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Granddaughter of musician who died from COVID-19 cautions public

BY FRANCISCO GUAJARDO
SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

BEARING WITNESS

Eighteen-year-old Hope Guerrero from Weslaco wanted to tell her grandfather's story, so she emailed the Museum of South Texas History. “My grandfather died from COVID on July 12, 2020, and I just felt there's a lot of disbelief in the community about the reality of COVID,” Hope said in the e-mail. “My grandfather is testament that it is real, and I don't want others to feel the pain we've gone through, so I wanted to tell his story.”

Hope exudes the wisdom of an elder when she talks about her grandfather José Moreno, who was born April 30, 1949, in Piedras Negras, Coahuila. She bore close witness to a man she describes

as a kind-of borderlands Renaissance man, someone who showed mastery as a musician, carpenter, pastor and farmworker.

José's daughter Sylvia also bore close witness to her father.

“My father drew musical inspiration from his mother, my grandmother,” Sylvia said. “He was a musician from a young age and could play many instruments.”

Sylvia added that José learned carpentry from his father.

“My dad learned how to be an *albañil*. He learned carpentry, how to lay brick, and how to build a home,” she



Courtesy photo

Hope Guerrero seen with her grandfather José Moreno.

said.

From the time the family landed in South Texas, José followed the migrant labor stream, because he had to provide for his family.

“When he went up north, he worked in the fields and

he also helped build homes for people,” Sylvia recalls. “He was always doing things.”

“My father was guided by his faith, so he built his own church and became the pastor of a church he named Casa de David,” Sylvia added. “The family helped build the church, but my father led the effort. He named it after David, because of the Biblical references to David and music.”

A man inspired by muses, José found Casa de David as the place where his passions came together, and he used the church to evangelize and to work for the public good.

“He often came out on the radio during the ‘Predicando a las Naciones’ program on Radio Vida,” Sylvia said.

On those occasions, José used a harp to spread the

word of God. Sylvia and Hope describe him as a man of words, music and faith.

“He was always there for others,” Sylvia said. “And that's why it was so hard to let him go to the hospital when he contracted the virus. When he checked into DHR, that was it, and we could not be there for him anymore. It hurts so much that he was there for everyone, but no one could be there for him.”

Sylvia speaks of her personal pain.

“I just wish I had a little more time to be with my dad. This just happened too fast,” she said.

But she also observes the community pain.

“After we buried my father, I visited his graveside often, and I noticed a lot of

people were dying: 16, 18, and 20 year olds were dying, and they were mostly COVID deaths,” she said.

“My grandfather was a special man,” Hope said. “And I just want people to take this thing seriously.”

Que en paz descanse José Moreno.

Francisco Guajardo, chief executive officer for the Museum of South Texas History at 200 N. Clossner 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.

An awesome feeling



Delcia Lopez | dlopez@themonitor.com

Mercedes Police Chief Jose Macias pins the newly appointed Assistant Police Chief Blanca Sanchez at the Mercedes Civic Center on Friday.

Mercedes welcomes first woman assistant police chief

BY DINA ARÉVALO
STAFF WRITER

MERCEDES — Police here acknowledged one of their own Friday by elevating her to among the highest of ranks within the department. Blanca Sanchez, a Mercedes resident and 22-year veteran law enforcement officer, was officially named as the department's assistant chief.

It was a first in a town with a history of firsts.

Sanchez has become perhaps the first woman in Hidalgo County to be named an assistant police chief, and follows in the footsteps of former Chief Olga Maldonado, who was one of the first women in the Rio Grande Valley to head a police force.

“Today is a very exciting and great day for the city of Mercedes,” said police Chief Jose Macias during a pinning ceremony held for Sanchez at the Mercedes Civic Center on Friday.

Macias himself is new to a leadership role within the

department, having been named chief late last month. Previously, he served as assistant chief under former chief Dagoberto “Dago” Chavez.

The COVID-19 pandemic kept the ceremony small, but it was nonetheless attended by Mercedes police officers, city staff and members of Sanchez's family.

Newly appointed interim City Manager Kevin Pagan was also on hand, and quipped at his and the chief's own newness on the job before congratulating the two officers.

“But on behalf of the city manager's office and the entire city management team, I want to congratulate chief on his appointment, and congratulate (Sanchez),” he said, adding that her résumé was “very, very impressive.”

Moments later, Macias made it official by affixing assistant chief rank pins to Sanchez's lapels.

“I want to say thank you for all the support, everybody that's here — my family,

my friends, my coworkers,” Sanchez said. “I'm honored. I'm honored.”

Sanchez, 53, has a master police officer certification and comes to the position with more than two decades of experience in law enforcement. She has served stints with the Mercedes Police Department and at Mercedes ISD as a school resource officer.

In 2008, she became a deputy constable with the Hidalgo County Precinct 1 Constable's Office, where she was later promoted to chief deputy constable. She served at that rank for more than 14 years before returning to the department where her career had begun.

Sanchez started out as a records clerk in 1987 — a position that had become vacant when a young Olga Maldonado transitioned over to the municipal court, Sanchez said.

Being among only a small number of women who at the time worked in law enforcement, Sanchez said she

and Maldonado endured similar challenges in a male-dominated career.

“She struggled, as all females do, but she overcame all her challenges, as have I. And it's an awesome feeling, an awesome feeling,” Sanchez said after the ceremony.

For Macias, Sanchez's experience within the department and community at large is what made her the perfect candidate to be assistant chief. Her being a woman is an added bonus.

“I've worked with great women in law enforcement. And we need them in law enforcement like we need them in other professions,” Macias said, adding he thinks Sanchez will serve as a beacon to young women and girls who are thinking of becoming officers.

Sanchez also shares his goal of restoring the community's trust in the department. It's something she spoke of to reporters Friday.

“The past administrations

Port Isabel woman faces drug charges

Records: Defendant arrested at border with \$195K in cash

BY LORENZO ZAZUETA-CASTRO
STAFF WRITER

A Port Isabel woman who recently faced money laundering charges was found with meth and heroin as she attempted to enter the country on New Year's Eve, records show.

Ruth del Carmen Esteves made her initial appearance before a magistrate Monday on charges she attempted to conceal nearly 62 kilograms of methamphetamine and more than 3 kilograms of heroin inside the vehicle she was driving back from Mexico, the criminal complaint against the woman states.

On Dec. 31, U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers at the Hidalgo Port of Entry referred the 44-year-old woman for a secondary

inspection as she attempted to enter the country.

During the secondary inspection, officers used an X-ray machine to scan Esteves' vehicle and found “anomalies” in all four tires. Additionally, the complaint states CBP officers used a canine and the canine alerted them to the presence of narcotics.

“A physical search of the vehicle revealed a total of 25 packages concealed within the tires,” the document states.

In all, CBP officers found 61.92 kilograms of meth and 3.52 kilograms of heroin inside the tires.

Esteves declined to speak to agents after her arrest at the port and subsequently made her initial appearance before a magistrate in connection with the charges against her on Jan. 4.

As part of a records check, agents learned Esteves was arrested at the same port of

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Donna sued in relation to candidate's 2017 campaign event

BY DINA ARÉVALO
STAFF WRITER

The city of Donna has been sued in connection with a 2017 campaign event held at a city-owned property and hosted by a then-candidate for mayor.

G&G Closed Circuit Events LLC filed the lawsuit in federal court in mid-September. The company alleges that the city, former mayoral candidate Ernesto Lugo and campaign worker, Marissa Ozuna, violated the company's exclusive license to broadcast a pay-per-view boxing match.

The complaint alleges the three defendants violated the company's licensing rights when the fight was broadcast at Lugo's campaign event, which was held at the Donna Main Square Park in mid-September 2017.

“The closed-circuit broadcast of the Event was not intended for the use of the general public. In Texas, the closed-circuit broadcast of the event could only be ex-

hibited in a commercial establishment accessible to the general public, if the establishment was contractually authorized to do so by Plaintiff,” the complaint reads.

In order to broadcast the fight to the public, an establishment had to agree to pay a fee, which G&G claims neither Lugo, Ozuna, nor the city did.

Furthermore, the suit claims the defendants violated the Communications Act of 1934 by accessing and broadcasting the fight without authorization.

“On September 16, 2017, either by satellite transmission or through unauthorized receipt over cable system, Defendants willfully intercepted or received the interstate communication of the Event,” the complaint reads.

“In the alternative, Defendants assisted in the receipt of the interstate communication of the Event ... and published said communication,

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See **SANCHEZ** | 4A

Former employee sues Weslaco for sexual harassment

BY DINA ARÉVALO
STAFF WRITER

A former Weslaco city employee has filed a lawsuit against the city, claiming she was forced to resign after filing sexual harassment complaints against a supervisor.

The suit was filed on Dec. 10, 2020, by Gloria Oliva, 50, who claims that the city's finance director, Vidal Roman, made "unwanted sexual advances" toward her.

She further claims the city knew of, and ignored, her complaints — instead retaliating against her by denying her pay raises due to her age and gender.

"During her employment at the City of Weslaco, Plaintiff was subjected to unwanted sexual advances from a supervisor, Vidal Roman," reads a copy of the complaint filed in Hidalgo County Court-at-Law No. 7.

"The unwanted sexual advances started out as verbal comments which made Plaintiff feel uncomfortable such as calling her 'Babe'. The verbal comments then progressed to 'I love you.' (sic) Mr. Roman would also call Plaintiff 'Love,'" it further reads.

Oliva also claims Roman had invited her to smoke marijuana with him.

According to the complaint, Oliva worked for the city for nine years, and reported the harassment to the city's human resources department. However, the "Defendant failed to take remedial action

and created a hostile work environment," it reads.

Oliva claims the city instead allowed the harassment to continue, creating a hostile work environment that ultimately prompted her to resign.

"The working conditions created by the city of Weslaco created such a hostile work environment such that no reasonable person would continue to endure it under the circumstances and created a constructive discharge situation on October 9th, 2019," the complaint reads.

On April 4 of last year, Oliva took her complaint to the Texas Workforce Commission's Civil Rights Division. The TWC ultimately dismissed the charge, issuing a letter on Oct. 27, 2020, informing Oliva of her right to file a civil lawsuit against the city.

Oliva is seeking between \$250,000 to \$750,000, including back pay, lost wages, retirement and fringe benefits, lost future earnings and attorney's fees.

She's also seeking exemplary damages, claiming that Weslaco acted "with malice, actual malice and/or a specific intent to injure the Plaintiff."

Weslaco City Manager Mike Perez declined to comment, citing the pending litigation. The city has yet to file a response to the complaint.

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Death doulas help the dying meet their end with affirmation

BY RENÉ A. GUZMAN
SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS

SAN ANTONIO — Andrea Aycock can only sometimes look at the photos of her hands clasped with her mother's just before she died in May. But she'll always cherish the helping hand she got from Anna Adams, an end-of-life doula in San Antonio who preserved that personal moment and so many more for Aycock in her mother's dying days.

"Anna came and took care of her," said Aycock, a call center operator in San Antonio. "(She) just mainly comforted me."

Just as birth doulas help expectant parents bring new life into the world, end-of-life doulas help the dying cope with their next journey. They help the dying and their survivors face death with empowerment and affirmation instead of fear and anxiety.

Also known as death doulas, these trained professionals provide the terminally ill and their families physical and emotional support before, during and after death, the San Antonio Express-News reported. These are nonmedical services that often include relaxation exercises, funeral planning, educating the family on their loved one's condition and just simple companionship.

Adams sees death awareness becoming more commonplace in the United States in the way that Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) celebrations have grown more mainstream and that there are more calls for services of end-of-life doulas.

"Cultures like the Mexican culture that have these beautiful traditions of staying in connection with that (dying)



Lisa Krantz | The San Antonio Express-News

Death doula Anna Adams sits in an office at Holistic Hospice in San Antonio on Oct. 28, 2020.

process are so admirable and so beautiful. Doulas want to make sure that is available to all people," said Shelby Kirillin, an end-of-life doula in Richmond, Va., and program development manager for the International End of Life Doula Association (INELDA) in Jersey City, N.J.

Kirillin sees the rising awareness of death doulas as part of what she calls a "death positive movement," where more people are getting back to supporting their dying loved ones at home and engaging with their death more up close and personal, much as their ancestors did.

"In the last 100-plus years in our Western culture, that has been taken away from us," Kirillin said. "How to be with someone who was dy-

ing, how to touch them. That was something that we knew how to do."

INELDA is one of just a handful of death doula organizations in the nation and was launched just five years ago. Co-founder Henry Fersko-Weiss created the first end-of-life doula program in the United States at a New York City hospice in 2003.

Kirillin estimates INELDA has around 40 certified death doulas across the country, yet has trained around 3,000 individuals in death doula care. Many just sign up to learn more about facing death and don't pursue death doula work, she said, while others branch off to do their own training.

Most death doula services come in three phases.

SANCHEZ

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used to have very different things, but I think we're gonna focus on our PR," Sanchez said.

She and Macias plan to do so by holding more community meetings and events, pandemic permitting, in order to reconnect with residents.

"Being able to communicate — not talking down to people — talking with people, talking to people. Explaining... I believe communication among all of us is very, very, very important," she said.

Already, relationships between the department and the community — and between other departments —

is improving.

One person present at Friday's ceremony was Weslaco police Chief Joel Rivera, who came to congratulate the woman who once served as his mentor.

"She took me under her wing and taught me almost everything I know about administration and operations," Rivera said.

The relationship between their two departments had become strained late last year, when Weslaco abruptly moved to cancel a contract to house Mercedes prisoners at the Weslaco jail.

The cancellation came about after Weslaco officials became concerned over Mercedes' non-payment of the contract, as well as what the mayor referred to as

"ethical concerns."

But early last week, Weslaco reversed course and renewed the contract for a year.

Rivera said that's due in large part to the change in leadership. With Macias and Sanchez now in charge, his previous concerns have vanished, he said.

"I think the city of Mercedes is well on its way to becoming a jewel in the law enforcement community," Rivera said.

"She's an incredible person, and she's an incredible administrator. That community is now going to be given the police department it deserves," he said.

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LAWSUIT

From Page 3A

or assisted in transmitting" the fight to those who attended the campaign event, it reads.

G&G is seeking up to \$170,000, plus attorney's fees. For their part, both Lugo and Ozuna deny the allegations of the lawsuit.

In a response filed Dec. 28, 2020, by their attorney, Damian C. Orozco, the pair ask for the court to dismiss the lawsuit with prejudice, and seek attorney's fees of their own.

They also claim that they "acted in good faith and had reasonable grounds for believing their actions were in compliance with the Communications Act of 1934," the response reads.

The defendants also say the complaint has been brought after the statute of limitations to do so has expired.

Meanwhile, the complaint alleges that the city of Donna is culpable in the suit because the park is city property which Donna "had a right and ability to supervise the activities of..." and "had an obvious and direct financial interest in the activities of the Establishment."

However, the city of Donna has yet to respond to the complaint, despite being served with notice of the suit months ago.

Court records show a process server hand delivered notice of the suit to Deputy City Secretary Belinda Tosca at Donna City Hall on Oct. 16, 2020.

By this Wednesday morning, however, when attorneys for G&G, as well as Lugo and Ozuna, met for an initial conference before U.S. District Judge Randy Crane, Donna remained a no-show.

The city's noticeable absence prompted the judge's first remarks on the case.

"It appears city of Donna has been served, but just isn't answering?" Crane asked David Diaz, the attorney representing G&G.

Diaz responded that neither he nor Orozco, the attorney for the other two defendants, had heard from the city.

"I was waiting to put off the request for entry of default until this hearing to see if they appeared," Diaz said, referring to submitting a request for default judgment against the city.

Crane appeared flummoxed that Donna would ignore the suit.

"I just don't know why they would neglect this," he said, before adding that progress on the lawsuit needs to move forward.

"I need to get you all on a scheduling order, at least for the defendants that are participating, and then proceed with the default on the city,"

Crane said.

Reached for comment Sunday, Donna City Attorney Javier Villalobos said he was unaware of the lawsuit.

"I guess I need to look into it because I didn't even know about it," Villalobos said.

Though Villalobos has served as the Donna city attorney for more than a decade, he wasn't the attorney at the time the suit was filed, nor when the process was served on the city in October.

The Donna City Council appointed Villalobos as city attorney in mid-November — one month after the lawsuit was filed, and almost a year after he had previously resigned from the position in December 2019.

For the majority of 2020, Donna's city attorney was Ricardo Perez, who also served as the city's bond counsel.

Villalobos said he didn't know why the city had failed to respond to the lawsuit, but that he would promptly look into it and prepare a response.

"I'm gonna take a look at it Monday and find out what it is and file the proper response. Find out if it's something we need to defend ourselves, or something that's covered by insurance," Villalobos said.

"I don't have the facts, but I will look into it pretty quick," he said.

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DRUG CHARGES

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entry a little more than two months before — on Oct. 20,

2020, when she was arrested attempting to enter into Mexico with nearly \$200,000 in cash.

Esteves remains in custody

pending a detention hearing, records show.

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