

Support Texas' haunted teachers



Mercedes Salas, center, a Robb Elementary School teacher, cries for her students — her “babies.”

By Nancy M. Preyor-Johnson

UVALDE — In the initial aftermath of a mass shooting that continues to defy words, law enforcement wrongfully blamed a teacher for propping open a door, allowing Salvador Ramos to enter Robb Elementary and murder 19 students and two teachers, and wound 17 others.

In response, Texas teacher Julianne Knott posted a Facebook message on Memorial Day that resonated with educators.

“To the teacher who propped the door open, we’ve all done it,” Knott wrote. “It’s not your fault. Schools shouldn’t have to be locked down like a prison.”

I’ve done it. When I was a yearbook and journalism teacher, students took photos outside and we sometimes propped the door open. It was against school policy. I would never do it again.

But we’ve since learned the Robb Elemen-

tary teacher, Emilia Marin, didn't leave the door propped open. Her attorney later shared a timeline that contradicts the Department of Public Safety's earlier account. Marin saw the shooter and ran back inside, kicking aside the rock keeping the door open, DPS confirmed. She closed the door and called 911 to report that Ramos, armed with an assault rifle, was shooting at the school. But the door's automatic lock malfunctioned.

That she was blamed is unjustifiable.

Overworked and underpaid, teachers in Texas were quitting before the Uvalde massacre — nearly 500 in six months. The ones who stayed were exhausted from teaching in a pandemic. The Uvalde school massacre — the second-deadliest school shooting in America — won't make the situation better.

Instead of calling a special session, Gov. Greg Abbott announced a special legislative committee, which doesn't meet this awful moment. He also directed the Texas School Safety Center and the Texas Education Agency to do random access control inspections at schools. Not only would that be ineffective, but it could further traumatize students and teachers.

Many in the GOP have called for teachers to carry guns to school. This is risky, and many teachers don't want to do it.

Our governor and Legislature must take action to ensure teenagers can't purchase assault rifles. They must also bolster mental health and school safety measures — immediately.

Teachers in Uvalde and beyond are heroes. As others left, they stayed. And now they are reminded that their lives are at risk when they report to work each day, amid the myriad other challenges they face.

Three days after the shooting, I met Mer-

cedes Salas, a Robb Elementary fourth grade teacher, at a makeshift memorial in the town square. She cried out as she stood at each of her student's crosses. "They're my babies!" she wailed in Spanish.

Media from all over the world swarmed. A local pastor prayed. She spoke of having nightmares and said the shooter was too young to drink alcohol and shouldn't have been able to purchase a gun.

Teachers are haunted. Instead of blame and excuses, they urgently need action and support.

Another Robb Elementary teacher recalled her classroom's escape from the shooter.

She also spoke of the betrayal she felt when she saw news reports blaming a teacher for propping open the door. She said she didn't believe it because no one ever used that door.

"I hate the finger-pointing in any direction other than that shooter," she told me. "Only the teachers and students in that district, in that hallway, on that day could, in my opinion, say where the weaknesses were."

The teacher said her warning was gunshots outside her window. "Every teacher in that building did everything they could, with the tools we are given, to protect those babies."

She said she put her arms around her students and they "prayed — very softly."

"They were so good," she said. "The quietest they've been all year."

Two officers pulled them out of their classrooms.

"The peace my kids and I felt when two officers entered our room to guard us — those two classroom didn't get to experience that, and that breaks my heart," she said. "The accounts of these babies and my friends will haunt me forever."

OPINION

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COMMENTARY

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I've done it. When I was a yearbook and journalism teacher, students took photos outside and we sometimes propped the door open. It was against school policy. I would never do it again.

But we've since learned the Robb Elementary teacher, Zani-Bia Martin, didn't leave the door propped open. Her attorney later shared a timeline that contradicts the Department of Public Safety's earlier account. Martin saw the shooter and ran back inside, kicking aside the rock keeping the door open, DPS confirmed. She closed the



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Three days after the shooting, I met Mercedes Salas, a Robb Elementary fourth grade teacher, at a makeshift memorial in the town square. She cried out as she stood at each of her student's crosses. "They're my babies!" she wailed in Spanish.

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No 'next time,' and no wavering on that

My first encounter with a mass shooting was on Jan. 8, 2011.

I was a metro columnist at the Arizona Daily Star, the newspaper in Tucson, where I grew up.

That Saturday morning, I was driving to the grocery store when I heard U.S. Rep. Gabby Giffords had been shot in the head. Six people died, including a 9-year-old, Christina-Taylor Green.

If Christina-Taylor were alive today, she would be celebrating her 21st birthday this year.

At the time of the Tucson tragedy, as a pall smothered a vibrant January blue sky and memorials popped up across the city, I often heard people wonder if the shooting would somehow define the community. I would also hear people say they never expected such violence. Not in Tucson. At least not on the community's most affluent North Side (as if gun violence is tolerable anywhere). Not at a grocery store named Safeway. I've read similar comments about other massacres.



JOSH BRODECKY
COMMENTARY

Then, as now, the national media swarmed to the tragedy and then moved on. Politicians came and went. Time marched forward.

With the gift of time, I eventually could see the shooting would never define Tucson. Not because it wasn't a defining tragedy. It was very much so. A remarkable young congressman had been shot, a child had been among those murdered. But it never defined Tucson partly because a community is always bigger than a horrid tragedy — there is still so much good in this world. And partly because the mass shootings continued in so many other communities: Aurora,

Colorado; Sandy Hook Elementary School, the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Fla.; Las Vegas; Sutherland Springs; Parkland, Fla.; Santa Fe High School; El Paso, Uvalde.

Mass shootings almost always result in murders, but I have also come to think of them as robberies. They end lives, but they steal life's precious moments.

When I think of the 19 children and two teachers murdered in Uvalde — and I will think about them every day for the rest of my life — my heart lingers over those life moments and connections that have been stolen. The graduations that will never happen. True loves never encountered. The laughter of generations silenced. The music never sung. I think of Christina-Taylor Green, who should be an adult.

It is unbearable. And perhaps — just perhaps — this is why in the all-too-familiar arc of mass shootings, we so often find solace in our heroes. After Tucson's shooting 11 years ago, the public cele-

brated those heroes who stopped the gunman and tended to the injured.

Likewise, in the immediate aftermath of Uvalde, Gov. Greg Abbott initially, and wrongfully, invoked the heroism of law enforcement, saying: "It could have been worse. The reason it was not worse is because law enforcement officials did what they do — they showed amazing courage by running toward gunfire for the singular purpose of trying to save lives."

We've since learned how the response from law enforcement was a confusing failure. But the root failure resides with state and federal lawmakers who allowed gun violence to rage. There were no heroes in Uvalde or Austin.

As much as I think about the children we have lost, my mind has also repeatedly turned to a chilling comment indicted Attorney General Ken Paxton made after Uvalde. He called for arming and training more "law-abiding citizens" to prepare for other mass shootings "because it's not going to be the

last time."

I agree Uvalde will not "be the last time" — a gunman killed four people in Tulsa on Wednesday — but I reject Paxton's underlying rationale and acceptance of present and future tragedies, just as I reject his "policy" response.

Paxton may view mass shootings as inevitable, a price to be paid for freedom. And that view may be accepted in some circles. But I view mass shootings — and all other forms of gun violence — as entirely preventable and a corruption of the very freedoms we celebrate. The expectation for our elected officials should be never again. Not, it will happen again.

But that expectation must be constant and enduring. It cannot waver. Inevitably after mass shootings, our attention drifts away. If Uvalde does not galvanize change and spur gun safety reforms, then what will? If not now, then when? Next time is already too late.

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The fairy tale that America tells itself

Once upon a time, in a land of oak trees and honey, a place once called Encina, there lived princesses and princes who ruled the hearts of that land, which they brightened with the dazzling colors of their joy and laughter.

Once upon a time, like princesses and princes everywhere, there were summer nights when they would gaze upon the glittering sky and sing:

*"Twinkle, twinkle little star
How I wonder what you are
Up above the sky so high
Like a diamond in the sky."*

Once upon a time, like princesses and princes everywhere, they would go to bed with stuffed animals and fall asleep to fairy tales, which began with "Once upon a time" and ended with "happily ever after."

Once upon a time, in a land once called Encina but now known as Uvalde, time and "happily ever after" were assumed for princesses and princes, who would grow into their dreams and become queens and kings.

Princesses and princes hap-



CARY CLACK
COMMENTARY

ply spent their time playing softball and basketball, doing gymnastics, catching footballs from grandfathers, cheerleading, running, swimming, learning dances from TikTok, learning to sew from YouTube, doing photography, singing with fathers, saving money to go to Disney World, watching "Encanto," enjoying Ariana Grande perform, cheering for the Houston Astros, being with family.

All while planning to be an artist, a teacher, a marine biologist, a lawyer or a police officer.

Once upon a time, it was all possible. Until time stopped and took away these princesses and princes. Now, there is no happily ever after.

Stuffed animals like the ones they once cuddled populate a memorial in Uvalde's town square, reminding us that this time, a billion loving kisses from their parents and grandparents won't open the eyes of these sleeping beauties.

Fairy tales are often stories of how to behave. We tell children fairy tales to entertain and educate. But we also tell fairy tales to deceive ourselves, to pretend we're better than we are and we're doing all the things we should be doing. There is no bigger fairy tale we tell ourselves in the United States than that children are our most precious resource and we do all we can to protect them.

Not when the leading cause of death of children in this nation is firearms. Protect the Second Amendment, fine. But protect second graders, and third and fourth graders, and all young people.

Once upon a time, we believed we'd do something more to protect them after we lost so many in Sandy Hook, then

Parkland, then Santa Fe. Instead, we watched the repeated assassinations of our youth, as happily ever after, ever after, ever after, ever after was shattered.

We call children angels, but we want that to be metaphorical. We don't want them to be given angels' wings before they receive their graduation rings, before their time on this Earth has taken flight and they've had the chance to navigate full lives, to have a chance at happily ever after, ever after, ever after.

Once upon a time, in a land of oak trees and honey, a place once called Encina but now known as Uvalde, there lived princesses and princes who ruled the hearts of that land, which they brightened with the dazzling colors of their joy and laughter.

Their names were Navaeh, Jose, Jacklyn, Annabell, Jayce, Makenna, Jalilah, Lexi, Tess, Xavier, Amerie, Maranda, Elihana, Rogelio, Layla, Allithia, Maite, Uzayah, Eliana. Their queen-protectors were named Irma and Eva.



Alisa Wong/Getty Images
In life and death, stuffed animals look over Uvalde's princesses and princes.

Then they were gone. These students and teachers should not have had to die for us to be shaken to our senses, not after the deaths of so many other students and teachers failed to do that.

But now that they're gone, what are the lessons learned? What are we going to do?

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Use all tools to keep schools safe

By Nancy M. Preyor-Johnson

In 2019, Texas lawmakers enacted school security measures that lacked teeth and adequate funding. The state's lax gun laws allowed a deeply troubled 18-year-old to purchase assault weapons and ammo in May. Then law enforcement failed to save the 19 students and two teachers he brutally murdered.

There are so many failures at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde that it is natural to focus on the most egregious. But even the smallest decisions weigh heavy in mass shootings.

Before the next shooting, schools must better fortify facilities and update active shooter protocols. No school official can claim a shooting could not happen in their district.

Uvalde Consolidated ISD had extensive school security protocols and training, yet it wasn't enough May 24. An effective lockdown could have saved more lives. Instead, the shooter easily walked through unlocked doors.

During Tuesday's Senate special committee hearing, Texas Education Agency Commissioner Mike Morath and others detailed renewed focus on incident response, facilities access control and behavioral threat assessment.

The alert system is critical. Part of the Uvalde school district's security effort is a silently activated mobile panic alarm. Houston-based Raptor Technologies, which serves more than 90 percent of Texas public schools and 35,000 schools across the U.S., provides the system.

The Uvalde shooting is believed to be the first time the alert system has been deployed in a mass shooting, but some Robb Elementary teachers have said they never received the alert

or it was delayed. Some said they later found it in spam.

State Sen. Donna Campbell, R-New Braunfels, an emergency room doctor, asked during the Tuesday hearing why there wasn't a code system for announcements like in hospitals. Sen. Judith Zaffirini, D-Laredo, shared concerns from a fourth grade Robb Elementary teacher.

The teacher posted in a private Facebook group that she and some others heard gunshots before getting the lockdown notification. Although she later found the alert in her spam folder, some teachers said they never received it, she said.

"That system failed us terribly," the teacher told me, saying she thought the intercom system would have made a difference.

It's unclear if Uvalde CISD protocol also called for an intercom announcement. School officials have not responded to my repeated requests for interviews and information.

In reply to the post, another teacher said she went into lockdown to the sound of gunshots: "The system should be tossed out and never used again."

But David Rogers, spokesperson for Raptor Technologies, told me the emergency management alert app did what it is designed to do. He gave me a demo and provided a timeline: At 11:32 a.m., within one minute of the shooter entering the school, the principal pressed a red button on a phone app to initiate the alert to cellphones, computers and tablets.

"We've spent a really significant effort in

terms of building a highly reliable platform that does what it's supposed to do. And in this case, that is what happened," Rogers said, adding the district had no complaints.

During the hearing, Texas Department of Public Safety Director Steve McCraw recommended a more centralized alert system. He's correct. Schools shouldn't only rely on the notification app. The app can be integrated with panic buttons, strobes and sirens, Rogers said.

Lockdown announcements via intercom are

crucial. Technology can fail. Some teachers may not have their device settings correct. They are also busy and often discouraged from looking at their phones or computers during class.

Discontinuing the use of Raptor's emergency alert product, which costs about \$1,800 per year for districts, wouldn't be the best move. Many staff got the alerts. Schools must utilize every tool they can get, not just one or the other.

For lawmakers and school leaders, there is nothing more urgent than securing schools.

OPINION

Not what 'reasonable people' expect

BRANDON LINGLE
COMMENTARY

Communicating with the public after a catastrophe is scary for many organizations. It's also a powerful and necessary act that can unite or divide, build or destroy trust, answer or create questions, clarify or obscure, create lawsuits or spark change, and reveal people as heroes or villains.

Most call it crisis communications, and it's how people in charge try to mitigate the damages of terrible news.

After the Uvalde massacre, state and local engagement with the public has been fragmented, delayed, incomplete and sometimes incorrect. The flawed communication response echoes the failed police response, and it's another layer of pain for those already suffering.

A few years ago, I heard a lecture from crisis communication expert and professor Hideo Fred Garcia during a seminar at the Defense Information School at Fort Meade, Md.

He presented a case study on the communication failures of BP in the aftermath of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill. His findings boiled down to a simple idea: Entities ask the wrong questions in crises.

The wrong question leaders worry about, he said, is, "What should we say?" The better



Sam Owens/Staff photographer

The credibility of DPS Director Steve McCraw and others will take years to repair.

question is, "What would reasonable people appropriately expect a responsible organization to do in this circumstance?"

The modifiers make it sound complicated, but they knock off extreme views. The core question is, "What would people expect us to do?"

It's a commonsense approach, and the reframed thought process, Garcia said, helps leaders get at the emotional reality of a situation. It also helps people think outside themselves and their political survival.

Local and state officials could have used this advice in the aftermath of the May 24 massacre at Robb Elementary School

in Uvalde that left 19 students and two teachers dead, and 17 others wounded.

Before May 24, "reasonable people" expected the systems, people and safeguards protecting our children to work.

After Uvalde, "reasonable people" expected and deserved honesty and transparency as much as families and friends of those involved warranted sympathy, support and protection.

We expected a unified voice and timely responses from the "responsible organizations," state and local politicians, the Texas Department of Public Safety, local police departments and the school district. We ex-

pected their answers to be true and accurate. We expected them to respect press freedoms.

We expected our politicians to put the welfare and will of all constituents over their own political survival or irrational allegiance to lax gun laws.

We expected tangible change to address gun violence in addition to more mental health and school security resources.

We expected accountability. Our "responsible organizations" have failed to meet most of these reasonable expectations.

On Wednesday, Garcia and I spoke about Uvalde. We discussed the danger of ignoring

small mistakes and how the risk of catastrophe skyrockets.

In Uvalde, the cascading failures led to tragedy.

And unlike natural disasters, the conversation after a tragedy involving firearms will always be skewed in America.

It's impossible to separate the aftermath of Uvalde from the national disagreement about firearms," he said. "This isn't a Texas thing. It isn't a Uvalde thing on its own. It is in the context of this massive problem of gun violence that coincides with this massive division in American political life."

From his office in New York, Garcia hasn't been inundated with Uvalde news, but he's been suspicious of the DPS response since its first press conference.

"They got themselves caught in some form of miscommunication or misinformation, and then they withdrew and said nothing for a while, and now they seem to be pointing fingers," he said. "It's easy to point fingers at the less robust, less experienced police departments when there's been a massive failure like this."

Garcia said agencies often focus on the short-term benefits of releasing or not releasing information versus long-term credibility. The slow trickle of facts, shifting narratives, obfuscation and blame may help these agencies in the short term, but it's causing more pain for the people of Uvalde.

The credibility and trust these agencies have lost since May 24 will take years, maybe decades, to rebuild.

Much of it will never return.

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Poet's voice will live on in the world she loved

On Christmas Day 2019, shortly after I'd returned to the Express-News, I received a text from Rosemary Catacalos.

"Beloved hermanito," she wrote. "I write with the greatest good wishes for you and yours in celebration of the Christmas season. Apologies for going silent a while, but I have been bound and determined not to distract you even slightly from your first week and column. I have been ill since Dec. 11. A new cancer treatment and I do not get along."

She concluded, "PLEASE don't allow this news to get in the way of your work!"

She'd sketched the character of a great friend, mentor and poet, one so selfless that she felt the need to apologize for being silent because she was being treated for cancer.

Rose, the first Latina to be named Texas poet laureate, died June 17 after living with cancer for more than seven years. She was 78.

Death never silences a poet's



CARY CLARK
COMMENTARY

voice, not after it's been spoken and heard, never after it's been written and read, and few voices resonated like that of Rosemary Catacalos, one of the best poets this city and state has produced.

"I cannot bear the thought that her indelible voice won't be coming over the telephone anymore," poet Naomi Shihab Nye, her friend of 51 years, said. "She made so many melodic sounds or intonations as parts of regular conversations — the 'huh' and 'meh' and 'uh-huh' type."

Little more than a week before her death, two of Rose's close friends, Betsy Schultz and

Bett Butler, set up a page for friends to receive updates and send messages. Butler, a magnificent jazz singer, wrote of Rose's "use of tempo, space, and breath; the judicious seasoning of Texas drawl or a Spanish phrase beautifully rendered."

It was a magnificent voice, one that initially confused me. I first met Rose in 2003 shortly after she became executive director of GenArt Ink, the literary arts center. I knew she was of Greek and Mexican heritage and grew up speaking Spanish, Greek and English, and I heard in her voice what Naomi and Bett heard. But I also heard the voice of a Black woman.

It all made sense when I learned Rose grew up on the East Side and had imbibed the idiom of the Black community in which she lived as deeply as she'd absorbed the rhythms and nuances of the languages spoken in her household.

Her poem "Swallow Wings" begins with the lines, "I been to



Catacalos

church, folks. I'm an East Side Meskin Greek and I been to church."

The poem is dedicated to Maya Angelou, who encouraged her to speak in all her languages.

Through the years, Rose and I would talk about our experience of growing up on the East Side, and the blessings of being the oldest grandchild and living with or near grandparents.

"She was elegant," Nye said. "Her voice in every language was gorgeously resonant. She was always wise. Beyond all of us somehow."

On Mother's Day, Rose called to tell me the cancer had spread. "I'm going to begin ..." there was a slight pause, "transitioning."

She apologized for making my day heavy — again with the apology — but I told her I was fine because I could feel she was at peace.

Then, she said, "I love this world. I love this world so much, despite all of its problems."

In 2013, at the memorial service of her former father-in-law, Bill Sinkin, the visionary businessman and advocate for social justice, Rose read her poem "Mr. Chairman Takes His Leave." It's a tribute to Sinkin, his faith in democracy and devotion to making its promise true for all: "You have left it to us, messy and imperfect

as we are and will be, to keep to the work, side by side and as long as it takes, all the while singing of miracles just as Whitman and you taught us to do."

It's a song of hope. Rose, you've taken leave of this world you loved, despite Ukraine, Uvalde and the unrest of insurrection. We must find the miracles we can give. We must keep to the work, side by side.

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Tears of joy, sorrow



April Elrod and daughter Cayden Seiler, 13, hug as they share memories of Makenna Elrod, 10, at their home.

By Nancy M. Preyor-Johnson

UVALDE — Makenna Elrod didn't want her big sister Kadence Kubish to graduate from high school and go off to college. She wrote this in a letter she handed her "sissy" in the Robb Elementary hallway on May 23.

That morning's senior walk at Robb was full of excitement and possibility. Robb Elementary kids treated the Uvalde High School seniors like celebrities. There were cheers, high-fives, letters and candy. It was a celebratory day full of life.

Kadence, 17, could hear Makenna, 10, call to her in the hall outside her classroom — "Sissy.

Sissy. Sissy. Sissy!" — but she struggled to find her little sister in a sea of elementary students and seniors in maroon caps and gowns.

Finally, Makenna tugged on Kadence's gown.

They hugged. They posed for a photo. And Makenna handed her the letter. As Kadence walked away, she could hear Makenna tell her friends: "This is my sissy! This is my sister!"

Despite her dyslexia, Makenna wrote a lot of letters and stories about family, friends, life and love. Busy with senior class fun and life, Kadence merely glanced at the front of this letter.

And then came May 24. Makenna was one of 19 children and two teachers murdered at Robb Elementary School. Mourning and grieving, shocked by the massacre, Kadence remembered the letter and read her little sister's words:

"I love you I do not want you to move I want to see you evre day why do you have to have good grae's Becuse you can get a 20 on your ster test and you can stey with me I'am going to miss you so so so so so so so so so so so so so so so much I love you so much! Love you - makenna to: sis"

Sixteen hand-drawn hearts filled the page.

Now, Kadence — and the whole family — treasure this letter and cling to it, a symbol of Makenna's youthful light in a dark world.

'Let's be happy for sissy'

On June 24, one month after the massacre, Kadence was finally graduating. But there was no graduation party. There will be no summer vacation. Life without Makenna hurts too much.

On graduation day, it seemed the whole town showed up, some people wearing Uvalde Strong T-shirts, to fill the home stands at the Honey Bowl stadium. The day was heavy. The 100-degree heat was oppressive.

Kadence's and Makenna's parents — April Elrod, a teacher at another Uvalde elementary school, and Jacob Kubish, the Uvalde CISD maintenance supervisor — have raised their six children from previous marriages together for about five years.

They live on a Uvalde farm homestead with six dogs, chickens, two rabbits, two guinea pigs, a cat and a leopard gecko.

Kadence, a blonde, blue-eyed cheerleader who works as a gymnastics coach and as manager of a nutrition shake store, was graduating with honors. A top-10 percent student, she adorned her cap to honor Makenna: Purple flowers for Makenna's favorite color. Makenna's photo affixed to a tassel charm.

The family did its best to focus on Kadence's graduation. This was her day and they were proud. But grief — the absence of Makenna — was inescapable.

"We miss her," April Elrod said. "My whole body aches for her. We miss her every day. There's a hole."

This hole can't be filled, but Makenna's

family has found comfort where it can: A fluffy new cat, June. Makenna's initials and a purple butterfly now tattooed on Jacob's arm. Eighteen bears from Build-a-Bear that have Makenna's voice saying, "I love you." A letter from her friend Maya Zamora, who was injured in the shooting, reminding Makenna not to forget to bring more homemade deer jerky to school.

Kadence often wept when she spoke of Makenna. But on this day, she found strength to experience moments of joy. She took selfies, danced and hugged.

She spoke of her promising new start at Texas A&M University-San Antonio, where she was awarded a full scholarship plus acceptance into the Presidents Leadership Class, another \$1,000 per semester. She will move into a dorm next month.

Jacob lamented how they had lost Makenna — and how Kadence would be moving away. In a way, he reflected Makenna's letter.

"We are happy that she's graduating but sure not happy about her going. You know?" Jacob said, his voice breaking. "I mean, Kadence is moving off and Makenna's not here, and I just don't know."

When Jacob's parents tried to take a group photo with Kadence before she left for the graduation ceremony, 8-year-old Holden Elrod, Makenna's younger brother, stalled and cried.

"Let's be happy for sissy," Jacob said, his voice breaking.

Kadence, wearing her cap and gown, hugged and comforted Holden.

So much to remember

Before the ceremony, Kadence and her family sat in their living room, photos of their blended family displayed under the words, "Better together. This is us."

They spoke of memories good, funny and lovely — of what made Makenna extraordinary.

April cried as she looked at Makenna's class photo. She pointed out Makenna and other children killed: Alithia Ramirez, Eliahna Garcia, Amerie Jo Garza, Tess Mata, Jailah Silguero, Nevaeh Bravo, Jacklyn Cazares, Maranda Mathis and Maite Rodriguez.

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There was a poem April struggled to read: *"To mom from Makenna. The poem of me and you. I love you so much. I cannot let you go. And you are the best mom ever in the Earth. I love you so much mom. You are the best. I love you mom."*

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April remembers hearing the patter of her daughter's feet.

The next morning, heading to H-E-B to get those bubbles, Makenna said she dreaded summer school. April held her daughter's hand. Summer school would pass quickly, she said.

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April told Makenna and Holden she loved them and to have a good day. She watched Makenna walk away, her backpack heavy with a giant bottle of bubbles. A box of four doughnuts in her hands. Makenna stopped to greet everyone.

May 24

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But she couldn't find Makenna.

Time passed and Makenna's sisters and brother waited at their aunt's house. As they watched the news for updates, her 15-year-old sister, Cailey Seiler, tracked Makenna's Apple Watch and saw it had never left the classroom.

It was 10 p.m. when April, Jacob, and Makenna's father, Chris Seiler, learned Makenna was dead.

Her body was found, along with three other children, in the embrace of her teacher, Irma Garcia. The gunshots went through Garcia's chest and then Makenna's.

"It gives me a little bit of peace knowing she was being held and Mrs. Garcia was praying with them and that she went from being held and loved by her teacher to Heaven's gate," April said.

Love and faith

Makenna was buried on June 4 in a long purple dress. Butterflies, which Makenna loved, were on her purple casket. The family released butterflies that clung to their clothes.

Now, the family is focused on taking the next step, however small or big or vulnerable it is.

“We don’t have to move on or move past this or whatever — we just have to keep moving,” Jacob said.

The week of Kadence’s graduation, Jacob, an Army veteran and hunter, returned to work. On the first day, seeing his office just as he left it the day of the shooting hit him hard. And as the maintenance supervisor, there are constant reminders of Robb.

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But she changed her mind, saying it felt “wrong” to not take part in the graduation because of the tragedy.

“We can’t change our entire life and the way

we live because somebody did something and ruined so many families,” she said.

Sitting on her bed adjusting her cap, her voice trembled and her eyes filled with tears.

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“I’ve always believed, but I wasn’t very strong in my walk with God and my faith and that kind of thing, but after all this, it’s like something that’s really been helping me,” she said. “If there’s anywhere besides here with us that I’d want her to be, that’s where I’d want her to be — with God. And that’s where she’s at. I know she is.”

The family credits Makenna for their stronger faith. A few months before her death, Makenna was asking about God. She downloaded a Bible app and said she wanted to be baptized. She often belted out “The Lion and the Lamb” in the shower.

One touchstone for the family is thinking of how Makenna would want them to live. She’d want them to focus on their love and faith. She’d want them to feel the words in her graduation letter to Kadence.

“It’s all that’s been getting us through,” April said. “It makes no sense why this happened, but one day we will know.”

“We have more love between us than you can ever imagine. There’s tons of love in this house,” Jacob said. “And we have faith that Makenna’s in that place that she’d been singing about.”

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ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

How much would San Antonio drivers save with a summer gas tax holiday? We crunched the numbers, at ExpressNews.com/Only-Online.

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MASSACRE IN UVALDE

Police chief for schools resigns from City Council

Arredondo faced pressure after response to shooting

By Sig Christenson
STAFF WRITER

Pedro "Pete" Arredondo, the schools police chief in charge of the botched law enforcement response to the May 24 school shooting in Uvalde, won a City Council seat two and a half weeks before the massacre.

Many Uvalde residents turned against Arredondo in the weeks after the killing of 19 students and two teachers at Robb Elementary School, with some calling for his ouster from council.

Arredondo quietly resigned Saturday, bowing to the pressure. Not that he's had much of a presence at City Hall. He was sworn in as



Arredondo

the District 3 councilman during a private ceremony a week after the shooting and hasn't attended a single meeting since then.

As the weekend began, residents were stunned, learning of his resignation from the Uvalde Leader-News. In a letter sent Saturday afternoon to the city secretary, Arredondo said the mayor, council members and city staff "must con-

Chief quits continues on A26



William Luther/Staff file photo
The Musicians of the San Antonio Symphony nonprofit are planning a full season of shows starting in September.

Tears of joy, sorrow



As one daughter graduates, family aches for another, who was stolen from them in senseless mass shooting



April Elrod and daughter Cayden Seiler, 13, hug as they share memories of Makenna Elrod, 10, at their home.

Photos by Sam Owens/Staff photographer

By Nancy M. Preyor-Johnson
EXPRESS-NEWS COLUMNIST

UVALDE — Makenna Elrod didn't want her big sister Kadence Kubish to graduate from high school and go off to college. She wrote this in a letter she handed her "sis-sy" in the Robb Elementary School hallway on May 23.

That morning's senior walk at Robb was full of excitement and possibility. Robb Elementary kids treated the Uvalde High School seniors like celebrities. There were cheers, high-fives, letters and candy. It was a celebratory day full of life. Kadence, 17, could hear Ma-



Kadence Kubish, 17, shares a laugh with brother Holden Elrod, 8, before her graduation ceremony.

kenna, 10, call to her in the hall outside her classroom — "Sissy, Sissy, Sissy, Sissy!" — but she struggled to find her little sister in a sea of elementary students and seniors in maroon caps and gowns.

Finally, Makenna tugged on Kadence's gown.

They hugged. They posed for a photo. And Makenna handed her the letter. As Kadence walked away, she could hear Makenna tell her friends: "This is my sis-sy! This is my sister!"

Despite her dyslexia, Makenna wrote a lot of letters and stories about family, friends, life and love. Kadence, busy

Family continues on A24

Waiting follows demise of symphony

By Deborah Martin
STAFF WRITER

The San Antonio Symphony may be gone, but the city's classical music fans have not been entirely forgotten.

The demise of the symphony left big questions in its wake. Will other groups try to fill the void? And will funders back those efforts?

There are no clear answers, but it's been just two weeks since the Symphony Society of San Antonio, the nonprofit that ran the orchestra, announced that it had initiated Chapter 7 bankruptcy proceedings. The 83-year-old orchestra was shut down for good after a strike that scuttled its 2021-22 season.

The musicians and organizations most closely associated with the orchestra have made clear that they intend to carry on. Other groups are closely monitoring what comes next. And the resident companies at the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts are reviewing their options for live music for productions that the symphony played for in the past.

The only organization to take a big step forward so far to keep the music playing is Musicians of the San Antonio Symphony (MOSAS). The nonprofit, created while the musicians were on strike, presented a three-concert series at First Baptist Church in the spring. Now the musicians are planning a full season there starting in September. They also will perform in schools.

They haven't pursued funding from corporations or foundations — yet. They've focused instead on individuals, said bassoonist Brian Petkovich, president of the MOSAS Performance Fund. A program for one of the spring concerts included a list of about 75 donors.

"We didn't want to aggressively pursue donors that the



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Symphony continues on A25

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Photos by Sam Owens/Staff photographer
Kadence Kubish poses for a picture with her diploma as a friend embraces her father, Jacob, right, after Uvalde High School's graduation ceremony at Honey Bowl Stadium.

room, photos of their blended family displayed under the words, "Better together. This is us."

She spoke of memories good, funny and lovely — of what made Makenna extraordinary. April cried as she looked at Makenna's class photo. She pointed out Makenna and other children killed: Alithia Ramirez, Eilahn Garcia, Amerie Jo Garza, Tess Mata, Jaiiah Silguero, Nevaeh Bravo, Jacklyn Cazares, Maranda Mathis and Maite Rodriguez.

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Love and faith

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April Elrod comforts daughter Cayden Seiler, 13, as both are overcome by emotion after the graduation ceremony.

Nancy.Preyor-Johnson
@express-news.net

Classical music, opera and ballet are still in the mix at the Tobin Center.

SYMPHONY

From page A1

sympphony would rely on and cause further tension between the musicians and the symphony as they tried to reach an agreement," Petkovich said.

They will be reaching out to those funders soon, he said.

It is possible corporate donors that support the arts but shied away from giving to the San Antonio Symphony because of its ongoing struggles might get behind something new. Symphony board members have said a number of corporations and other large donors had grown tired of the organization's inability to get its finances in order. A new organization without that history might prove more appealing.

The Area Foundation and the Russell Hill Rogers Fund for the Arts, which had supported the San Antonio Symphony, declined to comment on whether they have been approached about funding a new organization. The Kronkosky Charitable Foundation did not respond to a request for comment.

One organization that won't be contributing to a new orchestra is Symphonic Music for San Antonio. The group was formed in 2017 by major funders — the Tobin Endowment, H-E-B and the Kronkosky — to take over management of the symphony with different business model. When that deal collapsed, the organization was dissolved, said J. Bruce Bugg Jr., chairman of the Tobin Endowment.

He said there are no plans to revive it.

"It's hard to get the soufflé to rise twice," he said.

Other orchestral groups

A few organizations in the region have a vested interest in the success of the former symphony musicians' new venture.

Cory Krae, president of the board of Alamo City Arts, said the organization is keeping an eye on what MOSAS does. The association includes the Alamo City Dance Company, Alamo City Symphony Viva, the Heart of Texas Concert Band and the Memory Lane big band.

"We definitely don't want to try to do the same thing they're doing because, in fact, we want to help support them in whatever endeavors they're doing," Krae said. "We're waiting to see how their season's going to shape up."

Some symphony musicians played with Symphony Viva during the strike, he said, which enhanced the ensemble's quality.

The Mid-Texas Symphony, which primarily serves patrons in Seguin and New Braunfels, is keeping an eye on MOSAS, too, mostly out of concern for the regional talent pool. Mid-Texas and the San Antonio Symphony shared some musicians, said Executive Director Jason Irle, so the possibility that the symphony's dissolution might scatter them far afield is a cause for concern.

"If the Musicians of the San Antonio Symphony are successful in getting some sort of season off the ground, it might be an incentive for them to stick around," Irle said.

Organizations that were more closely tethered to the San Antonio Symphony have announced they will move on. The San Antonio Mastersingers, the choral ensemble that performed with the symphony for more than 75 years, released a statement that it is a nonprofit separate from the symphony. It also said the group

will continue to perform, just as it did while the musicians were on strike.

Similarly, the San Antonio Symphony League, a nonprofit created to provide volunteer and financial support to the symphony and its musicians, will continue the latter part of that mission, said President Vickie Kinder. In the wake of the symphony's demise, more people have expressed interest in joining the league as a way to support the musicians, she said.

Bringing back the music

The symphony was one of the resident companies at the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts, which was designed in part to give the musicians a first-rate acoustical space to showcase their talents.

Now that it's gone, no organization has contacted the Tobin Center about the possibility of filling the void, said spokesman Christopher Nowasak.

"We are currently neither interviewing nor searching for new resident arts companies at the Tobin Center," he said.

Classical music remains a part of the Tobin's programming, he added, noting that violin virtuoso Itzhak Perlman is slated to perform there Feb. 21.

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The San Antonio Symphony, which shuttered in June, was a resident company at the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts.

A 'little light' still shines



Sister Clarice Suchy, center right, leads a game of Simon Says with campers at the start of Camp I CAN on July 27 in Uvalde. The mission of this year's Camp I CAN was to help the campers find their inner strength.

By Nancy M. Preyor-Johnson

UVALDE — Freshly painted and in-progress murals honoring the teachers and students murdered in the Robb Elementary School massacre can be seen outside the St. Henry de Osso Family Project building. Inside this building, late last month, divine healing was in progress for Uvalde children.

It could be seen in the art they made and heard in their voices, lifted in song.

"This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine. All around Uvalde, I'm going to let it shine. ... let

it shine, let it shine, let it shine," the elementary students sang as Sister Clarice Suchy strummed her guitar. They made gestures to "act out" the music and played tambourines and maracas.

Some smiled.

Darkness has overwhelmed these children since the May 24 massacre, the second-deadliest school shooting in America, in which a gunman murdered 19 children and two teachers, injuring more than a dozen others.

Amid the anguish and division in Uvalde,

the scene at the Henry de Osso building in the last week of July offered hope for healing. This old building, where the air conditioner struggles, became sacred ground for 22 rising third-, fourth- and fifth-graders, some of whom were in Robb Elementary classrooms and on the playground when the shooting began.

Two campers survived injuries; another camper's best friend and cousin were killed. Every student here lost friends and teachers. One volunteer was a Robb teacher, present the day of the massacre.

Camp I CAN — Inner strength, Commitment, Awareness, Networking — is the vision of Sister Dolores Aviles, 67, who grew up in Uvalde and recently marked 46 years with the Society of St. Teresa of Jesus. Catholic Extension, a nonprofit headquartered in Chicago, and Hustle Fitness in Uvalde, sponsored the free camp.

Aviles, who holds a master's degree in educational leadership, has worked as a teacher and principal at Catholic schools in Texas and other states for nearly 50 years. Her latest service is leading the St. Henry de Osso Family Project after-school tutoring organization, which began in 1993 as a home-based program.

The nonprofit hasn't provided tutoring since the start of the pandemic, but in the aftermath of the tragedy, Aviles saw use for its 13,200-square foot building, built at the turn of the century. It was once the Uvalde Wool & Mohair Co. In 2008, Texas Gov. Dolph Briscoe's family donated the building to the St. Henry de Osso Family Project.

To get the word out about this camp, Aviles distributed flyers and placed an ad in the Uvalde Leader-News. Her mission was to help students from Robb find their inner strength.

The camp was a massive effort. Aviles, a Teresian sister, led the program with help from Suchy, Sister Mary Lou Aldape and 10 sisters from San Antonio, Kalamazoo and Los Angeles. Other volunteers from the local community included a Robb teacher and her daughter, a Uvalde college instructor. And some parents helped.

The sisters gently encouraged campers to pray about the tragedy. They didn't hesitate.

The children repeated Suchy's prayer:

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ask you to bring healing to our hearts, to our families, to our friends and to our town. Help us Jesus to know that you are always with us. And we turn to you when we are scared, when we are frightened, when we are hurting. Help us to know that our parents, and our teachers and other friends are here to help us through these times. Amen."

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Then, she reminded them of the fun they had the day before: cornhole, pingpong, art and play.

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Other children could be heard singing “This Little Light of Mine” in the next room.

“This little light of mine, Hide it under a basket? No! I’m going to let it shine. Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.”

In their hearts

Every survivor here carries a story of pain and resilience. Not every victim was shot. Some were in rooms 111 and 112. Some were in other wings. Some weren't even in the building.

Before the shooting, Levi Cervantes, a rising fourth-grader, had nightmares about someone turning into an evil robot. He wanted to attend awards day, which was celebrated the morning of the shooting May 24, but his mother, Melissa Cervantes, kept him home. His good friend Jose Manuel Flores Jr. was murdered in his classroom that day.

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In green crayon, Vivian Trevino, an 11-year-old rising fifth-grader who attends the Uvalde Dual Language Academy, wrote about her second cousin Eliahna Torres and best friend Maite Rodriguez, considered a part of her family.

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“I'm holding her, and I felt so guilty. Ana (Maite's mother) was just there watching me. I felt like I should let go, but I couldn't.”

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“I just broke down. His whole shoulder was bandaged. I said, ‘Son, how are you?’”

“Dad, my clothes are ruined. They’re all bloody,” Noah said.

“Don’t worry about your clothes,” the father said.

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But the healing continues. Each week, he goes to trauma counseling, physical therapy and occupational therapy. His shoulder may never look normal.

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“We live our life day to day now because we don’t make plans because we don’t know how the day will go,” Orona said.

Hard questions, hope

Some students asked Suchy, who has served with the Teresian sisters in Uvalde since 1990, what she calls “the hard question”:

“Why does God allow bad things to happen?”

“I don’t know that I know the answer to that question,” she said. “But I do know that God takes events and allows them to change us and brings out the good of people and gives us the grace that so even though bad things happen, God also provides the grace to come together.”

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“You don’t skip if you’re sad or tired. If you skip, that’s a sign of happiness. Oh, Lord, thank you!” she exclaimed.

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SA LIGHTS
BRINGING GLOBAL
MUSIC TO S.A. A23



ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

CHEERS: A bar near UTSA has sold more alcohol than any other locally owned place this year. The full story, at ExpressNews.com/Only-Online

San Antonio Express-News

EXPRESSNEWS.COM • SUNDAY, AUGUST 7, 2022 • VOL. 157, NO. 315 • \$4.00

MASSACRE IN UVALDE



Sister Clarice Suchy, center right, leads a game of Simon Says with campers at the start of Camp I CAN on July 27 in Uvalde. The mission of this year's Camp I CAN was to help the campers find their inner strength. Photos by Sam Owens/Staff photographer



Noah Orona writes "I hate guns" on a heart-shaped paper after being prompted to write down his fears during a faith lesson. Noah was shot and injured during the May 24 massacre at Robb Elementary School.

A 'little light' still shines

Children find hope among faith, fellowship during camp

Nancy M. Preyor-Johnson • EXPRESS-NEWS COLUMNIST

UVALDE — Freshly painted and in-progress murals honoring the teachers and students murdered in the Robb Elementary School massacre can be seen outside the St. Henry de Osso Family Project building. Inside this building, late last month, divine healing was in progress for Uvalde children.

It could be seen in the art they made and heard in their voices, lifted in song.

"This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine. All around Uvalde, I'm

going to let it shine. ... Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine," the elementary students sang as Sister Clarice Suchy strummed her guitar. They made gestures to "act out" the music and played tambourines and maracas.

Some smiled. Darkness has overwhelmed these children since the May 24 massacre, the second-deadliest school shooting in U.S. history, in which a gunman murdered 39 children and two teachers and

injured more than a dozen others.

Amid the anguish and division in Uvalde, the scene at the Henry de Osso building in the last week of July offered hope for healing.

This old building, where the air conditioner struggles, became sacred ground for 23 third-, fourth- and fifth-graders, some of whom were in Robb Elementary classrooms or on the playground when the shooting began.

Two campers survived gunshot

Camp continues on A24

School donation drawing scrutiny

Pettit gift raises eyebrows during his bankruptcy case

By Patrick Danner
STAFF WRITER

At the end of 2016, two representatives of Antonian College Preparatory High School paid a visit to Christopher "Chris" Pettit at his San Antonio law office.

The pair — then-Principal Tim Petersen and alumnus Charles Montemayor — detailed a capital campaign to fund improvements at the Catholic school in hopes Pettit would contribute.

While they didn't ask Pettit to give money during the visit, he later committed to help fund the campaign's first phase — the conversion of a building on the Castle Hills campus to a library, learning center and six classrooms.

The school subsequently named the building the Pettit Family Center for Academic Excellence. A plaque in the lobby reflects that the building was dedicated in honor of Pettit's parents. Pettit and his three brothers graduated from Antonian.

Pettit's pledge — \$500,000, according to a person familiar with it who did not want to be identified — is drawing scrutiny in the former San Antonio attorney's bankruptcy case as he faces allegations that he stole millions of dollars from former clients. Pettit reported about \$40.5 million in assets and \$12.2 million in liabilities for himself and his now-defunct law firm in the massive Chapter 11 case, but so far has been un-

Donation continues on A25

Legal hurdles follow deported

By Jasper Scherer
STAFF WRITER

Migrants arrested on trespass charges under Gov. Greg Abbott's border crackdown are being prosecuted even after they're deported, raising concerns from attorneys that their due process rights are being violated.

In more than 20 cases so far, state-appointed lawyers have argued that deportations are preventing their clients from preparing for state trials or appearing in person to confront witnesses. Deported migrants are also receiving orders from trial courts to appear in person for hearings, creating impossible choices between trying to reenter the country or collecting new charges for not showing, the attorneys argue.

Some lower courts have allowed migrants to appear virtually for procedural hearings and other matters, which has created its own logistical hurdles.

"I have clients that appear from shacks in Honduras and walk to the next village in Mexico to get cell service," said Kristin Eter, an attorney with Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, a nonprofit that is appealing the cases involving deported migrants.

The prosecutions are part of Operation Lone Star, Abbott's plan to fight illegal border

Border continues on A26



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Photos by Sam Owens/Staff photographer

"This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine. All around Uvalde, I'm going to let it shine," sing Sister Dolores Aviles, right, and Sister Clarice Suchy.



Elianna Ortegon, left, and Ezekiel Casarez cheer each other on as they win a game of foosball against Aleida Chavez and Sister Marichui Bringas.



White Daisy campers and volunteers sing along to children's gospel songs during the second day of Camp 1 CAN on July 26 in Uvalde.

CAMP

From page A1

wounds. Another camper's best friend and cousin were killed. Every student here lost friends.

Camp 1 CAN — Inner strength, Commitment, Awareness, Networking — is the vision of Sister Dolores Aviles, 67, who grew up in Uvalde and recently marked 46 years with the Society of St. Teresa of Jesus, Catholic Extension, a nonprofit headquartered in Chicago, and Hustle Fitness in Uvalde sponsored the free camp.

Aviles, who holds a master's degree in educational leadership, has worked as a teacher and principal at Catholic schools in Texas and other states for nearly 50 years. Her latest service is leading the St. Henry de Osso Family Project after-school tutoring organization, which began in 1993 as a home-based program.

The nonprofit hasn't provided tutoring since the start of the pandemic, but in the aftermath of the school shooting, Aviles envisioned its 3,200-square-foot building, built at the turn of the century, as a place of healing.

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The camp was a massive effort. Aviles, a Teresian sister, led the program with help from Suchy, Sister Mary Lou Aldape and to sisters from San Antonio, Kalamazoo, Mich., and Los Angeles. Other volunteers from the local community included a Robb teacher who



Rising third-graders Elianna Ortegon, from left, Ezekiel Casarez and Sofia Padilla put their hands together as they participate in an opening prayer for day three of Camp 1 CAN.

was present on the day of the massacre and her daughter, a Uvalde college instructor. And some parents helped.

The sisters gently encouraged campers to pray about the tragedy. They didn't hesitate. The children repeated Suchy's prayer:

"We remember in a special way our friends who were killed. We remember those who were hurt. We ask you to bring healing to our hearts, to our families, to our friends and to our town. Help us, Jesus, to know that you are always with us. And we turn to you when we are scared, when we are frightened, when we are hurting. Help us to know that our parents, and our teachers and other friends are here to help us through these times. Amen."

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Finding strength

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together before splitting into four small groups — White Daisy, Red Daisy, Star and Peace — for 15-minute stations of prayer, song, arts, crafts, games, exercise and mindfulness. At the end of the day, they would gather again as a group.

"I'm thinking of a word. A word that begins with F and it ends with N?" Aviles said on the first day.

"Fun!" the kids yelled.

"That's what this week is about. It's about having fun. Are you ready to have fun?" she asked.

"Yes! We're ready!"

The second day began with a group photo and a prayer led by Aviles.

"Thank you, Jesus, for being in the center of our lives. Help us, Jesus, to be like you. To think like you. To have fun like you. To love like you. Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of

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Photos by Sam Owens/Staff photographer
Sister Delia Aurora Ibarra Rodríguez of the Diocese of Kalamazoo, Mich., watches Remberito Tijerina attempt to sink the eight ball as they compete against each other in a game of pool.



Elianna Ortega cheers while playing cornhole with her fellow White Daisy campers. The children were rotated through games, arts and crafts, fitness and faith activity stations.

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Nancy Preyor Johnson
@express-news.net

DONATION

From page A1

willing or unable to explain where his clients' money went.

Legitimate income?
An amended bankruptcy filing last month showed Pettit contributed \$225,000 to Antonian from 2019 to 2021. The pledge was spread over multiple years, and it's not clear how much, if any, remains unpaid.

Under bankruptcy law, a trustee can claw back assets on behalf of a bankruptcy estate if they were fraudulently transferred within two years before the filing of the case. State law expands that time to four years.

Mary Elizabeth Heard, a San Antonio lawyer who represents longtime Pettit clients who lost \$2 million, said she hopes Chapter 11 trustee Eric Terry will void Pettit's "fraudulent transfers so that the money will be available" to pay his creditors — including her clients.

"Although the bankruptcy code provides that some charitable contributions are exempt from being clawed back into the bankruptcy estate, I do not believe those conditions exist in Mr. Pettit's case as it relates to the \$225,000 contribution," Heard said in an email.

"Here, we do not know if Chris Pettit has made any legitimate income in the years leading up to the bankruptcy filings," she added. "It is certainly possible that he used his clients' money to make charitable contributions in his name."

San Antonio attorney Martin Seidler, also representing creditors in the case, agreed that the donation warrants review.

"If he gives something away and he's insolvent, that's a constructive fraud on the creditors," Seidler said.

Terry, his lawyers and forensic accountants have been investigating various transactions made by Pettit. Terry didn't respond to a request for comment, so it couldn't be determined if the donation to Antonian is among them. His team has identified at least 149 bank accounts Pettit or his firm maintained and now wants the funds and account information for many of them turned over.

The archdiocese

Antonian Principal John Mein said he was not allowed to comment on the situation and directed questions to the Archdiocese of San Antonio. Antonian is an archdiocesan school.

"The archdiocese is obviously aware of what is occurring with Mr. Pettit," spokesman Jordan McMorrough said. "As far as the name on the building — we're looking at the situation on our end and we're in the process of determining the next steps."

McMorrough wouldn't say whether that includes removing the Pettit name. The amount of Pettit's pledge was confidential, he said.

It's not clear if excising the name from the building would open the school or archdiocese to legal trouble. But leaving the name creates a public relations headache for them given Pettit has admitted he "misappropriated and dissipated" money from a trust account in at least one of about a dozen lawsuits filed against him and his firm.

"That is a quandary," said Montemayor, the 1984 Antonian graduate who visited with Pettit about the capital cam-

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paign. "I thought the same thing as soon as the stories started coming out."

The bankruptcy put on hold the litigation that was pending against Pettit and his firm. The allegations in those complaints have triggered an FBI investigation.

Henry "Hank" Valdespino, president of the Antonian School Council, said there have been no discussions about Pettit by the council.

"It's not set up the way that the school could make those decisions on their own," he said about the building name. "We have to run all that through the archdiocese."

'Happy to join in'

Pettit, 55, graduated from Antonian in 1985. He followed in the footsteps of his brothers Jonathan, who graduated in 1978, and Martin, a 1982 graduate. Their youngest brother, Charles, graduated in 1991.

With the recent death of Charles, who worked at Pettit's law firm until it was shuttered about two months ago, all three of Pettit's brothers are deceased.

Work on the building named for Pettit's parents started in 2006. The cost was estimated at \$1.5 million, a filing with the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation shows.

In his speech at the 2017 ribbon-cutting and blessing for the building, Pettit recalled the visit from Petersen and Montemayor to discuss the capital campaign.

Petersen was mentioning the fact that you were looking for people to donate and help do a wonderful tribute to this school," Pettit told the audience during the ceremony, which was recorded and posted on YouTube. "I was happy to join in and do that."

He added how "tremendously fulfilling" it was for him to answer legal questions posed by former teachers who helped mold him as a student.

Montemayor, who has been an associate judge in Bexar County Children's Court, recalled the visit with Pettit near the end of 2016.

"I believed he was, at the time, a person of much resource or potential," Montemayor said. "And Mr. Petersen just asked me to go update him on Antonian — just to tell him what's going on at the school. And that was it."

Montemayor was a year ahead of Pettit at Antonian but both graduated from St. Mary's University School of Law in 1998. Montemayor's wife also attended Antonian and before that, like Pettit, St. Gregory the Great Catholic School, for grades kindergarten through eighth.

"He was always courteous and very nice," Montemayor said of Pettit.

But "I don't know what happened to him. It hit me out of left field, to be honest with you. I don't know the details of everything... But I have to admit, I'm shocked by it all," he said.

Pettit's bankruptcy lawyer did not respond to a request for comment.

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Courtesy
Antonian College Preparatory High School dedicated a building to Chris Pettit's parents after he made a donation.

For Uvalde family, no school on the first day of school

By Nancy M. Preyor-Johnson

UVALDE — The first day of school was Tuesday, but not for Robb Elementary massacre survivor Miah Cerrillo and her family. At their home, there was fear instead of excitement. Anxiety instead of smiling for pictures at the front door. A day spent at home instead of in the classroom.

“Everything has gone upside down,” Abigale Veloz, Miah’s mom, said.

The family of seven spent their day like most other days since the murders of 19 children and two teachers on May 24: protecting, supporting and loving one another in their bright yellow home a short walk from Robb Elementary.

Miah isn’t ready to return to school. She’s the 11-year-old who testified via video in June to a U.S. House panel.

“He shot my teacher and told my teacher ‘good night’ and shot her in the head, and then he shot some of my classmates and then the whiteboard,” she testified. “He shot my friend that was next to me and I thought he was going to come back to the room, so I grabbed the blood and put it all over me.”

During her testimony, she was asked: “And you think it’s going to happen again?”

She nodded yes.

Three months after her testimony, she feels the same, though she now says very little about that day to anyone, including her counselor.

Miah, who should have started her first day of fifth grade at Flores Elementary, may never



Tormented by fear, Miah Cerrillo, a Robb Elementary School shooting survivor, wishes they could move away from Uvalde.

feel ready.

Anxiety likely was part of the first day of school for almost every student and family in Uvalde, but 3,724 students, about 89 percent of the anticipated enrollment, participated either in person or virtual.

Their parents prayed for safety and that each school day would get a bit easier. But for those whose loved ones were murdered that day, and those like Miah who survived the shooting, the day was excruciating, yet another reminder of all they lost.

Miah's father, Miguel Cerrillo, doesn't want any of their kids to return to school.

"I'm real against it," he said "I didn't lose my daughter, but I don't want to go through the same thing. I don't want to lose my kids."

Elena Cerrillo, who should have started fourth grade at Uvalde Elementary, cried and said she won't feel safe at school.

Virtual learning is an option, but Veloz, their mother, remembers how they struggled to learn online during the pandemic. She hopes the district can send a teacher to their home.

Originally, she planned for two of the four school-age children, the boys, to attend school. The youngest, Miguel Angel Cerrillo Jr., would have started per-kindergarten at Dalton Elementary, and the oldest, Michael Hill, should have started his senior year at Crossroads Academy.

They want to go to school in person, and Veloz doesn't want them to miss out on the school experience — of being with friends and teachers.

But the night before the first day, there were rumors of a threat to Uvalde schools, shared among parents of school shooting survivors. Veloz changed her mind.

"OK. The kids are definitely not going," she said. "Nobody's going to school. Everyone is staying home."

The family struggled to sleep after hearing of the threat. Miah was nauseated. She felt feverish and sweaty. "A nervous breakdown," her mom said.

Miguel Jr. had been excited the night before, setting out his Uvalde Strong T-shirt, eager to begin the new school year.

Veloz and Miguel Cerrillo said Dalton Elementary's new security measures seem to make it safer than other schools — but Miah said it is not enough. At an earlier meet-the-teacher night, Miah did her own safety assessment for her little brother.

Her verdict? "Nope," she told her parents.

She begged them not to send him to school. "Please don't send Jr.," she pleaded. "He's little and if something happens, he won't know how to defend himself."

School — in person, virtual or at home — must happen for these children, and Uvalde CISD must work with the family to ensure it does.

School isn't the only change. Mom sleeps with Miah and Dad sleeps in another room with Miguel Jr., and sometimes Elena sleeps there, too. The kids can't play pranks on one another anymore.

When they shop, the family has a plan for when Miah feels uncomfortable — say, if she thinks someone is following her. Mom and Miah leave to sit in the van while Dad and the other kids rush to get what they need.

Miah wishes they could move away from Uvalde. She is tormented by fear — especially at night. So she tries to stay awake. When she hears noises, she asks her family to check the Ring camera, other rooms or the yard.

"She knows he's not alive, but she feels like he's coming," Veloz said.

During her showers, Miah props the bathroom door open with a can of air freshener and the boys stay away to give her privacy. Veloz sits on the couch steps away to listen for when she calls out to check if she's there.

This is progress. Before, Veloz had to keep her arm inside the door so it was visible to Miah. She periodically tapped the door because Miah needed to know she was there.

She was. She is. They all are.

OPINION

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COMMENTARY

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Abigale Veloz, Miah's mom, is never far from the 11-year-old. The family of seven spent the first day of school together at home.



Miguel Cerrillo and Veloz had planned for two of their four school-age children, the boys, to return to school this week. Rumors of a threat changed their minds.

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Biden exhibits malice toward quite a few

Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural address was a 3,600-word olive branch to a South on the eve of the Civil War. His second promised malice toward none after the war left 620,000 dead. Americans have long revered both speeches because they offered a measure of redemption and a means of reconciliation to those who deserved it least.

Joe Biden's recent speech in Philadelphia bears no resemblance to either address, except that, in his own inaugural, he staked his presidency on ending "this uncivil war that pits red against blue." So much for that. Like the predecessor he denounces, Biden has decided the best way to seek partisan advantage is to treat tens of millions of Americans as the enemy within.

He started with the "MAGA Republicans," who Biden said, "represent an extremism that threatens the very foundations of our republic."

Who are they? The president allowed they are "not even the majority of Republicans." Then, in describing their goals, he cast a net so wide it included everyone from those who



Bret Stephens
NEW YORK TIMES

cheered the attack on the Capitol and those who oppose abortion rights and gay marriage.

As categories go, this one is capacious.

It includes violent Oath Keepers and Proud Boys — as well as every faithful Catholic or evangelical Christian whose deeply held moral convictions bring them to oppose legalized abortion.

It takes in the antisemites who marched at Charlottesville — as well as socially conservative Americans with traditional beliefs about marriage, which would have included Barack Obama during his 2008 run for president.

It encompasses undoubted election deniers like lawyers Sidney Powell and John Eastman — along with ordinary Americans who have been bamboozled into harboring misguided but sincere doubts about the integrity of the last

election.

In other words, Biden claimed to distinguish MAGA Republicans from mainstream ones and then proceeded to conflate them. That may resonate with partisan Democrats who have never seen a conservative they didn't consider a bigot or a fool. But it gives the lie to the idea that dismantling MAGA Republicanism is the prime objective of the president or his party.

Then there were the transparently partisan purposes of Biden's speech.

For this election cycle, pro-Democratic groups have spent north of \$40 million in ad buys to help nominate the Trumpist candidates in Republican primaries on the theory that they will be easier to beat in November. That included a successful effort to defeat Michigan Rep. Peter Meijer — one of just two House Republicans who voted for Donald Trump's impeachment last year — in last month's GOP primary.

Is that smart as hardball politics? Maybe. But Biden could have spared us the pieties about timeless American values. As far as I can tell, he

has yet to say a word in public against the ad buys, much less tried to stop them. Instead, his speech makes a neat bookend to a strategy of promoting MAGA extremists so they can be denounced as MAGA extremists. Some liberals took a similar approach in 2016, all but rooting for Trump to win the nomination on the theory he'd be Hillary Rodham Clinton's weakest opponent. Look how that worked out.

And then there was the crassest part of Biden's speech, in which an ostensible presidential address became a campaign rally for Democratic priorities such as prescription-drug benefits and the "clean energy future." When a president makes the implicit claim that to be a small-d democrat one must today be a big-D Democrat he advances the interests of neither his party nor the country. He only gratuitously insults millions of voters as deplorable while again branding Democrats as the party of sanctimony and condescension.

I write this as someone who has long thought that Trump represents a unique threat to

democracy.

He is the only president in American history who has refused to concede an election, who has schemed with conspiracy theorists so they can be in power, who has sought to bully state officials into finding him votes, who has egged on a mob, who has cheered an assault on Congress, who has put the life of his vice president in jeopardy, who has flouted the demands of the Justice Department to return classified documents, who has violated every norm of American politics and every form of democratic decency. He is the tribune of the "mobocratic spirit" that Lincoln warned against in his first major address and to which he devoted his life to stopping.

The gravest threat American democracy faces today isn't the Republican Party, MAGA or otherwise. It's Trump. He's one man, sinister but bullionish. To defeat him, the core task is to make him seem small, very small. Biden's misbegotten speech did the opposite.

The next time Biden talks about democracy, he should remember Lincoln's other exhortation: charity for all.

Another milestone missed



Sandra Cruz takes a quiet moment at her 10-year-old daughter Eliahna Torres' gravesite.

By Nancy M. Preyor-Johnson

UVALDE — As parents dropped off their students for the first day of school Tuesday, Sandra Cruz was blocks away at Hillcrest Memorial Cemetery.

It was her 44th birthday, and she needed to be with her youngest child, Eliahna Torres, who was one of 19 students and two teachers murdered at Robb Elementary on May 24.

Like all grieving parents in Uvalde, Cruz fights to remember the good. But the bad often wins, because as time moves forward, Uvalde

parents live through experiences their children have been denied. Cruz likened it to a robbery.

“My Eliahna was so excited and nervous because she was going to the fifth grade. She was robbed from that experience,” Cruz said.

The mother of four stood at her daughter's grave, which was adorned with purple butterflies and the sunflowers that Eliahna loved. She comes here often, sometimes staying late into the night, wanting to feel close to her daughter. It brings her peace, especially when it seems

there is no wind but the pinwheels spin.

“I know that she’s here and it gives me comfort,” she said.

Since the shooting, Cruz, who works as a fleet driver, hasn’t returned to work. There are too many emotions, thoughts and questions racing in her head to focus on the road.

“There’s this emptiness that can never be filled,” she said.

She tries to focus on her sassy daughter’s wide smile, her kindness, grit and talent, on how she had earned the A Honor Roll — the good memories.

“She was my baby,” she said, her voice trailing off, tears in her eyes. “And she was always with a smile.”

Cruz used to leave home for work at 5 a.m. She would get a call from Eliahna before her daughter left for school.

The morning of the shooting, Cruz was just starting her drive to the Hill Country when Eliahna called her at 7:20 a.m. “Mom, I’m going to school already,” she said. “And I said, ‘OK, baby, have a good day at school.’”

Eliahna played second base for the Lady Bombshells. May 24 was to be her final softball game of the season. It’s also when she would find out if she made All-Stars.

“That morning on the phone, she said, ‘I’m so excited and nervous. What if I don’t make it?’” I told her, ‘Regardless if you make it or not, I will always be your No. 1 fan, and you are always going to be an All-Star in my eyes.’

“That phone call,” Cruz said. “It just plays in my head over and over and over. It’s all I have.”

Cruz was driving when she received a call about the Robb shooting. Like so many others, Cruz assumed it was an immigration bailout, but she then received more panicked calls.

She pulled over. “And at that moment, something came over me. I started crying. I felt something in my heart,” she said.

Another call: Eliahna had been shot and was on a stretcher. She wasn’t moving. She went to Robb and joined the chaotic scene of other desperate parents trying to find their children.

She went to the hospital, where she shared a photo of her daughter with a nurse. Thirty minutes later, she was asked to go back — alone. She saw a priest just before a nurse took her hand and told her, “I am so sorry I have to tell you this, but I need you to identify a body.”

But “it wasn’t my baby lying there,” Cruz said. “It was her best friend, Jackie. She was just lying there, lifeless. It hurt so bad because I knew how much this little girl meant to my daughter. But then I had hope. My baby was out there. She was still alive.”

Cruz was sent back to the Sgt. Willie de Leon Civic Center where the “waiting game began — again.”

There, she was told there were buses en route. But there was not a bus for her daughter’s teacher, Arnulfo Reyes. All 11 students in his classroom died.

Cruz said she was the last to get swabbed — the last to get told her “baby had passed.” But she knew. “Everyone they swabbed, their babies didn’t make it. I found out at midnight.”

About three weeks after the shooting, Cruz found out Eliahna made the All-Star team.

Cruz’s birthday wish? “Always remember their names. Their faces. Never forget them.”

Their names were: Eliahna, Nevaeh, Jose, Jacklyn, Annabell, Jayce, Makenna, Jailah, Lexi, Tess, Xavier, Amerie, Maranda, Rojelio, Layla, Alithia, Maite, Uziyah, Ellie, Irma and Eva.

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The gifts of grandparents

While reading the funeral program of a family member a couple of weeks ago, I learned that all four of her grandmothers died before she was born. It was difficult for me to imagine a life barren of grandparents, especially for a woman who was an excellent grandmother to her only grandchild.

For those of us blessed with wonderful grandparents, we don't need National Grandparents Day — which is today — to remember and honor them.

But it is a good day to be reminded of the roles grandparents play in the lives of their families and indelible imprints they make on their grandchildren. In a writing class for adults that I've been teaching for Gemini Ink, I've been struck that so many of the essays by the students, many of them grandparents themselves, have been about their grandparents.

What grandparents do so well for children is create memories that will bequeath to them a lifetime of sustenance and joy. They're often our first storytellers and the teachers from whom we learn the power of narrative and language.



CARY CLACK
COMMENTARY

I had a grandfather and both grandmothers in my life well into my adulthood; two great-grandmothers into my 20s; and a great-grandfather until I was 35 and whose pocket watch I still carry.

My maternal grandfather died when my mother was 3, but I cherish two letters he wrote to my grandmother. "All day yesterday," my grandfather wrote in January 1944, "my left eye was jumping. That is why I called you last night to ask about the children."

... Papa may close a deal today for a place. If he does, I think the place is nice. We have a space for you and the children now at home but am waiting until a deal is closed so when you come (you) will have a place

for our things."

There were four children; the youngest was my mother. The children and my grandmother were in Houston, where my mother was born.

My grandfather moved to San Antonio to receive treatment for tuberculosis. He was living with his father, my great-grandfather, whose nickname was "Cap" ("The Captain"). The place that Cap closed the deal on was a house in Denver Heights. In the second letter, dated March 1944, my grandfather writes to my grandmother, "The time is not long, before we will all be together again, and I will be very happy."

He'd die in that house in November 1944. I was raised in that house by a mother and grandmother, within walking distance of my great-grandfather's house and a five-minute drive from my paternal grandfather's house. I was blessed.

Grandparents have always been essential in the lives of their grandchildren, but never more so than today when, as the U.S. census tells us, 1.3 million grandparents in the labor force are responsible for most of the basic care of co-resident grandchildren younger than 18. So many grandparents aren't just weekend escapes for their grandchildren. They are lifelines.

But today isn't just for grandparents to be remembered and honored. It's also a day for grandparents to remember their grandchildren.

Until this year, I'd never thought about the other side of National Grandparents Day, which is grandparents missing, mourning their deceased grandchildren.

Like many of you, I think of Uvalde every day. Multiple times a day. It doesn't take much, whether it's going to a school or seeing families downtown. But what's happening more frequently is that whenever I see grandparents with their little ones, I think of Uvalde's grieving grandfathers and grandmothers.

I think of Ellie Garcia's grandfather, sitting on a park bench in Uvalde's Town Square



Courtesy Cary Clack

A young Cary Clack with his maternal grandmother, Olga Thompson.

in June, standing at her memorial on what would have been her 10th birthday. And I'm thinking about that, now, as this column ends in a direction not steered. It's National Grandparents Day, and I want the grandparents of Uvalde to know that just as we've not forgotten their grandchildren, we've not forgotten them.

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Global war on terror is fading away

During a speech to Congress 21 years ago this month, President George W. Bush announced what would become the global war on terror.

The endeavor, he said, "begins with al-Qaida, but it does not end there," as he outlined a framework for an enduring, open-ended conflict.

"Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen," he said. "It may include dramatic strikes, visible on TV, and covert operations, secret even in success."

From its first utterance, "global war on terrorism," or GWOT, triggered criticism. As the years dragged on, it fell out of style, but not the concepts and actions behind it or the question of when it would end.

Today, the global war on terrorism still smolders across the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere. The Pentagon doesn't really talk about it, and



BRANDON LINGLE
COMMENTARY

people are already planning a national memorial for the nation's longest military odyssey — a war memorial for a conflict that's still ongoing (sort of).

Since 2001, between 19 million and 3 million U.S. service members have participated in post-9/11 military operations impacting at least 76 countries. More than 7000 U.S. troops died, and tens of thousands were wounded in the \$8 trillion endeavor. Those numbers represent a fraction of the human and economic costs worldwide. During the Obama adminis-

tration, the GWOT language largely faded.

In a 2005 speech at the National Defense University, President Barack Obama said, "Beyond Afghanistan, we must define our effort not as a boundless 'global war on terror' but rather as a series of persistent, targeted efforts to dismantle specific networks of violent extremists that threaten America."

A search of the Defense Department's website for "GWOT" or "global war on terrorism" yields few results.

However, a 2005 planning document about how to communicate the war on terrorism, noted because the GWOT has no end date or easily defined battlefield, "Overarching messages must be broad to encompass the scope of the GWOT and flexible over time."

It called for communicating resolve, the right to self-defense, legitimacy, benefits of DOD

actions, adherence to the laws of armed conflict and reinforcing the authorities that UN security resolutions granted.

The sidelined term resurfaced July 29 when DOD announced it would restrict the award of the Global War on Terrorism Service Medal.

Since its introduction in 2003, most people who served in the post-9/11 military received the medal for "supporting" the GWOT regardless of their location or connection to it.

But after Sept. 11, 2022, people must directly serve "in a designated military (counter-terrorism) operation" for at least 30 days, according to a memo first reported by Army Times reporter Davis Winkie.

In another sign of a waning GWOT — and a move to more of a peacetime posture — on Aug. 30, DOD announced it would stop awarding the National Defense Service Medal at the end of the year.

"Termination is based on the United States no longer conducting large-scale combat operations in designated geographic locations as a result of the terrorist attacks on the United States that occurred September 11, 2001," Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin wrote.

Prior, everyone in the post-9/11 military received the medal. Navy Cmdr. Nicole Schweigman, a DOD spokesperson, told me GWOT "is not a term we use every day, but it's still a relevant term." She said GWOT still applies to a range of counterterrorism missions beyond Iraq and Afghanistan.

As the nation recognizes the 21st anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, the signs that the global war on terror is over continue to stack up. With luck, the term will only reside in the history books when the GWOT memorial in D.C. opens in 2026.

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No rest for families till demands met



Nikki Cross, Brett Cross and Laura Garza protest outside the Uvalde CISD administration offices, vowing to stay. Their demands in the wake of the school shooting are appropriate.

By Nancy M. Preyor-Johnson

UVALDE — The parents and families camping for days on the doorsteps of the Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District administration building have also protested in Austin and Washington D.C. They couldn't have imagined they would need to take their protest this far — in their own town.

They will not be silenced. They will not rest.

They demand accountability, and hot or chilly weather and a lack of sleep and restrooms will not deter them. After burying the 19 children and two teachers who were murdered at the Uvalde school shooting May 24, they are undaunted.

Leading the protest is Brett Cross, whose nephew and adopted son, Uziyah Garcia, was

murdered at Robb Elementary. He and others who gathered at the administration building are fueled by unrelenting outrage, heartache and grief.

They want Uvalde CISD school resource officers to be suspended pending an investigation of their response to the shooting.

When I joined them Wednesday, they had been at it a day, and when I wrote this Thursday, they were still going. I spoke with Lexi Rubio's parents, Kimberly and Felix Rubio; Jacklyn Cazares' mom, Gloria Cazares, and her sister Jazmin Cazares; Jailah Silguero's mom, Veronica Luevanos; and Amerie Jo Garza's grandparents, Fidencio Garcia and Dora Mendoza. I also spoke to parents of survivors, including Christine Olivarez, whose daughter, Kendall Olivarez, was shot; and Christopher Salinas, whose son Samuel Salinas suffered gunshot fragment wounds.

"We've done passed the (expletive) around part," Cross said. "We're at the 'find out' part now. It's been 18 weeks since our children were murdered, and they haven't done nothing. They refuse to do anything."

Countless community members dropped off food items or sent deliveries to the campsite. Kimberly Rubio and her husband brought coffee.

"We're here to support," she said. "It's a pretty simple demand. It's common that when there is an investigation, officials are suspended until there is an outcome," she said.

Their demands are appropriate.

On Wednesday at 5:54 a.m., four DPS officers arrived to help a school administrator enter the building through the back door, which was blocked by Cross' cot, items and car. An officer told Cross if he didn't move his car, they would call a tow truck. Cross moved it.

"Everybody here would love to go back in time and change what happened," one officer said.

"You wish that y'all could go back in time?" Cross responded. "And do what? Sit with your colleagues for 77 (expletive) minutes while children were screaming and bleeding out?"

The school district has responded to the parents, but officials haven't given the families what they demand.

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The district noted it has engaged with the Texas Police Chiefs Association to conduct a management and organizational review of the Uvalde CISD Police Department, and JPPI Investigations has been hired to conduct an independent review of the district's police department's response May 24.

Necessary, but not enough.

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Thursday morning, Superintendent Hal Harrell again offered to speak with Cross in his office. Cross agreed.

In the intense, livestreamed meeting, Cross accused Harrell of not caring. Harrell admitted failure but reminded him the district had terminated its police chief. Cross said it wasn't enough.

He stormed out of the meeting and resumed his protest. At 8:43 a.m. Thursday, he tweeted: "49 hours"

Harrell said the district couldn't suspend its officers because they are needed on campuses. I wonder why the district won't get outside officers to help during the investigation.

Thursday at 12:48 p.m., Cross tweeted: "54 hours. No quit in sight. We will have accountability come hell or high water. Only thing that sucks is there's no port-a-potty."

Someone offered to take him one.

OPINION

‘Mad Dash’ Paxtons on the run

In American culture and cinema, legends are created from the stories of two people in cars running from the law. Bonnie and Clyde. Thelma and Louise. O.J. Simpson and Al Cowling. Jake and Elwood Blues.

To this pantheon of road rogues, we can add Ken and Angela. As in Paxton.

Monday morning, the Texas attorney general and his wife, a state senator, fled their home when Ernesto Martin Herrera, a process server, attempted to serve a subpoena for a federal court hearing in a lawsuit from nonprofits that want to help Texans pay for out-of-state abortions.

Let's pause here to note that if there's one state attorney general in the United States most likely to be served a subpoena on any given day, it's Ken Paxton.

This is a man who, for seven years, has been indicted for alleged securities fraud and has yet to go on trial. He's been accused by former staffers of corruption, for which he's under



CARY CLACK
COMMENTARY

FBI investigation. He is being sued by the Texas state bar for professional misconduct for filing a ridiculous lawsuit — laughed out of the U.S. Supreme Court — that challenged the 2020 presidential election results in four states.

When it comes to being followed by unethical dust clouds, Paxton is the Pigeon of American politics.

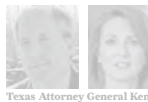
In an affidavit, Herrera says when he arrived at the Paxtons' house and told Mrs. Paxton he had legal documents to serve her husband, she told him the attorney general was on the phone. Herrera had waited nearly an hour when a black Chevrolet Tahoe pulled into the driveway and Paxton left his

house. In his affidavit, Herrera wrote, "I walked up the driveway approaching Mr. Paxton and called him by his name. As soon as he saw me and heard me call his name out, he turned around and RAN back inside the house through the same door in the garage."

After Paxton's dash back to the house, Angela Paxton left the house, got inside a Chevrolet truck in the driveway, started it and opened the doors. Ken "Mad Dash" Paxton then, according to the processor, "ran from the door inside the garage towards the rear door behind the driver side. I approached the truck, and loudly called him by his name and stated that I had court documents for him. Mr. Paxton ignored me and kept heading for the truck."

Seeing that Paxton wasn't going to take the subpoenas, Herrera told him he was leaving there on the ground beside the truck. Paxton got in the truck without picking up the documents, and both vehicles left.

In a statement, Paxton said "Here are the facts: a strange



Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton and wife Angela feared a man wielding documents.

man came onto my property at home, yelled unintelligibly, and charged toward me. I perceived this person to be a threat because he was neither honest nor upfront about his intentions."

If Herrera was yelling "intelligibly," how did Paxton know he wasn't honest about his intentions? And isn't it strangers who usually serve subpoenas? How often does one's child or best friend hand them an order to appear in court?

Elsewhere in the statement, Ken "The Flea" Paxton says, "In light of the constant threats against me, for which dangerous individuals are currently incarcerated, I take a number of common-sense precautions for

me and my family's safety when I'm at home."

Apparently, one of those precautions is to run back inside the house and send your wife out — and into the threat — so she can start the car and open the doors for your next sprint to the vehicle. Paxton continues: "Texans do the same to protect themselves from threats, and many also exercise their Second Amendment rights to protect themselves and their families. Given that this suspicious and erratic man charged me on my private property, he is lucky this situation did not escalate further or necessitate force."

Herrera is lucky that in carrying out his job of serving subpoenas he wasn't shot to death by the Texas attorney general. But is the Texas attorney general suggesting that anyone being served a subpoena should consider it a threat, which justifies running or shooting?

Or does it only apply to Ken "Step on the Gas, Angie!" Paxton?

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Sam Owens/Staff photographer

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Ukraine frays Russia's post-Soviet influence

As Russia moves deeper into the Ukraine quagmire, the Kremlin is losing its military and diplomatic ability to mediate the long-running conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan — and the Biden administration is moving to fill that void.

National security adviser Jake Sullivan last week hosted "di-rent and constructive talks" with Armen Grigoryan and Hikmet Hajiyev, his counterparts from Armenia and Azerbaijan, respectively. The meeting followed on the ground mediation efforts by Philip Reeker, the State Department's senior adviser for the Caucasus region.

The White House meeting produced a "road map" for further peace negotiations between the two countries, according to Lilit Makunts, Armenia's ambassador to Washington. The next step, she told me, will be a meeting in early October in Geneva between the two countries' foreign ministers, joined by Reeker and a European Union diplomat. The talks were

"evidence of strong engagement with the U.S.," Makunts said.

Armenia and Azerbaijan have fought a series of bitter battles over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan lost the territory in a 1994 war, but it regained control of broad swaths after heavy fighting in 2020. Russia negotiated a cease-fire that November and subsequent peace talks. But Moscow has failed to contain the conflict since then. Azerbaijan invaded Armenia last month, opening another bloody round.

Russia's failure to broker peace in the Caucasus might be the clearest sign yet of how the Ukraine war has enfeebled Moscow's power to enforce solutions along its borders. The Russian military, badly stretched, hasn't been able to

play the peacekeeping role it promised between Armenia and Azerbaijan. And its diplomatic efforts are now mistrusted by both sides.

Moscow is having similar problems in other spots around its periphery. Sweden and Finland have abandoned neutrality and moved to join NATO. Kazakhstan's president has denounced the Ukraine war as a "hopeless situation" and opened his border to Russians fleeing President Vladimir Putin's military mobilization. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan welcomed visits by Gen. Michael Erik Kurilla, the head of U.S. Central Command, this summer despite Russian objections. The post-Soviet "empire" is visibly fraying at the seams.

Russia's disarray appears to be pushing Armenia toward greater cooperation with the United States. The Armenians, surrounded by hostile neighbors, have long looked to Moscow for protection, despite their country's democratic, pro-West-

ern political orientation. When Azerbaijan attacked, Armenia requested urgent help from the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Moscow's attempt to create a NATO-like regional alliance. The CSTO did nothing.

Grigoryan, the secretary of the Armenian security council, explained in an interview the purpose of his visit to Washington last week: "I'm here to discuss how we can strengthen U.S.-Armenian relations." Areas of potential cooperation included security, energy, diplomatic and economic relations, he said. The foundation of the relationship would be "democracy strengthening democracy."

Whether the expanding U.S.-Armenian relationship will extend to military cooperation remains unclear. Armenia's defense minister visited the Pentagon in September. Armenia needs better training and equipment for its military, which was badly outmatched in the last war with Azerbaijan. But there's no visible sign of

U.S. military assistance.

A catalyst for improved U.S.-Armenian relations was the visit to Yerevan on Sept. 17 by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, which came soon after Azerbaijan's attack. Grigoryan said Pelosi's trip checked further escalation. "That visit gives hope that Armenia is not alone in its struggle," he said.

On the visceral question of Armenia's relationship with Turkey, there are also small glimmers of change. Ankara continues to deny the 195 Ottoman genocide, the darkest event in Armenian history. But Grigoryan said discussion of "normalization" with Ankara has begun, and the leaders of the two countries have agreed in principle to open their borders to transit, initially by third-country nationals.

"We expect it to happen as soon as possible," Grigoryan said of this border opening. But as always in such diplomatic gambits, the devil is in the details.