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Big news that grabbed us, changed the way we think **FROM STORMS TO FINGERS TO SCANDAL AND STADIUMS**

By Scott Herhold
Mercury News

From the moment the first caveman drew pictures on the walls, journalists have been arguing about what constitutes the year's big news ("I say it's an antelope." "No way. You forgot the mastodon.")

We're taught that news is when man bites dog, or defined by what you would tell your significant other when you get home. Somebody else could argue that news is important. News is gossip. News lies in the big movements that slowly push ice across the valley of our imagination.

None of these arguments sways a determined columnist. In my universe, a big story should have an element of unexpectedness, of grabbing us and changing the way we think. So let me wade into the fray with my list of the top 10 local news stories for 2005, in ascending Letterman fashion:

10. The Michael Walker case: In December, the 34-year-old state drug agent was acquitted on manslaughter charges in the February 2004 killing of Rudy Cardenas, who was shot in the back as he was running away behind a San Jose retirement home. It was triumph for a well-funded defense, which had to overcome the inconvenient fact that Walker chased the wrong guy.

It also raised enduring questions about whether a cop could be convicted of any crime in the line of duty in Santa Clara County. (In April, a jury deadlocked in the case of two Palo Alto cops, Craig Lee and Michael Kan, who were accused of beating a black man in 2003).

9. The attempts to bring baseball and keep soccer in San Jose: By year's end, the hard facts were sparse. The San Jose Earthquakes moved to Houston. After failing to obtain the old Del Monte cannery site, the city bought a shuttered downtown sausage factory for \$5.7 million, its first purchase toward assembling land for a baseball park south of the San Jose train station. The council was willing to offer \$80 million for an expansion soccer team, and probably much more for baseball.

Still, the sports talks were among those iceberg-changing-the-landscape stories that put it on my list. Unfortunately, like much in the administration of Mayor Ron Gonzales, the talks were shrouded in secrecy, making it hard for taxpayers to know why they should approve.

8. The crusade of JW. No, it didn't change the economy or the direction of governments. But the crusade of the dying Bellarmine student Jan-Willem Knapen touched the heart. The 16-year-old died of cancer in August after raising more than \$600,000 toward the building of JW House, a home away from home for the families of gravely ill patients. It was a grass-roots movement that became something far bigger.

7. The Norcal scandal. It seemed endless, and hard to explain. But with a mayoral election approaching, the effects of Gonzales' private deal with the garbage company in 2000 to cover a Teamsters' labor contract for recycling workers rippled through City Hall. In June, a grand jury lambasted the mayor and his top aide, Joe Guerra, for misleading the council. Six months later, a city-hired investigator confirmed the grand jury's findings. The city council censured Gonzales, who seems destined to spend his last year as a particularly wounded duck. City Manager Del Borgsdorf announced he was stepping down.

6. The changing of the guard at Hewlett-Packard: In February, the Palo Alto company announced that it was parting ways with Carly Fiorina, a marketing pro whose style grated with HP's engineering culture. It replaced her with Mark Hurd, an operations expert from National Cash Register who resisted Wall Street's siren song to sell the printing business. It was back to the basics at the valley's most storied company, a definitive change that helped boost HP stock by 40 percent.

5. The opening of a new San Jose City Hall. After 47 years in the wilderness on North First Street, San Jose City Hall returned downtown in July with a \$382 million Richard Meier-designed building at Fourth and Santa Clara streets. Aside from the symbolism -- after a \$2 billion downtown renewal, the city council finally was putting its mouth where its money was -- San Jose got something architecturally distinguished, particularly with the free-standing rotunda.

4. The toddler/train accident: In late November, a 20-year-old San Jose woman, Katrina Hatton, was charged with child endangerment in the tragic death of Alexander Arriaga, age 2. The details resonated with parents: She had taken two boys across the track and returned for her own baby in a stroller, warning the two boys to stay put. Alexander followed her back and was crushed by an Amtrak train going nearly 79 mph. The case prompted a passionate debate about the responsibility of a babysitter and the lack of adequate child care.

3. The climb of Google. At the end of 2005, the question really wasn't so much what Google was doing. It was whether there was anything left on the Internet that Google was *not* doing. In the course of the year, the Mountain View company announced it would cooperate with NASA on research, provide free WiFi to the city of San Francisco, make vast libraries available online and buy 5 percent of AOL. And oh yeah: The stock surged from \$193 to more than \$426, a height where it starts to get hard to breathe.

2. The chili-finger caper: Anna Ayala, a Las Vegas woman whose name will go down in infamy, stunned San Jose back in March when she announced that she had found a finger in her chili at a Wendy's on Monterey Highway. The news depressed Wendy's stock and cut work for dozens of Wendy's employees. It turned out to be a scam: The finger belonged to a work associate of Ayala's husband, Jaime Plascencia. Ayala and Plascencia pleaded guilty in September and will be sentenced next month. The case marked a triumph for San Jose cops but offered a lesson about the harm of urban myths. You didn't really buy it, did you?

1. The response to disaster. It doesn't fit the standard categories. It's not man-bites-dog. It's not even strictly local. But when you think back about the stories that moved Santa Clara Valley in 2005 -- that shook us from complacency -- you'd have to mention how local people responded to the twin disasters of the tsunami in southeast Asia a year ago and the devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina in early September.

You'd have to mention the crusade of Sunnyvale marketing manager Dian Alyan to set up an orphanage in her native Indonesia. You'd have to talk about the efforts of Menlo Park fire department division chief Harold Schapelhouman and his crew to rescue survivors of Katrina. You might credit the work of local Red Cross volunteers on behalf of 50-plus hurricane survivors at Spartan Village.

There are hundreds of other examples. In a valley that is sometimes criticized for weak charitable giving, the worst moment for others marked our very best.

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Joanne Ho-Young Lee / Mercury News Archives

HURRICANE KATRINA: Jill Asher raised \$22,000 for storm victims, just one example of the valley's philanthropic outpouring.



Joanne Ho-Young Lee / Mercury News Archives

FINGER SCAM: Anna Ayala and husband Jaime Plascencia.



Kathy Willens / Associated Press Archives

GOOGLE'S CLIMB: In moves that sent its stock soaring, the Mountain View firm expanded, including buying 5 percent of AOL.



Meri Simon / Mercury News

TODDLER'S DEATH BY TRAIN: Babysitter Katrina Hatton faces child endangerment charges, prompting passionate reactions.



Dai Sugano / Mercury News Archives

NEW CITY HALL: San Jose makes good on its commitment to downtown and opens a \$382 million Richard Meier-designed building.



Karen T. Borchers / Mercury News Archives

HP SHAKE-UP: Hewlett-Packard replaced CEO Carly Fiorina with Mark Hurd, who went back to basics, driving up stock 40 percent.



Richard Koci Hernandez / Mercury News Archives

NORCAL SCANDAL: San Jose Mayor Ron Gonzales was censured, in a first, for making a private deal with the garbage company.

http://www.mercurynews.com/mld/mercurynews/news/columnists/scott_herhold/13506596.htm



Gary Reyes / Mercury News Archives

JW'S CRUSADE: Jan-Willem Knapen, 16, died after raising \$600,000 toward a home away from home for families of gravely ill patients.



Nhat V. Meyer / Mercury News Archives

MICHAEL WALKER CASE: The acquittal of the state drug agent in the death of Rudy Cardenas prompted a vigil by Cardenas' family.



Patrick Tehan / Mercury News Archives

Grieving relatives visit the train tracks where Alexander Arriaga, 2, died in November in the care of a babysitter, who was charged with child endangerment. The case prompted a passionate debate about babysitters' responsibilities and the lack of adequate child care.



Thu Hoang Ly / Mercury News Archives

Valley residents responded generously to the tsunami disaster in southeast Asia, including here at a Grand Century mall benefit.