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From farmwork to family life, Eustolia Villarreal a paragon of virtue

BY FRANCISCO GUAJARDO
 SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

When Eustolia Villarreal died on July 14, 2020, her son Joe, who bore close witness to his mother's life, reflected on the complexity of his mother's life — and death.

“They called my mother Tola, or Tolita, and she was the most amazing person,” he said.

Even though Tola did

not attain formal schooling while growing up in the rural village of Nueva Apollonia, on the southern edge of Tamaulipas, Mexico, Joe described her as one of the smartest people he's ever known.

“When we were kids,” Joe said. “My mother saw that we struggled with Spanish, especially when as migrants we bounced around

from school to school. We just couldn't speak Spanish and got into trouble with that, so my mom put us in school in Reynosa.”

Joe argues that was a brilliant parenting move that set him up for life.

“Because I went to school in Reynosa, and then graduated high school in Hidalgo, I learned both language

es well, picked up other good skills, and I've done well in life,” Joe said. “I thank my mother for being smart enough to do that.”

Eustolia married Pascual Villarreal, who was born in Somersville, Texas, in 1937 and raised in Linares, Nuevo Leon. Together, they raised a family that would be immersed in the migrant farmworker stream.

BEARING WITNESS



Eustolia Villarreal is seen in this undated photo. Villarreal like many others, succumbed to COVID-19 on July 14.

Courtesy photo

See VIRTUE | 4A

How we behaved



Courtesy photo

Elena Quercioli, assistant professor of economics at the Robert C. Vackar College of Business and Entrepreneurship at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, is seen with her two rescue dogs, Valentine, left, and Sebastiano.

University professor charts human behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic

BY STEVE CLARK
 STAFF WRITER

Elena Quercioli's life's work lies at the intersection of economics and epidemiology in a field known, as a matter of fact, as “economic epidemiology.”

As with all serious studies of economics, it's complicated. But for over a decade the assistant professor of economics at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley Robert C. Vackar College of Business and Entrepreneurship has dedicated herself to perfecting a modified Susceptible, Infected and Recovered (SIR) epidemiological model that — using game theory — incorporates rational, strategic human behavior to produce a model that's actually useful in helping humanity.

Quercioli, a native of Pisa, Italy, who joined the UTRGV faculty in 2016, aims to come up with a model founded in scientific data and theory that accounts for virtually every dynamic of human behavior during a pandemic, a model that ultimately will inform policies to contain future outbreaks and save lives. The alternative is “guessing or going blindly into a pandemic, not knowing what's going on,” she said.

Quercioli actually began the research in 2006 with University

“Even my colleagues laugh when I say I want to write earth-shaking papers. And they take forever. Like this one takes 10, 12 years. This is who I am. There's nothing I can do about it.”

Elena Quercioli
 UTRGV professor

of Michigan economics Professor Lones Smith, when Quercioli was teaching economics at Tulane University. Then the work focused on “counterfeit money, contagion and crime,” she said. In 2009 the research was directed toward the H1N1 pandemic.

“We wrote a paper and never submitted it because we wanted to improve it,” Quercioli said. “It's still a working paper, and we worked on this for another eight or nine years.”

With the help of an army of graduate students and research assistants, she spent five years collecting county-level infection data from 51 state health departments, resulting in a trove of data. Quercioli was also engaged in other research projects, but when COVID-19 hit she and her colleagues turned their attention back to the modified SIR in a serious way.

“We realized that this could be our moment to get this out, because we've been working on this for much longer (than any-

one) in economics,” she said. “We had the right model that incorporates behavior, and we think behavior matters. There's no cure, so what people do is the only way not to get it. And when it comes to behavior, game theory rules. It's the one subject that is all about behavior.”

Quercioli is going full speed ahead with five co-authors from around the United States and one in Singapore on a short paper to be followed by a longer one once certain econometric issues are sorted out. It's all about making the world a better place and, ideally, making an original contribution to the science of economics, she said.

“That's why I'm dedicating my entire life to it,” Quercioli said. “Even my colleagues laugh when I say I want to write earth-shaking papers. And they take forever. Like this one takes 10, 12 years. This is who I am. There's nothing I can do about it.”

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UTRGV hosts distance-learning innovator, educator

BY GARY LONG
 STAFF WRITER

Nine months into the COVID-19 pandemic, the university professor, author and lecturer credited with inventing the term e-learning says distance learning's worldwide embrace is widening the gap between privileged and underprivileged children.

Badrul H. Khan, a world-renowned speaker, author, educator and e-learning consultant and whose 1997 book “Web-Based Instruction” heralded the rise of distance learning, answered questions Thursday afternoon during a Facebook Live event presented by the UTRGV Graduate College.

“Educators have a responsibility to reach every child and our current times may actually be taking us backward,” Khan said in response to a question from Robert H. Doyle, a retired Harvard University dean and the U.S. representa-

tive to the International Council for Educational Media. Doyle asked the questions during the session, a Frontier Lecture series event titled “E-Learning in the Age of COVID-19: How the Educational World Was Caught Flat-Footed in Its Response to the Pandemic.”

Moving the discussion from college and university campuses to K-12 education, Doyle asked, “Everyone has moved to distance learning, it happened so fast, but does it help the children?”

“On one side it's great that the children can continue their education from the comfort of their homes. However, this also increases the disparity in our social community,” Khan said.

“I am concerned it is increasing the gap. Our unprivileged children do not have the basic infrastructure at home to foster remote learning. This includes sufficiently fast laptop computers and fast internet,” Khan said.

See LEARNING | 4A



Khan

Money laundering charges tied to more than \$700K in gold coins, cash

BY LORENZO ZAZUETA-CASTRO
 STAFF WRITER

A local man faces federal money laundering charges related to an alleged attempt to bribe a public official, records show.

According to the indictment against Jose Luis Trejo, in February of this year, Trejo “conducted or attempted to conduct a financial transaction affecting interstate or foreign commerce involving property represented by (Trejo) to be proceeds and property used to conduct or facilitate specified unlawful activity,” the record shows.

Trejo allegedly attempted to bribe a public official in order to smuggle unidentified goods from the U.S. to carry on with concealing the nature, location, source, and ownership of property believed to

be proceeds from unlawful activity, the indictment against Trejo states.

In addition to the allegations, Trejo also attempted to do all of the above while avoiding transaction reporting requirements.

The government looks to take roughly \$347,356 in gold coins seized on Feb. 14, another \$400,000 in U.S. currency, and 5.03 acres of land at a property in McAllen, records show.

Trejo, who was indicted Oct. 7 on the aforementioned charges, made his initial appearance before a magistrate judge Thursday, records show. He will remain in custody pending a detention hearing where a Court could grant a bond release.

If convicted of the charge, Trejo faces up to 10 years in federal prison.

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El Paso sees largest number in hospitals due to COVID-19

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

EL PASO — The El Paso area has reported its highest number of hospitalizations due to the coronavirus since the pandemic began, officials said Sunday.

A record high 449 hospitalizations were reported for Saturday, with 129 of those patients in intensive care, according to El Paso health officials.

In the El Paso area, only seven ICU beds are available, according to the Texas Department of Health and Human Services.

Hospitalizations have been steadily increasing in the El Paso area since early September.

The increase in hos-

pitalizations and cases prompted El Paso officials last week to implement tighter restrictions to combat the spread of the coronavirus.

El Paso Mayor Dee Margo had announced that visitors to facilities that care for the elderly will not be allowed, and businesses not considered essential must cut back to 50% of their capacity from 75%. Restaurants are limited to takeout and drive-thru service after 9 p.m., home gatherings are temporarily banned and bars, which had not been allowed to reopen, will remain closed.

The number of new daily COVID-19 cases recorded in El Paso soared Thurs-

day to a record-breaking 838. That number dipped to 684 on Saturday.

The increase in cases in the El Paso area was prompted by Republican Gov. Greg Abbott to send doctors, nurses, respiratory therapists and personal protective equipment to support hospitals there.

Abbott has also deployed medical personnel and supplies to the Texas Panhandle as the coronavirus has again surged in that part of the state. Hospitalizations are increasing in Amarillo and Lubbock, mirroring overall numbers across the state.

Texas health officials reported 3,048 new confirmed cases and 30 new deaths on Sunday.

TEXAS BRIEFS

Joel Osteen resumes services at megachurch

HOUSTON — One of the nation's largest Christian megachurches resumed in-person services on Sunday in Texas after months of holding only online services due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Lakewood Church in Houston opened at 25% capacity under new city guidelines. People had to sign up online to attend services at the non-denominational megachurch run by Joel Osteen.

A recording on Lakewood's Facebook page of Sunday's services showed people complying with requirements that the wear face masks and sit spaced apart inside the church's cavernous arena, the former Compaq Center, which was once the home of the Houston Rockets.

Under the city guidelines, about 4,000 people were allowed during each service Sunday. The arena usually holds up to 16,000.

Lakewood officials said they had prepared the building with additional cleaning, sanitizing and equipment upgrades, including improvements to the air purification system.

Officials making changes to some oil-lease terms

NEW ORLEANS — A federal oil lease sale in November will be the first in a decade to offer 10-year leases at some depths.

Since 2010, leases in depths of 800 to 1600 meters have run for seven years, with a three-year extension available for companies that have started a well on their lease.

"After a careful analysis of the past 10 years' data, ... BOEM is reverting to offering the 10-year primary term in these specific water depths," the Bureau of Offshore Energy Management said in a news release Thursday. Leases in deeper waters remain at 10 years. In shallower waters, the leases are for five years, with a three-year extension for companies that start a well within those first five years.

The agency is offering about 78 million acres in water from nine feet to more than 11,115 feet.

Like all sales since August 2016, the sale on Nov. 18 will be livestreamed. Bids will be read publicly.

Associated Press reports



Kevin Baxter | Los Angeles Times | TNS

A popular mural outside Jo's Coffee in a trendy section of Austin, has been repainted for the election.

Democrats believe Trump has put Texas into play

BY MARK Z. BARABAK AND KEVIN BAXTER
LOS ANGELES TIMES

AUSTIN — For years it shimmered on the far horizon, beckoning like a watery mirage: a blue Texas.

Democrats plotted and schemed and talked about flipping this conservative stronghold and seizing its electoral votes, a stockpile that is crucial for Republicans. Inevitably, they fell short — typically by a lot.

This time, however, it is not far-fetched to think Joe Biden could carry the Lone Star State, a sign of the difficult straits facing President Donald Trump and the growing opportunities for cash-rich Democrats aiming not just to win the White House but to take control of the Senate and expand their House majority.

Biden remains a distinct underdog. Democrats have not won a statewide race in more than 20 years, and their last presidential candidate to carry Texas was Jimmy Carter, in 1976.

"It's not become probable," Jim Henson, who co-directs the University of Texas/Texas Tribune Polls, said of Biden's chances. "But it's gone into the realm of the plausible."

Recently the Biden campaign announced a \$6 million television ad buy — not huge in a state with 17 major media markets — and dispatched his wife, Jill, to get-out-the-vote rallies in Dallas, El Paso and Houston.

That's hardly a full-on as-

sault. Still, the fact Biden hasn't written Texas off entirely reflects his advantage heading into the final stretch of the campaign. With a steady lead in states he must win, the former vice president can reach for others less vital to his chances, including Georgia, Iowa and Ohio.

Biden doesn't need Texas' 38 electoral votes to claim the White House; Trump does. If the state flipped — and stayed Democratic in years to come, a far more difficult challenge — it would reshape the national political landscape like nothing since California turned blue nearly 30 years ago. Any Republican running for president would start at a huge disadvantage.

Even a close Biden finish would mean the GOP could no longer take Texas for granted, said Garry Mauro, a former state land commissioner and Democratic Party leader. "That means they couldn't spend as much money in Iowa and Ohio," Mauro said.

Several circumstances have converged to give Biden a shot. Four years ago, Hillary Clinton lost by 9 percentage points. But Texas is growing and changing, as hundreds of thousands of transplants arrive and bring their political inclinations from California, New York and other left-leaning states.

Kathleen Neilson, who moved last year from Brooklyn, New York, was among those casting an early ballot

for Biden on Wednesday at a busy community center near downtown Houston.

"He would be way more presidential than Donald Trump," said the 36-year-old law student, who described herself as "super-duper liberal."

Latinos, who tend to vote Democratic, are gaining strength in the state. (Since 2018, the number of Latinos in Texas has grown nine times faster than the white population; Latinos now account for more than 11.5 million of the state's nearly 29 million residents.)

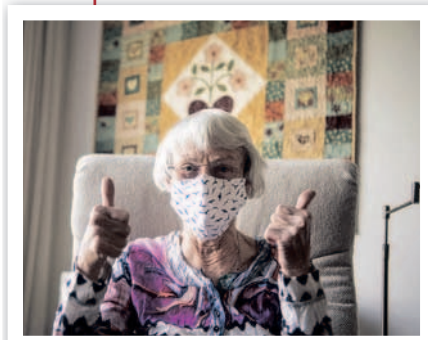
"We know the risk of losing democracy," said Paloma Diaz, 56, a director of Latino American studies at the University of Texas in Austin. She grew up in Chile under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet and sees the same impulses in Trump. "We are going straight to a totalitarian government," she said.

A number of hard-fought contests up and down the ballot — for the U.S. Senate and House and the Texas Legislature — also help Biden, producing a geyser of campaign contributions that fortify a Democratic ground operation built over years of increased competition. The Biden campaign is piggybacking on those turnout efforts.

"You are seeing the needle move in recent elections," said Rebecca Acuna, who directs Biden's Texas campaign. "We're going to have record turnout this year. ... We're gonna have more than 10 million voters."

STRONGER

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Let's be here for each other.

THE MONITOR
www.themonitor.com

VIRTUE

From Page 3A

"We grew up in the fields of California and West Texas, and my mother was a part of all that," Joe recalled. She kept the family together and was a very hard worker.

Tola lived a life of commitment, particularly to her children, and to her God. Born on July 20, 1938, she spent her life searching for her true spiritual calling. Joe said that the family may have disagreed on issues of religion, but his mother Tola "always showed commitment to her faith, and that was an admirable quality."

During the pandemic, Joe and the family attempted to shelter Tola from COVID-19, but she unfortunately succumbed to the virus. Joe's older sister Amelia, who also bore close witness

to her mother's life, became infected too.

"Amelia and my mother both got the virus, and they were taken to McAllen Medical Center," Joe said. "They were just a few rooms from each other. When my mother passed, we didn't want to make things worse for Amelia, so we didn't tell her. But when she figured it out, I had to tell her, and she just cried without us being there to console her."

Such is the way of the pandemic of 2020.

"My mother's funeral was the coldest funeral and the coldest experience I have ever had," Joe said. "Only a few family members could go, we all wore masks, some wore gloves, and we couldn't even hug. It's not the way to say goodbye. Nobody deserves a cold experience

like that."

But Joe and Amelia know their mother lived a meaningful life. Tola worked hard, she was committed to the right things, and though the family could not bid an appropriate farewell, they find comfort in having been raised by a smart and loving woman.

Que en paz descansa Eustolia Villarreal. Rest in peace.

Francisco Guajardo, chief executive officer for the Museum of South Texas History at 200 N. Clossner Blvd. in Edinburg, authored this story as part of an ongoing series entitled Bearing Witness. The museum's effort aims to document some of the Rio Grande Valley lives lost to COVID-19. For more information about the museum, visit MOSTHistory.org.

LEARNING

From Page 3A

In the U.S., many parents work, some are immigrants and therefore speak a different language than the one in which their children are being taught.

"They do not have the education to help their children learn, what are these children supposed to do?" he asked.

"On the flip side you have parents who have the means to hire a tu-

tor to enhance their children's learning. This also widens the gap with the underprivileged."

Khan, who is from Bangladesh and a PhD., is an assistant professor at the George Washington University in Washington, D.C. From 1994-1997 he was an assistant professor of educational technology and founding coordinator of the graduate program in educational technology at the University of Texas at Brownsville. Rene Corbeil,

who was moderator for Tuesday's program, was a research assistant on "Web-Based Technology," which was published in 1997 and has been translated into 22 languages, his wife Maria Elena Corbeil said in introducing him.

The Corbeils run the graduate program in educational technology, which offers bachelor's, master's and doctoral programs.

glong
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