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~J. GONZALEZ

Family in funeral business loses mother to COVID-19

BY FRANCISCO GUAJARDO
SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

Yolanda Guerra and her husband George last saw each other in person on Nov. 25, 2020, the day before Thanksgiving. That day, she said, “Honey, I’ve lived a good life. Thank you for everything. I love you!”

Moments later, she was whisked away to McAllen Medical Center, where she died of COVID-19 complications on Dec. 4, at age 63. She was born in Edcouch on May 21, 1957.

George bore witness to Yolanda since 1971, when they were in the band together at Edcouch-Elsa High School: he a 15-year-old sophomore, she a 14-year-old freshman.

“She was playing the clarinet, when she caught my eye,” George said. “I played the trumpet. We didn’t hit it off in the beginning, but when she asked me to be her chamberlain at her quinceañera, the relationship was sealed.”

“She came from a very humble family,” George added. “Her mother Toñita and her siblings all learned how to work hard, be responsible, and to be there for each other.

BEARING WITNESS

They learned to love the Lord. But materially, they didn’t have much.”

George recounts that as a little girl, Yolanda never owned a doll, and didn’t have a purse as an adolescent.

“But in case any family members or friends were ever curious,” George said. “Yolanda became a doll collector and had a closet full of purses.”

She even gave dolls for Christmas, especially to 7-year-old granddaughter Avery, who bore adoring witness to her grandmother, and who describes her as “silly old grandma.”

“She taught me how to do the hula hoop,” Avery said.

Funny that the exercise was a complete hip-action simulation — there was no hula hoop. Indeed, Yolanda was silly.

Yolanda’s son, George Jr., said his mother “brought life into any room. She had a glow about her, beautiful in every way.” He and his mother talked every day.

“My day would end with a phone call to her,” he said.

Eric, Yolanda’s younger son, said his mother exuded love, hope and faith.

“Mom always told me to pursue my dreams, to never let anyone tell you that you couldn’t do something,” said Eric, who saw his mother as a precious gift.

George and Yolanda shared the responsibility of growing Guerra’s Funeral Home into a respected business in the community. Yolanda was committed to the funeral home, but she always worked at least one other job.

“She was a bookkeeper and was good at it, always loyal and hardworking to her employer,” George said.

Through the years George and Yolanda built strong relationships with the community. A trained mortician, George handled the mortuary science, while Yolanda helped with



Courtesy photo

See GUERRA | 4A Mr. and Mrs. George and Yolanda Guerra.

Forecast: Wind



Courtesy photo

Acciona plans to bring its new wind farm, La Chalupa, online in the Lower Valley.

Acciona bringing new La Chalupa wind farm online in Lower Valley

BY RICK KELLEY
STAFF WRITER

Acciona Energy is busy plugging its new wind farm into the Texas power grid after completing construction of its La Chalupa site in Cameron County, officials said Thursday.

The 63 wind turbines, Nordex AWP 3150s, have a rotor diameter of more than 400 feet and are mounted on steel towers with a hub height of about 300 feet.

La Chalupa is Acciona’s 10th wind farm in the

United States and third in Cameron County. The company, headquartered in Spain, also operates the San Roman and Palmas Altas wind-energy sites.

The new wind farm will generate 198 megawatts of electricity, far larger than San Roman (93 MW) and Palmas Altas (145 MW).

“This new investment highlights Acciona’s commitment to the U.S. renewables market,” said Rafael Esteban, director of Acciona’s energy division in the United States.

“It will allow us to pass

1,000 megawatts of installed capacity in the U.S., where we also have a major portfolio of renewable projects under development,” he added.

In a previous interview with the Valley Morning Star, Esteban said his company is so bullish on Cameron County because, unlike other areas, the winds here blow at night as well as day, allowing for a more even power generating schedule.

The project includes the construction of an 11-mile high-voltage line to move

the power generated to the grid. The electricity will be sold on the ERCOT-South Texas wholesale market.

Acciona has three wind farms in Oklahoma, two in the Dakotas, one in Illinois and one in Iowa.

The company said the name for the new wind farm is taken from the small boat popularized by the Mexican bingo-style game Loteria.

The wind farm will be able to power up to 97,000 homes. More than 270 construction jobs were created to build it.

Mission man sentenced to 3 years in drug scheme case, carjacking

BY LORENZO ZAZUETA-CASTRO
STAFF WRITER

A court sentenced Daniel Herrera-Bear for his role in a drug scheme that involved cocaine and a carjacking, records show.

Herrera-Bear pleaded guilty in late September to a carjacking charge he faces in connection with the case.

During a teleconference hearing Tuesday afternoon, the court handed down a 37-month sentence for Herrera-Bear. The court stated there will be no supervised release term for the Mission man.

According to the indictment against Herrera-Bear, 38, of Mission, and four others — Emily Julieta Gonzalez, 23, of Edinburg; Jorge Alberto De Leon, 27, of Mission; Ruben Artemio Villarreal Jr. and Israel Hernandez, ages and last known residence unlisted — the group conspired with

each other to import more than 5 kilos of cocaine from Mexico.

The five were implicated in the conspiracy after an incident in March when 9 kilos of cocaine were found inside a Chevrolet Trailblazer that belonged to Gonzalez’s uncle.

On March 18, Gonzalez entered the country from Mexico in the Trailblazer.

After she crossed into the U.S., Gonzalez was seen on surveillance footage arriving at a business in Hidalgo — less than 30 minutes after crossing the U.S.

“According to the surveillance footage, less than ten minutes after the arrival of the Trailblazer, two other vehicles, including a white Volkswagen Beetle, arrive and enter the parking lot. The two vehicles park near the Trailblazer and individuals from the vehicles enter the Trailblazer and leave in the

See SENTENCED | 4A

20 years in prison for corporate exec who lied about terminal prognoses

STAFF REPORT

A corporate executive has been ordered to prison after his conviction related to falsely telling thousands of patients with long-term incurable diseases, such as Alzheimers and dementia, they had less than six months to live and subsequently enrolling them in hospice programs.

A federal jury in McAllen convicted Rodney Mesquias, 48, of San Antonio. The one-month trial in November 2019 was one of the first criminal hospice fraud prosecutions the Department of Justice has presented to a federal jury.

U.S. District Court Judge Rolando Olvera on Wednesday ordered Mesquias to serve a total of 240 months in federal prison and to pay \$120 million in restitution.

“Financial healthcare fraud is abhorrent enough, but to fraudulently diagnose patients with dementia or Al-

zheimer’s is the pinnacle of medical cruelty to both the patient and their family,” said U.S. Attorney Ryan K. Patrick of the Southern District of Texas in a news release. “They falsely gave patients life ending diagnosis and they will pay the price with years behind bars.”

“Mesquias funded his lavish lifestyle by exploiting patients with long-term, incurable diseases by enrolling them in expensive but unnecessary hospice services,” said Acting Assistant Attorney General Brian C. Rabbitt of the Justice Department’s Criminal Division. “This significant sentence represents the department’s continued commitment to pursue those who orchestrate and commit healthcare fraud schemes.”

Mesquias and his co-conspirator Henry McInnis, 48, were both convicted of one count each of conspiracy to

See 20 YEARS | 4A

\$5M gifted to United Way of Southern Cameron County

BY STEVE CLARK
STAFF WRITER

United Way of Southern Cameron County has received a major recognition of its work in the form of a \$5 million gift from author and philanthropist MacKenzie Scott.

It is the largest gift in the nonprofit's 65-year history.

The donation was announced on Dec. 15 as part of a nearly \$4.2 billion charitable blitz Scott embarked on after determining to deliver "immediate support to people suffering the economic effects of the crisis" caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, she posted on the online publishing platform Medium.

UWSCC was one of 384 community organizations across all 50 states, Puerto Rico and Washington D.C. targeted by Scott, who is also the ex-wife of Amazon founder, CEO and President Jeff Bezos.

"This pandemic has been a wrecking ball in the lives of Americans already struggling," Scott wrote on Medium. "Economic losses and health outcomes alike have been worse for women, for people of color, and for people living in poverty. Meanwhile, it has substantially increased the wealth of billionaires."

She wrote that it would have been easy for "all the people who drew the long demographic straws in this crisis" to hole up and wait things out, but

in fact community aid efforts have proliferated in response to the suffering, which Scott said inspired her to dial up her giving in 2020.

The 384 recipient organizations were chosen after Scott's group of advisers consulted with hundreds of nonprofit leaders and volunteers, funders and experts, she wrote. What followed was "thousands of pages of data analysis on community needs, program outcomes, and each nonprofit's capacity to absorb and make effective use of funding," Scott wrote.

Traci Wickett, UWSCC president and CEO, described the \$5 million gift as transformational and a huge validation of UWSCC's track record in the community.

Wickett said her organization is grateful and humbled to be included among the 384 nonprofits, and that she hopes it inspires the community "to realize that someone has that much belief in us and desires to support us in accomplishing our work."

Scott's support will allow UWSCC to continue its daily mission of "fighting for the health, education and stability of every person in our community" while also providing "incredible resources" to come up with innovative ways to solve the community's most pressing problems, Wickett said.

NEWSBRIEFS

Pilot dies in crash of experimental aircraft

BURLESON, Texas — The pilot of a small experimental aircraft has died after crashing into a parking lot as it approached a North Texas airport, authorities say.

The Federal Aviation Administration said the pilot was the only person aboard the single-engine Sonex experimental aircraft when it crashed Saturday afternoon in Burleson, located just south of Fort Worth.

A spokesperson for the city of Burleson said the pilot did not survive the crash.

The FAA said the plane crashed south of a runway at Spinks Airport.

The FAA and National Transportation Safety Board will investigate.

Average US price of gas up 4 cents a gallon to \$2.26

CAMARILLO, Calif. — The average U.S. price of regular-grade gasoline jumped 4 cents a gallon over the past two weeks to \$2.26.

Industry analyst Trilby Lundberg of the Lundberg Survey said Sunday that a rise in crude oil prices spurred the increase.

The price at the pump is 35 cents less than it was a year ago.

The highest average price in the nation is \$3.34 a gallon in San Francisco. The lowest average is \$1.18 in Houston.

The average price of diesel spiked 6 cents over the past two weeks to \$2.58. The survey was conducted Friday.

Arizona migrant border deaths on track for record amid heat

BY ANITA SNOW
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DOUGLAS, Ariz. — Heat exposure killed 19-year-old Cesar de la Cruz on an Arizona trail in July during his trek up from southern Mexico. The body of Juan Lopez Valencia, another young Mexican man, was discovered Aug. 3 along a dry wash on Native American land.

After the hottest, driest summer in state history, authorities have recovered close to a 10-year record in the number of bodies of people who crossed from Mexico into Arizona's deserts, valleys and mountains. It's a reminder that the most remote paths to enter the U.S. can be the deadliest.

Enforcement efforts in neighboring states over the years have helped drive people into Arizona's difficult terrain, and some officials and activists believe stepped-up construction of President Donald Trump's border wall this year, large-



Charlie Riedel | The Associated Press

In this March 2, 2019, file photo, a Customs and Border Protection agent patrols on the U.S. side of a razor-wire-covered border wall along Mexico east of Nogales, Ariz.

ly in Arizona, also could be pushing migrants into dangerous areas without easy access to food and water.

De la Cruz and Lopez Valencia were among 214 confirmed or suspected migrants whose deaths at the Arizona border were documented from January to November by the nonprofit Humane Borders and the Pima County Medical Examiner's Office, which

together map recoveries of human remains.

"There's no doubt in my mind that the high temperatures have had a lot to do with it," said Mike Kreyche, Humane Borders' mapping coordinator.

The highest annual number that the project documented was 224 in 2010. It wasn't clear if 2020 would exceed that once December is factored in.

The Border Patrol keeps its own statistics, counting the remains of suspected migrants it learns about in the course of its duties, according to its parent agency, Customs and Border Protection. CBP said that if another agency recovers remains and doesn't notify the Border Patrol, it won't be included in its tally.

For the first nine months of 2020, the Border Patrol listed 43 deaths in the Yuma and Tucson sectors that make up the Arizona border area. The mapping project tracked 181 deaths over the same period.

During the 2019 calendar year, the federal government listed 70 deaths in Arizona, while the mapping project counted 144.

Federal statistics show that search and rescue operations near Arizona's border inexplicably dipped to 213 during a record-hot July and August, from 232 in July and August 2019. But early fall figures indicate rescues across the Southwest were trending up.

SENTENCED

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Trailblazer," court records show.

Gonzalez, when interviewed by law enforcement, claimed the people in the footage took her SUV without her consent.

An hour after the vehicle was stolen, Mission police, with help from Gonzalez's uncle, found the SUV abandoned near Los Ebanos Road in Mission. Police captured footage of a vehicle, a Chevrolet Malibu, as it left the scene near the SUV as they were arriving, the complaint states.

Gonzalez's uncle located the vehicle using the GPS, and a killswitch to disable the vehicle.

"(Gonzalez's uncle) stated that after the killswitch was activated several individuals exited the vehicle and entered other vehicles to flee the scene," the docu-

ment shows.

Subsequently, police officers discovered the cocaine inside the Trailblazer.

Eventually a cooperating informant implicated De Leon and Herrera-Bear in the carjacking.

The CI told authorities De Leon was in the Volkswagen Beetle that was used to conduct the carjacking, while Herrera-Bear was the mastermind behind the carjacking's planning, and provided information regarding Gonzalez's Trailblazer and the drugs inside the vehicle.

Federal agents eventually executed search warrants on both Herrera-Bear's and De Leon's respective places of residence, and were able to gather evidence that the two were in communication regarding the carjacking.

"During a search of De Leon's phone, Agents also found WhatsApp conversations with other individuals including a contact saved

as 'Chamoy,' who has been identified as (Herrera-Bear) based on the cell phone number known to be used by Herrera-Bear," the complaint states.

"During a review of the WhatsApp conversations, Agents found audio messages with Herrera-Bear on April 19, 2020 discussing the purchase of a cell phone jammer that could be used to prevent the use of GPS or cell phone signals from being sent."

De Leon's phone also contained screenshots or photos of the Hidalgo Police Department and the U.S. Homeland Security Investigations office in McAllen at times that the tracker would have been located at said location.

"Agents also located screenshots of reporting from The Monitor detailing the federal arrest of (Gonzalez) on De Leon's phone," the court record shows.

Based on the cell site loca-

tions found on their respective phones, De Leon and Herrera-Bear were in the vicinity of the carjacking, and of the abandoned vehicle, respectively.

According to a subsequent redacted indictment, Villarreal and Hernandez are implicated as playing a role in the initial carjacking.

Gonzalez and De Leon each pleaded guilty to one count related to the drug conspiracy on Sept. 23. De Leon and Gonzalez are scheduled for sentencing in March 2021, court notes show.

Villarreal and Hernandez are the two holdouts and are each set for pre-trial conferences in the near future; Villarreal in January, with the potential jury trial, and Hernandez, who is scheduled for a pre-trial setting in February, records show.

lzazueta@
themonitor.com

20 YEARS

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commit healthcare fraud, conspiracy to commit money laundering and conspiracy to obstruct justice as well as six counts of healthcare fraud. Mesquias was separately convicted on one count of conspiracy to pay and receive kickbacks.

The USAO stated that from 2009 to 2018, Mesquias and McInnis engaged in a scheme that involved \$150 million in false and fraudulent claims for hospice and other health

care services. Mesquias owned and controlled the Merida Group, a large healthcare company that operated dozens of locations throughout Texas. McInnis was Merida Group's CEO.

"Families seek to give comfort and support to their ailing loved ones when all other medical options are gone," said Special Agent in Charge Christopher Combs, FBI San Antonio Division. "It is unconscionable and evil to prey upon the most vulnerable in our community to commit fraud against government-

funded programs. The FBI is committed to protecting our communities from those who may not have the strength to protect themselves."

Authorities said Mesquias and McInnis also were convicted in connection with laundering the proceeds of the fraud.

The jury found they used monies to purchase expensive vehicles such as a Porsche, expensive jewelry, luxury clothing from high-end retailers such as Louis Vuitton, exclusive real estate, season tickets for premium

sporting events and a security detail and bottle service at high-end Las Vegas nightclubs.

Mesquias and McInnis also treated physicians to lavish parties at these elite nightclubs, providing them with tens of thousands of dollars in alcohol and other perks in exchange for medically unnecessary patient referrals, authorities said.

McInnis will be sentenced at a later date. Two other co-conspirators have pleaded guilty and are awaiting sentencing.

GUERRA

From Page 3A

the bookkeeping, payroll and public relations.

"Sometimes, she'd help me prepare ladies' hair," George said.

The Guerras took pride in being there for others — a hallmark of the family value system.

"Like her mother Toñita," said George, Yolanda embodied a generous spirit.

There's the story of a friend of the boys, a young man named Orlando Rodriguez, who goes by the nickname Nige.

"When he was in the 8th grade," said George, Nige stayed the night after a school function.

According to Nige, "I was lost at that point in his life, but through Yolanda's guidance, I found my way to the Lord, and my life was changed forever."

"They took me in, as if I was their son, and she was the force behind that," said Nige, who also bore close witness to Yolanda.

While George has been in the funeral business since 1976, he said it "didn't quite prepare you for when you lose a family member. When it hits home, it's very different. I can now see how families can be so overwhelmed. I gained an appreciation for how challenging it is."

"Closure has been hard for all of us," George said. "I had to dress Yolanda for final viewing. It was very hard, but I felt (like) such an honor to do that."

"The rosaries have been very helpful," George Jr. said. "Even if we do them virtually. It's been great to see family be there throughout."

George also tells the story of Max, the family Shih Tzu who took Yolanda's death as hard as any human.

"Max knew," said George. "He got depressed and had this sadness about him. So, I took him to see Yolanda's body in the funeral home. I took him twice, in fact, be-

cause he needed closure."

Apparently, the last exchanges with Yolanda eased Max's grief.

"He is now back to his bouncy self," George said. "But only because he had a chance to sniff her one last time. Max and Yolanda were able to communicate — in a deeply spiritual way."

On this holiday season, we celebrate the gift of the love Yolanda Guerra bestowed upon so many. More than anything, "Yolanda believed in the Lord and in her family," said George.

Que en paz descanses Yolanda Guerra. 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.

Extended Coverage
by B.R. Whisenant

MANY GRANDPARENTS' MEDICINES NOT SECURE ENOUGH AROUND GRANDCHILDREN—PART I

Whether it's a rare treat or a weekly routine, spending time with grandchildren brightens life for many older adults. But a new poll suggests many of them could do more to reduce the risk of their medications harming their grandchild. More than 80% of the grandparents polled say they keep their medication in the same place as usual when their grandchildren visit their house—and 72% keep them in their purse or bag when they go to visit their grandchildren. Additionally, nearly one-third say they store their prescription medications in something other than the container they came in—with the vast majority of them using an easy-to-open container. These practices may put children at risk of accidental poisoning if they get into their grandparents' medications. And for older grandchildren, the easy access may lead to misuse of certain medicines that hold the potential for abuse—for instance pain medicines and sedatives.

The findings, from the National Poll on Healthy Aging, suggest that grandparents need more education about safe medication storage when they're around children and teens, whether for a holiday visit or a regular childcare session.

The poll asked more than 2,000 adults aged 50 to 80 questions about medication storage. The poll finds that two-thirds of grandparents say they provide care for their grandchildren; 42% care for them monthly and 18% care for them weekly. One in ten live with their grandchildren year-round. Just over half of all adults age 50 and over who answered the poll are grandparents, including 74% of those over age 65. In all, 86% said their grandchildren had visited them in the past year. According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly 40% of children treated in emergency departments for medication-related poisoning took their grandparents' medicines.

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