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Imaginary

FRIENDS

University professor Marjorie Taylor compares children and their pretend friends to authors and their characters

BY MORIAH BALINGIT
NEWS REPORTER

Some parents might find it bizarre if their child was friends with a 160-year-old world traveler, or a dragon that reads the legends of King Arthur or a pair of birds that bicker incessantly.

But University psychology professor Marjorie Taylor, who recently published an article on children and their imaginary companions, said it's common for children to have these sorts of unusual imaginary friends. In fact, Taylor's study shows that the phenomenon occurs in children much older than experts initially expected, and in some cases, in adults.

"What we found is that by the age of 7, children are just as likely to have an imaginary companion (as when they were younger)," Taylor said.

Before Taylor's research, psychologists typically assumed children stopped having imaginary companions around age 4 or 5, but the only research done on the subject was with children with psychological problems. In the mid-1990s, Taylor interviewed a sampling of normal 3- and 4-year-olds and then checked up with them three years later. Her results were surprising.

"Sixty-five percent of children have a history of play with imaginary friends," she said. "So it's a lot more common than we expected."

The study also found that children with imaginary friends tend to have "more advanced social understanding" than children without imaginary friends.

"Mostly there were no differences, but (the study's findings) tend to favor the ones that have them," she said. "Children with imaginary friends seem to be better equipped to understand that other people are not exactly like themselves."

According to the article, published in *Developmental Psychology*, the composition of the imaginary companions changed as the children got older. The study found that younger children are more likely to have imaginary companions based on props, such as when a child animates a stuffed animal or toy. But as children grow older, companions are more likely to be purely imaginary.

Taylor could find no pattern regarding the companions themselves, and while the characters are occasionally inspired by television or movies, they

are more frequently created from scratch in the child's imagination.

"There's incredible diversity in the form the friends take," she said. "It's true that they're sometimes adopted, but mostly they're idiosyncratic characters that you've never heard of."

Taylor encountered a number of interesting characters in the course of her study, including "Cream," a palm-sized baby, and "Elephant," an elephant that wears tank tops and shorts.

Liesel Sylwester, now 15 years old, participated in the study when she was 7 and described "Simpy," an invisible girl with blue skin and funny clothes. In retrospect, Sylwester said she felt like the impetus for "Simpy" was the study itself and she's not sure if "Simpy" was a genuine imaginary friend.

Sylwester said she lost interest in "Simpy" soon after the study was completed.

"I remember getting tired of it because you had to make up both sides of the dialogue," she said. "I figured it would be easier just to talk to someone."

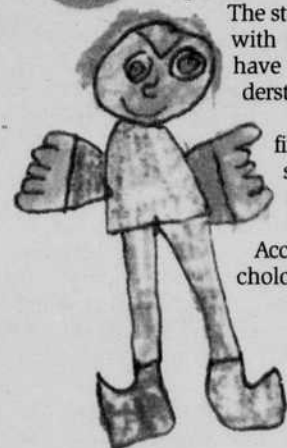
The study found that many children had conflicts with their imaginary friends, as if they were acting autonomously. One girl complained that "Elephant" was occasionally mean to her.

"They have a sense of independence," Taylor said. "How is it possible cognitively to create an imaginary friend and have it act independently?"

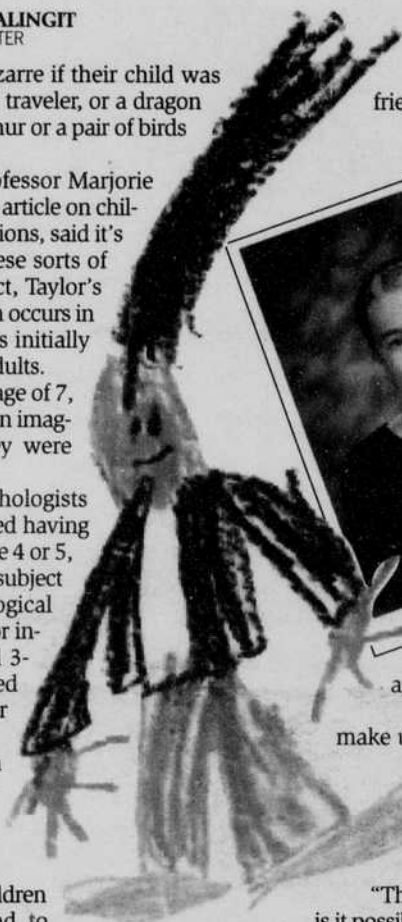
This question was the segue into Taylor's new project: She examines how fiction writers create their characters and how these characters develop a sense of independence from their creators. In an article published in 2003 in *Imagination Cognition and Personality* in conjunction with University associate professor of psychology Sara D. Hodges and former University master's student Adele Kohanyi, Taylor described a phenomenon called the illusion of independent agency.

"The illusion of independent agency occurs

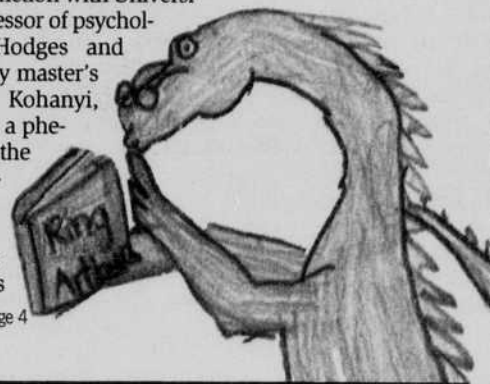
IMAGINARY, page 4



Children drew these depictions of their imaginary friends during Marjorie Taylor's study.



Liesel Sylwester



University acquires arena site funding

BY MEGHANN M. CUNIFF
SENIOR NEWS REPORTER

The University is one step closer to acquiring the Williams' Bakery site after the Legislative Emergency Board approved the use of up to \$27.4 million in state-backed bonds for a land acquisition that University President Dave Frohnmayer describes as "a once-in-a-century opportunity."

The decision came Friday morning after the Legislative Emergency Board Education Committee approved the acquisition under the circumstance that no funds will be used to finance whatever is done with the site.

"This is a really big day in the history of the University," Frohnmayer said later on Friday.

The University has wanted the site for many years, Frohnmayer said, and the \$25 million price-tag is a reflection of the property's value to the University. An additional \$2.4 million may be used to buy the 7-Eleven store site and the Villard medical building located behind the bakery.

"Land is always worth what a willing buyer and seller is willing to pay," Frohnmayer said, adding that "no one in the world" wants the Williams' Bakery site more than the University.

Paying \$25 million for the site is necessary because of the University's respect for the bakery and its hundreds of employees, Frohnmayer said. About \$17 million of the \$25 million will pay for the bakery's relocation costs.

"They really care about their employees," Frohnmayer said. "It's a burden for them to move but they wanted to be a good neighbor."

Frohnmayer said it may be possible to lower the site cost by refusing to fund the bakery's relocation, but it would cost the city more than 200 family-wage jobs and the University does not want to do that.

The University hopes to build a new basketball arena on the site but has not secured the necessary funds for such a project, which Frohnmayer said will mostly come from alumni donations.

The University of Oregon Foundation, a private, nonprofit corporation set up to receive and distribute private donations to the University, will create a separate organization to handle the arena's funding.

Legislative committee members questioned during the Friday meeting whether the potential transportation problems an arena would pose to the surrounding neighborhood had been examined and told Frohnmayer that the University will have to present a plan to the board on how it will mitigate such problems before arena construction can begin.

Frohnmayer said that would not be a problem for the University. He added that the committee was mostly concerned that state funds not be used in the construction of the arena.

Legislative Fiscal Analyst Steve Bender said the legislative board was checking to see that the University had examined the fiscal impact of using the extra bonds and was merely "exercising its responsibility of oversight of state public operations."

The next step in the land acquisition process is to sign a formal sale agreement with United States Bakery, the company that owns the site, and then decide what to do with the land, Frohnmayer said.

The site has been the targeted site for the new arena since plans for the Howe Field location fell through last spring — plans that University Vice President of Administration Dan Williams said

Neighbors formulate ambitious agenda

Reopening the park and preserving trees are among the issues the West University group will address in the upcoming months

BY MEGHANN M. CUNIFF
SENIOR NEWS REPORTER

Increasing student involvement in the neighborhood. Reopening the neighborhood park. Preventing the unnecessary removal of trees. Examining the effects of University development on the surrounding neighborhoods. If all goes as planned, the West University Neighbors will have a busy year.

The association had its first meeting of the year last Thursday at Central Presbyterian Church, where the executive board worked with

about 10 neighborhood and community members to draft a plan for the coming year.

Board members had drafted a list of pressing neighborhood issues at an executive meeting the night before and presented Thursday's meeting attendees with the opportunity to add to the list and highlight issues they thought should receive priority at the association's upcoming meetings.

Protecting trees received the most attention from both the board and the general population.

"We need to defend our trees," board chairman Drix Rixmann said. "These things

represent time."

The group decided to devote the Feb. 3 meeting to discussing tree protection and the need to reopen West University Park, closed since 1995.

Board Vice Chairpersons and University students Kellyn Gross and Ayal Alves will head up a tree committee to create a list of specific trees neighbors are concerned about and draft ideas about what can be done to prevent unnecessary tree removal.

City Planner Steve Gallup had good news for those concerned about tree removal, saying during his update on the alley paving project that the majority of trees once marked for removal because of the project could be saved because contractors will be

NEIGHBORS, page 4

ARENA SITE, page 5