Haiti has MU connections

Researcher OK; another waits for family news.

By Jonathan Branden

Wednesday, January 13, 2010

The call that finally settled Carsten Strathausen's heart arrived about 90 minutes after he saw the news: a 7.0-magnitude earthquake had struck Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

His wife, Valerie Kaussen, was in Port-au-Prince conducting research. But after the quake yesterday, she called her mother, letting her know she was OK.

"That was a huge relief," said Strathausen, who is chairman of the Department of German and Russian Studies at the University of Missouri.

His wife is an MU associate professor of Romance Languages and Literatures, serving as a Haiti specialist for the department. She visits Haiti and researches the culture twice a year for two or three weeks at a time. She has been in Haiti since Jan. 4.

This morning, further confirmation and more settling news came for Strathausen — a 6 a.m. e-mail from his wife, telling him she is safe.

Otherwise, Strathausen said, the e-mail was brief. "It's terrible down here. Total chaos," Strathausen said she wrote.

Strathausen knows it could be worse, as it is for Flore Zéphir, professor and chairwoman of the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures at MU. Zéphir is from Haiti and lived there for 17 years. She has two brothers who live in Port-au-Prince. Since the earthquake struck, she has had no contact with them.

"I am terrified because I don't know where they are," she said.

As Strathausen said, "It's terrible when something like this happens, but when you're suddenly involved in this way, when you have a loved one down there, it's shattering."
Losers? Not these nerds

MU showcases brainy faculty in Web site series.

Mizzou Wire

Tim Evans, the April nerd of the month in Mizzou Wire’s “Nerds of Mizzou” series, dresses as The Antidote, which Evans describes as just one of his alter egos. The assistant professor has also been known to dress as Captain Colic to teach children about horse health.

By Janese Heavin

Wednesday, January 13, 2010

Tim Evans admits he’s about “as nerdy as they come.”
The University of Missouri assistant professor can prove it, too: Sometimes he wears superhero costumes, and he’s prone to abnormal accidents. If that’s not enough, the animal reproduction and toxicology research projects he’s worked on over the years show just how brainy he is.

Don’t let the “nerd” label bother you: Evans and 11 other faculty members profiled in an online magazine series have made being a nerd at MU downright cool.

Mizzou Wire, part of the MU Web Communications office, launched the “Nerds of Mizzou” series last year as a way to showcase some of the brightest minds on campus. Writer Nancy Moen said she came up with the idea after watching math Professor Peter Casazza walk by her office every day. His disheveled look and hobby of raising bunnies combined with his expertise in mathematics made for the perfect introduction to a series about nerdy professors, she said.

After the series kicked off, students began nominating their own professors.

“‘There’s no shortage of nerdy folks here,’” Mizzou Wire Editor Karen Pojmann said.

The stories — a combination of easy-to-understand explanations of research projects and glimpses into professors’ personal lives — became immensely popular, Pojmann said. The online articles received nearly as many hits as sports stories.

A few readers complained about the use of the word “nerd,” and a couple of faculty members turned down offers to be nerds of the month, but those who were profiled embraced the title.

“Nerd has, really, a very positive connotation now,” Evans said, crediting billionaire Bill Gates for helping make geekdom a pop-culture phenomenon. And that Rob Duncan — MU’s vice chancellor of research — participated as July’s nerd of the month gave the series some extra merit, Evans said.

For statistician Nancy Flournoy, the June profile landed her an invitation to the prestigious New Yorker Festival in October, where she served on a panel to talk about new math.

Flournoy had never heard of the festival before that — proving, she said, just how nerdy she is.

Nerd references aside, the series helped highlight how brilliant some of MU’s faculty members really are, Pojmann said. Casazza, for instance, is considered a world leader in his specialty, frame theory. And February’s featured nerd, Lenworth Johnson, was named by his peers one of the best doctors in America in 2008.

The Nerds of Mizzou series is culminating with a “Nerd of the Year” title to be crowned next month. Mizzou Wire is asking readers to review the stories and vote online for their favorite nerd.

Evans said he should get the title because he considers himself the “least accomplished” among the group.
"Being the 'Nerd of the Year' would just be a footnote in their careers," he said. "For me, it would be a huge milestone."

And he's not ashamed to admit he's actively campaigning for votes using "Chicago politics. Vote early, vote often."

Flournoy said she wouldn't mind winning the crown but won't spend time asking for votes. "I have more nerdy things to do," she said.
Senate hearing explores eliminating income tax  

NO MU Mention

By Jeremy Essig
January 13, 2010

JEFFERSON CITY — Abolishing the income tax and allowing the state to go into debt were two budget fixes proposed to a Senate panel Tuesday.

Five witnesses testified to the benefits and problems of eliminating Missouri income tax, currently the state's largest source of revenue. Lost revenue would be made up by increasing the state's sales tax rates — currently at 4.2 percent — to 5.1 to 7.6 percent.

Proponents of the idea told a Senate "seminar" organized by the chamber's Republican leadership that Missouri is losing industry to states that have lower income tax rates, and that a reliance on sales as opposed to income taxes would provide the state a more stable funding base.

"Missouri is falling behind its competitor states," said Joseph Haslag, the executive vice president of the Show-Me Institute, a St. Louis-based conservative think-tank that promotes free markets, according to its Web site.

Haslag's organization proposes raising the sales tax rate in Missouri to 5.1 percent. Initially, this increase might not be enough to offset lost money from income taxes, a hole that could be filled temporally if the state was willing to take on debt, Haslag said.

Arthur Laffer, an economist who served in the Reagan administration, said the nine states that do not have an income tax have seen significant economic growth over the last 10 years compared to the states with the five highest income tax rates.
Laffer said states with revenue sources based on sales tax also see less of a fluctuation in money collected during economic declines.

"It's basic economics here," Laffer said, referring to his state-by-state comparisons.

Disagreement came from Missouri Budget Project Director Amy Blouin, whose organization speaks about budget issues involving lower income Missourians.

Blouin said a comparison of all states that currently have an income tax — as opposed to the top five that Laffer used — shows no discernible difference in growth compared to those that do not have an income tax.

The proposed bill that would eliminate the state's income tax, House Joint Resolution 56, would also place a sales tax on items that other states without an income tax do not tax, Blouin said.

"No other state taxes services like this would," Blouin said.

In order to equal revenue lost from income tax payments, Blouin said the new state sales tax rate would have to be as high as 7.6 percent.

Former state budget director Jim Moody, now a lobbyist for various business and health interests, agreed that raising the sales tax rate to 5.1 percent would not generate enough money to offset losses from eliminating income taxes.

Health care services would have sales taxes attached to them under the proposed bill.

Using numbers Moody said he found on the Show-Me Institutes's Web site, he estimated that raising the rate to 5.1 percent would leave the state $1.3 billion short.

"Stop messing around with the tax system without adequate research and adequate knowledge," Moody said.

Senate President Pro Tem Charlie Shields, R-St. Joseph, said that the current budget situation requires lawmakers to think about budget options not normally considered.

"No sane person would design (the current) tax structure," Shields said in closing remarks to the Senate seminar session.
By DAVID A. LIEB  JEFFERSON CITY, Mo.  January 13, 2010

Missouri has postponed an electronic records project while it waits to learn whether it will be penalized for reporting inflated food stamp participation numbers to the federal government.

Top officials at the state Department of Social Services said Tuesday that they have delayed a pilot project to create electronic versions of the agency's voluminous paper records for people receiving food stamps, Medicaid, child support and cash welfare payments.

The $5 million project in several southwest Missouri counties was to be funded with part of the $14 million in federal bonuses Missouri received over the past six years for its extraordinarily high participation rates in its food stamps program.

But the Department of Social Services acknowledged last month that a computer programming error had caused it to consistently submit exaggerated numbers since September 2002, potentially putting the bonus money in jeopardy.

Officials at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which oversees the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, have not said yet whether Missouri will face any financial repercussions because of the error.

Missouri officials said the errors did not result in any ineligible people receiving benefits, and the amount of benefits paid to lower-income households was correct.

The state agency said the actual number of Missouri food stamp participants is around 855,000 -- not the more than 1.1 million it reported to the federal government in September. It says the over-reporting generally occurred when one of several food stamp participants in a household left -- and thus no longer received benefits -- but still was counted by the computer-generated report as if he or she remained in the home.

Administrators from the Department of Social Services officials appeared Tuesday before the Senate Governmental Accountability and Fiscal Oversight Committee to answer questions about why the mistake occurred.

Alyson Campbell, the director of the agency's Family Support Division, said the agency has taken steps to better verify its numbers for future federal reports. She said the mistake was discovered when someone from the University of Missouri -- who had requested several different data sets from the department -- informed officials that the numbers did not appear to match.
Power of genomics cracks soybean code

Scientists on Wednesday unveiled the genome of the soybean, saying it was an achievement that should deepen understanding of one of the world's most important crops, help to boost yields and defend the plant against pests.

The study, published by the British weekly science journal Nature, provides a springboard for research into soy's DNA structure and protein-making machinery, its authors said.

Eighteen organisations, most of them American, teamed up in a 15-year endeavour that yielded a draft of 85 percent of the soybean's 1.1 billion base pairs, the "rungs" in the double-helix ladder of DNA.

"Soybean and other legumes play a critical role in global food security and human health and are used in a wide range of products, from tofu, soy flour, meat substitutes and soy milk to soy oil-based printing ink and biodiesel," said Molly Jahn, deputy under secretary at the US Department of Agriculture.

"This new information about soybean's genetic makeup could lead to plants that produce more beans that contain more protein and oil, better adapt to adverse environmental conditions or are more resistant to diseases," she said in a press release.

More than 46,000 soy genes have been identified, including key genes involved in the transformation of water, sunlight, carbon dioxide, nitrogen and minerals into energy and proteins.

One early breakthrough is the discovery of a gene that appears to confer resistance to a disease called Asian soybean rust, which can devastate up to 80 percent of a harvest.

Another, more futuristic, benefit could be in a next-generation form of biodiesel.

More than 1,000 genes involved in lipid metabolism have been spotted, said one of the researchers, Gary Stacey of the National Center for Soybean Biotechnology at the University of Missouri.

"These genes and their associated pathways are the building blocks for soybean oil content and represent targets that can be modified to bolster output and lead to the increase of the use of soybean oil for biodiesel production."

Biotechnologists have already unravelled the genome of rice, corn and the grape vine among other staples.