

## Eugene vulnerable to gang violence

Eugene may have been terribly fooled.

A woman who was an outspoken opponent of gangs has been arrested for some of the same activities she preached against. Mary Louise Thompson is accused of helping plot the ghastly murder of Aaron Iturra, an 18-year-old gang member. Iturra was shot in the head by 17-year-old James Elstad while sleeping in a garage bedroom at his Eugene home last fall.

Iturra was supposed to testify against Thompson's son in a criminal hearing. Thompson's son also was a gang member and police now consider Thompson a gang associate.

Thompson's arrest, regardless of whether she is guilty, should be a sobering wake up call for local residents. No one likes to believe that gangs could shake up a nice community like Eugene, but we need to face the reality that we are not immune to gang violence. We can't always be fooled by nice appearances.

Thompson was trusted by police and the media to serve as an expert on gang behavior. She was viewed by many as a credible source and she used the story of her son's experience with gangs to convince people that gangs are a serious problem for Eugene. In fact, she was a charter member of the city's Gang Prevention Task Force.

If she is found guilty of helping plan the murder, she also will be guilty of deceiving an entire community. Her possible crimes make others feel naive and foolish for trusting her. Her arrest affects the credibility of all others who speak out against gangs.

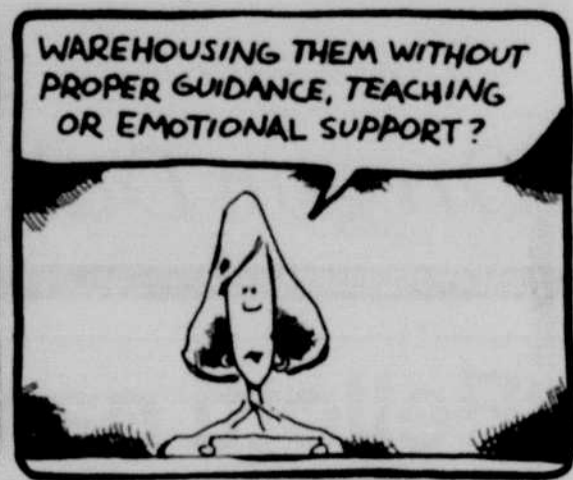
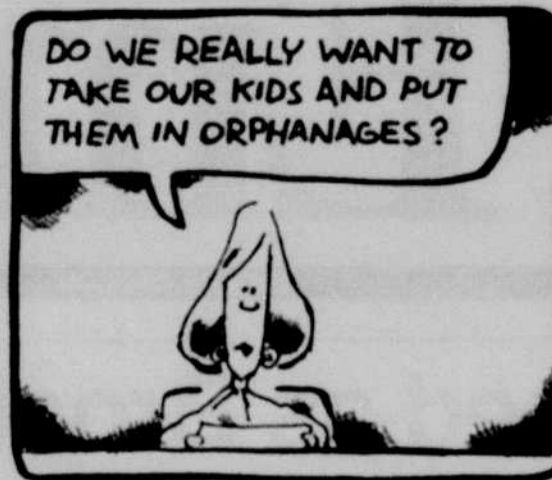
Speakers at a University seminar this weekend said it's not uncommon for gang associates to join outreach programs or speak out against gangs in order to be an information link to the rest of the gang. These people could be young women or family members whose appearances don't link them to the gangs. This could be the unfortunate case with Thompson.

If she is guilty, her association with her son's gang will have proved that gangs are infiltrating our community — not just the bad areas of cities like Portland and Los Angeles. Gang associates could be anywhere, and they don't have to look like the stereotypical gang member to be one. The crimes they plot could be devastating for Eugene.

Although we will probably never fall victim to the deadly drive by shootings that plague LA, we need to consider the serious threats posed by gang activity. Iturra's death may be a terrifying forewarning of what's to come.

The credibility and trust Thompson had gained in the community proves that anyone could be affected by the incredible influence of gangs. This isn't just a problem for large cities.

Eugene needs to try to preserve a safe environment. That won't be possible unless people realize the threats we face.



### OPINION

## Valentine's Day expensive, waste of time



Gayle Forman

If I see another pink heart, I swear I'm going to puke. Roses, balloons, candies, stuffed teddy bears and dumb little Hallmark slogans. Boy, do I hate this holiday.

Valentine's Day. It's come a long way from its origins as a pagan love fest. These days it's more like a spend fest. But I ask someone to tell me just where that love has gone in that whole Valentine's scheme of things.

It used to be such a lovely and loving holiday — back in kindergarten. We'd make cards for our mommies and daddies from construction paper, lace doilies and finger paint. Then on the day itself, the whole class would distribute little-bitty cards to the rest of the class. You either had to give a card to everyone or not give a card to anyone. If you were really lucky and had a nice teacher, you would have a party with pink, frosted heart-shaped cookies and purple Hi-C.

Once you hit puberty however, Valentine's Day becomes a hell of alienation and self-doubt. It's the true separation of the haves and have nots. Anybody who is — gasp — single is made to feel less than human on this holiday. Folks who don't have a "somebody special" are outcasts; they have no place in the fuzzy, pink consumer world occupied by the in-love elite. As February begins — and the images of love, happiness and romance roll on in — lovebirds come together and then go broke.

Because Love American '90s Style carries a pretty hefty price tag. A one-pound box of chocolates in a red, velvet heart box costs \$22. A dozen long-stemmed roses will put you back about

\$60. A nice dinner for two: \$50 to \$60. Couples race around, trying to prove — and pay for — their love for each other. Love is measured by the size of the stuffed bear, the quality of the silk stocking and the contents inside the pink, heart candy box.

Love American '90s Style is reserved and celebrated only on one day a year. On Feb. 14, hordes of couples will feign a kind of love and romance that they don't really possess. And they'll have to spend half-a-week's pay to do so.

Supposedly, great numbers of unhappy people kill themselves around Christmas every year, done in by depression and loneliness. I haven't heard any such macabre statistic for lonely hearts around Valentine's Day, but I wonder how many couples break up under the strain of the holiday. How many people just can't live up to the expectations put upon them by Hallmark? Do people who feel contented with their partner for the other 364 days of the year suddenly feel inadequate because they only got six roses instead of a dozen?

I'll spend my Valentine's Day watching other couples try to shove a year's worth of love into an evening. I'll be waiting tables. Crowds of people will come to the restaurant where I work and spend a lot of money they don't have on a meal. Many will be exhausted after a long day — Tuesday has got to be the least romantic day of the week — and couples would probably prefer spending a quiet evening at home, relaxing. They will order wine that they don't actually like and a meal that ordinarily would be quite delicious, but these folks will order it without onions, gar-

lic and other flavorful ingredients.

I'm sorry, but what kind of love is it that can't withstand a little garlic pungency? If we are so scared of bad breath, how can we ever achieve any sort of intimacy? And isn't closeness and intimacy what such a holiday is supposed to be about?

And why should we save the all this special treatment for one measly day? Why can Hallmark dictate when we do nice things for each other? I'm all for a romantic meal, and I'd never turn my nose up to a box of chocolates. But such niceties mean so much more to me when I know that the bestower of such gifts is spoiling me because he wants to, because love has moved him to. Not because the season dictates an ostentatious display of affection.

As I was talking to people about my anti-Valentine sentiments and this column, most agreed with me. I wonder if anybody really likes Valentine's Day or if they are just bullied into celebrating it.

But chances are, no matter how much anti-Valentine sentiment is produced, the holiday will never go away. So why don't we all make the best of it and return to the Valentine's Days of yore. I know it's not real practical to pass out cards in 400-person lecture classes, but maybe in the smaller classes, or maybe amongst friends. At any rate, don't save your loving and generous natures for just this one day. Be nice everyday. And for heaven's sake, don't wear pink.

Gayle Forman is a columnist for the *Emerald*.

## Emerald

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