

ALAN PHELPS

Governor starts wave of future

Ben Nelson waved to me the other night.

He was standing across the street from me in a tiny little shack in his front yard with his wife, Mrs. Ben Nelson. I waved back. He waved again. I waved back; he waved again.

Damn friendly state official, I thought, as he continued to wave. Mrs. Nelson smiled and petted a cat. I crossed the street to say "hi." It seemed as though Nelson was waving me over.

The closer I got, the more suspicious I became. The governor didn't quite seem himself. The stupid grin, the constant waving, the fact that he was standing in a shack with his wife and a Christmas tree — something didn't seem right.

I put my face up to the Plexiglas separating me from my governor. Slowly, it dawned on me. This wasn't Ben Nelson at all. It was all a fake. Or was I the fake, I thought with horror.

But I knew this couldn't really be the governor. I'd seen the governor on occasion in my official capacity of news hound, and I knew there was a difference somewhere.

Then it came to me: The hair on this mechanical mannequin, this automaton, this wildly waving liar, wasn't perfect enough to be Ben Nelson's hair. Every strand on Nelson's head is individually numbered and reconstructed each morning by inmates from the state prison.

That hair has a life of its own, even pitching in advice when the governor has a tough decision.

I didn't know much about the governor's wife, so I wasn't sure if that was her or not. The dog and cat could be the real dog and cat. But that Nelson was not my Nelson.

A couple of days later, I read a newspaper article that set me straight. The waving Ben was a Christmas display, it said — a mechanical mannequin dressed in 1800s clothing.

"The intent is to have a homey look of the governor and first lady sitting by the fireplace waving at the kids as they go by," Shirley Hart Arthur,



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mansion director, was quoted as saying.

Apparently, the odd little shack was donated by a state senator. It seems like a strange idea, to set up a fake self in front of your house to wave to people. Strange, and scary.

I suppose it's just another example of how our society is becoming less and less human. We have answering machines to talk to people we don't want to talk to, our computers run out holiday form letters so we don't have to write to people, and now we have mechanical men to wave to people we don't feel like waving to in person.

The only trouble is that Ben's shack is kind of bulky for day-to-day use, but technology will solve that problem. Soon you'll be able to carry around a little shaky hand to wave to people on the street while you continue on your way, looking at your feet.

During the holidays, though, people might go to the work of dragging out the whole shebang, propping themselves up in the yard and turning the wave button to "on." Then families will drive around town, watching everyone wave at everyone else. A holiday tradition is born in the governor's front yard.

Families with growing children would be hard-pressed to buy new mannequins each year. Little kids would probably want flashy 'quins with light-up eyes and punching action. Older children would worry about what their friends' wavers looked like, and whether their fake jeans fit well.

Competitive neighborhoods will be interesting to watch when the man-

nequin craze takes hold. Once, houses used to battle each Christmas to see who could set out the most wooden reindeer, the biggest nativity scene or the largest number of lights.

In the category of mechanical waver, these types of holiday contests will be decided in two variables: speed of wave and sheer size. With more money, you'll be able to show your holiday spirit with a mannequin that can wave to more people per hour than any other, waving faster than the human eye can see.

But for the man who started it all, Ben Nelson, the robots provide the added benefit of a year-round stand-in for political appearances. If Ben doesn't feel like campaigning at some charity event, he can just send the fiberglass governor. Once-demanding photo ops with foreign trade officials are a snap for the robotic Nelson. For those soup kitchen sessions on Thanksgiving, Ben could just set the wave to "ladle" mode.

Plus, the fake governor will never slip up in front of a grueling press conference. Never would the non-Nelson say something embarrassing or politically damaging — he'd just smile and wave.

"Gov. Nelson, what went wrong with your hair today?" a reporter might ask.

"Wave," the mannequin would respond. "Wave, wave, wave. And Merry Christmas."

Phelps is a senior news-editorial major and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

RICHARD WRIGHT

Random thoughts on year, kids

This is my last column. I thought last week's was my last one, so after this one, no more.

Because this is my last opportunity to write what I want, I thought I'd make some observations, thoughts and ideas public.

Is it me, or have you noticed most people in the art department wear sandals?

And how 'bout those Huskers. Orange Bowl prediction: FSU 21, NU 7. Once again, the quest for a bowl win continues.

Green space: Who cares?

Student regents going to the Orange Bowl: I don't see why they really need to go. I mean, just what do student regents do that they rate the same perks as the bigwigs, like being flown to Miami.

The Ideal: What Ideal? Where did it go? Not that I miss it; I like a good laugh.

Pay increases for athletic department officials: What?! You mean they actually deserve pay raises higher than some people on this campus who actually do something to better students?

The athletic department's concern that they may lose one meal that the athletes — oops, I mean student-athletes — receive at the training table: Gee, that's too bad that these STUDENT-athletes might have to be treated like the rest of us.

Travis Fox and Barney bashing: I hope the media attention was worth it. When your children ask you what you did in college, you can tell them you helped beat up a stuffed animal. Neat accomplishment for the ol' resume, huh, Travis.

Fraternity hazing: Oooops.

ASUN elections: Is it that time of the year again?

Grunge rock: I guess today's youth need something to listen to. Too bad it's not very interesting.

Rush Limbaugh and Howard Stern: Equal wastes of air time.



Now, I know many students probably don't understand or appreciate what I've said about my son and daughter. But I'm a believer in writing what you know about. And I know my kids, so I write about them.

Pro sports: Rafael Palmeiro is offered \$26 million over five years to play for the Texas Rangers. TWENTY-SIX MILLION DOLLARS! And it's not enough. Please kill me now; I've seen it all.

The Associated Press sportswriters' poll: Sports and politics don't mix.

Business, both big and little: Whatever happened to caring more about your employees and a little less about profit and bottom line?

Bill Clinton, Newt Gingrich, Bob Packwood: The Good, The Bad and The Horny.

Okay, I guess that's enough. What else can I say? If I missed anyone, I'm sorry.

I'll move on to another subject. My kids.

Now, I know many students probably don't understand or appreciate what I've said about my son and daughter. But I'm a believer in writing what you know about. And I know my kids, so I write about them.

With this being the Christmas season, my daughter is becoming aware of Santa Claus. I will always remember the other night.

A neighbor had Santa over for a party. As my wife, son, daughter and I were walking home, Alley kept calling for Santa.

"Where'd Santa go?" she asked.

It was cute, her walking out ahead of us yelling for Santa. Even when we got home, she opened the garage door

and called for Santa.

Though I still think Christmas is a hassle and has turned into a really big commercial venture for businesses, I'll always remember what she did and the feeling I had watching her.

My son Aaron had his six-month checkup last week. He weighed in at 20 pounds, 7 ounces and was 29 inches long. The doctor said his size was great, if he was a 1-year-old. He's going to be big.

My only thought was "football scholarship." College is taken care of.

Right now, my main goal in life is to provide for my family. That is my focus. Everything I do, I have that one end in mind. I want to give my children the kind of upbringing that I received. Anything less is unacceptable.

I may struggle to get there, but I know I'll reach that goal. My writing about my kids this semester has been important to no one but me. They are my life.

These columns have been my way of leaving something for them when they get older.

When the big show is over for me, I want my kids to be able to show their kids what their grandpa thought about them in the first few years of their life.

It's been fun. And the road ahead looks to be even more exciting.

Wright is a graduate student in Journalism and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

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