

Obama madness

Security is tight, and the streets are blocked as the US president visits Brussels and Flanders ▶ 4



Growers feel pinch

A Russian sanction against EU trade would cripple Haspengouw's fruit market ▶ 6

Seeking World Heritage status

The government of Flanders will submit a short list of 18 First World War sites to Unesco ▶ 11



© Filip Claus

You are not alone

A Flemish volunteer group supports people with conditions such as bipolar disorder

Martin Banks

Two years after attempting suicide, Geert Maddens of Roeselare has come out the other side and is helping others with bipolar disorder through his involvement with Ups & Downs, a support group set up and run entirely by volunteers. He and the group's vice president told their stories to *Flanders Today*.

Two years ago, Geert Maddens tried to kill himself. A lifetime of suffering manic depression had finally taken its toll, and, as a result, he found himself in a hospital emergency ward. After a course of electroconvulsive treatment, medication

and intensive therapy sessions, Maddens was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. He soon discovered Ups & Downs, a Flemish support group for people with his condition. Maddens, who lives in Roeselare, West Flanders, says the support he's received from the group's counselling sessions has helped to stabilise and motivate him. "At the first few sessions, I was a bit anxious," the 57-year-old says. "But I soon found myself looking forward to the meetings because they put you in contact with fellow patients and allow you to talk about your mental health problems. It felt like coming home." His condition has stabilised sufficiently for him to help launch a new group in his area, which will begin in May. His

goal now is to help and support fellow patients as a volunteer. Ups & Downs was founded 15 years ago by a group of people with bipolar disorder. They were, and still are, all volunteers. There is now an active group of about 20 people who run monthly meetings for fellow patients and their families in eight cities in Flanders: Aalst, Antwerp, Bruges, Ghent, Roeselare, Hasselt, Leuven and Mechelen. The group's vice-president, Patrick Colemont (*pictured above*), explains that, apart from its primary focus of monthly meetings for patients and their loved ones, Ups & Downs gives a voice to those with bipolar disorder by contributing to working groups that advise policymakers and by working with mental health organisations in Flanders.

Two die in munitions explosion

A shell from the First World War kills two workers on a construction site in Ypres

Alan Hope

Two workers were killed in an accident in Ypres, West Flanders, last week when a shell dating back to the First World War exploded. Two other men were injured in the blast, one of them seriously. The shell had been uncovered days before during building works. When the workers tried to remove it from the ground, it exploded. One man was killed instantly; the other died later in hospital. Police and fire services closed off the site, and the army's bomb disposal unit Dovo attended the scene. They removed a second missile and carried out a sweep of the area for further munitions, but nothing was found. It is not yet clear why the workers

tried to remove the shell themselves instead of calling in the local police. Dovo handles some 10 tonnes of "problem munitions" in the Westhoek every year. In recent weeks, it has had to deal with a massive cache of bombs and shells collected and stockpiled by three farmers in the area, as well as removing more than 770 shells – with more to come – that turned up when a farmer in Passendale ploughed a pasture for the first time. There is a fund for compensation of civilian victims of First World War munitions, but the prosecutor's office in Ypres said that none of the victims of the explosion qualifies, as they are not of Belgian nationality. One of the men who died is of



Turkish origin, and the other is a Bulgarian national not registered in Belgium. The two injured workers also have Turkish nationality.

Hundreds of people in Belgium have died as a result of unexploded munitions since the end of the Great War in 1918. Since the accident in Ypres, calls to Dovo in the area have gone up to 150 a day compared to 15 a day normally. The accident has prompted people who had previously found unexploded munitions but didn't alert the authorities. Dovo stressed that it only turns out at the request of local police, who should be the public's first point of contact. Meanwhile in Antwerp last week, an unexploded shell found in an empty apartment building on Italiëlei in the city centre was disposed of safely after 150 homes in the surrounding area were evacuated.

Flanders and the Netherlands guests of honour at Frankfurt Book Fair

Flanders and the Netherlands will share the title of guest of honour at the 2016 Frankfurt Book Fair, the largest book fair in Europe, Flemish culture minister Joke Schauvliege announced last week. The Dutch and Flemish have been working on a co-operation at the fair for some years. The trade fair attracts about 7,000 publishers and multimedia companies from nearly 100 countries, which negotiate international publishing rights and fees. The two days that are open to the public attract more than 100,000 visitors. Flanders and the Netherlands were also guest countries in 1993. The guest country has the advantage of its own pavilion at the event, where it can present its literature but also promote itself in a variety of ways, including as a tourist destination. The joint Flemish-Dutch



contribution will involve not only books but theatre, dance and music. The joint budget for the event is €6 million, including €2.4 million each from the Dutch and Flemish governments, with the rest coming from private sources. AH

Brugge hit form in time for play-offs

Club Brugge have quickened their pace just in time for the Belgian Football League's play-offs, as they aim to end a nine-year title drought. Brugge, who kick off their 10-match play-off schedule against Lokeren on Friday, start two points behind leaders Standard Liège in the six-club table, but Brugge are many pundits' favourite to lift the title in May. The other teams in the top tier, the Play-offs 1, are current champions Anderlecht, Lokeren, Zulte Waregem and Genk. The play-offs are the season finale: After the regular 16-club First Division finished on 16 March, the league was split into three groups to determine the final positions. The top six sides all play each other again twice to decide which teams qualify for Europe, with the top-ranked regular season teams starting with point

advantages. Below the top six, the next eight clubs play off for the chance of taking the final Europa League place, while the bottom two – OH Leuven and RAEC Mons – play each other five times to see who will be relegated. Meanwhile, Lokeren won their second Belgian Cup in three years with a 1-0 defeat of Zulte Waregem courtesy of a goal from Danish defender Alexander Scholz. Luck ran against Zulte Waregem, which twice hit the woodwork in the first half. Both sides are already in the First Division's Group 1 play-offs, and Lokeren's cup victory has already secured them a Europa League play-off place. Leo Cendrowicz

Kempens Landschap wins Europa Nostra prize for cultural heritage

Heritage projects in Antwerp, Ghent and Brussels have won cultural heritage prizes from Europa Nostra, a European network of 250 heritage associations and foundations. Kempens Landschap, based in Putte, Antwerp province, received the prize for Dedicated Service. The landscape association was founded in 1997 and now manages 800 hectares of historically valuable land in the Kempen, a large natural area in Antwerp and Limburg provinces. Most of the land in question is co-owned and managed by Kempens Landschap in order to conserve cultural and natural heritage and to ensure public access to the space. Their starting point was the land used

for charity colonies, where poor families and vagrants were provided with housing and jobs. The area also contains churches, fortifications and agricultural heritage in the form of mills and farms. "Kempens Landschap has a unique approach to conserving and managing a variety of built and natural heritage sites, located across most of the 70 municipalities of Antwerp province," the prize jury said. Europa Nostra also gave an award for conservation to the Horta Museum in the Brussels district of Sint-Gillis, which occupies the former home of the architect and designer. Horta built the house between 1898 and 1901 in the Art Nouveau style and



lived and worked there for 20 years. The most recent conservation work has returned the site to the state it was in while Horta was in

residence. Finally, a prize for education, training and raising awareness went to Shaping 24: Promoting Heritage in Norwich and Ghent, through which the two cities have "twinning" a series of heritage sites, with special promotions and events as well as educational projects. "We were impressed with the degree of imagination shown in this co-operative programme: educational projects, the use of digital applications and the organisation of matching public events," said the jury. Europa Nostra awarded 27 prizes to projects across Europe. Six of these will later be designated Grand Prix and pick up a prize of €10,000 each. AH

THE WEEK IN FIGURES

€1.5 million

cost of traffic chaos caused last week when a lorry lost a load of 21 tonnes of Finnish plaice on the Brussels Ring near Zaventem. It took five hours for the road to be cleared

4 mm

size of a pearl found in an oyster by a fish trader in Ostend. Although pearls grow naturally in oysters, the chances of finding one are about 15,000 to one

800

football fields' worth of public space made available to Antwerp under a plan proposed by university professors to cover the Antwerp Ring entirely. The cost of the project would be €2 billion

598

complaints received in 2013 by the ombudsman of the Brussels public transport authority MIVB, more than half concerning fines for travelling without a ticket

80%

score of satisfaction with Ostend Airport, according to a survey carried out across Europe. Brussels Airport scored 74%

WEEK IN BRIEF

Brussels University College (HUB) has launched an **international Bachelor’s degree in nursing**, with a multilingual programme, in response to the international demand for nurses who speak several languages. Classes take place in Dutch, French and English.

Theme park Bobbejaanland in Lichtaart, Antwerp province, has obtained the **rights to use Smurf costume characters** under an exclusive agreement signed last week with the company, owned by the daughter of Smurfs creator Peyo. The blue characters will be present every day for meet & greet activities in the coming season, as well as interactive shows and photo sessions with fans.

Nearly one in three companies based in Brussels are **considering a move to Flanders, Wallonia or another country**, according to a survey carried out by Beci, which represents 35,000 businesses in the capital. Among the reasons given are the level of local taxes, which are 28-38% higher than in neighbouring provinces. Beci called for more government investment in sectors where Brussels is strong: ICT, creative industries and tourism.

Three years after the introduction of the **alcohol lock**, which immobilises a vehicle if the driver’s breath sample exceeds the legal limit, only two have been fitted in the entire country, federal transport minister Melchior Wathelet said. Cost is the main factor: the apparatus costs €2,500 for two years, or €120 a month to rent, and magistrates are reluctant to order the device to be fitted. Seven drivers are currently waiting to have the locks fitted.

The Flemish bee keepers’ union has issued a plea to **farmers not to use chemical herbicides**, mainly the notorious Roundup, on yellow mustard plants, which are currently blooming in profusion following the mild winter. The blossoming plant is

a major attraction for bees. Farmers plough the plant under, as it is a natural fertiliser, but first prefer to reduce its size using Roundup.

Kontich resident Rudi Janssen who was injured while on holiday in Sharm-el-Sheikh, Egypt, was **refused permission to be airlifted to hospital** in Belgium because, his insurance company said, he had travelled despite advice from the foreign affairs ministry not to travel to the resort. He had, however, flown to Egypt on the morning of 28 February, arriving hours before the advice was issued. Janssen eventually made his own way home, and the case is being investigated by the insurer.

Every student accommodation must be **fitted with a smoke alarm** from the start of the new academic year, under a proposal approved by the Flemish Parliament’s housing committee last week. The proposal follows the death of two Irish exchange students in Leuven last month when a fire broke out in their student home. The bill’s proponent, Katrien Schryvers, called on the government of Flanders to ensure the registration of all student accommodation.

Visitors to the Flemish Opera’s performance of Dmitri Shostakovich’s *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* will be issued **ear plugs to protect them from sound levels** of more than 100 decibels, the opera announced. The opera includes the full orchestra plus an ensemble of 14 brass instruments positioned close to the audience. The opera is being revived in its original version as performed prior to being censored by Stalin in 1934.

Researchers at the University College of Leuven have found that a varied offer of **more physically active play** improves toddlers’ capability to deal with risk. Their study showed that children enjoyed these games and that teachers rarely had to intervene.

According to the researchers, children are generally too protected at school.

Medialaan, the company that owns TV stations VTM and 2BE as well as other media, has reached an agreement with telecommunications company Telenet to link **Medialaan channels to the Telenet service Yelo TV**, which allows viewers to watch programmes on a computer, tablet or smartphone. The Yelo service has about 400,000 users in Flanders. The new channels should be available before the summer.

The federal government has postponed a decision on the proposal to allow **prices in shops to be rounded off** to the nearest five cents, in preparation for the eventual scrapping of one- and two-cent coins. The plan has received positive reports from the National Bank, the European Central Bank and the Council of State. More than 90% of Belgians would like to see the end of the one-cent coin, and 83% of the two-cent coin. National Bank research suggests price increases will not be a result, said Unizo, which represents small-business owners and called the postponement “incomprehensible”.

IDBus, the subsidiary of the French railway company SNCF, which operates coaches from Brussels to Lille and Paris, has added **Amsterdam and London to its list of destinations**. The Amsterdam trip costs €19 to €39 return, and London €35 to €55 return.

Former KBC executive Remi Vermeiren, one of the founders of the Warandemanifest, which nine years ago advocated the independence of Flanders from Belgium, has published a book on the subject. *Belgie: De onmogelijke opdracht* (Belgium: Mission Impossible) sets out the steps and ultimate structure for Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels **to become independent states**. Vermeiren calculated that the national debt could be split amicably between the three new states but sees Flanders taking on the lion’s share of 55%.

FACE OF FLANDERS

Alan Hope



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Jeroen De Schepper

On 5 April, Jeroen De Schepper will set off on his bike from the technical college where he works in Ghent. The next time his family, students and colleagues see him will be four months later, by which time he will have covered 10,000 kilometres.

De Schepper, 34, is riding north through Scandinavia and then west through the British Isles to raise money for Huntington’s Disease, which has ravaged his family.

Huntington’s disease is degenerative genetic disorder that results in psychiatric problems, mental decline and debilitating muscular spasms, known as chorea. The disease usually appears in adult life in people who have the disorder from birth; the child of someone who has the disease has a 50% chance of developing it. Genetic testing can identify the disorder before symptoms begin, but no cure yet exists.

De Schepper’s aunt Emma has it, as did her mother, two aunts and an uncle. Emma’s sister Bea, De Schepper’s, mother, does not have the disease, and so De Schepper is also safe. Bea is now the president of the European Huntington Federation, as well

as the full-time caregiver for her sister, Emma.

“My aunt Emma is no longer able to get out of her chair. She is chained to it,” explains De Schepper on his blog. “I am travelling for her, so she can see the far-off places she can’t experience from close by. I want to be her champion before she is no longer there. ... Through this blog and the pictures I want to offer this trip to all Huntington patients.”

Along the way, he’ll be trying to raise awareness around the disease and money for patient groups and care facilities. The action is being supported by Ghent University rector Anne De Paepe. Before being elected rector, she was head of the department of medical genetics at the university, where she was closely involved in the care of patients with the disease.

“It will take blood, sweat and blisters (on my bum), being away from everything familiar for four months,” De Schepper writes. “But I am not alone in this challenge. I am overwhelmed by the support I have received from everyone who I’ve told about the project.”

► www.crosscountry4huntington.wordpress.com

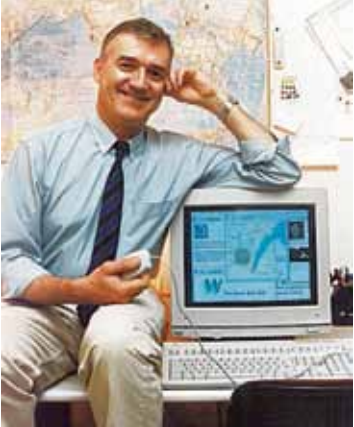
OFFSIDE

Alan Hope

The Best Belgian Inventions

Question: what do the following have in common? The Mercator projection, oil paint, the phenakistiscope, the Body Mass Index and the incandescent lamp. Answer: they were all invented or discovered by Belgians. Also, they are all on the long-list of DBBU, a Radio 1 poll to find the best Belgian invention. The list currently runs to 36 items – among them the stock exchange, the chemical known as soda, the internet, the plaster cast, the roll-on deodorant and the saxophone. Some of the claims are surprising: wasn’t it Thomas Edison who invented the incandescent lamp? Wasn’t the World Wide Web invented by Tim Berners-Lee? Well, no and sort of. Marcellin Jobard from France, naturalised when Belgium became independent,

developed such a lamp in Brussels in 1838, a full 41 years before Edison, although Edison’s version was more successful. And Berners-Lee invented the Hypertext Transfer Protocol (http) which allowed two computers to communicate effectively. Fleming Robert Cailliau worked with Berners-Lee on the same project, so he gets to share the honours. No doubts whatsoever, though, about Adolphe Sax inventing the saxophone. The saxophone came along in 1840, and it’s fair to say it changed music forever, whether your passion is marching bands, Charlie Parker or the bit at the beginning of Gerry Rafferty’s “Baker Street”. This year marks the bicentenary of Sax’s birth, and there’s an exhibition taking place at the Musical Instruments Museum in Brussels all year long.



© courtesy CERW

Co-inventor of the internet Robert Cailliau

The public are invited to add to the Radio 1 long-list, from which five leading contenders will be selected on 31 March. You then get the chance to vote, and the Best Belgian Invention will be announced on 4 April.

► www.tinyurl.com/radio1inventions

FLANDERS TODAY



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What's in a name?

Parliament is sometimes called a "voting machine". This less-than-polite term stems from majority MPs simply sanctioning anything the government has decided. However, with some issues, parliament does have a will of its own and manages to create laws by itself – the way it was designed to.

In family law for instance, parliament has often taken up this role. For more than a decade, it has tasked itself with modernising a set of laws dating back to Napoleon, including inheritance and custody matters. The federal parliament was also crucial in legalising same-sex marriage and adoption.

In a recent family law matter, though, the Chamber of Representatives has behaved rather childish. The issue is the awarding of a surname. For years, it has been widely believed that children automatically receiving their father's last name is outdated. Mothers, too, should have a chance to pass on their family name.

Despite a consensus, the issue has dragged on for years, until federal justice minister Annemie Turtelboom (Open VLD) recently came up with a proposal. After parliament made some adjustments to it, the result was total freedom for parents: They could choose the mother's name, the father's name or a combination of both. Soon enough, public opinion was shocked at this radical change. CD&V also began to doubt the measure and seemed to withdraw its support (which in fact was not needed, as opposition parties also supported the proposal). Turtelboom attempted to get them back on board with an amendment, which stated that the father's name should be used in case of a disagreement between the parents.

Exactly what CD&V's reaction to this would have been is hard to say, as the proposal and amendment were put to a vote during the five minutes that Raf Terwingen, CD&V's group leader, left to phone his party president about the matter. Needless to say, the incident last week has led to negative feelings between CD&V and Open VLD. CD&V is indignant about its colleagues' disloyal behaviour, while Open VLD states that the Christian-democrats started it by breaking their own word.

Either way, the proposal passed the House and probably will soon do the same in the Senate. Still, there are no winners. The most repeated comments run along the lines of: "In an economic crisis, is this what should be occupying our leaders?"

€2 million for city projects

Projects and campaigns to improve tourism and restaurant industries

Alan Hope

Flemish minister-president Kris Peeters has announced funding of €2 million for 10 projects involving tourism, food and drinks service and marketing in municipalities across Flanders.

The funding is part of the government's Enterprise-Friendly Municipality Action Plan for the promotion of policies favourable to business and economic growth. Because of the importance of tourism, the list of projects was drawn up with the cooperation of tourism minister Geert Bourgeois.

The list covers 42 cities and villages across Flanders and includes projects by Horeca Vlaanderen, which represents restaurants and cafés. The organisation is creating a guide for municipalities on best practice



in policy for the "horeca" (hotels, restaurants and catering) sector. Horeca Vlaanderen is also behind a system of using "mystery guests" in restaurants and other horeca establishments to ensure a high standard of service in busy tourist areas.

Another subsidised project is the Leuven Health Metropolis to better market the large number of companies in the Leuven area working in the life sciences. The marketing plan is meant to raise global awareness of the Leuven health cluster.

Other projects include taxi tours in the Flemish Ardennes; city branding in Aalst, Tienen and Kortrijk; innovation coaching in the horeca sector in Turnhout; improving links between tourist offices and local businesses in Sint-Truiden and the surrounding area; green tourism in the "blind spot" between Lier, Mechelen and Antwerp; and heritage tourism in the Westhoek of West Flanders.

One of the biggest and the most expensive projects is a planned workshop space in Mechelen's Thomas More University College to develop a more family-friendly horeca industry in the Mechelen area. The €306,800 budget is 80% is subsidised by the Municipality Action Plan.

US president Barack Obama in Belgium this week

As *Flanders Today* went to press, US president Barack Obama was due to arrive in Brussels on Tuesday evening for an official visit that will take in both the European institutions and the US military cemetery in Waregem, West Flanders, on Wednesday. Obama was due to meet European Commission president José Manuel Barroso, European Council president Herman Van Rompuy and Belgium's prime minister Elio Di Rupo, as well as hold a press conference at Bozar.

The US president will first travel by helicopter to Wevelgem, West Flanders, from where he will be driven in a convoy to the cemetery in Waregem. The site is the smallest of eight First World War US military cemeteries in Europe, with 368 graves. The organisers of the cycle race Dwars door Vlaanderen, which also takes place on



Wednesday, have been busy altering the course of the 69th edition, which trails through West and East Flanders, to avoid passing the cemetery, in accordance with security measures.

This visit will be the first time that Obama has come to Belgium since he was first elected in 2009 and has called for a number of exceptional security measures. Police advised anyone travelling to or from the airport on Tuesday or Wednesday to use public transport. Wednesday will also see large parts of the areas around the Justus Lipsius, Bozar and Hotel Bloom blocked to traffic. Drivers were also advised to avoid the E17 between Wevelgem and Waregem on Wednesday morning.

Before coming to Belgium, Obama will attend a summit on nuclear safety in the Hague. After Brussels, the President flies to Rome, where he will meet the Pope. China's president, Xi Jinping, is due to visit Brussels on 31 March to hold meetings with European leaders Van Rompuy and Barroso.

Derek Blyth

New measures to improve rental housing market

Flanders' housing minister Freya Van den Bossche has announced new measures aimed at helping renters find affordable accommodation. Based on the first results of the Groot Woononderzoek, or Housing Survey, the government, said Van den Bossche, has to do more to assist people in the rental sector. As a first step, a new regulation from 1 July will allow low-income families to pay the two-month deposit in instalments.

Two-thirds of those questioned in the 2013 Housing Survey said that they had difficulties when it came to paying the deposit. "People have to pay two months' rent on top of the first month,"

said Van den Bossche. "For many, that's too much all at once."

The new regulation establishes a central deposit fund, which will accept renters' deposits in instalments and pay landlords if the property is damaged in the meantime.

The survey also showed that rents have risen in Flanders in recent years, from an average of €512 per month in 2005 (at the time of the last Housing Survey) to €581 in 2013. The number of families that experience difficulties paying the monthly rent has gone up from 9.7% in 2005 to 11.3% in 2013.

Van den Bossche is also looking at new ways to improve the supply of rental housing. One proposal is to introduce a tax incentive for landlords who rent out decent accommodation at an affordable rate. Van den Bossche also wants to encourage people to rent out properties by shifting the tax break from second homes to places that are rented.

There are also problems in the rental market based on landlords' attitudes to foreigners, with 27% stating that they would not rent their property to a foreigner, while a further 21% said it was "not ideal, but they would do it". **DB**

Polling stations to stay open later on 25 May for triple election

With just two months to go until the elections in Belgium, federal interior minister Joëlle Milquet has announced that polling booths will stay open an hour later to avoid long queues. Polling stations equipped with electronic voting machines will remain open on 25 May until 16.00 rather than 15.00, though stations where voters mark ballot papers with a pencil will close at 14.00.

Milquet decided to add an extra hour because most voters will be choosing candidates in three separate elections – federal, regional and European. "By spreading people out more," she explained, "we can avoid needless queuing and ensure that everything goes smoothly."

Meanwhile, the order that parties appear on the voting lists has been finalised following a draw in the interior ministry last Friday. The French liberal party MR was picked to appear as party number one, followed by the Flemish green party Groen and the far-right Flemish nationalists Vlaams Belang. The unpopular last place went to the Flemish Christian-democrat party CD&V. Chair Wouter Beke was quick to respond with a joke: "The last shall be first." **DB**

Record numbers apply for federal government jobs

A record number of people applied for posts at the federal government last year, according to figures released last week. A total of 172,420 people applied to work for the Belgian government, or 60,000 more than the previous year. The majority of candidates were under 35 years old.

The number of applications has been steadily rising in recent years, from 87,000 in 2011 to 110,200 the following year. The federal government recruited 2,768 new staff last year, an



increase of 198 on 2012. Yet the total number employed by the federal government fell as a result of cuts in government staff levels from 70,573 in 2012 to 69,359 last year. **DB**

You are not alone

Group seeks to end taboo surrounding mental health issues in Flanders

► continued from page 1

Ups & Downs has an ambassador in Flemish stage and TV actor Maaïke Cafmeyer, who speaks out on behalf of people with mental health conditions. Having admitted to dealing with “mood swings” in her life, she participates in the group’s annual forum and helps raise awareness.

Last year, Brussels budget and finance minister Guy Vanhengel told the group’s forum that some years ago he had suffered from depression. But even in the tough world of politics, he was able to recover and become, says Colemont, an example of “how dealing with depression is not the end of a career”.

Many doctors see the group as a useful addition to their own therapy and, in some cases, refer patients to its sessions. Colemont: “We receive limited subsidies from the Flemish government, some sponsorship from pharmaceutical companies and a contribution from the Lions service club, and we generate some income from membership fees, which are €12 a year.” This allows the group to organise an annual conference, a quarterly journal, publications and support for regional groups.

Colemont, who lives in Hasselt, also has bipolar disorder and believes his story provides an insight into the impact such conditions can have. “Back in 1992, I was 31, living in a nice house in the Netherlands, happily married and working as an innovation consultant in a job that gave me great satisfaction. It was a comfortable life, and the future looked bright and promising.”

Then, he continues “a series of challenging events disrupted my harmonious life. My marriage went wrong, and I decided to return to Belgium, where I started my own independent consulting firm.

My father died in an accident, which meant I had to get involved in the family business while I had just accepted a part-time position as director of a European association. To make things even more complicated, I started a long-distance relationship with a French colleague – who eventually became my second wife and mother of my two children.”

He says that each of these factors “built up stress in my mind and body, to a point that I mentally crashed. I was totally exhausted and was diagnosed with a burnout.”

Colemont describes the experience as being “like a major earthquake that shifted the foundation of my physical and mental being.” He recovered from that depression but says that it “triggered a mental illness from which I suffer until this day: bipolar disorder, commonly known as manic depression.”

Bipolar is so named because sufferers function between two “poles”. On one end of the spectrum, explains Colemont, “there is the manic state or, in my case, the milder hypo-manic state, characterised by euphoria and excessive self-esteem.” On the other



Ups & Downs offers support and guidance to those with bipolar disorder and other kinds of depression

happy to feeling deep sadness”. But he believes this definition is too limited. “It is not only your mood that is disrupted, it is your

on every aspect of your life: relationships, health, finances, social life and certainly your work.” In terms of his professional life, work came and went, depending on his system. “With my consulting work, I attracted projects like a magnet when I was in an ‘up’ stage. I had the feeling I was on top of the world, and I could turn every challenge into an opportunity. Those manic periods would last for four to six weeks and consume a lot of energy.”

But after every “peak”, “a down period would follow, which could last from three to six months. During this time, I would neglect any initiative, lose faith in myself and see a major obstacle in every minor problem. My self-esteem was very low, and I even suffered from suicidal thoughts. Rather than being self-employed, I found myself in a recurring status of being ‘self-unemployed’.”

He was able to change jobs, but the disorder continued to cause highs and lows. “I had times when I could do the work of three people,” he says, “followed by a period where I wasn’t worth even one-third of my capacities. Such changes in performance are hardly acceptable for an employer, even if he is aware of your mental condition. So after I suffered a depression that kept me home for four weeks, I was sacked. It hit me hard and I realised I had a work disability. I was not sitting in a wheelchair, but I had a wheelchair between my ears”.

Because the disorder is largely invisible, Colemont says it is also largely unrecognised. “It is hard to explain to others, even if one dares to talk about it. So it leads to taboo.” The group has called for a national campaign to raise awareness of mental disorders, with the aim of fighting this stigma. As Colemont points out, although recent figures

show that 1.3 million people suffer from depression in Belgium, it remains difficult to talk about it.

“Even if one in four people suffer from a mental problem in their lives, it is still a taboo to talk about it publicly. Imagine what would happen if they could raise their voices to get respect and earn recognition for their condition. It would help them to live with depression in a less isolated way and would make society more open to dealing with mental health problems in general.”

He cites a personal example of how people deal differently with physical and mental problems. “Some years ago, I had a problem with my knee. Almost immediately, I got a friendly phone call from my boss, received get well cards, flowers and fruit baskets, and I was warmly welcomed back at work after I recovered. When I suffered from depression, the worried phone call went to my wife, there were no cards, flowers or chocolates, and my colleagues didn’t know how to react when I rejoined the workforce.”

Ups & Downs is also campaigning to allow people who are out of work to do voluntary work, without any limitations. In the Belgian system, someone who receives a substitute income because of a handicap is not allowed to do volunteer work unless it is approved by a doctor.

“This creates an unnecessary roadblock in allowing someone to feel valuable and to avoid social isolation,” explains Colemont. “What is wrong with a person with a mental disorder volunteering?” It would, he says, help both the patient and a non-profit organisation. “It would be a positive measure for both the individual and society. This should be promoted by the government rather than discouraged.”

► www.upsendowns.be

“Even though one in four people suffer from a mental problem in their lives, it is still a taboo to talk about it publicly

end is “the depressive state of total apathy and very low self-image.”

Bipolar disorder, he says, is usually defined as a mood disorder, “as if one only suffers from ‘mood swings’, from being extremely

total system of feeling, thinking and doing that is destabilised. That’s why I prefer to speak about a system disorder rather than a mood disorder.

“The disability has an impact



A suicide attempt eventually got Geert Maddens a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, which led him to the support group Ups & Downs

WEEK IN
BUSINESS**Aircraft**► **Sabena technics**

The Zaventem-based subsidiary of the French TAT aircraft maintenance group has sold its US Barfield affiliate, with operations in Miami, Phoenix and Louisville, to Air France-KLM.

Economy ► **Amcham**

The American Chamber of Commerce in Belgium released its annual "Priorities for a prosperous Belgium" report last week, which asks authorities for immediate action on reducing labour costs, lowering corporate taxation and encouraging R&D and innovation. The report also points out the cost of energy, problems with mobility and the skills gap as issues that need to be addressed urgently.

Electronics ► **Barco**

The Kortrijk-based producer of video and viewing equipment has bought the Canadian X20 Media company for €13.5 million.

Finance ► **US debt**

Belgium has become the world's third largest foreign holder of US debt after China and Japan, with \$310 billion (€225 billion) worth of securities, according to the US Treasury Department. However, while much of the purchase is handled by the Brussels-based financial services group Euroclear, it is difficult to know who the end-owners of the debt are.

Fitness ► **Aspria**

The London-based leisure and fitness group has plans to invest €25 million in a fourth facility on the site of the Solvay sports club in Brussels. The new outlet, expected to open in early 2016, will include several swimming pools and a 49-room hotel.

Retail ► **Veritas**

The Veritas chain of shops specialising in sewing and knitting supplies, founded in Antwerp some 120 years ago, is seeking to open its capital to outside investors to finance its expansion abroad. The company, which operates 117 stores in Belgium and Luxemburg and plans to open seven more this year, is controlled by seven families and employs 800 people.

Transport ► **Van Hool**

The bus and coach manufacturer in Lier has signed a contract to supply 12 hybrid "tram-bus" vehicles to the French island of Martinique and two to the Norwegian city of Bergen for delivery next year. The company is currently shipping 15 buses to the public transport authority of Malmö, Sweden.

Russia-Ukraine crisis threatens
Flemish fruit growers

Sanctions imposed by Russia could be a disaster for farmers in Flanders

Alan Hope

The current crisis involving Russia and Ukraine is having a negative effect on the fruit growers of Flanders. They are facing two problems: the fall in value of the rouble is making Flemish fruit more expensive for Russian customers, and the possibility of sanctions from one side or the other, such as a trading ban, is hanging over the heads of growers. Flanders sells, for instance, 60% of its entire pear crop to Russia. The crisis has already led to a Russian embargo on EU pigmeat, with severe effects for Flemish pig farmers. If Russia goes further and bans all agricultural imports from the EU, the results would be "nothing less than a disaster," said Etienne Leclère, commercial director of the Haspengouw fruit and vegetable auction market in Sint-Truiden in Limburg. "Currently, exports



are carrying on as normal, but if economic sanctions are imposed against Russia, our fruit growers will be the victims," he said. "Our country

exports 60% of its pears to Russia. The export of apples is this year relatively low; Russia mainly buys large apples from us. We can't do without the Russian consumer. There are stocks for two months sitting in refrigeration."

In an effort to compensate for the loss of sales to the falling rouble, Leclère said, the industry is trying to increase sales to Germany and Asia and also to growing customers like Poland and Moldova. The strong euro, however, is a hindrance to export growth.

"The fruit and vegetables sector is facing a crucial few weeks," Luc Vanoirbeek of the farmers' union Boerenbond told the industry magazine *Boer & Tuinder*. "We hope that politicians keep looking for diplomatic solutions and that the threat of trade sanctions can be avoided."

Racism in Belgium's labour
market, says European network

The Belgian labour market is based on "ethnostratification", according to the European Network Against Racism (ENAR), meaning that racial and ethnic origin play a major role in determining a person's employment prospects.

The network found Belgium to be a source of "continuing inequality and an undeniable hierarchy of socio-economic positions". The least likely to benefit from employment opportunities in Europe, according to the network, are those of Maghreb origin from North Africa. In Belgium, that translates to those of Moroccan background. Black Africans are the group with the second-worst job prospects in Belgium, followed by those from Italy and Eastern Europe.

According to the report, the same hierarchy comes into play at all levels of employment, from access

to jobs up to the risk of redundancy. The ENAR report makes a number of recommendations: ethnic quotas in government jobs, based on what is called "inclusive neutrality"; positive discrimination; opening government jobs up to non-citizens, in particular from outside of Europe; and reforms to public holidays to remove religious connotations. **AH**

BNP Paribas selling customer
data "not illegal"

BNP Paribas has rewritten its customer terms and conditions to include permission for the bank to share customers' personal data with its business partners. In some cases, the bank could charge a fee for those services. The changes to the terms and conditions were made at the end of last year, financial daily *De Tijd* reported last week.

The bank has the right to sell customers' private data to other companies, according to the consumer organisation Test-Aankoop. "It is not illegal to commercialise customer details, as long as it is done according to the law," said the organisation's Jan Moers.

Because of the use of bank cards, the quantity of customer information that banks possess is substantial: workplace, salary, holiday periods and destinations and shopping habits are a few examples. The facts and figures increase if clients have taken out a mortgage or other kind of loan. This kind of information is invaluable to marketers in targeting potential customers.

According to the Privacy Commission, however, the bank must seek the permission of the customer before handing over personal data and must state clearly for whom the information is intended.

"Business partners' is rather vague," said Eva Wiertz of the Commission. "It would be advisable to say what category of business partner is concerned."

BNP Paribas responded to the reports by stating that its policies fully respected both Belgian and European laws on privacy. "We share only the customers' personal details, not their bank or payments details." **AH**

Port of Antwerp will develop
and manage Oman port

The port of Duqm in Oman will be further developed and managed for the next 28 years by a consortium established by the port of Antwerp, according to an agreement signed by the two parties last week.

Consortium Antwerp Port (CAP) was set up by Port of Antwerp International and Rent a Port, an industrial investment company specialised in maritime infrastructure and industrial zones. Its main shareholder is the Antwerp-based investment company Ackermans & van Haren.

The consortium first won a contract to manage Duqm in 2009, prior to major infrastructure works being carried out by Jan De Nul and the Greek-Turkish consortium CCC/STFA.

The new agreement extends that relationship, with the creation of the Port of Duqm Company (PDC) – a 50/50 partnership between CAP and Oman. PDC will be responsible for the further development of harbour facilities and the day-to-day management of the harbour and adjoining industrial zone. PDC will also be responsible for the training of staff at the docks, warehouses and port offices and will develop international marketing strategies to turn Duqm into one of the key petrochemical hubs in the region.

"The Omanis can count on us for the best men and women in the harbour development sector," commented Ackermans CEO Luc Bertrand. "In addition, the involvement of Antwerp companies will strengthen our reputation in the region, which could be a very promising development for trade contacts between the ports of Duqm and Antwerp." **AH**

De Slegte returns as Polare
goes out of business

The eight bookshops across Flanders that were known as De Slegte before being taken over by the Dutch chain Polare will revert back to their original name and be run by the family that founded the company.

De Slegte was founded in Rotterdam at the turn of the 20th century, grew to a chain of bookstores covering the whole of the Netherlands and first opened in Flanders in 1959 in Antwerp. Specialising in the sale of second-hand books, the company suffered from competition from the internet, finally launching its own website in 2010. The period saw closures in the Netherlands, as well as shops in Turnhout, Kortrijk and Roeselare.

De Slegte was taken over in 2012 by investment house ProCures and later made part of the Polare chain

then operating in the Netherlands. Polare was declared bankrupt last month, with the eight shops in Flanders – in Aalst, Antwerp, Bruges, Brussels, Ghent, Hasselt, Leuven and Mechelen – excluded from the bankruptcy. Polare had been cut off by the main Dutch book distributor for payment arrears and could no longer function.

Now Jan Bernard de Slegte, the great-grandson of De Slegte's founder, has re-acquired the eight stores in Flanders and intends to go forward maintaining the company's original product base: second-hand books, textbooks and cut-price editions. Most of De Slegte's stock is in Dutch, but they also have a selection of second-hand books in other languages, as well as second-hand DVDs. **AH**

Brick by brick

Hasselt-born prodigy creates low-cost Braille printer from Lego blocks

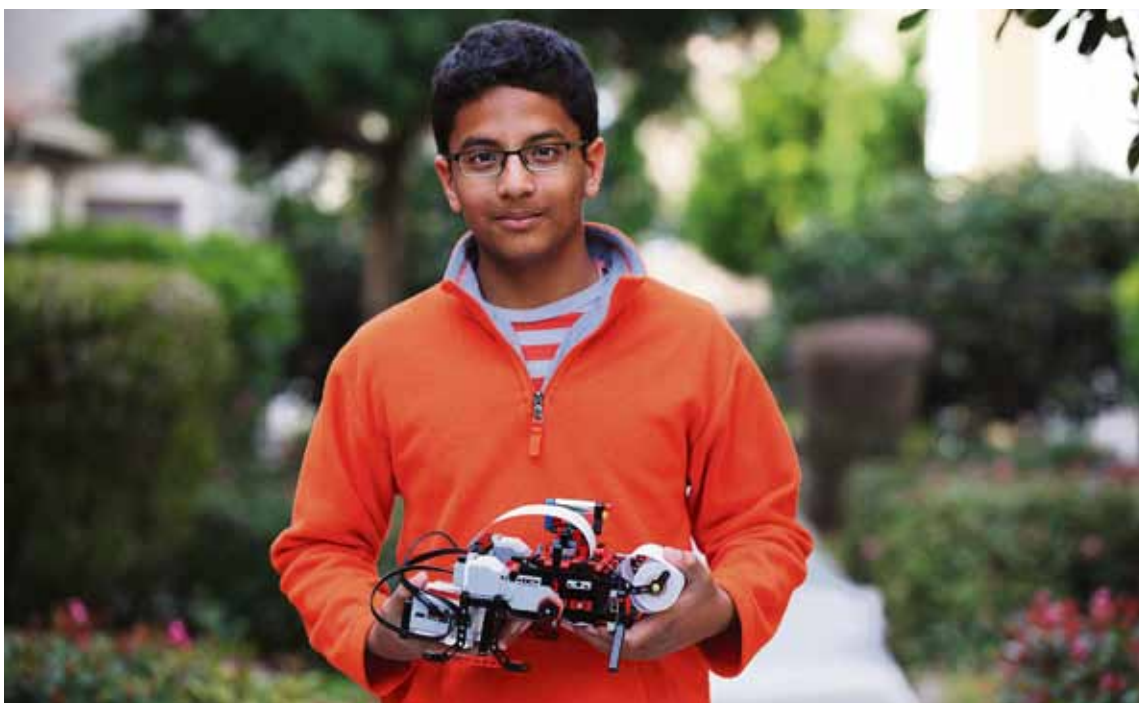
Andy Furniere

A 12-year-old boy originally from Hasselt is stunning seasoned technology experts at Silicon Valley and beyond with his low-cost Braille printer, which he built primarily with a Lego kit. Shubham Banerjee has now put step-by-step instructions online, so that anyone can build and improve the device, which he's called Braigo. Braigo began with a simple flyer that arrived months ago at the house of the Banerjee family in Santa Clara, California, asking for donations to help the visually impaired. Like many curious kids would do, 12-year-old Shubham asked his father how blind people read. Dad Niloy, who works for technology company Intel, told him to look it up online. For most kids, that's where the story would end.

But Shubham's interest grew when he learned how expensive Braille printers are. The devices, which render text as tactile Braille cells, usually cost at least €1,500.

A big fan of Lego, Shubham decided to build his own Braille printer using a Lego Mindstorms kit – which costs around €250 – and some cheap add-ons. With this basic equipment, he created a Braille printer for education, teaching and home use. The printer works using a normal drawing pin to push holes in a roll of paper, one letter at a time. Each letter takes between five and 10 seconds.

"It took me three weeks, breaking and re-assembling about seven different models, before I settled on one type and could program it," Shubham explains on his father's blog. "My dad was my guide whenever I got stuck. He sat down with me at the kitchen table and helped me while he also continued with his conference calls and work. I started working on Braigo after I finished my homework and on certain days, I was awake until 2.00. But it was worth it." Shubham's invention attracted a lot



Twelve-year-old Shubham Banerjee, born in Hasselt, with the invention that could change the lives of visually impaired people for a fraction of the usual cost

of attention at his school's science fair, but it also caught the eye of the international media – especially when he started posting YouTube videos to show how it works. All the building instructions and software are available for free at the online community page for Lego Mindstorms.

"I am just 12 years old; there are much more knowledgeable people in the world who could take this idea and enhance it," explains Shubham. "Braille as a language also has a lot of variations around the world. In any case, the benefits are for visually impaired people. That's the reason I am giving my work away to everyone who is interested."

Since then, Shubham has received testimonies from blind people, including some at the Santa Clara Valley Blind Center and Henry "Hoby" Wedler, a PhD candidate at the University of California, Davis, and a winner in 2012 of the

White House Champions of Change programme that honours everyday Americans doing extraordinary things in their communities.

In a YouTube video, Wedler tests the printer. "I am struck by the innovation of this device and your ability to so skilfully and humbly think about putting something like this together at 12 years old," he says. "It's absolutely brilliant, and I tell you with full conviction that you have a bright future."

He also offered suggestions to improve the device, which is far from finished. Shubham says he is now looking to add more complex Braille language features and test new equipment – like different print heads and thicker paper rolls. "I also want to examine whether voice-to-text features can be implemented so that Braigo can automatically print the words when someone speaks," he says.

Shubham was born in 2001 at the

Salvator Hospital in Hasselt. His parents moved from India to Hasselt the year before because Niloy had gotten a job at the local Philips factory, which closed in 2003. A year later, the family moved to the United States.

About his ambitions for a later career, Shubham is unsure, as you might expect for a 12-year-old boy. "I am only in seventh grade, and I haven't decided on a study path yet, but I'm primarily thinking of becoming an engineer, doctor or scientist. In general, I love science." Shubham's love for science was to a large extent instilled by his father and by family friends. "Since I was little, my father always encouraged me to play with toys that helped me to create stuff," says Shubham. "Additionally, all our family friends are either doctors, engineers or involved in start-up companies. They always talk about new technology."

► www.tinyurl.brailleprinter.com

WEEK IN INNOVATION

Herentals student wins Tech Olympiad

The final of the fourth edition of the Flemish Technology Olympiad for students in the third year of secondary school was won by 18-year-old Paul Van Hemeldonck from Sint-Jozef College in Herentals, Antwerp province. He was the best of the 48 finalists in carrying out four engineering assignments at the education ministry in Brussels. Education minister Pascal Smet awarded Van Hemeldonck the prize of €1,125. As very few girls take part in the competition – this year there were six – a prize is awarded to the girl who comes in first, which this year was Isa Sebrechts of Don Bosco College in the Ghent district of Zwijnaarde. **AF**

► www.technologieolympiade.be

Ghent researchers find allergy trigger

Researchers at Ghent University and life sciences research institute VIB have uncovered the mechanism behind the starting and maintaining of allergic diseases by the protein TSLP. The protein had earlier been identified as key to triggering chronic infection processes in the lungs, skin and gastrointestinal tract. Until now, it hasn't been possible to develop treatments because scientists didn't have enough knowledge of the structure of the protein and the way it interacts with receptors on the surface of cells to start diverse infection processes. The researchers will now pass on their conclusions to pharmaceutical companies for the development of more efficient treatments of different kinds of allergies. **AF**

Flemish agencies head EU waste treatment centre

The Flemish Public Waste Materials Agency (Ovam) and the Flemish Institute for Technological Research (Vito) have been selected by the EU to organise and monitor the new European Thematic Centre for Waste and Materials. Two consortia from Denmark and Italy had also applied to run the centre, which will establish a waste simulation model to help determine how much waste the EU will be faced with in the future, what can be done with it and any economic effects. "We'll be mainly concerned with the gathering and interpretation of data," said Jan Verheyen of Ovam. The centre will publish figures on major indicators, which will let member states see if their policies on the greening of their economies are working. **Alan Hope**

Q&A

Peter Lagey of the Flemish Institute for Logistics (VIL) is leading a search for the best alternative fuel for the road transport sector

What is the goal of your project Powering Logistics 2020?

By the end of 2015, we want to present the logistics sector in Flanders with a clear answer to the question of which fuel is the best alternative for diesel for different kinds of road transport – like local distribution and international transport. In another project I co-ordinated, Lean and Green, I noticed that only a small minority of Flemish companies are inclined to invest in alternative fuels such as propane, natural gas or electricity. There is too little known about the specific qualities of these fuels.

How will you map the qualities of alternative fuels?

In the first phase, we will examine



the fleet and policy of the 13 participating companies and organisations. The Flemish Institute for Technical Research will analyse how the different alternative fuels

score on criteria such as harmful emissions. Then we will develop three concrete business models, measuring the cost in comparison with vehicles running on diesel. We will take into account all aspects, like the extra distance they have to drive to reach the right fuelling infrastructure.

In the final stage, we will test the performance of one fuel in practice, taking to the roads in various circumstances, like with different loads and in different weather conditions.

What are the arguments in favour of alternative fuels?

Oil prices are going up while the transport sector faces economic challenges, and the increasing amount of fine dust in our air is posing serious health issues. The date of 2020 in the project title refers

to the important EU goals of cutting greenhouse gas emissions to 20% below 1990 levels.

Is Flanders lagging behind in using alternative fuels?

We notice that there is much more infrastructure and know-how in other Western European countries, like the UK, Germany and the Netherlands. But there are already pioneering Flemish companies, like the supermarket chain Colruyt, which is also participating in this project. The government of Flanders is helping us by funding 80% of this project through its Agency for Innovation in Science and Technology. **Interview by AF**

► www.vil.be



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Fear of failure

The stress of a passing grade sends students in search of psychological help

Andy Furniere

Recent surveys have shown that about one in 30 students in higher education in Flanders asks for the aid of their institution's psychological help services. Among the many reasons is the increasingly growing pressure to succeed academically.

International students, it seems, have a particularly high risk of psychological problems because they often feel isolated. Psychological help centres across the region are now organising training sessions to help empower students.

According to recent figures, about 4,800 of the 142,350 students at the Flemish universities and Antwerp University Colleges – that's about 3.4% – seek psychological counselling at the services centre of their institution every year. Most of the complaints concern study problems, like procrastination behaviour or failure anxiety, and personal crises such as relationship difficulties. Sometimes these problems can lead to a full-blown depression in young people.

The Psynet network, which provides guidance and therapy for the Antwerp University Association and Thomas More campus, receives the most queries: around 2,500 annually. The Psychotherapeutic Centre of the University of Leuven (KU Leuven) helps 1,668 students. Ghent University (448), the Dutch-speaking Free University of Brussels (120) and Hasselt University (30) get far fewer in comparison. These figures (from 2013) indicate a rise of 14% compared to 2012.

Professor Paul Van Royen, chair of Psynet, feels the figures are not entirely correct. "The number of students with psychological problem has remained stable," he claims. "We estimate there are about 1,700 students who need such assistance, which constitutes about 5% of our total student population."

The figures, Van Royen continues, "include students who need special facilities because of a chronic disease, for example, or autism or a



International students are particularly prone to depression because of a tendency to feel isolated

learning disorder, like dyslexia. Their numbers are rising because these disorders are increasingly discovered in secondary education." Students with dyslexia, for example, have the right to special software and get more time to complete exams.

Marleen Gheldof, psychotherapist with the Psychotherapeutic Centre at KU Leuven, says that, increasingly, students have already had psychological support before they knock on the doors of the institution's services. Normally, about one in five of the students has already had counselling, but last year that figure rose to about half. "This could indicate that the psychological problems of students have become more serious," she says.

According to Gheldof, 17% of the international student body asks for psychological help, making this a particularly vulnerable group. "Notwithstanding the existence of international student associations and buddy programmes, the students often feel isolated and lack the

personal support to fully integrate at the university," she says.

A growing problem for students, she notes, is the increasing taboo of failure, which is the cause of much of students' stress. "It's not only students who feel more anxiety about failing, but parents also have more difficulties in dealing with it," says Gheldof.

Van Royen notices that more and more students struggle to finish the last stages of their studies. "Students appear to have more difficulties accepting the end of their student life and choosing a new path," he says. "This results, among others things, in problems completing their theses." Self-management training can aid students to get over this and other hurdles.

Both the Psychotherapeutic Centre and Psynet provide training programmes, like sessions to deal with failure anxiety, increase assertiveness, avoid procrastination, improve social skills and acquire relaxation or mindfulness

techniques.

This autumn, the Psychotherapeutic Centre is introducing a new group session to sensitise students to psychological issues and encourage them to support fellow students when they notice certain symptoms. Online tests and self-help kits could also provide relief.

Van Royen points out, however, that Psynet has to refer about 9% of troubled students – 161 students in 2013 – to external therapists because their issues require more specialised treatment. To reduce the financial barrier, Psynet pays for the first five sessions, which, in any case, only cost €5 per session for students.

The Psychotherapeutic Centre doesn't provide such financial assistance, and Gheldof feels that the medical insurance agency Riziv should start covering the costs for psychological treatment, just as it does for most physical treatments. The federal government has recently taken steps in this direction, by requiring Riziv to recognise all psychologists and psychotherapists by 2016.

Gheldof also points to the long waiting lists to receive psychological support and furthermore feels there should be action undertaken to create more awareness and acceptance in Flanders with regard to psychological support. "The stigma around psychological issues is one of the reasons that Flanders has such a high suicide rate," she says.

According to a recent report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, in 2011 there were 17 suicides per 100,000 inhabitants in Flanders, which is 1.5 times higher than the European average. With three suicides a day, Belgium has the third highest number in Europe.

"It's a good thing that statistics make psychological problems more visible," says Van Royen. "Because there is currently too much hidden pain among students, which could be alleviated with the right assistance."

► www.psy-net.be

► www.tinyurl.com/psychotherapeutic

WEEK IN EDUCATION

Toeter Test causes failure anxiety

VRT's news magazine *Koppen* reported this week that half of all Flemish schools still use the "Toeter Test" to ascertain whether children in the third year of pre-school are ready to go on to primary school. Some experts, however, feel the test is outdated, and several teams from the pupil support agency CLB advise against its use. The test dates from the 1980s and tests children's language, maths, writing skills and attitude towards schoolwork. *Koppen* found that the test causes failure anxiety among children and unnecessary stress for parents. The test was defended by Patrick Lanckswert of the Belgian Federation of Psychologists, which developed it. "The test is a screening instrument, meant to detect problems with the development and skills of toddlers at an early stage so they can be addressed in time."

Only a third earn degree in three years

About 70% of students in Flanders who start a Bachelor's degree finish it, but only one-third get their diploma in three years, according to the Flemish Higher Education database. Some even take six or seven years. A few years ago, four in 10 students finished their degree in the three-year period. According to the vice-rector for education policy at the University of Leuven, the figures show that more and more government budget is being wasted. "This is completely irresponsible, certainly in times of crisis," said Didier Pollefeyt. The change is a consequence of increased flexibility in higher education, allowing students to decide if they want to move on to the next year, even if they haven't passed all courses.

Entrepreneurs talk to Flemish classes

By the end of this month, 250 Flemish entrepreneurs will have delivered more than 450 lectures on entrepreneurship to final-year secondary school students and to students at university colleges. They are participating in Vlajo Ondernemers voor de Klas (Vlajo Entrepreneurs at the Head of the Class), arranged by the Vlajo agency for young entrepreneurs. This 10-day edition was kicked off by Hilde Essers, managing director and head of marketing at transport and warehouse company H Essers in Genk. Essers, who won Flanders' Export Lion award last year, spoke to students at the Onze-Lieve-Vrouwlyceum in Genk and elsewhere about how to start their own businesses. **AF**

► www.vlajo-ovk.be

Q&A

Lien Wyckmans is a member of the Flemish Youth Council. She recently delivered a speech at the United Nations in New York about the urgency of tackling youth unemployment

How did you get a temporary seat at the UN?

I went to New York as the representative of the Flemish Youth Council, which represents the interests of Flanders' young people with policymakers. I recently spent two weeks in New York for lobby work concerning a resolution about empowerment that was discussed in the UN's Commission for Social Development. The high point of this experience was my speech of five minutes. I wrote it myself, but I used the expertise of the Flemish Youth Council and the text was also checked by the Foreign Affairs department.

What were the main points of your speech?

I presented four measures to reduce youth unemployment worldwide. First, information about the labour market should be more integrated into lessons at schools. Currently, students get too little info on jobs and it comes too late in their higher education studies. Another point concerns the official recognition of skills that students gain during activities outside of schools. Experience as a youth movement leader, for example, should be an important feature on a CV. In my speech, I also recommended the establishment of more



programmes for youngsters without a diploma, providing them with more career opportunities through internships, for example. Finally, I also demanded a successor framework to the Millennium Development Goals, with the creation of sustainable jobs as a key element.

How are you following up your work in New York?

I am lobbying Belgian politicians to convince them to implement the UN resolution, which is non-binding advice for member countries. The Flemish Youth Council also continues to ask youngsters about their opinion. Next September, I am going back to the UN in New York, this time to address the General Assembly.

Does this work fit in with your studies?

I am studying international law at the University of Leuven, so it's a real privilege to be able to experience the reality of the international institutions that I learn about in class. **interview by AF**

WEEK IN ACTIVITIES

Sword Dancing

Sword dancing was popular throughout Flanders in the 15th and 16th centuries. This traditional dance is performed on the fourth Sunday of Lent by 11 men and boys, dressed in white and wearing bells, and accompanied by drums, bagpipes, flutes and hurdy-gurdy. 30 March, six performances between 8.40 and 13.30, Handschoenenmarkt and Grote Markt, Antwerp, free

► www.visitantwerpen.be

Ghent Boxing Gala

It's the biggest boxing event in Belgium with local and international contenders, both men and women, in different weight classes and amateur and elite divisions. 28 March, 18.00, Topsportal Vlaanderen, Zuiderlaan 14, Ghent, €25-€40

► www.gentsboksgala.be

European School Open Day

Looking for a school near Antwerp? The European School of Mol is having an open house on Saturday, with entertainment, an international food court, open classes, a European quiz and a treasure hunt. 29 March, 14.00-18.00, Europawijk 100, Mol, free

► www.esmol.net

Play Outside Day

On Tuesday, April 2, the children's television networks Nickelodeon, VTMKZOOM and Ketnet will go dark from 13.00 to 17.00, so there's no excuse not to go outside and play. Check the website to find free organised activities in your area.

► www.buitenspeeldag.be

Slow Food Weekend

The international Slow Food movement offers a healthy and ethical alternative to fast food. This two-day festival in Brussels is aimed at both food lovers and professionals, with film screenings, workshops, show cooking, market and round tables. 29 & 30 March, 10.00-19.00, Huidevettersstraat 60, €8, includes €5 credit towards a purchase and one free drink

► www.slowfoodbrussels.be



Going local

Flemish cities embrace and market quirky USE-IT maps for young travellers

Ali Edelstein

In a recent interview with *Gentenaar* Nicolas Marichal, editor-in-chief of USE-IT Europe, *Forbes* gave Flanders a shout-out for its USE-IT maps that lead young travellers to the region's hidden gems. The *Forbes* writer talked about her family's visits to fusion restaurant De Stoepa in Bruges and to a giant mural by Flemish comic artist Brecht Evens in Antwerp, discovered thanks to the quirky maps.

It is hard to believe that USE-IT did not start in Belgium, since the maps reflect the youthful and quirky sense of humour characteristic of many of this country's inhabitants. But USE-IT started in Copenhagen in 1971 as an effort by the then-mayor to provide young travellers sleeping cheaply in the city's military barracks with valuable logistical and cultural advice. The model began with casual conversations and people-to-people exchanges and, over the years, expanded into a series of guide books.

The idea spread across Europe, but it was the USE-IT Ghent office that created the now-famous style of map – in 2005, three years after the office's launch. The map was created by locals to not just show backpackers their way around but to tell them where to go and why. Along with the usual tourist attractions, it included hilarious takes on locations and cultural habits only locals would know about.

The map was an instant success, offering a light and shareable alternative to the original guide books. The USE-IT website isn't shy about what makes its network special: "USE-IT makes young people break out of the tourist bubble to meet their local counterparts and discover the REAL city actively." The Brussels office in the Sint-Katelijne neighbourhood is one of six USE-IT hangout spaces across Europe, where bright-eyed and weary travellers alike can stop by to meet the locals that staff the office



Donors who contributed to the crowdfunding campaign at the USE-IT Brussels info desk

and take advantage of the free coffee and wifi.

The advice on tap is always free, like the guide books, since USE-IT is strictly non-profit. The local networks survive on donations and subsidies, and the umbrella European network assists them in finding funding.

In Flanders, USE-IT, registered as Tourist Info for Young People, survives on subsidies from the cities with USE-IT maps: Antwerp, Bruges, Brussels, Ghent, Leuven and Mechelen. They also get subsidies from the government of Flanders. It is not uncommon for the Brussels office to see 100 visitors a day in addition to the travellers walking around with the USE-IT maps offered

to them by their hostels.

A 2013 survey by the University of Leuven showed that 10% of travellers who used a USE-IT map stayed a day longer in the city they were visiting, while 80% looked for other USE-IT maps when choosing their next travel destination.

The Brussels office offers bistro Le temps d'une pose on Lakensestraat as an example of an establishment that has benefitted financially from inclusion in the quirky maps. But they are quick to point out that businesses can't pay to be on a USE-IT map; the venue selection remains in the hands of young locals.

USE-IT Europe has just finished a crowdfunding campaign on

Indiegogo to raise money for a free smartphone app that would digitise the traditional maps.

The Flemish cities with USE-IT maps sent in donations before the campaign started, allowing USE-IT Europe to create the technical analysis for the application, which was commissioned to Ghent-based company SumoCoders, as well as the Indiegogo movie used to inspire users to donate.

The campaign raised €12,898, allowing USE-IT to continue with the technical analysis and start work on the back-end of the database, but falling more than €20,000 short of the funds needed to create iOS and Android apps. Luckily, the organisation will soon be adding a permanent "donate" button to their website to allow stakeholders to continue giving year-round.

What's next for USE-IT Europe? "Quality control, app development and European funding are at the top of our list," says Marichal. More specifically, his focus remains on providing consistent, quality development for the cities the network is now committed to in Europe and finding EU funding to support a staff member to co-ordinate it.

Marichal receives an average of two requests a week from cities wanting a USE-IT map. While he works full time for the organisation, he is only paid on a part-time basis. Next month, USE-IT Europe will apply for the European Commission's Erasmus+ "strategic partnership" subsidy to fund future networking events and co-ordination.

More locally, the USE-IT Brussels office says that they will be relocating to a brand new location in the city. "We can't give away many details about that right now," says Marichal, "except that it's right in the centre".

USE-IT Brussels

Steenkoolkaai 9b

► www.use-it.be

Robyn Boyle

BITE

Smeus

One of Flanders' least known dishes is also one of its best. An old West Flemish recipe, *smeus* or *karnemelksmeus* is a delectable combination of buttermilk mash, poached egg and North Sea shrimp. Topped with a generous amount of brown butter and some freshly chopped parsley, this dish is now taking on star restaurant status.

With scores of Flemish restaurants joining the back-to-basics trend, many of them boast their own version of *smeus*. The first time I ate this dish was at Michelin restaurant De Zuidkant in Damme, West Flanders. I'll never forget the joy of tasting it for the first time.

Buttermilk gave the mashed potatoes a creamy texture and tart taste. Perched on top was one miniature quail's egg with a silky



white and rich golden yolk that dribbled out and over the mash. Fresh, hand-peeled North Sea shrimp contributed a briny accent and tender bite, while the brown butter provided the finishing touch, with a flood of warm, nutty flavour. My delight was double when I attempted to recreate the dish at home – and succeeded. The ingredients are easy to find, and the dish a cinch to make. The only really

time-consuming part is peeling each little shrimp by hand, which you'll find gets easier as you do it. Below is a simple recipe to prepare as a main dish, or as a side next to a nice piece of sole or cod. If there's one point I can't emphasise enough, it's to not be shy with the brown butter; that's what ties the whole dish together.

Ingredients

500g bintjes (puree potatoes)
butter
1 l buttermilk
4 free-range eggs
alcohol vinegar
100g hand-peeled prawns
nutmeg
salt and pepper
sprigs of fresh parsley

Preparation

Peel the potatoes, cut them into pieces and put into a saucepan. Cover them completely in buttermilk. Bring to a boil, cooking the potatoes until soft. Pour off any excess buttermilk and mash the potatoes. Season to taste with salt, pepper and nutmeg. Add a few knobs of butter and mix well.

Poach the eggs in simmering water with a splash of vinegar. Prepare brown butter by warming a clump of butter in a pan until it takes on a toasty, hazelnut colour, making sure it doesn't burn.

Serve poached eggs and shrimp atop the creamy mash. Pour the brown butter generously over the top and garnish with a handful of chopped parsley. Serves four.

“Far beyond 2018”

The government of Flanders applies for Unesco recognition of First World War sites

Alan Hope

The government of Flanders has drawn up a shortlist of 18 First World War sites to be submitted for recognition as World Heritage by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco). The application for Unesco recognition coincides with the region's commemoration of the First World War centenary, which begins this year and continues until 2018. Battlefield, memorial and cemetery sites in West Flanders and elsewhere will play a major role in the wave of tourism expected during the four-year centenary. “Recognition as Unesco World Heritage would be the icing on the cake of the commemoration of the First World War,” Geert Bourgeois,

Flemish minister of heritage and tourism, told an audience of politicians, business representatives and organisations recently. “It would be a suitable and lasting reminder, far beyond 2018, of what took place here 100 years ago.” Unesco maintains a list of 981 sites in 160 countries that are considered of “outstanding universal value” for the cultural and natural heritage of mankind. They include monasteries in Armenia, the Great Barrier Reef, the historic centres of Salzburg, Graz and Vienna, Angkor Wat in Cambodia, the Great Wall of China, the fortifications of Old Havana and the Galapagos islands. In Belgium, the list includes the Grote Markt in Brussels, the historic centre of Bruges and the *begijnhoven* of Flanders.

At the announcement of the list earlier this month, Bourgeois stressed that the value of First World War heritage is not exclusive to Flanders but is universal. The dossier that will be submitted to Unesco also involves the governments of Wallonia and France as well as Flanders.

When the government first announced its intention to introduce a submission for World Heritage status, it was understood it would cover the whole of the Westhoek frontline. That would have the effect of forcing farmers to apply to Unesco if they wanted to put up a new barn, for example, or demolish an old one. Bourgeois has since made it clear that the heritage designation would be specifically for war-related sites and not for the entire landscape. The submission would also ensure, he said, that there would be no hindrance to economic activities, crops or permits. The government had no intention of placing a bell jar over the Westhoek, Bourgeois said. The announcement was welcomed by West Flemish farmers, represented by the farmers' unions Boerenbond and ABS. “Our discussions with minister Bourgeois were constructive and brought a great deal of clarity,” said Boerenbond chair Piet Vanthemsche. The dossier is due to be submitted to Unesco in early 2016 and will receive an opinion from the scientific advisory committee later that year. A decision will be announced at the annual general meeting of the World Heritage committee in the summer of 2017.

THE UNESCO SHORTLIST

Nieuwpoort: Monument to the Lost Diksmuide: Vladslo German military cemetery; crypt beneath the Ijzertoren (pictured)

Alveringem: Oeren Belgian military cemetery

Houthulst: Belgian military cemetery

Langemark-Poelkapelle: German military cemetery; Canadian monument The Brooding Soldier

Zonnebeke: Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) cemeteries Tyne Cot and Doelbos

Ypres: The Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing; CWGC cemeteries Essex Farm, Pilken, Bedford House, Palingbeek



Heuvelland: Kemmelberg military graves cluster; CWGC cemetery Spanbroekmolen

Mesen: Island of Ireland Peace Tower

Poperinge: CWGC cemetery Lijssenthoek



The Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing is one of 18 sites to be submitted to Unesco for World Heritage status

Nederlands oefenen initiative works to bridge language gap

Foreigners living in Flanders are probably familiar with the daily frustration of trying to practise their Dutch with locals. Be it in the train, at the supermarket or just while having drinks with colleagues, those years of Dutch courses seem to disappear when face to face with a Fleming, who will begin speaking English the second your accent is detected.

The new language campaign Nederlands oefenen, ik doe mee! (Practising Dutch, I'm in!), wants to turn the tide. Launched by Flemish integration minister Geert Bourgeois last month, the campaign's goal is to encourage Flemish businesses, institutions and citizens to give non-native Dutch speakers more opportunities to practise their language skills.

“Language courses can only provide a basic foundation,” Bourgeois says. “The real language learning begins outside of the classroom – in the street, on the bus, with your neighbours. With this campaign, we hope to encourage non-natives to use and apply their knowledge of Dutch more – even if they have not yet mastered the language.”



The Nederlands oefenen campaign offers foreigners more chances to practise Dutch outside the classroom

Huis van het Nederlands (House of Dutch), with eight locations across Flanders, have put their full support behind the initiative. These central information points for newcomers seeking to learn Dutch in Belgium are working with local governments and organisations to create more opportunities for non-native speakers to practise the language. Taalboulevard (Language Boulevard) is one product of such collaborations. This web tool helps non-native

speakers find places to practise Dutch in their own neighbourhood. Taalboulevard also leads Dutch language discussions about the latest news on its Facebook page. Of course, communication is a two-way street, so encouraging Flemings to be less linguistically accommodating is an equally important element of the campaign. “We are asking Dutch native speakers in Flanders to give non-natives a chance to practise their Dutch,”

Bourgeois says. “This could entail not speaking dialect and resisting the urge – even if well intended – to switch over to French or English so quickly.”

To help Flemings make this linguistic transition, the Taalboulevard website provides tips to locals on how to speak clear and simple Dutch with non-native speakers. Claire Koreman, a communications officer at the Antwerp Huis van het Nederlands, says they are happy with how the campaign is going. “But the high point is yet to come,” she says: “Our world record attempt at the longest conversation table.”

Organised by the Flemish socio-cultural education centre Vormingplus, this attempt at a world record, Koreman admits, is meant playfully as no record for a longest conversation table currently exists. So far, 400 people have signed up for the conversation tables in Antwerp's

Park Spoor Noord.

More than just “breaking” the world record, the upcoming conversation table should call attention to the importance of maintaining the Dutch language between native and non-native speakers alike.

“The conversation tables illustrate perfectly what this campaign is all about,” Bourgeois says. “It's an occasion for anyone and everyone in Flanders to have their say in Dutch.” That's why the event leads into a whole day of Dutch-speaking activities and workshops, including a picnic, slam poetry, kids' theatre and yoga.

“For us, the real achievement has been the collaboration across Flanders,” Koreman says. “This is the first time Dutch-language associations from different Flemish provinces have worked together towards one goal, and the results have been promising.” Kelly Hendricks

**5 April,
from 10.30**

World's Longest Conversation Table
Park Spoor Noord, Damplein 27, Antwerp
► www.taalboulevard.be



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A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER 

Beauty in the everyday

Antwerp journalist Valerie Eyckmans' second novel is a satire on modern life

Rebecca Benoot

Antwerp-based freelance journalist Valerie Eyckmans was nominated for the Bronze Owl last year, a prize awarded to the best Dutch-language debut novel, for *Verloren maandag* (Lost Monday). It was a novel about a woman who is bored with the everyday hustle and bustle at the office and decides to play a few (mind) games to liven the place up a bit. It was hailed as funny and ruthless by the critics, and Eyckmans had a wonderful time creating a character we all loved to hate.

"I have to admit, I'm a walking cliché," the 37-year-old tells me. "As a child, I was already writing stories and even made several comics that I'd try to sell for five Belgian francs – or I'd just put them in my neighbours' letterboxes. I've always wanted to write a book, and there comes a time when you simply have to stop procrastinating and just do it."

Taking the plunge into fiction came naturally to Eyckmans (pictured), who, despite wanting to be an opera singer for a brief period (due to the Jommeke comic "Tita Telajora"), was determined to get her own column when she started out as a journalist.



the opportunity to freestyle." Full of ambition and attitude, Eyckmans started writing *Verloren maandag* as a secret side project. She kept her expectations low due to being exposed to the harsh world of literary publishing after a brief stint in the PR department of a Flemish publishing house.

"Nobody is waiting for a debut novel, so there's no pressure," she says. "I sent the manuscript to several publishers and was fortunate



as an author, which is why I also chose to write from the point of view of an omniscient narrator instead of a first-person narrator," she says. "I could have easily written a sequel to *Verloren maandag*, but I wanted to do something completely different." The everyday setting of Eyckmans' novels makes them very relatable and quick to read, but she adds cutting criticism when you least expect it. "It can sometimes be very cathartic to see others struggle," she says. "It makes you feel like you're not alone. Nobody's perfect, and everyone knows that, but that doesn't stop people from trying to obtain perfection. That was one of the things I was trying to convey."

By focusing on the seemingly trivial in our daily lives, she also emphasises that there is beauty and wonder where you least expect to find it. Our daily routines, the rut in our jobs or home life – these are the things that fascinate her.

With *De dierbaren*, Eyckmans proves she is a writer who is here to stay, displaying a wide canvas of characters, themes and emotions. Sadly, though, talent isn't the only thing that makes or breaks a writing career.

"When I was writing my first novel," she says, "I was scared of being labelled a chick-lit author, seeing as I'm a woman who has written for *Flair* who is now writing a light-hearted book about the daily life of a 30-something woman. Fortunately, that wasn't the case."

"That said, I'm also trying to escape the elitist label of 'author'. A novel doesn't always have to be serious, multi-layered or dramatic to be good. Just because a novel is fun or a quick read, it doesn't mean it requires any less effort or skill."

Thus another chapter in the on-going battle between highbrow and lowbrow fiction concludes. "In the end," says Eyckmans, "I hope that people just enjoy my books."

► www.valerieeyckmans.be

"I could easily have written a sequel, but I wanted to do something completely different"

"I was working for the weekly *Flair* at the time, and I thought it would be interesting to include a column written by someone who was the same age as the readers, who they could really identify with. That was something very different from, say, writing an interview, which is, for the most part, a representation of a conversation. A column gives you

enough to get a lot of responses. I never dreamed that my first novel would get so much positive feedback. Writing a follow-up was much more daunting, especially after my publisher told me that a second novel is the most difficult one to write as your audience already has certain expectations."

De dierbaren (The Loved Ones), that

dreaded second novel, deals with everyday life of ordinary people. There's Linda, a lonely housewife who accidentally runs over a cat, her confused son David and his obsessively clean girlfriend, and the local gym teacher, who is the talk of the town.

Happiness, ideals and loss play vital roles in a novel that doesn't shy away from edgy subjects such as paedophilia, divorce and adultery, showing us that ultimately you have to crack a few eggs to make an omelette.

"My second novel is different from the first," Eyckmans confirms. "A lot of people told me that they found *Verloren maandag* hilarious but, although there is some humour in *De dierbaren*, it's not the main focus. This time around, there are a lot more layers and some simmering tragedy."

De dierbaren is a lot more intimate and slightly conservative compared to her previous book but still revolves around some strong and outspoken protagonists. "It's my opinion that you have to try to grow

FRESH FICTION

Jevgeni

Johan de Boose • *De Bezige Bij*

The second part of Johan de Boose's *Vloekhout* trilogy, in which a piece of the cross that was used to crucify Christ is passed on through the ages, is set in 14th-century Moscow, where two Russian monks are fleeing from the Tartars. But wherever they go, tragedy and madness ensue as people prepare for the end of the world. is ambitious and theatrical, if *Jevgeni* lacking depth and emotion. ★★★

Poppy en Eddie

Herman Brusselmans • *Prometheus*

Three years ago, the prolific novelist Herman Brusselmans and his partner, Tania Demetsenaere, parted ways after a relationship of nearly 20 years. They have remained close, but the break-up was a hard blow for Brusselmans, whose past novels have generally dealt with making sense of this thing called life. He's usually known for his flamboyant characters, snappy dialogue and crass humour, but *Poppy en Eddie* (a reference to Demetsenaere and their dog) is an intimate portrait filled with love and devotion, where Demetsenaere's breast cancer takes centre stage. ★★★



Ik weet waar je woont (I Know Where You Live)

Ilka De Bisschop • *Houtekiet*

Freelance journalist Ilka de Bisschop's new novel revolves around Luc, a man who, despite having a loving wife and two sons, still feels lonely. After a day with his infuriating brother-in-law, he decides enough's enough and takes matter in his own hands, setting out on a mission to confront everyone who has ever wronged him. But what seemed a straightforward journey suddenly takes an unexpected turn. Resentment and redemption play vital roles in this quick read. ★★★

Mehro, zwart op wit (Mehro: Black on White)

Toon Horsten • *Manteau*

To celebrate the 65th birthday of comic book artist Mehro, whose brainchild *De Kiekeboes* is still going strong after 37 years, journalist Toon Horsten sat down with this Flemish legend for a long and candid talk about his youth, successes and failures – and, naturally, that beloved and rambunctious Kiekeboe family. The result is a beautiful book filled with mesmerising anecdotes, personal photographs and intriguing glimpses into the mind of a man who has touched so many. ★★★

WEEK IN ARTS
& CULTURESinksenfoor moves
to Borgerhout

Beginning in 2015, the Sinksenfoor in Antwerp will be located along the de Singel motorway in the Borgerhout district instead of at its traditional home along the docks. The month-long summer fair has been the source of much controversy since residents living in Zuiderdok filed a complaint last year against it as a public nuisance. The city said that the fair will be located at the new site, for at least three years. The fair will this year be at the traditional site on the docks. Neither the vendors nor the neighbours of the new site are happy about the decision. Guillaume Borremans of the vendors' association VDBF told VRT that they are "in principle against compromises between cities and complainants because it sets a dangerous precedent for getting rid of fairs everywhere".

De Munt to close
for renovations

Brussels opera house De Munt will close on 1 June next year for eight months to carry out renovation works. Last week the federal government announced a grant of €11.6 million for the works. The work will include the renovation of the stage floor, access corridors and the lift for stage scenery as well as improvements to ventilation, decoration in the boxes and the artists' entrance. The house is now looking for alternative venues for productions. The first production concerned, *Rachmaninov Troika*, a set of three works by Sergei Rachmaninov, will run from June 2015 in the former Marivaux cinema on Adolphe Maxlaan.

Volunteers needed
to make 600,000
sculptures

Over the next four years, people across the world can take part in workshops to make a small clay sculpture for the massive art project ComingWorldRememberMe. Every sculpture, which is made according to a pattern but also possesses individual characteristics depending on who makes it, will be placed in the no man's land around Ypres in 2018 to represent the 600,000 people who lost their lives in Belgium during the First World War. Two installations by Flemish artist Koen Vanmechelen will also be part of the installation. Vanmechelen will be leading sculpture-making workshops from his studio in Sint-Truiden, and another workshop in Nieuwpoort invites participants, who must register in groups of at least 30.

► www.comingworldrememberme.be

Getting their hands dirty
Burning Ice festival puts spotlight on food from the field to your fork

Jacqueline Fletcher

In recent years, more and more young people in Flanders have begun taking up permaculture – a sustainable living model inspired by natural ecosystems – as an alternative lifestyle and sustainable food cultivation. Some scientists are also increasingly promoting agro-ecology as an alternative to industrial agriculture. Even artists are now exploring ecology, farming and food in their creative practices. Agriculture seems to be *the* defining issue of the decade, so it's apt that the seventh Burning Ice Festival at Brussels' Kaaithheater has adopted it as this year's theme.

The four-day programme focuses on the genetic technology approach to world food issues and agro-ecological alternatives centring on resilience and biodiversity. An array of Flemish and international artists will present installations, performances and collaborative projects, and there will be films, debates, lectures, forums and excursions related to the food we eat and competing visions on how it should be produced. Most of the events are free.

Humans first developed agriculture some 8,000 years ago, and we have arrived at another crucial moment in our civilisation with food production again spurring the evolution of our culture. If you feel the need to acquaint yourself with the issues, the colloquium *The Promised Land of Transgenic Crops*, featuring scientists from across the EU and the US, is a good place to start.

An alternative tourist experience, meanwhile, is provided by the GMO-Lobby Bus Tour. You can



Amy Franceschini's "Flatbread Society" explores the relationships between humans and grain

also visit the seed bank of the National Botanical Garden and attend a Forum of Alternatives, in which a variety of organic practices promoting agro-biodiversity are presented in workshops like seed saving, permaculture, urban agriculture and food sovereignty. The coyly titled documentary *The Strategy of Crooked Cucumbers* illustrates a successful community-supported agriculture scheme in Germany. In *Symphony of the Soil*, scientists take us across four continents, delving deep into the magical world beneath our feet, which most of us think of as simply dirt.

Seeds and soil provoke controversy, but also creativity. Heath Bunting's *Super Weed Kit 1.0* exhibition and Åsa Sonjasdotter's "The Order of Potatoes" installation place food firmly in our cultural practices and in a historical context, with some

humorous irony and a provocative aesthetic. Seriously, potatoes are beautiful.

According to Guggenheim-award winning artist Amy Franceschini from the California artist collective Future Farmers, the relationship between humans and grain has facilitated the evolution of our civilisations. Her performance piece *Flatbread Society* is a public art project that brings together bakers, oven makers, anthropologists, farmers and soil scientists to investigate our diverse cultural relationships with grain.

"In Norway, they used to bake bread directly after the harvest in a community oven fired for three days," says the San Francisco-based

artist. "The flat, circular bread with a hole in the middle was hung from the rafters, like disks suspended from the ceiling. This was a storage economy."

The Finns, she continues, used to store an almost extinct variety of rye in the roofs of their saunas. "Just nine grains were recovered recently, seven of which germinated to produce rye three metres tall, with 1,000 corns on each head. Now a farmers' co-operative outside Oslo is growing and selling the variety, even though this is illegal. But as artists, we can cultivate it legally."

Franceschini's *Flatbread Society* should make an imaginative and concrete impact through collaborations with local practitioners. Her knowledge of grains and cultures across the globe is impressive. "The baking is a way for me to express stories about food and the role it plays in social exchanges," she says.

"When we create a local oven and invite people to join in, everybody starts talking about their relationships to food, and conversations develop," Franceschini continues. "This can lead to the evolution of public space, like a harbour area of Oslo formerly used to store grain, where public debate changed the municipality's development plans. The area will now be designated for urban food production."

27-30 March

Kaaithheater & Kaaistudio's

Brussels

► www.kaaitheater.be

Film by Nicolaas Rahoens pits big
business against a fighting priest

It's happening – again. It began sometime in 2013 when Irish documentary maker Declan Lynch announced he was looking for 10 scripts from volunteer writers to make a film set in Ghent. Just a few months later, a distinguished-sounding character called Michael Tiger took to the internet to call on all *Gentenaars* to help him realise a movie that would feature Ghent as its lead character and setting. So who would have guessed that the first feature film about the soul of the city, starring only volunteers and realised with almost no funding, would be released as soon as next week?

De Maagd van Gent (The Virgin of Ghent) is Nicolaas Rahoens' second feature film. His debut *Ons dorp* (Our Village) was released in 2012 and featured an extensive group of volunteers from the director's own Oosterzele – with the town's mayor and other famous local residents making cameo appearances.

The idea behind *De Maagd* was different than that behind Rahoens' debut. "This time I wanted all the actors working in Ghent's amateur theatres to join in on the project," the director explains. "It would have been hard to write a play for more than 300 people, so I decided it should be a film. Then I started writing the script."

The movie, which opens on 2 April in Kinopolis in Ghent, centres on a young, progressive priest, played by Michiel Dendooven, who runs a social project. In real life too, Dendooven heads up a social project in Brazil. "I'm something of a Samaritan," he tells me, referring to his character in the film. "I grow organic vegetables in 'No Man's Land', the city's garden allotments. With those vegetables, I make soup every day and distribute it to the homeless."

But the future of those allotments is threatened when the large French supermarket conglomerate



Nicolaas Rahoens has won the Ghent-set film race, debuting *De Maagd van Gent* next month

Colfour wants the site for a new store. "We, the people, will do everything we can to stand our ground," Dendooven explains. "The soul of the city is at stake here, but the mayor has been bribed."

De Maagd, which also features Ghent's real-life mayor Daniël Termont in a quick cameo, had an initial budget of €6,000. Dendooven went looking for sponsors, and the movie eventually wrapped up production at €20,000. That was possible, Rahoens explains, because professional shooting equipment has become relatively cheap. "With a budget as low as that, we can now shoot a movie with an image quality that is hardly discernible from that of a big-budget production."

According to Dendooven, the movie is "an expression of the soul of Ghent," which is true both for the story as for the entire project. "Both offer a peek into the big heart of this city," he says. "*Gentenaars* are known to be red and green, social and ecological – always sticking up for each other." Daan Bauwens

► www.facebook.com/demaagdvangent

Feathery fashion

Birds of Paradise

Until 24 August | MoMu, Antwerp

► www.momu.be

Feathers have played an important role in women's garments for millennia. In the 18th and 19th centuries, they were a sign of wealth and luxury because of their costliness. Ostrich plumes and hats adorned with feathers of the bird-of-paradise were all the rage among ladies of the upper classes. Until the latter bird became endangered, and animal rights organisations reared their heads, that is. The exhibition *Birds of Paradise: Plumes & Feathers in Fashion* at MoMu is full of interesting historical digressions such as that, but of course the main focus is the fashion on display in cages (naturally!) of

glass. All the great designers and fashion houses are present, from Chanel to Balenciaga to Prada. One of the great showpieces of the collection is an impressive bird-of-paradise *couture* gown by French designer Thierry Mugler, and there is a considerable section that recounts Yves Saint Laurent's vision of the feather as a symbol for emancipation. But let's not forget the locals. Dries Van Noten donated several pieces to the exhibition, and an entire room is devoted to Flanders' queen of the feather, Ann Demeulemeester, including the dramatic stage outfits she created for British singer PJ Harvey.



© Dani Leca

Apart from the beauty and refinement of both the feather-light *couture* and ready-to-wear,

the various guises of the material are what is really striking about the exhibition. The feather may have started out as a sign of riches, decadence, and even debauchery – showgirl references are never far off – but gradually, it evolved into a symbol of freedom and spirituality. Mugler's *femme fatale* in feathers, a pleasure to the male gaze, becomes Saint Laurent's *femme mystère*, mysterious and powerful. At the end of the evolution, there is Demeulemeester's bird-like heroine and the slightly discomforting work of British artist Kate McGuire, which includes a giant umbilical cord made entirely of pitch-black crow feathers. *Birds of Paradise* makes it clear that the role of feathers in fashion should not, ahem, be taken lightly. Catherine Kusters

VISUAL ARTS

Ravage

Until 1 September | M Museum, Leuven

► www.mleuven.be

The centenary of the outbreak of the First World War reminds us of the horrors of war in the abstract, at a distance of 100 years. Leuven's M Museum dares to take us up close and personal in the new exhibition *Ravage: Art and Culture in Times of Conflict*, rooted in the city's all-too real experience. The ancient university town was attacked early in the war, its famous library torched by the Kaiser's troops. The brutality of the occupying forces became the stuff of legend, and the exhibition gives an unflinching account. From there, *Ravage* explores the role of arts and culture in war throughout history. Works of art can be documentary evidence, focal points of resistance, enemy propaganda or simply spoils looted from the ruins of conquered peoples. Georgio Valentino



© Bruno Vandemulen

FOOD&DRINK

Volkscafé Weekender

4-6 April | Across West Flanders

► www.toerismewesthoek.be

If it's spring, it's time to venture out beyond the city limits and take in the sights and sounds of small-town Flanders. The third edition of the Volkscafé Weekender gives you the chance to explore the Westhoek, the western-most fringe of West Flanders (some neighbouring French villages, just across the border, are also participating). All

told, 80 cafés offer themselves up for an event that's something between a pub crawl and an anthropological expedition. The colourful characters of Alveringem, Heuveland and Poperinge (among others) have cooked up a rich programme of live music, games and local food and drink. So go ahead – go native for the weekend. GV



EVENT

Earth Hour

29 March, 20.30 | Across Belgium, | ► www.earthhour.be

Ten years ago, the World Wide Fund for Nature pioneered a modest public-awareness campaign called Earth Hour. The concept was simple: participants in select cities would switch off the lights for one hour as a show of solidarity with climate-change activists. Not only has the annual event's popularity spread around the globe in recent years, but participants have gotten

ever more creative. Not content with simply flipping a switch, local groups organise collective actions, conferences, performances and parties. Last year more than 6,000 Belgians from 100 cities and towns took part. Earth Hour Belgium's website features a searchable database of grassroots events planned for this year. You're sure to find one in your neighbourhood. GV



CONCERT

GET TICKETS NOW

Boy George

8 April, 20.00 | Ancienne Belgique, Brussels

► www.abconcerts.be

As the androgynous frontman of 1980s chart-toppers Culture Club, Boy George gave his voice to hits like "Karma Chameleon" and "Do You Really Want to Hurt Me". As an out gay solo artist, his cover of "The Crying Game" was the iconic theme song of the 1992 blockbuster film of the same name. (Indeed, George's ironic treatment of the 1960s ballad gave early audiences their only clue that they were in for something other than a political thriller about the Irish Republican Army). Then the singer went through a lean period (and a few scandals), but now he's back on stage to perform his greatest hits. GV



Concert

Leuven

Mokoomba: Group of musicians from one of Zimbabwe's most rural villages, known for its Tonga music, using both traditional and modern instruments, and a sound that ranges from rap to hypnotizing mantras. Earlier in the evening, Ballaké Sissoko will show the audience why he belongs to the top of a new generation of kora (21-string bridge-harp) **27 MAR 20.00 at Schouwburg, Bondgenotenlaan 21** ► www.30cc.be

Visual arts

Knokke-Heist

Art@Knokke-Heist: Tenth edition of the parcours featuring 40 galleries showing the works of both well-known and up-and-coming artists, including paintings, sculpture and photography **5-6 APR across Knokke-Heist** ► www.artknokke-heist.be

Party

Brussels

Antitapas Primavera Night: What started out as a house party held by four Italian friends has turned into a famous underground party, drawing hundreds of people for a mixed bag of concerts, DJs, free food, circus acts, workshops and more **29 MAR from 21.00 at Brussels Event Brewery, Delaunoystraat 58** ► www.antitapas.org

Film

Ghent

Courtisane Festival: Annual showcase of film and media art, with a soft spot for recent and historical experimental works, a personal signature and a sense of resistance **2-6 APR across Ghent** ► www.courtisane.be

Event

Brussels

International Language Days: Foreign languages fair, with extensive information about professional advancement through language learning, courses, immersion classes and study abroad opportunities **28-29 MAR 10.00-19.00 at Brussels Info Place (BIP), Koningsplein 2-4** ► www.languagedays.be

Middelkerke

Donkey Parade: Quirky annual parade that goes back to the 1950s and features not only donkeys, but carnival floats, brass bands and dancers, followed by a party **30 MAR 14.30 from Westende to Lombardsijde** ► www.ordevandeezel.be

Talking Dutch

Size matters

Derek Blyth

It was a relief to know it wasn't just me. It seems that lots of people have problems with their size. Sometimes you find you can fit into a small. Other times you turn out to be XL. In one shop, a 42 fits. In another shop down the street, you have become a 52.

It turns out that this is a European problem; it depends on which country is doing the measuring, according to the Dutch MEP Toine Manders. And he wants that to change. *Hij wil dat er over de heel Europese Unie standaardmaten voor kledij worden ingevoerd* – He wants to see the introduction of standard measurements across the entire European Union.

This will ensure, he told *De Morgen*, *dat een maatje 35 van Portugal tot Finland precies even groot is* – that a size 35 is exactly the same from Portugal to Finland.

Met andere woorden: een L moet een L worden, om het even in welk land je die T-shirt of legging aankoopt – in other words: An L has to be an L, no matter in what country you buy your T-shirt or leggings.

Nu is er vaak te veel verschil – now there is often too much variation. *Om het met cijfers*

te zeggen: een 38 in Duitsland en Nederland is een 40 in België, een 42 in Frankrijk en een 44 in Italië – to put it in figures, a 38 in Germany and the Netherlands is a 40 in Belgium, a 42 in France and a 44 in Italy.

There is another problem that was recently revealed in a study by HoGent's research department. *Uit de meetcampagne blijkt dat de gemiddelde Belg na al die jaren groter is geworden, maar vooral ook breder* – on the basis of a study into sizes, it appears that the average Belgian has become larger over the past years, but especially broader.

De tailleontrek is, zowel bij mannen en vrouwen, met enkele centimeters toegenomen – the size has increased by several centimetres, both for men and women, according to the study.

When you go to



Manders' website, you don't find much about his views on clothing sizes. But you do discover that he is standing in the coming European elections as a candidate for the political party 50PLUS.

Given what you have just read, you might imagine that Manders is campaigning for the larger size of Dutch person.


But no. He is representing people over the age of 50, who are currently worried about something other than their weight. *Het belangrijke onderwerp pensioen dat in de komende jaren in Europa gaat spelen* – the important discussion on pensions that is going to take place in Europe over the coming years.


Manders has another proposal he wants adopted by the European Parliament. *Naast een standaardmaat, wil Manders ook dat er minder informatie komt te staan op kledingetiketten* – As well as a standard size, Manders would also like less information on clothing labels. *Dat moet ervoor zorgen dat die etiketten kleiner worden* – that way the labels could be smaller. So it seems that we need larger clothes but smaller labels – and a pension that stays just the same.

VOICES OF FLANDERS TODAY


 **Spot On Locations** @SpotOnLocations
Need help finding your way around #Flanders? Check out the Great War Battlefields #WW1 phone app <http://bit.ly/1eood9m>


 **BSG History&Politics** @BSGHistory
We are at the fabulous In Flanders Fields Museum in Ypres. #year10battlefields

 **Mikey Wu** @123_Coaching
The eagle has landed. Welcome in the #Holland @BarackObama. See you in Flanders field #Waregem #Belgium

 **Jamie Anderson** @ProfJamieA
Very cold, wet and windy race in Wortegem yesterday. Just like racing in Flanders should be! pic.twitter.com/3vL2P45ym6

 **Invest in Flanders** @InvestFlanders
2013 was a record year for investments in #Flanders, good for a total of 1.91 billion euros, 191 foreign projects and 4076 jobs #FDI...

 **In response to President Obama in Belgium next week**
Priscilla Draper It's going to be fun getting to and from work next Wednesday!

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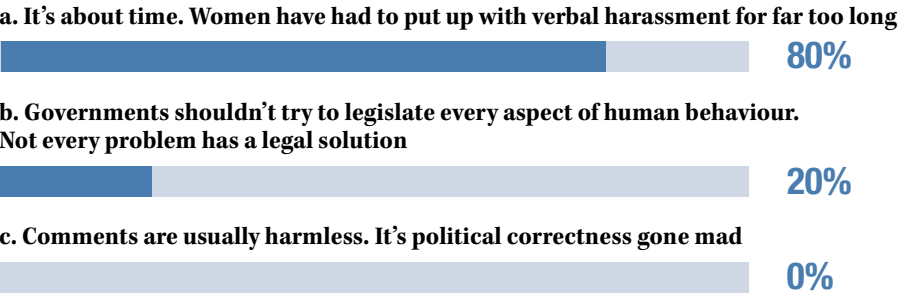
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Poll

The federal government has passed a law against sexual harassment in public, including verbal abuse. What do you think?



At least this poll got one thing out of the way: cat-calling after women in the street and other forms of harassment are not "just a bit of fun," far less something a woman should be pleased about. None of you saw any merit in that position, so well done, you.

By far the largest number of you – by a margin of four to one – reckoned it was time to do something about the situation highlighted by film student Sofie Peeters in her 2012 film *Femme de la Rue*, in which she showed how women are incessantly badgered, accosted, propositioned and insulted

on the streets of Brussels because of how they look or what they're wearing. The law makes such verbal harassment illegal. A minority of you thought the principle would be impossible to translate into practice. That remains to be seen.

Next week's question:
Some experts have spoken out against Flanders' use of the Toeter test, given to children in the third year of pre-school to determine if they're able to move up to primary school (see p9).
Is such a test really needed?
Log in to the Flanders Today website and click on VOTE to tell us what you think!

THE LAST WORD

Playing rough

"For each activity we asked ourselves: Is the risk acceptable? A little bit of blood was just about OK. Toddlers hammering nails into one another, on the other hand, was obviously not acceptable."

Researchers from KH Leuven experimented with more active playtimes in pre-school classrooms (see p9)

Speed demons

"30 km/h? That's one rule I'll be breaking."

Cycling ace Sven Nys on a new speed limit for cyclists training on narrow roads

See and be seen

"For 10 days, the centre of the world."

Het Nieuwsblad headline celebrates 130 world leaders, including US president Barack Obama and Chinese president Xi Jinping, in Belgium this week and next

Sister act

"I had no stage presence. I was really shy. I don't think it would ever have come to anything."

Veerle Wauters, sister of Koen and Kris, at one point stood on the point of becoming lead singer of the newly formed Clouseau

