

# And the Weenies Are . . .

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Talk about cheap laughs.

Five years ago this week The Washington Post inaugurated a humor contest, The Style Invitational, that features entries from readers. We print the results on the back of this page. The readers write gags both puerile and sublime, jokes that ingeniously combine the brittle wit of Evelyn Waugh with the finest elements of the poop-doo genre. It has developed an avid following. Moreover, it is frequently the best intentional humor in The Post.

If the contestants were employed here they would collectively earn a six-figure salary, have dining privileges in the famed Washington Post cafeteria (motto: "The finest in tepid steam-table cuisine") and enjoy the full protection of the First Amendment.

Instead, they work for bumper stickers and T-shirts that probably cost fractions of pennies to produce in Far East sweatshops with working conditions that make a chicken abattoir appear progressive. The Holy Grail of their efforts, the so-called grand prize

awarded each week, has included a plastic pig that dances to "La Cucaracha," a shark fetus in a bottle and a rubber replica of a diseased prostate gland.

They are slave labor. They get no respect. Even their names are presented parenthetically.

To apologize for their years of systematized abuse, we invited the 12 all-time Style Invitational winners, the stars of the contest, to The Post to celebrate their accomplishment.

They thought there would be party hats and cake and champagne. They thought there would be speeches and testimonials. They thought publisher Donald Graham would arrive and, weeping with gratitude, offer them all high-paying, lifetime positions on the Editorial Board.

Ha ha ha.

That wouldn't have been The Style Invitational way of doing things. We made them wait an hour, then packed them into a tiny conference room, force-fed them bad Chinese takeout, switched on a tape recorder and

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BY TOM ALLEN—THE WASHINGTON POST

**Winners with that loser style: From left, Tom Witte, Chuck Smith, Elden Carnahan, John Kammer, Joseph Romm (in hat), David Genser, Jennifer Hart, Russell Beland, Jean Sorenson, Stephen Dudzik, Sarah Worcester and Jonathan Paul.**

# By Invitation Only

WINNERS, From F1

commanded them to be funny. For more than an hour, we peppered them with questions carefully crafted to elicit the maximum possible comedic results. They might not agree with that, but "they" are not writing this article. They struggled heroically in the most difficult of all comic media: extemporaneous humor.

Who are these people? Like the unnamed Czar who runs the contest from somewhere within the ancient catacombs deep beneath The Post, they are largely cloaked in mystery. They are known merely as (Tom Witte, Gaithersburg) or (Jennifer Hart, Arlington). The all-time winner, (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge), is an Environmental Protection Agency bureaucrat who also ghostwrites gags for several comic strips that appear in this newspaper. Sarah Worcester, No. 11 on the all-time list, calls herself a "computer thingy" at the Library of Congress. No. 9 (Jonathan Paul, Garrett Park) is also a computer thingy, but at the Federal Reserve. No. 2 (Witte) works at a U.S. Army research and development lab. No. 3 (Elden Carnahan, Laurel) says only that he is a "law student." No. 4 is Hart, a desktop publisher for a Bethesda medical association. Among the rest are engineers, economists, accountants.

In short, they represent the cross section of button-down Washington professionals. Yet their humor efforts each week in *The Style Invitational*—and those of dozens of others—are anything but button-down. They are more like "fly down."

Rounding out the Droll Dozen are: (No. 5: Russell Beland, Springfield), (No. 6: Joseph Romm, Washington), (No. 7: David Genser, Arlington), (No. 8: Stephen Dudzik, Silver Spring), (No. 10: Jean Sorensen, Herndon) and (No. 12: John Kammer, Herndon).

Most importantly, they are friends, these men and women, bound by their perverse love of the *Invitational* and its particular brand of self-defecating humor. Twenty to 40 *Invitational* winners meet for breakfast once a month, a self-titled "Algonquin round table with whoopee cushions." They have a newsletter. And a Web site (<http://members.tripod.com/~mmexandra/>). Carnahan maintains an elaborate database of the winners and their rankings.

Perhaps they will never stand before the famous brick wall of the Improv comedy club, searing in the white-hot spotlight of fame. But, on the other hand, they probably also won't end up like Chris Farley, remembered less for his comedy and more for the way he died—fat, alone and more toxic than a Superfund site.

Whatever becomes of *The Style Invitational*, they will always have each other. The suckers.

A heavily edited transcript of their humor round table follows.

■ *Questions we asked are in italics.*

The contestants' responses are "in quotes."

■ *What would be a funny flavor of ice cream?*

Genser: "Pork."

Carnahan: "Postnasal drip."

Smith: "Barium."

Kammer: "Anthrax pistachio swirl."

Dudzik: "Vanilla."

■ *Aside from *The Style Invitational*, what is the funniest thing in *The Post*?*

All, simultaneously: "Bob Levey!"

Romm: "That ombudsman woman." Then: "Those pun headlines in the obits."

■ *What does God look like?*

Dudzik: "Me, but with a mustache."

Carnahan: "Don't you have God in a bottle here somewhere?"

■ *You are caught—in your motel room, by your boss—stealing a Gideon Bible. What do you say?*

Kammer: "What are you doing in my motel room?"

Beland: "I'm looking for a picture to see what God looks like."

Romm: "My name is Gideon."

■ *Saddam Hussein: What's the deal?*

Witte: "Well, you can't accuse him of nepotism."

■ *Look at today's [Feb. 28] front page of *The Post*. Find something funny.*

Romm: "It has the word 'subpoenaed' in a headline."

Hart: "Anthony Faiola has three vowels in a row in his name."

Dudzik: "It says 'Final' but they

keep coming up with another edition every day."

Smith: "'Bilingual' is always funny."

■ *If you were a disease, what disease would you like to be?*

Witte: "Priapism."

■ *What is your favorite element from the *Periodic Table*?*

Romm: "Carbon."

Beland: "Kryptonite."

Smith: "Zimbalist."

■ *Make your cookie fortune funnier:*

Carnahan: "We all know how to do that, right? Just add the words 'in bed' at the end of it."

Dudzik: "Mine says, 'You are whimpering and flaccid.'"

Beland: "If you rearrange the letters in mine, you get 'tooth mucus.'"

Romm: "Mine says: 'You will never be last in line. You will always excel!' I would change it to: 'You will never be last in line. You will always be second-to-last in line!'"

Beland, after sustained scribbling of pen on paper: "'Tooth mucus' really is an anagram for 'A Hot Smut Co.,' if you abbreviate 'company' 'Co.'"

[Ed. note: And if you spell "mucus" with an "a."]

■ *Tell the first joke that comes into your head:*

Worcester: "A priest and a rabbi walk into a bar. The bartender looks at them and says, 'What is this? A joke?'"

■ *Sorensen's husband and children arrive outside the glass-walled conference room. Everyone waves.*

Hart: "Russ, stay away from the little girl."

Beland: "I have a way with kids."

Hart: "That's what we're afraid

of."

Beland: "As long as I'm not alone with them, it's not a violation of my parole."

■ *If you could change the world in one way, what would it be?*

Kammer: "I'd make it banana-shaped."

Smith: "Less gravity for Gheorghe Muresan."

Kammer: "I'd change its orbit so I'd get to see the outer planets more."

Genser: "I'd clothe the hungry."

At the beginning of the lunch, each group member was asked to complete a limerick that began with the following line: "There once was a young man from Wheaton." By the end of the session, they'd all forgotten about it. But, prompted, they finish it, extemporaneously, as a collaborative effort:

"There once was a young man from Wheaton"

Carnahan: "Who every Sunday in *The Post* took a beatin' "

Worcester: "He sent in good stuff"

Witte: "But it wasn't enough,"

Worcester: "So he always ended up . . ." Before she can finish, the rest of the group shouts, in unison: ". . . cheatin'!"