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## Tornadoes, floods deliver blow to state budgets

### MU mention p. 2

By DAVID A. LIEB, Associated Press - 2 days ago

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) — The tornadoes and floods that pummeled much of the South and Midwest also have dealt a serious blow to struggling state budgets, potentially forcing new cuts to education and other services to offset hundreds of millions of dollars in disaster aid.

Most state budgets were still reeling from the economy when a huge outbreak of tornadoes marched across the South in late April, followed in May by more twisters and flooding that extended into the Midwest.

"The disaster could not have come at much worse of a time from a budget standpoint," said David Perry, Alabama's finance director. The budget lawmakers adopted included "relatively steep cuts for many state agencies, and the tornado outbreak only adds to our budget pressure going forward."

The first of the cuts have already hit home in Missouri, where students will be saddled with greater college costs, and grants for domestic violence shelters have been trimmed, among other things.

Missouri and Alabama — where about 400 people were killed by twisters this year — could be forced to make a total of about \$150 million in cuts because of the violent weather.

Georgia has tapped an emergency fund. Tennessee is relying on its reserves, too. And storm costs in Oklahoma will only add to the state's multimillion-dollar disaster debt accumulated over several years of natural disasters.

After a major catastrophe, the federal government often shells out billions of dollars to clean up debris, rebuild roads and buildings and help families left homeless get back on their feet. For most disaster costs, the federal government pays 75 percent, leaving state and local governments to cover the rest.

Yet when disaster costs climb to nine or 10 digits, the state's comparatively small share can still present a staggering bill.

In Missouri, lawmakers passed a \$23 billion annual budget about the same time that the Army Corps of Engineers blew up a levee to ease flooding pressure along the Mississippi River. The resulting deluge affected an estimated 130,000 acres of fertile farmland and rural homes. A couple of weeks later, the nation's deadliest tornado in decades tore through Joplin, killing 156 people and destroying about 8,000 homes and businesses.

Missouri's budget had set aside \$1 million for disaster aid, but Gov. Jay Nixon quickly pledged \$50 million for the Joplin tornado and southeast Missouri flooding, offsetting that with cuts to other government programs. The biggest chunk came from higher education, which already was slated for a 5.5 percent cut in the coming school year.

Nixon deepened that cut to 7 or 8 percent, depending on the institution, and also reduced the amount of money lawmakers had budgeted for scholarships.

**For the University of Missouri's four-campus system, that means its state aid for the 2011-2012 school year will be 11 percent lower than in 2001, despite an enrollment increase of 39 percent during the past decade.**

**Eric Woods, student president of the Columbia campus, acknowledged the need for disaster assistance, but bemoaned that students now have to shoulder the burden for Missouri's "crummy luck" with disasters.**

"I think when you're making a state chose between rebuilding after several natural disasters or funding their schools, there's something not quite right about it," said Woods, a senior majoring in political science, history and religious studies.

Among other things, Nixon also trimmed the budget for domestic violence grants by 15 percent, essentially continuing a cut from the previous year. That comes as the number of abused women and children seeking shelter the Lafayette House in Joplin has more than doubled since the May 22 tornado, said Louise Secker, the organizations' director of community services.

Missouri and Alabama hope the federal government will agree to cover a greater-than-usual share of the cost for rebuilding public facilities and removing debris. But that may not be enough to avoid painful budget decisions in Alabama, which has about \$20 million

available for disaster aid in the next fiscal year but expects this year's tornadoes to cost the state \$80 million to \$120 million over the next several years, Perry said.

"Obviously, we'll have to either cut other areas to come up with enough money to pay for the state's share, or we'll have to come up with some new revenue sources," Perry said.

The situation in other states is less dire, but still troublesome.

When lawmakers return to the Georgia Capitol next year, they will need to find an additional \$5.9 million to cover the state's remaining share of disaster costs from tornadoes. Georgia's governor already has tapped \$2.6 million from an emergency fund.

Tennessee, which has been trying to rebuild its reserves, plans to dip into them to cover part of the \$71 million budgeted for tornado and flooding aid, said Lola Potter, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Finance and Administration.

Some Southern states, including Louisiana and Mississippi, created special disaster-reserve funds after hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. Those accounts have helped ease the strain of paying for this year's storm damage.

Even for a state with a budget surplus — North Dakota — disaster relief spending has been high. After several floods this year including the Souris River in Minot, which forced thousands of residents to evacuate their homes, state flood-fighting expenses are expected to exhaust a \$23.5 million disaster relief fund that was supposed to last until June 2013.

Because rebuilding can take years, disaster bills often go unpaid for long periods in some states. For the second straight year, budget problems led Kansas to delay a couple of million dollars' worth of payments to electric cooperatives for storm damage.

In Oklahoma, where the federal government has declared more than two dozen emergencies or disasters since 2007, the state has a \$30 million backlog of unpaid reimbursements to cities, counties and rural electric utilities. At the same time, its emergency fund has just \$1.6 million, and no new money was appropriated this year.

Because of a spate of blizzards, floods, twisters and other storms, Oklahoma will likely incur an additional \$5 million in disaster debt, said Albert Ashwood, director of the Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management.

"We're probably further behind, but keep in mind where we compare to other states in terms of disasters," Ashwood said. "When you start getting four, five or six disasters every year, it's easier to use it up."



## NRC considers MU's timeline for radiation

By Janese Silvey

Columbia Daily Tribune Friday, June 24, 2011

**Jeff Wilcox hasn't experienced any symptoms or illnesses he suspects would have been caused by the low-level radiation in his building on the University of Missouri campus.**

Still, he's not exactly comfortable being required to wear a dosimeter — which measures the radiation he's exposed to — when he's working in Pickard Hall. That and the radiation signs in parts of the building are a little unnerving, he said.

Wilcox, who has worked at the Museum of Art and Archaeology at Pickard for 35 years, expressed his concerns during a Nuclear Regulatory Commission hearing yesterday. It was part of NRC's yearlong process to consider the university's request to indefinitely extend a federal timeline that would require MU to clean up the radioactive material at Pickard within two years.

MU has known for decades about the radiation at Pickard, thought to date back to chemistry Professor Herman Schlundt's work with radioactive materials in the early 1900s. The highest levels at Pickard are comparable to levels of naturally occurring radiation the average person is exposed to in food and beverages each year, according to the NRC. NRC staff considers Pickard safe for workers, students and the public.

Pickard has been on the NRC's radar since 2009, when MU notified the agency that the building's radiation levels exceeded new regulations. Federal requirements gave MU a year from the notification to submit a two-year cleanup plan to get the building off the watch list or to ask for an exemption. MU submitted the latter.

A two-year cleanup deadline isn't feasible, said Peter Ashbrook, director of MU's Environmental Health and Safety office. Although some material has been cleaned, contamination exists under floor tiles and in pipes and ductwork, he said. And the museum wouldn't be simple to move, even temporarily.

MU has tried to use the fact Pickard is on the National Register of Historic Places as another justification to extend the deadline. But some pointed out MU routinely has renovated buildings on that list.

The radiation is mostly in the basement and attic, where signs direct workers to contact environmental office staff before entering. Wilcox said workers go into basement storage areas multiple times a day without notifying anyone. He said the university didn't give workers a choice about whether to wear the dosimeters.

Any worker on campus who is near radioactive materials, such as those in medical labs and facilities, is required to wear the measuring devices, which snap onto a lapel, said Jack Crawford, assistant director of the environmental health office and the radiation and laser safety officer.

There also are policies at Pickard that prevent people from eating or drinking in restricted zones, which include the basement and one employee's office. The rules mirror those in other campus labs, Crawford said.

Wilcox agreed the two-year deadline might not be feasible, but he asked the NRC to deny the request to put off cleanup indefinitely. "I think the university's request for an indefinite, open-ended delay seems unreasonable," he said. "I think there should be some kind of limit."



## UM System plans out 2013 budget request

By Janese Silvey

Columbia Daily Tribune Sunday, June 26, 2011

**The University of Missouri System is in the process of crafting a financial wish list to submit to state lawmakers next year that requests a total of \$536.3 million, or about \$142.8 million more than the system is due to receive this coming fiscal year.**

The request is multifaceted. In addition to an increase of \$16.4 million to the estimated core appropriation, administrators say they need another \$40.3 million to bring salaries among ranked faculty up to competitive levels, another \$27 million for building maintenance and repairs and \$16.7 million to support enrollment growth, along with some extra funding for health programs, science and technology initiatives and endowed professorships. Administrators outlined the requests during a Board of Curators' finance committee meeting earlier this month.

The UM System will receive \$393.5 million when fiscal year 2012 starts July 1.

The request for 2013 is, no doubt, lofty in the state's current economic climate. Some argue, though, that the university should explain its funding needs, even if the money doesn't materialize at the end of the legislative session.

"We understand the tough budget challenges that the state faces," Nikki Krawitz, vice president of finance and administration, said in an email. "However, it is our responsibility to keep the state and our board informed about the university's needs."

To meet educational, service and research missions and maintain quality, the UM System needs resources from the state, as well as students, she said.

"Everyone understands that tight economic conditions might make such a request probably difficult to expect in full, but we have to give the public and general assembly some size and scope of what we really think it takes to do this job," said Warren Erdman, chairman of the Board of Curators.

The funding requests might sound high, but they're actually pared down from what the university estimates it actually needs. For instance, administrators say they need a \$40.9 million increase in core operating funds but are only requesting the \$16.4 million. But would the

university be better off whittling down the funding requests even more? That's tough to predict, says Curator Wayne Goode, who has served in both the state House and Senate.

"Some senators and representatives would criticize the university and other institutes of higher education — and other departments, for that matter — for asking for more than everybody knew the state could afford," he said, remembering his days in the legislature. "And, of course, the other side of the issue, and this applies to all entities, is that they feel they have an obligation to let the legislature and public know what they think they need to run a respectable program."

Goode said he doesn't think it hurts the university to ask for the amounts administrators think are needed.

Even if the state were to pony up the money on the UM wish list, that doesn't mean curators wouldn't seek another tuition increase. This year, tuition and fees systemwide went up an average of 5.5 percent, with a 5.8 percent increase on the Columbia campus.

Asked whether another tuition hike would be needed if the state agreed to the requests, Krawitz said "potentially."

"But we wouldn't make a decision on this until we have looked at all aspects of our budget along with campus needs," she said. "This decision is part of the total annual planning and budget process for the university and not something done in isolation. ... We don't ask the state to fund everything we need to achieve our mission. Students share in the increase in costs."



## Cigarette tax petition aims at off brands

### Lawmakers: Measure seeks to preempt broader taxation.

By Janese Silvey

Columbia Daily Tribune Sunday, June 26, 2011

Some local lawmakers and the chairman of the University of Missouri System Board of Curators have made no secret of the fact they want Missouri to increase the sales tax on cigarettes to raise state funds for education.

But a new proposal to increase taxes on generic-brand smokes isn't exactly what they had in mind. And some worry talk of two separate tobacco taxes will confuse the state's residents.

Earlier this month, the Missouri Secretary of State's office approved a ballot initiative petition that would increase taxes on certain smaller brands of cigarettes by \$1. If organizers can collect enough signatures, voters would decide the fate of the tax in 2012.

The petition was filed by Marc Ellinger, a Jefferson City attorney who did not return Tribune phone calls for comment. He told another media outlet, MissouriNet, that the proposal was the brainchild of people interested in "fixing inequities" within the industry.

At issue is the fact that the four largest tobacco companies in the United States pay into a fund for smoking-related medical costs under a settlement agreement reached in 1998. Right now, smaller tobacco companies in Missouri do not pay into that fund. Some argue that gives generic brand cigarettes a price advantage.

That's an entirely separate issue than raising cigarette taxes to generate new state dollars.

State Reps. Mary Still and Chris Kelly, both Columbia Democrats, have been pushing for Missourians to consider increasing the tobacco tax as a way to boost funding for education. They argue the tax makes sense because, at 17 cents per pack, Missouri has the lowest cigarette taxes in the country. "We could raise it by 12 cents and still be the lowest," Still said.

Neither Gov. Jay Nixon nor the legislature has expressed much interest in putting a tobacco tax on the ballot. But it could get to a vote through the petition process.

There are discussions under way to do just that, said Warren Erdman, chairman of the Board of Curators.

“There are Missourians interested in exploring the possibility of using the initiative process to offer Missouri the opportunity to raise cigarette taxes and do it in a way that it’s supportive of things important to Missourians,” he said. Erdman said he’s active with a group “exploring that possibility. I grow more and more confident with each week we’ll be able to put something together.”

Kelly is worried, though, that having two separate tobacco tax initiatives will confuse citizens being asked to sign the ballot petitions.

“It complicates the picture,” he said, adding that the \$1 proposal confuses “any rational discussion of cigarette taxes.”

And Kelly and Still wonder if that’s the point of the first proposal. “It’s probably being done as a pre-emptive strike by big tobacco companies for fear there will be a real initiative petition to raise taxes on cigarettes,” Still said.



# Missouri Scholars Academy challenges students

## High schoolers embrace tests.

By Janese Silvey

Columbia Daily Tribune Sunday, June 26, 2011

By the end of the Thursday afternoon class, the back wall of Room 108 in the Geology Building on the University of Missouri campus was a bloody mess.

Dozens of high schoolers had taken turns shooting fake blood from a syringe onto taped-up paper targets. The point? A forensics lesson to see how speed and distance affect the pattern blood makes when victims are shot.

"It's all physics my friend," instructor Bill Palmer told the class.

It also was entertaining, at least gauging from the "oohs" and "aaahs" and giggles coming from the students every time they heard the spattering of the red liquid against the wall. But that's the point of all Missouri Scholars Academy classes — to find ways to teach and entertain some of Missouri's smartest teenagers.

The annual three-week academy is in full swing on the MU campus and will wrap up Saturday. It's surviving this year for the first time with no funding from the state. Instead, MU and private donors are supporting part of it with students being asked to pay a \$700 activity fee. The fee didn't necessarily come out of family budgets, but in many cases, students held fundraisers and relied on donations from clubs and churches in their hometowns to send them to the camp, said program co-director Ted Tarkow, associate dean of the College of Arts & Science.

Just because the camp continued without state funding, that doesn't mean the state shouldn't be contributing, Tarkow said. He realizes the state likely can't pick up the entire bill, but "we want to be a partner with the state," he said. "I would argue funding opportunities for bright students should be a priority."

The 325 MSA participants — all entering their junior years of high school — represent the cream of the crop, academically making up the top 0.5 percent of Missouri's students.

“This is teaching heaven,” said Lou Jobst, a retired educator from St. Louis who serves on the MSA faculty. “The kids are motivated, hungry, thirsty for knowledge. They’re willing to stretch and do things they can’t do at their normal schools. And we give them a smorgasbord of opportunities.”

A smorgasbord, indeed, participants of the camp agreed.

“What haven’t I done?” asked Drew Floyd, a Rock Bridge High School student who has toured MU’s nuclear reactor and is building a musical instrument as part of one class.

Another Rock Bridge participant, Rachel Volmert, got a chance to see her brain activity in action at MU’s Brain Imaging Center.

Corey Piotter, a Hickman student, had a chance to visit MU’s College of Veterinary Medicine, where she might attend one day.

And Sean Brennan, another Hickman participant, is on a transportation team in an urban planning class that’s creating a community.

Palmer’s course in analyzing blood spatter patterns was right up Ashley Muench’s alley. The Valle Catholic High School student from Ste. Genevieve hopes to study forensics someday. “We have nothing like this in my school,” she said.

MSA might sound fun, but it’s hard work, too, students said.

“Ninety-five percent of this stuff, I’ve never seen before, and that’s good,” said Daniel Shyu, a Hickman student taking math-intensive classes. “I’m actually learning a lot more than I expected. Nothing is easy; you have to work for it here.”

Jacob Freyermuth, a Rock Bridge student, said he’s learning more at the three-week camp than he would have expected at summer school. “It’s been a challenge, more so than a lot of other things I could’ve done with my summer,” he said.

There’s plenty of fun and games, too. In addition to morning classes and daily puzzles and math problems to solve, the students are also treated to guest speakers, music and dance presentations and — a favorite among some teens — a hypnotist.

“We’re always going, going, going, which is great but different from normal school,” Volmert said.

That’s why Muench, the wannabe crime-solver from Ste. Genevieve, doesn’t want to leave MSA. “I’ve had a blast,” she said. “I don’t want to leave, ever. It’s like high-speed education, and I love it.”



## MU offers resource for nursing homes

By Janese Silvey

Columbia Daily Tribune Sunday, June 26, 2011

Starting this month, nursing home administrators in Missouri have a new resource they can use when trying to figure out how to meet state and federal regulations and keep up with trends to improve the quality of long-term care.

**The University of Missouri Sinclair School of Nursing has launched a Nursing Home Leadership Coaching Service with funding provided through the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services. Dave Walker, a retired nursing home director from Jackson, has been tapped to provide the coaching services.**

The program will be free to nursing homes and participation will be voluntary. Marcia Flesner, a clinical educator at the nursing school, envisions Walker tailoring services to meet individual needs. Some administrators might need help getting ready for evaluations or filling out forms, for instance, while others might need advice on how to deal with high turnover or adopting new policies, she said.

Walker will be based out of his home and will provide services over phone, the Internet, video, or, when necessary, with site visits. "I'll assist administrators with whatever tools they need from me," he said.

In addition to providing technical assistance, Walker and Flesner envision a way to help nursing homes adapt to changing philosophies in the industry that encourage administrators to make long-term care facilities less like hospitals and more like communities.

That means operating a facility based on what residents need and want, not on staff schedules. For instance, some facilities are now offering residents more dining options during extended hours instead of forcing everyone to eat the same meal at the same time.

It's a philosophy Walker subscribed to when he led the Jackson Manor Nursing Home for nearly three decades. He recalls a resident who had been a musician and was used to working on compositions at night. Walker made accommodations so the man could get meals delivered to his room overnight and sleep during the day.

“It’s deinstitutionalizing an institution,” Flesner said. “Don’t call it a home and not make it a home. Nursing homes were built on hospital models, but years later consumers are saying, ‘We don’t want to live like this.’ Once you have a leader like Dave who gets it, you can start making that change.”

It’s tough to change mindsets, Walker acknowledged, but nursing homes won’t have a choice in the future as a growing segment of the population ages, he said. “Baby boomers will want change.”



## Study looks at alcohol, racial bias link

### Professor says drink not cause.

By Janese Silvey

Columbia Daily Tribune Saturday, June 25, 2011

Alcohol often gets blamed when celebrities — or University of Missouri students, for that matter — get caught saying or doing something considered racist.

Don't blame the drink, an MU researcher says. Bruce Bartholow, an associate professor of psychological sciences, has conducted a number of studies that show alcohol doesn't make people become racist; rather, intoxication decreases a person's willingness to control the biases they already have.

"Everyone, to some extent, has these racial stereotypes just by virtue of the fact we're in this culture and stereotypes are perpetuated in a lot of ways, such as through media," he said. "Most of the time, most people try to control the extent in which they act on these stereotypes. When people are intoxicated, they have a hard time inhibiting all kinds of behaviors, and racial bias is one of those."

Bartholow presented his work during an all-day Racial Bias Symposium he hosted on the MU campus earlier this month. There, he used Mel Gibson as an example of a person in the spotlight blaming booze for racist rants.

There are local examples that also fit the bill, he said later.

During Black History Month in February, Benjamin Elliott, an MU freshman at the time, admitted to painting a racist slur on campus property one night. He later told campus police he was drunk at the time, according to the probable cause statement.

Elliott is facing a charge of second-degree property damage motivated by discrimination. His preliminary hearing has been continued several times. Elliott is due in court July 13. His attorney, Jeff Hilbrenner of Harper, Evans, Wade & Netemeyer, declined to discuss how Elliott will plea or whether the case will again get pushed back.

Harper, Evans, Wade & Netemeyer also represented two former MU students who were found guilty of littering after they lined cotton balls in front of the Gaines/Oldham Black Culture Center on campus in February 2010. The firm in that case blamed alcohol, saying the cotton incident was one of a string of drunken campus pranks.

With so many students on campus and plenty of them getting drunk, it's a wonder MU doesn't see more racial incidents.

"Certainly as the student body increased pretty dramatically in the past five to six years, you'd expect to see more intoxicated, irresponsible behavior," Bartholow said. "Maybe this is to be expected to some extent. We're lucky so far we haven't seen more of it."

Bartholow has tested racial bias among participants who are knowingly intoxicated, knowingly sober and those who thought they were drinking alcohol but weren't. He showed them images of black and white faces followed by photos of either tools or guns, then asked them to determine what type of object they saw. All groups demonstrated some bias by selecting "gun" more often after seeing black faces. But sober individuals, even those who thought they were drinking, were more likely to slow down and think about their responses when they were told they'd made an error. When intoxicated participants made mistakes, though, they knew they were doing so and seemed less likely to worry about making the mistake again.

That was a finding that makes Bartholow's studies unique from other alcohol research.

"What was fascinating was they don't seem to be bothered as much by their mistake," he said. "Think about it this way: A brain signal is measured as an alarm. Normally, when something goes wrong, an alarm goes off and that alarm essentially is 'heard' by other parts of the brain responsible for controlling behavior. When you're drunk, a couple of things happen. The volume on that alarm is turned way down so other parts of the brain might not hear the alarm. Also there's this piece that even if you hear the alarm, you're not really concerned."

Bottom line, drinking isn't an excuse for racist behavior, Bartholow said.

"The decision to get drunk is certainly a conscious one in the first place," he said. "I think it might provide a partial explanation but not an excuse. It's a tricky distinction to make, but an important one: Doing things when you're drunk because alcohol makes you do things you normally wouldn't do versus the alcohol freeing your inhibition in such a way you're acting on things you already believe."



## Jesse Hall event setup fascinates

By Bill Clark

Columbia Daily Tribune Friday, June 24, 2011

**Each time I attend a major event at the University of Missouri's Jesse Hall, I am amazed at how the stage is transformed into an ever-changing wonderland of Broadway shows, symphonics, operas and ballets.**

Everything is so professional, on-time, precise. Except for an occasional bat, never a glitch.

Pass the lot outside the only loading dock, and it is filled with sets, boxes and crates, all numbered and labeled. Sometimes there are five trailers of stuff. How does this all happen?

Ask John Murray. He's the guy with the answers. He's the MU assistant business manager in charge of Jesse Hall — and a lot of other things.

Probably the most visible and best-known renter of Jesse is the University Concert Series. Early last month, the series gave us "The Color Purple," Garrison Keillor and "Mama Mia" in a four-day stretch. The two Broadway shows came in a caravan of either four or five trailers.

They arrive at the stage door at 8 a.m. and are met by a crew of part-time stable hands numbering from 20 to 70, depending on the workload. The vans are unloaded one at a time in the order of staging under the direction of the traveling company's work crew, usually a dozen or so who do the job every day.

The single loading dock is a problem — it's not even at trailer height.

The stage is set up by 1 p.m. because the drivers must have eight hours of sleep before they take off on another journey to the next stop the next day — at 8 a.m. The local stagehands will return to load the trailers and let them on the road by 1 a.m., which means the next day's performance can't be more than seven hours away — Chicago, Wichita, Little Rock.

The performers, by union rules, spend the night in a Columbia hotel and move to the next show the next day. That's a tough life for all involved, including John.

John came to Columbia and Jesse Hall 11 years ago. When he arrived, Jesse was being used 70 nights a year; it was used 230 nights in 2010. John has a crew of only three full-time employees.

two technical and one custodial, who handle the sound and light mix and the air conditioning, heating and janitorial service.

John's staff works hand-in-glove with the concert series staff, which is responsible for what goes on stage, but not how it gets there.

John was born 47 years ago in Tishomingo, Okla., where his dad was dean of Murray State Community College, and educated at Lawton, Okla.

A 1982 high school grad, John was active in musical theater and a theater graduate from East Central Oklahoma State University in 1986. He went directly to the big leagues, working for four years as a stage manager at Opryland USA in Nashville, Tenn. After two years at the Roy Acuff Theatre, he spent four years on the road with the Regional Opera Company, plus he was doing corporate level entertainment setup around the nation. He even spent six winter weeks in Anchorage, Alaska.

Next came 7½ years as production manager of the Alabama Theatre in Myrtle Beach, S.C. — where he met his wife, Marie, in 1993 — and then a move to Columbia in 2000, bringing a loaded résumé with him.

There's more to John's job than Jesse Hall. He's responsible for all rentals of classrooms and general auditoriums on campus and all campus vending machines, plus all major gatherings on campus such as Barack Obama's visit in 2008 and the recent "College GameDay" telecast with ESPN on Francis Quadrangle.

"The most fun week ever," John said, "was working with ESPN. The crew was a real hoot."

John enjoys working with the shows he performed in the past and, if you listen closely in the lobby, you'll hear him quietly singing along and telling the staff all about the plot. John's take on superstars? "Very few are difficult. Their handlers are a different story."

Handling 230 nights a year at Jesse can be a chore, but John looks forward to each date with the philosophy that "every show, every speech, every concert is the most important in the world."

It shows.