VETS GET A SECOND CHANCE | PERRY'S LAST PRAYER IN IOWA | CZECHING IN FROM CALDWELL

OBSERVER

JANUARY | 2012

The Power of Love

Can Texas' new approach to prisoners with newborns keep families together?

BY DIANA CLAITOR

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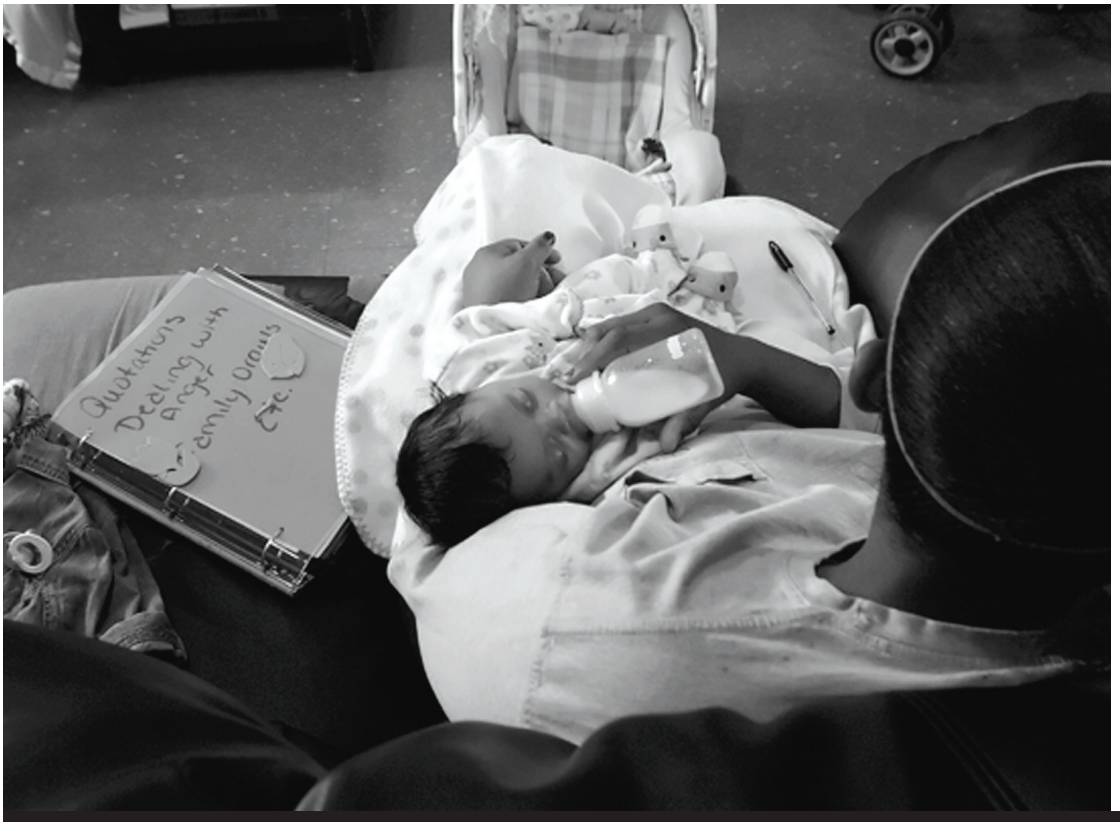

ON THE COVER
ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN STAUFFER

LEFT
A BAMBI resident waits for group therapy session, where inmate mothers discuss issues and strategize how to cope with returning to their lives once they leave the program.
PHOTO BY JEN REEL

OBSERVER ONLINE
See additional photos of inmate mothers and their babies living at the BAMBI unit at **www.texasobserver.org.**

REGULARS

CORRECTION: We neglected to credit Brian Cahn of ZUMA for the image of Rick Perry that appeared on the cover of our December issue. The photo was taken on Sept. 7, 2011, in Camarillo, California, where Perry spoke to several hundred supporters an hour after the Republican debate at the Ronald Reagan Library. We deeply regret the omission.

A JOURNAL OF FREE VOICES
SINCE 1954

OBSERVER

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OUR MISSION
We will serve no group or party but will hew hard to the truth as we find it and the right as we see it. We are dedicated to the whole truth, to human values above all interests, to the rights of humankind as the foundation of democracy. We will take orders from none but our own conscience, and never will we overlook or misrepresent the truth to serve the interests of the powerful or cater to the ignoble in the human spirit.

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DIALOGUE

A Real Curtain Raiser

Ah, so the brains have been hiding behind the curtain, where no one can see them ("The Brains Behind the Curtain," December issue). "Oops" is suddenly so clear.

Scott Nicol
POSTED ON FACEBOOK

Subject to Debate

Full disclosure: I haven't seen the film. I competed in forensics in the late '70s ("Documentary's Focus Is Subject to Debate," December issue). I absolutely take the [author's] point about social class, in the sense that the film should have addressed the issue and/or focused more broadly on the diversity of Texas tournament participants. I will submit, however, that the barriers to success in competitive speech are much more about good coaching and parental support than they are about finances. When I was in school, individuals didn't pay to attend tournaments, schools did. I would be very sorry to learn that this had changed, but not surprised. The larger question would be whether schools are subsidizing athletics differently than they subsidize academic or performance-oriented competitions. Again, that wouldn't surprise me.

Shelly Brisbin
POSTED AT TEXASOBSERVER.ORG

No One's Laughing

The Texas electorate is sitting on the couch, sucking on a Lone Star beer, watching "Dancing with the Stars," hoping for a crotch shot ("Think Rick Perry's Collapsing Campaign is Funny? The Joke's on You, Texas," December issue). How else can you explain Perry's success in Texas politics—it's the electorate, folks. **Chris Columbus**
POSTED AT TEXASOBSERVER.ORG

I didn't vote for Perry or either of the Bushes. What an awful way to represent the great, compassionate, intelligent people of Texas.

Deb Hancock Tullos
POSTED ON FACEBOOK

It's terrible to have a man who's been the governor of the 13th-largest economy in the world, the largest exporter of any state, the second-largest population, one of the lowest in taxes and a 2nd Amendment supporting Christian. Those things are just terrible.

Johnny Thompson
POSTED ON FACEBOOK

Every single media entity in the state has been complicit, in their immoral laziness, in allowing Perry's lies to go unchecked. Absolutely nothing that's come to light in the last three months should have been a surprise in any way, but the media in Texas ... take anything King Perry says as gospel without so much as lifting a finger to even pretend to verify his absurd assertions. Remarkable, isn't it, that once he marched on the national stage, competent reporters exposed his failings with admirable alacrity? And the voters, actually informed by a few stray members of the media ... are voicing their opinions, astutely, in the poll numbers we see today. **H.L. Newsom**
POSTED AT TEXASOBSERVER.ORG

Media Matters

It's sad that we don't aspire to the change necessary to help correct the problems of diversity in media ("Meet the New Media, Same as the Old Media," December issue). I think things could be better if that's what consumers and producers desired. I'm just not sure either really cares at the end of the day. **Shawn P. Williams**
POSTED AT TEXASOBSERVER.ORG

Chartering the Future

Could you imagine, educating kids of different social statuses—white, black, Hispanic. ... Asian ("The Strange Tale of Deion Sander's Charter School," Dec. 5, texasobserver.org)? Why, yes, Mr. Sanders. Those of us in public schools have been doing that for quite some time now. **Stephen J. Wright**
POSTED ON FACEBOOK

Sound Off

editors@texasobserver.org
or comment on facebook.com/texasobserver and texasobserver.org

King Street Patriots founder Catherine Engelbrecht speaks at a recent rally. PHOTO BY PATRICK MICHELS

ANNALS OF VOTER INTIMIDATION

King Street Patriots Go National

WATCH video of the King Street Patriots' November meeting at txlo.com/ttvv

On Election Day 2010, a well-coordinated barnstorming tour of inner-city Houston polling places helped make King Street Patriots one of Texas' premier Tea Party groups. They called their campaign True the Vote. The group's 1,000 volunteer poll watchers, many of them dispatched to Democratic-leaning minority neighborhoods to scour for voter fraud, combined to send 800 complaints of improper voting to Harris County officials, who investigated a few but ended up taking no legal action.

While it generated little evidence of voter fraud, the King Street Patriots' effort did result in complaints about voter intimidation and breached ethics, a lawsuit from the Texas Democratic Party, and an investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice.

But that was just the warmup act. For Election Day 2012, the group is planning a nationwide poll-watching drive, with one million volunteers hell-bent on staring down all the supposedly fraudulent voters they can find.

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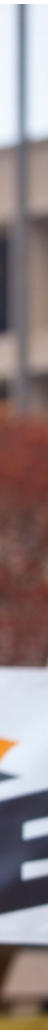


At a late-November meeting in the group's new dark-gray, bunker-chic headquarters, founder Catherine Engelbrecht gave her loyalists an update on the cause. King Street Patriots have compiled an ever-growing database of voters across the country. She said the group has created an "exportable, comprehensive True the Vote model" they've spread to 30 states.

Volunteers from around the country can add their names to the King Street Patriots volunteer database, then get connected with other groups of aspiring poll watchers closer to home.

"True the Vote has a lot of brand recognition, but, you know, it also has a lot of baggage with all of the media smearing that goes on," Engelbrecht said. To keep that baggage from traveling beyond Harris County, local poll-watching groups are encouraged to train with True the Vote, but to come up with their own names. Some of these include Dallas County's "Red White and True Texans," "One Vote/True Vote" in Tennessee, and "Clean Up the Vote" in Nevada.

They're hoping to find volunteer coordinators in every county in every state, but, as in 2010, some polling places will get more attention than others. Vickie Pullen, who is coordinating the group's national efforts, told the *Observer* they're most interested "in those states where there have historically been problems with election integrity."

That kind of language has spurred the group's critics to say King Street Patriots' fraud complaints are not only overblown, but an attempt to intimidate minority voters. Such a massive roll-out of amped-up and largely Anglo outsiders challenging voters in minority neighborhoods, critics say, increases racial tensions.

At the November meeting, True the Vote trainer Alan Vera said he's well aware of that concern, which is why he stresses cool-headed professionalism to his trainees. "Your mission is the vote, not to start a fight," Vera said.

And then he compared Election Day to "a Vietnam firefight."

"Ultimately, the integrity of the election comes down to this," Vera said at the meeting. "In the wee hours of some November morning, patriot men and women get up before the rooster crows. They put on the armor of God's protection, they carry the shield of knowledge and discipline, the sword of truth. They drive to an area where they're probably not going to be welcomed, leaving their comfortable home and neighborhood behind. They come face to face with ignorance and evil, and they stare it down. They stare it down."

In 2010, the Patriots took their epic fight to Houston neighborhoods Moody Park and Sunnyside. This November, the whole country's in play.

—Patrick Michels

DEPT. OF WATER HOGS

Perish the Brazos?

A river, John Graves wrote in *Goodbye to a River*, his 1960 homage to the upper middle Brazos, is "one of the real wholes, but to feel the whole is hard because to know it is harder still."

For those who know the mighty Brazos, or at least a piece of it, the feeling these days is one of discomfort. In 1957, when Graves canoed his stretch of the Brazos, between Possum Kingdom Lake and Lake Whitney, it was to take stock of the river before an onslaught of dams changed it forever. Even though only one of the dams was eventually built, some nature lovers have been waving goodbye to the Brazos ever since. Over the decades, the river has been increasingly drawn on by cities and the Comanche Peak nuclear power plant, and plagued by fish-killing golden algae. But perhaps the greatest threat to the river comes from the agency charged with overseeing it: the Brazos River Authority.

For the past seven years, the authority has been angling to lock up every last drop of water left in the Brazos. In 2004, the authority filed for a permit with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality for the right to withdraw up to a million acre-feet per year from the Brazos and use it however it sees fit.

The plan is an audacious, perhaps unprecedented, water grab by a quasi-public entity in Texas. In October, an administrative law judge—after five years of legal proceedings—recommended that TCEQ either deny the permit or require the Brazos River Authority to explain its plans more thoroughly. The judge agreed with interested parties like Friends of the Brazos River and Dow Chemical, which relies on river water at its coastal Freeport facility, that the authority has failed to show what impact its plans would have on cities, industry, agriculture and the environment.

Now it's up to three Perry appointees at TCEQ—not known for their environmental sensitivities—to accept the judge's recommendation or grant the river authority's water rights request.

"If they get that water, the river's screwed," says Ed Lowe, president of Friends of the Brazos. "It's already seriously degraded, and to me, the river as we know it is going to be gone."

The outcome could have huge consequences for other major river basins, said Austin attorney Rick Lowerre, who is representing the Friends of the Brazos. "They want to be the monopoly that everyone has to buy the water from," Lowerre says. If Brazos River Authority gets its way, it may set a precedent. Other river authorities could soon try to lock up the last of the freely flowing water.

Every molecule in many of the state's water

TRIVIA TEXAS

Who wrote the introduction to Rick Perry's 2010 book *Fed Up!*?

a) Newt Gingrich
b) Sarah Palin
c) Friedrich Hayek
d) Donald Trump
e) There was an introduction?

READ our previous coverage of the Brazos permit fight at txlo.com/brazos

ANSWER: a) Newt Gingrich: Oh, the irony.

TALK OF TEXAS

RICK PERRY HAIL MARY EDITION

"By this memorandum I am directing all agencies engaged abroad to ensure that U.S. diplomacy and foreign assistance promote and protect the human rights of LGBT persons."

—President Barack Obama, Dec. 6 presidential memo

"This administration's war on traditional American values must stop. ... Promoting special rights for gays in foreign countries is not in America's interests."

—Gov. Rick Perry, Dec. 6 campaign statement

"Memo to Rick Perry: Not getting murdered isn't a 'special right.'"

—Andrew Sullivan, Dec .7 post on *The Daily Beast.*

systems is accounted for, assigned to some entity to consume. Other rivers are close to being fully appropriated. The question is, will we save a few drops for a river to be a river? —Forrest Wilder

FROM THE HOMELAND INSECURITY FILES

A Wall Runs Through It

Seventy-three-year-old Leonard Loop, an Air Force veteran, grows citrus and vegetables on the outskirts of Brownsville and also runs a feed store. His family has been farming this same land for five generations.

Last year, the Department of Homeland Security bulldozed a swathe through Loop's grapefruit orchard and filled in a pond that was home to roseate spoonbills, snowy egrets, and great blue herons. The government then erected an 18-foot steel fence—a section of the infamous border wall— bisecting 890 acres of farm land owned by the Loop family near the Rio Grande.

The hulking metal structure divides the family. Loop, 73, his wife Debby, and a son live north of the wall, while Loop's nephew Tim, his other son Ray, and Ray's family live south of the wall near the Rio Grande. Since 2008, Leonard and his family have been battling with the department for a gate in the wall. "My sons own the 730 acres on the river side of the fence. It's their livelihood, and they are in deep debt for it. I told my boys, 'the federal government will ruin you if you don't stick up for your rights,'" Loop told me as we drove around the property last year.

A few months after my visit, the Loops finally got the government to agree to a 50-foot-wide gate, but they still couldn't get any explanation as to how to access it. At one point they were told they'd need a Border Patrol escort every time they wanted to open the gate. The notion of needing an escort to access their own property struck family members as ludicrous. Loop explained that the section of wall that cuts through their land ends half a mile away. After that, there's a 14-mile stretch of levee, largely on federal land, that doesn't have any fence at all. "You can just walk around it and do anything," Loop said.

READ more about the Loop family and the U.S. border wall at txlo.com/lop

Recently, the government came up with a new plan: a keypad and a secret pass code. The Loops will be able to open the gate without an escort, but the family will have to provide Homeland Security with the names of anyone who has regular access to the pass code—including the hundreds of employees who work their land. "I'll have to ask permission from the government to live my life," Tim Loop recently told *Texas Monthly*. No doubt the whole mess would leave the architects of the U.S. Constitution scratching their heads in wonder. Welcome to the borderlands. Bring your passport—or at least your secret pass code.

—Melissa del Bosque

THE POLITICAL BEAT

Brain Drain

The 83rd session of the Texas Legislature won't begin for another year, but it's already looking pretty grim. Lawmakers will have to actually deal with the structural

Leonard and Debbie Loop's citrus orchard.
PHOTO BY EUGENIO DEL BOSQUE

deficit that creates a hole in the state budget every year and the resulting tax-policy problems. There are impending school-finance lawsuits, which will likely force the state to rewrite the entire education-funding system. Perhaps most disturbing, the state House and Senate will have to tackle these problems without many of the lawmakers who know the issues best.

A handful of House and Senate members have made themselves experts on complex issues most lawmakers don't bother to learn, like tax policy, school finance and criminal justice. Their colleagues trust them to explain bills and assess policy. Often, they're the ones who can reach across party lines and forge compromises. With many lawmakers opting not to run for reelection, there are about to be fewer of them.

In the Senate, Steve Ogden, R-Bryan, has helped lead lawmakers through several budget fights, and he knows just about every area of the complex state budget. Last year, facing a $27 billion budget shortfall, ideologues in the House passed an extreme budget that cut $8 billion from public education and another $1 billion from higher ed. Ogden provided a voice of reason. He began the session by giving a speech to his colleagues outlining the need for a working tax structure and a fix for the state's structural deficit. He pushed hard to use at least some of the state's $9 billion Rainy Day Fund rather than simply hack away at health care and schools, and created a special subcommittee to find more non-tax revenue in the budget. In the end, public schools sustained a $6 billion cut. Ogden decided not to seek another term.

The House's biggest loss will likely be Scott Hochberg, D-Houston, the man who knows almost everything about the Capitol's most mind-bogglingly complex subject: school finance. Hochberg, who's also not running again, spent much of his time on the House floor explaining rules and policy details to his less-informed colleagues. He often lost battles for more funding or a more equal system of distribution to schools, but he remained an integral part of each negotiation, explaining outcomes to the floor. The Legislature may soon have to rewrite school-finance laws without its resident expert.

Then there's Jerry Madden, R-Plano, a grandfatherly figure who deals with criminal justice. Madden worked closely with lawmakers in both parties to overhaul the scandal-ridden Texas Youth Commission and introduce reforms to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Madden showed that a lawmaker can be "tough on crime," but still work to reduce recidivism rates and promote programs that divert addicts and nonviolent offenders into treatment programs instead of prison. Madden is retiring.

LEARN more about Rep. Scott Hochberg at txlo.com/hochs

These are just some of the big names. At press time, 26 House members have announced they won't be running for re-election. Many have just finished their first term, or spent their tenure as backbenchers. But others played key roles in shaping the most important issues facing the state. Their former colleagues may soon be reminded of an old bit of wisdom: You don't know what you have until it's gone.

—Abby Rapoport

TYRANT'S FOE

Seeking Worker Rights for Cab Drivers

Ann Darbonne
fights for fair pay for Austin cab drivers.

EVEN BEFORE THEIR FIRST CUSTOMER SLIDES INTO THE BACK SEAT and names a destination, Austin cab drivers start out every week hundreds of dollars in the hole. ¶ The cab company charges around $300 a week for the permit to drive the cab. Drivers spend $400 a week for gas, and pay more than $100 per week for the car itself, if they're leasing it. If they don't want to drive everywhere with an ad for, say, a strip club on their car, they'll pay another $25 a week to rent back the space on the trunk.

The average Austin driver, after fees and driving expenses, makes just $2.75 an hour.

In return, drivers get little job security, no insurance or workers' compensation, and little recourse when fees go up.

Still, Ann Darbonne says she loves her job. "I just don't like the way they treat us all the time."

Darbonne, director of the Taxi Drivers Association of Austin (TDAA), began driving about five years ago for Lone Star Cab. She liked being behind the wheel and meeting new people, but she realized quickly that the industry didn't make much room for drivers to have a say. At the time, there was no organization looking out for her.

Between them, Yellow Cab, Lone Star Cab and Austin Cab have all 669 taxi permits issued by the city, and the tightly controlled market means operators hold a lot of leverage over drivers. The city dictates the rates that cabs can charge, but operators set drivers' permit fees and terms of employment. Because they're treated as independent contractors, drivers don't get benefits and have to pay self-employment taxes.

"If I have an accident on my way home today, I have to pay for all damages to my vehicle, the other person's vehicle. The company will cover personal injuries to the other person, but not me," Darbonne says.

She joined TDAA as its secretary shortly after the group formed in 2009, and when founder Jeffrey Jones stepped down, she took over as director in the summer of 2010.

"I was just another driver who was being—let me put it mildly—messed over, and I felt really bad for the people who were being treated badly for God knows how many years," she says. "I decided to open my mouth and say something about it."

Before Darbonne took the helm, the nonprofit Texas RioGrande Legal Aid released a report on the plight of Austin drivers, called "Driving Austin, Driving Injustice," which helped generate attention for the new organization. Among the report's findings: The average Austin driver, after fees and driving expenses, makes just $2.75 an hour. Since then, much of Darbonne's work has involved spreading the word—and trying to keep that number from dipping any lower.

Over drivers' objections, Austin cab companies have waged a long campaign at City Hall to raise the number of permits they're allowed to issue. That would mean more money for operators, but a smaller slice for each of the folks working behind the wheel. Driver advocates say Austin has already handed out far more permits than the city needs.

Darbonne still hopes to convince City Council members to consider the downside of issuing more permits, and hopes someday the city will start selling permits directly to veteran drivers, providing an incentive to stick with the profession and empowering workers who struggled to make it for years. She keeps in touch with other drivers' groups across the country, in Dallas, Portland, Ore., and Baltimore, to work on common issues like health insurance and contract troubles.

She also writes a newsletter for her group's 250 members, posting it on a bulletin board at the airport, one of the only places in town where drivers take time to stop and commiserate.

"My intent was just to get out and ruffle feathers and see if I could do some good," she says. "I wouldn't say I'm the best at it, but I'm not the worst at it, and I'm the one willing to do it."

Along with her organizing work, she still drives—for Austin Cab now—around 15 hours a day, five days a week. That's actually less than most drivers, who typically work the whole week without a day off.

"We're not trying to put them out of business, we just want to be treated well," she says of the cab companies. "They have some bad rules they've been allowed to get away with. Hopefully we can fix some of that."

—Patrick Michels

EDITORIAL

A Different Kind of Texas Justice

The Texas criminal justice system isn't exactly known as a bastion of progressive thinking. We've lost count of the scandals that have sprung from the state's notorious tough-on-crime mindset, from overly aggressive prosecutors to dozens of wrongful convictions to the historically rough treatment of inmates in state prisons.

But there is another side to the story of Texas' criminal justice system—one not often told, but infinitely more inspiring. In this issue, we highlight two of the most progressive criminal justice initiatives you'll find anywhere in the country.

Freelance writer Diana Claitor takes us inside the Baby and Mother Bonding Initiative run by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). Under the program, which started in April 2010, select inmates who have just given birth are transferred from prison to a residential treatment complex in northeast Houston, where they can live and bond with their newborns. The program is a reaction to the growing body of research that shows the months immediately after birth are a critical bonding period for mothers and children. The goal is to keep the mothers and their children from committing future crimes. And early returns show that mother-baby bonding programs dramatically reduce recidivism.

Also in this issue, writer Leila Levinson explores the phenomenon of veterans courts. These courts are designed to keep military veterans who suffer from combat-related mental illness and/or addiction out of prison and divert them into court-mandated treatment. Vet courts are similar to other jail diversion programs, increasingly prevalent in Texas, that keep thousands of non-violent offenders with drug and alcohol addictions or mental illness out of prison. If their underlying addiction or mental illness can be treated, they can become productive members of society.

These smart-on-crime programs are the result of years of hard work by a coalition of advocates and state lawmakers from both parties who realize that the fast-swelling Texas prison system, which quadrupled in size between 1980 and 2000, isn't sustainable.

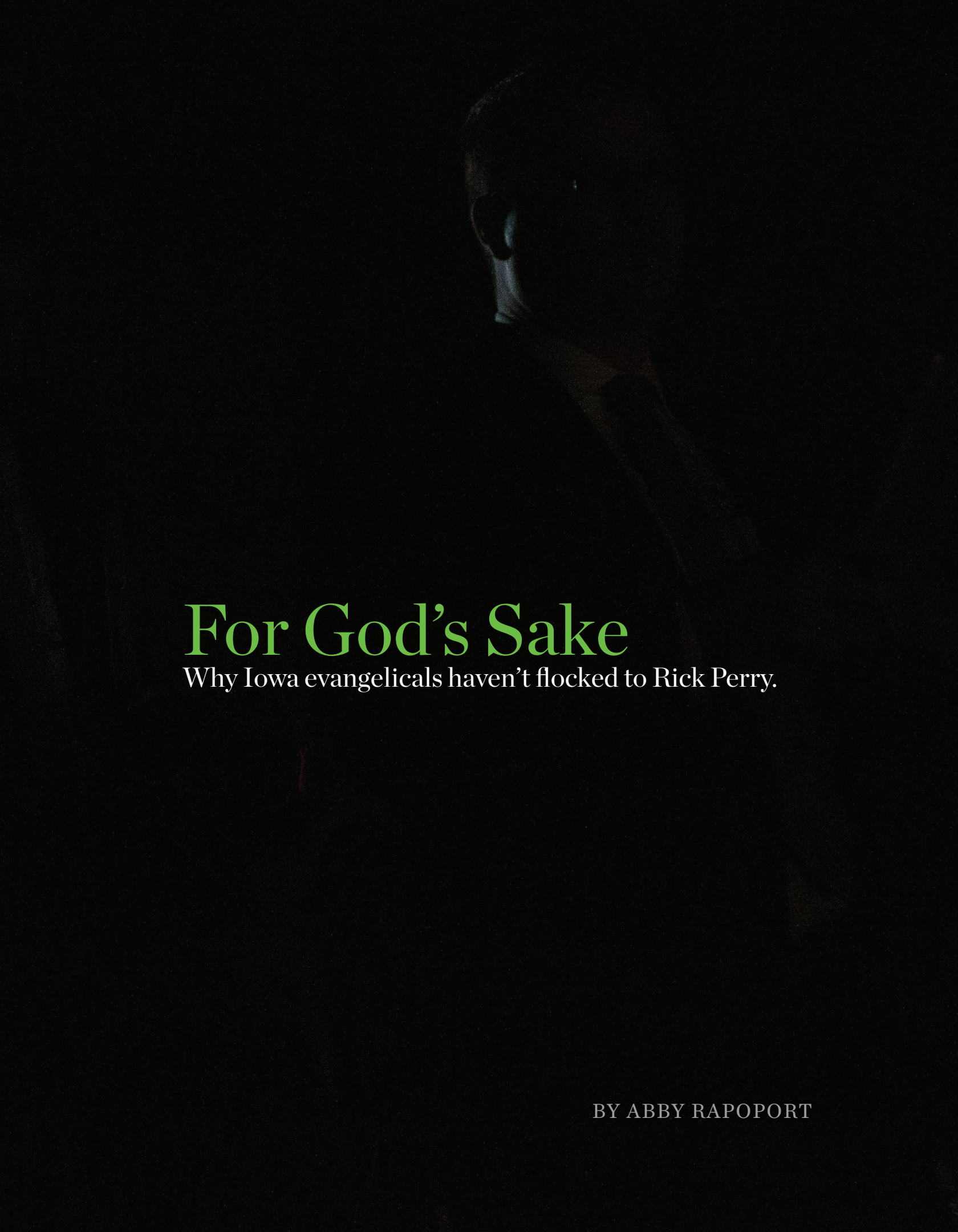
Unfortunately, not everyone at the Capitol understands why these programs are so important. With the state facing a huge budget gap last spring, lawmakers cut funding for prison diversion and treatment programs at TDCJ by 5 percent. The cut wasn't as large as it could have been. Still, it was a step in the wrong direction.

These programs need to be expanded, not cut. Texas lawmakers have begun to embrace a new approach to criminal justice. They need to stick with it.

Diversion programs keep thousands of non-violent offenders out of prison.

LOON STAR STATE Ben Sargent


EXIT



For God's Sake

Why Iowa evangelicals haven't flocked to Rick Perry.

BY ABBY RAPOPORT

On a drizzly, gray November day, the First Federated Church in Des Moines looked particularly formidable. The mega-church is a gigantic brick building, a converted high school that dominates the block. Its lack of aesthetic appeal didn't deter the crowds. By the time approximately 3,000 people had filed in and taken their seats in the pews, the anticipation was palpable. The politics soon began.

Everyone was there for the "Family Forum," a debate between GOP presidential candidates vying to win the critical Iowa caucuses on Jan. 3. But this debate would be less about issues than about religious and moral beliefs, and the candidates' personal stories of faith. On the sanctuary stage was a long table with a cornucopia of pumpkins and vines—like a Last Supper table if the apostles had gone to Hobby Lobby. In the background hung pale yellow banners, completing the autumnal effect. Outside were signs advertising the event's moderator, Frank Luntz, a Republican pollster who's developed an audience among the Fox News-watching set. Of the Republican candidates, only Jon Huntsman and Mitt Romney—the two Mormons in the field—weren't making appearances. The rest were competing for the support and endorsement of the group organizing this spectacle: The Family Leader.

A powerhouse in right-wing Iowa politics, The Family Leader made national headlines earlier this year when the organization asked presidential candidates to sign its "marriage vow," promising to define marriage as between a man and woman, and to support a marriage amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Romney refused to sign. He objected to a section of the document that appeared to argue that slavery was preferable to the current number of unwed African-American mothers. The comparison didn't invite positive press.

READ the full marriage vow at txlo.com/famleadvow

But the group's muscle is hard to ignore. It helped unseat several Iowa Supreme Court judges after the court ruled a ban on gay marriage unconstitutional. One prominent political news site, *The Hill*, ranked an endorsement from the group's leader, Bob Vander Plaats, among the most coveted in the country. The Family Leader was hosting the Family Forum to highlight issues most debates hadn't bothered to drill down on: which candidate is most pro-life, most anti-gay rights, most Christian.

LEARN more about the groups associated with The Response at txlo.com/armyofgod

In case it wasn't clear just what kind of politics The Family Leader endorses, videos before the forum offered further hints. In one video, ominous music played while a deep voice burst forth: "These precious things we hold dear are in dire jeopardy. Not everyone believes in democracy. They don't believe in the will of the people. And most important, they don't believe in you."

The video went on to criticize Iowa lawmakers who hadn't worked hard enough to end gay marriage after the Iowa Supreme Court ruled the state had to grant marriage licenses to same-sex couples. In another video, Vander Plaats' face popped on the screen to talk about the national debt. "Some of us turn on TV, and we see $14.3 trillion, and we ask, 'How can we do this?'" Vander Plaats exclaimed. "The reason we're doing this with the national debt is 'cause the focus is on me, not on the next generation. We as people of faith are called to have a multi-generational focus. And that's what we at The Family Leader are doing." Between the videos, contemporary Christian music blared from the speakers.

After a prayer and some introductions, Vander Plaats appeared in the flesh to kick things off, seeming more Sunday school teacher than hardened political kingmaker. He explained to the crowd that "for people of faith to remove their voice from the public policy process is spiritual negligence." He beamed as he introduced his wife and offered that "we don't need you to be Republican or Democrat, but we need you to be biblical." He soon sat down to make way for the big star: Luntz.

The roly-poly pollster stepped off the stage and stood inches from the closest pews. He knitted his eyebrows and said in a voice dripping with solemnity, "Today is one of the most important days in my life because I want it to be one of the most significant days in your life. ... I want you to understand what's in these people's hearts. Not just the sound bites." It was a tall order, but Luntz went on, asking the audience's permission to forgo "bells and buzzers" and "gotcha questions." He promised the audience "real conversations." The applause was thunderous. A few minutes later, the candidates appeared on stage and took their seats at the long table, completing the Last Supper tableau. And at the center, in Jesus' traditional spot, sat Rick Perry.

BACK IN AUGUST, Perry's campaign staffers probably dreamed about such a forum with Iowa evangelicals. It would have seemed the perfect event for their candidate. The Texas governor entered the race with a roar, disrupting the Iowa straw poll with his announcement. Even before he officially announced his presidential bid, Rick Perry had a two-part message: He'd brought jobs to Texas, and he'd done it by the will of God. The message seemed to stick.

While the governor bounced from Fox News to New York fundraisers expounding on the so-called Texas Miracle, he was also making clear that he believed wholeheartedly in a different kind of miracle.

At the beginning of August, Perry hosted a giant prayer rally he called "The Response." The event attracted tens of thousands of believers with an unapologetically Christian message that was particularly appealing to fringe elements of the evangelical community, especially Christian Zionists and members of the New Apostolic Reformation movement, who believe in modern-day prophets with supernatural abilities. The event was hardly without controversy. The Anti-Defamation League, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, and the Southern Poverty Law Center all criticized the governor's explicitly Christian rally. Perry called the event "a call to prayer for a nation in crisis." It was the largest gathering any GOP candidate (or in Perry's case, soon-to-be candidate) had put on, and it was geared entirely toward Christians.

The political strategy behind The Response was easy to see. By some estimates, evangelical Christians make up more than half of GOP caucus-goers in Iowa. Gay marriage has dominated Republican politics in Iowa, a state with a huge population of conservative, rural communities. With his own rural roots

PREVIOUS PAGE
Gov. Rick Perry watches an introductory video before speaking at a veterans' issues forum in Des Moines in December. PHOTO © PATRICK FALLON/ZUMAPRESS.COM

Perry speaks during a campaign stop at Cafe Diem in Ames, Iowa, in December. PHOTO © PATRICK FALLON/ZUMAPRESS.COM

and evangelical ties, Perry seemed a natural fit. It also made political sense for Perry to focus on Iowa. His hardline social conservatism and Texas swagger weren't likely to play well in New Hampshire, the earliest primary state, but Iowa's caucus would come first, and if Perry could win over Iowans, a loss in New Hampshire wouldn't matter as much. If he could capture the evangelicals, Perry would be tough to beat in Iowa, and probably in South Carolina too—states that former preacher Mike Huckabee won in 2008. Those key early wins might boost Perry to the nomination.

At first, the strategy seemed to be working. A few days after entering the race, Perry stopped at the Hamburg Inn in Iowa City. Famous for its pie shakes, in which an entire piece of pie is blended into a milkshake, the family-owned restaurant has catered to candidates as far back as Richard Nixon. The restaurant hosts the "coffee bean caucus," in which patrons place a coffee bean in their favorite candidate's jar.

The restaurant was packed with supporters when Perry visited in August, said kitchen manager Jay Schworn. The candidate arrived with a security detail, unusual for small-town Iowa meet-and-greets, but Schworn said the event was a success. "I am not by any means a supporter of the Republican Party or Rick Perry, but I honestly thought ... he seemed to have all the pieces in terms of being the good-looking guy," Schworn said. "He was very charming. I thought he definitely had potential."

That potential seems long gone now. Perry quickly rocketed to the top of most polls, but on the campaign trail, voters simply didn't respond. Despite out-fundraising his competitors, Perry seems more a late-night talk-show joke than a serious candidate these days, thanks to a series of debate gaffes. The fall from grace has been particularly dramatic in Iowa, where Perry peaked in August, polling as high as 29 percent. Now he's down to between 7 and 9 percent, trailing both Newt Gingrich and Ron Paul, who once seemed long shots. Gingrich is outperforming Perry even among evangelicals—an unexpected turnabout given the former House speaker's history of adultery and divorce. Even Perry's jar in the coffee bean caucus is embarrassingly low. One server at the Hamburg Inn estimated Perry had only 40 beans, compared with Paul's 400. Obama's jar holds well into the thousands.

Iowa is Perry's last chance to regain his status as a contender for the nomination. If Perry polls a distant fourth or fifth in Iowa, his campaign is likely finished. And his hope for a good showing in Iowa now rests with evangelicals. With only a few weeks to go, the campaign has clearly made such voters its focus. In early December, Perry released a blatantly anti-gay TV ad, introducing himself as a Christian before saying, "You don't need to be in the pew every Sunday to know that there's something wrong in this country when gays can serve openly in the military, but our kids can't openly celebrate Christmas or pray in school." The ad created a firestorm.

Perry the Christian is only the most recent of Perry's campaign personas. First there was Perry the Job Creator. After his early gaffes put him on the defensive, Perry unleashed his inner tough guy, going after Romney in debates and on the air. When that didn't play

"I am not by any means a supporter of the Republican Party or Rick Perry, but I honestly thought ... he seemed to have all the pieces in terms of being the good-looking guy."

Leading up to the Iowa caucuses, Perry positioned himself as an "outsider." PHOTO © PATRICK FALLON/ ZUMAPRESS.COM

well, and after more egregious missteps, Perry tried to portray himself as a lovable bumbler, about substance over style. Now he's back to courting the evangelical voters who once supported him in droves. Winning them back may take a miracle.

RILEY AND KRIS Lewis are just the sort of people Perry must convince. They're conservatives who take the caucus very seriously. They're still undecided, and that's why they're at the Family Forum. The tickets were Riley's birthday gift from Kris. They live in Forest City—home to Winnebago Industries—where Kris is a social worker. Riley proudly explains that he's farming the same land his family bought in 1871. In addition to raising 20,000 hogs, he's got 900 acres of corn and 900 acres of soybeans. A grandparent, he's tall and trim, a typical farmer. Even though they're conservative Christians, neither Riley nor Kris is especially interested in Rick Perry. His piety isn't the issue.

"Rick Perry has not come up with a stance on ethanol and renewable fuels," Riley explains. "He's completely out of the picture on that. And if he's going to get the agriculture vote in Iowa, he's going to have to come out about ethanol. If he doesn't come out about ethanol, he's going to be flat."

WATCH the Family Forum at txlo.com/famforum

Ethanol, a fuel made from corn, is a crucial issue in Iowa. Government ethanol subsidies have given corn growers here a big boost. Perry has criticized such subsidies, along with Michele Bachmann and Rick Santorum. While Perry's opposition to ethanol is bound to cost him some of the farm vote, of more concern is Perry's lack of basic political skill: massaging his positions to seem appealing even when he disagrees with voters. Candidates like Paul and Gingrich have repeatedly presented controversial policy stances as evidence of their independent thinking and honesty with voters. Perry more often comes off as a say-anything-for-the-vote politician. Unpopular positions just make him less trusted and less popular.

He's so bad at presenting nuanced policies that, at one critical moment, he deeply offended the anti-immigration wing of the Republican Party. When he was questioned on his support for allowing undocumented college students in Texas to pay in-state tuition, Perry said that those who disagreed didn't "have a heart." The statement was a major blunder with a party base eager to turn away "illegals." In Iowa, in particular, many GOP voters want to see harsher laws against undocumented workers. At the Family Forum, Perry's immigration stance was a frequent topic of conversation, though Luntz never raised the issue.

"I have a lot of doubts" about Perry, explained one woman, who said she was undecided and asked that her name not be printed. "The tuition for illegals—that's a biggie."

Another woman, an evangelical Christian with eight children and a family farm, is just the type of voter Perry's campaign once expected to appeal to. But after the Family Forum event, she explained that Perry simply didn't seem "strong" on issues. "If you want me to stand firm with you, you need to stand firm on your issues," she said. "You can't say something in one situation and then when you're among a different group of people change it up and say it to suit what is going to go best with that group." Perry's earlier immigration comments had "really disappointed" her.

THE PROBLEM ISN'T just his policy positions though. Perry's campaign has also failed at basic voter outreach and organization.

In mid-November, after Perry's polls tanked, his campaign scheduled an event at The Drake Diner. He was down but not out—there was still time to bounce back. With the Jan. 3 caucuses fast approaching, however, each event in Iowa was taking on extra importance. The diner seemed like a good place to start rebuilding. It's across the street from Drake University, where a GOP debate would take place on Dec. 10, and it's decked out to appeal to the student population. With a black-and-white checkered tile floor and neon lights, the diner has a nice ambiance for photo-ops, but when the campaign arrived, only

20 or so supporters showed up at the restaurant with capacity for 130.

"It's on their shoulders to get their campaign to flood us with supporters," said Steve Vilmain, who owns the diner with his wife Shannon. Instead of supporters, Shannon said, there was just "a lot of security and a lot of press."

This should be the easy stuff: ensuring that the room isn't empty when the candidate speaks. Perry doesn't even have that many events. According to *The Des Moines Register*, only 8 percent of likely Iowa caucus-goers had seen Perry in person. Only Jon Huntsman ranked lower. Mitt Romney, who barely campaigned in Iowa, had seen 12 percent. Bachmann had seen 20 percent. For someone counting on Iowa, Perry hasn't exactly made himself a regular presence here. He has relied more on expensive TV ads playing constantly in the state. Television ads aren't likely to impress Iowans, who have come to expect personal appearances from candidates. *The Des Moines Register*'s candidate tracker shows Perry has been in the state only 16 days since August. Between August and mid-December, he did a mere 12 meet-and-greets and public meetings, the bread and butter of the Iowa caucus culture.

As his numbers have tanked, Perry has particularly lost support among evangelical caucus-goers. And such losses have been recent. In October, according to an NBC poll, Perry's support among likely caucus-goers had dropped to 10 percent, tied for fourth place with Bachmann. But among self-identified evangelical Christians, he still had 15 percent support, and was solidly in third place. By December, according to another NBC poll, Perry's support among evangelicals had eroded. He had only 11 percent support from evangelicals, barely more than the 9 percent he enjoyed among all Iowa GOP caucus-goers. Perry's drop in popularity among evangelicals was particularly damning because that support seemed to shift directly to Newt Gingrich. As Perry (and later Herman Cain) fell in the polls, the once longshot former speaker of the U.S. House had shot up in the polls, from 4 percent support among evangelical voters in October to 31 percent in December. The irony, of course, is that Gingrich is hardly an archetypal evangelical. Most pundits assumed that with his history of adultery, Gingrich wouldn't appeal to the Christian set. But this campaign has hardly been predictable.

PERRY, IN MANY ways, appears to be the real deal. No one knows what's in Perry's heart—despite Frank Luntz's best efforts at the Family Forum—but he's certainly got the credentials. He grew up in rural Texas and has often noted that his childhood revolved around church and Boy Scouts. Later, he married his childhood sweetheart, and stayed married. He attends church regularly in Austin and can reel off Scripture. He knows his way around Bible study and prayer breakfasts. He's never had a major scandal about his personal life.

At the Family Forum, he received warm applause for his professions of faith. When explaining what "so help me God" meant to him, Perry got specific. "I've been driven to my knees multiple times as governor of the state of Texas ... making decisions that are life and death," he said. "The idea that I would walk into that without God Almighty holding me up would scare me to death." When Herman Cain teared up talking about his wife's support during his bout with cancer, it was Perry who reached over to comfort him. Perry did the same a few minutes later when Rick Santorum teared up talking about his disabled daughter. "There's a hole in your soul only Jesus can fill," Perry told the crowd, to much applause.

But Iowans with similar life stories aren't embracing Perry. Take Dennis and Terri Gonnerman, a couple sitting in the crowd at the forum. With Dennis' glasses and a sweater vest, it's not surprising to discover he teaches government at a local Christian high school. Like the Perrys, the Gonnermans were high school sweethearts. Like the Perrys, they are evangelical Christians with rural roots. They're also vehemently anti-Obama and believe the president is not a true Christian, because he supports abortion rights. They're both concerned about the fraying moral fabric of the country. "If you remove God from everything as we have in the last few years, you see the morality of the country has really gone down," Dennis said. "And I think that needs to be restored."

Despite their similarities with Perry, the Gonnermans are leaning toward Gingrich. They have forgiven Gingrich for his multiple affairs. Terri believes Gingrich has "sought forgiveness from God."

"We all sin and fall short of the glory of God," she said, as Dennis nodded.

The Gonnermans don't quite trust Perry. Initially they were excited to see him enter the race. They forgave the gaffes, awkward silences, and stupid answers. "I didn't care if he couldn't answer certain questions and he forgot something," Terri said. "It was more of a character issue."

Dennis pondered for a moment before chiming in. "He acts very political. To me, I don't want another politician playing in the politico game. I want somebody who is going to do what they're going to do for America, not for some political gain."

Without the support of folks like the Gonnermans, Perry has little chance in Iowa. His shifting personas have left voters wondering just how much they can trust him. Gingrich may not talk or act like an evangelical, but he's been consistent in his rhetoric and bearing. The candidate who only a few months ago hosted a prayer rally for 30,000, on the other hand, now comes off like a politician who will say anything to get elected. Evangelical voters in Iowa just aren't getting behind Rick Perry.

You might call it a lack of faith.

Perry more often comes off as a say-anything-for-the-vote politician. Unpopular positions just make him less trusted, and less popular.

SEE Perry's poll numbers at txlo.com/perrypoll

Arthur Davis said the Harris County Veterans Court gave him “the chance to live again.”

AFTER THE PARADE

Courts Ease Homecoming for Troubled Vets

BY LEILA LEVINSON | PHOTOS BY JEN REEL

By the time he was deployed to Iraq, Arthur Davis had been a Marine for 20 years.

He thought nothing could faze him. In 1990 he fought in Operation Desert Shield. In 1996 he helped evacuate the American embassy in Liberia when it became the target of warring factions. After 9/11 he spent 14 months in Afghanistan.

Then, in 2007, he led 600 Marines against insurgents in Iraq. After months of dealing with the aftermath of suicide bombings, his nightmare occurred: a roadside bomb hit his unit, killing two men. "I had had enough," Davis said.

When he was discharged, a screening revealed that Davis, whose wife had divorced him in 1992, had post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. And, somewhere along the way, he had become an alcoholic.

Retirement did not bring peace. The Veterans Administration gave him a cocktail of medications for his PTSD. He began to use cocaine and continued to drink. "Anything I could put in my mouth, I did," he said. "I didn't care."

"The skills that kept [veterans] alive in combat got them in trouble back home."

In early 2010, simmering hostility with a neighbor at Davis' home in Houston exploded into a fight. Ten police cars pulled into his front yard; officers pinned him to the ground and handcuffed him. "I wouldn't have cared if they had shot me," he recently said. "There was nothing left for me."

He spent a week in the Harris County jail with no meds or alcohol. He was charged with assault and placed on probation. He hated his probation officer. "But you know, that man saved my life," Davis said.

The officer told Davis about the Harris County Veterans Court, the first specialty court of its kind in Texas, which opened on Veterans Day 2009. Veterans convicted of felonies cannot receive benefits, not even health care from the VA. The veterans court helped Davis avoid a loss of benefits, while also connecting him to therapeutic treatment for his PTSD and alcoholism.

In May 2009 the Texas Legislature passed Senate Bill 1940, which permits counties to create veterans courts. If defendants successfully complete a court-mandated treatment and rehabilitation program—it typically takes a year—the case is expunged from his or her record.

"We spend more taxpayer dollars than any other state on prisons, when we know that alternatives, like veterans courts, are more effective at reducing crime, increasing public safety, and saving taxpayer dollars," said state Sen. Rodney Ellis, D-Houston, the bill's author.

The co-sponsors were then-state Rep. Allen Vaught, D-Dallas, a Purple Heart veteran of Iraq, and Sen. Leticia Van de Putte, D-San Antonio.

Today, the state has veterans courts in eight counties—Harris, Tarrant, Travis, El Paso, Dallas, Denton, Guadalupe and Bexar—connecting veterans like Davis to the help they need. The number of participants in each court varies based on staff capacity, how long the court has existed, and other factors. In Harris, the oldest court, there are 43 active cases; in Bexar, the newest court and home to several military bases, there are 48, with another 45 pending acceptance. So far, the statewide recidivism rate for the three dozen veterans who have completed court programs is zero.

The soldiers who returned home from Iraq at the end of 2011 will join the ranks of the state's veterans, putting more pressure on services for vets. The veterans courts help people who have served in the nation's wars and make an argument for more funding for effective diversion programs in Texas' bloated criminal justice system.

TEXAS' VETERANS COURTS are modeled after the Veterans Treatment Court in Buffalo, N.Y., which was established in January 2008 by judge and veteran Robert Russell. The courts are pre-trial diversion programs. Veterans who take their case to these specialty courts are assessed for PTSD, traumatic brain injury (TBI), and mental illness. Most courts rely on the VA to do the assessment. If trauma exists as a result of the defendant's military service and was a contributing factor in the crime, the prosecutor decides whether to allow the veteran into the program. If accepted, the veteran pleads guilty to the charge, reports to the court every other week, and completes a program that includes substance abuse and PTSD counseling and treatment, anger management, and regular support group meetings. Upon graduation from the program, the charges are dismissed.

The veterans courts were inspired by the drug and mental health specialty courts that sprang up in the late 1980s when many prosecutors decided that incarcerating people whose offenses could be linked to mental illnesses didn't address the underlying causes of their crimes, or necessarily make communities safer. These courts demonstrated that proper assessment and treatment, in conjunction with frequent interaction with a judge, work. A study published in the February 2003 *American Bar Association Journal* found that such courts result in reduced incarceration rates and more productive and independent members of society.

The veterans courts build on this approach. There's a strong correlation between combat-related trauma and criminal behavior, according to research. A 2008 study by the School of Advanced Military Studies found that 40 percent of veterans with PTSD commit violent crimes after their service. In Harris County, 350 to 400 veterans are booked into the jail every month, and 25 percent of the veterans in the jail have mental illnesses, compared to 15 percent of the general inmate population.

When Ellis approached Pat McCann, defense attorney and then-president of the Harris County Bar, and Judge Marc Carter of the 228th Harris County Criminal District Court, himself a veteran, about creating a veterans court, they quickly embraced the idea. The law requires counties to choose whether the veterans court will be within the district court, which hears felonies, or the county court, which hears misdemeanors. Dallas and Harris counties placed their veterans courts in district courts, but also accept misdemeanors, though Dallas does not accept DWIs. Only Harris County accepts violent felony cases, such as Davis'. McCann said Harris County made the risky decision to focus on felonies because court officials recognized that "the skills that kept [veterans] alive in combat got them in trouble back home."

AT MEETINGS, COURT staffers sound more like teachers than lawyers as they review cases and discuss how to respond in the courtroom. Each court consists of a team including a judge, prosecutor, defense attorney, court manager, sometimes an assistant, and a Veteran's Justice Outreach specialist from the VA. (In 2009, the VA created the Veterans Justice Outreach program to help veterans, particularly those with mental illness, avoid unnecessary criminalization and incarceration.)

A session of veterans court isn't like the adversarial courtroom on television programs like "Law and Order" or "The Good Wife." It's not like the judicial system taught at law schools, either. In veterans courts, the defense attorney and the prosecutor cooperate. The courts exist to rehabilitate and heal defendants so they can create new, productive lives as civilians.

Judge Mike Denton of the Travis County Veterans Court encouraged veterans at a court session in November. A newcomer to the program introduced himself to the roomful of defendants. He was applauded as he approached the judge.

"You're going to do great. You just stay connected to the team, go to your appointments and meetings, and you will do fine," Denton told him.

In an interview, Denton said, "What I see as most important about this court isn't the law. It's hooking these vets up to the services they desperately need. Those services make all the difference in the world to a veteran getting his or her civilian life on track."

Many of the court staffers are veterans themselves, like Judge Mike Snipes of Dallas County, a retired U.S. Army colonel and veteran of Iraq. When his court began last year, he said, "As a veteran, it means a lot to me to be judge of this court, because I've seen firsthand the terrible sacrifices these young men and women make."

Judge Denton, a West Point graduate and veteran of the Gulf War, helped start the Travis County court. After noticing an increase in the number of veterans

"One day you're in Iraq, the next day you're back in your home with your wife and kids."

Staci Biggar, left, defense attorney for the Harris County Veterans Court, with a client before Judge Marc Carter of the 228th Harris County Criminal District Court.

appearing before his criminal court, in September 2007 he initiated the Veteran Intervention Project (VIP) in Travis County and asked Precinct 4 Constable Maria Canchola and Precinct 5 Constable Bruce Elfant to investigate the needs of veterans. They found that 150 veterans were being arrested in Travis County every month, about a third of them two or more times.

Canchola had her own connection to combat's legacy. Her husband, a Vietnam veteran, never received care for his PTSD, she said. His self-medication with alcohol destroyed his first marriage. Marriage to Canchola gave him a second chance, as she helped him quit drinking and get mental health care. "We owe our veterans the opportunity to heal," she said.

Jackson Glass, the program manager for the Travis County Veterans Court, believes the courts' non-adversarial atmosphere makes them effective. "It is imperative that veterans feel respected for their service. They are embarrassed to be in the situation they are in," he said. "Though it does put prosecutors in a difficult position. How do they hold the defendants accountable while also demonstrating compassion?

"The real test will be in a couple of years, once we have outcome studies."

The courts exist to rehabilitate and heal defendants so they can create new, meaningful lives as civilians.

STACI BIGGAR, DEFENSE attorney for the Harris County Veterans Court, said veterans need to know their path through the court won't be easy, but staff will be there to help them along.

"They need to know excuses are not possible, that one misstep can take them right back into the downward spiral, that their resistance only hurts them," she said, adding that once veterans recognize that she cares, "they commit to the program."

Biggar handled Arthur Davis' case.

"She was tough on me," Davis said. "I was angry. I had sacrificed for my country and was left with a disorder that no one can really solve. People only wanted to judge me, and I didn't expect anything different from this court. But then I met Staci, and she said to me, 'You're not young anymore. Are you ready to do this program? Because if you're not, I don't want you taking someone else's spot who is ready.'"

Biggar helped him move forward, Davis said, choking back emotion.

"The veterans have difficulty accepting that they're no longer the person they were before the war," Biggar said. "They want to go back to that 18-, 19-year-old innocent kid who went to parties and hung out. When they realize that's not possible, they explode with rage. We help them accept who they are now, and how much they have to offer the rest of us."

Many people associated with the state's veterans courts say the military doesn't offer enough support for returning troops. "One day you're in Iraq, the next day you're back in your home with your wife and kids or you're finding an apartment and trying to find work or go back to school. There's nothing to help you become a civilian again," said Paul G., a participant in the Travis County Veterans Court who didn't want his full name used for fear of being stigmatized.

He served in Iraq as an infantry sergeant through most of his twenties as a member of the 101st Airborne Division. During his two tours in Iraq between 2004 and 2008, he "saw it all." He spent months clearing roads of IEDs and searching Iraqi homes. And then, out of nowhere, an IED would explode, killing friends. "You never knew where the enemy was, you never could relax," he explained.

Paul held himself together by focusing on his wife back home and the life they would create when he returned. But on his last tour, he received a letter saying she was divorcing him. "A 'Dear John' letter. I couldn't believe it," he said, the shock still permeating his voice.

Before Paul was discharged, the military told him he had PTSD. "They handed me some meds and said, 'Good luck.' I didn't think I had PTSD, so I just blew it off. The cocktail of drugs they gave me—the Zoloft, the Ambien, the Xanax—it just messed me up more."

In the fall of 2009 he came to Austin to major in Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas. "A lot of combat vets do that," he explained. "It's what we know. It gives us something to do with what we learned over there."

Single, and an older student who couldn't quite relate to his younger classmates, Paul G. gravitated to bars, eventually working at one. "Most of the bouncers are vets; I felt comfortable at bars. I felt better when I drank," he said. But after receiving his second DWI, Paul said he became enmeshed in what felt like a legal morass: "The whole criminal justice system seemed to only be about keeping people stuck in it. It's an industry."

He became deeply depressed as he faced the possibility of a lengthy jail sentence. Then he read about the Travis County Veterans Court in a newspaper, told his lawyer about it, and signed up.

"Jackson Glass and Jolene Grajczyk [the court's caseworker and an Air Force veteran] hooked me up with intense treatment and a peer-to-peer group that made all the difference," he said. "I realized I wasn't alone; that what I had been going through was typical of so many guys. ... Now, I see other guys coming back, living in barely controlled chaos, getting arrested."

DESPITE THEIR SUCCESS, the veterans courts do not receive funds from the state's general revenue. Their funds come from counties and grants from the Texas Veterans Commission and the Office of the Governor's Criminal Justice Division. Many counties established veterans courts with the understanding that the programs would not cost them anything. The majority of veterans court judges and lawyers fold their work for the courts into their existing workload and forgo compensation. Mary Covington, who manages the drug court in Harris County, agreed to oversee the veterans court without pay. "Without Mary, there would be no veterans court," Pat McCann said.

"I understand that our state is suffering through a budget shortfall, but we ought to fund the veterans

courts out of general revenue," said Sen. Ellis. "The courts are the perfect policy model: They save the state money, implement best practices to reduce recidivism, and serve those who have served our country."

Money for the Texas Veterans Commission grants comes from Veterans Cash lottery $2 scratch-off tickets, which raise about $8 million annually for the Veterans Assistance Fund. The commission distributes $40,000 to $50,000 to each of the veterans courts except those in El Paso, Denton and Guadalupe counties.

The money for the governor's criminal justice grants comes from the federal government. The amount varies from year to year. Last year, Texas received $18 million; the amount has been as high as $30 million. Veterans courts in Travis, Bexar, Dallas, and Tarrant counties receive an average of $175,000 each that they use to pay court managers, assistants, and, in Dallas' case, a psychologist. (The other courts rely on the VA to assess defendants.)

The number of veterans a court admits depends on the capacity of the staff to handle the caseload. At their current levels of funding, courts in the larger counties won't be able to meet increased demand for their programs. Most counties would like to either pay their team the compensation they deserve or hire an additional case manager.

Judge Wayne Christian of the Bexar County Veterans Court believes that county officials will allocate necessary funds for the court, given Bexar's strong military presence, "Though I think that the real responsibility lies with the federal government," he said. "If the government is going to send our troops off to war, then the government owes them the care they need as the result of fighting in that war."

ADVOCATES FOR VETERANS speak of the "coming tsunami" of returning veterans, referring to the 40,000 non-combat troops who returned from Iraq at the end of 2011. "The war isn't winding down; it is coming home," said Chuck Luther, a retired Army sergeant who runs the Killeen-based advocacy group Disposable Warriors.

As Arthur Davis' experience illustrates, it can be difficult for veterans to get effective mental health care from the VA. Even when they are diagnosed with PTSD, as Davis and Paul G. were, they too often receive only medications, but no therapy. And the number of veterans seeking care is increasing exponentially. According to Paul Sullivan of Veterans for Common Sense, every three months this year the number of combat veterans with PTSD asking for care has increased 5 percent nationwide, and 133,595 veterans still await a decision from the VA on their claims. Sullivan estimates that in the next two years almost a million new veterans will file disability claims.

Davis and Paul G. were among the lucky ones; they weren't incarcerated. "The court gave me what the military or the VA didn't," Davis said. "The chance to live again." ✪

Leila Levinson is the author of the award-winning Gated Grief: The Daughter of a GI Concentration Camp Liberator Discovers a Legacy of Trauma.

A December 2011 resident of the BAMBI unit with her baby.

BABY STEPS

Can Texas' new approach to prisoners with newborns help keep families together? BY DIANA CLAITOR

photos by **Jen Reel**

LEARN more about BAMBI at txlo.com/bambi

When Isabel Saucedo arrived at Texas' BAMBI unit on a recent October morning, it was clear this wasn't going to be a typical prison experience. She was quickly surrounded by four women holding babies. They were laughing and joking. An exuberant energy filled the room, but 21-year-old Saucedo still looked shaky.

Thirty-six hours earlier, Saucedo had delivered her first child, under guard, at the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) in Galveston. Just two hours ago she had been separated from her baby and driven to Houston by correctional officers. Infants cannot be transported with their mothers because the child isn't a prisoner of the state, and BAMBI—the Baby and Mother Bonding Initiative—is designed to keep it that way.

The BAMBI unit for inmates with newborns is Texas' latest and perhaps most forward-thinking attempt at reducing recidivism and keeping families together. BAMBI operates not at a prison, but at the Santa Maria Hostel, a residential treatment facility for women in northeast Houston. The gated complex of handsome, brick, two-story buildings houses several programs for women as well as BAMBI. Each day, a Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) officer drives from a nearby prison and walks through the unit to count the women. Up to 15 mothers and their infants can live here, but there were only seven the day Saucedo arrived.

After the guards removed the shackles from her legs, Saucedo signed in, and a social worker guided her through the outer room, where the electric baby swing was gently rocking a dark-eyed beauty back and forth and two rocking chairs stood waiting. The new mother walked on into the main bedroom, which held four single beds for mothers and bassinets for the babies. Bulletin boards with photos of family and friends hung on the walls. Saucedo's bed was piled high with baby supplies and a welcome card on top of a handmade quilt. She stared at the women who were all talking to her at the same time. "You can take a shower anytime you want, without asking permission," Juanita Castillo said. "Or a bath!"

An exuberant pink-faced woman pointed to the courtyard visible through the window: "You can take your baby outside for a walk!"

Saucedo looked doubtful. "We can walk outside?"

A woman in her mid-30s said, "We have group [therapy], every day, and it's really good."

Someone remembered it was Thursday and a chorus erupted: "Tonight is pizza night! We get to order pizza!"

Saucedo hugged herself. "Pizza? For real?"

A tall African-American woman put her hand on Saucedo's arm and said quietly, "The staff here, they treat us like they care about us."

Castillo ran over to a bowl of fruit sitting on a table and held out both hands, extravagantly framing the bowl. "See this fruit? This is for us! You can eat this any time you want!" That was too much. You don't get fresh fruit in prison. Tears poured down Saucedo's face, and she had to take off her glasses, overcome by the over-the top-welcome from the sisterhood of BAMBI.

Saucedo still had one major worry, though, and she turned to Liz Moore, BAMBI's program manager, to ask about it. Moore said she had just gotten the call that social workers were on their way from Galveston with Saucedo's baby. Moore then grabbed Castillo and drew her toward Saucedo, putting a friendly hand on each woman's shoulder.

"Juanita, you are her big sister, to help her get settled and show her the chore list and how the program works. Isabel, this is Juanita, she can answer your questions and help you get settled, okay?"

The two women eyed each other and nodded. Saucedo's eyes went back to the door.

Ericah Rico with her second child, Araceli, says her goodbyes on her last day in the BAMBI unit. Ericah completed the program and was released on Dec. 8, 2011. View a slideshow of Ericah's last days with BAMBI at txlo.com/ericah.

THE MONTHS IMMEDIATELY after birth are a critical time in a mother's relationship with her child. After the birth, the intense and uncertain process of bonding begins, a process that is increasingly recognized as essential to a successful and healthy life for the baby. Research by a wide range of academics, social workers, doctors, and groups like the Women's Law Project and the Women's Prison Association is now emphasizing the need for incarcerated mothers and their infants to stay together to ensure the formation of those maternal-child bonds. That's the goal of BAMBI: keep the mother and child together, prevent the mother from committing another crime, keep the child from being placed in foster care, and perhaps prevent the child from eventually ending up in prison. A baby born to an incarcerated mother, whether she is in a county jail or a prison, can become a ward of Texas Child Protective Services within 48 hours of birth unless a suitable relative is available to care for the baby. Typically, a female prisoner is returned to her unit almost immediately after giving birth. And it is often difficult for mothers to reclaim children even after short sentences for minor offenses. Termination of parental rights can and does occur. For women who have lived months in dread and depression awaiting the birth and loss of their baby, BAMBI is an unexpected gift. Many call it "a blessing."

Each year about 250 babies are born to Texas offenders, but only a small percentage of pregnant prisoners qualify for the BAMBI program, which opened its doors in April 2010. In its first 19 months, BAMBI has been home to about 50 babies and inmate mothers.

To ensure security, TDCJ keeps tight restrictions on the program. To be accepted, a pregnant woman

must be a non-violent offender serving a short sentence in a state jail, where women typically do time for low-level crimes related to alcoholism, drug use, and property crimes. Nobody convicted of a violent crime, sex offense, or arson is eligible. A common reason for exclusion is physical or mental illness or instability; the program doesn't have the space or staff to treat mothers with special needs. On rare occasions, another law enforcement agency cuts short a woman's stay. Isabel Saucedo, for example, was removed by federal officers to face federal charges after just a few weeks in BAMBI; luckily, her husband was able to take their baby home. Saucedo's early departure was unusual. The overwhelming majority of women stay as long as they can, and many will never commit another crime. Mother-baby bonding programs in other states have significantly reduced recidivism. So far none of the "graduates" from BAMBI have reoffended.

"At 12, my mother's rights [were] terminated without my consent, and my younger siblings and I were adopted out like slaves during the trade. No one ever asked me if I wanted to see my mother again. No one even asked me if I wanted to visit my mother in prison."

Originally, TDCJ planned to accept only women who had one to six months left on their sentence at the time of delivery, but the agency has relaxed the rules, allowing some with longer sentences to participate. Once in a while, a baby grows to be a toddler before the mother graduates from BAMBI.

TDCJ has relaxed the minimum stay, too. The thinking is that something is better than nothing; even a short stay can bolster parenting skills and ensure bonding. About 25 percent of BAMBI participants are first-time moms.

It was not unusual for U.S. prisons to have nurseries and facilities for mothers until the 1950s and '60s, when most were phased out. Now, a resurgence of such programs is demonstrating their value. In Nebraska, recidivism is defined as returning to confinement for a new crime within three years of being released. The Nebraska women who gave birth in custody and were immediately separated from their child have a recidivism rate of 33.3 percent. Just 9 percent of the women who went through the state's nursery program returned to prison.

READ more about mother-baby bonding programs at txlo.com/mbbp

Texas hasn't always been so progressive on criminal justice issues, but skyrocketing numbers of incarcerated women have begun to awaken policy-makers and prison administrators to a new reality. Since 1986, following the introduction of mandatory sentencing for drug offenses, the number of women in prison has risen 400 percent, according to the Rebecca Project for Human Rights. A significant number of those women were pregnant or parenting, and often their family's primary caregiver.

Prison officials and policy-makers are increasingly aware of how much damage can result from separating mothers and infants. Those who experienced it firsthand, like social worker, advocate and mother Veronica Lockett, said the trauma of losing a mother to prison led her straight into prison as well. In an eloquent letter to then-chairman Jim McReynolds of the Texas House Corrections Committee in 2010, Lockett described how a chaotic family was still a family.

"At 12, my mother's rights [were] terminated without my consent, and my younger siblings and I were adopted out like slaves during the trade. No one ever asked me if I wanted to see my mother again. No one even asked me if I wanted to visit my mother in prison," Lockett wrote.

"A mother who drinks or sometimes takes drugs is still the mother of her child," said state Sen. John Whitmire, a Houston Democrat and sponsor of the bill that created BAMBI. And if that mother could receive intensive therapy and education, he asks, wouldn't a rehabilitated mother be a healthier role model for the child and possibly break the cycle of incarceration?

Whitmire's education on the subject began back in 1993, when the hell-raising senator was the brand-new chair of the Texas Senate Committee on Criminal Justice. He was given the obligatory tour of Gatesville prison and was in the midst of asking four inmates questions about their backgrounds. "All of a sudden I realized that this frail little woman was crying. The whole time she was talking to me, she was sobbing. I finally said, 'Ma'am, what is going *on* here?' She said, 'I had my baby two weeks ago. The next day my family picked him up and took him away.' She understood that by the time she was reunited with him many months later, he would have become somebody else's baby." The realization of how that separation would permanently damage the mother-child relationship hit Whitmire hard. But it would take until 2007 for Whitmire and Rep. Jerry Madden, a Republican from Plano and vice chair of the House Corrections Committee, to pass House Bill 199, which authorized the creation of BAMBI.

The next challenge was to decide whether to establish a prison nursery inside TDCJ, or to find a location outside jail and create a community-based residential parenting program. Finding the answer to that quandary fell largely on Wanda Redding, a program specialist in TDCJ's Rehabilitation Programs Division who serves as a department program supervisor to BAMBI.

She researched inmates' experiences in other states and interviewed administrators of baby-bonding programs. In the end, Redding and the agency decided that a community-based program would provide the best outcomes. The decision echoed the findings of the Rebecca Project for Human Rights and the Women's Prison Association, which both state that bonding programs outside the prison environment are more successful for both babies and mothers.

Madden said that while it's still new, the program looks great. But he is also a realist. "The ultimate decision point for me is whether it keeps these women from coming back to TDCJ, and does it keep their children from ever being in TDCJ? Also to see

if the mothering skills these ladies are being given result in better families."

He has visited the Houston facility twice. "I think it's awesome," he said.

"BAMBI IS NOTHING like what you hear it is back at Dawson or Plane State [units]," says Angela Allgayer, holding month-old Miley. "People say 'Yeah, all you'll do there is hang out with your baby all day.' They didn't know about the sharing and group and parenting skills classes."

The program offers a range of services to ensure that mothers don't re-offend. Five days a week, the women have a peer-led group therapy session during which they discuss their backgrounds, how they were mothered, their experiences in school, and the abuse and violence in their lives. They also participate in parenting classes, life-skills training, infant-care classes, and a session led by a certified drug abuse therapist plus one individual therapy session a week. That's 20 hours of programming a week on top of 12-step recovery meetings at night.

Allgayer, now 28, said she had her first child at 15. "I went to TDCJ for drugs one month after my 17th birthday. When I got out that time, I went back to doing drugs and left my son. If I'd had BAMBI back then, I wouldn't have done all that. I'm learning how to be a better mom."

She showed a visitor her new baby book. Each mom received one in the class designed to teach parents to read to newborns and to play with babies in a way that builds healthy bonds. Barely taking a breath, Allgayer ticked off other areas of new knowledge. "I'm learning how to use my resources. I'm learning about triggers and warnings signs. The lies we told in our addiction. We have really good groups with a counselor who is an ex-addict."

Moore, BAMBI's program manager and herself a licensed chemical dependency counselor with years of experience working with TDCJ, says such therapeutic help is essential if the women are going to change the ways of living and thinking that landed them in jail. And she is seeing impressive results. "This is it—the most teachable moment I've ever witnessed," Moore said. "The amount of change in these moms is huge, and not only that, the babies are healthy and thriving."

Change is no doubt helped along by a selection process that allows both Redding and Moore to carefully rule out bad candidates, using a balance of discernment and optimism to pick the right women. While a UTMB doctor issues a report on each candidate and other administrators have input, Moore and Redding visit the Carole Young Medical Facility and the UTMB hospitals in Galveston to get to know the women. Moore and Redding make tough decisions on borderline cases, and many are turned away, but once chosen, the mothers soon come to know that Moore and Redding are invested in their success.

The successes are beginning to mount. Kortney Courtney, one of the first inmates admitted to the program, is now in beauty school and sometimes visits Moore, whom she considers a friend and a mentor. As her rambunctious curly-haired son Dylan played hide and seek, the 33-year-old recalled what helped her the most. "I think it was having that support, having somebody in your corner. That makes a huge difference," she said.

Another BAMBI graduate, Brandee Nichols, recently emailed Redding, "I will always be so grateful to you, Wanda ... to Liz and all those that gave me the chance and acceptance into Bambi ... it has changed my life!" Nichols is out of prison, has a scholarship, and is studying to become a land surveyor in East Texas.

Remarkably, in the program's first 19 months, not a single BAMBI graduate has re-offended.

That success hasn't come easy. The day-to-day life in the program wasn't always sweetness and light. "Yes, some babies aren't sleeping," Moore said, "and all the women have hormones raging so soon after birth, and they're all getting the first period they've had in nine months. They're all anxious about the future. At the same time, they are getting therapy and anger management and life skills classes. All in 1,200 square feet."

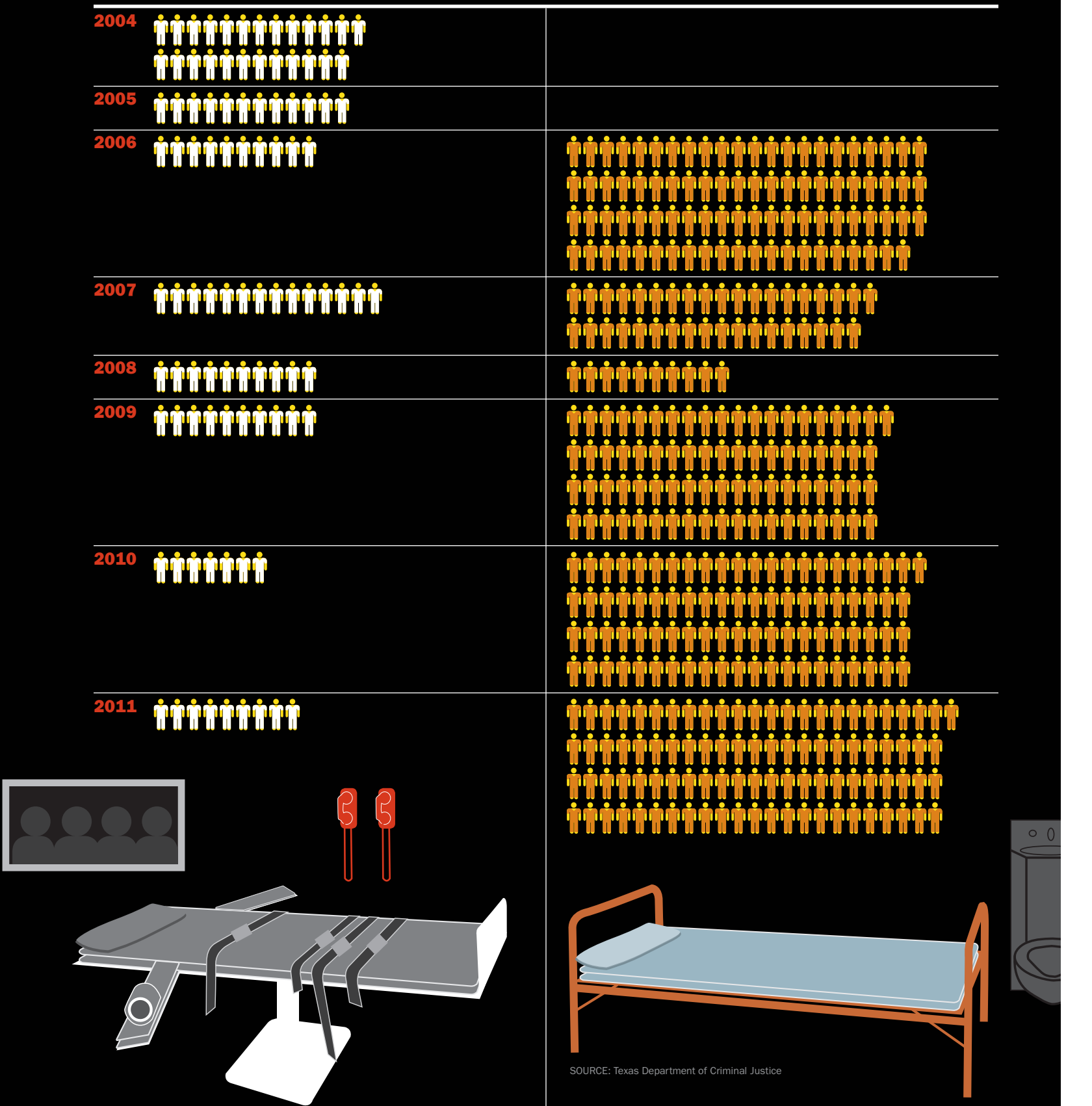
Out of that complex turmoil has emerged a powerful new kind of community that is keeping new mothers, and perhaps their offspring too, from reentering prison. It's a community built on a foundation of accepting responsibility and believing in the possibility of change.

"Something special happens," Liz Moore said. "I know what's going on in the dorm with these women and babies, but it's bigger than you or I. Is miraculous too strong a word?"

Austin resident Diana Claitor is a freelance writer who also does historical research and directs the Texas Jail Project.

STATE OF TEXAS: Texas' Sputtering Death Machine BY DAVE MANN

THE NUMBER *of death sentences in Texas has dropped in recent years. In 2005, the Texas Legislature passed a new sentencing option: life without parole. This gives juries the option of sentencing a murderer to life in prison with the assurance the offender will never be released. Texas juries appear increasingly reluctant to administer the ultimate punishment. In the last three years, the number of life-without-parole sentences has risen while death sentences remain low.*



SOURCE: Texas Department of Criminal Justice

CINDY CASARES

BIG BEAT

Lawsuit Raises Issue of Why Affirmative Action Is Still Needed

THE FATE OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AT AMERICA'S COLLEGES COULD REST on a dispute over $100. Abigail Noel Fisher, a white woman from Richmond, Texas, has sued the University of Texas over the $50 application fee and $50 housing deposit she forfeited when the school did not admit her to its Austin campus as a freshman in 2008. ¶ Fisher ended up attending Louisiana State University and expects to graduate in May. But apparently she's still angry she didn't get into UT. She is asking the U.S. Supreme Court to hear her case in hopes that she can win back the fees she would have lost even if she had been admitted to UT. The more important issue—and the reason conservatives have latched on to Fisher's case—is the constitutionality of race-based admission policies. Fisher and her lawyers want the High Court to rule the university's policy of considering race on top of the state-mandated "top 10 percent" rule, which requires Texas' four-year public universities to admit students in the top 10 percent of their graduating high school class, unconstitutional. Fisher didn't achieve that rank.

If the [lawsuit] should go before the Supreme Court, we could be looking at an end to the plus system.

The law currently allows universities to consider race to a limited degree in the admissions process as long as no quotas are in place. That stems from a landmark 1978 case, *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke,* in which the Supreme Court deemed unconstitutional the practice of setting aside a certain number of spots for African-Americans.

Some conservatives don't like universities considering race at all when choosing which students to admit, leading them to file friend-of–the-court briefs asking the Supreme Court to hear Fisher's case in hopes of overturning these policies.

So far, lower courts have agreed that UT is well within the law in considering race as a factor after filling about 62 percent of its incoming freshman spots with top-10-percent students, a strategy known as the "plus system." That policy began after the 1996 case *Hopwood v. Texas* banned the use of race in admissions decisions at all public postsecondary institutions. The state of Texas became one of the first to enact the top-10-percent rule.

In 2003, the Supreme Court upheld the "plus system" admissions policy of the University of Michigan Law School in *Grutter v. Bollinger*, ruling that the school had a compelling interest in promoting class diversity and that its policy did not amount to a quota system.

The *Grutter v. Bollinger* ruling constrained the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals when it considered Fisher's case. The court decided that Texas uses race as a plus system, not a quota system. If *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin* should go before the Supreme Court, we could be looking at an end to the plus system—and the end of any consideration of race in college admissions.

The case raises the very question of whether affirmative action is still needed in this country. I'm sure you won't be surprised to learn that I think it is, but to better make my case, I consulted the facts.

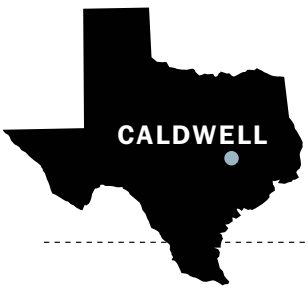
Even with the top-10-percent rule in place, Texas' diversity isn't reflected in its top-tier public universities. Latino and African-American students are dramatically underrepresented at UT and Texas A&M. Latinos constitute 38 percent of Texas residents, according to the 2010 Census, but just 17 percent of the UT student body.

Which is why the court, in the Grutter case, supported the "narrowly tailored use of race in admissions decisions to further a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body." The court in Grutter held that an interest in obtaining a "critical mass" of minority students at the law school was indeed a "tailored use."

Adding to UT's case are recent guidelines issued Dec. 2, 2011, by the U.S. departments of Education and Justice that focus on "the compelling interest of achieving diversity." Both departments filed friend-of-the-court briefs in February 2010 with the 5th Circuit in support of UT's case. The Supreme Court justices will decide in mid-January whether to take up Fisher's case.

My guess is they won't. At the end of the day, we're talking about a young lady with not-so-great grades that didn't get into a top-tier public school. Is that a breakdown of the system? I don't think so.

READ more about the Grutter decision at txlo.com/gvb



POSTCARDS

Caldwell Czechs In by Saul Elbein

THERE WERE FOUR OF US SITTING AROUND A table at the Longhorn Bar and Grill in downtown Caldwell, just across the street from the Burleson County courthouse. My companions were all retired, and they had nothing better to do. Charles Barack and Joe Rychlik were talking about Czech.

"My parents never spoke it," Charles said. "Never learned. Grandpa wouldn't teach them. He wanted them to learn English."

He gestured with his Shiner and leaned over the table. "In fact," he said, "once I started to pick up a little, he got *mad*. He said, 'That's not for you to learn.' He said I was an American now, and that we were going to leave all that behind."

"Oh, my parents always talked to us in Czech," Joe said. "So did all their friends. I learned pretty quick that if I asked my friend's mother for a *kolac* in Czech, I'd get it a lot quicker than if I'd asked in English."

Junior Barone laughed. "Ask in English, you might not get anything at all."

Joe turned to me. "Back then, it was very common. You'd do business at the Czech stores in Czech; you'd talk Czech in school with your friends," he said. "When I worked at the post office, sometimes customers would come in and we'd do their business in Czech. Now, not so much."

Dutch Schorre plays the accordion with the Shiner Hobo Band at Dickie Doo's during the Caldwell Kolache Festival. PHOTO BY STUART VILLANUEVA, COURTESY OF *THE BRYAN-COLLEGE STATION EAGLE*

Charles nodded. "Yeah, no one much speaks it anymore," he added. He looked at his beer. "Start to think sometimes that something's been lost there."

At this, he turned to Joe. At 66, Joe describes himself as the town's youngest Czech speaker. When I arrived in Caldwell to report a story on Czechoslovakian Texas, I began by calling local authorities including the Chamber of Commerce and the *Burleson County Tribune*. I would ask them questions about the Czech settlement in Texas, they would listen, and then they would say, "Have you talked to Joe Rychlik?"

Joe's family history is in many ways the story of Czechs in Texas. It's also a window on an almost-forgotten part of the American immigrant narrative. In a state where "immigrant" has come to be synonymous with "Mexican," it's easy to forget how many Europeans left home for new lives in Texas.

I MET JOE Rychlik at his house in Caldwell, a red-brick structure on a side street a few minutes from the town square. The bricks are subtly different shades of red. Joe collects antique bricks; those on the walls of the house are from a half dozen long-shuttered brick factories.

He is a big man, tall and broad across the chest, with an ample belly and a loud laugh. With his shock of white hair he resembles a beardless Santa Claus. The inside of the house was snug and eccentrically decorated with antique appliances and heirloom plate collections. Antique revolvers sat under glass on the coffee table. A plaque by the kitchen read, "I only drink wine when I'm alone or with people." Joe saw me looking at it.

"That's a gift from a neighbor," he said. "Me, I prefer beer, or..." he rooted around in the kitchen, emerging with a glass bottle lettered in Czech: "slivovice."

He pointed out the back window, toward the rolling prairie. Cattle grazed in the yard next to his. "If you look back there, way back, you can see the farm where I grew up."

The farm was a beige smudge among other beige smudges. "Here," Joe said, "let's go take a look." We got into his Chevy Tahoe and set off. In a few minutes we were out of town, passing farmland portioned off with barbed wire. We passed a white clapboard church with a sign out front advertising services for the Moravian Brethren, a Czech Protestant church organized a century before Martin Luther started what became the Reformation.

Finally Joe drove us through a break in the barbed wire to a little wooden house—made of planks—that looked like a holdover from an earlier time. A little pear tree grew out front.

"This is where my family has lived since my great-grandfather," he said, pointing around. "He came, bought the land, and Rychliks have lived here since."

Joe's great-grandfather—also named Joe Rychlik, but we'll call him Grandpa Rychlik—grew up in Moravia, in the southeast of what is now the Czech Republic. He was a farmer, working a small plot that provided just enough to feed his family. There wasn't enough land to grow surplus crops for sale, so there was little money. As Rychlik lore has it, at the age of 60 he decided "to take the Rychliks we like to America, and to hell with the rest," Joe said.

Grandpa Rychlik's decision to leave his homeland for an unknown foreign country reflects how bad things were in Central Europe a hundred years ago, and reminds Americans of the unbridled possibilities people associated with America. The Czechs had no country of their own; their homelands of Silesia, Bohemia and Moravia were provinces of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Young men were drafted into the imperial military and sent to die in far-off territorial wars. A small, entrenched, largely foreign aristocracy controlled most of the available farmland.

As early as the 1850s, Czechs began to leave for America. Some were political radicals, disillusioned by the failures of the great liberal revolts that swept Europe in 1848. Some were simply looking for a bit more land. Whatever their reasons for going, in the decades that followed, in taverns across the Czech lands, people crowded around and read aloud the letters those first emigrants sent back. The letters described a world undreamed of. A place where a man could be what he wanted. Where if he worked hard enough, he could *own* land.

"I've read through hundreds of letters that Czechs sent home from Texas," said Clinton Machann, a historian at Texas A&M University and Caldwell High School graduate who specializes in Czech Texas. "You read them today, and there's this remarkable shine of optimism that comes through them. Despite the hardships of the new country, despite whatever discrimination they dealt with, there's this feeling of being liberated, of being in a place where anything was possible."

Grandpa Rychlik's brother left Moravia in 1880; his letters home were enough to convince Grandpa Rychlik to follow him. In 1882, his young family caught a ship to Galveston, arriving at the crest of a wave of Czech immigration to the United States. By then there were already many Czechs in Caldwell and the surrounding communities of Central Texas. By 1900 there would be 9,204, and by 1910 there were 15,074, mostly clustered in a few small enclaves like Caldwell.

Many were eager to bring more of their countrymen to the area. One wealthy Czech landowner loaned Grandpa Rychlik money at almost no interest to buy a farm—provided he and his family stayed in New Tabor, just outside of Caldwell. Grandpa Rychlik fell out with his brother for reasons no one remembers anymore. For the first time in the family's memory, Rychliks worked and raised crops on land of their own.

Even now, Joe Rychlik, whose grandfather was born in Texas, speaks English with an identifiably Czech accent.

THE CZECHS OF Central Texas were unlike other Czech colonies in the United States. They were from the opposite side of the Czech lands—Moravians instead of Bohemians. Elsewhere Czech immigrants were mostly "freethinkers," shunning the authority of a church; in Texas they stayed religious. (Most were Catholic, but a substantial minority were members of the Protestant Moravian Brethren.) In towns from Caldwell to West to Shiner, they built Czech-speaking schools and churches and breweries. Often they settled near Germans and Poles, with whom they shared tastes in food, music, and politics.

Machann, the historian, says that most Texas Czechs worked hard to integrate into American society.

"They saw America as a new homeland," he said. "They generally had a very positive point of view about their new homeland—they wanted to fit in. Remember, the Czechs at that time didn't have a country. They had fewer ties to Europe than other groups—their ties were to the Czech people and culture, not the Czech land. And the people could go to America."

From the beginning, Czech-Texas culture was marked by a high degree of participation in American society, and at the same time a certain insularity and self-reliance. They learned English. They ran for local office. But they also established cultural institutions of their own. They published Czech newspapers such as *Nasinec*, a weekly started in 1913, which today is probably the last Czech-language newspaper in the country. They formed mutual-aid societies to provide community insurance to farm families. Over time, these societies evolved into social clubs that sponsor barbecues and polkas.

It was not quite an idyllic world. The arrival of thousands of non-English-speaking foreigners created tensions among the already established population, primarily Scots-Irish Protestants. The new immigrants' Catholicism didn't help. The KKK campaigned against Czechs, Protestant and Catholic alike.

But given what the Czechs had experienced in the Old Country, Machann says, Texas was nothing. "There weren't many people in Texas who would have refused to sell a Czech land if he had the money," he said. "In Moravia, that wouldn't have been true."

The Czechs held so tightly to their culture that Joe and his brother Bernard grew up in the 1960s—80 years after the heyday of migration—in a community that was in many ways a time capsule of 1880s-era Moravia. Like many immigrants, Caldwell's Czechs were more loyal to their traditions than those who had stayed behind. The boys were raised on folk songs that had long since died out in the Old Country. They learned to speak Czech—in the distinctive accent of their homeland—even as they learned English. Even now, Joe, whose grandfather was born in Texas, speaks English with an identifiably Czech accent. His vowels are a little squashed; his " th" sounds more like a "d."

I asked him about this as we were walking back to his car. In the '90s, he told me, he was touring the Czech Republic with his wife. He said something in Czech to a local woman. She heard his accent and said, "Oh, you're from Vizovice," a nearby town.

"I told her, no. My great-grandfather was," Joe said, shaking his head in wonder as he recalled the incident. "The accent was still the same."

Driving back toward town, I asked Joe what the hardest part of growing up Czech in Anglo Texas was. Was there much discrimination?

"No," he said. "We were still white, remember. We went to white schools when the schools were segregated. And there were so many Czechs in Caldwell. . ."

But sometimes they still felt like outsiders because of religion. One of his most vivid memories, he told me, is of sitting in the stands for a Friday night football game in the days before Vatican II, smelling the hot dogs cooking. The hot dogs were from the Manas Meat Market, a Czech-owned deli whose legendary sausages attracted people from all over the county. It's a clichéd rural Texas image: Friday night football and hot dogs.

"But I was Catholic," he said. "And back then we still couldn't eat meat on Fridays. So week after week,

LEFT TO RIGHT: Smith and Manas meat market, downtown Caldwell. The Etzel Band, circa 1920. Jancik and Rippel Saloon, circa 1900. PHOTOS COURTESY OF *THE BURLESON COUNTY TRIBUNE*

I would see my Protestant friends eating those hot dogs, and I would just be so jealous."

Years later, Joe said, a high-school friend called him. "He said, 'you know we can eat meat on Fridays now.'"

"I said, 'Yeah, of course.' And he said, 'You know what I want to do?'"

Joe did. Manas Meat Market had closed by then. There was no football that week. But that Friday night, the two went to the stands, sat in the dark, and stuffed themselves with sausages.

We were pulling back into town. On Joe's car stereo, Czech-American Joe Patek was singing a polka tune called "In Heaven There Is No Beer" to bouncing accordions.

Joe's wife Donna was waiting for us inside the house. She grew up in the Church of Christ, in Eustace, in East Texas. She took a job as the county extension agent in Caldwell in 1971. She was 23, fresh out of college. Caldwell stunned her.

"I thought I was in a foreign country," she said. "I remember my first day at work I went to my office in the basement of the courthouse. And out the window I could see the Dergac lumberyard, and across from that was Vychopen dry goods. And by those was the Siptak-Pargac drug store. We didn't have names like that in East Texas. I called my mother and I said, 'Mother, I'm not in Texas anymore.'

"I didn't know how to act, what was expected of me, how to pronounce any of the names in the phone book."

She learned. She learned other things, too. Joe, with

the aid of "at least a six-pack of Schlitz," taught her to polka. When Joe asked her to marry him, she said yes. His only condition: She would become a Catholic.

She said yes. I asked Joe if he would have converted for her. He frowned. "I don't think so," he said. "I was raised in the Church."

Much of Donna's extended family was furious about her decision. Her stepfather's family was staunchly anti-Catholic. She wasn't sure her parents were coming to the wedding until she saw them there. No one else from her family came.

"You should have seen their faces," Joe said. "I mean, you take a big Baptist wedding, a big Church of Christer wedding, it's 50 people and maybe they have cake and punch. A Czech wedding is 300 people, brisket, beer, dancing."

"But they went back," Donna said, "and they told everyone in the family what a good time they'd had, how it was the best wedding they had ever been to. And when we had our 25th anniversary, what do you know? A lot of them came."

"So in some ways," I said, "you were an immigrant too."

She laughed. "It's good," she said. "I make a better Czech Catholic than I ever did a Church of Christer."

FEW PEOPLE IN Caldwell speak Czech anymore. Joe ticks off names of people he used to speak with in Czech. Neighbors and friends, long dead. His brother Bernard, killed in a car accident last year.

He shook his head and said sadly, "I'm losing everyone I can talk to."

We were leaving the bar where we had been drinking beer with his friends. I asked him if it bothered him that the young kids weren't learning Czech. "It's sad," he said, "but that's the way things go. Nothing ever stays the same. But what's remarkable is that we still have a strong heritage."

I could see his point. Part of the dilemma of being an immigrant is deciding how much of your culture to hold on to and how much to trade in for a place in the broader society. Part of the immigrant experience is watching your culture slowly ground away, to be replaced by something else. This has happened to the Czechs, as it has happened to all groups. The Caldwell of today is not the Caldwell of Joe's youth. It isn't even the Caldwell that Donna found in the 1970s. The Czech names are gone from the courthouse square. No one does business at the post office in Czech. Joe Rychlik is stuck at the center of an ever tightening circle of people who remember the old language.

The remarkable thing about the Caldwell Czechs is not how much of their culture they've lost, but how much they have managed to keep. Caldwell's Kolache Festival (in Czech, "Kolache" is plural for Kolac), a brainchild of Joe's brother, among others, has grown over the last 27 years from a small bake-off to a full-blown cultural festival, attracting as many as 20,000 visitors every September.

Most of those who attend aren't Czech, of course. But many are. And many of those who participate in the festival are children.

"We have lots of kids, teenagers or younger, who enter to show off the traditional Czech dances," said Louemma Polansky, the Kolache Festival organizer. "We had 35 youth enter the bake-off."

Which, for a town of 4,000, isn't bad. Polansky herself isn't Czech, but like Donna Rychlik she calls herself an "adopted Czech." She married a Czech and threw herself into the culture.

"We have a lot of youth who are active in the festival, active in 4H," she said, "but as an adult they don't forget. One young lady grew up in Caldwell, entered in the baking competitions. Then after she graduated college, she ran for Miss Czech Texas, and when she won it, a whole bunch of us drove up to Nebraska to support her at the nationals.

"Now she comes back—comes to the Kolache Festival and sings the Czech national anthem. Even though she's grown up, she comes back for that weekend and participates. So she hasn't forgotten her roots. And there are many people like that. It's not something you can just walk away from. A lot of people are born and raised in Caldwell, and they end up coming back."

Or, like Joe Rychlik, they never leave. He and Donna have built a house that is painstakingly decorated, full of paintings and knicknacks that bespeak their life together. It would be almost impossible to move. No one I know has a house like that. No one I know is so settled.

When I asked Joe why he never left Caldwell, he paused, as if the question didn't quite make sense. "This is where my friends were," he said. "This is where my family was. Why would I have left?"

Opportunity, I suggested? See the world?

He laughed. "I got a chance to stay in Caldwell," he said. "That's where I always wanted to be." ✪

Contributing editor Saul Elbein lives and freelances in Austin.

The remarkable thing about the Caldwell Czechs is not how much of their culture they've lost, but how much they have managed to keep.

DIRECT QUOTE

Growing Urban Farmers

As Told to **Geoffrey DeCanio**

MAX ELLIOT HAS THE FARMING BUG, and hopes to pass it on to young people in Austin. Elliot is one of the founders of Urban Roots, a youth development and community gardening nonprofit that educates dozens of young people each year about the benefits of growing food sustainably and eating healthy. Through paid internships, kids learn how to farm, and donate produce to local food banks.

"We feel like there are lots of life lessons through agriculture. When you get people together to clear out a huge field, there's this amazing sense of accomplishment that comes, and an increased sense of ownership. And that is made much more valuable and meaningful when [youth] then donate produce to those in need and they see that all this effort is really benefiting people. ... Our priority is really transforming the lives of these young people and then giving them the chance to really have a huge impact in the community.

"Each year our goal is to grow 30,000 pounds [of produce]. Last year we grew 32,000 pounds and we donated almost 13,000 pounds of produce to local food kitchens and food pantries. That also includes about 1,000 pounds of produce that we donated to youth's families. We try to encourage and create this culture where it's great to try food straight off the farm, and it's great to try new foods. Our youth have never tried a lot of the fruits and vegetables that we grow on the farm. So we're giving them that chance to take them home and providing them recipes and cooking skills so they can share that with their families.

"We bring together youth from all over town who would not normally hang out together and then we put them in this strange farm that's this really rare environment, that's not like anything they know in school or in their neighborhood. This is a place where they can go to get away from school, where they go to get away from troubles in their neighborhood or maybe issues with family.

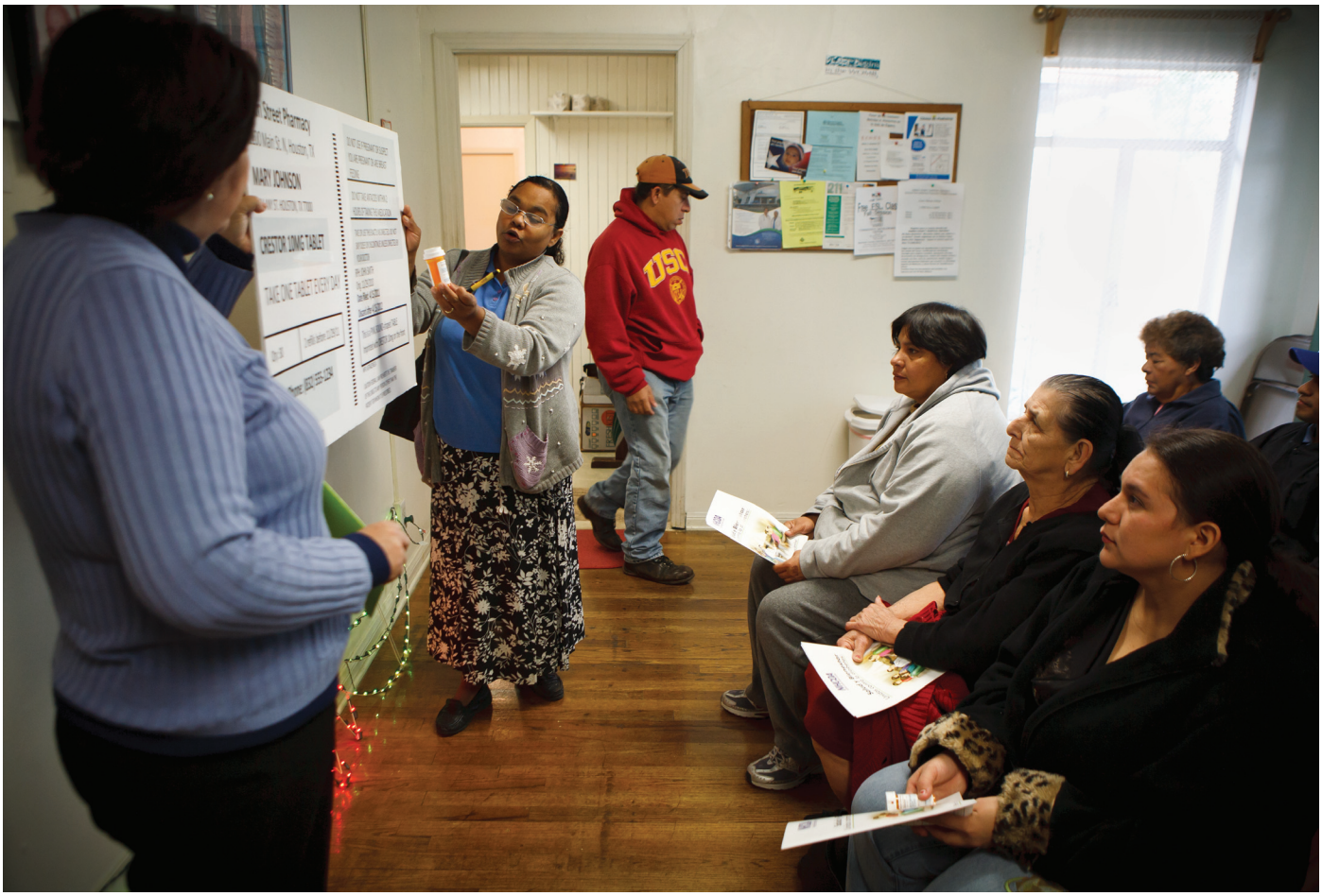
"Last year we had 80 applicants for the 24 positions we were hiring for. So there's a big demand among young people for a paid internship where they can really give back to the community. We're giving them the chance, setting a high bar for them and saying, 'Hey, you're going to do some really hard work where you're going to learn a lot and have a lot of fun, too, but it's not going to be easy.'

"There's a huge interest in celebrating local foods, but also a really heightened awareness around food deserts and food justice issues, in addition to anti-obesity campaigns. We're kind of at the crossroads of all those different movements.

"If we change the way that youth eat and their families eat, that's great. And if we give them farming skills or gardening skills, that's amazing. But it's really all about giving them the chance to cultivate self-esteem, and cultivate life and job skills. That's the true gift that I feel we give to these young people."

photo by **Jen Reel**

CULTURE



Sonia Sierra, left (and opposite page), and Rina Chaves, right, talk about health issues with patients in the waiting room of the Casa Maria health clinic in Houston on Dec. 17.
PHOTOS BY MICHAEL STRAVATO

The Language of Prevention

by Christine Granados

SIX YEARS AGO, MY OB-GYN FOUND TWO millimeters of cancerous cells on my cervix and told me that my uterus should be removed as a precaution. I steeled my nerves and decided I would not have the procedure. I was 38 years old. I wanted to keep my uterus, keep my body whole, keep all of my spirit. I'm not sure where this idea came from. I'd never considered myself a deeply spiritual or religious person. (Perhaps agnostic theist is the best term to describe my beliefs.)

As I pondered my response, I recalled my interview, years earlier, with Dr. David Hayes-Bautista, director of the Center for the Study of Latino Health and Culture at the University of California at Los Angeles. He told me that the Latino population's medical needs were different from the Anglo population's, citing attitudes toward heart transplants as an example.

"Hispanics believe, as did the pre-Columbian Nahua Indians, that the soul resides in the heart, and wonder whether a heart transplant recipient could become a different person after the operation," he said.

I found it ridiculous at the time. But my experience with cancer—I was diagnosed with Stage 1A microinvasive cervical cancer in 2005—has changed my mind. Today, with good reason, health care providers and researchers talk about the importance of cultural competency, the concept that the prevention and treatment of diseases are affected by the culture, gender, race and ethnicity of patients. In short, belief systems affect people's attitudes toward disease and

treatment, and to be effective, health care professionals have to understand these differences.

I HAVE PRIDED myself on being an atypical Mexican-American, defying the statistics. I'm not Catholic, I am educated, and I get annual health screenings. Yet I decided that if the heart holds the soul, then my uterus held the magic of life—and as a woman I wouldn't be whole without it.

But there was more to my feelings than wanting to be "whole." Cervical cancer is caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV), which is transmitted through sexual activity. It's the most common sexually transmitted infection in the country, and, with regular screening and early treatment, the most preventable female cancer.

I imagined facing the judgment of my family and friends for my condition, like Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*, and it scared me, though there was no basis for my fear. I had grown up in El Paso on the border with Mexico, but unlike many of my Catholic friends' mothers, my mother encouraged me to leave home and live with a man before I committed to marriage. She talked to me about sex and introduced me to birth control in my early teens. Still, after my diagnosis I recalled my five relationships, chastising myself for being sexually active before marriage. I didn't want my husband or father to think poorly of me. Perhaps a subconscious reason for wanting to keep my uterus was to punish myself by holding the disease inside me.

The embarrassment and difficulty in talking about sexuality and reproductive health are part of the reason Latinas are not getting these life-saving screenings, according to studies by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other health organizations. Lack of health insurance remains the major barrier to receiving early cancer diagnosis and treatment for many women. I was not a member of the uninsured, but I was part of a cultural statistic. Like many Latinas, I was ashamed to share sexual information with health care workers.

This mindset, coupled with the lack of health insurance, keeps cervical cancer and mortality rates among Latinas in Texas and the U.S. higher than those for Anglo women, according to the CDC. Three of every 100,000 Latinas diagnosed with cervical cancer in the U.S. die from the disease, compared to two of every 100,000 Anglo women. The highest mortality rate is for black women, at 4.3 per 100,000 women, even though black women have high rates of screening for the disease. Eighty-one percent of black women are screened for cervical cancer, compared to 82 percent of white women and 76 percent of Latinas, according to Usha R. Ranji, Associate Director of Women's Health Policy at the Kaiser Family Foundation.

In communities along the U.S. side of the border with Mexico, cervical cancer mortality rates for Mexican-American women are almost identical to national rates among black women. A study by Dr. Theresa Byrd, co-authored with Drs. Katherine Wilson and Rafaelita Chavez in the journal *Ethnicity & Disease* in 2007, found the mortality rate from cervical cancer in El Paso County was 4.2 per 100,000 Latinas. According to the study, "Hispanic women have a lower rate of participation in cervical cancer screening programs than other women."

Like many Latinas, I was ashamed to share sexual information with health care workers.

The same can be said of breast cancer screenings, the most common cancer diagnosis and the second-leading cause of death among Latinas. Heart disease is the No. 1 killer. Colorectal and lung cancer are the second and third most common cancer diagnoses, while cervical cancer ranks seventh. Though cervical cancer is not the leading cause of death among Latinas, health officials say it is the most frustrating because, as with colorectal cancer, "you can find early changes before they are cancer," Byrd said.

"So there are cancers where screening can be either for early detection or for prevention."

BYRD'S STUDY WAS used to develop educational information targeting Mexican-American women along the U.S. border. The result was the AMIGAS project, created in 2004 to help reduce cervical cancer rates among Latinas. The program has since expanded to El Paso, Houston and Washington state's Yakima valley. Community health workers called *Promotoras de Salud* (Promoters of Health) fan out in neighborhoods with a DVD, flip charts, and games. The program is part of a broader effort by the CDC to increase cervical cancer screenings for all women to 93 percent by 2020.

The program helps women put themselves first by stressing their importance to their families. "We stress in the video that we don't [get Pap tests, which detect the presence of cancerous cells] for us, but for our family, because what would our family do without us," Byrd said, explaining the program's approach.

How health care providers get the word out is one of the most important factors in reaching a community, said Dr. Wilson. A large part of educating Mexican-Americans, the largest Latino population in the country, lies in who delivers the message. "The community health worker programs have been alive since the 1960s," said Dr. Wilson. "The health worker acts as a bridge [between the patient and doctor]."

The *promotoras* have lists of low-cost and free resources for cancer screening and early-detection programs. The video opens with two young women from El Paso talking in Spanish about the dates they are about to go on. The conversation progresses to birth control. One of the young women, Alyssa, invites her mother, who is a *promotora*, to explain why a Pap test is important. Alyssa's grandmother overhears the conversation and joins the intergenerational discussion. The video also highlights issues that CDC researchers found were barriers to screening, such as lack of insurance and misinformation.

The program also addresses embarrassment about going to the doctor. "For all women, Pap tests are embarrassing and unpleasant," Byrd said. "Hispanic women, especially young women, have the added problem of not wanting everyone to think they're having sex."

NOT WANTING TO talk about my sexual history initially led me to reject having a hysterectomy. But I changed my mind, stunned back to reality by the fact that Latinas have a rate of invasive cervical cancer that is twice as high as that of Anglo women.

I consented to having my uterus removed. But I toyed with the idea of keeping it after surgery, as I continued to grapple with what it meant to me.

I settled on merely seeing it. Looking at it in the hospital pathology lab a few hours after my surgery, I realized that it didn't define me. I was still whole. I had learned something about myself through my experience with cervical cancer. My belief system was not so different from that of the border community where I was raised, and the thousands of Latinas I hope the AMIGAS program can save.

Christine Granados is a mother, wife and writer, although not always in that order. Her writings have appeared in anthologies, journals, magazines and newspapers. She teaches at the University of Houston-Victoria.

ROBERT LELEUX

NOVEL APPROACH

A Prophet and a Liar

Holy Ghost Girl, a new memoir by Donna M. Johnson, tells the remarkable story of the author's childhood among the followers of Brother David Terrell, the last of the great tent-revival preachers of the fabled Sawdust Trail, an evangelical circuit in the South named for the sawdust on the floors of its temporary tabernacles. Johnson's mother, Carolyn, was the Depression-era daughter of an itinerant Assemblies of God minister. Born into the kind of white Southern poverty photographed by Dorothea Lange, Carolyn possessed a longing for the wider world, and uncanny musical ability. When Brother Terrell brought the gospel to her Alabama town in the late 1950s, Carolyn discovered both her soul mate and her calling. Within a week, she'd sold or given away most of her earthly goods, and joined his circus.

Brother Terrell amassed a personal fortune of many millions from the frightened and desperate people who flocked under his tents.

With her two children (the author and her little brother Gary) in tow, Carolyn became Brother Terrell's organist, ghostwriter, Girl Friday, and considerably more. Though he was a married man, and his interpretation of the Scriptures was peppered with hellfire and brimstone, Brother Terrell also had quite an eye for the ladies. As the years would reveal, it wasn't just the Holy Spirit that Terrell was sowing on the Sawdust Trail. In addition to the children he had with Betty Ann, his wan, long-suffering wife, and the three daughters he would eventually father with Carolyn, he begot many progeny by an assortment of worshipful followers, mistresses, fellow preachers and wives. By 2001, when Johnson's sort-of step-brother Randall—a mischievous, pitiful, Southern Gothic figure who suffered from an obscure chronic ailment—mercifully passed away, Terrell's family "numbered around seventy." Emphasis on the "around," because, like so much in *Holy Ghost Girl*, there's really no way to rightly know "the truth."

There's much to admire about Johnson's memoir, including its wry humor and sprightly, elegant prose, but one of the things I, as a fellow memoirist, most admire is her willingness to acknowledge the "unknowableness" of her experience; to suspend judgment and shrug her shoulders at the strangeness of her early life and the odd crop of adults who peopled it. The incidents of Johnson's childhood were peculiar even by the somewhat compromised standards of the rural South. She now lives in Austin. She's married to a poet. And I imagine she voted for Obama.

The reason that I emphasize this is because it makes the extraordinary open-mindedness she exhibits toward Terrell and his followers more extraordinary still. Is Terrell, she asks herself, "a con man? A prophet? A performer?" Though he was her step-father, he remains a figure of LBJ-caliber complexity. She witnessed him perform extremely convincing miracles, healings, even an exorcism. Prospero to her Miranda, he possessed undeniable power, and a knowledge of the private sufferings of others that beggars rational explanation. Johnson provides a startling description of the time he "laid hands" on her: "It was as though a curtain fell over my senses. ... The I that was me, separate and distinct, released its hold, and I experienced myself as a vast and bliss-filled darkness. ... [That night] the sores, fevers, and lethargy that had plagued me for months disappeared."

In so many ways, *Holy Ghost Girl* depicts Brother Terrell as a scoundrel. Besides his shabby behavior toward his children, wives, and lovers, and his cavalier treatment of sycophants, he amassed a personal fortune of many millions from the frightened and desperate people who flocked under his tents. Eventually, in the 1980s, he was arrested, convicted and sentenced to three concurrent 10-year prison sentences for income tax evasion, but only after making preparations to flee the country, and allowing Johnson's spurned mother to languish for weeks in the Wichita County jail for refusing to testify against him.

And yet, Johnson still struggles to reconcile the disparate aspects of Terrell's character, in such a way that reveals the "irreconcilableness" of belief and rationality. "I believed," she writes, "[he] was a prophet and a healer. I knew he was a liar and an adulterer," a flawed messenger in a world of such "messy glory." Meeting him again after many years, she finds herself relating to him in terms with which we can all probably identify, if not quite understand: "It wasn't belief or unbelief," she writes. "It was love."

James Lee Phillip, 66, and Ernestine Lloyd, 61, volunteer at the Farmer's Street garden in Houston's Fifth Ward neighborhood.
PHOTO BY MICHAEL STRAVATO

EAT YOUR WORDS

Turning the Food Desert into an Oasis

by Cheryl Smith

For many Texans, it's easier to get Cheetos, Twinkies and Ho Hos from a convenience store than fresh fruits and vegetables from a supermarket.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture reports that approximately 15 percent of Texans reside in food deserts, defined as more than a mile from a grocery store or supermarket in cities, and more than 10 miles in rural areas. National studies have linked lack of access to healthy food in low-income and minority communities with diet-related diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure. The story has made its way to the White House, where first lady Michelle Obama has campaigned against childhood obesity and for financing healthy food initiatives. Recently, she recognized Walgreens for offering produce in some of its inner city stores, not just the usual assortment of high-fat, high-sugar, processed foods.

Given the situation, you'd think our state government would promote bipartisan legislation to help people gain easier access to nutritious food.

So far, that isn't the case.

Last session, Gov. Rick Perry signed into law House Bill 2994, the Urban Loan Microenterprise Support Program, a state-managed lending system for fruit and vegetable growers in cities with populations of at least 500,000. The bill was sponsored by Rep. Borris Miles, D-Houston, and Sen. Craig Estes, R-Wichita Falls.

Miles said he authored the bill to help combat food deserts. "We don't have anything nutritional to eat around here," he said of parts of his Southeast Houston district.

But there's no money for the program in the state budget. Hopefully someday the program will award $25,000 to $50,000 loans to new and existing farms, respectively. In many cases, that means community gardens. According to the law, which went into effect Sept. 1, just about anyone can donate to the fund—individuals, businesses, local governments, even Uncle Sam—except the state.

But the people tasked with controlling the fund—the board of directors of the Texas Agricultural Finance Authority—aren't making it easy to donate. Agriculture Department Communications Director Bryan Black said the fund hasn't been set up yet due to a lack of money. When I inquired to whom a donor could write a check and where to send the donation, Black couldn't answer. After a few follow-up calls over a week or so, he clarified how to donate to the fund. He added that the finance authority plans to discuss the program at its next meeting—sometime in July.

This is the type of program that Texas Agriculture Commissioner Todd Staples, a candidate for lieutenant governor in 2012, could help promote. In October he announced his support for the "No Kid Hungry" campaign. The campaign's mission is "to develop and implement strategies to alleviate hunger through policy, education, community organizing, and community development." The urban loan program could help with that effort. Many nonprofit urban gardening organizations such as Urban Harvest in Houston donate produce to food banks and organize farmers markets in communities without easy access to grocery stores.

LEARN how to donate to the Urban Loan Microenterprise Support Program at txlo.com/urbanloan

Until the fund can get going in earnest and begin to have an impact, Doritos and Ding Dongs will still be easier to find than fruits and vegetables in some urban neighborhoods.

Farmer's Street garden helps address the food desert. PHOTO BY MICHAEL STRAVATO

Echoing the message of healthy food advocates across the country, state Rep. Miles ticked off the health problems associated with life in food deserts: high blood pressure, obesity and diabetes among them. A 2010 report by the nonprofit organizations Policy Link and The Food Trust highlighted research from Baltimore, Los Angeles and Chicago that shows the link between access to healthy food and diet-related health issues.

Cities from Dallas to Detroit are creating community gardens and urban farms on vacant lots to help food desert communities eat healthier and create jobs. Such gardens and farms may not be viable alternatives to well-stocked grocery stores, but at a minimum they help generate awareness about the connections between access to healthy food and health.

Miles said his constituents shouldn't have to sit around hoping a grocery store will come to them. "I've got several vacant lots in my community. ... If we grow it on our own, we're being self-sufficient," he said.

Cheryl Smith is an Austin-based freelancer who writes about agriculture and food policy.

"We don't have anything nutritional to eat around here."

THE PICTURE SHOW

JFK's Cinematic Legacy

by Josh Rosenblatt

Several years ago, I visited a friend in Dallas. While I was there I went to Dealey Plaza, scene of one of the most infamous crimes in American history. There I saw the fateful curve in the road where Houston and Elm streets meet, gazed upon the famous grassy knoll, and looked up at the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository building from which Lee Harvey Oswald reportedly shot his magic rifle.

I spoke to a man there who kept a small stand where he sold self-published books and DVDs about the assassination of President Kennedy, and who explained to anyone who would listen what conspiratorial nefariousness really transpired on Nov. 22, 1963. In addition to his theories about the Mafia, the Cubans, the CIA and the Warren Commission, the man claimed he had acted as a historical consultant on the film *JFK*. He said he had taught director Oliver Stone everything he knew about the murder and the resulting cover-up. And yet, when the movie came out, the man's name was not in the credits. It had been erased, he said, like Trotsky from old pictures of the Soviet high command. Like Kennedy 40 years earlier, he had become the victim of a great conspiracy.

Whether the man's story was true or not, Stone would surely have appreciated the multi-tiered depths of its paranoia. *JFK*, released 20 years ago this month, was what Stone called his "counter-myth" to the "myth of the Warren Report," a phantasmagoric, nearly hallucinogenic detective movie that takes the great political paranoia pictures of the 1970s and blows them up into visceral, multicolored explorations of the disorientation of an entire society. In movies like *All the President's Men* and *Three Days of the Condor*, fear is expressed with shadow and cinematic detachment; coldness separates the audience from the incidents onscreen. *JFK*, on the other hand, is an immersive physical experience; watching it feels like drowning in a whirlpool of lies and speculation.

Stone was attempting to make a movie about a world gone mad, and he dared to create a new, disorienting visual language to communicate that madness. He hired an editor who had spent his career making commercials, and who viewed the world in 30-second fragments designed to grab viewers' attention and hold it only momentarily. Together they came up with a visual, structural and temporal aesthetic that dragged viewers into a state of disorientation. Historical footage, scenes shot in both black and white and color, footage shot on four or five different film stocks and played back at different speeds all bled into one another, creating an air of vertigo and information overload. The approach thumbed its nose at traditional movie editing, constantly demanding that viewers assess and re-assess information from new angles, just as Americans in the years after Kennedy's assassination were forced to re-evaluate their country. It was a ruthless place where seemingly immutable truths about the decency of our institutions and the righteousness of our leaders could no longer be taken for granted.

Oliver Stone dared to create a new, disorienting visual language.

Kevin Costner in a scene from Oliver Stone's *JFK*, released 20 years ago this month. FILM STILL COURTESY OF ZUMAPRESS/© ALCOR FILMS

For all the noise about Stone's historical revisionism and massaging of the facts, the director never got enough credit for his movie's stylistic innovations. The controversy surrounding *JFK* distracted from the fact that Stone had pulled off the rarest of cinematic magic tricks—one that only Welles, Hitchcock, Godard and a few others have ever managed: He found a new way of speaking through film. Over the next decade Stone would turn his visual discoveries into a more formalized language, one that would find its High Renaissance (with just a touch of rococo extravagance) in *Nixon*, which used bleeding steaks and flickering ghosts and Freudian flashbacks to transform the country's nastiest president into a tortured anti-hero worthy of Shakespeare. But *JFK* was the moment when story and technique came together to achieve something close to sublimity, turning the oldest story there is—the murder of a king—into an opera of dying innocence, and pulling back the curtain on a country losing its soul.

BOOK REVIEW

Made in El Paso by David Duhr

THERE'S AN OLD PACE PICANTE SAUCE COMmercial in which a man named Cookie hands a jar of "Mexican sauce" to a bunch of cowpokes who all *swaller their tobaccy* when they learn the salsa isn't from Texas. "This stuff's made in New York City!" says one. "New York City?!" the others repeat, incredulously.

So it goes with literature. Publishing's "Big Six" are all headquartered in New York, and most fiction writers—even those down here, writing about the Lone Star State—aspire to publish with one of the Big Six. That's where the money is, and Big Six titles get the lion's share of review coverage.

It's refreshing, then, to see James Carlos Blake take a book to a smaller press after finding success with the big boys. *Country of the Bad Wolfes,* Blake's 10th novel, is slated for January release by Cinco Puntos Press in El Paso. In his first nine novels, Blake wrote, to great acclaim, about Texas, Mexico, and other points west. All were Big Six books, including *In the Rogue Blood,* which won a *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize.

At 456 pages and spanning more than a century, *Country of the Bad Wolfes* is sure to be labeled an epic saga—which is part of the reason Blake chose Cinco Puntos. He told me over email that when it came time to shop the book around, few large publishers were taking on dense historical fiction. "I thought a small house might be able to give *Bad Wolfes* the kind of careful attention that the New Yorkers don't," he said.

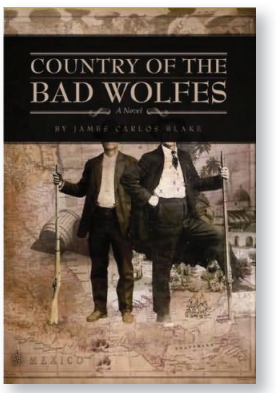
Enter Cinco Puntos, a small outfit that has published Texas- and Southwest-themed books by heavy hitters like Dagoberto Gilb and Luis Alberto Urrea. Cinco Puntos had already approached Blake about reissuing two of his early books, so the decision to send the publisher *Bad Wolfes* was a logical step.

Spanning three generations, *Country of the Bad Wolfes* spins the tale of a family "cursed by twin passions." Some in the Wolfe clan are "in thrall to the passions of the flesh," others "to a passion for risks of blood," and many are "damned by both." Love and violence rule the day, and are parceled equally between the sexes.

Progenitor of the cursed is London-born Roger Blake Wolfe, who "loved the sea but abhorred regimentation." Hanged as a pirate in Veracruz, he leaves behind twin sons John Roger and Samuel Thomas in New Hampshire. Samuel Thomas yearns to run away to sea like his father, but after killing a constable in self-defense he enlists in the U.S. Army. It will be decades before John Roger learns any of this, but Samuel Thomas is sent to battle in the Mexican-American War, is humiliated in front of his squad, and deserts to join the Saint Patrick's Battalion, which fought as part of the Mexican Army against the U.S. After the war, most of the San Patricios are sentenced to death, but Samuel Thomas manages to escape with a brutal whipping and branding in the novel's first of many violent scenes.

Meanwhile, John Roger, showing his father's wanderlust, accepts a job running the Veracruz branch of an import/export business. Over the following decades, he has three sons (including twins identical in appearance and stubbornness), builds a thriving hacienda, reunites with his brother's side of the family, and, through a family connection to Edward Little (protagonist of *In the Rogue Blood*), is caught up in the uncertainty and bloody violence of the reign of Mexico's nation-building President Porfirio Díaz.

The trick for the writer of a multi-generational story is to keep a reader's interest once the initial generation dies off and the story transfers down the genealogical line. Blake lays enough groundwork to make a seamless transition. John Roger's twin sons, James and Blake (note the names), take over the



COUNTRY OF THE BAD WOLFES
by James Carlos Blake
CINCO PUNTOS PRESS
$16.95, 456 PAGES

narrative in the book's second half, and the rest of the novel details their various (mostly illegal) adventures along the border—until the family curse catches up with them at the book's vivid and bloody conclusion.

Violence and brutality have always played a large role in Blake's writing; many have compared his work to that of Cormac McCarthy and legendary director Sam Peckinpah. Relating the death of Porfirio's brother Felix Diaz at the hands of villagers, Blake writes, "They gouged out one of his eyes and knocked out his teeth and fried his tongue with a hot iron [...] As is the way with mobs, the more they did to him the more they wanted to do, became frenzied to do, until they finally lost all control and tore him apart as a dog pack does a hare."

Country of the Bad Wolfes is an engrossing novel. Readers will take comfort in the fact that Blake is working on another Wolfe novel. In Blake's words, the new one is "Set in our own time and center[s] on a young Wolfe's very serious trouble with a Mexican crime cartel."

I'll be pleased to see this book, too, find a home in Texas.

Duhr is fiction editor at The Texas Observer *and* Fringe *magazine, and co-founder of Austin-based writing center WriteByNight.*

WITNESS
by Sally Ridgway

a sheep looking out from a trailer
traveling to slaughter

traveling, traveling
if I write enough will I erase

the sheep's eyes seeing our same world,
red smudge mark on its white forehead

I could choose not to see it
close my eyes to memory:

tufts of sheep on a foothill, their chanting,
yellow eyes, their long-faced gawking

following me, our communal
curiosity, our game of stops and starts

write it *sheeeeep*
sounds, letters transport me

sheeep it stops suddenly, plosive
shee it turns back on me

eyes follow *follow*
fallow *fallow* eyes

A longtime Texan, Sally Ridgway has taught English and creative writing in Houston and Galveston, and her poems have been published in Texas literary journals and anthologies.

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BILL MINUTAGLIO

STATE OF THE MEDIA

The Next Generation of Guerilla Warriors

THE BIG TERM BANDIED ABOUT IN MEDIA CIRCLES THESE DAYS IS IMPACT journalism. Cause-and-effect journalism. The kind of journalism that gets people talking, uncorks indictments, passes bills, frees the unjustly incarcerated, and might convince people to pay for their news. ¶ At the same time, more and more news veterans are worrying about the thousands of new reporters being spit out of journalism schools who could care less about game-changing journalism. They want to be Anthony "No Reservations" Bourdain. They wish their lives were as interesting as David Sedaris', so they could write a memoir and have critics declare them the voice of a new generation. They don't want to be I. F. "Izzy" Stone or Sy Hersh, in their thick eyeglasses, hip deep in the deadly dull but ultimately damning reporting that renders government malfeasance transparent and cleaves a lot closer to what John Henry Faulk said were our "guaranteed liberties and freedoms."

There are fresh legions of young journalistic foot soldiers who are clearly not averse to investigative news.

These are the things I think about as the presidential race kicks into high gear this new year. The stakes seem higher than ever. With the economy ground to a raw nub, college graduates carrying record debt, and journalism students less certain than ever that there will be any kind of paying job in the news game, you may wonder if there are any young journalists at all willing to take on the hard, droning work of the modern muckraker.

Thankfully, there are. From the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) to Southern Methodist University, students are signing up to become muckrakers.

Don't tell Rick Perry as he continues his fevered quest to ferret out research on Texas campuses, but student journalists are researching him and other profoundly important issues in Texas and elsewhere. They are committing to a career in investigative work, and diving into it without much faith that there will be jobs with 401(k)s waiting for them when they graduate.

They are doing it as a calling, "swooping down" on government bureaucracies like a "guerilla warrior," as Izzy Stone once put it.

At UTEP, the extraordinary "Mexodus" project is a sweeping investigative narrative, driven by student journalists, that shines a light on middle-class families fleeing Mexico because of drug-related violence. The ongoing "Light of Day" project, spearheaded by the Freedom of Information Foundation of Texas, teaches students from universities across the state how to use public records to create investigative stories. The project has led student journalists to take long, hard looks at whether Texas schools are fully disclosing their public records.

In my investigative journalism class at the University of Texas at Austin, students spend several months looking into these issues: the breakdown in a federal system meant to protect parents against international child abductions; whether public universities are violating federal labor laws; why Texas immigration judges have the highest denial rates for asylum seekers; what happens to women in Texas when lawmakers slash health care funding; the lives of poverty-stricken college students; how U.S. policies for assimilating refugees cause further suffering for newcomers to this country.

As the new year unfolds, and you worry whether the media's clucking prophecies ("You'll miss the news when it's gone") are about to come true, take solace in the fact that there are fresh legions of young journalistic foot soldiers who are clearly not averse to investigative news.

I knew a Dallas reporter who was nicknamed, behind his back, The Reverse Nostradamus. He wrote a column that often featured excerpts from stories that had appeared decades earlier. People said he was good at predicting the past. I'm taking a crack at predicting the future:

Journalism will survive in 2012 and the years to come. The hard stories will be covered, and covered well, by young Texas reporters who are doing it because it is a calling. With no reservations.

LEARN about the Mexodus project at txlo.com/Mexodus

LEARN about Light of Day at txlo.com/LightofDay

FORREST WILDER

FORREST FOR THE TREES

Get Rich or Kill the Planet Trying

AT LEAST A FEW TIMES A YEAR I HAVE REASON TO DRIVE THROUGH the sleepy South Texas town where I spent my first 14 years. Yorktown is one of those places where a new post office building is the event of the decade, and people like it that way. ¶But that was before The Boom. ¶In the past year or so, Yorktown has undergone a transformation thanks to the "fracking" frenzy that's swept the Eagle Ford Shale, a massive oil- and gas-bearing formation that stretches across South Texas. There's long been a little oil and gas production in DeWitt County. My family had a producing well for a time in the '80s.

The long-term costs of fracking have yet to be tallied.

This boom is different. Land-poor rednecks—and I mean that affectionately—I grew up with are now figuring what to do with monthly royalty checks in the five figures. Others, who lost the mineral-rights lottery, watch gloomily as their neighbors come back from the mailbox each month with a year's earnings.

The countryside, gently rolling hills of mesquite- and oak-dotted rangeland, now glows at night with flares and the lights of processing facilities. It's quite a sight— one replayed in towns across North Texas' Barnett Shale and South Texas' Eagle Ford.

To some it's the sight and smell of money. I think we can all understand the allure of an oil boom to an economically depressed area. In the early '90s, Yorktown boasted on official signs: "A Great Place to Live. Where Your Neighbors Still Care. The Heart of Future State Prison Expansion." There are only so many small towns that can goose their economies with antiques, hunting leases, or—all the rage now—for-profit immigrant detention centers. How can you possibly say " no" to winning the lottery?

But the long-term costs of fracking have yet to be tallied. There's compelling anecdotal evidence that fracking pollutes water wells. You may have seen the startling images, like those in the documentary *Gasland*, of people lighting their faucets on fire.

READ the Cornell study at txlo.com/cornell

The industry has bragged for years that there hasn't been a single documented case of the fracking process contaminating groundwater. It may be harder to maintain that line now that the EPA has released the results of a three-year study of groundwater in Pavilion, Wyoming. In December, the EPA said it had determined that pollution in an aquifer, including the carcinogen benzene, had likely migrated from nearby hydraulic fracturing activity.

But opponents of fracking shouldn't declare victory just yet. Gas producers are jumping on the fact that the study is only a draft, and attacking it on the merits. For example, Encana, the company implicated in the investigation, argues that the wells the EPA drilled tap into a reservoir bearing naturally occurring gas. "Natural gas developers didn't put the natural gas at the bottom of the EPA's deep monitoring wells, nature did," Encana wrote.

There are plenty of reasons not to trust the frackers, but they are correct that it's difficult to definitively link groundwater pollution to specific fracking activity. Wells employing hydraulic fracturing are typically drilled thousands of feet below the surface; it's hard to assess exactly what's going on that deep down.

And what if the EPA manages to prove conclusively that fracking polluted groundwater? The industry will attempt to shift the conversation to the thousands of fracks that haven't. Yes, even a single polluted well is a tragedy, but there are more lasting, planetary consequences to fracking that don't get talked about much.

It's the old problem of a single death being a tragedy and a million deaths being a statistic.

Fracking commits the crime of all fossil fuels: adding greenhouse gasses to an atmosphere already infested with them. If you believe the industry's propaganda, natural gas is the most realistic short- to mid-term panacea for climate change. Boone Pickens wants to convert the nation's truck fleet to natural gas. But here's the catch: gas produced from fracking may actually be dirtier than coal. In May, two Cornell University researchers published a bombshell study in *Climatic Change* that figured the carbon footprint of shale gas to be "at least 20 percent greater and perhaps more than twice" that of coal. That's because the fracking process releases up to twice as much methane gas—an extremely potent greenhouse gas—as conventional methods. More research is needed, but if true, the study could lead to a complete rethinking of fracking's costs.

All the money in the world won't save us from a hot planet.

EYE ON TEXAS **Evan Prince**

THE CENTRAL TEXAS SHOWDOWN *Temple*

The Central Texas Showdown is an annual bodybuilding and figure competition held in Temple. Competitors such as Tiffany Heilaneh perform a one-minute stage routine in which they are judged on their musculature, posing and overall look. Preparation for the contest begins months in advance with dieting, mental discipline and, of course, hours in the gym. Heilaneh warms up backstage before a performance.

See more of Austin photographer Evan Prince's work at www.texasobserver.org/eyeontexas. CALL FOR ENTRIES: Seeking Texas-based documentary photography that captures the strangest state. Please send inquiries to smith-richardson@texasobserver.org.

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