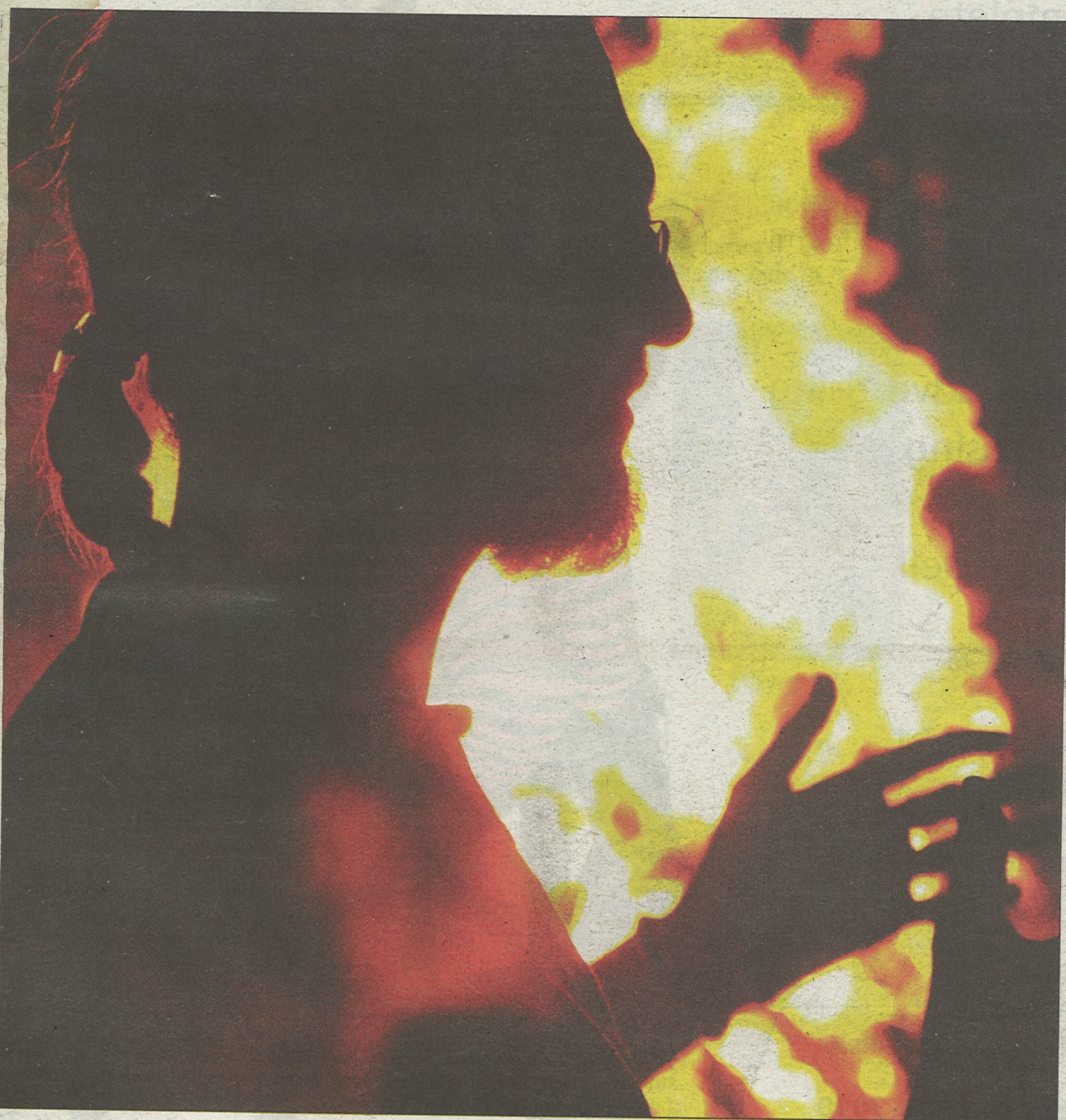


SUNDAY



Put your feet to the fire

A Santa Fe man leads workshops in overcoming fear — and walking on hot coals. **Page 10**



The Parisian flea

The most famous flea market in Paris — and maybe Europe — is a study in the unusual.

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Liar, liar

A 'hoaxter extraordinaire' tells his side of the story. Can you believe him?

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Be the blaze

Santa Fe man conquers the coals — and says you can, too

By Natalie Storey
The New Mexican

Fahrenheit: 1,600.

Twice as hot as the kitchen stove.

To firewalker Ibrahim Loeks, the 1,600-degree coals he traverses feel like “walking on the beach on a hot day” or “walking on really hot asphalt.”

It would be hard to take his word for it, except the man’s feet, as he says, really are nice and soft. There are no burn scars, blisters or other unsightly marks. And this 22-year-old has been walking on fire for two years, completing more than 150 treks.

But Loeks, who has lived in Santa Fe for most of his life, says what he does isn’t that special. In fact, he’s made it his job lately to teach others how to walk on fire. Loeks learned the ins and outs of walking on fire at the Fire Walking Institute of Research and Education in California. He has a certification in teaching fire walking.

At his house in Santa Fe he often gives seminars. On a recent Saturday he outlines the tools one needs to be a successful firewalker.

1. Pay 100 percent attention to the fire. (Loeks says you must connect with the fire, understand it.)
2. Expect the best but be prepared for the worst. (The worst being, of course, charred feet.)
3. Go for it. (“When you feel good about it, take that step. Know where you are in your life; know where you want to go,” Loeks says.)

“A lot of that might seem like some mumbo jumbo,” he says. It’s grown dark outside in his backyard, where he holds his “seminars.” The only light comes from the fire, which is slowly burning down. Loeks makes his fire out of cedar logs, kerosene and newspaper. He waits until most of the flames have died. All that’s left are the hot coals, shimmering in the moonlight.

Loeks begins to roll up the legs of his pants and takes off his shoes. (It isn’t wise to walk fire in shoes, he says, because the soles will melt and mold to the walker’s feet.) Then the dozen people who have gathered in his backyard make their way to the fire.

The mumbo jumbo Loeks is teaching these people is about conquering fear. He says that’s all anyone needs to walk across hot coals.

He breaks it down. Fear: False Evidence Appearing Real. Or as his brochure says, “The ancient art of walking on a burning hot bed of coals is used around the world to realize spirituality and overcome fear of the unknown.”

“Fire walking: Not very practical for everyday life,” he says. “But overcoming fear? Priceless.”

As for technique, that’s really up to the walker.

“Some people have a faster walk; some people walk really slow; others dance,” Loeks says.

Seems impossible, but the joy of fire walking lies in learning that people can do things they never thought possible, he says. Besides, people have been walking on fire for thousands of years.



Photos by Natalie Guillén/The New Mexican

Ibrahim Loeks teaches a class on overcoming fear. As part of the class, students are given the opportunity to walk across red-hot coals.



Hardy but still shod firewalkers-to-be help Ibrahim Loeks, left, place newspapers in the stack of wood that will eventually be reduced to a bed of red-hot coals.



The class waits.

Apache scouts, for example, could hold a hot coal in their hands and blow on it, he says. Ancient Hawaiian people could walk on lava flows. The Kalahari Kung of Africa got naked before they did their fire walks, then they rolled around in the hot coals.

At the fire, Loeks is smoothing the coals with a pitchfork. He pats them down so the bed of the fire is level and even.

He's already warned the people who are taking the seminar that they could get burned. Everyone who comes here has to sign a release to participate, one that warns them that this is dangerous. Loeks has even been burned a few times himself.

The worst time was two years ago, when he was teaching his first seminar ever. He got a little carried away and started doing cartwheels over the fire. On his seventh one, he lost his balance and burned his hands. They blistered so badly that he couldn't sleep for days. He says he was burned because, as he lost his balance, he stopped paying attention to the fire. As he stopped concentrating, the fire started charring his flesh.

But that won't happen tonight, he assures his guests.

They form a half circle around the smoldering coals. Loeks says no one has to go unless they want to. He tells everyone to wait until they feel ready.

The first of the firewalkers stands at the head of the bed of coals, breathing deeply and tapping her feet to a drumbeat. She scampers across the coals, taking about two steps in the bed of the fire. When she is done she says, "It's amazing. It's just you and the belly of the earth." Her feet are fine, she says.

Loeks does his own walk a few minutes later. He asks the other participants to give him their support so they yell, "Yes, yes." Then he holds his arms out wide and walks slowly, taking large strides.

After he's walked, he smiles widely. His feet aren't burned.

But, he says, he still uses potholders when he takes things out of the oven.



Loeks rakes the fiery coals into a smooth, level bed. Because it might break participants' concentration, he did not allow flash photography at his seminar last weekend.

Interested?

Ibrahim Loeks gives classes from his home in Santa Fe. Seminars are \$50 each. Call 984-1266 for more information.