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## '03 Ring Circus

While war was waged in Iraq, the neighborhood battled with increased crime, political scandal, changes in schools and stadiums, and general chaos.

January 1, 2004

By David Gambacorta, Alexis Abate and Anthony Scafide  
*Review Interns*

Change was the buzzword for the events of the last 12 months in South Philly.

Residents witnessed the closing of the Vet and the opening of the Linc, one of the most heated mayoral elections in the city's history, plans to merge the area's two single-sex Catholic high schools and a snowstorm the likes of which hadn't been seen for seven years.

There was talk of riverboat casinos and neighborhood racetracks, school mergers and bus-route closures, disturbing murders and shocking crimes.

So, yes, business as usual in the neighborhood -- save for a war protest here and a presidential visit there.

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## January

The year began with the announcement of a five-year, \$1.5-billion capital improvement plan for the city's public schools. Schools CEO Paul Vallas' blueprint incorporated the expansion of elementary schools to include middle-school grades and the conversion of middle schools into high schools.

Local institutions affected by the plan were Audenried High School, 33rd and Tasker streets; E.M. Stanton Elementary, 17th and Christian, slated to close in June; Bok Technical High School, Eighth and Mifflin; and Furness High School, Third and Mifflin.

After the proposals were announced, parents, neighbors, teachers and school volunteers voiced their opposition to the shutdown of several schools.

While school officials planned for the long term, state officials scrambled to find stopgap solutions to the medical malpractice crisis. Local doctors were among those pressing the legislature for help. Gov. Rendell developed a plan that would provide short-term relief from high insurance rates.

The newly inaugurated governor also made promises to resolve other issues. He planned to reform school funding and property taxes, as well as tackle the \$2-billion state deficit.

Back in Philly, Shawn Jalosinski became the first executive director of the **Stadium Complex Special Services District**. The former traffic engineer for the Streets Department would work in conjunction with neighbors and the sports teams and prepare for the demolition of Veterans Stadium.

Over at another venue, Viking Hall at Swanson and Ritner streets, a new tenant -- a wrestling organization with roots in the pornography industry --

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## February

An arson fire almost robbed the city of one of its National Historic Landmarks -- the U.S. Naval Home at 2400 Grays Ferry Ave. More than 135 firefighters banded together to fight the blaze, which left the building in "imminently dangerous" condition, according to the city. The owner of the property, Toll Brothers, would be ordered to hire an engineer to perform a structural assessment.

Narcotics officers arrested 131 suspected drug dealers, served 77 warrants and nabbed more than \$200,000 worth of drugs in a daylong series of raids in South and Southwest Philadelphia. The massive effort also netted 30 guns and more than \$57,000 in cash as part of the citywide Operation Safe Streets program.

The man who helped bring Kvaerner to the former Navy Yard caused an uproar with stadium complex residents when he revealed his plan to bring a harness racing track to the Naval Business Center.

Delaware River Port Authority chairman Manny Stamatakis reached a tentative agreement to build the track on an unused 90-acre parcel of land only to have neighbors condemn the plan before it could develop.

Residents across the city spent days trying to dig themselves back to civilization after a storm dumped 18.6 inches of snow -- the sixth-largest storm to ever hit Philadelphia and the largest since the Blizzard of '96.

A 10,000-person-strong antiwar rally took over the streets of Center City to oppose President Bush's plan to invade Iraq. The demonstration -- the largest in the city's history -- was just one of thousands that were going on around the world.

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## March

A voluntary agreement by South Street businesses to close by 7 p.m. led to an almost-subdued Mardi Gras that netted just 14 arrests.

The city dubbed the uneventful day "Mardi Blah" because of its stark contrast to 2001's near-riot.

Schools CEO Vallas revealed more details about his plan for the district's 200,000-plus students. He aimed to double the number of guidance counselors and to provide teachers and administrators at all of the city's 45 high schools with year-round professional development.

Vallas' plan also entailed building five new high schools and converting nine middle schools into high schools by 2007 as part of an overall effort to reduce class sizes.

The Jefferson Square Community Development Corp. held a groundbreaking ceremony at Fifth and Reed streets, marking the beginning of a \$22-million neighborhood revitalization plan that would build 88 new homes and rehabilitate six others.

The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection and the Health Department investigated a putrid-smelling underground fire that was feeding on an illegal landfill just south of the Platt Bridge.

The city said the burning debris -- which was found to contain high levels of cancer-causing agents -- would likely be excavated, extinguished and hauled away.

After years of rumors, the Archdiocese of Philadelphia acknowledged it was indeed exploring the possibility of closing St. John Neumann High School, 26th and Moore, or merging it with St. Maria Goretti, 10th and Moore.

In addition to declining enrollment, Neumann cited nine years of operating in the red as cause for its predicament.

Residents reacted as bombs dropped on Baghdad, signaling the start of the war in Iraq. It seemed as if everyone had a loved one overseas or knew someone who did.

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## April

Eleven days into Operation Iraqi Freedom, President Bush's wartime tour stopped in Philadelphia.

A few hundred protesters greeted the president at the Coast Guard station at Washington Avenue and Columbus Boulevard, where Bush addressed a crowd of nearly 400 Coast Guard officers along with agents from the Federal Bureau of Immigration and Border Protection.

Fundraising problems and rising debts caused the three-year-old Samuel S. Fels South Philadelphia Community Center at 2406 S. Broad St. to cut its weeknight hours short and to eliminate weekend hours altogether.

The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation began a \$2.5-million landscape project around the I-76 on-ramps near Broad Street and Packer Avenue in anticipation of the traffic the new Eagles and Phillies stadiums would bring to the area.

The Philadelphia International Airport hosted a decadent ribbon-cutting gala in honor of "Arrivals Hall," the \$550-million international terminal that would allow Immigration and Naturalization officers to process more than 2,800 people an hour. The tab for the party ran more than \$200,000, putting Mayor Street on the defensive as Republican mayoral candidate Sam Katz lobbed criticisms about partying on taxpayers' dollars.

The Miami-based Norwegian Cruise Lines purchased the SS United States -- the legendary vessel that had been rotting away at Pier 82 on Delaware Avenue since 1996 -- and announced plans to convert the 990-foot ship into a modern cruise line.

The String Band Association announced that all 18 bands would be returning to South Broad Street -- but only to participate in a parade honoring the U.S. troops stationed in Iraq.

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## May

Excavation workers at the old Quartermaster Depot, 24th Street and Oregon Avenue, happened across bright green sludge underground that was later identified as chromium. The Environmental Protection Agency labeled the substance hazardous to humans.

Universal Companies founder Kenny Gamble announced a four-year, \$100-million plan to construct or renovate 400 homes in blighted neighborhoods between South and Federal streets west of Broad to 19th.

Several South Philly doctors joined more than 46,000 doctors and surgeons throughout the state in walkouts and office closures in an effort to get the state legislature to impose caps on jury awards in medical malpractice verdicts.

Neighbors were horrified to learn of a triple tragedy that included crimes on the 2700 block of Federal Street and the 2100 block of Woodstock Street.

Isaac Bordley, 34, sexually assaulted and slashed a 29-year-old cousin before he tied up and raped his 19-year-old sister, police said. Later, Bordley committed suicide by stabbing himself in the chest, according to reports.

School district administrators began planning for the closure of Audenried High School before the School Reform Commission approved a plan for a replacement facility. The possibility remained that the school could close for a year while a new building would be constructed.

SEPTA's board of directors began seriously entertaining the notion of eliminating the Broad Street Route C bus in a cost-cutting move that would have affected 17,500 daily riders.

A group of investors, including Flyers and Sixers owner Ed Snider and the Delaware River Port Authority's Stamatakis, began eyeing up 47 acres of riverfront property for a "racino" -- a combination horse track and casino property.

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## June

A 38-year-old woman suffered a fractured skull and bone-deep lacerations to her pelvis after jumping from a third-floor window on the 2100 block of South Eighth Street to escape a rapist. A man who lived in her building, Gary Jackson, was charged with rape, aggravated assault and related offenses.

Railway magnate CSX's management of the 93-year-old railroad bridge above South 25th Street was called into question as aides from Council President Anna Verna's office and local business managers examined chunks of debris that fell from the ever-deteriorating bridge.

Planning committees from St. John Neumann High and St. Maria Goretti High approved a plan to merge the two schools by September 2004, bringing to fruition nearly 30 years' worth of rumors about the schools consolidating.

An Operation Safe Streets police officer critically wounded a drug suspect at Moore Street and Moyamensing Avenue when the 20-year-old male allegedly drove a station wagon toward the officer. The suspect later died of his injuries.

The Phillies reached a 25-year, \$95-million naming rights agreement with Citizens Bank for their new ballpark. Citizens Bank Park is set to open in April 2004.

Local teen Gregory Lattera made national headlines when a local Boy Scout group, the Cradle of Liberty, kicked him out after the 18-year-old declared that he was gay.

Audenried ended a tumultuous school year that was pock-marked by violence and poor academic performances on an optimistic note. The school's new administration promised to rely on positive energy to get the school through its construction woes as the district continued to debate on the logistics of a new building.

The four Mummers divisions met with city officials to relay their intentions to return the parade to South Broad Street after a four-year absence.

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## July

Kenny Gamble and Universal Companies came under fire after it was discovered that Gamble owned four properties in neighborhoods that were targeted for redevelopment by the city and Universal Companies.

Gamble, it was reasoned, stood to profit if real estate values skyrocketed around the homes he owned as part of Universal's redevelopment plan.

The Philadelphia Housing Authority trumped the \$168-million makeover of Tasker Homes in the area of 31st and Morris. When completed in 2006, PHA promised, the 554 new twins and rowhomes will give the city a unique mixed-income community.

Following a lengthy career of dodging police and making records, South Philly native Dwight Grant -- also known as rap star Beanie Sigel -- was deemed a danger to the community and held without bail on a federal gun charge.

Two masked robbers burst into Jade Express, 16th and Wharton, just after closing and shot to death the owner, 31-year-old Dayu Yee. The incident, along with other crimes that victimized Asians across the city, led to a community meeting with Police Commissioner Sylvester Johnson.

After six years, the Kvaerner Philadelphia Shipyard completed its first product, the 712-foot-long container vessel Manukai. The ship was sold to the Matson Navigation Co. for \$115 million.

The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection gave the city \$2 million to pay for a portion of the cleanup of the garbage fire near the Platt Bridge, which the city expected to be cleaned and cleared by the end of the year.

The Eagles opened their new home, Lincoln Financial Field, to the public during a two-day event that drew more than 100,000 visitors.

State Sen. Vince Fumo came out against a gambling bill he had helped pass after he and other Democrats said the bill contained loopholes that would make it hard for the state to ensure that gambling in Pennsylvania would be run in a clean and effective manner. The legislation was expected to provide Philadelphians with wage-tax relief as well as property-tax relief throughout the rest of the state.

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## August

State Rep. Bill Keller targeted the dilapidated structures between Fourth and Sixth from Mifflin to Jackson streets for a neighborhood revitalization plan. The cornerstone of the project is an apartment building for seniors at Fifth and Jackson. Construction should be complete by August 2004.

Open drug-dealing and prostitution prompted residents to form a townwatch called the Claws of Justice to patrol the area from 12th to Broad streets, from Shunk to Ritner. The need for the group was underscored by the second armed robbery in a month at Ralph's Food Market on the 1300 block of Porter Street.

Other neighbors coped with a rash of car vandalism in the area of Front and Dickinson.

A wait that seemed endless was finally over -- the official opening of Lincoln Financial Field. The arena, quickly dubbed the Linc, debuted with a series of Bruce Springsteen concerts. The fans were thrilled, but neighbors complained of noise and vibrations. Still, reviews were mostly positive for the \$512-million state-of-the-art stadium.

The death of 3-year-old Porchia Bennett and the discovery of her abused sisters in her aunt's South Fifth Street home became a national news story and a glaring indictment of the child-welfare system. Bennett's aunt, Candice Geiger, and her boyfriend, Jerry Chambers, were charged with attempted murder and other offenses. Tiffany Bennett, Porchia's mother, also was charged with child endangerment. As the case unraveled, it became clear that the Department of Human Services had lost track of the family.

Another murder also haunted the area: Susan Brennan, a pregnant mother of two, was found dead in a Southwest Philadelphia alley with peanut butter smeared on her body. Investigators said she had been killed on the 1800 block of South 18th Street in South Philly. An acquaintance admitted to strangling Brennan.

The Archdiocese of Philadelphia confirmed that Neumann and Goretti high schools would merge. An archdiocesan committee later recommended that Neumann move its students to Goretti at 10th and Moore.

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## September

Students in 22 Philadelphia archdiocesan high schools were ready to go back to school, but their teachers were not. The Association of Catholic Teachers Local 1776 walked the picket line, citing low raises and higher costs for medical coverage.

On Sept. 11, 2003, Philadelphia and the rest of the United States remembered the two-year anniversary of the terrorist attacks that claimed nearly 3,000 lives.

A natural disaster -- Hurricane Isabel -- blew through town, injuring at least one local man when a sign fell on him.

The Philadelphia mayoral rematch between Democratic Mayor John Street and Republican challenger Sam Katz became increasingly contentious. In South Philly, incumbent First District Councilman Frank DiCicco, a Democrat, had an opponent in attorney Rick Cataldi, a Republican. Also, Council President Anna Verna prepared to face off with Republican challenger Paula Terreri for the Second District Council seat.

In an exclusive interview with the *Review*, Porchia Bennett's aunt, Bridgette Bennett, talked about her anger over the child's death and her belief that her sister, Candice Geiger, was simply another victim.

The merger between Neumann and Goretti high schools became official close to a month after the news that Neumann students would move to Goretti in September 2004.

Residents prepared for another big change as the last game was played at Veterans Stadium. Construction on Citizens Bank Park continued across the street.

Two weeks after they went on strike, Catholic high-school teachers accepted a contract. Not all of the union members were happy. The contract passed 486 votes to 434.

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## October

The leadership of the Philadelphia Archdiocese changed hands when 80-year-old Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua retired. St. Louis Archbishop Justin Rigali was installed as the new Roman Catholic leader. Shortly thereafter, Pope John Paul II elevated Rigali to Cardinal.

Less than a month before Election Day, police discovered a listening device in Mayor Street's office. Blame initially focused on Republicans, but it turned out the FBI had planted the bug as part of an ongoing corruption probe into the awarding of city contracts. Within days, the FBI had issued subpoenas for documents pertaining to city dealings at the airport, South Philly's Tasker Homes and more.

The annual Columbus Day Parade was held on South Broad Street, this time with a political undertone. Supporters of Mayor Street and challenger Katz loudly disagreed over their choice of candidates.

A New York developer broke ground to build a shopping center on the old Quartermaster site on Oregon Avenue. The \$100-million project is expected to include retail stores and restaurants, and to create 1,000 jobs.

In other development news, the city settled its lawsuit against developer Toll Brothers, allowing construction to move forward on a gated luxury home community at the Naval Home.

Andrew N. Farnese, a lawyer and former school board president who was a prominent member of the community for decades, died at the age of 89.

Columbus Charter School held a vigil for 8-year-old Khynief Hatchett, cut down by a bullet apparently intended for his father. The man arrested in the boy's shooting was jealous over the elder Hatchett's role in a love triangle, police said.

Billy Rinick was convicted in the 2001 execution-style murder of associate Adam Finelli. Prosecutors had argued that Rinick killed 25-year-old Finelli to steal the \$85,000 Finelli was going to use to buy Rinick's home.

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## November

The big story was the landslide victory of Mayor Street in an election that proved to be a battle of investigations, allegations and endorsements. In the end, Street won over Republican challenger Katz by 70,000 votes. In South Philadelphia, Katz received at least 2,000 more votes than Street. All local incumbents won reelection.

A group of Goretta students received national attention when they chased down a man who was allegedly flashing them repeatedly near the school. The suspect, Rudy Susanto, 25, was charged with multiple counts of corrupting the morals of a minor, lewdness, stalking and disorderly conduct.

The state House Liquor Control Committee approved legislation that would legalize coin-operated video gambling machines in taverns and liquor-licensed restaurants and hotels. The bill would go on to the Republican-controlled General Assembly, which already reluctantly passed the slot-machine bill.

The Philadelphia Housing Authority announced a broad-based plan to fight crime at its developments during a press conference at Tasker Homes.

The Phillies hired Tennessee-based Demolition Dynamics Inc. to implode Veterans Stadium in early 2004. Neighbors of the stadium hired their own engineer to review the plans. The residents claimed the Phillies were not including them in the process.

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## December

The Mummies finally reached a deal to televise the 2004 New Year's Parade. The parade would air once again on WPHL-TV (Channel 17). Citizens Alliance, a nonprofit organization with ties to Fumo, announced it would pay for the production costs, estimated at \$250,000.

Citizens Alliance also made headlines for refusing to reveal the identity of its \$11-million benefactor. Fumo defended that decision in a two-part interview with the *Review* that also addressed his scrutiny in the media, his political opponents and the revitalization of Passyunk Avenue. Later in the month, citing a need "to lift the cloud that has been unnecessarily hanging over our charity," Citizens Alliance announced that PECO had given the nonprofit \$17 million in donations since 1998.

Fumo also was involved in negotiations to keep the Philadelphia Regional Produce Terminal from moving to New Jersey.

Another local school seemed in danger of extinction as Annunciation BVM announced its parish, based at 1501 S. 10th St., was \$200,000 in the red. The school had been suffering from declining enrollment.

Luckily Ky, a 19-year-old Community College student and St. John Neumann graduate, was killed in his family's store at 17th and Moore while trying to protect his mother during a robbery.

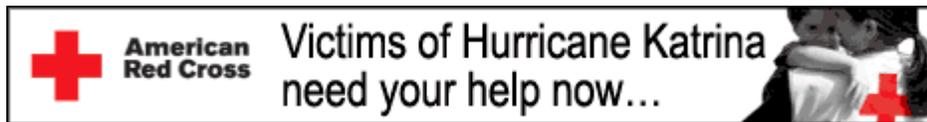
A string of local store robberies continued with a Dec. 26 holdup on the 2300 block of Christian.

*Managing editor Sheri Brenner contributed to this report.*

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