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~J. GONZALEZ

Farmer cultivated fruitful life before dying due to COVID-19

BY FRANCISCO GUAJARDO
SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

BEARING WITNESS

Alberto Ybarra, a La Blanca farmer and family man, died Aug. 15, 2020, at McAllen Medical Center, when he succumbed to COVID-19. He was 49 and leaves behind his wife Lilliana, 18-year-old son Angel, 17-year-old son Abram, and 14-year-old daughter Andrea. He is also survived by his parents Rosa and Abel Ybarra, who are 89 and 87, respectively, and six brothers and sisters.

Lilliana bore closest witness to her husband of almost 25 years.

“Albert came from a farming family,” she said. “He knew how to operate all the equipment: tractors, planters, plows, cot-

ton pickers, combines. All the equipment to harvest, he knew how to work it. He learned it from his family, and he passed it down to my children and me. When he died, we just continued to do what he taught us.”

Albert grew up in the fields, and along with his sisters and brothers learned just about every facet of farming.

“Everybody was involved,” Lilliana said. “When he planted calabazas, for example, he did it with his father and his siblings. They harvested together, and then his



Alberto Ybarra

mother sold the calabazas from her home. That’s how he grew up.”

The family and the farm

became Albert’s greatest teachers.

After he graduated from Edinburg High School in 1989, Albert continued to farm and eventually became an agriculture specialist at the University of Texas Pan-American, now UTRGV. Through that position Albert took part in training at least one generation of new farmers in the Rio Grande Valley. After more than 20 years at UTPA and then UT Rio Grande Valley, he leaves an enduring legacy in his role as mentor and friend to farmers, and many others.

Juan Raygoza, a UTRGV director of special programs who helps beginning farmers, also bore witness to Albert’s life. Juan tells that Albert was a

great mentor.

“I called Albert almost daily, because he knew more about farm equipment than anyone,” Juan said. “His knowledge on farm equipment was vast, and he mentored me and many others while maintaining great humility.”

Juan describes the challenges Albert experienced with COVID-19 and describes a sense of immediate loss.

“Albert was just gifted as a farmer,” Juan said. “I miss his wisdom, and his guidance, but I mostly miss him as a friend. He was so giving.”

Juan describes Albert as a bridge person, the kind who bridged 20th century agricultural knowledge with an understanding of more modern-day farm-

ing practices. Lilliana describes him as a man who was always there for his family.

“We did everything together,” she said. “He was always there for me, for his children, and for everyone in his family.”

“When Hurricane Hanna hit in July,” Lilliana said. “Albert got really busy securing the fences to protect the cows, goats, chickens and other things on the farm. And the day after the hurricane, he got sick with the virus, and he didn’t recover.”

Like many others during the pandemic of 2020, Albert leaves us too prematurely. But Lilliana and her family can find solace in having been part of

See **YBARRA** | 4A

Community roots



Photos by Denise Cathey | The Brownsville Herald

Eugene Fernandez walks around the tree limbs from the Montezuma cypress trees pruned by TxDOT Dec 15 at the site of old Lincoln Park under the US 73/88 Expressway. TxDOT will purchase 12 Montezuma cypress trees to replace the two lost.

Brownsville cypress trees to be replaced

BY DENISE CATHEY
STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

It started, as many cases do for Eugene Fernandez, director of South Texas Center for Historical and Genealogical Research, with a phone call.

“They said ‘Mr. Fernandez, you don’t know me, but ... have you seen Lincoln Park lately?’ and there was this pause and I said ‘oh my God why,’” Fernandez recalled.

On Oct. 26 a Texas Department of Transportation ground crew working in the old Lincoln Park, now a TxDOT right of way under the elevated U.S. 83/77 Expressway, pruned two of the hundred-year-old Montezuma cypress trees that grew in between the main lanes.

Fernandez was out at the site within an hour of the call.

“My heart went into my stomach,” he said.

The trees had been overpruned to the extent that almost nothing remained of their former leafy crowns.



Eugene Fernandez spreads out a map on a table to find new sites for 12 new Montezuma cypress trees Dec 15 at Cobbleheads Bar and Grill. The trees, purchased by TxDOT, will replace two that were over pruned by a TxDOT ground crew in October in the old Lincoln Park.

Fernandez was horrified, not only at the loss of the trees themselves, but for the loss they represented to the history of Brownsville.

Montezuma cypresses are in some ways a rarity in the Rio Grande Valley. According to Fernandez, records of the tree’s presence here stretch back to 5,000 years ago as they traveled from Mexico

along the Sabines River into the Rio Grande.

However they were one of the few sources of lumber in the Valley and the cypress forests were depleted by the late 1800s. In Brownsville the trees are largely found now at the Jagou Plantation and the old Lincoln Park.

The park was part of decades of development start-

ing in the 1920s with further additions and improvements coming through WPA funding and labor as part of the New Deal.

Lincoln Park was forested with numerous Montezuma cypresses and other species that flourished along a leg of Town Resaca that ran through the grounds.

However, time marched on and with it came an end to the park as the U.S. 77/83 Expressway was expanded to connect with Los Tomates Bridge in the late 1990s leaving behind only three of the cypresses.

Fernandez, a known champion of the trees through his work with the Jagou Plantation, was ready to take up their cause.

He reached out to the city of Brownsville and crafted an online petition to send out to his 1,500 followers collecting signatures that could then be presented to TxDOT to get reparations. City municipal code requires an

See **CYPRESS TREES** | 4A

Starr County women get 6 years in 2019 meth case

50 kilos found inside vehicle

BY LORENZO ZAZUETA-CASTRO
STAFF WRITER

A federal judge handed down more than six-year prison sentences for two Starr county women in a methamphetamine smuggling case, records show.

U.S. District Judge Randy Crane sentenced Helen Garza and Herminia Cantu-Garcia for their roles in a conspiracy to import methamphetamine into the country.

Garza, of Rio Grande City, and Cantu-Garcia, of Roma, pleaded guilty in late February to conspiracy charges related to the December 2019 incident.

According to the complaint against the women, Garza drove a car from Mexico and attempted to enter the United States through the Roma Port of Entry. Authorities subse-

quently inspected the vehicle and found hidden compartments within its tires.

Upon further examination, they found multiple bundles containing 50 kilograms of meth, a release from the U.S. Attorney’s Office Southern District of Texas stated.

Garza admitted she knew there were drugs in the car when she was interviewed by federal authorities, the release stated.

Further investigation revealed Cantu-Garcia had coordinated the drug trafficking with Garza and other unnamed and unknown individuals.

U.S. Homeland Security Investigations officials said the sentence should convey a message that this type of criminal activity will result in severe punishment.

“The vast scope of this criminal scheme would have had a devastating effect on the citizens of south Texas.

See **METH CASE** | 4A

National seashore announces six fee-free days in 2021

BY RICK KELLEY
STAFF WRITER

HARLINGEN — Miles of beaches at Padre Island National Seashore will be there for the taking on six fee-free days planned for 2021.

Officials at the national park have announced fee waivers for six days, starting Jan. 18, Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

The rest of the free days are: >> Saturday, April 17, the first day of National Park Week;

>> Wednesday, Aug. 4, the Green American Outdoors Act anniversary;

>> Wednesday, Aug. 25, the National Park Service’s birthday;

>> Saturday, Sept. 25, National Public Lands Day;

>> and Thursday, Nov. 11,

Veterans Day.

“South Texas has some of the best weather and most comforting stretches of coastal beach anywhere. Fee-free days are wonderful opportunities to experience our federal lands and appreciate the resources we’ve set aside for everybody’s enjoyment,” said Eric Brunnemann, national seashore superintendent.

The usual fees to enter the park are \$10 per vehicle and \$7 per motorcycle.

The entrance fee waiver for the fee-free days does not cover amenity or user fees for activities such as camping or boat launches.

Annual passes for Padre Island National Seashore are available for \$45, and seven-day passes are \$25.

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Miguel Gutierrez Jr. | The Texas Tribune

Dennis Bonnen, outgoing speaker of the Texas House, is experiencing mild coronavirus symptoms, he said Sunday on Facebook.

Texas House Speaker Bonnen tests positive for coronavirus

BY KATE MCGEE THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

The outgoing speaker of the Texas House of Representatives, Dennis Bonnen, R-Angleton, has tested positive for COVID-19, according to a post on his Facebook page Sunday.

all health protocols since March, thanks to my wife's adamant reminders," Bonnen said on his Facebook page.



Rick Bowmer | The Associated Press

Utah running back Ty Jordan (22) scores against Washington State during the second half of an NCAA college football game, in Salt Lake City on Dec. 19

Authorities: Utah's Ty Jordan died in accidental shooting

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DALLAS — Ty Jordan, a star freshman running back for the University of Utah, died at a Dallas-area hospital after accidentally shooting himself, authorities said Sunday.

cording to medical examiner's records. Police officers had responded about an hour earlier to reports of a shooting at a home in Denton, a city 40 miles northeast of downtown Dallas.

A speedway finish among atypical graduations marking 2020

BY JAMIE STENGLE THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DALLAS — It wasn't the graduation ceremony Lou Ann Hintz had pictured as she worked toward her doctorate, but driving across the finish line at Texas Motor Speedway to mark the achievement turned out to be pretty thrilling.



Michael Modecki | Texas Woman's University

A graduate of Texas Woman's University is photographed at Texas Motor Speedway in Fort Worth, Texas on Friday, Dec. 11.

around the 1.5-mile speedway in Fort Worth with her two sons — ages 27 and 30 — made for a meaningful graduation. Once she got to the finish line, she got out of the car and one of her son's performed the hooding ceremony for her doctorate in occupational therapy.

ing a virtual ceremony in May, administrators talked with students and knew they needed to try something different for winter graduation.

spokesman David Hart said. For those ceremonies, the students sat in socially distanced chairs near the finish line with their families watching a giant screen from their vehicles.

Some New Mexico students go to Texas for in-person education

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

HOBBS, N.M. — New Mexico schools have ranked at the bottom for years and parents, lawmakers and others are concerned the state is worse off now with no in-person learning due to the pandemic.

in person. Texas schools also rank higher in the quality of education offered, coming in near the middle of the rankings while New Mexico hovers at the bottom.



Denise Cathey | The Brownsville Herald

The two pruned Montezuma cypress trees are visible Dec 15 at the site of the old Lincoln Park under the US 73/88 Expressway.

CYPRESS TREES

From Page 1A assessment from the city forester to remove major trees of importance, according to Fernandez.

cypress trees to be planted on the city right of way and to be maintained by the city," said Octavio O. Saenz, Public Information Officer for TxDOT in a statement on Dec. 18.

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YBARRA. From Page 3A the life of a decent, generous and committed family man. Meth Case. From Page 1A HSI along with our law enforcement partners will continue to seek out and bring justice to those involved in the illicit drug trade.