and his master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1991. He has been a member of the AIA since 1990 and a fellow of the American Institute for Research in the Health Sciences since 2001. He is a recipient of the AIA's Heart Disease Research Award in 2001.

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Window | Interface at Kemper Art Museum

New media artworks explore connections between the visual and the physical

BY LAM OTTEN

Windows shape and function life literally and figuratively, the ways we see and the world around us. Intersections represent the points of contact between different systems and entities — for example, the screen, the human user and the computer that connects the human with the world.

In August, the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum will present "Window | Interface," the second installment in its Screen Arts and New Media Aesthetics series. The exhibition will highlight a variety of artistic projects, including videos, photographs and installations, that explore the role of windows and interfaces in the design and nature and purpose and general and particular functions of windows and what they mean to humans.

Drawn from private collections and major museums, "Window | Interface" is organized by Selina Eckman, Ph.D., director and chief curator of the Kemper Art Museum, and Lulu May, Ph.D., curator for new media and professor of Gender and Sexuality Studies at Washington University in St. Louis.

The exhibition explores the ways in which artists — such as Doug Aitken, Olafur Eliasson, David Hilliard and Jeff Wall have used windows to represent abstracted, disembodied and framed light.

For example, Evans’s "Think of this as a Window" (2003) consists of a series of photographs spelling out the title on a horizontal, window-like sheet of Plexiglas. The piece highlights the role of architecture in making windows do as mechanisms for framing space and light while also alluding to the design and display devices we have come to take for granted today, electronic or not.

For instance, "Think of this as a Window | Series" (2000) presents a kind of dysfunctional window that is cumbersome to act upon. Displayed in backlit boxes, hand-drawn or computer-generated transparencies depict sites in which duplicative window frames are barricaded or cased by rough wooden planks. At the opposite end of elegant and claustrophobic, these scenes reconstruct the long tradition of associating the window with transparency and rationality, thus "opposing" the different types of framed viewing experiences that constitute the exhibition.

The second section looks at ways in which multimedia installations, videos and photographs offer new aesthetic experiences with the help of electronic devices.

These works by artists such as Joseph Boyer, Peter Campus, (Muñoz Elorza, Jeffrey vicent made their way to the window during "Window | Interface," which runs through Oct. 29.

"Window | Interface" runs through Oct. 29.

Martin contender for Woman of the Year

Track and field standout Delaina Martin has been named as one of the Top 30 contenders for the 2007 NCAA Women of the Year award, as selected by the NCAA Committee on Women’s Athletics.

From the 19 schools, 10 from each NCAA division, the Committee on Women’s Athletics will narrow the field to nine finalists, eventually selecting the 2007 NCAA Woman of the Year.

Martin completed her undergraduate degree in May with a 3.67 grade-point average as a mathemat- ics and Spanish major, both in Arts & Sciences. She fin- ished her four-year college career as the indoor holder in four events — the 20-pound weight throw and shot put in- doors, and the hammer throw and shot put outdoors.

Martin is one of the most decorated track and field athletes in University Athletic Association (UAA) history with 16 All-Confer- ence awards, including four in the indoor. In indoor competition, she was named UAA cham- pion in the 20-pound weight throw (2005-07) and also won the UAA Field Athlete of the Year award in 2005.

She was twice named the field events Most Outstanding Per- formeur in the indoor and outdoor season. In 2008, Martin claimed league titles in the hammer throw (2005, 2006, 2007), the discus (2004, 2005) and the shot put.

The woman's soccer team is ranked No. 11, while the mens' team was ranked No. 23 in the NSCAA/adidas pre-season top-25 poll, as announced on the Web site.

The women's soccer team finished the 2006 season with a program-best 17-3 record and advanced to the NCAA Sectional. The Bears fell to Wheaton College (Ill.) in the second round of the NCAA Tournament.

Washington U. returns all 11 starters from the 2006 season, including senior defender Elie Zen- ners, freshman goalkeeper No- ken Smelcer, junior midfielder Morgan Van. The Bears are expected to return to the NCAA Second Round in 1999.

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City Year/Coro partnership with GWB

The City Year Fellows Program in Public Affairs and City Year are partnering with the George Washington University Brown School of Social Work to offer their alumni added incentives when applying to the University's Master of Social Work program.

• A $20,000 scholarship award for two years of study for each Coro alum admitted to the program who is deemed scholarship worthy. Admitted alumni will still have to pay room, board, fees, and tuition for all the Brown School.

• Ability to pursue independent study opportunity facilitated by Coro leadership

• Ability to participate in community service co-op projects.

City Year's St. Louis center is extremely pleased that the Brown School is extending this wonderful opportunity to the Fellows who participate in our program as well as to the students of the Fellows of the Coro program.

Early in the summer, incoming Fellows will receive a City Year/Coro partnership with GWB brochure. The reading program is part of Fall Orientation 2007, which runs from Aug. 27 to Sept. 3.

Orientation officially kicks off today with "move-in" and residence hall floor meetings, followed by Convo, Convocation, and the Welcome to GW dinner.

For more information about these and other opportunities, contactROKE@wustl.edu or 935-6499.

Gene - from Page 1

Genevieve Posey Millerbe

The Brown School offers the following admissions opportunities in an area of interest with Brown faculty members.

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Gregory, Shearrer named to new positions in Medical Alumni and Development

By DIANE DUKES WILKINS

Patricia Gregory has been named assistant vice chancellor for University City Schools as the University's designated agency for out-of-school youth, and David Shearrer has been named executive director of development for clinical programs in the School of Medicine and Development.

Gregory, Ph.D., has been the University's executive director of corporate and foundation relations since 1992.

In her new role, she will continue to provide strategic corporate and foundation fund raising at the University and will add additional responsibilities in Medical Alumni and Development Programs. As part of the Medical Alumni and Development Leadership Team, she will report to Pamela Butts, associate vice chancellor and director of Medical Alumni and Development.

Before she joined Washington University, Gregory spent six years at Northwestern University as assistant chancellor and senior associate vice chancellor for its Department of Social Work; and six years at the College of William and Mary as coordinator of corporate and foundation relations.

Campus Card Account expands services

In response to the interest of students, parents and other members of the University community, the Campus Card Account (CCA) has expanded the services it offers.

Accessed through the University ID card, the CCA is used for on-campus purchases at the Student Union and Bear Store convenience stores, as well as for the purchase of meals at many campus eateries.

The undergraduate and graduate student CCA will continue to be managed through WebSTAC. Faculty and staff manage their accounts through WebSTAC, the University's employee self-service system.

The CCA most recently expanded to include the three Arena facilities, Ford Sports Complex, the Student Union and Bear Store convenience stores, as well as the Bear Store convenience stores on Danforth Campus, West Campus and North Campus.

Gregory, Sherryann named to new positions in Medical Alumni and Development

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It could be said that Bob Chekoudjian’s life has been a matrix of being in the right place at the right time. Whether it was getting his job at the University, falling in love with bike riding, meeting his wife or picking a hand that would eventually open up for the Ramones at the old Mississippi Nights, Chekoudjian has been pretty fortuitous regarding major life events.

Born and raised in St. Louis, Chekoudjian, an engineer in Personal Computing Support Services (PCSS) in the Office of Information Services & Technologies, has been a part of the University community for nearly seven years. But his background gave no real indication of his career path at WUSTL.

It’s his more fine arts classes than computer classes, and his educational background is pretty much all art-related. But he came into computing when they first introduced it, at a time when nobody had a computer back- ground.

“Everybody got one and just played around with it to see what they could do with it,” he says. “It’s a very organic relationship that I have with computers in that re

gard, I didn’t get my information out of a book. I learned things by figuring it out.

Chekoudjian is one of about eight full-time employees in his office tasked with keeping the University’s computers up to date and running smoothly. He does his job description down to simply something of a technical support desk.

His areas of responsibility include Office of Accounting Services, the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum and the Office of Public Affairs.

“For the most part, given time, almost anyone can learn the technical part of technical support,” says Carrie Burr, supervisor of technical services in Information Systems & Technology. “The support part is more difficult because for that, you need plenty of patience — and generally, you can’t learn patience.

“Anybody who loves his and his wife’s hobby, those of us involved in fixing problems especially need patience.”

School’s out for summer

Coming out of what was then Webster College, Chekoudjian accepted a position at Webster Groves High School as a part-time aide to the media department, which had just received a grant to install a broadcast-quality television studio.

The goal was similar to the equipment he had used in college, so he applied for the job and was hired.

Over the course of the next 15 years, Chekoudjian's responsibilities expanded to include teaching a yearbook course and graphic arts courses. That’s when he started dabbling in computing.

“We had some of the first computers out off the school in the lab — the old Apple IIe or two or three brains in the school would come down and beg for time on the computer,” he recalls. “And when computers ran off two 3 1/4-inch floppies and cost 2,500 bucks, so your average family wouldn’t buy these.

“So it was cool. You had kids in here playing with it in the cafeteria. Scrapping for time on the computers, so it was a fun environment to be working in.”

After awhile, he tried for something new but with no designs on a new job. He came back after his summer vacation and turned in his resignation, only knowing that his future work would be computer-related.

“It was sudden, but it was one of those things where I either had to do it now or be miserable for a year and I’m going to hate it and everyone is going to hate me,” he says.

“One thing I told myself is that I never wanted to be in that position — he somewhere I didn’t want to be, too much at stake with the kids — you don’t want to screw them up.”

His then-girlfriend, now wife, Mindy Mass, quit her job a month later, so in his words, they spent the next six months “sitting our mouths off, burning through our savings and getting to know each other.”

Then, just when the money started to run out, along came the University.

“I got a call asking if I wanted to come work here and I said, ‘sure, why not!’ he says with a laugh.

“Shenza is a punk rocker”

“Bob is always cool under pressure,” says Craig Luciano, systems engineer in PCSS. “He’s a consummate professional and he helps out coworkers even when he’s busy. He’s loved by everybody.”

“While we were there, there was no one to ask questions from,” says Shenza. “And it was my comfort zone. Everyone was very patient with me.”

Bob — or something like Bob — “is very patient and he’s a great riding buddy,” says Shenza. “Sometimes, even though we don’t ride together very often, he always:*he’s a great riding buddy.”

And so his involvement with The Retros was born. Fans of the local music scene in the late 1970s/early 1980s may remember The Retros as being a popular punk band, just as the genre was becoming more accepted.

“We always had like 50-100 songs,” Chekoudjian recalls. “We were together for maybe three songs of our own, and we played the same songs over and over. So in those days, you were playing to the same audience because the audience was somewhat limited back then.”

However, that audience knew what is like. And when one of the granddaddies of the punk movement came to town, The Retros were ready.

“I called Mississippi Nights and said that we wanted to open for the Ramones,” Chekoudjian said.

“Our reputation was out there; we would have been the natural band, from my perspective, to open. But we were told we were touring with an opening band.”

Fast-forward to the night before the show, a flyer was handed out and the band received a call at 12:30 a.m. asking if they could open after all. They were.

“We were very happy,” he says. “The Ramones asked everyone to get up and they're our friends." Chekoudjian recalls.

“Talk about your heroes living up to your expectations, that was it,” he says. “But heroes only sometimes go so far for someone.”

“I still swear to this day, one of the songs on their next album was a rip-off of one of our songs,” Chekoudjian says with a laugh.

“They were all three-chord songs back then, but I'm sticking to my story. They stole one of our songs!”

I want to ride my bicycle

Chekoudjian’s other passion is hiking, and he discovered his love of riding a trip to Austria in 1985.

His parents had emigrated from Austria; his mother died when he was 12, and the trip was the first time he had visited her relatives on her side of the family.

“It was an eye-opening experience, to say the least. I never thought, ‘Everybody in the world was riding bikes!’ He says. “They lived in a town of about 500 people, so it was all we could do to hop on a bike.

They’d go to the store almost all day and get fresh bread or produce. It was part of the culture, part of the fabric of everyday life and it really piqued my interest. It's not kids playing on a bike, it's people using a bike for life.

“I came back here and started riding a bike, reading and researching. And started riding — my house to Ted Drewes, which was about three miles into the neighborhood — I thought that was enough to earn my conference when I get there. I learned otherwise.”

Chekoudjian became more serious about riding later, to the point where he’d join Saturday morning rides that covered something like 70 miles.

One day a woman showed up.

“I don’t know how she found out about it, but she showed up at one of our rides,” he says. “I was just getting out of a relationship, and I found out later that she was just getting out of one.

It was basically all guys, so a woman showed up and you don’t want to annoy them. I was attracted to her but I didn’t want to be aggressive, I wanted her to have fun and come back. And she rode very well, I was impressed — she was up in front of the group. And I found out later she was new to cycling. It was a little too late for that.

After a few more rides, they started talking. The Ramones needed someone to another and after five years of dating, Chekoudjian and Mindy were married Aug. 23, 2003.

“When you are that comfortable with someone right off the bat, you don’t want to believe it because you don’t want to be disappointed,” he says. “But we‘d got to know each other, and we’re starting to be in life, I think what made it so good is that we were very comfortable with who we were then.”

Once again, they are getting comfortable — cautiously so — after a rough start to 2007.

“Everybody here has somebody else, and we all just got used to each other.”

That’s probably the hardest thing I’ve ever seen anybody deal with, but she kept her attitude positive,” he says. “I feel she’s learned a lot from her own experience, to say the least. I can’t think of anyone in the world who was riding bikes!”

Now, they are organizing a triathlon in Colorado to benefit the Lance Armstrong Foundation and the riders that could raise something like 250,000.

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And so it goes.

“We’ve never been able to change things," he says. "I think we’ve been able to change things, to work on changes, to make things better, but I don’t think we’ve been able to change..."