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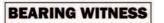
Farmer cultivated fruitful life before dying due to COVID-19

BY FRANCISCO GUAJARDO SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

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



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

"They said 'Mr. Fernandez, vou 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 Tx-DOT 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

"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 stretches 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 starting 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 Tx-DOT 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 subsequently 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 re-

vealed 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 feefree 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,

tional Public Lands Day;

>> and Thursday, Nov. 11,

birthday;

the National Park Service's >> Saturday, Sept. 25, Na-

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 sevenday 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. His wife, Kim Bonnen, has also tested positive. He's seen in this undated photo.

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.

Bonnen said he tested positive this weekend and has mild symptoms. His wife, Kim Bonnen, tested positive last week and "continues to battle difficult but manageable symptoms," he said. His two sons will continue to be tested as the family quarantines together.

"We are unable to pinpoint our initial exposure, as we – like so many other families - made the difficult decision to celebrate Christmas with just our own household this year and have diligently followed

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

Bonnen, who did not seek reelection after a secret recording scandal damaged his political career, encouraged people to continue wearing masks, practice social distancing and avoid large gatherings.

Multiple state leaders have tested positive for the virus since the pandemic

The first statewide elected official to publicly confirm a positive coronavirus test was Texas Supreme Court Iustice Debra Lehrmann in May. Other state lawmakers, including Rep. Tony Tinderholt and Sen. Kel Seliger, have tested positive.

Texas Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller tested positive earlier this month.



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 accidently shooting himself, authorities said Sunday.

University officials announced Jordan's death Saturday, a day after he was named Pac-12's newcomer of the year, but did not release details.

Jordan, 19, died in an emergency room at a hospital in Denton around 10:45 p.m. on Christmas Day, according to medical exam-

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. The officers found a man had accidently shot himself in the hip and began giving first aid, Denton police spokeswoman Allison Beckwith told The Associated Press Saturday. She said the man later died at a hospital and that investigators did not know how he came to shoot himself.



Extended Coverage by B.R. Whisenant

MANY GRANDPARENTS' MEDICINES **NOT SECURE ENOUGH AROUND** GRANDCHILDREN, POLL FINDS—PART II

During grandchildren's visits, the poll found, 84% of older adults don't change their routine regarding where they store their medicines. Those usual places include cupboards or cabinets (61%), countertops and tables (18%), purses or bags (7%) or other locations (15%). Only 5% said they routinely keep their medications in a locked cupboard or cabinet. And when grandparents visit their grandchildren, the chance of easy access may go up, the poll suggests. Nearly three-quarters of grandparents say they keep their medicines in their bag, and 7% leave them on a counter or table. Only 7% placed them in a locked cupboard or cabinet.

Containers matter

Childproof prescription drug vials and bottles were developed and required starting years ago, specifically to protect children from accidentally swallowing medicine not prescribed to them. Those "childproof" containers, however, can be hard for some adults to open. So the poll asked grandparents if they ever used alternate containers — ones that could be easier for children to open.

Twenty-nine percent of the older adults polled said they transferred their prescription medicines to other types of containers. Slightly lower percentages did the same for supplements and over-the-counter medicines, which can also harm children especially when taken in larger than recommended amounts.

If you put your pills into day-of-the-week pill sorters so you can remember whether you took your medicine each day, that's great - but keep that sorter out of the reach of little ones. Grandparents should make sure to have the national Poison Control number, 1-800-222-1222, stored in their phone,

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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.

"It is a disappointment not to have the traditional, but this is a cool thing to get to do," said Hintz, who graduated this month from Texas Woman's University in Denton. "It's something that I will always remember.

Across Texas and the U.S. this year, high schools and universities scrambled to find ways to give students a meaningful graduation amid the coronavirus pandemic. There have been virtual events, drive-through ceremonies in parking lots and more traditional inperson events that took several days to ensure social distancing.

And some schools like TWU, took the creativity up a notch.

Images from those atypical ceremonies provide a poignant reminder of the ways life changed as the coronavirus spread.

Hintz, 59, said driving



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.

"For me, it meant a lot because I know a lot of universities were doing virtual commencements," she said.

TWU Provost Carolyn Kapinus said that after holding a virtual ceremony in May, administrators talked with students and knew they needed to try something different for winter graduation.

"The virtual ceremony just didn't provide the kind of acknowledgment and closure that they really wanted," Kapinus said. Texas Motor Speedway,

home to NASCAR and IndyCar races, has also hosted about 30 high school graduations as well this year, 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. Hintz said that as fun as it was to have an unusual graduation, she'd always envisioned the professors that helped her along the way being there.

But, she said, it helped to at least participate in an inperson ceremony,

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 inperson learning due to the pandemic.

Public Education Secretary Ryan Stewart during a recent legislative meeting addressed a significant drop in enrollment this fall, estimated at roughly 4%. He said more than 12,000 students did not inform schools about why they left, with no indication of a transfer or pivot to home schooling.

Months of data processing and cross-referencing by department officials have accounted for around 5,000 of the students. The vast majority had switched to private schools, Bureau of Indian Education schools, or moved out of state.

Local school leaders in Hobbs and Lovington questioned the state's data, saying they can account for the students who did not enroll in their districts this year. They submitted enrollment information to the state earlier this year.

"They have that data, and just didn't look at it. ... It's just frustrating that they sent out bad information," Hobbs Superintendent TJ Parks told the Hobbs News-

In Lea County, more than 1,600 students have left the area's school districts.

Many have gone to Texas because that state is allowing students to attend class

HOUSE CRACKING?

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.

Attending school in Texas isn't an easy option as districts there have a residency requirement.

Seminole Independent School District Assistant Superintendent Sylvia Suarez said there have been about 62 Lea County students who have moved into the Texas district to attend Seminole schools. The district is expecting another 17 students when school resumes on

She said the district gets calls almost every day from parents in New Mexico about enrolling their students in Seminole schools.

Amber Cervantes said she moved to Seminole because her three children were falling further behind with New Mexico's online system.

"They're not getting an education here," she told the News-Sun. "They have no activities, no sports. In Seminole, they can go to school full time. I think going to Texas is the best thing for my children to get an education."

Hobbs Municipal Schools had an enrollment of about 10,000 students last year. That's down around 10% this year, according to numbers compiled by the district. Of the 1,232 students lost by the Hobbs district, about one quarter ended up in Texas and another 28% opted for home schooling.

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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.

Never one to air a problem without a solution, Fernandez proposed that TxDOT purchase 12 Montezuma cypress trees from a nursery in Harlingen. Two trees could be planted to replace the ones lost, while the others would be placed on vistas around Brownsville for the public.

Then each tree could be adopted by one of Fernandez's followers and watched over for a year until established enough to survive.

In late December TxDOT agreed with the plan.

"As partners, we work in a way that is responsible and in harmony with local authorities. In this case, to show our goodwill, TxDOT has agreed to provide the city with 12

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.

"With 12 trees growing up in the legacy of the two that were sacrificed, we feel as though that is a fair trade," said Fernandez.

There's even some hope for the original trees. Cypress trees don't re-sprout or coppice easily, but it is possible if conditions are right.

"Some tree species coppice very easily and some don't at all, cypress is in the middle," said Bill Green, a community forester with the Texas A&M Forest Service.

There is a small chance that, given time and luck, these two cypresses will see Brownsville through another century alongside the 12 planted as their legacy.

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YBARRA

From Page 3A

the life of a decent, generous and committed family man.

Que en paz descanse Alberto Ybarra. Rest in peace.

Francisco Guajardo, chief executive officer for the Museum of South

Texas History at 200 N. Closner 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 MOS-THistory.org.

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," Shane Folden with HSI said in a

As part of their plea deals

import and distribution of a controlled substance, court records show. Garza and Cantu-Garcia

will also be required to serve three years of supervised release upon completion of their respective prison terms, court records show.

Both women have been and will remain in custody pending transfer to a U.S. Bureau of Prisons facility to be determined in the near

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statement.

with government prosecutors, the government agreed to dismiss the remaining charges they faced, including conspiracy to possess a controlled substance, and