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~J. GONZALEZ

Family already-reeling from grandfather’s death loses mother to COVID

BY FRANCISCO GUAJARDO
SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

Rio Grande City native Heidi Saenz died on Aug. 3, 2020, unexpectedly taken by COVID-19. She took her last breath at the Resolute Health Hospital in New Braunfels, Texas, where she was taken because Starr County Memorial Hospital overflowed with patients.

Heidi left too early, at 41. “She had so many things going for her,” said Heidi’s sister Jessica, who bore witness to Heidi’s entire life. “She often lacked self-confidence, but she was smart, fearless, beautiful, and just a great mom.”

Heidi’s mother Yvonne Saenz, a retired school nurse, admired Heidi’s masterful parenting skills.

“We didn’t dote on her when she was growing up. We were always working so our kids could have stuff that we didn’t have growing up,”

BEARING WITNESS

Yvonne said. “But Heidi was beyond that. Her thinking was that what kids really need is love, not stuff. She gave her children all of her love,” she said.

As a mom, Heidi was a natural. She loved her kids and doted on them with intensity and care.

“My mom was my best friend,” said 25-year-old daughter Meagan. “She had me when she was young, so we kind of grew up together, and we did everything together. She was always there.”

“Every birthday and every holiday, she would always make it special,” Megan said. “On Easter, we’d wake up to the trail of little eggs and go outside to our little baskets. On



Heidi Saenz

Christmas, we’d go to sleep early and at midnight she’d make little bells as if Santa was here. Everything was always so special.”

And she was fearless. Jessica recalls the time someone stole their father’s car.

“Heidi got on Facebook and wrote ‘whoever you are, you will regret

messing with the Saenz family. You hurt my father and you scared him. We’ll hunt you down,” Jessica said.

“Heidi was a lady, but she was also from the barrio and wasn’t afraid to get her hands dirty,” Jessica added. “She was an amazing person, a good sister, and a good mother. My sister was special.”

Heidi’s 9-year-old daughter Maddison is mostly at a loss for words, as she wistfully thinks about her mother. “Maddie,” as the family calls her, is handling things as one would expect a young child would, but she’s keenly aware of the moment.

A few days after Maddie lost her mother, she lost her grandfather Julio Saenz, also due to complications from COVID-19. Maddie was close to both, so her collective loss has been especially profound.

But like her mother, Maddie appears strong, even as she attempts to make sense of her new reality.

When asked to reflect on her mother Heidi, she deflects the question and instead offers news that her big sister Meagan just tested negative — after having previously contracted the virus.

Maddie’s understated manner speaks loudly. She can’t afford to lose anyone else.

Maddie is surviving, and she’s leaning on Meagan, her aunt Jessica and grandmother Yvonne. There’s deep sadness, but there’s great hope, too. Like her family, Maddie is excited to welcome Meagan’s baby, whose expected delivery is on Feb. 28.

“I was about five weeks pregnant when I told my mom,” said Meagan. “She was already sick. It was sad because I had just gotten my ultrasound, but she wasn’t able to hear the recording.”

See SAENZ | 4A



John Minchillo | The Associated Press

Rioters break into the U.S. Capitol in Washington on Jan. 6.

Texans among notable Capitol riot arrests

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — More than 125 people have been arrested so far on charges related to the violent insurrection led by supporters of President Donald Trump at the U.S. Capitol, where a Capitol police officer and four others were killed.

Charges from the Jan. 6 riot range from curfew violations to serious federal felonies related to theft and weapons possession.

From a man pictured kicking his feet up on a desk in House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s office to a far right-wing media personality known as “Baked Alaska” to the bare-chested guy sporting a furry hat with horns, here’s a list in alphabetical order of some of the more notable arrests and allegations made by authorities.

Richard Barnett, 60, of Arkansas was photographed sitting with his boots on a desk in Pelosi’s office during the Jan. 6 riot. He was ordered Friday to be brought to Washington, where he



Tim Fischer | Reporter-Telegram via AP

Jenny Cudd, front, a flower shop owner and former Midland mayoral candidate, and Eliel Rosa leave the federal courthouse in Midland, Texas on Jan. 13. She is one of more than 125 people arrested so far on charges related to the violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

faces charges of unlawfully entering a restricted area with a lethal weapon — a stun gun. Barnett is also charged with disorderly conduct and theft of public property.

Retired Air Force Lt.

Col. Larry Rendall Brock Jr., of Texas, is a former former fighter pilot photographed on the Senate floor wearing a military style helmet and body armor and carrying plastic zip-tie handcuffs. He is charged with knowingly entering or remaining in a restricted building and violent entry and disorderly conduct on Capitol grounds.

Jacob Chansley, 33 of Arizona was seen in the capitol wearing face paint, no shirt and a furry hat with horns and carrying a U.S. flag attached to a spear. Chansley, also known as Jake Angeli, calls himself the “QAnon Shaman,” a reference to the apocalyptic and convoluted conspiracy theory spread largely through the internet and promoted by some right-wing extremists. He is charged with entering a restricted building without lawful authority, violent entry and disorderly conduct on Capitol grounds.

Lonnie Leroy Coffman, 70, of Alabama drove to

Washington to attend Trump’s “Save America Rally” in a red pickup packed with an M4 assault rifle, multiple loaded magazines, three handguns and 11 Mason jars filled with homemade napalm, according to court filings. The grandfather was arrested that evening when he returned to the truck carrying a 9mm Smith & Wesson handgun and a .22-caliber derringer pistol. He is charged with possession of an unregistered firearm and carrying a pistol without a license.

Jenny Cudd of Texas, a former mayoral candidate in Midland, was arrested after posting a video bragging that she was part of a group that broke down Pelosi’s door. Cudd, who owns a flower shop, deleted the video and told The Associated Press she didn’t personally go into Pelosi’s office and didn’t do anything violent or destroy any property. She was charged with entering a restricted building

See TEXANS | 4A

McAllen kids complete final mile in citywide marathon

STAFF REPORT

Saturday morning marked the seventh annual McAllen Kids Marathon Final Mile, in which more than 3,000 students registered to participate.

Unlike previous years, where runners would gather and run together, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the city to make the marathon events virtual.

How do you hold a marathon virtually?

Well, in McAllen ISD’s case, kids who registered for the marathon race were asked to take a video or photo of themselves during their run, according to school district spokesman Mark May.

A video featuring various entries from kids can be found at McAllen ISD’s

Facebook page and YouTube channel.

In September 2020, kids ran the McAllen Kids Marathon Kickoff Mile, in which they ran a mile, and ran an additional 24 miles either at home or at school during the fall.

Saturday’s race marked the kids’ completion of their marathon.

From kindergarten through eighth grade, kids who participated and registered for the event will receive T-shirts and medals.

The McAllen Marathon Scott Crane Memorial Run was also held through the weekend, with participants uploading videos and images of themselves completing the event to Facebook as a public event was not held due to the pandemic.

Mission insurance agency owner named to state medical board

STAFF REPORT

Gov. Greg Abbott has appointed six members to the Texas Medical Board District Four Review Committee on Thursday, including an insurance agency owner from Mission.

Owner of Ruth Villarreal Insurance Agency and board member of the South Texas Independent School District, Ruth Villarreal has been a sponsor for many Hidalgo County community and charitable organizations such as food drives, the Diabetes Awareness Fair, the Breast Cancer Awareness Walk and more.

She received a Bachelor of Architecture from the University of Houston.

Terms for Villarreal and Dr. Andrew “Jimmy” Widmer of Belton, general internist for Baylor Scott and White Health, are set to expire Jan. 15, 2026.

Widmer is also a member of the Bell County Medical Society, American College of Physicians and Texas Medical Association.

Also appointed were Dr. Ada Booth of Corpus Christi, a child abuse pediatrician with the Child Abuse Resource & Evaluation team at Driscoll Children’s Hospital, along with Walton “Boyd” Bush, Ed.D. of Bee Cave, who is a recently retired executive director of the Texas State Board of Dental Examiners.

Their terms are both set to expire on Jan. 15, 2022.

Philip “Phil” Worley of Hebbronville, a reappointed member of the committee and adjunct instructor at Laredo College, and Dr. Leanne Burnett of Missouri City, who has served as a neurologist at Clear Lake Houston Methodist Hospital, have their terms set to expire on Jan. 15, 2024.

Texas lawmakers offered vaccine despite ineligibility

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

AUSTIN — Austin's top health authority is offering coronavirus vaccines to Texas lawmakers and their key staffers, regardless of whether they are currently eligible under state guidelines.

Dr. Mark Escott, interim medical director for Austin Public Health, confirmed to The Dallas Morning News on Thursday that he organized the vaccination effort with Ascension Seton, a local hospital health system. He said he knows at least five to 10 legislators of both parties who were vaccinated through this process in the past few weeks.

"If they're going to lawmakers, they're not going to somebody else. But, again, the overall strategy is to get the vaccine in the arms of people as quickly as we can," Escott said. "We have to recognize that there are competing interests, and that continuity of government is vital."

An Ascension Seton spokesperson said the hospital is cooperating with Escott's request, adding that most of those vaccinated so far have been eligible under state guidelines that prioritize healthcare workers, the elderly and those with certain medical vulnerabilities.

Escott said he's concerned that the flood of lawmakers coming to Austin for the legislative session could make it a superspreader event.

The 2021 legislative session kicked off Tuesday and adjourned Thursday until the end of the month. On Friday, Rep. Joe Deshotel, a Democrat from Beaumont, confirmed that he tested positive for COVID-19.

Escott said he pushed, unsuccessfully, for the state to put lawmakers on a priority list for the vaccine. He said he doesn't believe he is breaking any rules, saying the state's vaccine guidelines are just recommendations.

The Department of State Health Services has set up a multi-tiered system for vaccine distribution. Front-line health care workers and nursing home residents are first in line. Those age 65 and older or adults with chronic health issues that put them at heightened risk are also priorities.

The state says it will likely be spring before people in all of those in the priority categories are inoculated.

On Sunday, the Texas Department of State Health Services reported that 13,728 people with COVID-19 were hospitalized across the state Sunday.

SAENZ

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The Saenzes are storytellers, so it's inevitable Meagan's baby will hear stories about her grandmother Heidi.

For now, Maddie shows off the stuffed leopard big-sister Meagan gave her for Christmas.

"Meagan is like my mom. She cares for me," Maddie said.

In this pandemic moment, we would do well to care for each other — like Meagan cares for Maddie, and like Heidi cared for everyone.

Que en paz descansa Heidi Saenz. And may her father Julio Saenz rest in peace as well.

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 MOSTHistory.org.

Actions by GOP attorneys general could damage credibility

BY GEOFF MULVIHILL
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

By supporting efforts to overturn the results of the presidential election, most of the nation's Republican state attorneys general may have undermined their offices' long-held special status in federal courts.

In December, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton filed legal papers attempting to overturn the results of the presidential election based on unfounded claims of election fraud in four states that voted for President-elect Joe Biden. The Republican attorneys general for 17 other states made legal filings supporting his effort, which was rejected by the U.S. Supreme Court.

More recently, an association that is affiliated with their political arm, the Republican Attorneys General Association, became entangled in the Jan. 6 rally by President Donald Trump that preceded the violent insurrection against the U.S. Capitol. That group, the Rule of Law Defense Fund, helped pay for promotional efforts to get people to attend Trump's rally. The controversy prompted the AG association's executive director, Adam Piper, to resign.

Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey, a Democrat, blasted the Republican attorneys general who have continued to support Trump's attempts to overturn the election, even as he and his allies have lost case after case in court. Even Trump's former U.S. attorney general, William Barr, said the Justice Department had found no evidence of widespread fraud that would have altered the outcome of the presidential election.

"There have been a number of Republican AGs who have gone too far and have stepped outside of their role, and who have deviated from the obligation to adhere to the rule of law," she said, characterizing their conduct as "un-American and incredibly destructive."

Some legal experts think the overt political involve-



Jacquelyn Martin | The Associated Press

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton speaks in Washington on Jan. 6, at a rally in support of President Donald Trump.

ment by the Republican attorneys general could have a lasting effect on how judges view legal actions their offices bring.

"States occupy a unique position and an important position" in the courts, said Paul Nolette, a Marquette University political scientist who studies attorneys general. "If it turns out that AGs are no different from another politician or another interest group just looking for an angle trying to get into the courts, the courts could revisit special solicitude."

The term refers to a state's ability to unilaterally weigh in on any federal lawsuit, giving attorneys general and their states a say in a wide variety of issues.

Attorneys general are elected to office in most states and frequently use the job as a platform to run for governor or the U.S. Senate. Their offices serve as the legal arm of state governments, and they often band together — almost always with AGs of their own party — to challenge federal policy.

They also file claims on behalf of their state's residents over consumer affairs and antitrust matters. Every state's AG's office, for example, has sued companies over the toll of the opioids crisis.

Most attorneys general also are the top law enforcement officers in their state, prosecuting criminal cases and upholding justice.

Greg Zoeller, a Republican and former Indiana attorney general, said attorneys gen-

eral could lose the right to file "friend-of-the-court" briefs in any federal case without permission because of the activities of the Republican AGs in support of Trump's election claims.

But he said the work of prosecuting crimes and protecting consumers is handled mostly by career government lawyers who are not focused on political cases.

"You can still have a very strong law office that represents the best interest of the state, the people, when it comes to consumer protection issues," he said.

The Republican Attorneys General Association and its counterpart group for Democrats launched two decades ago. The groups are major independent spenders in AG races, pouring money -- much of it raised from corporations -- into ads attacking the other side. In the last decade, the groups ditched their old agreement not to try to oust incumbents.

The Republican group has spent \$15 million and contributed \$50 million to other political entities over the last decade, according to data compiled by the National Institute on Money in Politics. The Democratic group has spent less, but has recently closed the gap.

Anthony Johnstone, the former state solicitor in Montana who now teaches law at the University of Montana, said the attorneys general are falling in line with their party more often because of the pursuit of campaign spend-

ing from the Republican or Democratic associations.

"The concern with these groups is that it's not about states' rights or the Constitution or the rule of law at all. It's about maintaining power and the dark money that sustains it," he said.

The push to overturn election results based on unfounded fraud claims did get some GOP pushback. Eight Republican attorneys general opted against joining Paxton's effort.

One of them, Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost, urged the U.S. Supreme Court to consider the case — but rule against Texas.

"Federal courts, just like state courts, lack authority to order legislatures to appoint electors without regard to the results of an already-completed election," he said in a statement last month.

Sylvia Albert, the director of voting and elections for the liberal advocacy group Common Cause said the filings were so troublesome that she believes there are grounds to disbar the attorneys general who made them.

"When you submit something in court, you're saying: 'To the best of my knowledge, the information I've given you is true and valid,'" she said.

Doug Gansler, a former Democratic attorney general in Maryland, said attorneys general should not file motions based on "imaginary evidence," but expects judges to see those filings as political actions that do not taint the regular work of attorneys general.

Despite the deep political divide, most attorneys general joined together this week in a bipartisan condemnation of the deadly insurrection against Congress by a pro-Trump mob. Those representing 46 states, the District of Columbia and some U.S. territories, signed a joint letter to the Department of Justice condemning the invasion of the Capitol: "The events of January 6 represent a direct, physical challenge to the rule of law and our democratic republic itself."

TEXANS

From Page 3A

and disorderly conduct, both misdemeanors. She said she received death threats and her business, Becky's Flowers, was bombarded with one-star reviews calling her a traitor and domestic terrorist.

Derrick Evans, 35, was a West Virginia lawmaker who streamed video of himself charging into the building with the mob. The recently sworn-in delegate to the West Virginia House resigned after his arrest on two riot-related charges and apologized. Evans

was quickly identified after he posted the video of the Capitol door being smashed and declaring: "The door is cracked! ... We're in, we're in! Derrick Evans is in the Capitol!"

Tim Gionet, a far-right media personality who calls himself "Baked Alaska," entered various offices in the Capitol and cursed at a law officer he alleged had shoved him. When told by law enforcement officers to move, he identified himself as a member of the media. Gionet live-streamed for about a half hour from inside the building and could be heard encouraging other protesters not to leave, cussing and saying "I'm staying" and "1776 baby," prosecutors said. He was arrested in Houston and faces charges of violent and disorderly conduct on Capitol grounds and knowingly entering a restricted building without

lawful authority.

Jack Jesse Griffith of Tennessee was arrested after an informant identified him as a person known on Facebook as Juan Bibiano. That account shows of Griffith in what appears to be the Capitol Crypt, raising his closed fist into the air. Another post included a message saying he helped "stormed (sic) the capitol today." He is charged with knowingly entering or remaining in any restricted building or grounds without lawful authority to do so. He's also accused of engaging in disorderly or disruptive conduct with intent to to impede or disrupt government business.

Emily Hernandez of Missouri was seen in photos holding a splintered name plate belonging to Pelosi. Hernandez is charged with five counts, including disorderly conduct that impedes the conduct of government business and the stealing or disposing of government property.

Doug Jensen, 41, of Iowa was seen on video chasing a Black officer up an interior flight of stairs in the Capitol as a mob trailed several steps behind. Jensen, who is white, was charged with trespassing and disorderly conduct.

Adam Johnson, 36, of Florida is accused of swiping Pelosi's lectern during the chaos and smiling as he walked through the

Capitol rotunda with it. He is charged with theft, violent entry and disorderly conduct on Capitol grounds.

Nicholas R. Ochs, 34, of Hawaii, founder of a local Proud Boys chapter, posted a photo of himself on Twitter inside the Capitol grinning widely as he smoked a cigarette. The FBI said it identified him from photos taken when Ochs campaigned unsuccessfully last year as the Republican nominee for a seat in the Hawaii statehouse.

Robert Keith Packer, 56, of Virginia caused an uproar on social media after being seen in the Capitol wearing a sweatshirt bearing the name "Camp Auschwitz," a reference to the Nazi concentration camp where about 1.1 million people were killed during World War II. He was charged with violent entry and disorderly conduct on Capitol grounds, and unlawfully entering a restricted building.

Dominic Pezzola, 43, of New York is a former Marine identified as a Proud Boys member who was seen in video shattering an exterior Capitol window with a stolen Capitol Police riot shield before he and others climbed inside, the FBI said. The bearded man, whose nickname is "Spazzo," also appears in a second video taken inside the building that shows him puffing a cigar in what he calls a "victory smoke," according to a court filing.

He is charged with destruction of government property, obstruction of an official proceeding and illegally entering a restricted building.

Jenna Ryan, 50, of Texas live-streamed a Facebook video walking with a group toward the Capitol and said, "We are going to (expletive) go in here" as they approached the door. "Life or death, it doesn't matter. Here we go." She then turned the camera to expose her face and said, "Y'all know who to hire for your Realtor, Jenna Ryan." She told KTVT-TV in Fort Worth she didn't do anything violent, didn't realize there was violence and hoped Trump would pardon her. "I just want people to know I'm a normal person, that I listen to my president who told me to go to the Capitol, that I was displaying my patriotism." She faces a charge of knowingly entering or remaining in the restricted building or grounds without lawful authority and disorderly conduct on Capitol grounds.

Robert Sanford, 55, a retired Pennsylvania firefighter, allegedly threw a fire extinguisher that hit three Capitol Police officers during the violent siege. He was charged with assault of a police officer, disorderly conduct on Capitol grounds, civil disorder and unlawfully entering the Capitol. His lawyer said he was a Trump supporter who got caught up in the mob mentality.

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