

SHINING OVER CALIFORNIA'S GREAT CENTRAL VALLEY SINCE 1869

# MERCED SUN-STAR

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## Chowchilla football faces familiar foe this week. INSIDE SPORTS

**LIVINGSTON:**  
Police haven't  
settled yet.  
**LOCAL, PAGE B1**

### INVESTIGATION

## 12-year-old remembers class lesson, avoids man

Mom calls cops after son says driver of black SUV called him.

By **DOANE YAWGER**  
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Four years ago, Michael Prado attended an assembly at Ada Givens Elementary School that taught him to resist unwelcome advances from strangers. The advice paid off this week as the 12-year-old foiled an attempt to abduct him in the Fahrrens Park area.

Prado, 12, now a seventh-grader at Rivera Middle School, took part in the "Stranger Danger" program, met McGruff the Crime Dog and saw a video warning against childhood abductions at Givens School while a third-grader.

His mother, Cherish Asher, is thankful he paid attention that day.

"I fear for those children every day. I'm so scared for them. I hope to God these kids are either smart or lucky," she said.

Prado went out to the family's garbage can Sunday about 7:30 p.m. to empty a vacuum container when he heard a man in a black sport utility vehicle beckon him to his car to help look for his lost dog. The boy froze for a moment, remembered what to do, then walked fast to his front door as the man screamed, "Get back here."

"I'm not sure whether to be angry or scared. It was so unbelievable. I'm so proud of my son for doing the right thing. With no adults you can't even be in your front yard. They need to catch that person," Asher said.

Lt. Andre Matthews of the Merced Police Department is in charge of the police-school partnership program and intends to bring McGruff and his safety message back to local students. Ada Givens School Principal Connie Hadley remembers that assembly four years ago and would like to revive those safety programs.

SEE INVESTIGATION, PAGE A6

## Would death be a blessing? Autistic 4-year-old in coma with an infected brain after mom accused of beating, burning and biting him

# Mother may face murder charge if son dies in hospital



Martha Franco, 42, left, is responsible for her 4-year-old child's injuries, according to the Merced County Sheriff's Department. Her husband, Jose Franco, 39, below, is facing charges for failing to intervene.



By **CORINNE REILLY**  
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**A** 4-year-old boy hospitalized in May after his mother allegedly beat him into a coma has developed a serious brain infection.

Even before the infection, doctors said they held little hope for the boy's survival. Now, authorities concede, his death appears all but certain. "To be honest, we're really surprised he's held on this long," said sheriff's spokesman Paul Barile.

The boy, whose name has not been released because he's a minor, also suffers from severe autism. He was admitted to Children's Hospital Central

California in Madera in May, where he remains connected to a ventilator. Sheriff's department officials say his mother, 42-year-old Martha Franco of South Dos Palos, is responsible for his injuries.

Frano was arrested on May 22 at her home on the 21000 block of Squire Avenue after she called 911, claiming her son was unresponsive. Later that week, she pleaded not guilty to charges of aggravated mayhem, child endangerment and bodily injury to a child.

If the boy dies, a homicide charge could be added to that list.

SEE CHILD ABUSE, BACK PAGE

### ILLEGAL DRUGS

# Area meth busts way down, but still high

Labs move to Mexico after new law, more local enforcement.

By **VICTOR A. PATTON**  
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Methamphetamine production is way down in Merced County, but the county still claims the dubious honor of being No. 1 for meth production in the Central Valley.

The figures from Merced County sheriff's investigators dovetail with the one-year anniversary of the Combat Methamphetamine Epidemic Act, a federal law authored by Sen. Dianne Feinstein that placed controls on the sale of medications that contain chemicals like ephedrine or pseudoephedrine — key ingredients in the production of meth.

So far, in 2007 Merced County law enforcement agencies have investigated 40 meth lab-related incidents — incidents where investigators have busted a lab, seized chemicals used to make the drug or discovered a meth dump site, according to Deputy Paul Barile.

That's a vast improvement over 2003, considered a peak year for meth in the county, when investigators recorded 211 lab-related incidents. "There was a time in this county when you could throw a stick in the air and it would hit a meth lab," remarked Barile.

Despite the decline, of the 128 meth lab-related incidents that have been recorded from Sacramento to Bakersfield this year, Merced County still ranks No. 1. "It's a mixed signal for

### 2007 meth lab-related incidents in the Central Valley

Merced County — 40  
Fresno County — 25  
Stanislaus County — 21  
Madera County — 13

### 2007 meth cleanup costs in the Valley

Merced County — \$86,000  
Fresno County — \$45,000  
Stanislaus Cty. — \$42,000  
Madera County — \$28,000

me," admitted Sheriff Mark Pazin. "If you look at the big picture, we're still higher than our counterparts in the Central Valley."

Fresno County came in second with 25 meth lab-related incidents this year. Stanislaus County recorded 21, Madera County 13. Los Angeles County, in comparison, has recorded 29 meth lab-related incidents this year, Barile said.

Many of those cases in those counties involved meth "super labs," where at least 10 pounds of meth were produced.

While sheriff investigators credit Feinstein's law as one of the reasons why less meth is brewing in the county, Barile said a concerted emphasis by

SEE METH, BACK PAGE

## QuickTake

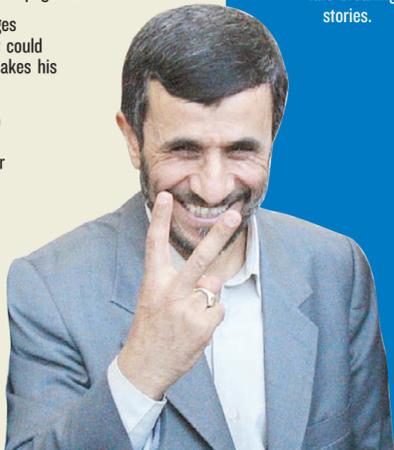
News outside Merced County

**WAR IN IRAQ:** The Senate failed to scrape together enough votes to guarantee troops more time at home, frustrating Democratic efforts to challenge President Bush's Iraq policies. See page A3

**SIMPSON FREED:** After arraignment on charges including kidnapping and armed robbery that could put him behind bars for life, O.J. Simpson makes his \$125,000 bail. See page A3

**SPY LAW:** President Bush wants Congress to expand and make permanent a law that temporarily gives the government more power to eavesdrop without warrants on suspected foreign terrorists. See page A4

**GROUND ZERO:** Iran's president, pictured, is being denied permission to place a wreath at the World Trade Center site when he's in New York City next week to address the United Nations. See page A5



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## PRESCHOOLERS LEARN NEED TO READ

By **ABBY SOUZA**  
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In preschool, it's easy to pick out the kids who've never had a book read to them.

"They have a hard time paying attention — they don't focus on the pages," explained Linda Kaercher, the director of Merced County Head Start, a child development program for preschool children from income-eligible families and children with special needs.

But by the time most kids leave the preschool program, Kaercher said, "they love reading."

Literacy is an integral part of the curriculum for many preschool programs in Merced County. That is especially true in September, National Literacy Month. While the month focus-



SUN-STAR PHOTO BY JACK BLAND

Jackie Gonzales, a teacher at Arwater Castle Head Start, reads "The Way I Feel" by Janan Cain to her class on Tuesday in honor of National Literacy Month.

es on all ages of literacy development, research shows that what children learn about reading before starting school can affect

SEE LITERACY, BACK PAGE

### WEATHER

Chance of rain today and tonight. High of 66, low of 51.

### CONTACT US

Have news for us? Contact the Sun-Star newsroom at 385-2457 to leave a tip or story idea.

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### COMING TOMORROW

Merced took out Sonora to highlight last week's prep football action. This week, Sonora's back in Merced to take on Golden Valley.

