

WHO THE HECK IS
Billy Dec?

He is the latest incarnation of a familiar Chicago archetype:
the superhip nightclub host. Some become legends.
Others have the shelf life of a latte. Which will he be?

By **Lucinda Hahn**



IT'S A FRIDAY NIGHT IN OCTOBER at Rockit Bar & Grill, the restaurant and watering hole on Hubbard Street where trendy beer flows, bass thumps and the young and affluent jam into the vast, top-floor bar, abuzz like so many charged particles in a magnetic field. □ Bears quarterback Rex Grossman is playing pool with wife Melissa and friends in one corner, roped off by velvet cord to keep the hordes at bay—though “hordes” hardly describes this crowd of buff twenty- and thirtysomething alpha males and attractive young females whose expensive hair shimmers with possibility. □ Enter Billy Dec—the baseball cap-wearing part-owner of Rockit and its swank sibling, Oak Street’s Le Passage. With his Blackberry in hand and earpiece hooked on tight—so he can talk to his managers at both clubs—the 33-year-old is armed for what he calls a night “in full host mode.” He looks around, preparing to wade into the crowd, and a grin of anticipation opens across his tan face. “If anyone steps on my new Nikes,” he shouts suddenly, like a war cry, “I’m gonna kick their ass!” □ Granted, the shoes *are* special—made to

Billy Dec and Jen Schefft attending the Marshall Field’s 2005 Glamorama last August.

order for Dec at the invitation of Nike Inc. Dec is one of a handful of A-listers and influencers—others include singer Joss Stone and cyclist Lance Armstrong—that Nike has flown to its iD studio, an atelier in Manhattan that customizes athletic shoes. Dec picked the style, colors and types of leather and fabrics; then Nike stamped the sneakers with the words “Rockit Bar & Grill.” □ Why was Dec enlisted in a marketing program alongside internationally known athletes and entertainers? Because, says Nike’s brand manager Nancy Majors, “he knows everyone!” And Nike wants to know them too—those upscale young professionals who crowd Dec’s clubs and overflow with disposable income. So Nike stuffs Dec’s walk-in closet with free Nikes. □ And that Blackberry that he’s toting? Another freebie, courtesy of T-Mobile, the carrier that provides free service to Dec. And the silver Mercedes he drove to work tonight? Also free. □ Dec has been under consideration to headline two reality

TV shows. (Beginning Jan. 16, he will contribute nightlife and celebrity reports on “metromix,” an entertainment show that is aired on Tribune-owned CLTV. This article was reported and written before the arrangement was signed.) One of his best chums is “Friends” star David Schwimmer. He spent most of the summer of 2001 palling around with Jude Law and his kids, while the actor was here filming “Road to Perdition.” And you might remember—because Us Weekly and Star reported it—that he romanced blond beauty Jen Scheff this year after she turned down all comers on “The Bachelorette.”

All of which begs the question: Who the heck is Billy Dec? And better yet, why should we care? Is it because he’s Chicago’s newest incarnation of a long-standing social archetype: the nocturnal playground director, cool, in-the-know, someone you’d love to have call you by your first name?

Is it because he typifies the shallow, self-hyping, celebrity-chasing climber that our culture seems to breed like rabbits? Or is it because he’s really a solid, industrious family guy who is using his current gig as a steppingstone to a less frenetic future?

Steve Dahl wondered just that after being introduced to Dec at a party one night. The next day on his radio show, Dahl told his cohorts, Buzz Kilman and Wendy Snyder: “I kept saying, well, who is this guy? . . . He’s, like, famous for being famous.”

SNYDER [sarcastically]: Billy Dec!

DAHL: I don’t know what he’s famous for, even! It’s this kid with a tan and a hat on.

KILMAN: He’s a promoter.

DAHL: Right—he’s promoting himself, first and foremost . . .

Dahl then read aloud from Dec’s bio, taken off the Web site of his com-



Billy Dec helps actress Kelly Hu play drums at Le Passage while Earl Talbot chimes in.

pany, Rockit Ranch Productions:

“The king of clubs, our town’s scenester, nightlife mainstay, nightclub impresario—these are just a few of the titles bestowed upon Billy Dec in the past year . . . Dec is also an attorney at law, a licensed real estate broker/developer, and a marketing consultant.”

DAHL (snickering): I was at a meeting at Paramount [once], so I could [say] that I’m a movie producer! But come on!

KILMAN: You could say that.

DAHL: But who would?!

SNYDER AND KILMAN: Billy Dec!

Dec and his mom, Celia, are riding in a car tuned to Dahl’s show at the very moment this dialogue is airing.

“Why are they saying these things?” says Celia,

blinking back tears. “Did you do something wrong?”

But Dahl’s riff is just another variation on the same one Dec has heard a hundred times: that he is a shameless self-promoter; that he is a celebrity suck-up; that he has befriended Schwimmer and dated Scheff and hung with Law and any other celebrities passing through town to get publicity for his businesses—and to nourish his ego.

“Billy is very good at the p.r. of himself,” says club vet Marc Bortz when asked why, in most articles, Dec is given implied—or even overt—credit for launching the mega-club Circus in 1998. In truth, Bortz birthed the project himself, he says, and owned 65 percent to Dec’s 10 percent.

“That’s OK,” says Bortz, who currently operates Cabaret, Jet Vodka Lounge and Cabaret. “All press is good press.”

“It’s always me, me, me,” says another professional acquaintance, who has known Dec for years. “He’s relentless.”

Billy Dec! Dahl and his sidekicks had not so much said it as spit it out. It reminded Dec of how much he hates hearing his name spoken aloud.

He once asked a girlfriend to call him by some term of endearment—“baby” or something—anything but his name. After so many years in the club trade, his name has come to sound to him like a brand—like a two-word, superficial sound bite that sums up all the glitz in his life, the parties and celebrity schmoozing, the red carpet walks and free stuff.

To him, “Billy Dec” doesn’t sound like the real story of who he is and the choices he’s made and what he’s overcome while promoting parties and bars and managing clubs and restaurants, shaking hands and buying people drinks and working 16 hours a day making sure everyone is having a good time.

“People think I wake up at 9 p.m. and roll into the club and start looking for the girl of the night,” says Dec, recalling how Dahl dissed him on-air. “And that I just look in the mirror and wink that I’ve got that trust fund and everything is all good. That’s not me.”

It might have been. Dec grew up in a 12,000-square-foot, antiques-filled house on Deming Place in Lincoln Park. His father, Bill, was a real estate developer—“a wealthy man,” recalls the elder Dec’s former business partner, Al Perres. His mother, a former flight attendant, devoted herself to her family, having left so many relatives behind when she emigrated from the Philippines after meeting Bill Sr. on an airplane.

Dec and his brother, Anthony, younger by two years, grew up watching martial arts cartoons on Saturday morning. Their mom had them in tennis lessons at Lakeshore Athletic Club, but the boys twisted her arm into driving them to the Cabrini-Green area for karate and tae kwon do classes, which became a passion for Billy.

By the time he transferred in his freshman year to The Latin School of Chicago, the prestigious private school on the northern edge of the Gold Coast, Dec sported muscles and a friendly confidence. “All the girls were saying, ‘Oh, the new guy is so cute,’” says Julie Fogel, a classmate at Latin.

Dec played on the school tennis team and made the starting soccer lineup after the coach bet him he couldn’t. At home he doted on his sister, Leilani, who is 13 years younger.

But amid this pacific existence, a maelstrom was gaining force. Dec’s father was struggling with bipolar disorder. “It was the most frightening



Billy Dec (green shirt) walks past the line waiting to get into his club on a Friday evening in November. At right, Dec is flanked by celebrity pals Joey Slotnick of "Alias" (on left) and David Schwimmer of "Friends."

"PEOPLE THINK I WAKE UP AT 9 P.M., ROLL INTO THE CLUB AND START LOOKING FOR THE GIRL OF THE NIGHT. THAT'S NOT ME." —BILLY DEC

thing I'd ever seen," says Perres. "And it got worse and worse and worse. He could be on top of the world, and then bang. He'd get hit again, and it would be like, 'Where's Bill?'"

As the younger Dec's senior year approached, his father's business, Michigan Avenue-based Realecorp Development, went under. The firm had generated much of its income from real estate syndicates—which wealthy investors used at the time to shelter income from federal taxes. But in 1986, President Reagan's Tax Reform Act abolished the shelter. The business tanked, and in 1991 Bill Dec filed for bankruptcy—losing the family home and savings in the process.

Meanwhile, symptoms of bipolar disorder and schizophrenia had overtaken Dec's brother, and he had to be hospitalized. With little income, the Decs depended on state-run facilities, where doctors had trouble making a clear diagnosis and treating Anthony's problems successfully. "It's been extremely challenging for Billy," says Perres, who remains a friend of the family, "and he's had to bear the brunt of it."

With his father out of work and the family's medical bills and school fees mounting, Dec threw himself into a variety of jobs, from sales clerking at a clothing store to hauling garbage. He also worked at local clubs that threw on-alcohol parties for teens. When his friends, noticing he wasn't around so much after school, asked him what was going on, Dec stayed mum. "I was scared, embarrassed..." he says. "My dad was sick, and my brother was just diagnosed with a mental disability that we all needed to chip in and care for."

Dec also joined his mom in the Realecorp office, dealing with the demands of various attorneys for documents as they dismantled the bankrupt company. For 18-year-old Dec, it was a nightmare.

"[I was] just filing and literally watching everything crumble, and watching the attorneys being the only ones who understood what was going on—and benefiting," he recalls. "It was such a horrible experience, and I never wanted to be in that situation again. And if I was, I wanted to make sure I was one of the guys who knew what the hell was going on. Because the attorneys were the only ones who did, and I knew my father didn't."

The knowledge-is-power mantra played over and over in Dec's head as he left for an uncertain college career at the University of Illinois. With the family's house having gone to the bank, Dec packed far more than just clothes and extra soap. He stuffed his beater of a Jeep with everything he wanted to keep—trophies, scrapbooks, files. "It's not like there was any money for storage—or a house," Dec says.

There wasn't any money for college, either. Sharing books with buddies cut expenses. Pigging out at the cafeteria so he didn't have to spend cash on food between meals helped too.

Still, Dec became a fixture at the financial aid office—and a workaholic. When summer came, all of Dec's friends from Latin returned to their parents' homes, to their old rooms and familiar beds. Dec rented an apartment without air conditioning on Armitage Avenue, throwing an old mattress on the floor for a bed.

In the midst of this squalor, he made himself a solemn promise. For the next 10 years, he would work as hard as he possibly could. He would essentially sacrifice his 20s, hoping to establish a career and make enough money to enable him to take care of his parents and siblings and never, ever be the guy who doesn't know what the hell is going on.

He snagged a job as a bouncer at the front door of Shelter, a hot club on West Fulton Street where on weekend nights Chicago's up-and-coming

young professionals would line up in droves to get in. They were the city's future movers and shakers, people who could afford to drop \$15 just to get into a place. And 18-year-old Dec was the guy at the door.

It became a good idea to know Billy Dec. Who's Billy Dec? He's the guy at Shelter—you gotta know Billy Dec. He began promoting events at other bars and clubs, getting a cut from the owners. He'd contact everyone he knew about a party at, say, Dragonfly—and come Thursday night, there'd be a line down the street to get into Dragonfly.

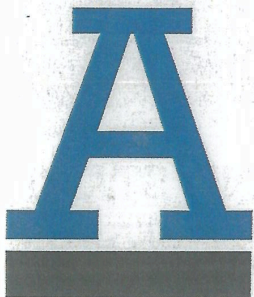
Having grown up in the city, Dec was well-connected—and proved to be an energetic networker. "I didn't care if you were working at my bank or the local store," he says, alluding to his burgeoning mental Rolodex. "I knew every kid [from] every high school."

Dec would be there shaking hands and giving high fives, making sure people had drinks and felt welcome. He learned to read people. If there was someone in the corner who was maybe a little shy, then Dec noticed, and made sure they were taken care of.

"I could make the owner happy by providing consumers to the venue," he says, "and I was able to do that by accommodating the consumers, by making them happy. That's really what started kicking."

Because the money was better than what he could make in Champaign, Dec worked mostly in Chicago, driving up on weekends, crashing at a friend's place, and heading back to U. of I. for Monday classes. You could always find Dec out at night, creating good times. It was his job, and the check paid his own bills and many of his family's.

"It wasn't for fun, it wasn't to meet girls, it wasn't to spend money on clothes and craziness," he recalls. "I needed it bad, so I hustled. I worked really, really hard at it. I worked every single angle."



s reported in newspaper and magazine columns, Dec has entertained more than a few A-listers at Rokit or Le Passage, including Michael Jordan, Isaiah Thomas, Billy Corgan, Johnny Damon, Seth Myers, Schwimmer and Mark Prior. Dec's had Daniel Craig (pre-Bond) to his mom's house for dinner. He's thrown a Frisbee with Jude Law. On a recent night, he cautioned the injured QB Rex Grossman: "Hey, don't let anybody step on that foot."

"He's such a celebrity hanger-on," snorts one colleague, who has followed Dec's career closely.

But Dec is hardly the first club owner to brew a potent mix of celebrities and journalists to create buzz about his establishment. When Sherman Billingsley opened his legendary Stork Club in 1920s Manhattan, he sent mailers to the homes of Hollywood movie stars, hoping they'd drop in the next time they came to town aboard the New York Central. He'd never allow a journalist to pay for a drink—a practice that paid off when gossip columnist Walter Winchell plugged it as "New York's New Yorkiest place on W. 58th." Business boomed.

Billingsley was relentless—as Ralph Blumenthal captured in his recent book, "Stork Club." One night when author-poet Carl Sandburg came in, Billingsley asked a journalist friend, "What does he do?"

"Writer," the journalist confided. "Writes books."

"Tell him," Billingsley said, "to stick in 'Stork Club' once in a while."

As Dec's graduation loomed, a club owner offered him an \$80,000-a-year job promoting the venue full-time. "It was hugely tempting," Dec says, but he turned it down to go to law school.

"I saw money hit my father's hands and get ripped out because of things he was lacking, like knowledge and security and real understanding, so it scared me. I didn't need disposable income. I needed protection from what [my family was] going through."

While attending Chicago-Kent College of Law, Dec opened his first club, Solo, in a former Ranalli's pizza joint on Goose Island. It was a rough neighborhood then and Dec—who learned the real estate scene through his father's dinner-table talk—had a feeling a club could succeed against

Lucinda Hahn covers Chicago's social scene for the Tribune. lhahn@tribune.com

the gritty backdrop.

"The whole concept back then was going to these crazy hideouts, these great little clubs in the middle of nowhere [with] beautiful people and great music," says Dec, who borrowed cash from friends to make over the place.

Artist pals helped him paint old pizza pans that the owner had left behind. When they set them outside to dry, wind gusts blew gravel and scrap paper onto the still-wet tins. Disaster? No—texture! The pebbly pans went on the wall as art. Meanwhile, couches from the Salvation Army served as seating.

"It was so raw," Dec says. He called it Solo because he was working for himself now, and it was an instant hit.

"It was packed," says Schwimmer, who popped in one night on the advice of friends. "Great music, deejay—great, great vibe. You could barely just move around the pool table. But I waited and got on and started playing this dude. And I said, 'This is a great place, man. What's up with this?' And it's Billy—and he says, 'Actually, it's my place.'"

The cynics say Dec probably made a beeline to the pool table, knowing it couldn't hurt to have Ross from "Friends" as a patron and pal. Dec's version is that someone tipped him off that "the tall guy from 'Friends'" was in the house—but after a cursory look, he says, "I forgot about it." Until suddenly he was playing pool with a guy who turned out to be Schwimmer.

Either way, Schwimmer and Dec became close friends. "He was protective of me—as any friend would be," Schwimmer says. "Crazy stuff happens, like drunk guys wanting me to do shots with them or kiss their girlfriend. He would step in . . . he was very cool that way. But the real reason, more than anything, that I'm friends with Billy is he's just a lot of fun to be with. We just have a lot of laughs."

Over time, the two have traveled to Spain and London with a group of guys that included Joey Slotnick ("Alias," "Boston Public"). They have hung out on movie sets and partied at red carpet events, including NBC's 75th anniversary show last year. Dec was a bit player in the "Friends" finale. Last summer, he invited Schwimmer to Nike's courtside box at the U.S. Open men's tennis final at Flushing Meadow.

Dec's celebrity suck-up rep doesn't wash with Schwimmer. "I think that's people who don't know him and don't understand him and also don't hang with him. [Celebrities], sports stars, whatever, they probably just enjoy hanging with him. But I think it's also his business—catering to people. He's running one of the hottest places in Chicago, and people who want to be there expect a certain level of service and attention, and people who want to give him a bad rap for it either don't understand the business or are probably jealous."

While some owners stay in the background—Marc Bortz is a behind-the-scenes guy, as was Ian Schrager at Manhattan's Studio 54 in the 1970s—there is always a "front-of-the-house man" to pamper and party with guests, especially high-profile ones.

"You work the room," says longtime Chicago nightspot owner Jim Rittenberg, sitting at his bar, Mother Hubbard's, across the street from Rokit Bar & Grill. Concur Bortz: "Everybody wants to meet the owner and feel a connection."

Rittenberg recalls rubbing elbows with the stars who passed through Faces, his '70s-era Rush Street disco. "I'd get a call, 'Cosby's here,'" he remembers. "At 27, it was new—hey, I know Cosby. At 40, it was like, 'Tell him I'm outta town.'"

Thanks to Dec, Schwimmer was there when Circus opened its doors on Weed Street in 1998 to an overflow crowd of 4,000. The 20,000-square-foot megaclub, which Bortz, Dec and former investment banker Brad Young opened the year Dec graduated from law school, was an immediate success. Its second weekend, more than 1,000 people stood in line to get in, prompting the cops to close Weed Street.

At the same time, Dec was cramming for his bar exam in the Wicker Park apartment he shared with Arturo Gomez, then a manager at Circus' VIP lounge, the Dragon Room.

"He'd say to me, 'I don't want you to talk to me.' He was putting in 16-hour days [studying]," says Gomez. "He's probably one of the most intense people I've ever met. It's scary—and sometimes annoying."

Dec passed the exam on the first try.

In 2002, Dec and Young left Circus to pursue their own projects. They launched Rokit Ranch Productions, with an eye toward developing new

**DEC'S CELEBRITY
SUCK-UP REP
DOESN'T WASH WITH
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THAT'S PEOPLE WHO DON'T KNOW HIM."**

—DAVID SCHWIMMER, ACTOR AND BILLY DEC PAL



Patrons party away at Rockit Bar & Grill on Hubbard Street on a Saturday night in December.



venues, opening Rockit Bar & Grill in 2004 and, on contract, two Hard Rock bars in Miami.

"It was like someone gave us \$10 million and said, 'Here, open up three places,'" says Gomez, who came aboard later as the firm's third partner.

Meanwhile, Le Passage, a trendy nightclub that opened in 2000, needed a semi-extreme makeover. "We were successful, but the numbers were slipping," says one of the original owners of the alleyfront club, Joe King.

King hired Dec and Young in 2002—it was Rockit Ranch Production's first job—in part because of, well, brand recognition. "Billy Dec—people knew him; his name had cachet," King says. "He's got that almost-celebrity status. He goes up to a girl, and she feels special—and the guys too."

They changed the music; dismantled the VIP Yow Bar, which attracted most of the patrons and left the rest of the club empty; and they marketed the place to a more mainstream crowd, including tourists on nearby Rush Street. Dec and Young, who became partners in Le Passage as part of the deal, say they nearly doubled revenues within a year.

"They did an extraordinary job," agrees King. "Billy was out hitting the streets. He was hands-on. He was just there all the time, working. He's hungry, and he wants success."

King was so impressed that he partnered with Dec, Young and Gomez in their Rockit Bar & Grill venture. With \$1.6 million from a coterie of investors, the team was able to hire Nate Berkus, the decorator and regular on

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A GALLERY OF CHICAGO NIGHTSPOT HOSTS:

1940s

> Ernie Byfield / The Pump Room*

1940s, '50s

> Ric Riccardo / Riccardo's

1950s

> Benny Dunn / The Black Orchid

> Art Adler / Tradewinds

> Jack Schatz / The Chez Paree

1960s

> Arnie Morton / Playboy Clubs

> Victor Lowmes / Playboy Clubs

> Butch McGuire / Butch McGuire's*

> Michael Butler / Cheetah

1970s:

> Jim Rittenberg / Faces

> Arnie Morton / Zorine's

> Mr. T / Dingbat's

1980s

> Larry Spatz / Tijuana Yacht Club,
Baja Beach Club

> Peter Gatten / Limelight

> Joe Shanahan / Metro / Smart Bar*

> Dave Shelton / Medusa's

> Cal Fortis / Neo

> Walter Payton / The Pacific Club,
America's Bar, Studebaker's

1990s

> Cal Fortis and Kenny Smith /
Ka-Boom, Vinyl, Crobar*

> Sam Madonia and Jerry Kleiner /
Shelter

> Fred Hoffman / Excalibur*, Snuggery

> Marc Bortz / Circus

2000+

> Rainer Zach / Soundbar*, Y Bar*

> Marc Bortz / RadioStar*, Cabaret*,
Jet Vodka Lounge*

* Still active

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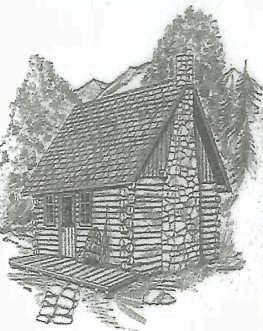
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Billy Dec

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The Oprah Winfrey Show, to do the interior design; and Patrick Robertson from one sixtyblue as the executive chef.

"We're doing \$7.5 million in revenue, it's got a good bottom line and things are right on target," says King. "I don't think anybody thought it would be quite that successful."

With Young and Gomez handling day-to-day operations and the financial side, Dec is free to mastermind the CD release parties, fashion shows and other events that lure crowds. "Billy brings in the customers," says Gomez, "and I keep them here."

Plans to open Rockit Bar & Grills in other states are on the table. Further down the road, Dec hopes Rockit Ranch will be a leader in bringing entertainment events to Chicago and producing them.

"There's no reason why we shouldn't have movie premieres here, awards shows [like the Video Music Awards, which was in Miami last summer]," he says.

Until then, the team will focus on producing marketing parties, such as the one Nike hired them to stage to kick off its Run Hit Wonder race this past September in Chicago; and on consulting to nightclubs and restaurants. Most recently, Tao—the newest, hottest club in Las Vegas—approached Rockit Ranch about helping it attract the Midwestern market. Dec's working on the proposal now.

You're a mogul, a visitor taunts.

"No, I'm screwed," Dec jokes back. "I've got so much work to do."

"He definitely is one of those people whose work is his life," Jen Scheff said, not long before the two parted amicably in August. "He doesn't take Saturday off. He doesn't take Sunday off. He's at the computer checking his e-mail every chance he gets. He is in contact [with work] or working in some respect all the time."

Indeed, Dec's schedule alone would win him a spot on "The Apprentice."

Wake-up, 8 a.m. Breakfast (health-food cereal with blueberries). Check e-mail. Arrive work, 10:30 a.m. Meetings, phone calls, deal-making, etc. Try to leave work, late afternoon. Nap. Return to work, 9 p.m. Leave work, 3-4 a.m.

Despite the massive plasma screen that hangs on his bedroom wall, the only TV show Dec watches is NBC's "Today," while eating breakfast. Thus he can be surprisingly clueless about who's who in pop culture. At Glamorama this year, he found himself in the VIP room with an actor who he had been told played on "Desperate Housewives." Dec whispered to a friend that he thought it was "the plumber guy." In fact, it was Mark Moses, who plays creepy dad Paul Young.

"If you said, 'Oh, did you see 'The O.C.' last week?'" says Dec's friend, Julie Fogel, "he'd be like, 'I don't even know what that is.' A couple of years ago, he was hanging out with Selma Hayek and Lucy Liu [on a movie set with Schwimmer]. He'd call me and be naming who he was with, and getting all their names wrong."

That's one reason Dec is so at ease with the B-list, and occasional A-list, celebs who come through his venues. "I don't find him oily or slick or the kind of guy who works it," says Schwimmer. Indeed, it's his ability to act like one of the boys, rather than a butt-kissing proprietor, that makes Dec popular among the Hollywood crowd.

On a recent night, Adam Blane, who is singer/guitarist Ryan Cabrera's agent, stopped by Rockit. He confided:

"Ryan travels to every city, and the club owners always treat him well, and he has a great time, but when he comes back to L.A., the only one Ryan talks about is Billy. He always talks about Billy, so I wanted to come and meet him."

Soon after, Blane began telling Dec a story. About mid-sentence, Dec turned away from Blane to chat up a lanky blond. Blane was just one of the boys, after all, and the tall blond was, well, a tall blond.

It's Friday night at Dec's three-story brick house in Lincoln Park. Leilani, an office manager in Dec's company, is at the kitchen table, telling tales about living at Billy's apartment from 2000 to 2002. Dec's parents had divorced by then, and Leilani was struggling at school. "He just kind of decided to take over as a parent," she says. "He was crazy protective. I couldn't buy the jeans I wanted; he'd make me buy them two sizes bigger."

If it seemed unusual for a guy in his 20s to raise his sister, it was simply part of Dec's mission to keep his family afloat. Last year—a decade after Dec's family scattered like shrapnel—he bought this house and moved his mom, sister and dad into various apartments and rooms. He claimed the second-floor for himself, an all-white space with a walk-in closet just

for his 50 pairs of Nikes.

"I wanted to take a year or two to, like, really enjoy my family and just make sure everybody's OK and get everyone on their own feet," he says.

The plan hasn't worked out perfectly. If it were up to Dec, the family would live together in perpetuity, gathering for its traditional dinner together each Sunday. Instead, his father's illness recurred and he moved out. In April, Anthony, who was living in a group home for the mentally disabled, was killed in an accident on an "L" train—on his way to one of those Sunday meals.

Still, Anthony's death "has given me a green light to say, 'OK, you've sacrificed 10 years,'" Dec says. "Now I'm starting to really live a bit more, really take the time to enjoy the house, enjoy the family."

Dec is cruising home from Rockit, speeding along Lake Shore Drive with the top down on the free Mercedes. "You're really lucky," I hear Dec say to me. Or at least that's what I think I hear—an apparent joke about me getting a privileged ride in his luxe sports car.

"I am?" I shout over the wind.

He glances at the lake, where the light sparkles on the water like so many gems.

"No," he says. "We are." □

Dave Barry

Continued from page 21

will—you will think I am making this up, but I am not—advise clients on preparing for disasters.

DECEMBER

General Motors, the world's largest auto maker, announces that, despite a massive program of rebates, zero-interest financing, employee discounts, lifetime mechanical warranties and dealer incentives, it has not actually sold a car since March of 1998. "We're in real trouble," states troubled CEO Rick Wagoner, adding, "Even I drive a Kia."

In other troubling financial news, Delta Air Lines announces a plan to convert its entire fleet of planes to condominiums. Within hours, the housing bubble bursts.

The hurricane season, which has produced so many storms that the National Weather Service is now naming them after fraternities, fails to end as scheduled, as yet another hurricane, Epsilon, forms in the Atlantic. The good news is that Epsilon poses no threat to land. The bad news is it still manages to knock out power to most of South Florida.

In politics, Republicans and Democrats debate the war in Iraq with increasing bitterness, although both sides agree on the critical importance, with American troops

in harm's way, of continuing to jack up the deficit. Tom DeLay flees to California, where a friendly jury agrees to hide him in the barn until things cool off.

Greta Van Susteren is elected prime minister of Aruba.

Abroad, Western nations become increasingly suspicious that Iran is developing nuclear weapons when a giant mushroom cloud rises over the Iranian desert. Iran's government quickly issues a statement explaining the cloud was caused by, quote, "mushrooms." As a precautionary measure, France surrenders anyway.

As the troubled year draws to a close, yet another hurricane, Kappa Sigma Gamma, forms in the South Atlantic, threatening to blast the U.S. mainland with a load of energy that, according to the National Hurricane Center, is the equivalent of 17 trillion six-packs of Bud Light.

On an even more ominous note, officials of the World Health Organization reveal that—in what disease researchers have been calling "the nightmare scenario"—a mad cow has become infected with bird flu. "We don't want to cause panic," state the officials, "but we give the human race six weeks, tops."

So, OK, we're doomed. But look at the upside: If humanity becomes extinct, there's a chance that Paris Hilton will too. So put on your party hat, raise your champagne glass, and join with me in this festive toast: Happy New Year!

Or however long it lasts. □

JUMBLE

THAT SCRAMBLED WORD GAME
by Henri Arnold and Mike Argiron

Unscramble these six Jumbles, one letter to each square, to form six ordinary words.

COABEN
○ ○ ○ ○ ○

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SADLIM
○ ○ ○ ○ ○

PARTUB
○ ○ ○ ○ ○

SMURTI
○ ○ ○ ○ ○

GLAJEN
○ ○ ○ ○ ○

DANGIE
○ ○ ○ ○ ○



Now arrange the circled letters to form the surprise answer, as suggested by the above cartoon.

PRINT YOUR ANSWER IN THE CIRCLES BELOW

THE ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ " ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ " ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

Answers appear below

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O U T R E H O O E Y B O L E E L E M
R E S I D E L U T H E R A H Y D R A
V I O L S N I N E R S H E B
F E T E E A S T A R E P A R A D E S
H E R R I N G C A R P E T T A P E C E N T
A L U M N A R I S E O A T S I K T E R
A V I S E N A W N A I S
C A I N E S E S T H I N R E T R A P
C R O S S K A N G A R O O E Y E S H I F T
V I S I T O R I L E N Y E T U C L A
O E D M A T E R S S H E M
S T A N D F A N S U P S A L B E R T
O H M S L E N T S H E L F A B N E R
M E A T T O R A L C O R P U S C L E I S E A
E N I M A D F A I L P I T A A U G O I I
R E D A I R E E N N A E C O N M E I L L
S T A I S E S E D I E N R E P S S I T S

Solutions to last week's puzzles

Quote-Acrossic:
ANDREW JACKSON:
OUR RIGHTS

Every man is entitled to protection, but when the laws undertake to make the rich richer, and the potent more powerful, the humble of society have a right to complain of the injustice of their government.

Jumble answers (Jumble appears above)

BEACON DISMAL ABRUPT TRISM JANGLE GAINED
THE SAME "AULD" SONG
What they sang to ring in the New Year—