# TOUCHING BASE

QUESTIONS? THOUGHTS? IDEAS?
e-mail us at ngfeedback@natureny.com



## What kind of tree would you be?

**The UK's National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) has awarded £35,000 to George Tremmel and Shiho Fukuhara, two budding entrepreneurs whose idea is to turn trees into 'transgenic tombstones'. NESTA was established by an Act of Parliament in 1998 and uses funds from the National Lottery to help bring innovative ideas to the marketplace. The new company, called Biopresence, will introduce fragments of human DNA into "a single apple tree cell," which would then be grown into a small plant, ready for planting. The NESTA website says, "It means a person's DNA would still be alive long after they have died". According to Tremmel, "Life is DNA. If you can pass your DNA into a tree, you will live on within the tree. Our project seems to be giving people a sense of hope and relief." He and Fukuhara must be extremely hopeful and relieved, with each buyer paying about £20,000 for the insertion of an inert macromolecule into a tree ("it's cheap for eternal life," notes Tremmel). Alas, the time-honored passing on of your DNA to actual human offspring lacks a certain technological cachet these days. But why not plant an old-fashioned nontransgenic tree in their honor? For a donation of only £150, the World Land Trust (http://www.worldlandtrust.org) will save and protect 1,500 trees in the Amazon Basin and will plant a tree for you in the UK for free. Having saved both the environment and £19,850, you'll no doubt feel like you just won the lottery.** ***AP***

## Mendel Museum

Although we need not introduce the scientific contributions of Gregor Mendel to you, we are confident that most of you didn't know that Mendel was the president of the local Mortgage Bank and was quite the beekeeper. Need more info on the father of genetics? Read a book—or if you're feeling adventurous, you can hop on a plane to the Czech Republic and hit the Mendel Museum of Genetics. Located in the city of Brno at the historic Abbey of St. Thomas where Mendel did his work, the museum aims to recreate Mendel's garden and apiary where he experimented with bees. The museum both looks back in time at Mendel the man and geneticist and considers the impact of genetics on society today by juxtaposing contemporary art works with the historical items. The museum is looking to raise 1.3 million Euros over the next three years to cover the cost of further renovating and developing programs at the museum. For more information, visit the museum online at http://www.mendel-museum.org. *MS*

*Touching Base written by Alan Packer and Michael Stebbins*

## Exaggerating not exaggerating

Scientists often claim that the press has a tendency to exaggerate the claims of research findings or to make key mistakes in reporting. Therefore, we were happy to learn of a new study that found that the press doesn't over-hype genetics stories and even gets the story right… mostly (*Can. Med. Assoc. J.* **170**, 1399–1407; 2004). When looking at the numbers, it seems that there is truly a glass-is-half-full—glass-is-half-empty argument to be made. The team looked at 627 articles published in major newspapers in Canada, the UK and the US based on 111 peer-reviewed papers. The most striking findings were that 82% of the articles contained no substantial scientific or technical errors and that 63% made no exaggerated claims. That leaves 37% of the articles with exaggerations and 18% with important scientific or technical errors, despite the research paper being available for reference. Reporters may just be parroting the exaggerated claims made in some research papers, but this is probably not causing the high error rate over a large number of articles. Although it is a good starting point, a broad assessment of accuracy across newspapers will not address the problems with individual newspapers that routinely publish articles with less concern for accuracy. Lapses at this rate would not be acceptable in other types of reporting, such as business news. Nonetheless, kudos for getting it right a lot of the time. *MS*

## Mutant of the Month

**This month we bring you Yoda, a long-lived Snell dwarf mouse and our first posthumous MoM. Yoda (pictured on the left) died in April, just after his fourth birthday, which is approximately equivalent to 136 human years. He is survived by his companion, Princess Leia (on the right), who is said to be 'moving on.' Yoda was homozygous with respect to a spontaneous mutation in *Pit1*, which encodes pituitary-specific transcription factor 1. The mutation was first described in 1929 by George Snell and leads to an increase of more than 40% in mean and maximum longevity. The mutation causes hypoplasia of the anterior pituitary, which in turn leads to reduced levels of growth hormone, IGF-1, thyroid-stimulating hormone and prolactin, causing a dwarf phenotype. Snell mutant mice have delayed age-related decline in T-cell function and increase in collagen cross-linking. Fibroblasts from Snell mice are resistant to cellular stress. Unlike calorically restricted geriatric mice, Snell mice get obese and have proportionally high leptin levels in old age, implying that the extended lifespan in these mice is not a result of altered fat metabolism. May the force be with you, Yoda.** ***MS***

Photo courtesy of Richard Miller