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**BEARING WITNESS**

# A life lost to COVID-19, Amado Garcia lived for God, family and community

BY FRANCISCO GUAJARDO  
 SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

**BEARING WITNESS**

Edinburg resident Amado Garcia died on Aug. 22, 2020, due to complications from COVID-19. He leaves behind the love of his life, his wife of 56 years, Josefa Ochoa Garcia. He is also survived by an adoring family that includes five children, 10 grandchildren, one great-grandson and countless extended family members who bore witness to the life of a good man.

Rio Grande Valley, and on a tip from an acquaintance, bought a junk yard east of Edinburg.

He turned his modest enterprise, Garcia's Auto Junkyard, into a sprawling business that included a thriving small-town car lot. Established 32 years ago, the business is still in operation. Garcia was driven by an intense ambition to do right by his God, his family and his community.

Garcia found life experience as his greatest source of



Amado Garcia

learning. He was a student of the Bible and learned to be trilingual. Beyond Spanish,

he became functional in English and American Sign Language, because he felt a need to bridge the communication gap with Valley-ites from all walks of life. He was always willing to help people, teaching them how to use their Bible and fix their cars.

His family became his greatest legacy. Like their father, the children work for the public good. His son Abel is on the frontlines as a registered nurse at DHR Health. Abel tells the story of when his father contracted COVID-19. Because of hospital capacity issues, the family opted to send Garcia to San Antonio for treatment, where he succumbed to the virus.

“He had some good days, and he had some bad days,”

Abel said. “As I treated an endless line of COVID patients at DHR, I was getting reports about my father's condition. Not being able to be at my father's bedside, I saw my father in my patients. I tried even harder to keep them alive!

“We all tried harder. We didn't give up on anybody, just like I know the hospital in San Antonio would not give up on my father.”

Abel said COVID-19 patients are challenged to communicate.

“They're in too much pain; they're masked and unable to tell us anything about their story,” he added.

Fortunately, we can tell Garcia's story. Abel called him “the greatest man I've ever

known.” He was also a great teacher: “I learned so much about God, cars and love of neighbor from him. I can remember my father helping stranded strangers in the middle of the night.”

Perhaps Garcia's example of working for the public good is what moves Abel to be the kind of RN that he is.

On his Facebook page, Abel chronicles his COVID-19 work. When his boss asked, “Abel, can you go to SIDU1 (COVID-19 unit)? They need help!” His response? “I didn't even let her finish her sentence ... I was out the door.”

If this is what Amado Garcia's progeny does, then there

See **GARCIA** | 4A

# Fresh start



Photos by Delcia Lopez | [dlopez@themonitor.com](mailto:dlopez@themonitor.com)

Peppers from Aguascalientes, Mexico at the San Rey terminal on April 2, 2019, in Pharr.

## Pharr kicks off produce season at bridge; 190K truck crossings in 2020

BY FRANCISCO E. JIMÉNEZ  
 STAFF WRITER

The Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge on Thursday played host to what's become an annual kickoff celebration to the start of the produce season.

The event featured state and local representatives from Pharr, the produce industry and roughly 100 onlookers at the port — the number one fresh produce crossing location in the country, accounting for 65% of goods that enter the state.

“Pharr highlights this because Pharr's the number one crossing for fresh produce in all of the U.S.,” said Hector Garza, director for industry affairs for the Texas International Produce Association. “They're the port that crosses the most (produce).”

“... They've been doing this for the past seven years, and every year it's been growing.”

The produce season runs from October through May, with the number of crossings steadily increasing by



Araceli Benitez and Maria Morales sift through bell peppers coming from Coahuila, Mexico at the San Rey produce terminal in Pharr on April 2, 2019.

7% in recent years. This year, according to Garza, the bridge has 190,174 fresh produce truck crossings.

“It's very impressive,” Garza said. “Texas also has its domestic growers, but during the off-seasons when we're not growing in Texas, a lot of the fruit and vegetables come from Mexico.”

A large percentage of the produce that is crossed through ports in Texas disseminated to the east coast, where there is ample de-

mand for fresh produce.

Thursday's ceremony featured speeches from Pharr Mayor Ambrosio Hernandez and Pharr Bridge Director Luis Bazan, who gave updates on programs such as the STAC (South Texas Assets Consortium) Program, the DAP 16 (Donations Acceptance Program), and the current project in which more lanes will be added to the bridge to improve the flow of traffic.

The celebration concluded

with the ceremonial cutting of the fruit.

“This time around, it was a lot shorter,” Garza said. “We wanted to make sure that we didn't have too many speakers up there because of COVID-19. We wanted to make sure that everybody was safe.”

The ceremony also came a day before the Trump administration announced that the U.S. Department of Agriculture would be investing \$1 million to help agricultural producers in rural Texas boost production.

Funding recipients include Rio Grande Mesquite LLC and International Magsa LLC, DBA Golden Farm — both of Hidalgo County.

According to a news release, Golden Farms will receive \$49,993 while Rio Grande Mesquite gets \$49,750.

The funding will come from USDA's Value-Added Producer Grant Program (VAPG).

[fjimenez@themonitor.com](mailto:fjimenez@themonitor.com)

## Weslaco to shut off delinquent water accounts Nov. 1

BY DINA ARÉVALO  
 STAFF WRITER

The city of Weslaco will begin to shut off service to residential and commercial customers who have not paid their water bills in several months. The shutoffs are slated to begin Nov. 1.

The news came after city officials said delinquent water and sewer bills have ballooned from approximately \$55,000 before the COVID-19 pandemic struck the Rio Grande Valley this spring, to more than \$330,000 by late August.

“In March, it jumped up to (\$198,000), then 239, then 280. It's at (\$298,000) at the end of July,” Weslaco City Manager Mike Perez explained to the commission during a meeting late last month.

By the end of August, that figure had swelled to

\$330,000, he said.

The coronavirus pandemic hit the local economy hard, with multiple retailers and other businesses shutting down for weeks or months on end. And though the economy has recovered somewhat since regional lockdown restrictions began loosening in May, at around 10%, the Valley's unemployment rate still hovers a couple of percentage points higher than the rest of the state.

In early spring, as the Weslaco City Commission saw the economic impacts being wrought upon their city by the virus, they made the decision to continue providing water and sewer service even if a customer couldn't pay.

Such essential services should not cease in the

See **SHUT OFF** | 4A

## Former cop convicted of working for cartel loses federal appeal

BY MARK REAGAN  
 STAFF WRITER

A federal appeals court has denied an appeal filed by a corrupt cop serving a 20-year prison sentence for assisting the Gulf Cartel in moving cocaine loads through the Rio Grande Valley.

Geovani Hernandez, a 46-year-old Weslaco resident who was working as a sergeant for the Progreso Police Department when he was arrested, had appealed to the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals arguing his conviction on two counts of aiding or abetting the possession with intent to distribute cocaine was not supported by the evidence. He also made an ineffective assistance of counsel claim.



Hernandez

Hernandez, who at one time was the chief of La Joya's police department, had a career that spanned stints with the Hidalgo County Sheriff's

Office, as well as the Alamo, Pharr and Weslaco police departments, ended up on the other side of the law when he was arrested on Aug. 11, 2017.

After a four-day trial last year, a jury convicted him of the charges.

In his appeal, Hernandez first argues the evidence against him is insufficient to support that verdict because it does not show that he had actual or constructive possession of controlled substance, according to the ruling.

That ruling says when Hernandez was working with the Progreso Police Department he made an agreement with a confidential informant — Hector Obed Saucedo-Rodriguez — to provide safe passage for drug-laden vehicles passing through Progreso in exchange for money.

Hernandez believed Saucedo-Rodriguez was a Gulf Cartel associate, but the man was actually working as a government informant.

Saucedo-Rodriguez, a

See **APPEAL** | 4A

# 'We can't lose our momentum:' Louisiana vows to rebuild

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LAKE CHARLES, La. — Back-to-back hurricanes in the space of six weeks left parts of Louisiana blanketed Sunday with tarpaulins, mangled metal and downed power lines — but not necessarily despair.

Utility crews fanned out across the battered southwestern part of the state to restore electricity in the wake of Hurricane Delta, and residents began returning home along roads lined with debris and houses missing roofs. Some were grateful that the damage was not as bad as it could have been.

A 70-year-old woman in Iberia Parish died in a fire likely caused by a natural gas leak following damage from Hurricane Delta, the Louisiana Department of Health said Sunday.

Louisiana officials also blamed the death of an 86-year-old man on the hurricane. The St. Martin Parish resident died in a fire that erupted after he refueled a generator in a shed, Gov. John Bel Edwards said. He said it didn't appear the generator had cooled down before the man refilled it.

A third storm-related death was reported in Florida, where a 19-year-old tourist from Illinois drowned after getting caught in a rip current caused by the storm off Destin, authorities said.

Roughly 350,000 customers in Louisiana remained without power two days af-



Gerald Herbert | The Associated Press

Sonia King holds onto her husband Patrick King in Lake Charles, La., Saturday, Oct. 10, 2020, as they walk through the flooded street to their home, after Hurricane Delta moved through on Friday.

ter Delta blew ashore near the town of Creole with winds of 100 mph, slamming a part of the state still recovering from Hurricane Laura's 150 mph onslaught on Aug. 27. Laura was blamed for 32 deaths, many of them caused in the storm's aftermath by carbon monoxide poisoning from generators.

The remnants of Delta, meanwhile, dumped heavy rain on parts of Georgia, the Carolinas and Virginia.

The storm was also blamed for washing out a railroad track and causing the derailment of a freight train in the Atlanta area that sparked a small fire and briefly forced some residents from their homes. Two crew members were taken to a hospital for observation and later released.

Clair Hebert Marceaux

lost her home in Cameron Parish, Louisiana, during Hurricane Laura and said the community was hard at work on rebuilding when Delta struck.

"We can't lose our momentum," she said, though she added there was "utter devastation" in the area.

Marceaux, who was born and raised in Cameron Parish, is the director of the community's busy port, which hosts fleets of shrimp and crab boats and serves as a key link in the region's oil and gas industry.

Vessel traffic was halted until port authorities and the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers could take stock of the damage. Sunken boats, utility poles and other flotsam filled waterways.

"We are still in an assessment phase," Marceaux said, "but we will be limping along as best as we can."

Hernandez provided protection for the drug loads, which conduct is the kind of supporting action that proves his participation in the criminal endeavor," the ruling states.

Federal appellate judges also note that Hernandez met with Saucedo-Rodriguez to discuss drug loads, to act as a scout and to accept payment, which all denotes criminal intent.

"According to Hernandez, there was no evidence that he actually possessed or constructively possessed a controlled substance. However, aiding and abetting the possession of a controlled substance with the intent to distribute does not require the Government to prove actual or constructive possession," the ruling states.

Lastly, Hernandez argued that his trial counsel rendered ineffective assistance by failing to renew a motion for acquittal at the close of evidence during trial to preserve his insufficient evidence claim.

"We generally will not consider the merits of an ineffective assistance of counsel claim on direct appeal. We decline to consider Hernandez's ineffective assistance claim at this time, without prejudice to collateral review," the ruling states.

Court records also indicate that Hernandez claims to have fallen ill with COVID-19. He has filed three motions for compassionate release since July 22, saying he tested positive for COVID-19 on April 30.

In those motions, Hernandez accuses the Bureau of Prisons of being negligent for its care of inmates during the pandemic.

A judge has not ruled on the motions.

He also says in those motions that he maintains his innocence in his case.

Hernandez is scheduled for release in 2035. He'll be 61.

mreagan@  
themonitor.com

## APPEAL

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Pharr resident, became involved after meeting with Homeland Security Investigations agents and telling them he could get close to Hernandez because he was looking to open illegal eight-liner establishments and a friend told him Hernandez could help him with that, according to The Monitor's archives.

That relationship eventually grew from illegal gambling to drug smuggling.

According to the ruling, Hernandez accepted payment from Saucedo-Rodriguez on July 15 and July 21, 2017, for scouting on behalf of drug smugglers, who were actually federal agents.

"On the first date Hernandez used his private vehicle, but on the second date, Hernandez used his marked patrol car to scout the area to clear safe passage for the load vehicle. A rational jury could find that

# Jamaicans in Florida energized by Harris on 2020 ticket

BY ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — President Donald Trump and Joe Biden are entering the final stretch of the campaign in a fierce battle for Latino voters who could sway the results in Florida and determine who wins the White House.

But in this ultimate battleground state where nearly 10 million voters participate in elections often decided by a mere percentage point, other communities could suddenly become critical.

That's where the booming Black Caribbean community centered in Broward County comes in. Voters in this Democratic stronghold are eager to defeat Trump, but say they are even more energized to turn out in support of California Sen. Kamala Harris, Biden's running mate whose father is Jamaican.

"The fact she has a lineage means you are going to see a lot of Jamaicans voting even if they were not doing so before," said Antoinette Henry, director of corporate relations at the Dutch Pot Jamaican Restaurant, a company with several locations in South Florida. "Part of Jamaica will be in the White House."

Broward County, home to Fort Lauderdale, is the county with the most Jamaicans in the United States. Florida has more than 974,000 people of West Indian ancestry — a Caribbean category that excludes Hispanic nationalities such as Cuban. That total includes more than 300,000 Jamaicans and more than 530,000 Haitians, according to census figures.

A conservative estimate for the number of Jamaican voters in Florida stands at 91,000, because many may not report Jamaica as their country of origin. Haitian voters are estimated at about 115,000.

"These naturalized citizens vote. They turn out," said Dan Smith, a University of Florida political science professor. "We also know that there is a lot of mobilization that goes on in these communities."

Laura Uribe, who is getting



Lynne Sladky | The Associated Press

Florida Rep. Anika Omphroy poses for a photograph on Aug. 26 at the Dutch Pot Jamaican Restaurant in Pembroke Pines, Fla.

her doctorate in political science at the University of California, San Diego, has closely studied five immigrant groups in Broward County. She said 77% of voters of Jamaican origin are Democrats whereas 3% are Republican and 20% have no party affiliation. In the last presidential election, 78% of Jamaican-American voters turned out to vote, while the total turnout was about 66%.

Between October 2016 and September 2018, more Jamaicans became naturalized U.S. citizens than did Venezuelans, a group pursued by the GOP, according to the most recently available data from the Department of Homeland Security.

"I can tell you Kamala is in the tongue of everyone. They are talking about what must be done to make sure we deliver for the team of Biden and Sen. Harris," said Jamaican-born Hazelle Rogers, the mayor of Lauderdale Lakes who in 1996 became Florida's first Jamaican to be elected to office. "We are so proud, and we know that we must deliver."

Harris, whose mother was an Indian immigrant, appeared last month on a Caribbean weekly radio show that airs in South Florida. She was interviewed by a Jamaican American lawyer with political aspirations and told him that her favorite Jamaican dish was oxtail stew. When asked about songs on her playlist, she said she had "every Bob Marley song that he ever sung."

Locals also took note that Harris chose Karine Jean-Pierre, a Black woman born

in Martinique to Haitian parents, to be her chief of staff and that Biden's campaign senior adviser for Florida is Karen Andre, a first-generation Haitian American born in New York and raised in Florida.

The campaign has released a TV ad on Haitian creole stations and print ads for Caribbean publications promoting Biden's relief efforts to aid Black-owned businesses. A new ad made for English-language Caribbean radio stations refers to Harris as "our Jamaican sister."

During a campaign stop in Florida, Harris paid a quick visit to a Venezuelan restaurant and then headed to a historically Black university in Miami Gardens, where she met with Black leaders, including some with Bahamian ancestry such as U.S. Rep. Frederica Wilson and Miami-Dade Chamber of Commerce CEO Gordon Eric Knowles.

Shawn Myers, a voter in Broward County who is Jamaican American, said he would vote for Biden and Harris, just to unseat Trump.

"We need something better," Myers said. "With her I feel like we are getting somewhere. She is strict, so she knows what she is doing."

Florida Rep. Anika Omphroy, born to Jamaican parents, said she and her team are encouraging people to vote by mail and early on, especially those who vote at precincts that may now be closed due to the virus. Omphroy said she identifies with Harris as a first-generation daughter of immigrants, and she also thinks the candidate is easy to like.

## GARCIA

From Page 3A

is no doubt he left a valuable legacy. We bear witness to this truth.

Garcia was born on the seventh day of March in 1942 in Doctor Coss, Nuevo Leon, and leaves us as a victim of

the pandemic of 2020. He was a humble servant of God.

*Que en paz descanse Amado Garcia. Rest in peace.*

*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.*

## SHUT OFF

From Page 3A

middle of a pandemic where maintaining good hygiene is essential to combating the spread, they reasoned.

"A lot of those places were closing down and people were not employed, so the commission instructed us, really, not to shut anybody's water off during that period," Perez said during a phone interview.

But now, as the delinquent balances mount, the city can no longer afford such generosity, nor may such largesse be warranted for all those who are delinquent.

"It's six times what it was, and so there are some individuals on that list that we think have the ability to pay and they're just taking advantage of it," Perez said, adding that many of them are commercial accounts.

As Perez explained to the commission, unlike other public services, such as street maintenance or public safety, water and sewer operations are paid for directly through the payments from the customers who utilize those services.

And it's not just people who reside within the city limits and pay city property

taxes who use Weslaco water. The city serves customers who live in unincorporated areas around the city limits, as well.

If the delinquencies continue to grow, it can affect Weslaco's ability to continue providing its water service, or its ability to continue paying millions in outstanding debt, Perez said.

"We can't continue to do this. It's getting worse and worse. And we have an obligation because we have an outstanding debt in the water and sewer (fund)," Perez said. "We have an obligation to the people who are paying," he said.

Realizing that customers may not be able to pay a delinquent bill in one lump sum, the city began sending out notices to delinquent customers urging them to set up payment plans.

How much time a customer has to get out of arrears depends on how much they owe. Plans vary from six months to two years.

A person who is \$100-\$200 behind, for instance, has six months to pay off the debt, whereas someone who is \$700.01 to \$1,200 behind has a year. Customers who are delinquent more than \$2,400 have 24 months to

make good.

Nor are all delinquent balances eligible to be part of a payment plan. Only outstanding balances from March 1 through Oct. 31 of this year qualify.

Penalties assessed before March 1, disconnection fees and returned check fees are not eligible.

However, residents may also set up payment plans for delinquent trash and brush charges, according to a draft copy of the payment plan contract.

While explaining the issue to the commission last month, Perez said he had seen numerous people with limited income making efforts to pay their bills, while other accounts had amassed delinquencies in the thousands.

Of Weslaco's 10,500 water customers, just 200-300 are delinquent, Perez said.

"We can't continue to carry them on forever," Perez said. "We're gonna work with those individuals, but they need to come in and sit down with us and work on developing a plan," he said.

Residents may call (956) 968-3181 to learn more.

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