

# UNEXPECTED REUNION

*'This means the world to me'*

**James Ball**  
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I explore the way we as Northern Nevadans express ourselves through our interests and pastimes.



Tonna McNally holds up a picture of her son. PHOTO BY JAMES BALL/RGJ

*For Stead mom, project based on 'Storage Wars' restores a lifetime of possessions*

Tonna McNally was facing the breakup of her marriage and a pending eviction from her home. So the Stead resident rented a storage unit in north Reno to house her most cherished possessions until she could get her life back in order. It wouldn't take long, she thought. Just a few months to find work and save a few dollars, then she would be able to reclaim her items and get back on her feet. But early this year, her father broke his hip and everything changed. The combination of mounting bills and an obligation to her ailing father brought everything to a head. She had a choice: find a place to live or pay the now overdue rent on the storage unit. The storage unit was repossessed and, along with it, a lifetime of memories. She lost family photographs, personal paperwork

and all the little bits of ephemera people tend to collect over the course of a lifetime. The Reno Gazette-Journal acquired the storage unit in a March auction as part of a feature on the popularity of shows like "Storage Wars." What started as a lighthearted feature story would quickly transform

into the lesson that there's no such thing as a stranger in this world. Everyone is a "someone," and each of us has a powerful story to tell. McNally's is one of them. Her storage unit contained everything needed to furnish a

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# PROFIT HARD TO COME BY AT STORAGE UNIT AUCTIONS

By Laura Longero and Scott Oxarart  
Reno Gazette-Journal

A&E's popular TV show "Storage Wars" can sell you a fantasy. The premise is that you bid on a storage unit, spend a few hundred dollars and walk away with some-

thing of great value. That's what happens frequently on the TV show. When a few RGJ reporters recently bid on a storage unit in Reno, the experience was far different. We attended an auction Feb. 20 at A-American Self Storage in north Reno. The auction started at noon with around 80 people —

some retired, others young and enterprising — who had come to view 26 units that would be auctioned that day. It was over about three hours later, after the group traipsed through corridors of storage units and peered into them, trying to determine

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Items found in a repossessed storage unit. PHOTOS BY SCOTT OXARART/RGJ

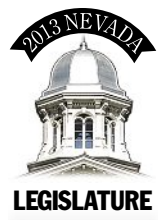
## NEVADA MARRIAGE DEBATE

# Long fight ahead for same-sex marriage

Both sides point to polls, claiming will of people

By Ray Hagar  
rhagar@rgj.com

People on both sides of the debate over recognizing same-sex marriage in the Nevada Constitution realize it has a long way to go before it becomes reality. Although it passed the state Senate last week, Senate Joint Resolution 13 must also pass the Assembly in the next six weeks. If that happens, it must pass both houses of the Legislature in 2015. And if that happens, it must pass a general-election test with voters in 2016. "It's a long road," said Tod Storry, interim executive director of the ACLU in Nevada. Even the resolution's most ardent opponents, such as the conservative Eagle Forum's Janine Hansen, think it will pass the Assembly before



See GAY MARRIAGE, Page 4A

## SAME-SEX MARRIAGE AND THE NEVADA LEGISLATURE

**CURRENT LAW:** Section 21 of Article 1 of the Nevada Constitution provides that only a marriage between a man and woman is recognized in Nevada. **SJR 13:** This resolution dictates that the state issue marriages for all people, regardless of gender and that all marriages will be treated equally under the law. **ROAD TO COMPLETION:** The resolution passed the state Senate last week. It must now pass the Assembly. It must also pass both houses of the Legislature in 2015 and then be approved by voters in 2016.


# Local economic panel cautiously hopeful

Staff report

The first quarter of 2013 brought economic stability — and in the case of housing, some growth — after five years of recession in greater Reno-Sparks. Even so, a sense of caution prevails among industry leaders. Today, as part of a periodic report, the Reno Gazette-Journal revisits six people from key sectors of the greater Reno-Sparks business community to assess the first quarter, as well as the months ahead. Find out what NCET President/CEO Dave Archer, real estate agent Guy Johnson, EDAWN President/CEO Mike Kazmierski, gaming CEO Ferenc Szony, bookstore owner Zoe Miller and DETR Director Frank Woodbeck thought. See full story on page 1F.

## ONLY IN THE SUNDAY RGJ

**RENO REBIRTH**  
**Businesses find home downtown**  
With more businesses, residents, restaurants and entertainment downtown, Reno's resurgence is building toward a critical mass. **1D**  
**CORY FARLEY:** The columnist writes that being a newspaper reporter isn't the worst job in America. **3D**

**NORTHERN NEVADA A&E**  
**David Sedaris to speak at Reno's Pioneer Center**  
  
Humorist David Sedaris will appear at the Pioneer Center in downtown Reno as part of a speaking tour, shortly after the release of his new book. **PAGE 4**

**PLUS**  
**NORTHERN NEVADA:** The Searchlight area has a history of mines, celebrities and desert warfare training. **1E**  
**FACT CHECKER:** Evaluating claims about the Boston Marathon bombing. **3A**  
**SUNDAY OBITUARY:** Sam Jaksick Jr. was a developer of upscale communities, a big game hunter and a man dedicated to his children and grandchildren. **5E**

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## Reunion

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home: a bed, tables and chairs, clothing, a standalone fireplace. There were boxes of paperwork and family photos. These photos told the story of a family, of children growing up, playing sports, graduating and growing into adulthood.

Inside a brown plastic box labeled with a name was the one piece that changed everything. The cremated remains of a man were tucked away in this box. His name was Patrick, and he died in 2001.

At this point, it was time to get in touch with someone — anyone — connected with this family to return the ashes to the people who cared for Patrick.

McNally's sister, Sherra Avampato, responded to a Facebook message.

"The most important things to her are the pictures and ashes, she was brokenhearted over losing them," she said.

McNally was reached by phone on a Sunday afternoon. She occasionally stopped to cry, sobbing with joy.

### Reunion

We met the next day at McNally's Stead home. A mattress lay on the living room floor facing a TV and stereo, but there was little other furniture in the house. Her father, Thomas Avampato, sat quietly as she talked.

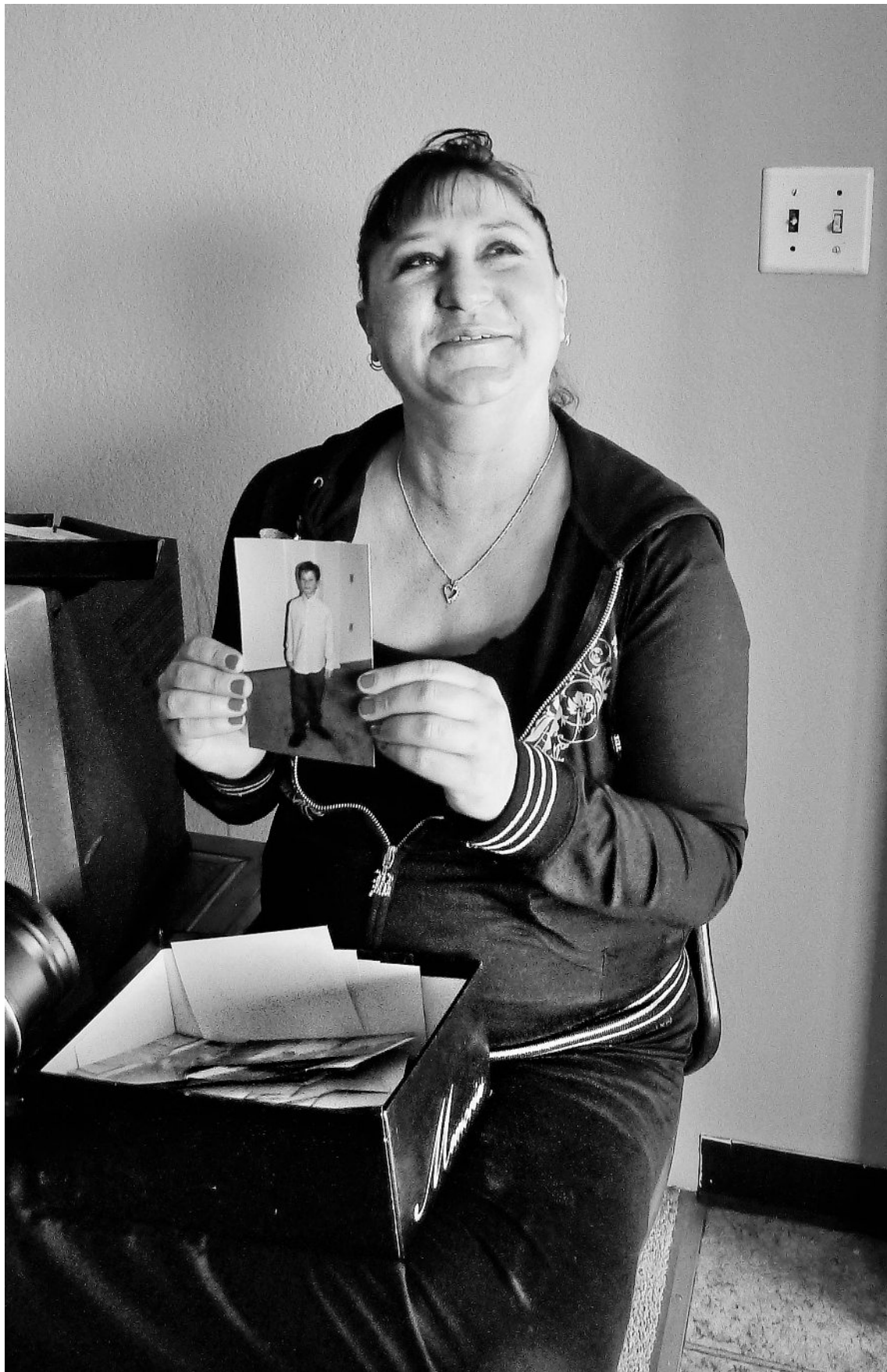
"My job just wasn't sufficient to pay the bills, to pay the rent," she said. "I had to let my kids stay with friends and just get out of the house we were in because we had a five-day notice to quit, so we had to move on so I wouldn't have an eviction on my record."

McNally said she has worked variously as a cashier, as a home care provider for handicapped children and with the state of Nevada, but her husband had been the breadwinner. Without him, things fell apart.

And McNally hasn't yet rebounded. Although there have been some bright signs in the economy, Reno-Sparks' unemployment rate remains at 10 percent. McNally is among those who have yet to find relief from the economic crisis.

"I put everything in storage, thought it would be fine," McNally said. "Then, because I had so much difficulty with finances, I wasn't able to pay my storage bill."

"It was either pay storage or get a roof over my head. So,



Tonna McNally is reunited with her family photos. PHOTO BY JAMES BALL/RGJ

I chose the house. I really wanted my stuff, but I chose the house," she said.

In Nevada, tenants are given a "notice to quit" before the formal eviction process begins. McNally said she opted to leave before eviction to avoid it going on her credit.

After McNally shared the details of her recent history, she brought the boxes into her house, where she sat, poring

over the pictures. She was at first silent, touching her hand to her face as if to hold back emotion, but soon started commenting on each of the pictures.

"Look at Sierra. She's 11 now," she said, holding up a glossy photo of her daughter. "And she's like 2 or 3 there. She's a little baby there."

She held up a picture of a man with gray hair and a broad

smile.

"This is Patrick," the man whose ashes we found. "He was my son's grandfather. He's named after him. I lost touch with my husband, but I couldn't see getting rid of the ashes, so I just hung on to them."

"They're something in the family, so I've always held on to them for safekeeping for the day that my children or some-

RGJ.COM  
/VIDEO



### MORE ON TONNA MCNALLY

**VIDEO ON RGJ.COM:** Tonna shares her photos with reporter James Ball and videographer Liz Margerum in a video with this story on RGJ.com.

body might want them."

Her ex-husband's father was "a wonderful person. A loving, kindhearted Irishman. Loving man. He was absolutely wonderful. I used to go over and have long conversations with him because he was so much fun to talk to."

Then she found another photo, one of the house decorated for Christmas.

"Wow," she said. "Remember that Christmas tree, Dad?"

### Staying afloat

Just days before the reunion, McNally said she had expressed to a friend, who had recently lost her possessions in a flood, how much McNally wished she could see her photos again.

"Eventually, you get over the losses of furniture," she said. "Those are replaceable, but I said my pictures are not replaceable. I had tears in my eyes, and I said what I wouldn't give to get them back. And I heard the next day that I had them back, and I was so happy and so blessed."

McNally said her Christian faith and stoic survivor's attitude have kept her afloat during times of trial in her life, including her recent hardships.

"I've been through a lot of things in my life, and God's helped me through a lot of things," she said. "Fortunately, I came on to the other side, and everything was a lot better than it was before."

In McNally's story, there is an acute lesson in the difficult curveballs life often throws, and that personal perseverance and a positive attitude are things no one can take away from you.

"It's amazing to see these pictures and know they're back with me home and safe," she said. "This means the world to me. Irreplaceable, right?"

## Auctions

Continued from Page 1A

their value.

The process goes something like this: The unit is opened, and prospective buyers are allowed to walk slowly past it, looking inside — flashlights are allowed — but no one can go in or touch anything. After everyone has passed by the unit, bidding begins. Units ranged from 3 feet wide and 6 feet long to 15 feet wide and 68 feet long, and they sold for as high as \$650, but the average was closer to \$350.

Winning bidders must have cash on hand for the unit and sales taxes. Then, the keys are handed over.

We headed over to the auction armed with \$400 and high hopes. Maybe there would be a 1952 Topps Mickey Mantle rookie card (current value: \$130,000) tucked away in a shoebox. Perhaps there would be a Ming vase or a mint condition Stratocaster lurking beneath an old blanket.

All profits were to be donated to a Reno-based charity, but the fun was in the acquisition and selling process, and then the storytelling.

What did we see?

Many of the 26 units were packed. Boxes of stuff, bags of stuff, stuff wrapped in sheets, stuff ... everywhere.

There were old magazines, empty beer cans, baby toys, bins, laundry baskets, assorted furniture, weathered mattresses, luggage, trash bags that spilled over, a lawn mower, music equipment, bedding, bikes, childrens' shoes and clothes, golf clubs, old TVs and even a cello. We spotted a stoplight, weed eaters, a basketball net and a hammock.

We bid on a few lockers, but didn't have the budget to keep up with the regulars. But as we approached No. 26 — the last unit to be auctioned that day — most of the other bidders were leaving.

The unit was ideal because it was in our budget. It had large items that would likely



The outside of A-American Self Storage, one of several storage unit companies that auction off repossessed units. PHOTO BY JAMES BALL/RGJ

## YOUR OWN STORAGE WARS

**HOW TO FIND AN AUCTION:** Create a login at [www.storage-treasures.com](http://www.storage-treasures.com) and it will give listings for all storage auctions in the area and beyond.

**WHAT TO BRING:** Cash, gloves, flashlight and a lock

**STORAGE WARS MYTH:** Last December, "Storage Wars" star Dave Hester filed a lawsuit against A&E after he claimed he was fired because he said the show was rigged, violating his First Amendment rights. Hester said producers planted valuable items in lockers without potential bidders knowing. The suit was dismissed last month in a Los Angeles court.

sell, and it had plenty of mystery boxes. The boxes made the experience fun because you have no clue what could be in there.

Bidding started around \$100; our final bid was \$300. Going once ... going twice ... sold! It was ours.

In our storage locker, we found: A beat-up Marilyn Monroe poster, dishes, pots and pans, a crib, grill, table and

chairs, a mattress, dresser, three Bibles, wedding cards, photos, a wedding cake topper and guest book, marriage license, binoculars, cowboy boots, clothes and toys.

We had three days to clean out the unit. We needed every minute.

Outside of the fireplace, which we sold on-site for \$40, we didn't find any big-ticket items suitable for resale at a

profit. We sold the dresser, DVD-VCR, coffee table, shelf and plant table for \$10 each. We happily sold an old vacuum for \$5.

In all, we spent \$300 and sold \$95. The \$205 loss wasn't as bad because we donated many items to the Salvation Army. We also dropped off furniture, clothes and novelties to St. Vincent's and Goodwill.



Items found in a repossessed Reno storage unit. PHOTOS BY SCOTT OXARART/RGJ

There were some success stories. A veteran picker claimed he had \$12,000 worth of treasure in the storage unit he bought for about \$600. He mentioned priceless paintings, a working traffic light and other valuable antiques.

Another guy said he found a slew of boxed Harley Davidson toy motorcycles.

Is there a chance you'll hit the lottery at an auction? Yes. Would we do it again? Probably not.

We'll leave it to the professionals who either own thrift stores or have the trailers, time and manpower to clean out a locker hours after a winning bid.