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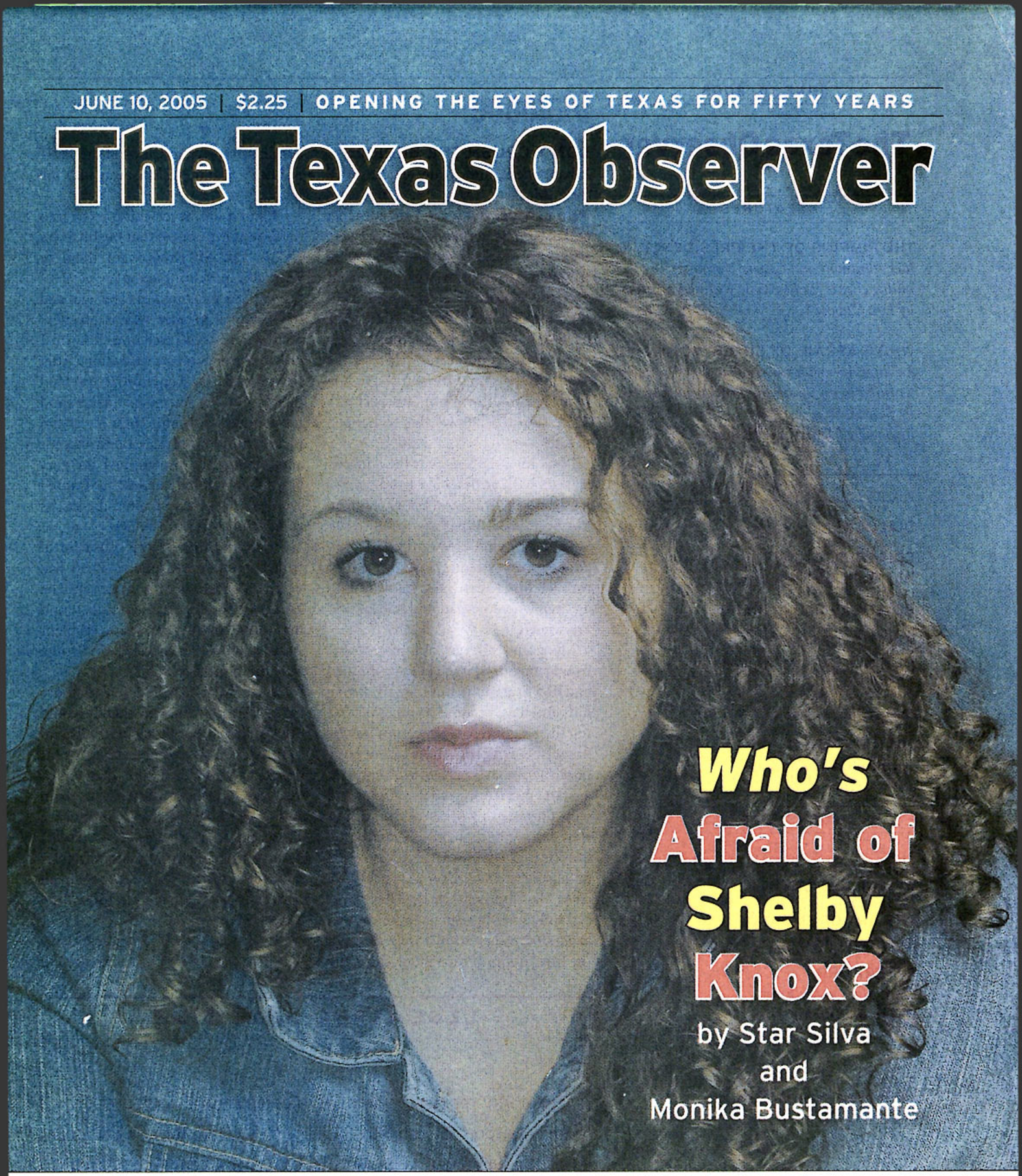
The Texas Observer



Who's Afraid of Shelby Knox?

by Star Silva and Monika Bustamante

Also Inside

Lou Dubose on the Pimping of the Presidency

Revenge of the Rural Republicans

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JUNE 10, 2005

The Texas Observer

FEATURES

THE PIMPING OF THE PRESIDENCY 8
Jack Abramoff and Grover Norquist billing clients for face time with G.W. Bush
by Lou Dubose

WHO'S AFRAID OF SHELBY KNOX? 12
An interview with the student from Lubbock featured in an upcoming PBS documentary
by Star Silva
Review by Monika Bustamante

DEPARTMENTS

DIALOGUE 2

EDITORIAL 3
War Against the Poor

POLITICAL INTELLIGENCE 4

CAPITOL OFFENSE 10
Revenge of the Rural Republicans

MOLLY IVINS 14
Bigotry, Texas-Style

JIM HIGHTOWER 15
The Real Credibility Gap

BOOKS & CULTURE

POETRY 21
by Marilyn Robertson

THE ART OF EL PASO 22
by Richard Baron

AFTERWORD 29
Once More to the River
by Erasmo Guerra

Cover photo by Artie Limmer

Dialogue

DON'T CRUSH THE BERRIES

I happened onto your article titled "Te$t Market," (May 13, 2005) and want to thank you for it. I am a teacher, and a damned good one. I've been very successful working with kids who are troubled, at-risk, in-crisis, or whatever the politically correct term is at the moment. But this is my last week of teaching. I cannot do the testing, scripted education, and "jam all the kids into the same size and shape box" type teaching. I will not be a part of a profession that allows this to happen to kids.

I will miss the kids, but the administration, both at the school and district level, and the state and the NCLB, will not be missed. What are we doing to your kids? What are we doing to our educational system? How did educators let Mr. Kress bully his way into an area where he had and still has no knowledge?

My grandchildren opt out of the testing in our state. They are bullied and lied to about it, but they are strong kids and have become stronger defending their right to an "education" that is not scripted or promoted by some large publisher. I have started working with a state grassroots organization, and will continue to work to get rid of our state testing and NCLB. Evidently the movers and shakers have never raised or observed a child, let alone taken a child development class. They most certainly have not spent more time in a classroom than to just walk through the front doors of the school, shake the administrator's hand, look at the TEST SCORES, and then slink away into the night.

Children are never going to fit into those neat little boxes that big business, NCLB, and Mr. Kress want them to. We're not mass-producing widgets!

I was at a meeting not long ago, and the keynote speaker was a businessman who was telling all of us how business was going to save education. After he finished, I asked him to pretend that he was an ice cream maker, and his company made the best ice cream in the country, only the finest ingredients, organically grown, just the very best of everything because he wanted each package of ice cream to be just as wonderful as the one before.

I then said that a large shipment of strawberries and raspberries had just been unloaded on his dock, and he came out to inspect them and found that some of the berries were blemished, some were shriveled, and some were discolored.

I asked what he would do with those berries. He informed me that he would discard them, that they did not live up to the standards that he had set for his product. I informed him that educators took whatever was sent to them and worked very hard to produce a good product—maybe not perfect because there were too many variables in a child's life for us to make them all perfect, to get them all into those little boxes.

Patricia R. Lang
Via e-mail

LEGE ISSUE NEXT TIME

The 79th regular session of the legislature ended–not a minute too soon–on May 30. It came too late for this edition of the *Observer*. Look for the *Observer*'s complete session wrap-up in our June 24th issue.

War Against the Poor

About the best low-income Texans can say of the regular session of the 79th Texas Legislature is that it could have been worse. An ill-conceived school finance plan, roundly condemned by every major education group in the state, failed. The only part of the plan that Speaker Tom Craddick (R-Midland) seemed to care about involved rejiggering how Texas collects money for education, which would allow the state to lower property taxes. Few would dispute that property taxes are too high and should be lowered, but Craddick's plan for accomplishing this consisted of raising the sales tax and other fees that disproportionately affect low-income Texans. Legislating against those who can least afford to take the hit—and not coincidentally, are least likely to complain and vote—is old hat to Texas' current leadership (most of whom identify themselves as Christian). Still, even without school finance, Republican leaders in the House and Senate managed to balance the budget on the backs of the poor. Their decisions could put essential services like health care and electricity out of reach for thousands of Texans.

Excessive heat is the number one weather-related killer, causing more fatalities per year than floods, lightning, tornadoes, hurricanes, winter storms, and extreme cold, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Those most at-risk of death are the elderly and young children. The nation watched in horror as a heat wave killed 700 prematurely in Chicago in 1995 and claimed between 7,000 and 15,000 in Paris in 2002. It is not uncommon for summer temperatures in Texas to stay as high as 100 degrees for days.

Until now, legislators were mindful of this. In 1999, the 76th Texas Legislature deregulated some electric utilities. Farsighted lawmakers understood that utility companies would view discounts to low-income customers as a burden in a deregulated market. They also recognized that electricity—particularly in cold and hot weather—is a necessity. So as part of the deregulation effort, they created the System Benefit Fund. The fund pools money to help poor families with their electric bills. Every Texas utility customer pays about 65 cents a month into the fund. That money pays for rate reductions to households below 125 percent of the federal poverty level (around $12,000 for a single person and $16,000 for a couple). About $200 million flows into the fund each year. Even the Association of Electric Companies of Texas endorses the concept.

At its peak, the fund provided rate discounts of 17 percent to help keep the lights on for about 780,000 Texans. Then in 2003, the Legislature raided the fund for $183 million to help fill a $10 billion budget gap. As a result, the fund aided only about 350,000 Texans. Last summer, 14,695 critical care electric customers who were seriously ill received disconnect notices, and 51 of them lost their electricity, according to the Texas Ratepayers' Organization to Save Energy.

This session, several legislators filed bills to restore the fund. The Republicans on the budget conference committee—Sen. Steve Ogden (R-Bryan), Sen. Kip Averitt (R-Waco), Sen. Bob Duncan (R-Lubbock), Rep. Jim Pitts (R-Waxahachie), Rep. Lois Kolkhorst (R-Brenham), and Rep. Dan Gattis (R-Georgetown)—thought otherwise. They raided the account balance of $427 million that is estimated for 2006-2007 and diverted it to general revenue. That's money Texas consumers will pay with the belief that it's going to help the needy. No longer will that be the case. Now at the very least, thousands of Texas families may have to live for extended periods in the dark. At worst, the state is one excessive heat wave away from a preventable tragedy. ■

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A Dutton for Punishment

FAMILY LAW FIASCO Rep. Harold Dutton (D-Houston) has a complicated relationship with his colleagues in the Texas House. Last session, Speaker Tom Craddick (R-Midland) gave Dutton the chairmanship of the Juvenile Justice and Family Issues Committee. Dutton, although a Democrat, is a member of the Republican team. He earns his place with small favors such as a timely disappearance during the tightly contested voucher vote. But the chairmanship Craddick offered Dutton is a poisoned chalice. The committee is a purgatory. The speaker placed Rep. Toby Goodman (R-Arlington), with whom he has a long antagonism, as vice-chair. He also appointed six other Democrats, several of whom spend much of their time trying to thwart the speaker. In a session seemingly full of family-issue obsessions like gay marriage, none of these "substantive" bills made it to Dutton's committee. Not that it would have mattered. The committee didn't meet very much. For some reason, throughout the session it could never quite muster a quorum. It was almost as though the members were staying away intentionally to spite their chairman. (This rolling boycott was confirmed privately by some committee members and denied publicly.)

Unlike other Craddick purgatories such as the Agriculture and Livestock Committee, Dutton's committee handles substantive legal issues, which require a fair amount of legislating. The attorney general's child support division had a laundry list of small corrections to the family code they needed passing this session. Their request formed the heart of House Bill 1449, which was scheduled to be heard in Dutton's committee.

Rep. Todd Smith (R-Euless) entered this tale of Dutton and HB 1449 in a roundabout but very personal way. Prior to the session, an acquaintance of Smith's wife told him a story that he knew all too well. Her husband, a wealthy lawyer, had left her and their children. The husband's child support payments were woefully low. In Texas, the maximum required by law in child support owed by a parent who makes $6,000 or more a month is 20 percent of $6,000 for a single child, 25 percent for two children, and 30 percent for three; or $1,200, $1,500, and $1,800 respectively. It doesn't matter if the parent earns more than $6,000 a month, that's the maximum. Despite inflation, that amount has stayed the same for 12 years. Efforts to raise it have faltered in the House where many of the members are wealthy men under child support orders.

Smith's own father, a lawyer, had left him and his sister in the care of their mother when he divorced his wife. His mom raised the two children alone in an apartment while working as a secretary. Smith offered a modest proposal to raise the income ceiling from $6,000 to $7,500. However, he couldn't get Chairman Dutton to set a hearing for his bill. Dutton himself is under a child support order from 1999 that affects his four young children. But when the full House voted on HB 1449, Dutton agreed to accept Smith's bill as an amendment. Smith even got the Senate sponsor of the AG's cleanup bill, Sen. Chris Harris (R-Houston), to go along.

Harris made minor changes to the bill on the Senate side. When it came back to the House, Dutton refused to accept Harris' changes and the bill went to a conference committee comprised of five members from each chamber. What happened next is a matter of some contention. Two sources say that at the last minute, Dutton tried to fold two controversial bills of his that had failed earlier in the session into HB 1449. In the Senate, Harris refused to go along and the bill died.

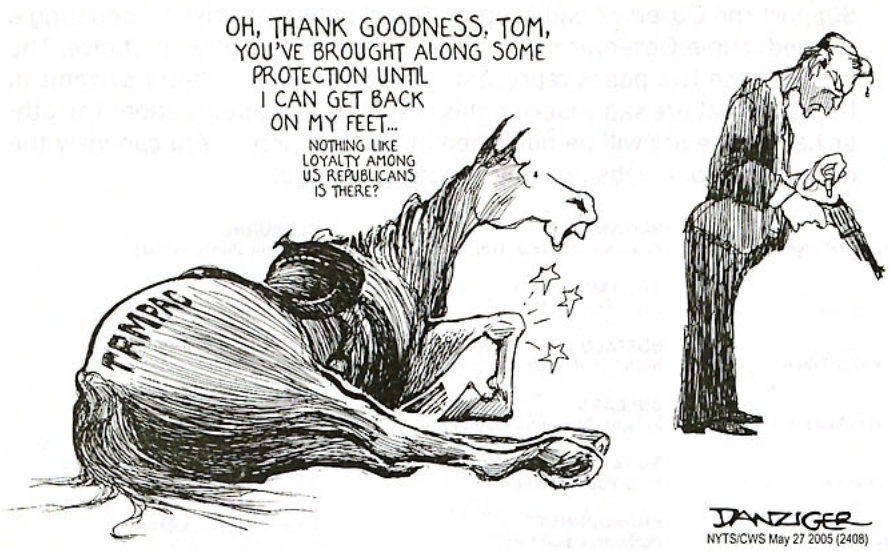
On the penultimate day of the session the *Observer* found Dutton standing off to the side of the House floor and asked what had happened with HB 1449. He claimed not to know why the legislation had died in the Senate. The *Observer* then asked whether his own child support order might explain why it has taken so long to raise the child support level. "What I have going on personally doesn't have a motherfucking thing to do with nothing," Dutton said. "If that's what you are after, fuck you."

He then turned and walked into the members' lounge.

TOMMY, CAN YOU HEAR HER? Carmencita Abad has a question for Tom DeLay. Recently the 45-year-old Philippine-born union organizer and lecturer for the non-profit organization Global Exchange traveled to Houston "to ask Mr. Tom DeLay why someone as powerful as he can ignore and even perpetuate the system of sweatshops."

On May 31, the Greater Houston Partnership organized a little luncheon love-fest for the beleaguered U.S. House Majority leader at the Westin Galleria Hotel. Across the hall, another group of Houston partners—the Harris County AFL-CIO and Houston Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice—were honoring a sweatshop survivor, Carmencita Abad. Although they have never met, Abad and DeLay have a history that goes way back. From January 1993 to January 1999, Abad worked in Saipan in the Northern Mariana Islands as a contract laborer for the Sako Corporation, which manufactured clothing for such name brands as GAP, Levi, and Old Navy. After reading an ad in a Philippine newspaper, Abad paid $2,500 up front to a local recruiter, flew to Saipan, and began working 14-hour days, seven days a week. She lived with 14 other women who shared one toilet and one shower in company-provided barracks with no air conditioning and no hot water. She earned $2.15 an hour (later raised to $3.05) to help support her family back in Manila.

TRMPAC (Texans for a Republican Majority)(er... Tom DeLay) Found Guilty



When she tried to organize a union, "thinking about having betterment in working conditions," as she explained in a recent telephone interview, Sako fired her. As *Observer* readers will recall, (see "Stranger Than Paradise," September 10, 2004), the congressman from Sugar Land once famously described the economics of manufacturing in the U.S. commonwealth as "a perfect Petri dish of capitalism ... like my own Galapagos Island."

After a whirlwind junket to the Marianas during the 1997-1998 winter holidays, DeLay also declared that he could find "no evidence" of sweatshop conditions in Saipan and challenged critics to produce one person or one story to prove him wrong. Well, ask and ye shall receive. There she was, so many years later, and just across the hall.

CONSUMERS GET HOUSED, AGAIN

No one personifies the powerful homebuilding industry in Texas better than Bob Perry. The reclusive Houston housing magnate is the owner of Perry Homes, which constructs so many of the look-alike suburban dwellings sprouting up around the state. He's also Texas' most prolific contributor to political campaigns—to the tune of $6.9 million since 2001, almost exclusively to the GOP. So you have to wonder: Is Bob Perry's corporate attorney the best person to help run the state agency regulating the homebuilding industry?

The Texas Senate sure thinks so.

Perry's corporate attorney is John Krugh. In 2003, he helped write the legislation that created the Texas Residential Construction Commission (TRCC). Ideally, the supposedly pro-consumer agency would help settle disputes between builders and homeowners, and would license and regulate the home construction sector. That was pretty much a fantasy. The TRCC is run by and for the politically powerful building industry (see "The Agency That Bob Perry Built," February 4, 2005). Krugh was appointed one of the agency's nine commissioners by Gov. Rick Perry (no relation to Bob Perry, at least genetically).

In May, all nine commissioners at the TRCC came up for Senate confirmation. Krugh's nomination, in particular, drew fierce opposition from state Sen. Robert Duncan (R-Lubbock). This was how Duncan summed up the agency's work when the TRCC commissioners came before the Senate Nominations Committee on May 16: "[TRCC] appear[s] to the public to be a regulatory body, when in fact, the people really being regulated are the consumers, not the builders," Duncan said. This elicited a sharp response from Commissioner Paulo Flores, who insisted that he is, in fact, not in the "pocket of the building industry."

Duncan saved his harshest rhetoric for Krugh. The Lubbock Republican was upset that his wide-ranging TRCC reform bill—which would have made the commission slightly more consumer friendly—never even received a committee hearing this session. Duncan blamed the homebuilding industry and "members of the commission" (read: Krugh) for killing his bill. Krugh acknowledges that he didn't like 30 percent of Duncan's legislation, including a section forcing homebuilders to disclose when new homes haven't been inspected.

Duncan shot back at Krugh: "I'm asking you to take off your builder hat, if you can do that. When you're sitting on this commission ... you have to make decisions based on what's in the best interest of the state of Texas, not just what's in the best interest of the builders. Now, taking off your builder hat ... do you not think it's a good thing for a consumer to know that their house hasn't been inspected?"

Krugh conceded, "Once you put it that way, I agree with you, yes sir."

Duncan: "But you opposed that provision in the bill?"

Krugh: "'Opposed' is awfully strong. I had objections to portions of it."

"Seems to be opposed, to me," Duncan said.

When the commissioners' nominations went before the full Senate on May 26, Duncan, along with Democrats Royce West of Dallas and Eliot Shapleigh of El Paso, spoke forcefully against Krugh's confirmation. The Senate did take the unusual step of separating Krugh from the other nominees for an individual confirmation vote. Duncan said before the final vote that the Senate needed to "send a message ... the Texas Association of Builders is a good organization, but they don't run the Texas Senate."

Uh, Senator, we beg to differ. The Senate confirmed Krugh by a vote of 24-7—four "no" votes short of blocking his nomination. Krugh's term runs until 2009. ■

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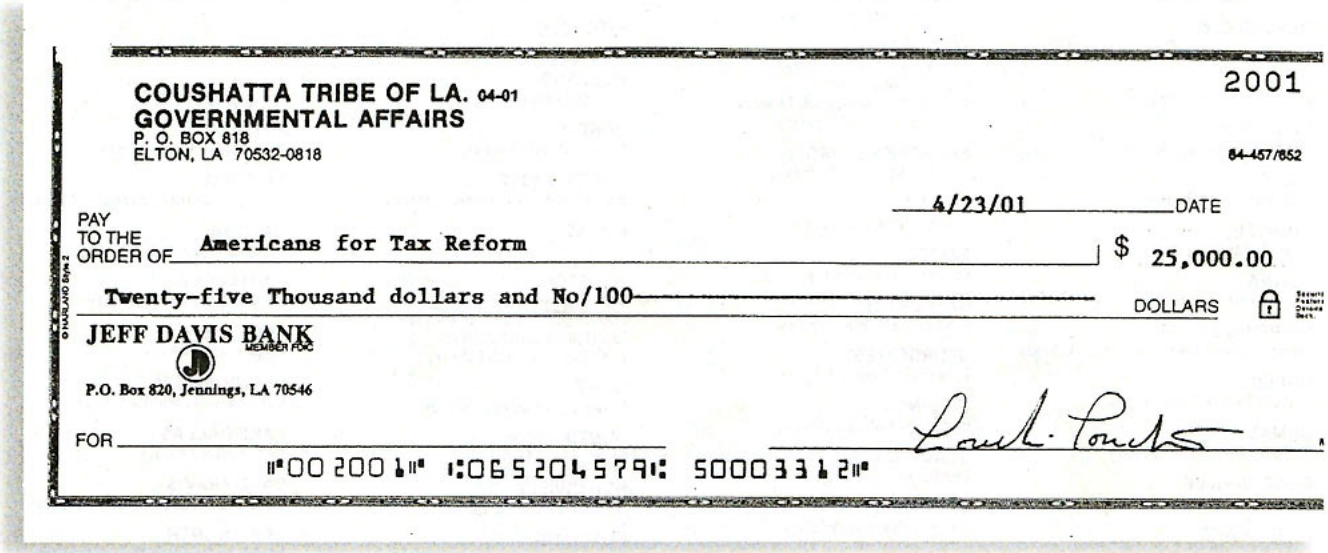
FEATURE

The Pimping of the Presidency

Jack Abramoff and Grover Norquist Billing Clients for Face Time with G. W. Bush

BY LOU DUBOSE



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PAY TO THE ORDER OF Americans for Tax Reform $ 25,000.00

Twenty-five Thousand dollars and No/100 DOLLARS

JEFF DAVIS BANK
MEMBER FDIC
P.O. Box 820, Jennings, LA 70546

FOR

Lou L. Dubose

⑈00 200 6⑈ ⑆065 204 579⑆ 5000 33 6 2⑈

Four months after he took the oath of office in 2001, President George W. Bush was the attraction, and the White House the venue, for a fundraiser organized by the alleged perpetrator of the largest billing fraud in the history of corporate lobbying. In May 2001, Jack Abramoff's lobbying client book was worth $4.1 million in annual billing for the Greenberg Traurig law firm. He was a friend of Bush advisor Karl Rove. He was a Bush "Pioneer," delivering at least $100,000 in bundled contributions to the 2000 campaign. He had just concluded his work on the Bush Transition Team as an advisor to the Department of the Interior. He had sent his personal assistant Susan Ralston to the White House to work as Rove's personal assistant. He was a close friend, advisor, and high-dollar fundraiser for the most powerful man in Congress, Tom DeLay. Abramoff was so closely tied to the Bush Administration that he could, and did, charge two of his clients $25,000 for a White House lunch date and a meeting with the President. From the same two clients he took to the White House in May 2001, Abramoff also obtained $2.5 million in contributions for a non-profit foundation he and his wife operated.

Abramoff's White House guests were the chiefs of two of the six casino-rich Indian tribes he and his partner Mike Scanlon ultimately billed $82 million for services tribal leaders now claim were never performed or were improperly performed. Together the six tribes would make $10 million in political contributions, at Abramoff's direction, almost all of it to Republican campaigns of his choosing. On May 9, 2001, when he ushered the two tribal chiefs into the White House to meet the President, *The Washington Post* story that would end his lobbying career and begin two Senate Committee investigations was three years away. (When the *Post* story broke in February 2004, however, Abramoff and Scanlon, a former Tom DeLay press aide, were already targets of a U.S. Attorney's investigation in Washington.)

Abramoff brought the Coushatta and Choctaw chiefs to Washington at the request of Grover Norquist. Norquist is founder and director of Americans for Tax Reform, the advocacy group committed to slashing taxes until the federal government is so small you "can drown it in the bathtub." Norquist started ATR in 1985. His power increased exponentially in 1994, when Republicans took control of the House of Representatives and he collaborated with then-Majority Whip Tom DeLay to launch the "K Street Project"—a coordinated campaign to compel lobbyists to contribute only to Republican candidates and ultimately to hire only Republicans. Like Abramoff and Rove, Norquist considered George Bush's victory over Al Gore the culmination of a project the three Washington insiders started 30 years ago as national leaders of the College Republicans.

Since the *Post*'s Susan Schmidt broke the Jack Abramoff story, the media has focused on the stunning $82 million Abramoff and Scanlon billed six tribes for lobbying and public relations work. Far less attention has been paid to the political contributions, by Abramoff's account $10 million, made by the six tribes. That piece of the story involves the K Street Project, which moves the money of corporate lobbyists and their

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April 19, 2001

FAX COVER SHEET

FAX NUMBER TRANSMITTED TO: (337) 584-[redacted]

To: Erick LaRocque
Of: Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana
From: Kathryn Fowler Van Hoof KFV
Client/Matter: Check request for White House function sponsorship

CONFIDENTIAL

Attached is an email from Jack Abramoff with the firm of Greenberg Traurig. The chairman has agreed for the tribe to be one of the four sponsors of and participate in a White House event on behalf of the Americans for Tax Reform, which is being held on May 9, 2001 in Washington, DC.

Please immediately prepare a check made payable to Americans for Tax Reform in the amount of $25,000.00 and forward to my office by Federal Express. I will then Fed-X the check to Mr. Abramoff.

Cc: Chairman Lovelin Poncho

Approved: Lovelin Poncho
Chairman Lovelin Poncho
Date: 4/19/01

Subj: **FW: May 9 Event in Washington**
Date: 04/19/2001 12:24:19 AM Central Daylight Time
From: *abramoffj@*[redacted]
To: *kvanhoof@*[redacted]
File: **May 9 Event Schedule.doc** (202752 bytes) DL Time (28800 bps): < 2

Americans for Tax Reform is bringing together the speakers of all Republican led legislatures for a meeting with Bush and the Congressional leadership. They have requested sponsorship ($25K) from only four groups. Two of them will be major corporations and one will be Choctaw. Chief Martin will be coming to the event (I expect). I told them that I would ask you guys to participate. The exposure would be incredible and would be very helpful. One of the things we need to do is get the leaders of the tribe (ideally the Chief) in front of the President as much as possible. Please let me know as soon as you can. Thanks.

-----Original Message-----
From: Grover Norquist
Sent: Wednesday, April 18, 2001 5:25 PM
To: Jack Abramoff
Cc: Courtney Roseman
Subject: FW: May 9 Event in Washington

<<May 9 Event Schedule.doc>>

Jack:
Here is the tentative schedule of events. We would be honored if a representative for the Coushatta Tribe and you could come to the White House meeting and the lunch and dinner. Please get me their full name DOB, SSN for the White House.
Thank you so much for all of your help!

clients into the accounts of Republican candidates, PACs, and issue advocacy groups.

Republican Campaign Accounts

Abramoff advised tribal leaders that the contributions were the cost of doing business in Washington, where he could protect them from other tribes trying to open casinos to compete with those that already had them. He sent orders for the checks to be cut, designating each recipient. On March 6, 2002, for example, Coushatta Tribal Council Chair Lovelin Poncho followed Abramoff's orders and disbursed $336,300 in tribal funds, according to tribal accounting ledgers obtained by the *Observer*.

The Coushattas, a southwest Louisiana tribe of 837 members, operate a casino that does an estimated $300 million in annual business. The $32 million they paid Abramoff and Scanlon makes the tribe the largest victim of the fraud their lawyers now allege in a lawsuit filed by Texas plaintiff's firm Provost Umphrey. The tribe also contributed what tribal council member David Sickey said was probably "many millions" of dollars to political causes and charities designated by Abramoff.

Since we first reported the White House ATR fundraiser and the $1 million contribution to the Capital Athletic Foundation (see "K Street Croupiers," November 19, 2004), the Coushattas, speaking through Austin attorneys at Hance, Scarborough, Wright, Ginsburg & Brusilow, and through Louisiana political consultant Roy Fletcher, have vociferously denied that tribal Chairman Poncho visited the White House after contributing $25,000 to ATR. They also denied the $1 million contribution to Abramoff's foundation. Recently the story has changed. Or at least the version told by the majority that controls the council has begun to change. Two minority members of the five-seat council have pointed to the pay-to-play meeting with

—continued on page 20

Revenge of the Rural Republicans

Rep. Carter Casteel (R-New Braunfels) leads the charge.

photos courtesy of the Texas House Photography Department

Rep. Carter Casteel (R-New Braunfels) stands before her colleagues to offer an amendment that could endanger her political career. "So, I've made a decision," she tells them. "It may send me home."

The Texas Legislature is usually not a place for acts of political bravery, especially of late. Three years ago, a corporate-backed GOP campaign stacked the House with legislators selected, whenever possible, to be radical ideologues pliant to special interests. Republican representatives were defined by their fear of crossing a vengeful leadership ready to marshal lobby money against them if they didn't cooperate. In 2003, Speaker Tom Craddick (R-Midland) used his new majority to ram through a list of action items coveted by major campaign contributors. But on the evening of May 23, in the 79th Legislature, there in the House chamber, Republican moderates like Casteel did the unthinkable, they followed their conscience and their constituents instead of their speaker.

Casteel hoped to amend Senate Bill 422, an innocuous-sounding bill to reauthorize the Texas Education Agency. But tucked inside the reauthorization legislation was one of Craddick's only priorities for the session: a pilot school voucher plan. Under the proposal, the state would siphon off $600 million in public education money to be given to select students in eight inner-city school districts as "vouchers" for private school attendance. There is no groundswell of demand for vouchers in these areas or anywhere else in Texas—even the state Republican Party has qualms—but that didn't matter. Delivering a successful vote on vouchers in the House was Craddick's last unpaid debt from the 2002 campaign.

Casteel, who worked as a public school teacher for 17 years, explains why she is offering an amendment that would strip the voucher plan from the bill. The 63-year-old Casteel often presents herself as a proud grandparent. It's a standard politician's trope that in her case is boosted by a shock of white hair and a folksy West Texas accent. Yet tonight Casteel is all fire and scalding wit, musing about her role on the floor of the Texas House and whether it's "to represent someone who visited with me with a lot of influence and power and money" or to "represent the people in my district who called me and wrote to me." She notes that voucher proponents are circulating an opinion piece that calls for abolishing public schools in favor of private schools. "Today's public schools have forfeited their right to exist," wrote David Gelernter, a computer science professor from Yale, in an article that ran in the *Austin American-Statesman*. "Let's get rid of them."

"Baloney! Baloney!" Casteel cries in response. "We have a Texas Constitution that says it's up to us to educate public children—all children and not take money away from the public school system."

Rep. Bob Griggs (R-North Richland Hills) approaches the back microphone for a friendly question. Griggs is a former principal and school superintendent. In many parts of rural Texas, where schools and prisons are the only economic engines, the school superintendent is one of the most powerful people in the county. As one rural House member, who wishes to remain anonymous, will say after the debate: "I could fuck a goat and my constituents might forgive me, but I could never mess with the public schools in my district."

Griggs cups his hand to his ear. "I'm hearing a noise that resembles that suction sound," he says. "If I could run a very successful [private] school on a minimum amount of money, it might force me out of retirement, make me a very wealthy man." Griggs leads Casteel through all the ways private schools receiving public voucher money wouldn't be accountable. They don't have to be accredited. They don't have to comply with class size limits. They don't have to take state exams. They don't need certified teachers. ("We've made [public schools] so accountable that they can't go to the bathroom without checking five boxes," Casteel would later say. "We're going to give this huge money drain to private schools with no accountability, it doesn't make sense to me.")

Griggs muses some more about his future private school and how he'd rent a warehouse with a big play area. He'd raid the local McDonald's for his workforce. "I might put 40, 50, 60 students with this hired babysitter—I mean this aide—that I'm going to hire at minimum wage," he says. And don't worry about the parents. "They are going to be very happy at my academy because we are going to win the state championship every year. I am going to spend my money hiring a great coach."

Griggs has little to lose in taunting Craddick and his pro-voucher leadership. The 56-year-old Republican already actively bucked the speaker on a critical school finance vote earlier in the session, and his hostility to vouchers is well known. But other House Republicans, less sure, need only look to the gallery for reminders of how this institution really works. Sitting next to each other are John Colyandro and Brooke Rollins. Colyandro is the research director of the Texas Conservative Coalition Research Institute. He's also under criminal indictment for his role as executive director of Texans for a Republican Majority, the Tom DeLay-founded PAC that helped coordinate the 2002 GOP campaign. Rollins heads the idea factory for the state's Republican leadership, the Texas Public Policy Foundation (TPPF). (Earlier in the day, outside the chamber coordinating the pro-voucher lobby campaign was Bill Ceverha—the former treasurer of TRMPAC—who lobbied this session without registering as required by law. Ceverha was recently hit with a $197,000 civil judgment for his role in 2002, which he plans to appeal.) And somewhere in the Capitol complex—in the speaker's private quarters or sitting with the governor, perhaps—is the grand puppeteer of this pro-voucher push.

Multi-millionaire doctor Jim Leininger has made the creation of voucher programs in Texas—and indeed around the nation—one of his life's passions. He gave $142,500 to TRMPAC in 2002. He's a patron and board member of TPPF. In the 2002 election cycle he gave a total of $1.35 million, almost entirely to GOP candidates. In 2004, he gave $1.31 million. The hospital equipment magnate has also founded and funded his own voucher program in San Antonio and bankrolled a minority "grassroots" pro-voucher advocacy group (see "One Man Groundswell," April 29, 2005). Leininger drops huge sums on House races and has a knack for maximizing his dollars while he does it. He even owns a mail house that sends out campaign flyers so he can get some of his political contributions back.

The doctor has spent some of the previous week and much of this Monday meeting with wavering Republicans in the suite of offices kept by the speaker behind the House chamber. Gov. Rick Perry and Craddick also met with members. Leininger gave Texans for Rick Perry $62,968 in 2004. The governor is going to need a lot more of that money if U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison challenges him.

A sampling of those Republicans whom Leininger talked with say the good doctor was polite and focused on policy. They say he extolled the power of the market. Competing for voucher money would force public schools to improve. He also talked about the dire needs of inner-city public schools.

Following Carter Casteel on the House floor, Rep. Rob Eissler (R-The Woodlands) presents a slightly less polished, although perhaps more revealing, version of the leadership's position. "This bill allows for demographically challenged people to get a voucher, to get a scholarship out of a low-performing public school," he says. "It allows market forces to shape their education."

The sudden Republican concern for the welfare of their constituents leaves representatives from minority districts more than a little skeptical. Former principal and current Houston Democratic Rep. Alma Alan points out that the voucher would be about $7,000 and a good private school can cost upward of $26,000. Rep. Sylvester Turner (D-Houston) asks repeatedly in his sonorous voice why this "pilot project" is limited to minority districts. "I am getting a little concerned with people who are willing to impose it on others but are not willing to impose it upon themselves."

Finally, debate is cut off. It's time to vote on the motion to table Casteel's amendment. Tiny green and red lights light up on the large voting boards at the front of the chamber. Craddick looks up and realizes what's happening. "Show the chair voting aye," he says. By tradition, the speaker rarely votes. When Craddick says those words, it is more than a vote. This issue is important to the leadership, to Craddick personally. For Republicans in the House, it's akin to a direct order from their commander. To disobey is to risk retaliation: Your bills may no longer reach the floor; funding for a new road in your district

—continued on page 16

Who's Afraid of Shelby Knox?

Sex, textbooks, and the culture wars—lessons from Lubbock

BY STAR SILVA

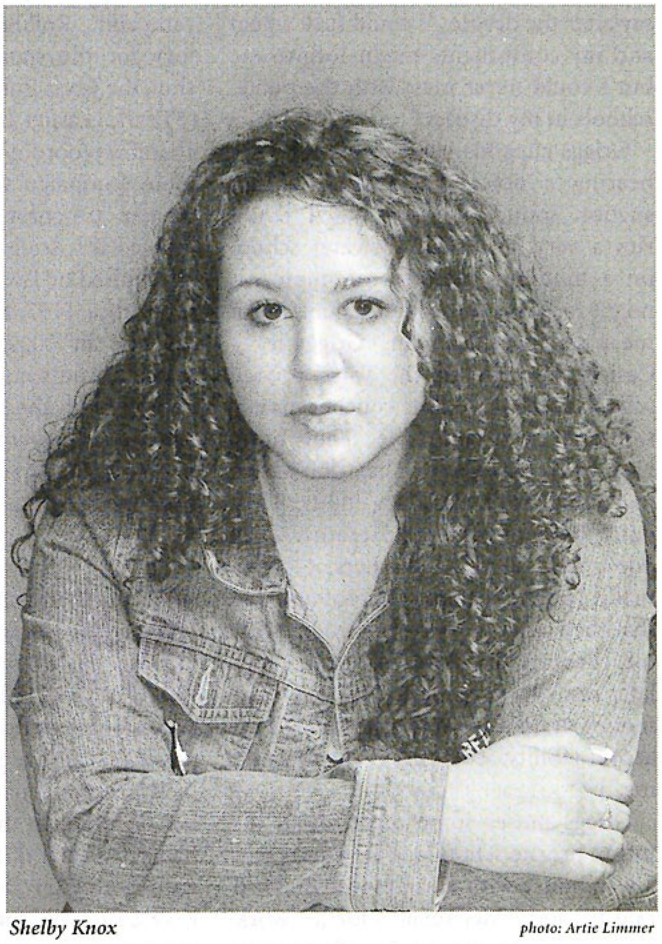
I attended high school in Corpus Christi in the late 1990s, not so long ago. In 1995 Nueces County had the nation's highest teenage pregnancy rate—nearly one in 10 births were born to young women aged 13-17. When I was in school, then-governor George W. Bush implemented sexual abstinence instruction as the only way to prevent teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Whereas Planned Parenthood once came to our schools and taught students where to obtain and how to use contraceptives, now we were compelled to sit through sensationalist hour-long programs advocating sexual "purity" and condemning the false advertising of condoms.

Once a year an abstinence-only organization lectured during our English class. I remember one particular demonstrator, symbolically using two hearts cleanly cut from aluminum foil to represent two starry-eyed lovers. "One is Ken and one is Barbie," she explained solemnly. She joined them and continued, "They got together..." The woman crumpled the foil into a ball "...and had sex, which is the closest you can be to a person." Then she tried to unravel the wad of aluminum, saying, "But then they broke up, and Barbie's heart looked like this." A damaged and wrinkly mess. "How do you think her future husband will feel? How do you think her self-esteem looks now?" To top it all off, the petite woman continued dramatically, "Let me tell you something. I am 30 years old. And I am still a virgin." [We secretly snickered at her.]

High schoolers (and an increasing number of middle schoolers) throughout Texas still have similar experiences. Lubbock is no exception. But in Lubbock, Shelby Knox's nascent bullshit detector promptly notified her that she and her peers were being not only patronized, but endangered. Eliminating valuable information about contraceptives and STDs was irresponsible. Her transformation into a high school leader is the subject of a documentary, The Education of Shelby Knox, *that had its Texas premier at Austin's South by Southwest Film Festival and will be broadcast nationally on PBS later this month.*

Recently, she finished her first year at the University of Texas at Austin, where she studies political science and is active in the pro-choice organization Voices for Choice, as well as the Campus Democrats. She is currently writing for The F-Word, *an online collegiate feminist magazine (www.thef-wordzine.com) and has also worked with Planned Parenthood in efforts to defeat legislation that would allow pharmacists to refuse to fill prescriptions for contraceptives.*

I spoke with Shelby before she returned to Lubbock this summer. The following is an excerpt of the interview.



Shelby Knox photo: Artie Limmer

TO: *The film conveys a steadily-increasing awareness of the problems in the world around you. How is it that you developed such a keen social consciousness to note these problems and find solutions? Was it your upbringing that gave you a different perspective, as opposed to those of other apathetic or politically ignorant youth?*

Shelby Knox: I don't think it makes me different. Basically I started seeing girls disappear. They would get pregnant and be forced to go to a special school for pregnant high-school girls. I saw the stigma of [people who pointed out], "She's a slut, but he got her pregnant, so he's a player."

And how unfair it was! When you trace it back to the root it was that we weren't getting more sex education. One girl told

—continued on page 18

THE EDUCATION OF SHELBY KNOX | BY MONIKA BUSTAMANTE

The issues at play are deftly dished out within the first few moments of Rose Rosenblatt and Marion Lipschutz's stirring documentary, *The Education of Shelby Knox*. Shelby's story is set in Lubbock, well-known as a southern stronghold of Republican Christian values. Opening scenes are rife with contradictions, depicting twangy-accented teens raunchily discussing sex in strip mall parking lots overshadowed by church signs and anti-abortion billboards. Young men harass and skirmish with young women, who look as if they are unsure of whether they're titillated or terrorized. Lubbock is a city in crisis that defiantly ignores its soaring teen pregnancy and sexually-transmitted disease rates and clings desperately to its obviously inadequate high school sex education curriculum—abstinence.

Enter Shelby. We meet her in her sophomore year as she becomes increasingly interested in her school district's need for comprehensive sex education, a cause at odds with her upbringing and faith. As a freshman, she took a pledge of abstinence, promising her parents that she would not have sex before marriage. However, as Shelby matures, her intelligence and sensitivity make two things obvious to her: The seeming simplicity of abstinence is failing the teenagers of her community, and her own moral values are becoming more difficult to manage. From a seat on the Lubbock Youth Commission, she sets about persuading the school board and the town at large to reconsider their policies. This leads to confrontation with several notable characters, including a fellow teen aiming for a political career (Corey Nichols, who wins mayorship of the Youth Commission over Shelby's bid for the position), the Lubbock Independent School District Superintendent (later revealed to be involved in a sex scandal), and Pastor Ed Ainsworth, who inducted Shelby into True Love Waits, a program that encourages teenagers to "maintain sexual purity."

Pastor Ainsworth's role in Shelby's life is particularly well-documented. He seems to make it part of his mission to catch the youth of Lubbock at their seediest, frequently descending on them as they frolic in late night parking lot parties. As Shelby's interest in sex education deepens, it comes to encompass a larger issue, that of the Gay-Straight Alliance in Lubbock. Shelby grapples with her Baptist education, which tells her that her newfound friends are sinners even as she finds their cause worthy of defense. Her co-members on the Commission spout inaccurate, homophobic statistics to defend their decision to exclude the group from school campuses. Shelby turns to Ainsworth for counsel, but his self-righteous sermonizing fails to move her. Nor does her conservative Republican parents' shaky compliance with her participation reassure her—she must discover that her developing moral and political beliefs will both isolate and liberate her.

This, at its heart, is the quagmire we're faced with... to define and defend our own beliefs, often in the face of radical opposition.

Though the documentary at times lacks focus (and features a less-than-stellar soundtrack), it shines when concentrating on Shelby's personal growth and deepening understanding of politics and bureaucracy. We see her mature from a young teen to a high school graduate, her face and body transforming in much the same way as her mind. Whereas she occasionally seems to be acting for the camera in the early months, by her senior year, Shelby is self-possessed, her awkwardness replaced with poise. Interestingly, the film never approaches Shelby's own sex life (or lack of it) after her promise to remain chaste. Further, the documentary wraps very suddenly, and we are given only brief summaries of some of the largest topics. It would have served the film well to have been a bit longer, if only to give those issues their due.

Still, what makes *The Education of Shelby Knox* so intriguing are the ways in which it both challenges and affirms preconceived notions—of Christianity, of Republicans and Democrats, of homosexuals, of contemporary teenagers, and of the South. Rosenblatt and Lipschutz, both New Yorkers, attest to their own frequent surprise at how their ideas of Shelby and her friends and family often shifted. Having searched somewhat fruitlessly nationwide for an ideal location to shoot a documentary on the subject that intrigued them (the filmmakers' production company, InCite Pictures and Cine Qua Non, has produced several documentaries dealing with American views on sex), they arrived in Texas after receiving an invitation from the Lubbock Youth Commission's Youth Advisor. Choosing Shelby as a subject was a no-brainer, as her interest in politics, her natural showmanship, and her Baptist beliefs created an intriguing mix with her commitment to sex education. And as the crux of the film, Shelby's relationship with her family represents the dichotomy most eloquently. Her parents, her mother in particular, are at turns amused, shocked, tested, and inspired by their typically moody teenager. It's a testament to Shelby's parents that they neither subdue her passion nor judge her rapidly developing beliefs, even when they are contrary to their own.

By the film's end, her Christian beliefs remain intact, though beleaguered and incontrovertibly redefined. This, at its heart, is the quagmire we're faced with as a population, more so now than at any time in recent memory—to define and defend our own beliefs, often in the face of radical opposition, even from our own families and personal histories. ■

Monika Bustamante is a writer in Austin.

Bigotry, Texas-Style

Here in the National Laboratory for Bad Government, it's "duck and cover" time—the Legislature is in session. The "Can't Shake Your Booty" bill passed the House, saving us all from the scourge of sexy cheerleaders. But nothing else is getting done. The state is being run by people who do not know how to govern. Keep in mind that based on past form, whatever lunacy is going on in Texas will eventually sweep the country.

Rarely are the words of one state legislator worth national attention, but when Senfronia Thompson, a black representative from Houston, stalks to the back mike with a certain "get out of my way" look in her eye, it's, Katie, bar the door. Here is Thompson speaking against the Legislature's recent folly of putting a superfluous anti-gay marriage measure into the state constitution:

"I have been a member of this august body for three decades, and today is one of the all-time low points. We are going in the wrong direction, in the direction of hate and fear and discrimination. Members, we all know what this is about; this is the politics of divisiveness at its worst, a wedge issue that is meant to divide.

"Members, this is a distraction from the real things we need to be working on. At the end of this session, this Legislature, this leadership, will not be able to deliver the people of Texas fundamental and fair answers to the pressing issues of our day.

"Let's look at what this amendment does not do. It does not give one Texas citizen meaningful tax relief. It does not reform or fully fund our education system. It does not restore one child to CHIP [Children's Health Insurance Program] who was cut from health insurance last session. It does not put one dime into raising Texas' Third World access to health care. It does not do one thing to care for or protect one elderly person or one child in this state. In fact, it does not even do anything to protect one marriage.

> 'I have listened to the arguments. I have listened to all the crap... this amendment [is] blowing smoke to fuel the hell-fire flames of bigotry.'

"Members, this bill is about hate and fear and discrimination. ... When I was a small girl, white folks used to talk about 'protecting the institution of marriage' as well. What they meant was if people of my color tried to marry people of Mr. Chisum's color, you'd often find the people of my color hanging from a tree. ... Fifty years ago, white folks thought interracial marriages were a threat to the institution of marriage.

"Members, I'm a Christian and a proud Christian. I read the good book and do my best to live by it. I have never read the verse where it says, 'Gay people can't marry.' I have never read the verse where it says, 'Thou shalt discriminate against those not like me.' I have never read the verse where it says, 'Let's base our public policy on hate and fear and discrimination.' Christianity to me is love and hope and faith and forgiveness—not hate and discrimination.

"I have served in this body a lot of years, and I have seen a lot of promises broken. ... So ... now that blacks and women have equal rights, you turn your hatred to homosexuals, and you still use your misguided reading of the Bible to justify your hatred. You want to pass this ridiculous amendment so you can go home and brag—brag about what? Declare that you saved the people of Texas from what?

"Persons of the same sex cannot get married in this state now. Texas law does not now recognize same-sex marriages, civil unions, religious unions, domestic partnerships, contractual arrangements or Christian blessings entered into in this state—or anywhere else on this planet Earth.

"If you want to make your hateful political statements, then that is one thing, but the Chisum amendment does real harm. It repeals the contracts that many single people have paid thousands of dollars to purchase to obtain medical powers of attorney, hospital visitation, joint ownership and support agreements. You have lost your way. This is obscene. ...

"I thought we would be debating economic development, property tax relief, protecting seniors' pensions, and stem cell research to save lives of Texans who are waiting for a more abundant life. Instead we are wasting this body's time with this political stunt that is nothing more than constitutionalizing discrimination. The prejudices exhibited by members of this body disgust me.

"Last week, Republicans used a political wedge issue to pull kids—sweet little vulnerable kids—out of the homes of loving parents and put them back in a state orphanage just because those parents are gay. That's disgusting.

"I have listened to the arguments. I have listened to all of the crap. ... I want you to know that this amendment [is] blowing smoke to fuel the hell-fire flames of bigotry." ■

Molly Ivins is a nationally syndicated columnist. Her most recent book with Lou Dubose is Bushwhacked: Life in George W. Bush's America. *(Random House).*

The Real Credibility Gap

Scott McClellan, W.'s mouthpiece, piled up a mountain of ironies when he lashed out at *Newsweek* for its piece about the desecration of the Koran by U.S. guards at Guantanamo. Scottie was outraged, he said, because *Newsweek* editors initially refused to retract the story after finding a factual flaw in it. Filled with righteous indignation, he lectured about standards of truth, about relying on only one source, and about credibility. Hooboy—where to start? How about with the entire pack of lies that the Bushites used to plunge American troops into the war and ongoing occupation of Iraq? Even though the White House has now been forced to admit that it couldn't find any Weapons of Mass Destruction or a link between Al Qaeda and Saddam, we still have received no retraction of their story or apology for damaging U.S. credibility.

Also, you might recall that the Bushites' untrue story about a "mobile biological weapons lab" in Iraq was not only based on a single source, but the source was a guy that U.S. intelligence never interviewed! And when Scott wailed about *Newsweek* relying on only one source, he didn't add that the source is a top-ranking official in Bush's own Pentagon, or that Pentagon officials were shown the story before publication and raised no objection to its truthfulness. Then there's the general tone of glee over getting to beat up on *Newsweek*, part of the despised "liberal media." But wait—the author of *Newsweek's* piece is a hero to the right wing, the guy who broke the Monica Lewinsky story.

One more irony: While Scottie is piously browbeating *Newsweek*, note that he does not and cannot say that the desecration charge itself is untrue.

WORKING FOR THE CIA George "The Liberator" Bush brought democracy to Iraq, right? He certainly takes every opportunity to tell us so, pointing to that country's newly-elected government that, he says, now is the sovereign authority in charge of Iraq's destiny. But how sovereign is it, really? For example, can you imagine considering our own U-S-of-A to be a sovereign democracy if—get this—a foreign power had total control of our CIA? If a nation does not control its own secret intelligence agency, it is not sovereign. So, guess who controls the Iraqi Intelligence Service (IIS)? The CIA!

The director of this secret police force, Mohammed Abdullah Shahwani, was not chosen by the new government, but was handpicked by the Bushites. He reports not to the new Iraqi officials, but to the CIA, which provides all of IIS's financing. In fact, immediately after January's elections, U.S. forces moved Iraq's national intelligence archives into U.S. headquarters in Baghdad, putting them off-limits to the very elected officials that George W. so loudly touts as that country's sovereign leaders.

As one leading lawmaker in the new government bluntly puts it, the IIS "is not working for the Iraqi government; it's working for the CIA. I prefer to call it the American Intelligence Service of Iraq." Why put this iron clamp on a supposed democracy? Because the Bushites don't trust the new leaders or the idea of real democracy. They say that Iraq's elected government is too friendly with neighboring Iran, so the leaders cannot be allowed the freedom of being—well, sovereign, democratic leaders.

Also, the CIA has spent a lot of time spying on the politicians whom the Iraqis have now voted into office—and the Bushites want to keep this information secret from the people and their chosen leaders.

A government that's under the thumb of the CIA is neither sovereign nor a democracy, no matter how George tries to spin it.

GREAT SMOKY PHOTO-OP This year Mother Nature messed up George's Earth Day plans. He was fully outfitted and had been flown out to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, where a horde of TV cameras, photographers, and reporters were going to record him working with a gaggle of volunteers to help restore a trail in the park. George loves being depicted as a regular working guy, and Karl Rove had carefully screened the volunteers so no pesky Democrats or Sierra Club kooks would interrupt his scripted moment with some nasty remark. (You know, like pointing out that George has broken his promise to eliminate the $4 billion backlog on repairing our deteriorating park system, and instead has actually increased the backlog to $5 billion).

It was to be a swell day—but Mother Nature whipped up a thunderstorm, and poor George had to give his environmental talk inside a cold, dank hangar at the airport, speaking to his own aides and some military personnel. This made him a bit grumpy, as he declared, "In the park, had I been there, I would have reminded people today is Earth Day, a day in which we recommit ourselves to being good stewards of the land." Then George flew back to Washington to continue pushing for policies that allow oil-drillers, clear-cutters, and strip-miners to plunder our national parks and pollute our environment. But he did make one sensible suggestion while in the park—he encouraged Americans to save our environment through volunteer action.

I agree. Please volunteer with your local Sierra Club or other grassroots environmental group to defeat George's corporate assault on Mother Earth. ■

Jim Hightower is a speaker and author. To order his books or schedule him for a speech, visit www.jimhightower.com. To subscribe to his newsletter, the Hightower Lowdown, *call toll-free 1-866-271-4900.*

—Voucher, continued from page 11
may vanish from the state budget; or worst of all, you may find yourself with a well-funded opponent in the 2006 primary.

Craddick gavels the vote to a close. It's a tie. The motion to table fails. The amendment is still alive.

The vote not to table Casteel's amendment is the second tie of the evening. Passage of both the voucher bill and the amendments lined up to destroy it is uncertain. The members watch the podium and wonder what the speaker will do. He could pull down the bill temporarily, pressure a few Republicans to vote his way and bring it back when the leadership is more assured of victory. In two sessions running the House, Craddick has yet to lose on any major legislation that he heavily supported.

He opts to continue.

Legislators, Republican and Democrat, will later wonder why. Is it because he wants Leininger to see exactly who needs to be eliminated in the next primary? Is it to show his patron that he, Craddick, personally, will not falter? Or is it just inconceivable to the terse Midlander that he could lose?

Casteel returns to the microphone and moves passage of her amendment to kill vouchers. Craddick casts another vote. This time the leadership wins. The amendment is defeated by a count of 72-70, and vouchers are still in the bill. Opponents go scrambling around the House floor to find out which votes they lost. Craddick and the leadership are looking for a few more votes too and continue to barrage Republicans, including a quiet freshman from Nacogdoches.

Roy Blake has bright blue eyes and a gentle demeanor. Like many rural reps, he's never liked vouchers, never thought government should divert money from public schools. As a GOP backbencher in this, his first session, Blake naturally is just learning how the Capitol works. He's best known for having been mayor of Nacogdoches when the space shuttle exploded over East Texas in 2002. On this night, however, he's in the crosshairs. Blake is asked into the back hall for a meeting in the speaker's office with Craddick's chief of staff Nancy Fisher to pressure him to change his vote. He and his constituents abhor vouchers. But the House leadership and the party's small collection of campaign moneymen could easily run a well-funded primary opponent against Blake that would unseat him or send him into debt.

A few minutes later, Blake walks back onto the floor looking a little dazed. Charlie Geren, a moderate Republican from Fort Worth and a leading voucher opponent, intercepts him, "You okay, Roy? Are you okay?" Blake nods wearily.

Geren is called away. His amendment to SB 422 is up next. He and other voucher opponents have spent months crafting and honing their amendments in anticipation of this floor fight. Geren's amendment is just an empty shell, it doesn't affect the bill. He comes to the microphone with a surprise. He has an amendment to his amendment, one that voucher supporters have not seen yet, that he will substitute for his original amendment. It gives the House leader-

Chairman Kent Grusendorf (R-Arlington) and Speaker Tom Craddick (R-Midland)

ship a taste of its own medicine.

Geren's amendment would remove the Dallas and Fort Worth school districts from the proposed voucher pilot program and replace them with Arlington and Irving. The choices aren't random. Arlington is Education Chairman and chief voucher cheerleader Kent Grusendorf's district. Irving is home to Republican Linda Harper-Brown, who also sponsored the voucher proposal.

If vouchers are such a great idea, let's try it in Grusendorf's and Harper-Brown's districts, argues Geren. He's already surveyed a swath of pro-voucher Republicans, who told him they don't object to the idea. Geren also knows that the Arlington and Irving school districts bleed into the districts of Republicans Ray Allen and Toby Goodman, both of whom may vote against the voucher plan if it will take money from their schools. "All I did was swap the districts so the authors of the bill could participate in the bill," Geren says from the front microphone.

Grusendorf opposes the amendment, and moves to table it. Five pro-voucher Republicans flip to support Geren's amendment. Grusendorf's motion fails by a relatively resounding 76-67. An excited buzz rings through the House. It's a huge defeat for the leadership. A team of lawmakers gathers in front of the dais to deliberate with Craddick about what to do. After five minutes, the conference breaks up, and Grusendorf announces he will accept Geren's amendment. It goes into the bill without a vote. But the damage to Craddick's cause has been done.

As luck would have it, the next amendment is another by Geren. (Geren and Casteel would later note that the order of the amendments favored their cause.) It would still allow school choice, Geren explains to his colleagues, but students could choose only among public schools. "It just takes private out," Geren says, his eyes twinkling. "It still creates this competition which seems so important... still maintains choice."

Grusendorf is plain in his opposition; a vote for Geren's amendment will kill vouchers this session. When Geren returns to the microphone to urge passage, he quotes from the state GOP platform: "[Vouchers] can only be considered upon passage of a state constitutional amendment that prohibits imposition of state regulation on private and parochial schools.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this [bill] isn't anything about a constitutional amendment."

The vote begins. The House floor is silent as everyone stares at the even number of green and red lights springing to life on the giant boards. Craddick looks glum. A columnist from the *Waco Herald Tribune* will later describe the speaker appearing as if he "had swallowed a cobra."

"There being 74 ayes and 70 nays, the amendment is adopted," Craddick says flatly. Vouchers are out. Just as Geren thought, Ray Allen and Toby Goodman vote to gut vouchers from the bill rather than have it include their school districts.

But the leadership makes one final, desperate play. Grusendorf walks to the front microphone and moves to pull the bill down. There is still time to twist a few more arms and bring the bill back up. Before he can finish, Houston Democratic Rep. Senfronia Thompson darts to the front of the podium and snatches the microphone away. As she bends it back toward her, Thompson shouts, "Mr. Speaker! I call a point of order against this bill."

Craddick overrules her point of order—a procedural weapon to kill bills on technicalities—that in this case would have killed the entire calendar of bills. But it's over. Four minutes later, Craddick sustains another point of order, raised hours ago, that he had yet to rule on. It sinks SB 422 and vouchers with it.

In GOP circles, there's little doubt that some of the rural Republicans who defied their leadership will find themselves fending off primary opponents funded by Leininger. Rural Republicans who voted with the leadership in defiance of their constituents might also find opposition in the primary from their public school community. Sixteen of these weak-willed Republicans lamely tried to explain away their pro-voucher votes with a statement placed in the House journal the next day. They wrote about an amendment—never offered—that would have ensured that no funds from rural school districts would be spent on the voucher pilot program. Their constituents might fall for this argument in 2006, but on May 23, Rep. Casteel and the other fighting moderates didn't.

"If you think there are two or three pots of money up here I want you to show them to me," she scolded her fellow Republicans. ■

—Knox, continued from page 12
me that she didn't think she would get pregnant because her boyfriend smoked enough pot that he had killed all of his semen, which he told her just to get in her pants. These girls weren't being educated, and it wasn't fair.

Maybe you could say it started as a feminist issue or just an awareness, but I started realizing that the lack of sex education was hurting people my own age. Many of them weren't getting the education at home or they weren't going [elsewhere] to get that information. It was the responsibility of the school to provide it.

TO: You testified in favor of comprehensive sex ed at a textbook hearing. What do you think of the Texas Board of Educators' approval of textbooks and the studies they rely on?

SK: Yeah, I testified, which was really scary. My guy from Lubbock was sleeping. I swear, he was against the wall sleeping. I was the last person to testify, and there was no response at all. The opposition had bused in all these 14- and 15-year-old girls to make impassioned speeches about the school making them want to have sex and about how they wanted to save themselves. And every single one would end their speech with, "I'm so-and-so, I'm 15, and I'm worth the wait." They had scripts! And they would get responses from and talk to everyone on the board.

I gave my speech, and they just looked at me. I think I was, from what I saw, the only young person they didn't respond to. And what's really scary is that textbook publishers don't want to redo books for every state, so the books that are approved in Texas [will be distributed] across the nation. Texas is one of the largest textbook distributors; our books are distributed across the nation. And we have the most conservative books, so we are actually harming the other states.

TO: It seems that, as with the question of gay marriage, our state finds the data that suits them.

SK: Well, Texas is really good at manipulating information from studies. They were doing it with sex ed as well. There is a recent [study] out of the Heritage Foundation evaluating the outcomes of comprehensive sex education. It was very small, with about 18 kids. A couple of the kids ended up having sex before the study was over, so they claimed it was something like a 60 percent failure rate.

But they were judging it on their standards of what failed while normal standards for sex education are what delays sexual activity, not that it stops it until marriage. That is the teen's decision to make, not the church's and not the school's. There are a lot of studies that have been manipulated to [achieve an agenda]. That is why a lot of people think that comprehensive sex education doesn't work, but there really aren't any studies to show that. No one's done a fair and balanced one.

TO: What is the dominant factor that prevents solutions to these problems?

SK: I think it's the blanket ignorance that schools are forcing upon them. "You're not supposed to have sex. You're a bad person if you have sex," and giving them [other such] messages. There's basically an underlying [belief] that you're going to hell if you have sex. It's really scary but to a religious teen that's a very real possibility. They think, "I'm a bad person, God won't accept me anymore and I'm going to hell."

That's a way to scare kids into not having sex. But then they go into the real world and there are so many pressures, and they have their own feelings. A lot of teen girls will give oral sex and other types of sex because they don't feel like [it counts]. They feel they are still a virgin and rationalize, "I'm not going to hell now." But yet they are still getting sexually transmitted diseases because they're not using protection. And that is *really* scary.

TO: You worked in the political field to change some of these norms and stigmas. Have you done anything in collaboration with the churches in the way they portray some of these issues? Don't they have as much responsibility?

SK: We worked with the Catholic and Episcopalian churches in Lubbock, as well as the Unitarian Universalist Church. But I believe churches have as much responsibility to educate their youngsters about sex and give them accurate information. Including a message of morality is good, as each particular church has their own beliefs. But schools shouldn't be the ones to teach morality, only information.

TO: Is there really such thing as "culture wars"? Or do you see what's happening as a case of the core meaning of the issues getting lost in the manipulation of facts by those in power?

SK: Well, it's fear-based. That's why the Republicans got such a large turnout in the last election by saying, "If you don't go out and vote, the gays are gonna take over the country, they're gonna kill your babies, they're going to destroy the family." Or, "The feminists are taking over," and things like that. The Republicans are very into scaring their base. With the gay marriage amendment, they are telling people that the country's going to pot, and they have to do something about it. And they're not giving people the facts, so when they're telling them all these things, [their base] is coming out and being very active without the facts.

A lot of people who hear "comprehensive sex education" are thinking, "Oh, they have two people, and they're showing my kids how to have sex." When really that's the Republican propaganda arm. It isn't true, it's just something they told people, and now it has that image.

It's kind of how we stopped saying we're liberal. Now we're "progressive"—because the Republicans put a bad image on that. It's something that we have to stop, and say, "No we're not going to let you define our issues anymore; we're going to define our issues ourselves."

TO: The quintessential question is always: Why are young people apathetic? Is it they don't know where to find the avenues for change, because they aren't aware? What is it?

SK: Young people don't know that they can make a difference. They don't know who to talk to; they don't know what to

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do. Plus there's also this pervading feeling of, "Our vote doesn't matter; our voice doesn't matter."

And sometimes it seems overwhelming, with so many terrible things coming down. It's tempting to say, "I'm just going into the library for four years, and I'll think about it when I come out." I think of doing that sometimes! (laughs). Because the problems are massive, and you don't see a solution. Living in Texas, I know my vote does not matter. I know that while I can go into the Capitol and testify as much as I want, the conservative legislature is still going to vote how they want. But I still do it because I think the voice of opposition is very important, and I think that somebody out there is listening. But most college students feel like, "If I can't do anything about it, I'll just stay here at school and party and live my life."

***TO:** What do you think is the best way to reach those young people? Through film?*
SK: I think so. A very powerful film that tells people what the issues are. Not telling them how to think about it, but just laying an issue out there and saying, "This is what's happening, what are you gonna do about it?" I'm hoping that's what my film does; there's a teaching guide around the film that I hope incites people to action. I think it's integrating those things into students' daily lives and making it something that they have to be aware of. But I don't really know how to do that. I know that we've tried. The group that I'm in, we try all the time.

***TO:** Do you think that after having this film made about you, you'll get into film yourself?*
SK: I think about it sometimes and I get random ideas and think, "Wow, I should make a film on that!" but I can't. It's not necessarily time issues, it's that I'm a political science major and I'm going to go on with college. My brother is going to be the filmmaker in the family.

***TO:** So, would you ever want to run for office while in Austin?*
SK: Ha! Ha! I did think that, but I'm going to leave. But in the future, it's definitely something that I want to do. I want to go somewhere, a liberal area, hopefully on the East Coast, or Seattle, and start running for lower offices and eventually be able to run for statewide and maybe national office.

***TO:** That's all I've got. Do you want to talk about anything else I haven't mentioned?*
SK: No, I always end up giving really bad quotes if I do that! ■

Star Silva graduated from the University of Texas at Austin in May. The Education of Shelby Knox *will be broadcast nationwide on PBS on June 21 as part of the P.O.V. (Point of View) documentary series.*

—Pimping, continued from page 9

President Bush and the $1 million contribution to Abramoff as examples of the council's financial mismanagement. One of the two members of the minority faction, David Sickey, has regularly made himself available to the press. Normally, press inquiries to the council majority are answered by Hance Scarborough, by Roy Fletcher, or occasionally by sources close to the council majority.

According to a source close to the tribal majority, Chairman Poncho recently "revisited that issue" of his visit to the White House. He had previously denied it because he thought he was responding to press inquiries that implied he had a one-on-one meeting with Bush. He now recalls that he in fact did go to the White House on May 9, 2001. Tribal attorney Kathryn Fowler Van Hoof went with him, although she did not get into the meeting with the President. That meeting lasted for about 15 minutes and was not a one-on-one meeting. At the meeting, Bush made some general comments about Indian policy but did not discuss Indian gaming. Abramoff was at the meeting—for which he charged the Coushatta Tribe $25,000 (see page 9). The change in Poncho's position is odd in light of the fact that he and his spokespersons have maintained for more than a year that he did not meet with President Bush in May 2001.

Norquist has not responded to inquiries about using the White House as a fundraiser. It is, however, a regular ATR practice to invite state legislators and tribal leaders who have supported ATR anti-tax initiatives to the White House for a personal thank-you from the President. A source at ATR said no money is ever accepted from participants in these events. The $25,000 check from the Coushattas (see page 8) suggests that, at least in this instance, Norquist's organization made an exception. The $75,000 collected from the Mississippi Choctaws and two corporate sponsors mentioned in Abramoff's e-mail suggests there were other exceptions. Norquist recently wrote to the tribes who paid to attend White House meetings. His story regarding that event is also evolving. The contributions, he told tribal leaders in letters that went out in May, were in no way related to any White House event. That doesn't square with the paper trail Abramoff and Norquist left behind, which makes it evident that they were selling access to the President.

The Coushatta Tribal Council majority has also revised its response to questions about the $1 million contribution, which critics in the tribe have insisted was made to Abramoff's Capital Athletic Foundation in 2001. The foundation funded Abramoff's Jewish prep school in Bethesda, MD, which closed soon after his lobbying scheme unraveled. When the *Observer* inquired in November 2004 about the $1 million contribution, we had obtained a copy of the Capital Athletic Foundation's tax filing, but the contributor's name was redacted. Following the lead of Lake Charles, Louisiana, *American Press* reporter Shawn Martin, the *Observer* last week obtained an un-redacted copy. The $1 million contribution, roughly 95 percent of what the foundation raised in 2001, was attributed to the Coushatta Tribe. A source working with the Coushatta Tribal Council majority said it now appears that the contribution was made in response to a bill sent by Mike Scanlon. Accountants working under the direction of Hance Scarborough found a $1-million Greenberg Traurig invoice that Scanlon sent the tribe. Scanlon routinely sent unitemized bills for larger sums, which the tribe routinely paid. But as he was not a Greenberg Traurig employee, he billed on his own Capitol Campaign Strategies invoices. On the $1 million Greenberg Traurig invoice Scanlon sent the tribe in 2001, the company name was misspelled.

There will need to be more accounting, probably by different accountants. And perhaps different legal representation, or at least under a different understanding between the tribe and its lawyers. In the May 28 tribal election on the Elton, LA reservation, a reform slate won a majority on the five-member council. Sickey, who five days before the election maintained that the $1 million contribution was made and that tribal chair Poncho indeed went to the White House in 2001, predicted the new majority will hire forensic accountants to determine where all the money went. (A week before the election he was looking for a tribal newsletter in which, he said, Poncho described his 2001 White House visit.) The shift on the council does not bode well for its Austin law firm. Hance Scarborough had gone to tribal court and successfully blocked a recall election that would have forced the council majority to stand for election a year ago, and David Sickey was a proponent of the recall. "Kent Hance doesn't represent me or [the other minority dissident] Harold John," said Sickey. "He represents Lovelin Poncho."

The White House press office has not responded to our questions about other visits Jack Abramoff might have made to the White House or about Norquist using the official residence of the President to raise funds for Americans for Tax Reform. As yet, none of the political contributions Abramoff insisted the tribes make has been returned. ■

Lou Dubose is a former Observer *editor and co-author of* The Hammer: Tom DeLay, God, Money and the Rise of the Republican Congress. *This story was written with support from the Fund for Constitutional Government.*

ADJUSTING OUR VIEW

Fresh wind blows from the west, ruffling white curtains.
A rock is struck like a bargain. Water reappears.

Fires are built on a cold night. Shadows give up their dead.
Two bowls on a table. The fierce-eyed neighbor is invited in.

A line on a map, a line in dark earth. They confuse
each other. That same earth plowed and walked,
turned and planted - enough corn for two villages.

Don't all eyes look out from the same fear?
A knot of men, fists clenched. Suddenly, a somersault
in the dust, an aria from an upstairs window.

For one day pretend what is different is the same.
Or one hour. Even a minute can awaken change.

Small hands fold and refold colored paper.
Lanterned boats are set afloat. Each one carries
an explorer bound for the land of new words.

DROUGHT

It has not rained in weeks.
Roots of vegetables call it quits.
Petals are unopened letters
tight on the ground.
We must give up our notions of green.

Thirst sits in a chair across the room.
Dreams are full of faucets.
A glass of water becomes a beautiful thing.
The sky becomes an altar,
the broad back of an angry father.

A parched yell: Why won't you turn around!
We are not camels, after all.
To us, oasis is only a word in a spelling bee.

MARILYN ROBERTSON is a northern California poet and folksinger who brings traditional songs and stories into elementary school classrooms. —Naomi Shihab Nye

The Art of El Paso

When Mago Gandara was eight years old, she went to a play and her ankles fell asleep. On her way back home, she could hardly walk, the pain was so severe. Gandara had rheumatic fever. It was during her long recovery that she decided she wanted to become an artist. "I remember sitting on my porch taking a little sun bath and munching a carrot," she recalls. "I know it sounds strange, but it came right through the top of my head that I wanted to be a visual artist."

After earning a degree in education with a minor in art, she began teaching high school in El Paso, then saved all her money—a thousand dollars in 1949—to go to the Art Institute of Chicago. She later married and began raising a family, but made a vow to herself that no matter what, she would still be an artist. After 25 years of marriage and motherhood, she decided that the way to do that was to live alone. While teaching at the community college, Gandara wrangled an assignment to design and construct a mural. It took three years to complete, and she parlayed the task into a master's degree from Antioch and an assignment to create a mosaic mural for an elementary school in El Segundo Barrio that was being rebuilt. After a daughter lent her the money to realize her dream of having a home and studio in Juárez, Gandara began receiving assignments to create large outdoor mosaics in Mexico as well.

"I just want to do art and live like a bachelorette," she says. "I go back and forth between El Paso and Juárez. In El Paso, it's pure luxury. I have electricity, I have television and a refrigerator. I have all these modern things. In Juárez, I choose to live simple and basic. I don't have electricity, and I love the quiet.

"There's a tremendous difference between Mexico and America. It's just culturally different, the way people talk, the sounds you hear. The little guy who sharpens knives has a whistle that goes 'tweee-doe, tweee-doe,' and you know he's coming. The lady who sells tamales sings, 'Tamales, tamales, tengo rojo, tengo verde, tamales, tamales.' You can hear her all over the neighborhood, 'Tengo rojo, tengo verde, tamales.' There's the lady who sells brooms, and the gas-tank man has a song. People play the radio and visit each other. I don't hear anything in my house in the U.S.

"Art is such a marvelous thing, I can be lying in bed at night or be digging in my garden and all of a sudden the idea of what I'm going to do with my next piece comes to me.

"If you're an artist, you're not just an artist when you're making things, you're an artist all the time."

"I'm not a radio personality," says Marina Monsivais of El Paso's KHRO. "I'm a music personality. I'm also promotions director, in charge of the image of the station—any contest, any giveaway, the hokey stuff that keeps people listening—and bringing bands in, promoting them, making sure people know about them.

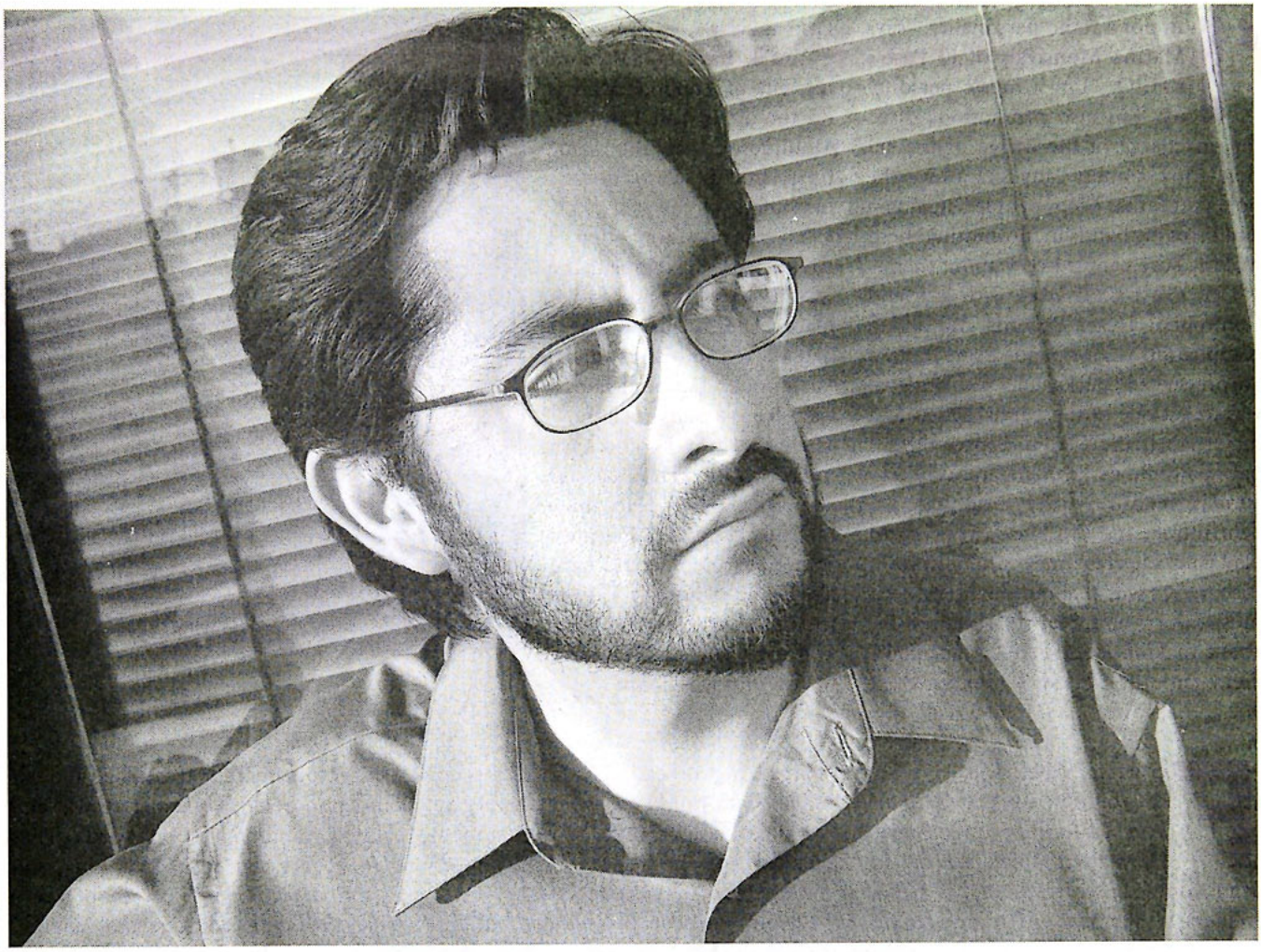
"I own a record label with a friend, Communal Heart Records. We did a compilation CD of bands from El Paso. We pressed and packaged it, and our goal was to get one of the bands signed to a major label, and we did. People think I have power to make them famous. Every Sunday night we play local independent music, and I'm like, 'I'm going to play your music because you're from El Paso. Don't worry about me liking your music; worry about it getting out, worry about making it happen.' I can't make them famous. Nobody's famous in El Paso anyway.

"You'll have a DJ coming out of Lubbock who is on the air in Salt Lake and Albuquerque at the same time, but El Paso doesn't have that.

"There's no way that I could have developed the way I have in any other place. There's no way if I had walked into a station in Austin or in L.A. and said, 'I want to do a punk rock show.' There's no way I could have walked into TicketMaster and said, 'Can I learn how to run concerts?' because somebody there would have already been doing it. El Paso let me be exactly who I am. And right now I'm very, very happy with who I am."

Fernando Villela was 11 when his family emigrated from Torreón to El Segundo Barrio. He started doing art in the army, drawing portraits of his fellow soldiers in Vietnam. After he was discharged, he worked in Los Angeles, then moved back to El Paso, where he began working as a sign painter, hand-painting billboards on the freeway. "We painted some of them in the warehouse and then we'd put them up in sections, but we also got out there and climbed the ladders a hundred feet over the freeway and painted right on the billboards. They were 14-feet high by 40-feet long, and I painted pictures of just about everything—buildings and cars and people.

"In the '80s, computers came into the advertising media, and little by little the sign painting industry went downhill. There is not any craft there anymore. I was told to get training in computers, but I said to myself, 'I'm a craftsman, and if I get into computers, the computers are going to do the work and I'm going to be like a secretary. I'll become a slave to computers.'" After working as a sign painter for 30 years, Villela enrolled at the University of Texas-El Paso as a painting and sculpture major. In 2004, at the age of 58, he received his degree. He now teaches art at a charter high school for troubled kids, and is working on his teaching certificate.



Born on the east side of El Paso in 1975, Kenny Phillips started playing the cello when he was in the fifth grade. In the sixth grade, he heard some Shostakovich and a recording of Dvorak's Cello Concerto and became determined that he, too, would play that well. He figured out the melodies and themes without looking at the music or learning the études and at 15 was invited to join the El Paso Symphony Orchestra.

"Playing and studying the cello is like having a conversation with people who lived 250 years ago," he says. "When you play Bach, you hit a high and lower octave in the same note, and your attitude changes every day because you can never play Bach the same twice."

But Phillips no longer plays Bach—or Shostakovich or Dvorak. In September 2000 he was riding his bike, and three months later he woke up from a coma in the hospital. He has no memory of the accident and was told that he had gone through a windshield. "If I had been hit a little harder, I'd be a quadriplegic right now, but I got lucky. I have brachial-plexus, which means my nerves are stretched and I'm paralyzed on my left side.

"I was in the hospital for seven months after I awoke from the coma, but I had no insurance so the state just threw me all over the place. My house and my car got repossessed. My cello—I had just bought a new Montagnana cello—I had to give my cello back to the bank.

"First thing I learned to do with one hand was tie my shoes. Now I do everything. I change the oil. I can cook really well.

"I can make dinner, make drinks, make coffee, clean the fridge, all at the same time, all with one hand. You get more focused, you think about what you have to do."

For a while he continued to focus on music, teaching cello to several students. Now he is studying for a master's degree in occupational therapy.

"I try to let people know that I've gotten over it and that it's okay to make a joke about it," he says.

"Did you hear about the guy who was in an accident and was in a coma for three months?

"When he woke up, he asked the doctor, 'Hey, Doc, will I be able to play the viola after I get better? and the doctor looked at him earnestly and put his hand on his shoulder and said, 'No, son, I'm afraid you won't ever be able to play the viola,' and the guy says, 'That's okay; I'm a cellist.'

"I'm just happy to be alive, I don't take things so seriously anymore, and my joke is I should be dead."

Tony Gleaton was born in Detroit in 1948 and moved to L.A. when he was 10. "I never saw any of my friends again," he recalls. "There was a break, a disconnect, that prepared me to be able to just leave and go off whenever I wanted, which I've been doing for long as I can remember."

After serving with the Marines in Vietnam, he went to UCLA and "schlepped around there for three or four years, kind of got interested in art." After UCLA he went to New York and did fashion photography, but left after three years and hitchhiked throughout the West. He started doing photos of cowboys in northeastern Nevada, then black and Native American cowboys in eastern and central Texas. That work led to a project he called "Cowboys: Reconstructing an American Myth."

From there, Gleaton went to Mexico and began spending time in the Copper Canyon area, living with the Tarahumara Indians. "The government gave me the use of a huge kiva house that forded the river. There's a reason people have small houses in the mountains, because when it gets cold you can only heat so much with a wood stove, and this place was huge. But I put a darkroom in there. I don't know how many times I would travel back and forth on Louie's El Paso-Los Angeles Limousine Express dragging photographic equipment, chemistry, packs of paper—I had everything up there."

Gleaton began researching the area and discovered that about 500 African slaves had worked the mines of Hidalgo de Parral in the 1600s. Their offspring were still in most of the northern mining centers in Mexico. That led to an investigation of the African diaspora throughout Mexico, and Central and South America, a subject upon which he frequently lectures.

Recently Gleaton taught at Texas Tech, where he was also the artist in residence.

"I've been crossing the Mexican border on and off for the last 20 years," he says. "I've crossed at every major crossing point, starting west to east—Tijuana, Tecate, Mexicali, Yuma, Nogales, Santa Ana, Columbus, Juárez, Ojinaga, Laredo, Del Rio, Brownsville.

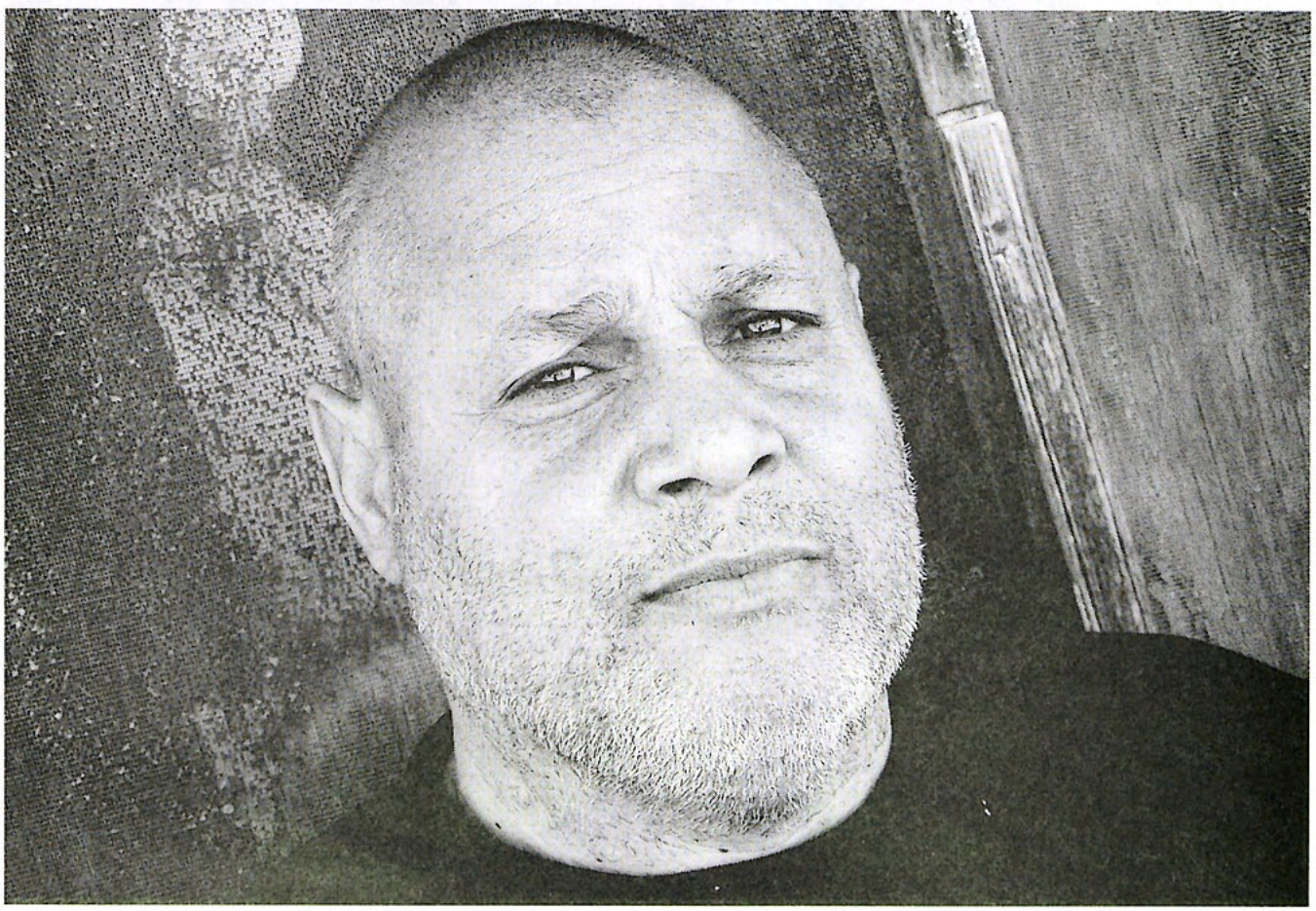
"The border's funny—it acts as a funnel, a sieve, where people are in transit, but it's not enough of Mexico, and it's too much of here.

"The border's never a place that I wanted to hang out at. I was living up in the mountains with the Indians, and El Paso was a place that I had to negotiate, a place I had to go through.

"In the rest of Texas, people look at El Paso like it's southern New Mexico. The two places have like the same heritage, but New Mexico has an indigenous symbol for their state, it's 'The Land of Enchantment.'

"Can you imagine someone calling Texas 'The Land of Enchantment'? It's more like, 'Don't Mess with Texas.'

"Texas' ideology is summed up in the right to capture water—if you can pull it out of the land, it's yours. It's the right-to-carry state."



One of Nadja Plagens' earliest memories is of the day her aunt took her to see some Kandinskys at a museum in Munich. "It was his later work, his really cool, spiritual stuff," she recalls. "I saw it and I liked it, and I convinced my aunt to buy me all the posters.

Plagens had spent her childhood traveling from one German Air Force base to another. At 18 she applied to an art school in Munich. The same day that she received her letter of acceptance, her father came home and announced that the family was moving to the United States. Instead of Munich art school, she found herself enrolled at the University of Texas-El Paso in a program designed for Germans assigned to Ft. Bliss. After two years she began studying art, focusing on printmaking.

"I like that there are a lot of steps to printmaking," she explains. "It's like following a recipe, or praying the rosary, where you have to do different things to get to the image. I'm fascinated with processes, thinking how things begin and end. You start a letter, you end a letter. You're born, you die. But I'm not just focusing on life and death; I like the idea of things being alive in the memory. Sometimes I alter old photographs, I draw on them, and I work them into a print. It's spontaneous memories and impressions that I put on the plate.

"My friends in Europe ask how can I be over here, how can I spend money here, how can I support what America is doing by living here, but I've gotten to know a whole different side. The changes in America frighten me; it's upsetting and frustrating to see what's going on, but I don't have a problem with the States in general. I've met great people here. It's just a different lifestyle.

"I don't feel I've become more American; I feel more like an El Pasoan.

"I never really had a physical house that I could come back to, where you know the certain smell of things, because my parents were always moving around. El Paso became the first place I had that. I enjoy getting up and doing things every day here. The people, the food, the lights, the sunset, the sunrise. Downtown—it's so beautiful. I get a cup of coffee, I walk around, I go to Juarez, I buy earrings and cheap shoes.

"There's a certain attitude towards life here. I've met some of the greatest people here. They're grateful for life, and they're adventurous. They're very easy-going. It's something I have to learn because I'm like, 'Here is the next step, this is what I have to do now.' I'm very structured. I'm very controlled. I'm German."

Recently Plagens received her degree and will soon move back to Germany.

Despite his 1938 birth in central Illinois, Jay White is adamantly not a Yankee, damn it. At two months, he moved to Sonora. That's where he grew up, a Texan.

He started his first novel, *The Rattler of Zacatecas*, in 1989. It took him 14 years to write. "The research took about 10 years," he explains, "the writing took about two, and there were a couple years off when I just didn't work on it.

"The protagonist is a young dude who survives Vietnam, and it's about his understanding of what constitutes courage and what constitutes cowardice, and where he sits in the balance of that. It's portrayed through the story of the Mexican Revolution, and it's based on historical record as told by fictional characters. But it explores Schopenhauer's idea that the only way an individual can be free is if he acts on his passions, because otherwise he's a sheep.

"When you start writing a novel, you really don't know what you're getting yourself into. It's like belladonna—the motherfucker blooms late and then it has a prickly pear. You start dreaming dialogue and plot. You quit the computer late at night and fall into bed, and you sleep for four hours, and you wake up remembering dreams of plot and dialogue. You get up, throw on your ratty-ass robe and get back to the computer and start writing again.

"Eventually you get to where the unconscious suggests plots and characters and dialogues, like a dream, and you can hardly keep up with the flood of images that emerge while you're sitting there looking at the screen.

"Flannery O'Connor said that you ought to spend four hours a day at the keyboard, even if you didn't strike a key, just to be there in case you had a brainstorm. I love Flannery O'Connor, she's a magnificent artist, and it worked for her, but she was Catholic, and she was an invalid. All she had to do was raise peacocks and write."

After finishing his first novel, White began teaching himself how to write a second one. This time he's writing about Pancho Villa's raid on Columbus, New Mexico. "You have to be passionate about writing," he says, "But it's not about writing, it's about language. In the first sentences of Mark—maybe it's Luke—it says, 'In the Beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.' Language is the mythology that commands our lives; you can't think without words, and if you don't have enough words, the nuance becomes emotional rather than intellectual. You have to have both; you have to have the art and the craft." ■

Richard Baron is a photographer, writer, and arts activist in El Paso. The profiles in this article are part of an ongoing project exploring life and art on the border.

Once More to the River

Each summer, as a young girl, Maria Guadalupe crossed the Rio Grande into Mexico to spend the long months at the ranch that belonged to her mother's family. They rode to the riverbank by taxi, steered by her *tío* Garcia. "He was fat," she says, which is about all she remembers about him and the drive to the Los Ebanos Ferry, which she calls *el chalán*. Her father never went. None of her brothers remember going, though she insists that they did. It may have just been the women: Maria and her sister Belsa, their mother, Victorina, and their aunt Petra and cousin Elvita. The taxi would leave them at the river, and they would board the hand-pulled ferry on foot.

The ferry is named after the surrounding community, which is named after the Texas ebony, a thorny tree with horned-moon husks; white wing doves nest in its branches; the black-brown seeds are eaten by wild tusked pigs. The plaza at Los Ebanos itself is not much more than a sun-scorched baseball field and St. Michael's Catholic Church; it's one of those communities that upstate folks cannot resist calling "sleepy" and "quiet."

The truth is that everyone is miles away at work on the morning that Maria Guadalupe (no longer that young girl of summer, but my mother, a woman in her late fifties who suffers from high blood pressure and too much free-floating anxiety) drives us through town. Most of the houses are made of clapboard or cinderblock. The smaller, mud brick and straw *jacales* seem slumped over with the pain of calcified bones. At the local cemetery, the decorative arch proclaims *La Puerta;* pink and aquamarine funereal bows are tied to the sagging chain-link.

My mother turns off at the sign for the ferry; the gravel road turns to dirt. Up ahead, a line of dusty, Chevy pickup trucks and Crown Victorias with tinted windows are parked on the downward slope toward the river; they're waiting for the ferryboat, which is banked on the Mexican side. But we're not driving across. We haven't risked that since the late seventies.

We park under the shade of a mesquite and walk to the wooden shack that serves as a tollbooth. A man with an apron heavy with coins charges the 50 cents.

"Before it used to be a quarter," my mother gripes.

"*Pues, ya no.* Now it's 50 cents."

I hand over the dollar for both of us.

Across from the shack are the Border Patrol barracks. Two agents sit outside waiting for the next load from Mexico. As my mother and I wait for cars to disembark and cars to board (the ferry takes no more than three cars per trip), we spot a pair of swim trunks discarded under the thick brush. The drawstring is knotted, the mesh lining bunched and crawling with ants.

The Mexico-bound cars start their engines. My mother hurries alongside, covering her nose and eyes against the up-churned dust, threatening to stumble and go head-over-tennis shoes into the dirt or the river. "'*Uenas,*" she says to the ferrymen, as we set foot onto the metal ramp.

Down river, a flat-bottom boat floats between the banks of the two countries and cuts a silhouette against the glare off the water—*La Migra*. The agents are motionless as they watch us drift.

"How many cars pass back and forth each day?" my mother asks one of the ferrymen.

He asks the others for an estimate. When they fail to reply, he concludes, "Maybe around 50."

"Now, why do you stop service at four o'clock?"

"Because that's a full day. From eight in the morning to four o'clock in the afternoon that's eight hours."

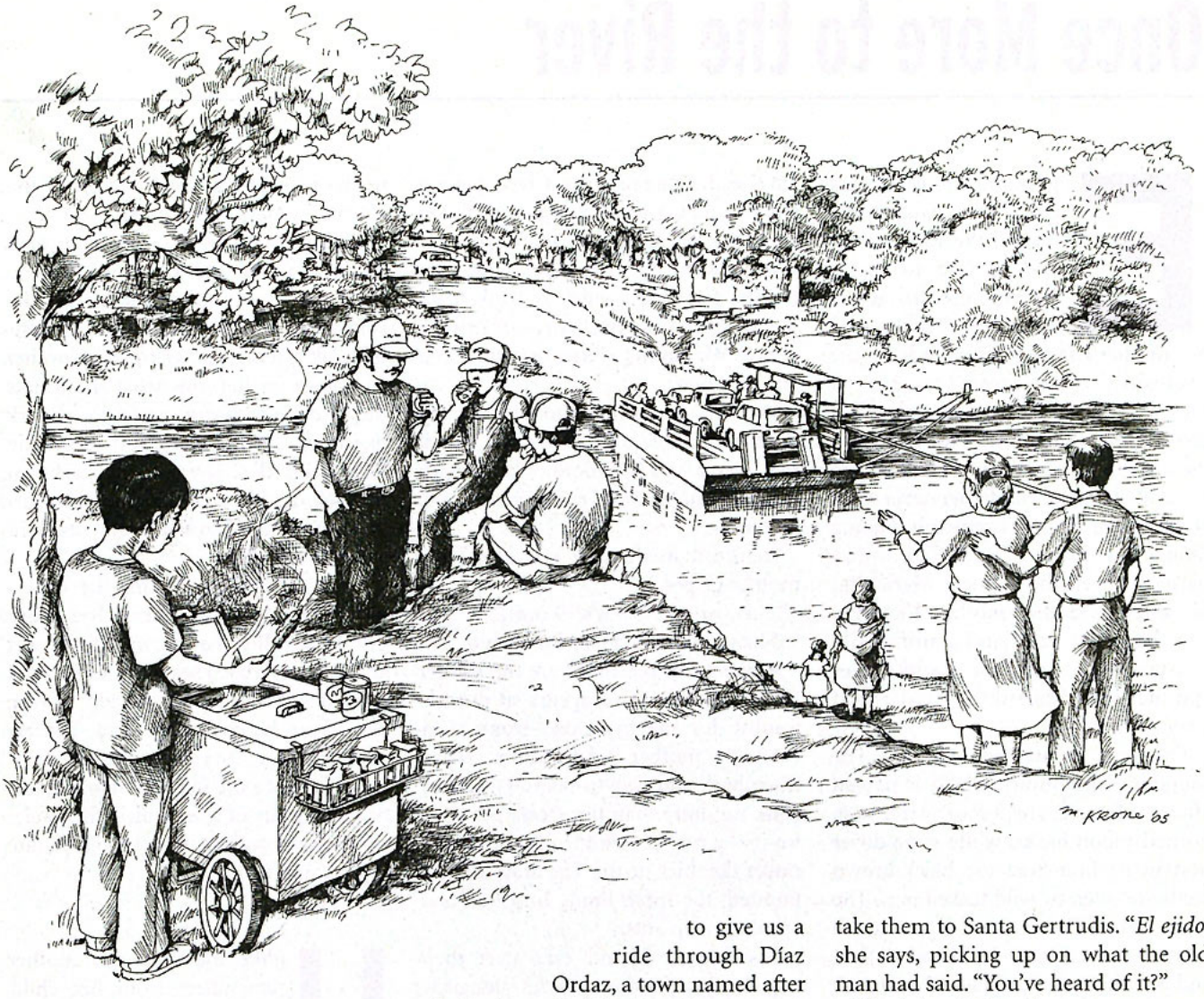
"Right," my mother says, and then she looks at me with an arched brow to make sure I got that. She still plays the sometimes meddlesome, always helpful and forever self-sacrificing mother who does for her kids what she thinks they are too embarrassed to do, like ask questions, get the story. But really, she likes doing this. She tells the ferryman that she used to ride this thing as a girl, on summer trips to the family ranch in Santa Gertrudis.

He nods and then joins the others who have distanced themselves from our leisure life. For them, this is just another workday. They are middle-aged Mexican-Mexicans; sunburned brown; who wear baseball caps and T-shirts, except for one in a sweat-stained straw hat. These are the kind of men who do not miss a day of work unless they wake up and find out that they have died during the night.

Unlike the visits my mother remembers from her childhood, there is no one waiting for us on the Mexican side. We walk to the shade of a few sparse trees, where a teenaged vendor has set up a drink cart and a rack of salted peanuts and chili-spiced chicharrón. "*¡Hi'jesú!,*" my mother says to him and to the old men who sit nearby eating their lunch. "I haven't been here in years." She tells them about the ranch.

My mother says that in the mornings, when she'd go fetch the *nixtamal* for the corn tortillas, the town boys would say, "Here comes the *gringuita*." She says it was because she was light-skinned. "I'd tell them, 'Not gringa and not anything but Mexican. *¡Soy mexicana!*'"

It's the first time I've heard my mother raise a little flag of Mexican pride. Usually she complains about all the Mexicans



Mike Krone

coming across to the United States.

One old man says that he knows the ranch, which he calls *el ejido*. He offers a name—Martín—who turns out to be one of my mother's uncles.

Excited, she asks if it's still possible to get to Santa Gertrudis from here. A moment later, a woman named Rosie, wearing chunky black sandals, capri khakis, and a PRI campaign T-shirt that reads *Yo Con Abdala*, pulls us to the taxi stand. The taxis—there are two—are parked under the faded billboards for Don Pedro's and Parillada la Mela, restaurants that have gone out of business. "The economy," Rosie says, as if that explains everything. She presents us to the driver of the first taxi, a yolk-yellow Grand Marquis, and tells him to give us a ride through Díaz Ordaz, a town named after the buck-toothed leader who was president during the 1968 student massacre in Mexico City. "Give them the sights," Rosie says.

"*Un tour*," my mother says. With the way she forever warns me about the dangers of Mexico, I never expected her to agree to a taxi ride, but here she is, getting into the back seat. Maybe the driver, because of his bulk, reminds her of her fat tío Garcia.

I sit in front and roll the window down further, what we call "Mexican Aircon." My mother, relaxed in the back seat, lets the air and sun hit her full on the face, despite her recent diagnosis of skin cancer. A moment later she props herself up between the seats and tells the driver about her childhood, crossing over on the ferry, a truck waiting to take them to Santa Gertrudis. "*El ejido*," she says, picking up on what the old man had said. "You've heard of it?"

He shakes his head no.

There is no more talk of the ranch. We remain silent as we drive the two miles into town, where the central plaza looks like so many other small-town Mexican plazas: wrought-iron gazebo, anemic trees with white-painted trunks, cement benches. The church is named for San Miguel, brother to the church in Los Ebanos. There is no one around. "It's the heat," the driver says, adjusting his trucker's cap.

We drive to another end of town, a slum where tennis shoes hang from power lines and the skinny houses shouldering each other have their doors kicked open as if from a recent act of violence. The good thing about living in these houses, our driver says, is that "if your neighbor decides to hang anything

on his wall, you can take advantage of the nail when it pokes through the other side. You save yourself a nail."

After the tour, my mother finally thinks to ask the driver his name. "*Pa' la otra*," she says, though I can't imagine "a next time."

Perhaps she cannot let go the idea of having someone—even a taxi driver—forever waiting for her on the other side. As Arturo Acosta Ramírez drives us back to the ferry, he tells us about an accident in the late fifties, when a taxi carrying four women plunged into the river and everyone drowned. Every story written about the ferry mentions this tragedy; in some versions four women died, in others three. According to Acosta, one of the women panicked, startling their driver and causing him to hit the accelerator and send the car into the river. (It's the kind of sexist morality tale I expect from a macho cab driver.)

When we arrive at the ferry station, a soldier nods us through. Acosta parks under the faded billboards, next to the other taxi, a shiny Jetta. Rosie comes over to ask how it went and, I imagine, to collect her commission. My mother and I head to the river. A band has set up under the trees opposite the snack and drink vendor. Rosie says the band plays whenever the mood strikes—which is apparently not right now.

I pay for the return toll, but the ferrymen are taking their lunch break. My mother and I sit at one of the picnic tables. Two middle-aged women approach to say that they are going to divine her luck and tell her the future. My mother shrieks and gets up. She lets out a string of "NOs," shaking her shoulders and stamping her feet as if to shake off a chill. "*¡Qué susto!* Those things make me scared," my mother says, ignoring the women and giving them her back.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," the second woman reassures. "It's nothing bad."

The first woman eyes me. "How 'bout you, *joven*?"

My mother pulls me away. "*¡Ya! vámonos d'aquí.* I don't need nobody to tell me my future if I already have God." My mother is a born-again Christian.

As my mother and I head to the ferry, the band finally starts to play "Las Mañanitas."

My mother doesn't need to know the future when she has the past to keep her happy. She recalls the early morning errands for the *nixtamal.* She also remembers the house—the kitchen with the dirt floors and the walls made of dried mud, the wool blankets for the night chill. On weekends, the boys from the neighboring ranches came to the windows to sing "Las Mañanitas" to the girls.

Of the family at Santa Gertrudis, she recalls the bachelor uncle, Augustín, who liked to play the accordion and guitar: "They say that a woman left him and he never wanted another."

Her Aunt Virginia didn't marry until she was so old that most of her teeth had already fallen out, and she kept wads of cotton in her mouth. That's what my mother says. She also says that the husband would shut Virginia in the house and brush the dirt around the front door with a tree branch so that later he could check for tracks; he didn't want anyone coming in and out of the house while he was gone.

My mother stopped going to Mexico when she became old enough to work. Summers she picked cotton and cleared fields. The only time she went back to the ranch was for the funerals.

"Over there the caskets are fitted with glass," she tells me. "You see them dead, but you don't touch them."

You don't kiss their cold cheek or their liver-spotted hands. Which my mother forced me to do at the funerals on this side. Until now I always thought it was a Mexican thing. It must be my mother's way of sending off our loved ones with the hope that they will be waiting for us on the other side of whatever lies beyond this life.

Back on the job, the ferrymen wave the first U.S.-bound truck forward a few more inches to make room for a beige pickup they call *la Guerita*, referring either to its pale color or to the light-skinned, bleached-blond Mexican woman at the wheel. My mother and I stand and watch the dragonflies disturb the river surface with the dip of their tails. La Migra is nowhere in sight. For a moment it's as if there were no borders, as if this *norteño* homeland was still undivided.

Working in tandem, the four ferrymen lean forward and pull on the rope with their gloved hands. A pulley squeaks against a greased guide rope. The water slaps the lip of the ferry, pushing aside leaves and twigs and trailing a delicate wake of foam. The ride has been clocked at three to five minutes. For my mother it must feel like a lifetime passing.

It isn't until we're almost midway across that we notice our cab driver standing against the railing. My mother calls and waves to get his attention. She hollers that she just remembered that a cousin of hers died in the nearby river of Comales. "Her car fell into the water and she drowned," she says.

Acosta nods without comment—what could he say? When the ferry docks, he walks ahead, as if to get away. A bald spot gapes through the back of his cap. He is fatter than I had first thought, his white shirt too tight, the epaulets ready to pop their buttons.

At the checkpoint, a sober, vaguely antagonistic sign welcomes us to the United States of America. The immigration agent checks Acosta's "papers"—a single laminated card that he pulls out halfway from his wallet and then puts back into his worn back pocket, where there's a shotgun-sized hole.

The agent is Mexican-American, like us. He asks my mother and me if we're American citizens. I say yes. My mother says, "Yessir, I'm an American!"—just as proudly as she had said, "*Soy mexicana.*" ■

Erasmo Guerra, born and raised in the Rio Grande Valley, lives in New York. He is at work on a non-fiction book about summers in South Texas.

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