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Official Newsletter of Minnesota Mensa

Volume LX Number 5 February 2024



Foggy Lake in Winter
Photo by Doug Heimstead

Science Fiction and Fantasy SIG – Page 6
First Friday & First Friday Feast – Page 8

M · E · N · S · A · G · E · N · D · A Staff

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★★ The deadline for the March 2024 issue is Feb. 6 ★★

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I nformation

Mensagenda is the official publication of Minnesota Mensa, Local Group #550 of American Mensa, Ltd., which serves the state of Minnesota and certain areas of Wisconsin.

Mensagenda is published to provide members with a schedule of events and activities of the local group. It may also contain organizational and administrative information, and any other material selected for publication by the editor. Opinions expressed in *Mensagenda* are those of the individually named contributors. No material herein may be reprinted without permission of the editor, except by other Mensa publications, provided that *Mensagenda* is credited.

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This month's column provides an update and thoughts on initiatives from Minnesota Mensa's "Strategic Plan 2021–2026." Achieving our strategic goals requires working in multiple areas of our local group. Work in those areas progresses, though slowly; time is a severe constraint in a volunteer-run organization. Recognizing our volunteers and improving event access are the two focus areas here.



The LocSec's Podium

Kevin Borchers

The People Team is creating a system for improved recognition of the work of our volunteers. The system is about something other than sending out a certificate once a year like we used to do. People have different preferences. I've seen that from work at previous employers and discussions at Mensa Annual Gatherings. One person thinks putting an accomplishment on an intranet (internal website, like our members' web area), for example, is great. At the same time, someone else says, "Don't ever post something on an intranet." The system is about talking to members, finding out what people prefer, and then providing it promptly and regularly.

The Events Team analyzed and discussed results from the recent survey of members about topics, activities, and timing preferences. We are ultimately working on creating an ongoing process for generating ideas that we present regularly, looking for volunteers to help organize because they find something exciting and want to make it happen. The survey results help identify topic areas of interest. Results on timing help members and teams pick days and times with the broadest appeal.

A member recently asked me about the next Regional Gathering. When we have our next RG is intertwined with our strategic efforts. We need more engagement and volunteers than we have now to fill department head and staff positions. I made a mistake with the last RG in moving forward with plans and thinking we could fill department head positions along the way. That didn't work, and I had to do way too much myself. Any RG this year would be at unattractive times around the end of the year. There is a 9 to 12 month, or more, lead time to put together an RG, so the earliest will be 2025.

Finding members to do the work is the most significant factor in making progress on any of our initiatives. We need "do-ers." Our existing channels for finding people have not been very successful. The other traditional method of "arm-twisting" is counterproductive and detrimental. The "Report of the Volunteerism Task Force" of May 2022 by the American Mensa Committee clearly identified that as problematic.

Our work goes on, slowly, renovating and creating our underlying infrastructure to implement our strategic goals. It's much like a puzzle, with interlocking pieces that ultimately make a great picture. Let me know if you want to be one of the do-ers to help build that picture.

Reach me by email to locsec@mnmensa.org or by phone at (612) 819-8088.

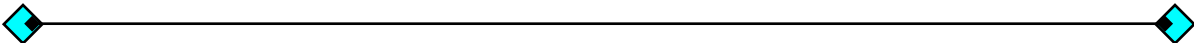
Gifted Youth Program
Angela Gotz, Co-coordinator

January finally brought snow, which meant sledding for our Mensa youth! In February we are going to take things online for a special regional event with the

Gifted Youth Programs Manager for American Mensa, Molly Bundschuh. Join us on Thursday, Feb. 22, at 7 p.m. to learn more about programs and benefits Mensa has for youth. Please register at the link: bit.ly/mensayouthfeb.

This event is open to Mensa youth, their parents, and Mensa members with children. We will discuss programs for youth of all ages from reading programs to college scholarships.

We will go back to in-person events starting in March and we will hopefully be able to start letting you know about events a few months in advance from now on. We have some great plans for the next few months and can't wait to meet more of you!



**The December Board of Directors
(American Mensa Committee)
Meeting: Dues and Officer Conduct**

Jon's Journal
Jon Gruebele, RVC4

Last month I wrote about a proposal to increase annual dues 35%, from \$79 to \$107, with multi-year dues increasing proportionally. This passed at the Dec. 9 AMC meeting but must pass again at the March meeting to go into effect. Timely membership renewals for the upcoming year wouldn't be affected, but renewals after April 1 would.

Inflation since the last dues increase would have taken dues to \$99.20. The additional \$7.80 increase was justified by a desire to fund our "business needs."

Unfortunately, there are no firm commitments regarding where the additional revenue would be spent, only ideas. Since the proposed increase would happen on April 1, most renewals would be done at the old \$79 rate; therefore, 2024-25 fiscal year revenues would only be marginally affected. The full impact would be felt in 2025-26, and the budget for that won't be approved until Spring 2025. We'd have to wait until then to finalize how the additional revenue would be used.

Ideas for funding increases have included:

- Increased Local Group subsidies. This was last changed in 2015 and stands at \$0.85 per member per month;
- Improving service and support to improve the member experience;
- Updating our existing technology;
- Better funding for marketing to attract new members (note: the entire 2023-2024 advertising budget was a paltry \$87,000);
- Improving national office employee salary competitiveness;
- Adding pages to the *Bulletin* to be more in line with past issues;
- Additional funding for RVCs who sometimes have expenses they pay out of their own pocket when their budget is insufficient.

And the list goes on.

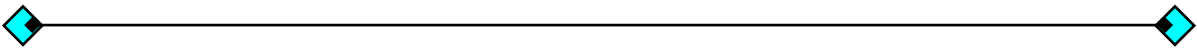
While I agree that some dues increase is needed, I'm not a fan this proposal's magnitude. I'm concerned we may see significant membership decreases, particularly since we're crossing that psychologically important \$99 threshold. We obviously won't know what will happen to membership until any dues increase goes into effect.

I am also concerned we haven't done our due diligence in reviewing national office operations to determine where efficiencies could be achieved. Are there tasks that could be outsourced? Our membership has dropped 15% from our peak in 2010. Have we adjusted our staffing and operations accordingly? How could an increased focus on quality reduce rework and pay efficiency dividends?

In the end, I voted against the measure in December. Stay tuned for the results of the March vote.

One other action taken at the meeting prohibits AMC members and the National Ombuds from concurrently serving as Local Group LocSec, Treasurer, Editor, RG Chair, local or regional Ombuds, or any other position authorized to sign contracts on behalf of the Local Group. This improves our governance by prohibiting someone from having oversight over their own actions. I voted in favor of this motion.

Feedback? Please contact me at rvc4@us.mensa.org or via phone/text at (309) 693-1359. Region 4's Facebook group is: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/americanmensaregion4>.



This month GenY will be going to Padraigs Brewing (formerly 612Brew) for game night. "Padraigs is a locally owned craft brewery tucked in the corner of the historic Broadway Building in the heart of Northeast Minneapolis. The brewery focuses on producing interesting and balanced beers in an inviting atmosphere, poured by friendly and knowledgeable staff. The taproom and private rental space have both been recently renovated and offer plenty of room for you and all your closest friends. Check out our calendar for events and live music, along with a list of our current taproom selections."



This event is free to attend (not including drinks or food) and parking is free onsite in their parking lot. This event is on Friday, Feb. 9, at 7 p.m. Padraigs Brewing is located at 945 Broadway St. NE in Minneapolis. For more information visit <https://612brew.com/>

Please contact Shannon to RSVP and for details at slrichmond@live.com or (651) 336-0096.

For other ways to connect with Mensa, join the Facebook group for National GenY SIG: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/GenYMs/?ref=share> or the Minnesota GenY group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/MensaGenYMN/?ref=share>.


Marx Brotherhood SIG

Kenneth Kuller

In February we will screen *A Day At The Races* (1937). Judy Standish (Maureen O'Sullivan) runs the Standish Sanitarium in the resort town of Sparkling Springs Lake. It has


fallen upon hard times and banker J.D. Morgan, who owns a nearby race track and nightclub, is attempting to gain control of the sanitarium in order to convert the building into a casino. Tony (Chico) suggests asking for financial help from the wealthy hypochondriacal patient Emily Upjohn (Margaret Dumont); she threatens to leave unless Dr. Hackenbush (Groucho) is hired as chief of staff. Meanwhile, Judy's boyfriend Gill (Allan Jones) spends his savings on a racehorse in order to make enough money to pay the sanitarium's debts.

The most memorable scenes from this movie include Chico scamming Groucho while selling "tootsie frootsie ice cream" and the "examination room scene." Plot complications related to the crooked Sheriff (Robert Middlemass) and seeing Harpo as the jockey are also most entertaining.

Join us on Feb. 10 at 2 p.m. RSVP (required) for location. Contact: Ken Kuller at kenneth.kuller@gmail.com or by phone at (952) 465-2134.

In March we will screen a variety of the brothers' television appearances. Watch for our SIG announcement in next month's *Mensagenda* for further details.

Do you know much about science? How does your knowledge level of science influence your enjoyment of science fiction? We will explore the dynamic between science and science fiction in our focused discussion in February.


Science Fiction & Fantasy SIG

Kevin Borchers

After the first hour, we'll take a break and then open up the discussion to whatever comes up.

This meeting continues the option to attend either in-person or online.

When: Sunday, Feb. 25 at 1 p.m.

Where: In-person at Kevin Borchers' home in Chaska. RSVP if you are not on the regular email list to be sure you get the address and directions.

Join us online via Zoom at <https://us06web.zoom.us/j/89624230015?pwd=aGVnM2tjSkk1bm1wK01HZ1lISE1OZz09> Meeting ID: 896 2423 0015, Passcode: 078455. For phone-only or audio by phone, call (312) 626-6799 and enter the meeting ID and passcode.

Audience: This is for everyone, whether science fiction and fantasy has been a part of your life as long as you remember or you are new to it and want to learn more. Even if you haven't been involved in the SIG before, we want you to meet your fellow science fiction and fantasy fans.

What to Expect: It's all casual and you don't have to share anything if you don't want to, there's no pressure. Take a no-risk chance to check out the SIG. The worst that can happen is you decide you're not interested and leave early.

Movie Outing: Denis Villeneuve's much anticipated second half of *Dune* is our next movie outing. **The outing to see *Dune: Part Two* is scheduled for Sunday, March 3.** We'll select the theater and time once showtimes are available.

But wait, there's more! Feeling a little hazy about the first part? That was back in November 2021. Dan and Arleen Roberts offered to run a special showing of *Dune: Part One* in their home theater. We'll have a pre-outing outing to their home in Montgomery, Minnesota, to refresh our memories. It's also a great opportunity to catch the first part if you missed it. **The outing to see *Dune: Part One* is scheduled for Sunday, Feb. 18, at 1 p.m.**

Contact Kevin if you're not on the SIG email list and want to join the outings.

Contact: Kevin Borchers by email to techie@kbhome.net or by phone at (612) 819-8088 for more information.

The book for February is *How To Avoid a Climate Disaster* by Bill Gates. It speaks to the issues of climate change from the perspective of an entrepreneur. As we're experiencing crazy winters and an El Niño, it is a fascinating read.

I look forward to meeting all of you.

When: Wednesday, Feb. 28, from 7 to 9 p.m.

Where: Online via Zoom at <https://us06web.zoom.us/j/81271471236?pwd=R3l2WTh0UTY5R0l2Ly9pOFNGd3M2UT09>. Meeting ID: 812 7147 1236, passcode: 763377. Call (312) 626-6799 for phone only or audio by phone and enter the meeting ID and passcode.

Audience: All members who would like to get together and talk about exciting books.

Contact: Michelle Peterick at peterick.michelle@aol.com or (320) 402-9876.

Games SIG

Wanda Shelton

I'm scheduling one Games SIG event in February, and we'll see if my health and the weather cooperate to pull it off. Let's meet at my house in Roseville on Saturday, Feb. 10, at 1 p.m. Participation will be very limited; please check with me the day before or the morning of the event to see if it will be held and to see if there are already as many attendees as can be accommodated. Thank you.

Contact: Wanda Shelton (651) 487-7197 or jouwan2420@gmail.com.



February First Friday

Don Nemitz

The January First Friday had us reaching a milestone. We hit the 250 total attendees mark since I restarted the First Fridays post-Covid. Congratulations to

Barb Andersen on being the 250th person to sign in the book! Barb received a coupon good for one free attendance at a First Friday in 2024. We had a good discussion, with various topics, a jigsaw puzzle was completed, and we all had very good meals. Sounds like success! Think about stopping in to see some old friends and meet some new ones.

Please add this event to your monthly calendars. The email group messaging process is set up, so if you want a reminder about a week before the Friday, just drop a message to fffeast@mnmensa.org and I'll add you in.

First Friday for Feb. 2 will be at the Fred Babcock VFW Post 5555 in Richfield. Their address is 6715 Lake Shore Dr. S. in Richfield. We will have a private room.

The parking in their front lot is extremely limited, but there is additional parking in the rear with an access door and a short flight of steps down. (Rear lot is not connected to the front one, you have to go back to the street, then turn in) There is some limited street parking near the front, and also a park across the street with parking available.

Their food options are pretty good, with soups, salads, sandwiches, and dinners. Their website is <https://www.facebook.com/vfw5555/>, but they do not post a menu.

The registration will be set up before 6 p.m. for people who plan to come for the First Friday Feast. First Friday socializing, for those not coming for dinner, begins at 8 p.m. It's all one price, \$5 for members, \$7 for guests.

If you plan to come for dinner, please RSVP to fffeast@mnmensa.org so we can give them an approximate number.



Last Thursday Break

Wanda Shelton

Your morning opportunity to converse with other Mensa members in February falls on Leap Day, Thursday Feb. 29. Will that date focus our

conversations? A co-worker was married on Leap Day. She'd say things like, "We have been married only five years, but it feels like 20." Do you have a Leap Day story to tell?

Join the conversation on Zoom at 10 a.m. by clicking on the link <https://us05web.zoom.us/j/81935860837?pwd=4MCChu0bNqsdCijtb7xtSipuChOZvz.1> or by using meeting ID 819 3586 0837 and passcode nvk37D. Intelligent, spirited talk from intelligent, spirited individuals.

Contact: Wanda Shelton at (651) 487-7197 or jouwan2420@gmail.com.

Board Meeting Online, Feb. 6, 7 p.m. Please contact LocSec Kevin Borchers by email to locsec@mnmensa.org or by phone at (612) 819-8088 for details.

First Friday Feast Feb. 2, 6 p.m., at the Fred Babcock VFW Post 5555 in Richfield. Please RSVP for the Feast before Friday morning. Admission fee is \$5 for members, \$7 for non-members (covers both Friday events). Contact: don.nemitz@comcast.net. See the article on page 8.

First Friday Feb. 2, 8 p.m., at the Fred Babcock VFW Post 5555 in Richfield). Admission fee \$5 for members, \$7 for non-members (covers both Friday events). Non-members welcome (at both events). Contact: don.nemitz@comcast.net. See the article on page 8.

Games SIG Saturday, Feb. 10, 1 p.m. Attendance is limited. Contact: Wanda Shelton at jouwan2420@gmail.com or (651) 487-7197. See the article on page 7.

GenX SIG Sunday, Feb. 11, 7 to 9 p.m. I will be hosting our January meeting online via Zoom. The link is <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89431776959?pwd=S1krMFBLL0thVi9ha1JWtU5KdDdTz09>. The Zoom ID is 894 3177 6959 and the passcode is 241512.

February Dinner: Friday, Feb. 16, 6 p.m., at the Olive Garden Restaurant in Bloomington. Contact: Lisa G. Sanders at Lisa.g.sanders.bucklin@gmail.com. See the article on page 14.

GenY SIG Friday, Feb. 9, 7 p.m. Game Night at Padraigs Brewing in Minneapolis. Contact: Shannon at srichmond@live.com or (651) 336-0096. See the article on page 5.

Gifted Youth Program Feb. 22, 7 p.m. Webinar with American Mensa's national Gifted Youth Programs Manager, Molly Bundschuh. Contact: Angela Gotz at giftedyouth@mnmensa.org. See the article on page 4.

Last Thursday Break Feb. 29, 10 a.m. Coffee break time. Stop by for a chat. Contact: Wanda Shelton at jouwan2420@gmail.com or (651) 487-7197. See the article on page 8.

LGBT SIG Contact: Jerry at (763) 546-1457.

Marx Brotherhood SIG Feb. 10, 2 p.m., to watch *A Day At The Races* (1937). RSVP (required) for location. Contact: Ken Kuller at kenneth.kuller@gmail.com or by phone at (952) 465-2134. See the article on page 6.

Reciphiles SIG Saturday, Feb. 24, 6 p.m., at the home of Karen Bodin at 501 Theodore Wirth Pkwy. in Golden Valley. Our theme this month is Herbs. Contact: Mary Olson Coleman, text to (612) 804-9489 or email at molsoncoleman@yahoo.com.

Scholarship Essay Judging Sunday, Feb. 4, from noon to 5 p.m. at the Rouch residence in Vadnais Heights, **OR** Saturday, Feb. 10, from noon to 5 p.m., at the home of Karen Bodin in Golden Valley. Contact Barb Andersen at phone (763) 546-7160, text at (612) 812-3888, or scholarships@mnmensa.org.

(continued on page 12)

March *Mensagenda* Calendar Deadline:
Tuesday, Feb. 6, 2024

February 2024

See pages 9 and 12 for details.

Send calendar items to: mensagenda@mnmensa.org.

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
28 Science Fiction & Fantasy SIG 1 p.m. Theodore Talks Online 2:30 p.m.	29	30	31	1	2 First Friday Feast 6 p.m. First Friday 8 p.m.	3
4 Scholarship Judging Noon to 5 p.m.	5	6 Board Meeting Online 7 p.m. March 2024 <i>Mensagenda</i> deadline	7	8	9 Second Friday Online 7 to 9 p.m. GenY SIG Padraigs 7 p.m. Game Night	10 Scholarship Judging Noon to 5 p.m. Games SIG 1 p.m. Marx Brothers SIG 2 p.m.
11 Sharp Women SIG Online 1:30 p.m. GenX SIG Online 7 to 9 p.m.	12	13	14	15	16 GenX dinner, 6 p.m. Olive Garden, Bloomington	17
18 Science Fiction & Fantasy SIG 1 p.m. Movie Outing	19	20	21	22 Gifted Youth Program Online 7 p.m. Webinar	23	24 Reciphiles SIG 6 p.m.
25 Science Fiction & Fantasy SIG 1 p.m. Theodore Talks Online 2:30 p.m.	26	27	28 Talking About Books Online 7 to 9 p.m.	29 Last Thursday Break Online 10 a.m.	1	2

Science Fiction and Fantasy SIG Sunday, Feb. 25, 1 p.m. Focused discussion on the dynamic between science and science fiction. We'll follow with an open discussion in the second part. In-person and online.

Sunday, Feb. 18, 1 p.m. Movie outing to the Roberts' home in Montgomery to watch *Dune: Part One* to get ready for the outing to *Dune: Part Two* on March 3.

Contact: Kevin Borchers by email to techie@kbhome.net or by phone at (612) 819-8088. See the article on page 6.

Second Friday Online Feb. 9, 7 to 9 p.m. Our discussion article for this month is from *Scientific American*, about the shortcomings of BMI as a measure of health. Read the article at [SciAm BMI charts](#). The Zoom Meeting ID is 876 8187 1712 with Passcode 622537, and the link is <https://us06web.zoom.us/j/87681871712?pwd=zWbsahymiKEoS1bWNbuPSi1aw2kedi.1> Contact: (612) 444-6399 (the Mensaphone) or mensagenda@mnmensa.org. For more information, see the article on [page 12A in the online edition](#) of the February *Mensagenda* on our website mnmensa.org.

Sharp Women SIG Feb. 11, 1:30 to 3:30 p.m., via Zoom online. Contact: Arleen Roberts at (612) 720-8847 or family@danclan.com. See the article on this page.

Talking About Books SIG Online Feb. 28, 7 to 9 p.m. Time to talk about exciting books. Our February book is *How To Avoid a Climate Disaster* by Bill Gates. Contact: Michelle Peterick at peterick.michelle@aol.com or by phone at (320) 402-9876. See the article on page 7.

National Speaker Presentations for February

Theodore Talks: National WWI Museum & Memorial

This virtual event will take place on Zoom Feb. 25 at 2:30 p.m. Central. See the article [on page 12B in the online edition](#).

Our [local post-talk discussion](#) opens at 3:30 p.m.

San Francisco Regional Mensa: The Next Pandemic, with Dr. Robert Enteen

This event will take place via Zoom on Feb. 11 at 12:30 p.m. Central. See the article on [page 12C in the online edition](#).

Register at <http://livepresentation.link/SignUp>.

Registration is required for both of these events.

See the complete details at the links, or on pages 12B and 12C in the online edition of the February *Mensagenda* on our website mnmensa.org.

Sharp Women SIG

Arleen Roberts

F

February is a great time to stay inside and work on a fiber project. If you knit, crochet, spin, or do any form of fiber art,

or want to start, please join us to converse

and work on your own needlecraft project. Don't let the group name fool you, regardless of gender, everyone is welcome. We will meet this month via Zoom on Sunday, Feb. 11, from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m. Contact SIG coordinator Arleen Roberts at (612) 720-8847 or family@danclan.com for information on how to join us.

Join our CultureQuest® Team

Exercise those trivia brain cells! CultureQuest® is a national trivia contest for teams of five Mensa members who collaboratively answer a series of questions in a limited amount of time. The top 20 scoring teams win recognition and prize money. CultureQuest® takes place in late April. (The 2023 contest dates were still on American Mensa's website when I wrote this.)

See <https://www.us.mensa.org/attend/culturequest/> for details.

Read what last year's Minnesota Mensa's team members say about it on our website at <https://www.mnmensa.org/culturequest/>. Minnesota Mensa covers the team fee, we just need you to step up and show off your knowledge. Contact Kevin Borchers by email to locsec@mnmensa.org or by phone at (612) 819-8088 to join the team or for more information.

N ew Members

American Mensa, Ltd.



Edwin Heyn Alexandria
Max Hinkley Zimmerman

Member Moving/Preferencing In

Joseph Butterfield Rochester

Rejoining Members

Wade Adamson Richfield
Barbara Rodberg Duluth
James Tanabe Little Canada

Minnesota Mensa Profit & Loss

April – December 2023

Income

AML Local Group Support	6,805.40
Friday Income	
First Friday	642.00
Total Friday Income	\$642.00
Mensagenda Income	
Advertising	60.00
Total Mensagenda Income	\$60.00
Total Income	\$7,507.40
Gross Profit	\$7,507.40

Expenses

Local Group Support	
Accounting Software/Services	270.00
Domain, Web, Email Hosting	269.91
Meeting Tools	197.88
Mensabuck Reimbursement	25.00
Online Conferencing Services	155.01
Other Local Group Expense	6.11
Postage	63.41
Recognition Materials	14.10
Supplies	32.77
Total Local Group Support	\$1,034.19
Mensagenda	-175.00
MA mailing support	1,253.40
MA mileage	24.06
MA postage	1,070.49
MA printing	2,556.63
Total Mensagenda	\$4,729.58
Program Support	
Culture Quest	50.00
Testing Expense	
Postage	21.72
Test site	150.00
Total Testing Expense	\$171.72
Total Program Support	\$221.72
Regional Gathering Expense	
RG Volunteer Incentives	100.00
Total RG Expense	\$100.00
Total Expenses	\$6,085.49
Net Operating Income	\$1,421.91
Net Income	\$1,421.91

GenX SIG

Lisa G. Sanders

I will be hosting our next virtual meeting via Zoom on Sunday, Feb. 11, from 7 to 9 p.m. The Zoom ID is 894 3177 6959 with passcode 241512 and the link is <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89431776959?pwd=S1krMFBLL0thVi9ha1JWWTU5KdDdTZz09>.

For our February dinner, we will be going to the Olive Garden Italian restaurant at 4701 American Blvd. W. in Bloomington on Feb. 16, at 6 p.m. Please RSVP to Lisa at Lisa.G.Sanders.Bucklin@gmail.com or on the Facebook invitation I will create. Family members are welcome to attend. You can also bring a friend if you like.

Other ways to connect with fellow Minnesota Mensa GenXers are in Facebook groups: "MN Mensa Gen X" (where I will post event invitations for our Zoom and in-person meetings) at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/958072014361618/> where other GenX Facebook groups are also listed, including the original group from the 2000s, National GenX, and Mensa Region 4.

Laurent's Circus*Hole Hog*

Cheryl Laurent

By the time you read this, we will be anticipating Groundhog Day and a rodent's opinion on how much more cold and snow we can expect this season. I got to wondering about the little fellow.

Every year, the president of the Inner Circle of the Groundhog Club drags Punxsutawney Phil out of his burrow at dawn, holds him on a stump, and attempts to translate his communication. The official wears chainmail-lined gloves specially made for animal handling because, well, sometimes Phil objects to the process. My sympathies. If someone dragged me out of a warm bed at dawn on a frigid morning to answer a stupid question, I'd bite, too. And you wouldn't want to translate my words if there were children present. Someone reads one of two prepared scrolls, Phil goes back to bed, and festivities continue.

The thing is, Phil and/or his translator are bad at their jobs. They claim to be 100% on the furry little nose, but the NOAA National Climatic Data Center says Phil is no more accurate than flipping a coin. Other groundhogs get less press with far more accuracy. Stormy Marmot in Aurora, Colorado, has been statistically shown to be 70% correct in his forecasts. Poor Richard, just 200 miles from Phil in York, Pennsylvania, scores similarly, despite having been being dead and stuffed for a century. Rich's committee claims to communicate with him in Hog Heaven and so may have a supernatural advantage, but still.

If you want really accurate critter climate prediction, you have to think outside the mammalian box. Snohomish Slew is a bullfrog in Washington State and his handlers claim 80% accuracy. I don't know. I think asking an amphibian if there will be more wet weather 10 miles east of Puget Sound might be

considered rigging the result, but I'm willing to overlook such manipulation only because they call their celebrations Groundfrog's Day. I'm a sucker for a bad pun.

If you don't want to wait until halfway through winter to find out if there will be more, there's always the Woolly Worm festival in North Carolina in October. Owners bring their fuzzy friends to compete in string-climbing races. The winning worm gets the honor of having its frizz used to make the annual prediction. (Its humans get \$1,000.) The 2023 champion predicted lower than average temperatures and light snow. I didn't check to see if he was right; I was too depressed by his name. Past entrants have been dubbed Patsy Climb, Woolly Nelson, Dale Wormhardt, etc. It's hard to work up the same whimsical joy for a worm called Jeffrey.

Pedants will want to point out that Jeffrey isn't a worm at all, but a woolly bear caterpillar. I will just say firstly, in a couple of months, he won't be either one but will have morphed into a moth. Secondly, the pedants never feel the need to let folks know he's not a bear. Why is that?

Maybe it's because the killjoys don't want to get too far into the history of using animals to predict winter. Serbian folklore doesn't reference rodents. The Serbs say if the bear comes out of its den and sees its shadow, people need to be ready for more winter.

And the Inner Circle in Punxsutawney is going to need some bigger gloves.

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Our Contributors

Linda Seebach

A

n editor is fortunate indeed to have so many talented and generous contributors, and I thank them, each and every

one. Some have bylines or photo credits; others do the necessary work behind the scenes. Without them, you'd be getting a postcard every month. (Don't laugh—some chapters do exactly that. Or less.)

This list of contributors reflects the issues from July through December, 2023.

I am always happy to welcome new voices, so if you have a story to tell, a hobby you love to tell people about, a photo or other artwork, please share your ideas with *Mensagenda* readers. Email me at mensagenda@mnmensa.com.

Barb Andersen	Niki Foor	Karen Kuntz	Linda Richter
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On a Whim

Mat Rouch

A

few months back I wrote an article here about Artificial Intelligence. At the end I included a brief

section on ChatGPT, noting that it seems to

fulfill many previous benchmarks set for “true” AI. Since then, I have had multiple conversations about ChatGPT, and most of the people I’ve talked to are still in the “not true AI” camp. Surveying the literature, it looks as if many people who work on Large Language Models (LLMs), of which ChatGPT is an example, also aren’t convinced. I was leaning in that direction myself for a while, but now I’m back on the fence.

Back in the early days of AI, it was all very top-down. You tried to codify all your rules explicitly. Early expert systems were essentially enormous conglomerations of human experts’ rules of thumb, which could be sifted through automatically to find answers to specific questions. Games of skill like chess were given explicit rules and strategies. I remember from my undergraduate days the final project of my AI class: coding the board game Othello. There was the section that generated the game board. There was an evaluator that estimated each player’s current relative strength based on the board positions. There was a “possible move generator” that took the current state of the board and output every legal move that could be made. And then there was the “plausible move generator” that selected the best of those legal moves based on the game’s strategies. But the strategies, and everything else, had to be hand coded by me.

This is very different from how LLMs work. LLMs are bottom-up. Models such as ChatGPT use what’s called “generative pre-training.” Basically, they are given a fundamental set of rules and then turned loose on a colossal unlabeled dataset, the entire Internet, essentially, and left to grind through it all, making all the associations and connections and inferences that they can.

I don’t want to get too technical, because I have not the space and you likely have not the interest, but in the case of text input, the way ChatGPT attempts to understand is to break down all the text into *tokens* (mostly the stubs/roots of words) and then create *vectors* for each token, describing its relationship with other tokens in a given document and/or *corpus* of documents in terms of how closely or distantly they are related. All this vector data is encoded in a neural network which is designed to function in a way similar to a human brain.

This maybe doesn’t sound a lot like “real” understanding, but the results very much speak for themselves. ChatGPT version 3 was trained on a corpus of roughly 500 billion tokens, and it seems to be able to deal with questions posed to it in natural language eerily well.

A side-effect of the automated pre-training is that the people who wrote the LLM typically don’t know how it reaches any given conclusion. The volume of

interconnections between the tokens is just too large. Prescient as ever, Arthur C. Clarke predicted this in his novel *2001: A Space Odyssey* way back in 1968. Speaking about his fictional sentient computer HAL-9000: “Artificial brains could be grown by a process strikingly analogous to the development of a human brain. In any given case, the precise details would never be known, and even if they were, they would be millions of times too complex for human understanding.” Spot on!

One writer, articulating negative sentiments held by many, including some AI researchers, said ChatGPT is merely “attempting to understand your prompt and then spitting out strings of words that it predicts will best answer your question, based on the data it was trained on.” But ... isn’t that a fair description of what a *person* does when you ask them a question? Just replace “the data it was trained on” with “their personal life experience” and I think you’re pretty much there. And I believe I could make a reasonable case that your personal life experience is very literally “the data you were trained on.”

The same people will tell you that GPT does not really “understand” English. Rather, it generates, via crunching its 500 billion tokens, a map of how concepts interrelate. I find this line of reasoning particularly baffling as an *objection* to AI. To my ear that is exactly what understanding English, or any language, *does* mean. It is not relating the letters or collections of letters to each other, but rather *abstracting out the concepts they stand for* that counts.

Another commonly heard objection is that ChatGPT “never really creates anything new.” Rather, it delves into an unimaginably vast pool of human-generated content (text, pictures, audio clips, videos) and roots around in there, spinning correlations and combinations until it comes up with something that answers your query. That strikes me as a spectacularly weak argument. How many people do you know who create *truly one hundred percent original* texts? or paintings? or sculptures? Things that have never been seen before, and that have built on the work of *no one else*? I think the number I have seen is about exactly zero. All new knowledge, art, and writing is built on the works of those who came before. Over several millions of years, we’ve together bootstrapped ourselves up from clever apes into (hopefully) self-aware, conscious, creative beings. No one does it all by themselves. None of us are islands. Not even the machines.

And finally, critics like to hold up the fact that ChatGPT often *makes mistakes*. You can ask it a question and get a flatly incorrect answer back. I have in fact done this. I half-jokingly asked ChatGPT for a hardware installation procedure I was unable to find. I got back a plausible sounding, but erroneous, set of installation steps. I mean ... I dunno, man. In all honesty I think the fact that ChatGPT is able to be *confidently wrong* about something is the best possible indicator that it’s nearing true human intelligence.

Vantage Point*Comic Books*

James Satter

I started reading comic books at a young age and considered myself a collector by the sixth grade. In my youth, I wondered if I would grow up to continue frequenting comic book shops as an adult. As it turns out, I did.

About a decade ago, I stopped storing my comics in cardboard boxes on the floor of my closet and instead began displaying them in a barrister bookcase in my den. My collection consists almost exclusively of superhero comics, but lately I've expanded my horizons and acquired many early issues of *Patsy Walker*. During the mid-20th century, Patsy and her pals appeared in teen romance comics similar in tone to Archie Comics of that era. (Fans of the Netflix series *Jessica Jones* might recognize a grittier, adult version of Patsy by the name of Trish Walker.)

Other Mensans might understand my particular interest in *Patsy Walker* #42 (published September 1952, just a few years after Mensa International formed). In that issue, Centerville High School administered IQ tests to the student body. When the results came in, school officials proudly announced that one of the students was a genius with an IQ of 160. That student was Patsy Walker!

After a teacher remarked that Patsy had always been an average student, the school principal concluded that Patsy had probably just been bored with her classes. The principal then informed Patsy that she mustn't fritter away her time on childish activities; people with her intelligence had a mission in life to work for the good of humanity. To put Patsy's mind to better use, the principal assigned her a large stack of books on advanced subjects. The demanding coursework went well over Patsy's head and left her with no time to socialize.

In a dramatic twist of fate, Patsy's friend and classmate Nan effortlessly solved a math problem that had left Patsy stumped. In response, school officials rechecked the IQ tests and discovered that a mixup had occurred: Nan was in fact the genius! Patsy was more than happy to return to her previous life as a typical teenager. Meanwhile, the principal gave Nan an earful about her intellectual obligation to the world, along with a predictably intimidating reading load.

The message of the story was disheartening, depicting high intelligence as a burden rather than a blessing. Although the comic book did not mention Mensa, the principal (or more specifically, the comic's author) espoused the organization's goal to identify and foster human intelligence. Yet the story seemed oblivious to Mensa's priority to provide intellectual *and* social activities. The result left Patsy—and then Nan—in the unenviable position of sacrificing their social lives in the pursuit of knowledge. I am very glad that my IQ score was high enough for entrance into Mensa, and I understand the importance of working for the good of others. All the same, I have learned to take no shame in spending my leisure time reading comic books intended for a young audience several decades ago.

Board Meeting – Jan. 2, 2024

Kevin Borchers, Acting Recording Secretary

Call to Order: LocSec Kevin Borchers called the unofficial meeting to order at 7:04 p.m.

Attendees: Kevin Borchers, Bill Conlan, Michelle Peterick.

Board Officer Reports

- Local Secretary: Membership was 868 as of Jan. 2.
- First Vice Secretary:
 - ◆ People Team: Met on Nov. 20.
 - ◆ Reviewed Volunteer Support role description.
 - ◆ Discussed logistics of supporting volunteer recognition.
 - ◆ Next meeting to be scheduled.
- Second Vice Secretary
 - ◆ Events Team: Met on Dec. 7.
Delved into the topic responses.
Next meeting scheduled for Jan. 18.

Appointed Officer Reports

- Membership Officer [Bill C., acting MO]
 - ◆ Two new members, one move-in, and three rejoins.

Old Business

- Elections
 - ◆ MOTION 24/01-01 (KB/BC): Appoint Linda Seebach to the Nominating Committee. Passed by in-person and email vote.
 - ◆ MOTION 24/01-02 (KB/MP): Use Election Buddy for online voting for the 2024 election. Passed by in-person and email vote.

New Business

- Annual Meeting 2024
 - ◆ Discussed online and hybrid possibilities.
- Culture Quest 2024
 - ◆ Start advertising for members and team captain.
 - ◆ MOTION 24/01-03 (KB/MP): Minnesota Mensa will cover the \$50 CultureQuest team fee. Passed by in-person and email vote.

Next Meeting: Next meeting will be online at 7 p.m. on Feb. 6.

Adjournment: LocSec Kevin Borchers adjourned the unofficial meeting at 7:39 p.m.

We send a link to the online edition of *Mensagenda* to everyone for whom we have an email address. If you aren't receiving these links, you can edit the preferences on your profile on the national website us.mensa.org to allow your email address to be shared within Mensa.

M · E · N · S · A · G · E · N · D · A

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