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Taken by COVID-19, Daría Vera’s impassioned civil rights advocacy lives on

BY FRANCISCO GUAJARDO
SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

Daría Vera, a lifelong resident of Rio Grande City, died Aug. 6 at 5:05 p.m. at the Baptist Medical Center in San Antonio. At 73, she succumbed to complications resulting from COVID-19.

Daría’s daughter, Maricela Olvera, bore close witness to her mother’s life and tells that the hospital in Rio Grande City had simply run out of space to treat COVID-19 victims.

“So they flew my mother to the Baptist hospital in San Antonio, and she died there,”



Vera

BEARING WITNESS

she said. “It was very sad because we could only communicate with her through the computer.”

Daría was born on Nov. 18, 1946, in Rio Grande City. She attended school up to the third grade and at a young age began to work in agricultural fields in South Texas and even followed the crops to the fields of West Texas. Her lack of formal education did not define her, however. Maricela describes her mother as a spark plug, a capable woman whose enormous talent was matched only by her immense passion.



Courtesy photo

Daría Vera is seen in this 1966 photo lying on the ground to block a bus with Mexican workers that tried to make its way across the international suspension bridge between Miguel Aleman, Tamaulipas, and Roma.

When Daría was 19, she worked as a melon picker, earning 40 cents an hour to

pick cantaloupes, a wage much lower than what other laborers earned. Daría did

not like that, and she did not like the fact there were no bathrooms available to women working in the fields, nor was there running water, or access to other basic laborer necessities. The United Farm Workers organization, led by Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez, was just gaining strength across the country, and it came to Daría’s community to gauge interest in a strike to protest low wages and unacceptable working conditions. Daría threw herself into the organizing effort, assuming a leadership role in the famous Melon Strike of 1966 in Rio Grande City. This historic event pitted melon growers against the workers who picked the melons.

To combat Daría and

other strikers, the growers looked to bring in replacement workers from Mexico. When a bus with Mexican workers made its way across the international suspension bridge between Miguel Aleman, Tamaulipas, and Roma, Daría laid down on the bridge to block the oncoming bus filled with replacement workers. A photograph of Daría and another striker became the subject of national news.

According to historian Maritza de la Trinidad, who conducted an oral history with Daría in 2016, “Daría loved that picture. She was so proud of her role in the strike, and adamant that she should be involved. She was such a formidable woman.”

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Staying festive

With ‘Carnaval de Calaveras’, H-E-B Park hosts first large event since pandemic

BY MATT WILSON
STAFF WRITER

EDINBURG — H-E-B Park hosted its first festive event since the pandemic began Saturday evening, making it the only large event center to host a traditional in-person event in Hidalgo County in the last eight months.

H-E-B Park and Bert Ogden Arena, just down the road, have hardly been inactive during the pandemic.

Much of the response to the crises that have faced South Texas have played out in the parking lots of the facilities: blood drives, large scale coronavirus testing efforts, hurricane recovery initiatives.

More recently, the RGV Toros began playing in the stadium again, starting with no fans and traditioning into socially distanced spectating. Last week the facility held a drive-in concert.

Still, spokesperson Shalimar Madrigal said, Saturday’s Carnaval de Calaveras: Dia de los Muertos Festival was an important step back toward the sort of events that are H-E-B Park’s bread and butter.

“It’s a beautiful fresh evening, so it’s wonderful for this,” she said Saturday.

A steady stream of festival goers trickled through the doors after they opened at 7 p.m., stopping to have their temperatures taken before going inside to enjoy themselves.

Inside, there was a Dia de los Muertos altar, a pumpkin patch set up to take Halloween pictures in, candy skulls, pan de muerto and roasted corn being peddled at the concession stand.

In short, everything you would expect at a Rio Grande Valley festival on any Oct. 31.

“It’s such a cultural thing for us to get together and celebrate, any holiday really, but especially Halloween and Dia de los Muertos,” Madrigal said. “We realize



Monitor photo

A Dia de los Muertos altar was among the features available at Saturday evening’s Carnaval de Calaveras: Dia de los Muertos Festival at H-E-B Park in Edinburg.

that we have this huge facility, it’s an awesome outdoor facility with a capacity of 10,000, so since we made it socially distanced, we can offer that to people to come enjoy as a family in a safe way.”

The steps taken to provide safety stood out, but according to Madrigal, will likely become the norm at in-person events for the near future.

“We’re talking to several promoters, other events that are looking to do something, so we’re showing them all the possibilities that can be done here at our facility,” she said.

The most significant was the capacity of the venue. Madrigal says it was slashed by about a third, from 10,000 to a little over 3,000.

“It took us several months for us to figure out the seating chart, but we sell in groups of two, three, four or six, and we also have a few single seats,” she said. We did that so we can ensure enough distance, in front, behind and to the sides in the stands.”

There was more seating down on the turf, where 10-by-15-foot squares had been outlined in white paint. Families sat in those squares picnic style, 6 feet away from each other, watching “Coco” on the jumbotron. Later, people would watch from those “pods” and from the stands as Grupo Solido took the stage.

There were other pandemic precautions on display. A table with goody bags, for example, was

turned perpendicular to the sidewalk instead of parallel. Whenever a kid asked for a bag of candy, one of the facility’s employees slid it down the 6-foot table with a stick grabber, like someone might use to hand out prizes at an old timey carnival.

One booth had some sort of inflatable blue couches for sale. The couches were meant to be used down on the field in those square pods. At least two had been bought by eight, their new owners lounging on them down on the field.

The demand for people to go somewhere and do something is evident, Madrigal said, even with all the pandemic measures in place.

“People want to get

Case closed in political retaliation lawsuit filed against DA

STAFF REPORT

A lawsuit filed by former Hidalgo County District Attorney’s Office employees who alleged they were fired for political retaliation has been settled.

The litigation, filed by Doria Salia Maldonado, Dora L. Muñoz, Rogelio Cazares Jr., Jorse A. Salazar, Palmira Muñoz, Chris Yates and Santos Leal against District Attorney Ricardo Rodriguez Jr. and Hidalgo County was scheduled for jury selection Tuesday.

However, on Sept. 29, court records indicate the case was closed.

“Now, therefore, in accordance with the parties’ compromise and settlement

it is ordered, adjudged and decreed that Plaintiffs Dora Salia Maldonado, Dora L. Muñoz, Rogelio Cazares Jr., Jorge A. Salazar, Palmira Muñoz, Chris Yates, and Santos Leal take nothing by reason of this suit and that Hidalgo County and Ricardo Rodriguez Jr., individually and in his official capacity, are hereby discharged from any and all liability from the allegations in the complaint made basis of this suit,” the order states.

The details of the settlement are not contained in the court record.

“On this day came to be heard the above entitled and numbered cause whereby all parties, by and through their attorneys of record, expressly stated to the Court that each party waived the right to a trial by jury; that all claims and causes of action that were or

See **CASE** | 4A

Woman charged in connection with human smuggling attempt

Claimed man threatened her with gun

BY LORENZO ZAZUETA-CASTRO
STAFF WRITER

A Pharr woman claimed a man threatened her with a gun to transport two women who were later determined to be in the country without legal authorization, records show.

Ruby Jo Davila faces federal smuggling charges in connection with her Oct. 22 arrest in Starr County after authorities found her transporting people who did not have authority to be in the country legally, according to the federal complaint against her.

U.S. Border Patrol agents pulled over 29-year-old Davila, a U.S. citizen, shortly after agents observed three people, a male and two females, board a gray sedan on a street located less than three blocks from the river in Roma, the complaint states.

“The vehicle stopped without incident and agents identified the driver as Ruby Jo Davila, a United States citizen. The three passengers located in the rear passenger seat of the sedan were determined to be illegally present in the (U.S.),” the court record shows.

Davila, after her arrest, told agents she was in Roma because a relative had purchased a home in the area.

She claimed that a (man) walked out to her car with a gun and demanded a ride, or give up her car.

Davila stated the man got in her car and told her to wait for two women — she claimed that she cooperated because the man had a gun.

Agents searched the passengers, a man from Honduras, and two women from Guatemala, but found no weapons.

All three foreign nationals were interviewed and gave similar statements, in which they stated Davila told them

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See **CARNIVAL** | 4A

Trip to closed Walmart for baby wipes ends in arrests

BY MARK REAGAN
STAFF WRITER

With a bottle of liquor on ice in their vehicle, a late-night trip to a closed McAllen Walmart for baby wipes landed two men in jail on charges of resisting arrest.

The disturbance happened outside of the Walmart at 2800 W. Nolana on Oct. 26 when employees there called police because two people entered the store, which was closed, demanding to buy baby wipes, authorities say.

McAllen police charged 27-year-old Pharr resident Jacob Joel Nieto with two counts of harassment of a public servant and a count of resisting arrest. Junior Ivon Solis, a 32-year-old McAllen resident, is charged with resisting arrest.

When told the store was closed and there was no

working cash register, one of the men became upset, saying, "Y'all (expletive) need to let me buy baby wipes the door open so it means the store is open for (expletive) business!" police say in the probable cause affidavit.

The officers tried to make contact with the man, who became belligerent, telling the officer in slurred speech, "You have no (expletive) business being here, we didn't call you! We don't have to tell you (expletive)!", the affidavit states.

Police say they tried to get identification from the men, but both were uncooperative and appeared to be intoxicated.

When authorities handcuffed one of the men, police say the other man charged at them.

A woman also showed up at the Walmart who was with the men and she began to scream at the store's entrance, police say. She was taken to jail but online jail records don't list her as being charged.

Police say they found an open bottle of liquor on ice in the front right passenger floorboard of the vehicle the trio was in.

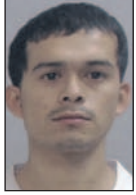
"As I transported Nieto he was making claims that he was inappropriately touched in his genital area by another officer, then redirected the same allegations toward me," the affidavit states.

Police say they had to drag him to booking from the patrol car and used force in the booking area when Nieto allegedly spit on two officers after seeing the woman being escorted in to booking as she "was screaming and calling out to Nieto, and that set off Nieto again. Nieto then spit multiple times."

Authorities say he later apologized for spitting.

"(The woman) was also escorted to the holding cell for incarceration in the cell beside Nieto as she continued to scream calling out 'Jacob!' as Nieto began to bang on the jail cell door. Then both continued to scream and bang on the doors therefore we completed the booking sheets by obtaining limited information from the system from prior arrests," the affidavit states.

mreagan@
themonitor.com



Nieto



Solis

San Juan man faces conspiracy, drug smuggling charges

Sentencing set for early next year

BY LORENZO ZAZUETA-CASTRO
STAFF WRITER

A Rio Grande Valley man headed to Houston from Mexico faces drug conspiracy charges after authorities found more than 35 kilos of methamphetamine inside a vehicle he was driving, records show.

In March, Roberto Soto pleaded not guilty to four counts against him — two conspiracy charges, and one distribution, and one drug possession charge, in connection with his February arrest at a port of entry.

According to the federal complaint filed against Soto in February, Soto attempted to enter the United States from Mexico through the Anzalduas port of entry.

During his attempt to enter the country, U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers referred Soto for a secondary inspection after the 30-year-old San Juan man stated

he did not have any prohibited items in his vehicle.

Soto told officers he had been in Mexico for three days and was heading to "City, Texas," for work.

During the secondary inspection, officers used a K-9 unit to determine if anything illegal was inside the vehicle.

"A subsequent X-ray scan of the vehicle revealed anomalies in the vehicle's rear quarter panels. A probe of the rear quarter panels revealed a crystal-like substance which field-tested positive for the properties of methamphetamine," the court record shows. "A total of 119 packages of crystal methamphetamine with a total weight of 36.74 kilograms were extracted from the vehicle."

During an interview, Soto told federal agents he knew he had narcotics inside his vehicle. He said he was headed to Houston from Mexico and was to be paid roughly \$5,000 for his role in transporting the meth to its destination.

According to a U.S. De-

partment of Justice 2018 National Drug Threat Assessment study, the southwest border is the main entry point for a majority of the meth that is brought into the country.

"CBP reported that 97 percent of methamphetamine seizures occur at or near the southwest border and that meth seizures continue to increase along that corridor," the study stated.

Months after his arrest, Soto retained McAllen-based Crispin "CJ" Quintanilla as his attorney in April.

In September, Quintanilla filed a motion advising the court of his clients' desire to plead guilty in the case.

But court notes show Soto, who filed that motion Sept. 25, had not made an appearance before the court until Wednesday when he pleaded guilty to one count of importing a controlled substance.

Soto is scheduled for his sentencing Jan. 6, records show.

lzazueta@
themonitor.com

Trump decries FBI probe of supporters surrounding Biden bus

BY MICHAEL BALSAMO
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump on Sunday suggested the FBI should stop investigating an incident in which his supporters were seen surrounding a Biden campaign bus in Texas, which led Democrats to cancel an event there.

The president's tweet came hours after the FBI confirmed that it was "aware of the incident and investigating."

On Sunday night, Trump

retweeted a screenshot of the FBI statement, adding: "In my opinion, these patriots did nothing wrong. Instead, the FBI & Justice should be investigating the terrorists, anarchists, and agitators of ANTIFA, who run around burning down our Democrat run cities and hurting our people!"

An FBI spokesperson said the bureau had no comment about the president's tweet.

Trump's tweet came as tensions remained high between the president and FBI Director Christopher Wray, and as Trump has pressed the Justice Department and FBI to act against his rivals, including Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden

himself. The president has also told people around him that he is frustrated with Wray over the FBI director's public statements on issues like voting fraud, Russian election interference and antifa, and has discussed the possibility of removing Wray if he wins reelection.

In videos posted on Twitter, a group of cars and pickup trucks — many adorned with large Trump flags — can be seen riding alongside the campaign bus on Friday, and at times boxing it in, as it traveled from San Antonio to Austin. At one point, one of the pickup trucks can be seen colliding with an SUV that was driving behind the bus.



Trump



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VERA

From Page 3A

After the strike, Daría and others led a march from Rio Grande City to the State Capitol in Austin, to announce their protest before the state government. Along the way, they stopped in small towns that dotted the South Texas landscape. Kenedy, Texas, was one of those towns, and the strikers apparently made an impression on one of churches in town.

For a half century after the strike, Daría continued to work in the fields, she raised a family, and lived a proud life. But material success never came to her, as

she settled into a modest life. Maricela said that her mother basically lived in poverty. She said, "Her house was almost unlivable, but Pastor Martinez from the church in Kenedy, a town they visited on the 1966 march, came just a few years ago. With others from their church, they built my mother a new house."

Unfortunately, COVID-19 took Daría, but not before she cemented her legacy as a woman of historical importance. Professor de la Trinidad, who bore witness to Daría's life through the oral history process said, "Daría saw herself as the mother of the community, and through her activism

she also became one of the people who would launch the civil rights movement in South Texas."

Que en paz descanse Daría Vera. Rest in peace.

Francisco Guajardo, chief executive officer for the Museum of South Texas History at 200 N. Closter 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.

CASE

From Page 3A

could have been asserted by and between said parties have been compromised and settled; that Plaintiffs shall take nothing against Defendants; and that all court costs and attorneys' fees should be

taxed against the party incurring the same," the order states.

The plaintiffs had alleged Rodriguez fired them for posting signs on their front lawns, for wearing T-shirts, for displaying bumper stickers and for soliciting support for former DA Rene Guerra's re-

election bid.

Guerra served as district attorney from 1982 to 2014, when Rodriguez defeated him in the election. He took office in January 2015.

Rodriguez denied the allegations in previous statements to the newspaper.

The case was officially closed on Sept. 29.

SMUGGLING

From Page 3A

to say she was merely giving the trio a ride.

Davila, who was identified as the driver of the sedan by all three passengers, told officers that the man had a gun.

No gun was found, according to the complaint.

On Tuesday, during a morning bond and detention hearing, after the government stated it did not oppose a bond for Davila, the court agreed to grant Davila a \$35,000 unsecured bond with

the standard bond restrictions, including travel, court notes show.

If convicted, the woman faces between five and 10 years in prison.

lzazueta@
themonitor.com

CARNAVAL

From Page 3A

together, they want to celebrate," she said.

One of those people celebrating Saturday evening was Melissa Quintanilla, who attended with her family. She

was dressed as Jessie from Toy Story 2; her daughter and significant other rounded out the cast as Bo Peep and Buzz Lightyear, respectively.

Quintanilla said if they hadn't been invited to the festival, they likely would've stayed home watching

scary movies.

"There's no trick or treating door to door, so it's really nice H-E-B Park is doing this for the kids," she said. "That's why we brought our daughter out."

mwilson@themonitor.com