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Friend honors memory of farmworker, musician, jack of all trades

Editor's note: After John Garza of McAllen read several Bearing Witness articles in The Monitor, he decided to write about his dear friend Pedro "Pete" Torres, who died from COVID-19 complications on July 19, 2020. Herein, is John's tribute to Pete.

BY JOHN GARZA
SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

Poet Dylan Thomas wrote, “Rage, rage against the dying of the light,” while somebody else said about a deceased loved one, “He was just one of the humble people whose joys and pains aren't noticed by the big world outside.”

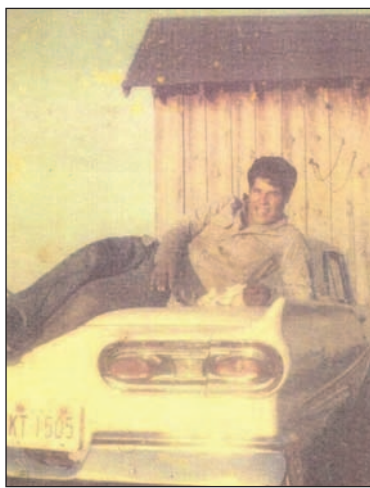
My friend Pete Torres, who was born on Sept. 9, 1942, and to whom I bore close witness, was about the light, the rage belonging to us left behind. We were stunned when COVID-19 took Pete on July 19, his last

BEARING WITNESS

11 days without contact with any of us, in a crowded hospital ward.

The cruel ending didn't define him; the light defined him, his smile, the innocent joy of how he accepted whatever good or bad came every day, which he radiated back out as good to anybody he encountered. That was the key to him, acceptance and radiating back, a childlike sweetness all of his 78 years.

Whoever said, “Don't tell people your dreams because they will tear them down,” never met Pete. When he was young and uprooted for back-breaking farm work up north, music refreshed him, and just hearing it was not enough.



Pete Torres

He put a band together and made music. And he composed songs. His music began with the basics of traditional Mexican rancheras, but he then surprised you with the blues of B.B. King, the rockabilly of Jerry Lee

Lewis, and a particular Elvis song, “Treat Me Nice.”

To make a living, he became a crew leader, shepherding his farmworkers, mostly family members, as far as Washington State, to Colorado, gone from the Valley from July to October. Every departure here became a homecoming there and vice versa, at home everywhere.

A sociologist said migrant farmworkers were undervalued and underestimated by “rooted” society; that their life experience resulted in coping strategies more diverse, flexible, and versatile through exposure to travel, to people of different races and backgrounds, and to dealing with unexpected challenges.

Pete was nothing if not versatile, able to do a little bit of this and that, perhaps not at a deep down professional level, but at the practical level of getting things working again in the moment when needed the most

— able to handle electricity and plumbing, electronics, carpentry and automotives. When computer-ing became a thing, he dived into that like into water, following his curiosity into fearlessly dismantling the hardware and putting it back together, installing and uninstalling software, and video making for quinceañeras and weddings.

Out of nowhere came this horrible COVID-19, with confounding news of numbers of cases and deaths, unheard-of rules of non-visitation and dying alone, packed hospital wards and medical staff exhausted and exposed.

And out of nowhere Pete said, “I don't want to die,” and asked for an ambulance. And for all of us ensued 11 days of dread in July 2020; peak of numbers of cases and deaths without loved ones and unheard-of

See **TORRES** | 4A

Rocketing momentum



A view of Starship SN8 at the SpaceX South Texas Launch Site on Dec. 2 prior to a 15-kilometer altitude or 9.3 mile test flight and landing.

SpaceX's Starship program racks up wins in 2020

BY STEVE CLARK
STAFF WRITER

It was a year of milestones for SpaceX's Starship development program at Boca Chica, most recently on Dec. 9, when the SN8 achieved the first, mostly successful, high-altitude flight of a Starship prototype.

The test, which ended in an explosion when the SN8 landed too hard after a well-executed descent from 41,000 feet, was preceded by the successful launch and landing of the SN5, the first flight of a full-size Starship prototype. The 500-foot hop of the SN5 on Aug. 4 was followed by the Sept. 3 flight of the SN6, which also flew to 500 feet before touching down. SN stands for “serial number.”

In addition to achieving the first high-altitude Starship test, the late SN8 was the first multi-engine Starship prototype, fitted with three SpaceX-designed Raptor engines compared to one each for the earlier prototypes, the first of which was Starhopper, which many likened to a flying water tower. Starhopper made its first and only test flight at Boca Chica on Aug. 27, 2019.

Starship is being devel-



Photos by Miguel Roberts | The Brownsville Herald

The SpaceX Starship Hopper, from right, is the first prototype to launch from the SpaceX Boca Chica Launch Site.

oped as a fully reusable vehicle to one day carry cargo and humans to Earth orbit, the moon and Mars, though SpaceX founder and CEO Elon Musk said in September that it would be a long time before Starship goes up with human crew or passengers.

“We've got to first make the thing work, automatically deliver satellites and do hundreds of missions with satellites before we put people on board,” he said during a virtual “Humans to Mars” conference.

Not all went swimmingly for SpaceX's Boca Chica operations in 2020. The SN1 ruptured on the launch pad during a pressurization test

in February. The SN2 survived a series of similar tests and was retired to make way for testing of the SN3, which was destroyed due to a “testing configuration error,” according to Musk. The SN4 prototype went out in more spectacular fashion, exploding on the launch stand on May 29 due to a leaky propellant connection.

SpaceX has begun construction of its first Super Heavy booster at the Boca Chica Starship production complex. The Super Heavy, eventually to be fitted with 28 Raptor engines, would be responsible for helping Starship get to orbit and beyond. While the Federal Avia-

tion Administration in May granted SpaceX a two-year license for suborbital tests of Starship, it does not cover the suborbital and orbital testing of Super Heavy that SpaceX is working toward. A public scoping period is underway as part of a new environmental assessment of this next phase of testing.

“Mars, here we come!” Musk tweeted after the Dec. 9 test flight. “Thank you, South Texas for your support. This is the gateway to Mars.”

He attributed SN8's explosive landing to low “header tank” pressure, a problem SpaceX aims to resolve with the SN9, which was moved from the Boca Chica production complex to the launch pad nearer the beach on Dec. 22 for Starship's second high-altitude flight. Meanwhile, several more Starship prototypes are in various stages of assembly in addition to the first Super Heavy.

The SN9 test flight is expected to take place early in the new year. For now, the silver rocket is perched atop its launch stand a stone's throw from the SN8's charred and mangled nosecone, undergoing testing for the

See **SPACE X** | 4A

McAllen forms committee tasked with achieving ‘Tree City’ status

STAFF REPORT

Residents can expect a greener McAllen in 2021.

On Tuesday, the city announced via a news release the creation of the Keep McAllen Beautiful Tree Advisory Committee, which will coordinate Arbor Day activities, create a five-year plan to plant and maintain trees on municipal-owned properties, and promote public awareness and education programs.

Established by Keep McAllen Beautiful and the city of McAllen Parks & Recreation Department, the committee will also be tasked with reviewing city department concerns relating to tree care.

According to the release, the committee will submit an annual report to the McAllen City Commission, apply annually for a Tree City USA designation and develop a list of recommended native trees for planting on city properties.

“We were already doing a lot of these initiatives,” McAllen Mayor Jim Darling said in the release. “The establishment of the Keep McAllen Beautiful Tree Committee just formalizes our activities to be able to direct our activities to advocate for the planting and care of native tree species, and to receive the designation as a Tree City, which has both environmental and economic benefits for our community.”

McAllen's release stated that trees provide an essential benefit to the community as they help improve air quality, provide shade, help decrease temperatures and reduce air pollutants by intercepting many airborne particles.

Urban trees reduce the potential of city heat islands created by solid, impervious surfaces that change weather patterns, provide wildlife habitat and increase property values.

See **TREE CITY** | 4A

Edinburg man pleads guilty in cash smuggling case

BY LORENZO ZAZUETA-CASTRO
STAFF WRITER

As part of a plea deal with government prosecutors, an Edinburg man will forfeit more than half a million dollars, records show.

Sergio Guadalupe Saucedo-Saenz pleaded guilty to bulk cash smuggling Dec. 21 in connection with his April arrest at a port of entry.

On April 4, 2020, the 36-year old legally permanent resident attempted to leave the U.S. through the Hidalgo port of entry in his vehicle.

Port officers subsequently conducted an inspection of Saucedo's vehicle which led to the discovery of \$571,497 in bulk U.S. currency in the spare tire, a news release from the U.S. Attorney's Office Southern District of Texas stated.

At the December hearing, Saucedo admitted to evading currency reporting requirements by knowingly concealing more than \$10,000, the release stated.

Saucedo-Saenz acknowledged knowing he was concealing the money and that it was illegal to transport the currency from the U.S. to Mexico unreported. As part of the plea agreement, he has agreed to forfeit his interest in the seized cash.

U.S. District Judge Ricardo H. Hinojosa accepted the plea and set sentencing for Feb. 10, 2021.

Saucedo-Saenz faces up to five years in federal prison along with a possible \$250,000 maximum fine and could also lose his status as a permanent resident.

Saucedo-Saenz will remain in custody pending sentencing.

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Go Nakamura | Getty Images via TNS

Medical staff exits the COVID-19 intensive care unit on New Year's Day at the United Memorial Medical Center in Houston.

Texas COVID-19 hospitalizations remain at record highs

BY RYAN AUTULLO
AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATEMAN

AUSTIN — For the second time in the new year, the number of Texans hospitalized with COVID-19 is higher than it has ever been.

Texas reported 12,563 people in hospitals with the disease, 82 more than the previous high mark set on New Year's Day.

It's the sixth hospitalization record for the stater in the past seven days as Texas grapples with a second wave of COVID-19 that's exceeded the previous highs of July.

The troubling number of hospitalizations comes as Texans have begun receiving vaccinations that health officials say will eventually stifle the spread of the disease. As of Sunday, the state was reporting that 377,050 people had received vaccinations.

Most of those who've gotten the shots are health care workers who began receiving the doses three weeks

ago. Others fall into a second category of people 65 and older and 16 and older with qualified health conditions.

The state approved that group to get the vaccinations on Tuesday, although pharmacies and hospitals in Austin said they did not have available doses to treat them and were waiting on additional shipments.

In Travis County, 17,741 people have received the first dose of the vaccination, according to the state. That group will not be fully vaccinated until they receive a second and final dose in the weeks ahead.

Overall, Texas reported 14,535 new confirmed cases reported statewide on Sunday. Infections resulting from New Year's Eve parties won't be reflected in new case counts for several more days.

There were 50 new deaths in Texas reported Sunday that are linked to COVID-19, bringing the state-reported total to 27,917.

TEXAS BRIEFS

15-year-old charged with beating mother to death

MCKINNEY, Texas — A 15-year-old Texas boy was charged with murder Sunday for beating his mother to death.

The teenager's father called McKinney police around 1 a.m. to the home outside of Dallas, where authorities found Stacy Ellen Barney, 50, police said. Home security video allegedly captured the teen attacking Barney inside the family home, police said.

The boy was arrested in the area during a search, according to investigators. His name was not released because he's a juvenile.

Authorities did not comment further on the circumstances surrounding the beating or the injuries Barney suffered.

McKinney is about 32 miles (51.5 kilometers) northeast of Dallas.

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Extended Coverage
by B.R. Whisenant

NOTE: While we do not typically shovel snow in the RGV, here are handy tips about body usage.

BE CAREFUL SHOVELING SNOW

As with any strenuous physical activity, you should warm up before shoveling snow. Take a brief walk or march in place to get your body ready. Add arm movements and stretch your back to warm up the upper body. Here are a few more tips to help you stay healthy during shoveling season:

- Dress appropriately. Wearing layers allows you to adjust to the temperature outside. When you are going to be outside for a long time, cover your skin to prevent frostbite.
- Use a small shovel that has a curved handle. A shovel with wet snow can weigh up to 15 pounds. A small shovel ensures you have a lighter load, which can prevent injury.
- Separate your hands on the shovel. By creating space between your hands, you can increase your leverage on the shovel.
- Lift with your legs, not your back. Make sure your knees are bending and straightening to lift the shovel instead of leaning forward and straightening with the back.
- Shovel frequently. Don't wait till the snow piles up. Shovel intermittently, about every two inches.
- Push the snow. It is easier and better for your back to push the snow rather than lift it. Also, never throw snow over your shoulders.
- Pace yourself. Take breaks and gently stretch your back, arms and legs before returning to work.
- Stay hydrated. Drinking plenty of water is important when exercising regardless of the outside temperature.
- Avoid caffeine and nicotine. These stimulants increase the heart rate and constrict blood vessels, putting strain on your heart.
- Avoid alcoholic beverages. Alcohol can dull your senses and make you vulnerable to hypothermia and frostbite.

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Report: Asylum seekers with strong cases for protection sent back to danger

BY KATE MORRISSEY
THE SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE

SAN DIEGO — Stranded in Tijuana, a group of asylum seekers from Cameroon, Uganda and Ethiopia banded together in a shared hotel room. There, they would wait out Trump administration policies that had blocked their ability to request protection in the United States amid the pandemic.

The group has been harassed, threatened and extorted by Mexican officials since their arrival in the border city, an Ethiopian man told human rights researchers.

"The conditions are very horrible," the man said of the hotel. "We have to buy everything like bed sheets and everything that we need. They give us these rotten mattresses. There are a lot (of) bugs and animals."

Then, in November, a new hotel owner kicked the group out onto the streets, saying that he doesn't like Africans, the asylum seeker said.

The group is among many thousands of asylum seekers stuck in Tijuana and along the U.S.-Mexico border who are struggling to survive as their temporary housing options whither and orders blocking their entry to the United States stretch out indefinitely.

Their plight is just one of the examples laid out in a report published by Human Rights First in December that looked at the ways asylum seekers have been increasingly harmed by U.S. immigration policies in 2020, especially those put into place following the arrival of the pandemic.

"This is both a humanitarian disgrace and a legal travesty," the report says of a series of Trump administration orders.

The group of asylum seekers from African countries, like many others along the U.S.-Mexico border, had been waiting before the pandemic for their numbers to be called on wait lists that have become the de facto process for migrants to request asylum at ports of entry. The policy, known as "metering," restricted how many asylum seekers ports of entry would process on a given day.

When the pandemic hit, ports of entry stopped processing asylum seekers altogether.

Then the Trump administration issued an order through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to keep asylum seekers who cross into the United States illegally — the only other option when ports of entry are closed — from even taking the beginning steps in the long process of requesting protection in the U.S. asylum system.

Under the order, border officials turn back many asylum seekers to the country they were most recently in — generally Mexico. Officials also detain asylum seekers



Nelvin C. Cepeda | The San Diego Union-Tribune via TNS

A group of migrants from Central America watch near the border fence that separates San Diego and Tijuana in 2018 as a few people try to cross.

and then put them on planes back to the countries that they fled.

Sending asylum seekers back to their home countries without screening them to see if they qualify for asylum goes against a key part of international agreements about the treatment of refugees.

Several Nicaraguan asylum seekers who fled their country after being jailed and tortured for protesting the regime of Daniel Ortega were put on planes back to Nicaragua without any screening process to see if they should be protected, the report says. Once back in Nicaragua, they were taken into custody and interrogated and are still being surveilled by Ortega's network.

Mexican asylum seekers have been expelled to Mexico, the report says, including a young man who was sent back through the Nogales Port of Entry around midnight in freezing temperatures, and a woman whose 2-day-old baby had been born inside the United States.

Less than 1% of those expelled received any screening related to their fears of returning home in the first three months of the pandemic, the report found.

The expulsions include at least 8,800 unaccompanied children, the report says, and possibly as many as 14,000.

In October and November, Border Patrol conducted 119,500 expulsions, according to Customs and Border Protection data. Officials have said many of these expulsions are of people who cross multiple times.

The Trump administration has said that the expulsion policy is meant to stop COVID-19 from spreading inside the United States, and to keep from detaining migrants together in holding cells.

"The administration's preventative measure protected DHS frontline employees, individuals in our custody, and the American public — thereby preventing a potential disaster along the border," said Chad Wolf in a

recent speech. He has served as acting secretary of the Department of Homeland Security despite a judge ruling that he was illegally put in the position.

But asylum seekers who are expelled to their home countries are detained — and generally tested for the coronavirus — before being put on planes, according to the human rights report. That, Human Rights First argues, runs counter to the administration's justification for the policy.

Public health experts from Johns Hopkins University, Columbia University and George Washington University have called on the expulsion program to stop, arguing that there are safe ways to quickly process asylum seekers and allow them to shelter-in-place with their loved ones in the United States.

Human Rights First found that the blocks on asylum requests at ports of entry and expulsions of people caught crossing illegally have led more migrants to try to get through in more remote parts of the border where they're less likely to be noticed — and more likely to die.

Ibrain Wencislao Perez Suarez, a 30-year-old political activist from Cuba who fled persecution, disappeared crossing in the Texas desert in July, the report notes. His family is still trying to find out what happened to him.

A Nicaraguan asylum seeker was hospitalized for nine days for severe dehydration that caused kidney damage after he tried to cross through the desert. Border officials later expelled him to Nogales while he was still wearing his hospital gown, the report says.

Expelled asylum seekers and those stranded by metering are not the only ones left in danger in Mexico.

Migrants forced to wait south of the border for the duration of their U.S. immigration cases under the "Remain in Mexico" program — known officially as Migrant Protection Protocols, or MPP for short — are being

harmed even more because of the pandemic, the report says. That's because violence against migrants in Mexico is escalating, migrant shelters are shutting down and court hearings for cases under the program have been indefinitely halted by the federal government.

Human Rights First has tracked more than 1,300 reported instances of murder, torture, rape, kidnapping or other violent attacks on asylum seekers waiting in the program since it began two years ago.

Cartels in the border region of the state of Chihuahua, where many migrants are sent back, have focused efforts to kidnap and extort asylum seekers whom the United States has returned, according to a Mexican prosecutor there. And many asylum seekers report being targeted by Mexican police themselves.

A Nicaraguan man returned to Tijuana under MPP was beaten and robbed by Mexican police and is still facing harassment from officers, immigration attorney Margaret Cargioli with Immigrant Defenders Law Center told researchers.

A Cuban woman who was waiting in the Remain in Mexico program in Ciudad Juarez was kidnapped, beaten and raped by Mexican police in June, an attorney representing her told Human Rights First. Once she was free, she immediately crossed into the United States, visibly injured, to ask for help, the report says, and U.S. border officials sent her back to Mexico again.

There are about 23,000 pending cases in the Remain in Mexico program, the report says, and about 70% of them have been waiting for more than a year as of January.

Roughly 3,500 new MPP cases were opened during the pandemic, the report found, meaning that those asylum seekers were placed in the program rather than expelled under the pandemic policy. The majority are from Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela.

TORRES

From Page 3A

refrigerated trailers, because morgues were full.

We are stunned by his loss, thinking we should be adjusting, going through motions

of thinking we have adjusted, but instead missing him more every day and wishing we could have him back to do over every day with more smiles and greetings and appreciation that we didn't give enough to him. He tried to tell

us, that time when he played Elvis singing "Treat Me Nice" on the jukebox.

This story is part of an ongoing series entitled Bearing Witness. In the series, the Museum

of South Texas History aims to document some of the Rio Grande Valley lives lost to COVID-19. For more information about the museum, visit MOS-THistory.org.

TREE CITY

From Page 3A

The Tree Committee will also focus on tree plantings to help increase McAllen's tree canopy and educate the public on tree care and maintenance.

"The proper planting of and care for trees, especially native species, in McAllen and other cities provide health, aesthetics, and financial benefits that greatly exceed their cost," Mike McClure, chairperson for the new commit-

tee, wrote in the release.

Other members include: >> Vice-Chair Linda Calderon; >> Vice-Chair Marie Perez; >> Normalynda Zepeda; >> Patty Lopez; >> Carlos Lopez;

>> Mary Gonzalez; >> Art Lopez; >> Claudia Gutierrez; >> Ernesto Sepulveda; >> Chelsea Howell; >> Gloria Doyle; >> Luis Lopez; >> Carlos Garza; >> and Melanie Watson.

SPACE X

From Page 3A

pending flight, all of it serving as a huge draw for the legions

of space tourists who had never heard of Boca Chica Beach before SpaceX.

Meanwhile, the company has succeeded in buying

out most of the residents of Boca Chica Village near the production complex, with only a handful of holdouts remaining. The tiny unincor-

porated neighborhood is now occupied largely by SpaceX employees.

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