



## J GONZÁLEZ

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~J. GONZALEZ

# Daughter laments not being able to comfort dying mother

BY FRANCISCO GUAJARDO  
SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

**BEARING WITNESS**

When Maria Elena Saenz died of COVID-19 complications on Aug. 23 at Rio Grande Regional Hospital in McAllen, she died alone. Her daughter Veronica, who bore close witness to her mother's life, laments that her mother died alone.

“I understand the public health issues,” Veronica said. “But I believe my mother could have fought this virus, or at the very least she would have died with more dignity, if I had been allowed to be by her side.”

“Everything my mother did in her life was about her family. She cared for us, and we cared for each other, so being sick and not having anyone to fight the sickness with, that alone could have killed her,” Veronica added. “She

could've had a chance.”

Being there for others was a way of life for Mary, as family and friends called her. Born July 22, 1952, in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Mary loved, and was beloved.

“Mary was warm, loving, and hilarious. She always had a smile on her face, always, and just loved to have fun,” said Vivian Vargas, a lifelong friend of the Saenz family, who also bore close witness to Mary's life. “There is no question Mary was the matriarch, the person everyone leaned on, especially during hard times.”

While Mary experienced great joy and love, her family also endured deep loss.

“My mom was the one who



Courtesy photo

Mary Saenz, right, is seen with her daughter Veronica. Mary took care of everyone. When someone died or someone

“Mary was the one who helped others grieve, always there to help,” Vivian recalls. “Veronica's father and my father died during the past seven to eight years, and Mary was the consistent rock in helping others deal with our losses.”

Vivian herself contracted the virus in June.

“My mom and I got it, don't really know where, but I'm sure we spread it to a lot of our family. We thought we were being careful, but you can't be careful enough,” she said.

When Vivian felt sick, she checked into the hospital.

“I didn't know if I was going to come out alive,” she said. “The COVID unit at the hospital had patients at different levels of severity, but there just weren't enough doctors for all the people coughing, yelling, and the chaos.”

Veronica describes her mother as calm and collected, but unable to handle the COVID-induced stress that enveloped the hospital.

“My mother never showed anxiety in her life,” Veronica said. “She was always calm, but the environment in the hospital was something she couldn't deal with, at least not by herself. She needed me!”

Veronica and Vivian argue that having family close to their sick loved ones can provide a boost, and perhaps save lives.

“If not save her life, at least my mother could have died differently,” Veronica said. “And that's important.”

The loss of her mother, but especially the way she died, continues to haunt Veronica.

“I haven't had the guts to

See SAENZ | 4A

# Toy drivers



Photos by A. Colleen DeGuzman | [cdeguzman@themonitor.com](mailto:cdeguzman@themonitor.com)

Car fanatics from across the Rio Grande Valley gathered Sunday for the eighth annual Car, Truck, Bike & Big Rig Christmas Toy Drive in Edinburg. The collected toys will be given to children living in colonias on Christmas Day.

## Valley car clubs, enthusiasts rev up holiday giving efforts

BY A. COLLEEN DeGUZMAN  
STAFF WRITER

EDINBURG — Lovers of lowriders and all things classic cars and pickup trucks gathered here Sunday afternoon to put their polished vehicles and generosity on display.

The men hopped off their vehicles — some with painted flames — carrying boxes of bubbles or dolls in their hands to donate to the eighth annual Car, Truck, Bike & Big Rig Christmas Toy Drive.

The event was hosted by local organizations Adopt an Angel and Cruize 4 Cause and held at the parking lot of CC Truckers LLC.

“It's all about the happiness for the kids, that is why I love this so much,” said Juan Lopez, founder of Cruize 4 Cause.

As some stopped by to drop off toys, others parked



Anita Salas, Julisa Rodriguez, Luis Rodriguez and Jose Rodriguez gather in Edinburg for a toy drive on Sunday near Julio Rodriguez's car. Julio died of COVID-19 in July.

along the side to add to the growing show of classic cars. However, some of the vehicles were missing their owners.

Next to the toy drop-off station were posters memorializing those part of local car clubs who died this year

— most due to COVID-19.

The cherry red 2017 Volkswagen Jetta GLI parked next to the toy drop-off station belonged to Julio Rodriguez, who succumbed to the virus in July. He was 38 years old.

His oldest daughter, Julisa Rodriguez, 16, was at the

toy drive and said he always looked forward to the event. It combined his two favorite things: cars and giving back to the community. He went every year.

“He was so loving and caring, and he liked a lot of cars and car events and shows,” she said.

Jesse Ramirez's black and maroon 2006 Chevrolet Silverado was parked next to the trucks of his friends of Pharr Boy Racing, a local car club.

The collected toys will be passed out to children living in colonias identified by Casa of Hidalgo, and Rio Grande Valley Families & Friends of Murdered Children Inc.

Additionally, Lopez is a human remains transporter for Elite Transportation & Clean Up of McAllen, and said since he spends his days driving around the Rio

See TOY DRIVE | 4A

## Border Texan Committee awards \$90,000 to UTRGV

BY MATTHEW RODRIGUEZ  
STAFF WRITER

McALLEN — The Border Texan Committee held a check presentation to donate \$90,000 to the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley on Thursday at the McAllen City Hall.

At the annual check presentation, the 2019 Border Texan of the Year, UTRGV President Guy Bailey, announced that a \$90,000 donation will be given to the university.

The committee started the check presentation by detailing the creation of the organization.

“Glen Roney, Henry Kawahata, Morris Atlas, and Joe Lamantia decided that it would be appropriate to recognize who was selfless in their work to better the Rio Grande Valley and the border community, and so they started the Border Texan of the Year event in 1989,” said committee co-Chair John David Franz.

The committee selects an annual Border Texan of the Year and recognizes the nominee at a banquet that serves as a fundraiser. Any proceeds raised at the banquet will be donated to the nominee's choice of charity or cause.

The Border Texan of the Year is announced annually at the check presentation. COVID-19 has, however, delayed the nomination for the 2020 honoree until 2021.

McAllen Mayor Jim Darling

introduced the formal 2019 Border Texan of the Year by highlighting his contributions in South Texas.

“He came down to create the greatest university, more than we ever expected and one of the best in the state of Texas” Darling said.

Prior to moving to South Texas, Bailey, 2019 Border Texan of the Year, served as president for the University of Alabama and Texas Tech University.

Since 2014, Bailey has served as president of UTRGV and has made numerous achievements with the university.

The U.S. News and World Report in 2020 rated UTRGV the top public university in the nation for the lowest student debt after graduation, and also garnered fourth in the nation right behind Harvard, Princeton and Duke when including private universities.

Washington Monthly ranked UTRGV 86 out of 383 universities nationwide based on social mobility, public assistance and research.

As Bailey announced the \$30,000 donation to the university, he fulfilled a promise he made at last year's banquet.

“I'm writing a \$30,000 check as soon as I get to the office today and the UTRGV foundation has also agreed

See 90K AWARD | 4A

## Discovery of 2 bodies leads to homicide investigation

STAFF REPORT

Hidalgo County Sheriff J.E. “Eddie” Guerra says authorities discovered two dead people Sunday morning, an incident which is being investigated as a homicide.

The bodies of a man and a woman were discovered after deputies responded

to a welfare check north of FM 1925 on Moorefield Road then east on Landing.

“They discovered the lifeless bodies of one adult male and one adult female. Investigation is ongoing,” Guerra wrote on Twitter.

Guerra's post accompanied a graphic that says HCSO homicide investigation.



## El Paso elects former mayor, defeating incumbent in runoff

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

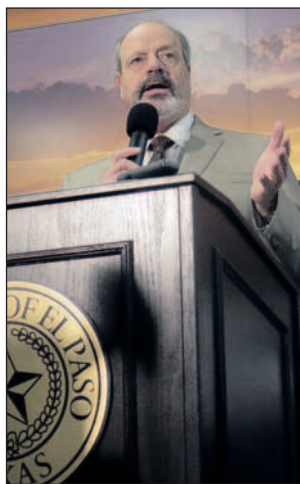
EL PASO, Texas — El Paso residents have elected a new mayor, handing a defeat to incumbent Mayor Dee Margo in favor of his predecessor, Oscar Leeser, in a runoff race defined by the city's coronavirus crisis.

Leeser, who was mayor of the West Texas city on the Mexican border from 2013 through 2017, won with an overwhelming 82% of the vote, according to El Paso County's unofficial tally. He finished first among six mayoral candidates in November, but with less than 50%, forcing Saturday's runoff.

Leeser pledged Saturday night to bring together the city that has been battered in recent years by overcrowded migrants at the border, a mass shooting at a Walmart and the economic and health crisis brought on by the coronavirus.

"We're going to unite our voice and we're going to have a plan to make sure our community feels we no longer have a crisis," Leeser, standing by his wife, told KVIA-TV. "I look forward to really starting tomorrow morning."

Mayoral races in El Paso are nonpartisan, but Margo, a businessman and former state legislator, identifies as a Repub-



Astrid Galvan | The Associated Press

El Paso Mayor Oscar Leeser speaks during a city meeting on Tuesday, Jan. 26, 2016, in El Paso, Texas.

lican. Leeser, president of a Hyundai dealership, is a Democrat.

Margo said in a concession speech Saturday that he believes no mayor has had to deal with the array of calamity he's faced in the last two years.

"I am hopeful that it will be recognized that I did the best I could to lead on behalf of the community through these three crises including the one we are still going through which is this pandemic," Margo told the El Paso Times.

Leeser will be sworn in in early January, a city official told the Times, although a date has not been set for the ceremony.

## More US churches are committing to racism-linked reparations

BY DAVID CRARY  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — The Episcopal Diocese of Texas acknowledges that its first bishop in 1859 was a slaveholder. An Episcopal church in New York City erects a plaque noting the building's creation in 1810 was made possible by wealth resulting from slavery.

And the Minnesota Council of Churches cites a host of injustices — from mid-19th century atrocities against Native Americans to police killings of Black people — in launching a first-of-its kind "truth and reparations" initiative engaging its 25 member denominations.

These efforts reflect a widespread surge of interest among many U.S. religious groups in the area of reparations, particularly among long-established Protestant churches that were active in the era of slavery. Many are initiating or considering how to make amends through financial investments and long-term programs benefiting African Americans.

Some major denominations, including the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention, have not embraced reparations as official policy. The Episcopal Church has been the most active major denomination thus far, and others, including the United Methodist



Bebeto Matthews | The Associated Press

A plaque sits at the steps of St. James Episcopal Church, Friday Dec. 4, in New York's Upper East Side neighborhood, acknowledging the church's wealth created with slave labor.

Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, are urging congregations to consider similar steps.

The Minnesota Council of Churches initiative was announced in October.

"Minnesota has some of the highest racial disparities in the country — in health, wealth, housing, how police treat folks," said the council's CEO, the Rev. Curtiss DeYoung. "Those disparities all come from a deep history of racism."

The initiative, envisioned as a 10-year undertaking, is distinctive in several ways. It engages a diverse collection of Christian denominations, including some that are predominantly Black; it will model some of its efforts on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that operated in South Africa after the end of apartheid; and it is based in Min-

neapolis, where the police killing of George Floyd in May sparked global protests over racial injustice.

"This particular event, because it was right here where we live, was a call to action," DeYoung said. "The first thing that we did, of course, like everyone else, was get into the streets and march ... but there are deep, historic issues that require more than marching."

Another notable aspect of the Minnesota initiative is that it seeks to address social justice concerns of African Americans and Native Americans in a unified way.

"For so long these have been two separate camps — Indigenous people and African Americans felt they are competing against each other for the same limited resources," said the Rev. Jim Bear Jacobs, a Native American who is the church

council's director of racial justice.

"By bringing these two communities together, it removes that mindset of, 'We have to get ours, and that might mean you don't get yours,'" he said.

Jacobs belongs to a Wisconsin-based Mohican tribe but was born in Minnesota and is well-versed in the grim chapters of the latter's history regarding Native Americans. He cited the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862, which ended with the internment of hundreds of Dakota people and the hanging of 38 Dakota men in Mankato — the largest mass execution in U.S. history. After the war, many of the Dakota were expelled from the state.

Jacobs hopes to see churches commit to ongoing financial support for Native Americans to reclaim their culture and languages.

"I want it to be a line in their budget, like they do for building maintenance," he said. "If all the churches do is take up a special offering, there's no shift in the power dynamics that created these problems in the first place."

The Rev. Stacey Smith, presiding elder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Minnesota and a member of the Council of Churches board, said the reparations initiative places the state "at the epicenter of being transformed with racial justice."

## US agency looks to open rare lizard's habitat to oil and gas

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CARLSBAD, N.M. — Federal wildlife managers are considering offering permits to landowners in the Permian Basin that environmentalists say could further compromise habitat for a rare lizard found only in parts of southeastern New Mexico and West Texas.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will be accepting comments on the proposal through Dec. 21.

The permits would be available to landown-

ers who are participating in candidate conservation agreements with the federal government. The permits would cover situations when dunes sagebrush lizards are harmed or killed during oil and gas operations, sand mining, renewable energy development, agriculture or construction activities.

A candidate for federal protection for nearly two decades, the lizard has yet to be added to the list of threatened and endangered species.

It dwells in sand dunes

and among shinnery oak. It's active between April and October.

Federal biologists have said the primary threat to the lizard is the loss of habitat associated with oil and gas development and sand mining. As a result, the reptile's habitat has become more fragmented.

The federal government has leaned on conservation agreements — which call on landowners to take actions to protect the lizard and its home range — as a way to put off a listing that would restrict access to

large swaths of the land in one of the nation's most active shale plays

The permit proposal would allow development on 54 square miles (140 square kilometers) across six counties in West Texas, assuring landowners they would not be subjected to federal restrictions whether the species is listed or not, in exchange for following numerous conservation requirements. Permits would remain in effect for up to 23 years or until surrendered by the permittees.



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Anita Salas, founder of Adopt an Angel, collects toys Sunday afternoon during the eighth annual Car, Truck, Bike & Big Rig Christmas Toy Drive in Edinburg.

## 90K AWARD

From Page 3A

to match with \$30,000, so we have \$90,000."

Along with the \$30,000 funds raised from last year's banquet, Bailey and the UTRGV foundation have agreed to individually donate \$30,000.

The donation will go toward funding student scholarships at the university. The university cur-

rently offers 200 full ride scholarships to the top 10% scholars and with the donation, it is expected to raise up to 400 in the fall of 2021.

"I cannot think of any better use of money in the Valley than investing in our students," Bailey said. "I have a commitment to our students too and for me it is personally rewarding to see our students go to college and graduate."



## Extended Coverage by B.R. Whisenant

### STUDY SHOWS TRAMPOLINE INJURIES HAVE INCREASED OVER THE PAST DECADE

Between 2008 and 2017, the incidence of trampoline-related fractures increased by an average of 3.85% in the U.S., and the driver behind those increases are trampoline injuries outside of the home at places of recreation or sport, according to new research.

The growing popularity of trampoline entertainment/exercise businesses—which are often advertised as places to hold birthday parties and other children's activities—coincides with an increase in trampoline injuries, in particular the injuries that occurred outside of the home. Researchers found that every year during the study it was 32% more likely that a child's trampoline-related bone fracture occurred at a recreation facility or gym, rather than on a trampoline in the backyard or otherwise attached to a home.

Researchers used the National Electronic Injury Surveillance System to study the increasing prevalence of injuries from trampolines in children who have broken bones.

Trampoline injuries have long been a substantial contributor to broken bones in children, and this study suggests the popularity of new trampoline parks may be contributing to the increased incidence of trampoline fractures. Research showed that trampoline-related fractures accounted for 3.59% of pediatric fractures in 2008. By 2017, trampoline injuries caused 6.16% of all broken bones in children.

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## TOY DRIVE

From Page 3A

Grande Valley, he has a good idea where to find families in need.

"Every time I see a colonia I can help, I wait for this day, for December, to be able to take them these toys," he said.

Since Cruize 4 Cause began taking part in the drive, Lopez with his twin 6-year-old daughters and 8-year-old son have spent every Christmas Day delivering toys to less fortunate children.

"My kids, they're already used to it," Lopez said. "In the morning they don't open their own presents, they go with me and deliver the presents and when they come back they open their own presents. I am teaching them how to be humble, and I want people to know that others care for them."

Anita Salas is the founder of Paragon Promotions, a company that assists local fundraisers that involve car shows which opened its Adopt an Angel branch eight years ago. She shares the same drive for

fostering kindness and joy for needy families this season.

"Our goal is to plant seeds into this new generation to keep the spirit of Christmas alive, the spirit of giving and kindness, and to put Christ back into Christmas," Salas said. "It's more than just a toy, we want to bring smiles to children's faces so that when they wake up, they can receive a toy that is coming from a complete stranger that loves them and cares for them."

Lopez noted last year's event was much bigger, with about 180 vehicles in attendance and about 500 toys collected. Early in this year's toy drive, about a couple dozen vehicles were present, but he said if the drive brightened up just one child's day, then the event would have been worth it.

"I don't know how many people are going to come by, but God is good and I know we will supply where we are needed," he said.

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## SAENZ

From Page 3A

go through my mom's stuff, not even find her yearbook to tell you when she graduated from PSJA High School. It's in boxes in my spare bedroom, but I'm not ready. I know I'll break if I get into it," she said.

"My mom was great. She was always there. She loved and was loved. But after she helped so many for so many years, I just feel we could not help her the way she deserved," Veronica said.

We can only hope reflection and eulogy help Veron-

ica assuage the loss of her mother.

*Que en paz descanse Mary Saenz. 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.*