

INSIDE THE AUTISM INDUSTRY | PRAYERS AT THE LEGISLATURE | SNAP JUDGMENTS AND FOOD STAMPS



JUNE | 2013

# OBSERVER



## Back In Line

WHEN PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS IN BROWNSVILLE MISBEHAVE,  
**THEY'RE SENT TO BOOT CAMP.**

BUT DOES MILITARY-STYLE DISCIPLINE HELP OR HARM?

BY PATRICK MICHELS



# IN THIS ISSUE



ON THE COVER  
PHOTO BY  
PATRICK MICHELS

LEFT The white male visages of Charlton Heston (deceased) and Tom Selleck greeted NRA convention-goers in Houston in early May. PHOTO BY JEREMY SMITH

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## REMEMBERING WACO

by Alex Hannaford

Twenty years later, participants recall the day "all hell broke loose."

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**OBSERVER**



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# DIALOGUE

## Meeting a Need

Thank you, Carolyn, for this story (“Need an Abortion in Texas? Don’t Be Poor,” May issue). Thanks to all the people who fund abortion and dispel myths and shatter stigmas about our reproductive rights. I have been volunteering with the Lilith Fund Spanish hotline for about four months, and every shift I am reminded of how important it is. Please, join the volunteer list, donate generously, and do not be afraid to spread the word.

**Carmen Llanes**

POSTED AT FACEBOOK.COM/TEXASOBSERVER

THANK YOU SO, SO MUCH FOR WRITING THIS. THIS IS such an incredibly important story, and you’ve done an amazing job telling the stories of real women who need help.

**Flavia de la Fuente**

POSTED AT WWW.TEXASOBSERVER.ORG

IF YOU DON’T CONTROL YOUR BODY, YOU CONTROL NOTHING. The law, and men, should have no say in what a woman does with her body. Men will never understand it, and use the law for control.

**Kirsten Zielinski**

POSTED AT WWW.TEXASOBSERVER.ORG

## That’s Rhetorical, Right?

REGARDING “HOUSE BACKS KRAUSE AMENDMENT Letting Student Groups Discriminate,” May 17, 2013: Republicans legislators apparently sit around thinking, “What’s the most egregiously offensive thing I can propose? How about mandatory gun ownership? How about legalizing bigotry? How about more tax breaks for billionaires?”

Have they no decency?

**Bill Young**

POSTED AT TEXASOBSERVER.ORG

## An Off-putting Schedule

PRUETT’S EXECUTION IS ON HOLD INDEFINITELY (“THE Road to 500 Executions,” May issue). The May 15 execution of Jeffrey Demond Williams was the 498th. The 500th would now be Kimberly McCarthy on June 26. Way to go Texas. What an appalling “milestone.”

**Petra de Jong**

POSTED AT WWW.TEXASOBSERVER.ORG

## PACS, or Tax?

I’D LIKE TO SEE THE IRS LOOK INTO THIS KIND OF STUFF (“Pflugerville Pastor Comes up Short in Same-Sex Partner Benefits Fight,” May 15, texasobserver.org). Either you are a church, and you preach the gospel, or you are a PAC, and you pay taxes. You can’t be both.

**Evelyn White**

POSTED AT FACEBOOK.COM/TEXASOBSERVER

## Not So Pro-gov.

IN HER REVIEW OF *THE FIGHT TO SAVE JUÁREZ*, SUSANA Hayward states: “Ainslie’s book mostly provides the government’s official account of a conflict...” In truth, I cover much material that is at odds with the Mexican government’s position. For example, I describe the mutiny of federal police after their commander forced them to participate in extortions. I also chronicle the army’s murder of Javier Rosales with this observation: “This was the dark underbelly of the government’s efforts in Juárez.” A long-time Juárez human-rights activist is one of my book’s central characters. None of this material (and there is more) is palatable to those carrying the official government narrative.

**Ricardo Ainslie**

AUSTIN

## Sound Off

editors@texasobserver.org

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

# POLITICAL INTELLIG



## THE GAMING FILES

# Busted

INTERNET SWEEPSTAKES PARLORS HAVE BECOME SUCH A lucrative business in the Rio Grande Valley that even the former mayor of Brownsville, Pat Ahumada, opened his own. Ahumada called his eight-liner parlor Goldmine 777 (eight-liners are video gaming terminals). In early May, police raided the establishment, carting away 200 computers and escorting the former mayor out in handcuffs.

After his release on a \$2,000 bond, Ahumada told *The Brownsville Herald* that he did nothing illegal. But Cameron County District Attorney Luis Saenz calls the Internet sweepstakes and eight-liner businesses a “criminal epidemic.” Saenz estimates there are at least

200 such businesses in his county. In Texas, eight-liners and sweepstakes games generate as much as \$300 million annually, Saenz said in a written statement to the *Observer*. “This is revenue known to benefit organized crime. It doesn’t benefit our community, because it’s not being spent in our community.”

Ahumada and other sweepstakes owners contend that their business is perfectly legal, and that Cameron County has been issuing permits for the machines. They charge for Internet time on their computers, but they don’t charge customers to play the game. This distinction, they argue, makes their actions technically legal. The former mayor told the

READ more about Ahumada’s arrest at [txio.com/bro](http://txio.com/bro)

Former Brownsville Mayor Pat Ahumada  
PHOTO COURTESY OF CAMERON COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY’S OFFICE

*Herald* that Goldmine 777 offers one daily free entry per person, but participants are not required to play.

Saenz says the parlor owners are breaking the law. The problem is the way customers use the machines. “There is a gross misconception that a sweepstakes is legal gambling either because they utilize a computer system and/or they benefit a local charity,” he wrote. “Bottom line: If a sweepstakes is paying out at least \$5 in cash, it is illegal.”

Law enforcement in Cameron County has shut down five eight-liner businesses in recent months. The crackdown is part of a countywide criminal investigation into illegal gambling called Operation Bishop, which, according to Saenz, is aided by the Department of Homeland Security and several county law-enforcement agencies.

After the former mayor’s arrest, the county decided to pass an eight-month moratorium on issuing permits for gaming, building or zoning permits that could be used by sweepstakes or eight-liner businesses. Brownsville city leaders say they’ll study ordinances in other cities in hopes of crafting one that both officials and business owners can embrace. An agreement will likely come too late for the former mayor, whose 200 computers were seized under Operation Bishop and will either be salvaged or destroyed.

—MELISSA DEL BOSQUE

## THE JUSTICE BEAT

### Thicker Than Water

THE PESKY U.S. SUPREME COURT HAS ONCE AGAIN DISAPPOINTED the Texas legal system.

In 2009, when the Texas Legislature passed a bill requiring police officers to take blood samples from some suspected drunk drivers even without warrants, prosecutors were ecstatic. Blood tests showing illegal blood-alcohol levels in DWI cases can be as powerful as matching DNA samples in sexual assault cases. But before 2009, an officer in Texas could take a warrantless blood sample only if the suspected drunk driver had just seriously injured or killed someone. Otherwise, the driver could refuse a Breathalyzer test and sit around metabolizing alcohol while the officer worked to get a warrant. To cops and prosecutors, that’s destruction of valuable evidence.

Under the 2009 law, a police officer was required to get a blood sample if a suspected drunk driver refused a breath test and either had a child in the car, had two previous DWI convictions, had a prior conviction for intoxication manslaughter or intoxication assault, or had been in an accident in which anyone but the suspected drunk driver was hurt. Having guaranteed blood samples in the most serious cases didn’t just mean more successful prosecutions; it meant fewer DWI cases going

to trial. As Shannon Edmonds, director of governmental relations for the Texas District and County Attorneys Association, put it, “If it bleeds, it pleads.”

Predictably, some naysayers thought that letting officers decide without judicial oversight whether to forcibly take blood samples from people in custody was creepy and weird—if not unconstitutional. If the Fourth Amendment protection against unreasonable search and seizure applies to your house, shouldn’t it also apply to your veins?

Clay Abbott, the Texas District and County Attorneys Association’s DWI Resource Prosecutor in Austin, had some pretty smug words for those people. In the September-October 2009 issue of the group’s magazine, *The Prosecutor*, Abbott wrote, “The initial media coverage of this new law was full of ‘concerned’ criminal defense lawyers and civil rights experts ‘wondering about its constitutionality.’ Real lawyers need not worry: The U.S. Supreme Court and Court of Criminal Appeals have both found that DWI cases present very clear exigent circumstances allowing warrantless draws.”

Alas, now even real lawyers need worry. In April, the Supreme Court turned out to be packed with those experts “wondering about” the law’s “constitutionality.” In an 8-1 ruling in *Missouri v. McNeely*, the Court determined that the mere fact that alcohol dissipates over time does not, by itself, create an exigent (urgent) circumstance overriding the whole Fourth Amendment thing.

But the justices also stopped short of requiring warrants for all blood draws. Exigent circumstances may occur, they said, but will have to be determined case by case and based on the totality of circumstances.

That left Texas prosecutors a bit freaked out. “The following attachment is my attempt to answer the dozens of questions you’ve sent me by email, phone calls, and texts,” wrote Clay Abbott in a letter to association members titled, “Don’t panic... thoughts on adapting to SCOTUS’s McNeely decision.”

“I am sure many defense counsel will cite *McNeely* as the end of everything related to blood evidence in DWI cases,” Abbott wrote, “but this is just not so.” The question isn’t whether warrantless draws will continue—Austin and San Antonio stopped the practice immediately, and the prosecutor association advised members to educate their local law-enforcement officers on the new necessity of at least trying to get a warrant—but whether the ruling will endanger prosecutions or convictions from after 2009.

The same day that the court decided *Missouri v. McNeely*, defense attorneys in San Antonio filed a motion to suppress the blood evidence in their client’s murder trial.

Christopher Hughes Lamar had multiple drugs in his system and a blood alcohol level nearly three

## TRIVIA TEXAS

**The Fort Worth Cats, a minor league baseball team, recently signed the former major leaguer Jose Canseco to play baseball again, according to the *Dallas Observer*. The 48-year-old was with the Texas Rangers from 1992-1994. Since he last played in North Texas, what has Canseco been up to?**

- a. Wrote a book admitting steroid use and implicating other players.**
- b. Tried to run for mayor of Toronto.**
- c. Tried his hand at both boxing and mixed martial arts.**
- d. Played in both the Canadian and Mexican leagues.**
- e. Was a contestant on both *Dancing with the Stars* and *Celebrity Apprentice*.**
- f. Was detained at the Mexican border for trying to smuggle a fertility drug into the United States.**
- g. All of the above**

**ANSWER: (g) All of the above.** What can we say? The man’s done it all. Except politics. His run for Toronto mayor was cut short in January 2013 when it was revealed that candidates have to be Canadian citizens.

SHOOTING-THEIR-MOUTHS-OFF EDITION

“It’s a strange notion that with the stroke of a pen, any president could prevent something from happening in Colorado or Connecticut or even Texas.”

—Gov. Rick Perry at the annual National Rifle

Association convention in Houston, May 3, on why gun-control legislation is pointless.

“The truth is that guns on so many occasions are the only difference between your mom or sister getting raped and them walking home unmolested.”

—Glenn Beck, during the keynote address at the Stand and Fight Rally at the NRA convention, May 4.

READ a report on economic conditions for Austin taxi drivers at [txlo.com/Austincabs](http://txlo.com/Austincabs)

times the legal limit when he caused a wreck that killed a woman and her 10-year-old daughter.

But this is still Texas. The motion was denied.

—EMILY DEPRANG

DEPT. OF LABOR

Fare Share

THERE’S UNDOUBTEDLY SOMETHING ROMANTIC ABOUT driving a taxi: working your own hours in your own way, cruising the city streets instead of being anchored to a desk, picking up total strangers and never knowing where you might take them. And then there’s the economic reality. In Austin, cab drivers earn, on average, just \$2.75 an hour after deductions for insurance, taxes and paying one of the city’s three cab companies for the privilege of driving their cars. Austin cabbies have brutally long hours—many work 12- to 14-hour shifts, seven days a week, 50-plus weeks a year—and as independent contractors, they have little job security, no unemployment benefits and no employer-provided retirement or health insurance.

For the three taxi franchises in Austin—Austin Cab, Lone Star Cab and Yellow Cab—the economics are much sweeter. The city has granted the three companies a total of 744 permits. In turn, they pay the city \$400 a year per taxi. The companies then lease the permits to the drivers for \$250 to \$295 a week, or between \$13,000 and \$15,340 a year (a 3,000-percent markup). For Yellow Cab, which controls more than 60 percent of the market, that works out to nearly \$6.8 million a year in revenue from permits alone.

“And nobody sees the discrepancy between those numbers?” asks David Passmore, president of the Taxi Drivers Association of Austin. “We’ve been going to City Council for years saying these things and they say, ‘We hear you.’ But they always vote in favor of the franchise.”

Passmore has been driving for Yellow Cab for five years. He likes the flexibility of the work but thinks the city has allowed the drivers to be exploited.

“I’m struggling right now, man,” he said. “It’s that uncertainty you have to work with each day—each day we start off in the negative.”

That’s where the Taxi Drivers Association of Austin comes in. Formed in 2009, the association is a formal vehicle for representing drivers’ interests. In late April, the association went one step further and formally affiliated with the AFL-CIO, making Austin the third city to see its taxi drivers unionize. But the catch is that with a membership of independent contractors, the association isn’t covered by most U.S. labor laws. Still, Passmore, said the affiliation is an important step in securing better pay, improved conditions and bargaining power.

“I do believe that it will give us some leverage,” he said. “It will better our position, speaking with one voice rather than being individual drivers.”

For the AFL-CIO, the affiliation represents a new tack in labor organizing. “How many workers are filing for union recognition and bargaining for a first contract?” asks Aaron Chappell, an Austin-based labor organizer with the AFL-CIO. The traditional methods of growing new unions are “broken,” he says. “People are going to use nontraditional means to

make economic gains.”

The taxi drivers plan to ask City Council to cap the fees that cab companies charge their drivers, create a fairer insurance system that doesn't leave drivers in the hole after an accident, and impose anti-retaliation clauses to protect union members from being punished or fired for their activities.

—FORREST WILDER

## ANNALS OF DOWNSIZING

# Brownsville's Brain Drain



KAREN FUSS-SOMMER CAME TO BROWNSVILLE IN THE 1980s for a nursing job. Over the years she made friends in the community, raised two daughters as a single parent and helped build the University of Texas-Brownsville's nursing program. Eventually she gained tenure, and if everything had gone as planned, she would have retired in 2017.

Instead, at age 50, Fuss-Sommer is one of more than 350 staff members at UT-Brownsville and Texas Southmost College losing their jobs. The mass layoffs are the result of the two schools splitting up after a 20-year partnership. Their unique union, the only one of its kind in the nation between a community college and a state-funded university, is slated to end August 31, 2015.

The partnership seemed like a good deal at first. The schools got to share state funding and the community college's local tax revenue, and students in the Rio Grande Valley, where 35 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, got a university education for the lowest tuition in the UT System.

But after a series of clashes, the schools asked the Legislature in 2009 for \$10 million to help UT-Brownsville pay rent to Texas Southmost. The Legislature kicked the problem back, asking the UT System and the TSC Board of Trustees to settle the rent dispute, and in November 2012 the UT Board of Regents chose to dissolve the partnership.

UT-Brownsville developed a plan to downsize staff to meet an enrollment that was estimated to shrink from 15,000 students in 2011 to 7,000 at the start of 2013. To match the shrinking student body, the university began dismissing faculty and employees.

The layoffs began in March 2012 with 30 adjunct professors who taught trade courses like air conditioning repair and car maintenance. This April, Fuss-Sommer and 104 other faculty members—nearly

a fifth of the school's 518—were also let go. Of those laid off, 53 were tenured professors.

Some retired or took other jobs before the final layoff notice. Others, like Fuss-Sommer, fought back.

First she appealed her termination, arguing that even after the split, UT-Brownsville would still have a nursing college, and would need an assistant dean. She asked why the administration laid her off but kept untenured, less experienced faculty in her department.

“I'm a dedicated employee, have been a dedicated faculty member of our institution from the day I stepped on that campus, and this is how it ends for me,” she tells the *Observer*.

In July she received a final notice asking her to sign a severance deal: give up her tenure and her right to sue UT-Brownsville or the UT System, and waive all her grievances. She would get an eighth of her salary as severance pay.

Fuss-Sommer refused to sign. Instead, she went to her union lawyer, Russell Ramirez, with the Texas Faculty Association and the Texas State Teachers Association. She and Ramirez—who is also representing three other laid-off faculty members—are looking into suing UT-Brownsville over the school's handling of the layoffs.

These are strange times for higher education in Brownsville. While so many faculty members are being laid off, state leaders are stoking excitement about a new super-school for the Valley, a collaboration between UT-Brownsville and UT-Pan American in Edinburg. The deal would bring a new medical school and far more state funding to the Valley. The UT System projects the new combined universities could enroll the second-largest number of Hispanics of any college or university in the country. At press time, the Legislature was putting the finishing touches on a bill approving the merger.

State Rep. Rene Oliveira (D-Brownsville) says the merger is the best long-term solution and shouldn't be seen as related to the tumultuous split with TSC. “I think it's sort of the old saying: one door closes, another opens.”

—BETH CORTEZ-NEAVEL

Karen Fuss-Sommer  
PHOTO BY BETH CORTEZ-NEAVEL

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## STATE OF TEXAS: Miles and Miles of Texas (Pipelines) BY FORREST WILDER

TEXAS HAS MORE MILES of pipelines than any other state. But the agency charged with pipeline safety, the Texas Railroad Commission (it has nothing to do with railroads—that's a long story) lacks the inspectors the agency says it needs. Meanwhile, the state has seen hundreds of pipeline accidents in the past decade that resulted in 17 deaths and, in some cases, severe environmental damage. If they were put together, Texas pipelines would stretch from the Earth to the moon and halfway back. And with oil and gas booming, several new pipelines are under construction.

### THE PIPES

Total miles of pipeline in Texas:

**366,274**

*the distance to the moon  
and halfway back to Earth*

### THE OVERSIGHT

Number of pipeline safety inspectors employed by the Texas Railroad Commission:

**34**

Number the agency says it needs:  
*Approximately*

**68**

Number of pipeline miles regulated by Texas per inspector:

**4,941**

### THE CONSEQUENCES

Number of significant pipeline incidents since 2002:

**585**

Number of fatalities:

**17**



# CINDY CASARES

## BIG BEAT

### Major Tom Reignites Passion for Space Travel

O

N SUNDAY, MAY 12, CANADIAN ASTRONAUT COMMANDER Chris Hadfield ended a five-month mission aboard the International Space Station by releasing a YouTube video of himself performing David Bowie's 1969 hit "Space Oddity"—in space. Just three days later, the video had been viewed more than 11 million times, with nearly every one of the comments enthusiastically in support of Hadfield and astronauts in general. Earth's first music video shot in space was the grand finale of a five-month social media campaign

by Hadfield to engage the public in his space adventure. By performing mundane tasks on video, such as making a peanut butter and honey sandwich, brushing his teeth, and washing his hands, Hadfield managed to do what NASA and every other national space program hasn't—reignite the public's enthusiasm for space exploration.

But why did people become so blasé about space travel? America's serious entry into space exploration was founded on the fear that the Soviet Union was going to colonize the moon. Fueled by paranoia about losing our technological and ideological superiority, the U.S. raced to get to the moon first. In 1969 the world gathered around television sets to watch Neil Armstrong take that first lunar step, and the result was a popular culture inspired by dreams of the future. When it became clear, however, that Russia wasn't going to follow us to the moon, American moon missions ended. By the end of the 1970s, we had stopped advancing the frontier for human space-flight, and the public's enthusiasm waned.

In the ensuing years, government funding steadily dropped. The space shuttle program ended in 2011 and, by 2012, only one half of a percent of the U.S. federal budget went to NASA. Locally, cutbacks at the Johnson Space Center have resulted in massive layoffs for NASA employees and contractors. It's hard to get precise numbers, but in the past three years, the Aerospace Transition Center, a human-resources facility run by the Texas Workforce Commission, has been utilized by an estimated 5,000 people in the Houston suburb of Clear Lake, the home of NASA. Though the numbers are dwindling, the layoffs continue. But if American astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson is to be believed, the economic crisis we're in didn't cause the end of the space program. Rather, it could be the other way around.

In a 2012 Senate committee hearing on the future of the U.S. space program, Tyson theorized that "Epic space adventures plant seeds of economic growth because doing what's never been done before is

intellectually seductive whether or not we deem it practical." He went even further to speculate that today's economic crisis is a symptom of a collective loss of ambition due to our loss of the space dream.

Intellectual seduction seems a good term for what Commander Hadfield did with his social-media campaign. His zeal for space exploration is such that even the act of washing his hands is something he wanted to share with the world—and the world wanted to share it with him. His nearly one million Twitter followers attest to that.

To NASA's credit, the agency was instrumental in helping Hadfield carry out his video broadcasts. The agency provided the technology that allowed Hadfield to do an "Ask Me Anything" session on Reddit live from space. But it was Hadfield's enthusiasm and creativity that provided the content.

Not only did he mastermind the "Space Oddity" recording, planning well ahead of his mission to get permission from David Bowie to alter the lyrics and perform the song, but he also spent hours outside his 10-hour-a-day job as an astronaut creating content for his followers back home.

What NASA does now is crucial. It can take Hadfield's social media model and leverage its creativity to drum up popular support for new projects like commercial space-transport company SpaceX's proposed rocket launch site outside Brownsville, a move that could bring hundreds of jobs to Texas' poorest region. Or NASA can go back to what it was doing before and risk floundering another 20 years.

If that happens, however, American innovation may go with it. ☐

"Epic space adventures plant seeds of economic growth because doing what's never been done before is intellectually seductive whether or not we deem it practical."

# TYRANT'S FOE

## Fighting Modern-Day Slavery

**T**RUJILLO, 33, IS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE HOUSTON RESCUE AND Restore Coalition, a nonprofit formed after the city was roiled by one of the largest human-trafficking busts in U.S. history. In 2005, police rescued more than 120 Central and South American women who had been held against their will, forced into prostitution, and made to work as barmaids in seedy bars and restaurants in northwest Houston. ¶ The discovery of the massive human-trafficking ring spurred a grassroots volunteer group founded by Houstonians Stephanie Weber and Gayle Christie. In 2007 the group formed a nonprofit and then appointed Trujillo as executive director. “People in Houston realized that this was a big problem that needed to be addressed,” Trujillo says. “There wasn’t an organization doing education, awareness or training.”



**Maria Trujillo**

raises awareness about human trafficking.

Maria Trujillo and her five employees have an ambitious goal: end modern-day slavery.

Human trafficking is the second-largest criminal industry in the world, behind drugs, Trujillo says. Its victims are often sexually exploited and forced to perform unpaid, or slave, labor. Many people think of human trafficking as a problem largely confined to foreign countries, but there are thousands of modern-day slaves toiling in the United States. Houston is considered a hub for human trafficking, Trujillo says, because of its port, international airport and proximity to Mexico. “It’s a distribution area, and it has a large sex industry.”

Trujillo and her team focus on outreach, training and prevention. They train health professionals, law enforcement, 9-1-1 operators and even cable installers—because they have a level of access to homes and businesses that police don’t, she says, and can often spot victims of trafficking. Last year, the coalition trained 9,000 people how to identify and help victims. “We also have a huge outreach effort,” she says. “We do community presentations with everyone from the Rotary Club to neighborhood associations.”

In 2006, the Houston Rescue and Restore Coalition designated the third week of September as human-trafficking awareness week to inform and educate Houstonians. Since then, Texas’ elected officials have gotten more involved in the issue. In 2010, Attorney General Greg Abbott appointed Trujillo to a statewide task force on human trafficking, and Houston

Mayor Annise Parker formed an advisory committee on human trafficking with Trujillo as chair.

The nonprofit also launched a campaign to make Houston one of the largest fair-trade cities in the country, “connecting our consumerism with an awareness about fair labor without slavery,” Trujillo says. The group is increasingly focusing on prevention with a program for at-risk youth that promotes self-esteem and aims to educate young people to prevent them from becoming vulnerable to exploitation by traffickers.

A lot has changed since 2005, when Houstonians woke up to the news of a major trafficking ring operating in their city. Now, Trujillo says, many residents are aware of the problem and even volunteer with her organization to help victims. The field of human-trafficking awareness and prevention is still young—only 13 years old, Trujillo says. But it has come a long way. “When I first started working on this issue, very few people knew anything about human trafficking,” she says. “Now we have a solid law-enforcement team investigating these cases. Houston has really made a concerted effort.”

But in a global economy, the industry of human trafficking has become a \$32-billion-a-year business, Trujillo says, and Houston is still a major hub. “Of course, we know we still have a lot of work to do,” Trujillo says. —MELISSA DEL BOSQUE

## EDITORIAL

# The Near-Sighted Budget

**A**S WE SEND THIS ISSUE OF THE *Observer* to press, Texas lawmakers are putting the finishing touches on a budget plan for the next two years. The budget is the one bill the Legislature *has* to pass, and, because it determines how the state will spend money, it's the most important. In past sessions—especially in 2011, when the Lege cut billions from critical programs—the budget debate filled us with dread. But this year, with the state flush with cash from the oil and gas boom, lawmakers were in a relatively generous mood. They restored some 2011 cuts, including a good portion of the \$5.4 billion slashed from schools, and invested in water and transportation infrastructure. If you look strictly at the bottom line, there is much to like in this budget. Millions of Texans will benefit.

But there is the big picture to consider, and it doesn't look promising. Even with the funding increases, the budget will return us only to 2010 spending levels to pay for the needs of a 2013 Texas that has seen three more years of population growth. In fact, when you account for population growth and inflation, according to the liberal Center for Public Policy Priorities, a draft of the 2014-2015 Texas budget spends about \$1,700 less per capita than in

2002—and those weren't free-spending days.

Meanwhile, the Lege went another session without addressing the major fiscal problems facing the state. For instance, for the fourth straight session lawmakers refused to confront the "structural deficit." That's the result of a 2006 tax-swap plan that wasn't much of a swap—the franchise tax still doesn't bring in enough money to cover 2006 property tax cuts. The result is that the Texas budget has a yearly \$5 billion hole that has forced spending reductions. It's also put pressure on local governments, which have seen their debt burden double in the past 10 years, according to the Texas comptroller.

This kind of budgeting has a name: deficit spending. The state will soon max out its credit cards, and our main revenue streams (sales and property taxes, and federal money) can supply only so much. The needs of the state are growing quickly, and our revenue sources are just about tapped out.

Whenever the budget is finished—either in the regular session or in a 30-day special session—lawmakers will undoubtedly congratulate each other for constructing a better budget than two years ago. And by that low standard, they have done well. But contrary to what you hear from the governor's office, Texas' fiscal model remains unsustainable. ■

The Lege went another session without addressing the major fiscal problems facing the state.

## LOON STAR STATE Ben Sargent





CAPTAIN UNDERPANTS AND THE BIG, BAD, BAD GUYS  
GOOSEBUMPS  
THE ORIGINAL SERIES AND THE SERIES OF SERIES  
HOSTED BY  
R.I.



# BOOT STRAPS

When Brownsville public school students step out of line, they're marched off to

**BOOT CAMP.**

But does military-style discipline help or harm?

**BY PATRICK MICHELS**

-----  
**PHOTOS BY JEN REEL**

# THEY START ARRIVING AT 6 A.M.,

Brownsville's gang members, brawlers and foul-mouthed youth, truants and scofflaws who have violated the student code of conduct. Here, they will learn a thing or two about conduct.

Within a week, they know the drill. First they line up for intake screening, the boys in double-file, girls single-file beside a wall, and for the first of many times in the next 10 hours, they wait. When they reach the front of the line, they turn their pockets inside-out, take off their shoes, raise their arms and submit to a pat-down.

This is how each day begins at the Brownsville Academic Center—"BAC," in the acronym-rich military shorthand popular here, or just "the boot camp," as it's known around town. It's a public school campus in the Brownsville Independent School District, but there are no students here—only "cadets." The men and women in head-to-toe desert camouflage, checking the kids for contraband, are "drill instructors" or "DIs." In these early-morning hours before the teachers arrive, the school and everyone in it belongs to them.

Clear of the intake screening, cadets find their places in the school's courtyard, drop their belongings at their feet, and wait some more. They range from sixth-graders to seniors in high school, all in matching gray T-shirts and shorts. Their haircuts are the same—short buzz cuts for the boys, the girls' hair pulled back in buns—and only their size and sneakers differentiate them.

They don't come here with much. The things they carry fit in neat bundles at their feet: dark camouflage pants, shirts and hats tied up in a cloth belt, a canteen, and a pair of black boots. Most have worn copies of a school handbook. A couple have library books: *Goosebumps* or *Captain Underpants*.

Most of the kids stand in place quietly, but as the intake drags on, a few start messing around. "Eastside!" comes a boy's voice. "Southside," another calls back. They repeat this and, the silence broken, a couple of boys begin joking with one another until a drill instructor catches them.

"Knock it off," he says.

"Sir, yes sir," they murmur.

"I didn't hear that! Louder than that."

"Sir, yes sir!"

Female cadets line up for intake. A female drill instructor looks for contraband by inspecting pockets, socks and shoes, and performs a final pat down before allowing cadets in the building.

READ the Observer's feature on racial disparities in Texas school discipline at [txlo.com/schoolprison](http://txlo.com/schoolprison)



It's a radical, and rare, approach to school discipline that Brownsville has employed for 15 years. Brownsville ISD's boot camp has survived the bad press and scandals that shuttered most other juvenile boot camps years ago. It's tough to get a hard count, but of Texas' 1,000-plus districts, only about five others have anything like BAC, and none this big.

Principals in Brownsville can send kids to boot camp for any misbehavior serious enough to warrant out-of-school suspension: bringing weapons to school, or just cursing in class. BAC provides tough love for gang-bangers and class clowns alike. Sometimes it's just a stop for kids before they drop out or end up in the juvenile justice system. Until a few years ago, Brownsville ISD police issued misdemeanor tickets to more students than any other district its size in Texas, a prime example of the trend toward criminalizing student misbehavior—the school-to-prison pipeline.

The boot camp's critics say this pipeline runs right



through BAC, that every time students are pulled out of regular class and booked into a disciplinary program, they get the message that they aren't good enough. And the critics contend that BAC, with a bunch of camo-bundled sixth-graders just five miles from the ultra-militarized Mexican border, is grooming kids for the military or the border patrol.

But advocates for the school say the boot camp is designed to catch kids *before* they end up in that pipeline to prison, and to turn them around. It's character training and structure, in assignments of just 30 or 45 days, for kids who need more than their neighborhood school can offer. Take a look at BAC, they say, and it's clear this place isn't about breaking spirits or making soldiers—it's about learning to love the rules.

**IT'S EARLY MORNING** and the sun is still hidden beyond the Gulf horizon, the sky a deep blue. The sweet but unmistakable smell of sewage blows through

the courtyard, where the kids gather for exercises and marching practice. The courtyard is the school's signature feature, open at the sides and topped by a three-tiered metal pagoda painted dark green, olive and blue. The roof is corrugated metal, supported by massive beams bearing inspirational words stenciled in gray: motivate, communicate, decisive.

Patches of grass lighten the mood, and they are immaculate, like the rest of the school. The campus was littered with stray rock when it opened in August, but it wasn't long before the kids who stepped out of line and earned "beautification duty" had the rocks cleaned up. Kids who spit on this ground learn to use a mop.

At morning exercises, platoons of students are doing jumping jacks, neck rolls and mountain climbers, shuffling their feet in the push-up position. A drill instructor named Diaz, a hulking man built for yelling, keeps the rhythm: "UNH! OOGH! HREE! UNH! OOGH! HREE!" When an exercise is complete and it's

**PRINCIPALS IN BROWNSVILLE CAN SEND KIDS TO BOOT CAMP FOR ANY MISBEHAVIOR SERIOUS ENOUGH TO WARRANT OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUSPENSION.**



A drill instructor barks orders to female cadets during marching practice.

**“THAT MILITARY PIECE WAS ALWAYS A MEANS TO AN END. THE END WAS ALWAYS EDUCATION.”**

time for the group to move, he counts down from 10. After “UNH!” the students quit shuffling and answer in unison: “FREEZE, CADET, FREEZE!”

In the cafeteria, the highest-ranking cadets have changed into their battle dress uniforms of dark camouflage for breakfast. The meal is a tightly regulated enterprise that begins, like everything else, with waiting. The cadets wait outside the cafeteria before they’re ordered to go in. Then they wait along the cafeteria wall, staring at a cardboard cutout of Brett Favre holding a glass of milk, before advancing to the counter for a tray. When they reach their seats, they wait some more until they’re told to sit, all on the same side of the table so they won’t be tempted to talk. When a drill instructor barks, “Secure plastics!” the cadets unwrap their plastic forks, straws and napkins, and the DI walks sternly down the row collecting the plastic wrappers. “Ready ... eat!” comes the call, and only then do they unwrap their PBJ pockets and poke straws into their milks. They eat with brutal efficiency. The only mealtime sounds are crinkling plastic wrappers, humming kitchen appliances and walkie-talkie chatter between the DIs.

Even more than the morning frisk or the marches around the yard, this is the drill instructors’ shining moment, a typically social occasion distilled to its essence. In other schools, meals might last 45 minutes or an hour. Here they’re 15 minutes, half that time spent on logistics like ensuring the plastics are, in fact, secure.

You can trace procedures like this at BAC to one

man, Orlando Salinas. A veteran of the first Gulf War who’d gone on to teach, he was running a nighttime program for Brownsville ISD high schoolers when an assistant superintendent asked him for thoughts on addressing the district’s dropout problem. Salinas, still serving in the Texas National Guard, decided lack of discipline was the biggest problem, and he found inspiration in the best discipline instruction he knew of. “That military piece was always a means to an end,” Salinas says. “The end was always education.”

In the late 1990s, Brownsville ISD already had an alternative school for disciplinary referrals. Salinas’ venture, which he named the Teen Learning Center, was a more extreme option—students served out semester- or year-long suspensions in his school, much longer than a stint at BAC now.

Salinas drafted principles to guide his new school, housed in portable trailers on a patch of dirt. The school would be a tough place, but not one for constant punishment.

“We endeavor to return these students to mainstream education and thus produce self-directed life-long learners,” read his mission statement, in part. The program would be “an exhausting daily routine” from 6:30 a.m. to 6 p.m., with students in a platoon structure, in uniform, led by drill instructors, teachers, a probation officer, counselor and nurse. Salinas set aside space so probation officers, social workers and teachers could talk together, to get a fuller picture of



what a student was going through. He hand-picked his teachers from around the district, and drove a U-Haul trailer to San Antonio to buy uniforms in bulk—50 cents for a set of pants, shirt, hat and boots. His first class of students unloaded the trailer and sorted them out by size.

He wanted kids to grapple with strict school routines during the day, he says, then go back to the same friends and home life that led them into trouble. “If I take you out of your environment, it’s easy to change. You’ll change because your environment is different,” he says. “I want these kids to change while they’re in an environment [that’s familiar], so that the change is lasting.” A kid might show up at school drunk or high, he figured, but once they try the daily two-mile run in that condition, they’re not likely to do it again.

He tracked graduation from and recidivism to his program, thinking he’d present his school as a case study in an academic paper someday. In the six years he was at the school, the number of students returning for a second tour hovered around 5 percent.

In 2004, Salinas was called up for active duty in Afghanistan, and left his place at the school. He’s a general in the Texas Army National Guard today, living near Austin, but remains proud of the school he built 15 years ago. On his wall at home, he still has a gift from some old students: a handmade wooden shape of Texas bearing the school motto, “Discipline with dignity.”

Brownsville’s superintendent when Salinas left

was Michael Zolkoski, a San Antonio native and a boot-camp-school evangelist in his own right who’d founded boot camps in three other districts. Zolkoski tapped longtime principal Sharon Moore to design a new, more intense boot camp model. Zolkoski named it the Brownsville Academic Center, and designed programs for short-term suspensions and more serious, long-term interventions, all built to mimic the Boys Town model of tough love for tough kids.

At the time Salinas designed his Teen Learning Center, youth boot camps were a popular answer for problem kids in Texas, part of then-Gov. George W. Bush’s zero-tolerance approach to student misbehavior. (See “Too Black for School,” April 2010.) Most of those “scared straight” programs were residential facilities run by juvenile probation departments, and a few were collaborations with school districts. But most have since closed after studies suggested that boot camps do little to steer kids away from crime, and after horror stories of violent drill sergeants and child abuse. A parent in South Texas’ Harlingen CISD recently filed a complaint with the police claiming she was shoved by her daughter’s boot camp drill sergeant. One of Zolkoski’s own boot camps, the Tulsa Academic Center, modeled after Brownsville’s, became so violent and overcrowded after a year in operation that it cost him his job. (He’s now superintendent of El Paso’s Ysleta ISD, which doesn’t have a boot camp.) But Brownsville’s boot camp endured and thrived.

A platoon stands at ease before morning exercises.

SEE a breakdown of which neighborhoods refer the most students to boot camp at [txlo.com/bacmap](http://txlo.com/bacmap)

**“PERSONALLY, I’D LOVE TO PUT THE MARINES OR SEALS IN OUR SCHOOLS SO WE CAN START DEVELOPING FUTURE STUDENTS THAT WANT TO GO INTO THE SERVICE.”**

**TOP:** Reading teacher Rosie Martinez discusses bullying with her middle-school class.

**BOTTOM:** Cadets are never left unattended. Here a drill instructor accompanies cadets to another classroom.

After the boot camp was housed in drafty portable trailers for years, the district built a new campus for the BAC with \$8 million in local bond money. The grand opening in fall 2012 featured local bigwigs and politicians, and a presentation from the school honor guard.

Caty Presas-Garcia, a Brownsville ISD trustee who was once Salinas’ administrative assistant at the school, is a firm believer in the power of BAC, and wants to see the model grow. “When I worked with Col. Salinas, it was really an eye-opener,” she says. “By the time they’re in middle school, they’re starting to do drugs, their hormones are changing, they’re developing. So when do you structure them?” Even younger, she says—it should start in elementary school.

She concedes she probably feels more strongly than most because she comes from a military family. Her father served in Vietnam and her siblings were in the Air Force. Spreading the boot camp model would mean good jobs for returning veterans, she says, and more students would benefit. “If people were to really embrace it, I think we’d have less crime in our communities,” she says.

“Personally, I’d love to put the Marines or SEALs in our schools so we can start developing future students that want to go into the service,” she says. She mentions the Border Patrol and customs as well. “We’re on the border, why not? Our students will have such great opportunities.”

**CARMEN ROCCO, A PEDIATRICIAN** with her own clinic a few miles from the boot camp, argues that the BAC is indoctrinating Brownsville’s school kids.

“The most common way out when you see kids graduating from high school—like any other impoverished community—it’s the Army, the Navy,” she says. “Get ‘em to believe the best thing to happen to them is a pair of Army boots, and I have a problem with that. Give them a stethoscope. What’s wrong with that?”

She worries that boot camp is too blunt an instrument for students with complex problems, and their stays too short to be much of a solution. Military discipline isn’t the answer, she says, when students with mental-health issues need psychiatrists, and there’s only one in town, with a wait list months long. “I think there’s a lot more creative and effective ways of doing it,” Rocco says.

Marsha Griffin, another pediatrician whose job entails signing off on students’ medical releases when they’re assigned to BAC, says she’s heard of kids sent to BAC for minor infractions—things that she never would’ve been kicked out of school for when she was a kid. “We didn’t grow up in a culture of zero-tolerance. We had mentors and parents and teachers that really tried to help children grow into adulthood,” she says. “What happened in the ‘60s? Kids were talking back and dressing different, and we didn’t haul them off to prison camp.”

She frets about the school district’s role in criminalizing students, and that this particular experiment in alternative education is being visited upon a vulnerable community that’s unlikely to push back. Parents in the U.S. illegally aren’t likely to lodge a complaint with the higher-ups if they don’t want their kid sent to boot camp. (Since 2005, the state and the district have received just one formal complaint about BAC.)

Some critics in the community wonder if the boot

camp is continuing an ugly local tradition. A 2010 study by the children’s advocacy group Texas Appleseed pegged Brownsville ISD as a leading issuer of misdemeanor tickets and expulsions—its 176 expulsions were ninth-highest in the state in 2007-2008. (After instituting rules to limit its ticketing, Brownsville ISD issued far fewer citations beginning in 2009, Texas Appleseed noted.)

The Texas Appleseed study has sparked a statewide conversation about the consequences of criminalizing student misbehavior in school. It has become an epidemic in Texas: misbehavior that once resulted in suspensions now leads to criminal offenses. Texas Appleseed’s study also found that Texas schools ticket African-American and Latino students for misbehavior, including swearing, far more often than white students, saddling them with juvenile records and acclimating them to life on the wrong side of the law.

BAC’s all-Latino student body isn’t so remarkable in a 98-percent Latino district. Consider, though, that there are troubled and troublesome kids all over Texas, but it’s the ones in Brownsville—one of the poorest cities in the country—who get boot camp. Misbehaving kids from Austin, Houston and Highland Park don’t wear battle-dress uniforms to school or have a drill sergeant follow them into the bathroom for “head breaks.” Most of BAC’s students come from schools in the poorest parts of town, where the military and Border Patrol recruit heavily.

“This is a community that’s become militarized in an extraordinary way,” says Mike Seifert, Griffin’s husband and coordinator of the Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network, which includes 11 community groups. School officials aren’t inclined to talk about the Border Patrol as anything but a career opportunity, but the helicopter flyovers, the border wall cutting off the town, and the green and white trucks parked alongside it—Seifert says they’ve all hardened the city in the past few years. Throw in a boot camp at the school district and the town looks even rougher. “At the end of the day,” he asks, “is it really about brutalizing people?”

**BROWNSVILLE MAY HAVE BECOME** militarized, but BAC’s principal, Carlos Guerra, is not a military man. He stops short of Presas-Garcia’s boosterism, but still says there’s a big difference between his school and real military training. “We’re not a military boot camp. We’re not a military school,” he says. “We’re trying to discipline them, to teach them to make good choices. Not prepare them for war.”

Guerra joined BAC in August, in time to dedicate the new school. A former superintendent at tiny San Perlita ISD a few miles north along the coast, he has gray hair and a white mustache, and the warm but professional air of an anchor on the evening news. He happened into the job by accident, he says. “According to the district, it was in the best interest of the district for me to come here.”

He says the military format helps simplify things for students. At a regular school, even a trip to the bathroom presents the options of taking the long or the short way, or skipping out of school altogether. With a drill instructor on kids’ heels, the DI’s way becomes the only option. “That relieves a lot of stress for them,” Guerra says. “You’ve made a lot of decisions for them





**Principal Carlos Guerra honors a cadet for exemplary reading. The cadet's white t-shirt and jeans signifies he has completed his sentence and will soon leave BAC.**

that they really don't want to make, or may be ill-equipped to make."

Guerra agrees with Rocco that kids need more counselors and support. Some kids, he says, are referred to drug rehab or outside counseling. "Many of them come from broken homes, and they're dealing with issues that you and I can't even fathom. To spend five to 10 minutes with a counselor does not do them justice." The district just hopes that six or nine weeks of boot-camp discipline are enough to help its kids.

Even with those limited resources, it's expensive to keep the school running. Constructing the school cost plenty, but then there's the extra staff—enough teachers to maintain a 15-to-1 student-teacher ratio, plus 12 drill instructors, eight special-education teachers and other aides. Brownsville ISD is spending \$2.7 million of its supplemental state funding on BAC, far more than any other school in the district gets. That might seem like too much money on a military-style facility that's unlike almost any other school in Texas. But Guerra argues that the district is trying to turn lives around. "What goes into the building, what goes into the uniforms—you change one kid, it's worth the expense. This building has paid for itself many times."

But even Guerra wonders whether some of his kids, sent to boot camp for minor offenses, should have been removed from their regular schools. "I have had some referrals where I thought, 'Really?'" he says. "Certainly some of these referrals are questionable, and I feel that they could have been handled in a different manner." But he doesn't get to pick his students, he

says—he just tries his best with the ones he has.

Annabel Velez's 10<sup>th</sup>-grade son was sent to BAC this spring, an assignment he received, along with criminal probation, for chronic truancy. Driving her son to BAC in the morning wasn't a problem, she says, but it was tough for her to get away from work in the afternoon every day to pick him up.

Guerra and Salinas agree the program is meant to impact parents too. Salinas says he wanted parents to pick up and drop off their students every day, to ensure extra involvement in their child's school life.

"You are not punishing the student," Velez says. "You are punishing the parent."

She recalls their first visit to BAC, before her son's first day. A drill instructor noticed her son's shirt hanging out, and yelled at him to tuck it in. It shocked Velez to see a stranger come down so hard on her son. But modeling that discipline for parents is part of the point. Velez wasn't about to argue. "There's nothing I could have said or done, because they're the school, and that's the way," she says.

Her son liked the program. He's still on probation, and another referral to BAC will be bad for his record, so Velez is encouraged that the lessons seem to be sticking. He doesn't need nagging to get up in the morning for school anymore, and he's been exercising more. He got a punching bag at home, so he can work out his anger, and he even started drinking protein shakes. "Before, it was just go home and sleep. Now, he likes to go to the gym," she says. "Plus, lately, he's been talking about going into the Army."

**READ** more on the scandal at the Tulsa Academic Center at [txlo.com/tac](http://txlo.com/tac)

**THE SCHOOL HALLWAYS ARE LINED** with a gray stripe of tile, and that's where the cadets line up outside their first class. As they file in and find a spot among the desks, it starts to feel more like school than boot camp. They're still in camouflage pants, but most have shed their uniform blouse for a white T-shirt. The teachers are dressed like teachers anywhere, smart business casual or school hoodie and jeans.

American schools are often criticized as institutional, creativity-stifling places that teach kids to stay in line. Most don't have Drill Instructor Salinas looming beside the whiteboard, stone-faced in full camo, shaved head and goatee. This is part of the handoff of authority, though, and after a few minutes he leaves control of the middle school classroom to reading teacher Rosie Martinez. It's a delicate balance, and the DIs are never too far away to maintain order.

Students begin by reading. One stands a hardcover book entitled *Cars* on his desk, and buries his head in pages full of big type and chrome. Students must read two or three books, depending on the length of their stay, to move on from BAC. Martinez next guides her class through a lesson on social skills, talking about who has bullied other kids and why, and how they can cool off when they're frustrated at school.

"You're faced with this every day," Martinez says. "Here, we tell you when to talk, when to walk, when to do anything. You go back to your home campus, you don't have any of that."

A few kids say they'd rather not go back at all.

"But you can't stay here," she tells them. "You need to move on and make better choices."

When a student whistles—a quick double note, easy to miss, but he's been told before not to do it—Martinez finds a drill instructor in the hallway, who pulls the boy out for a few minutes of "redirection."

"Once they enter the classroom, they belong to the teachers, but they're still expected to comport themselves with the military discipline," explains Gilbert Saucedo, the head drill instructor. When they're pulled out to speak with a DI, students may talk out the problem or go out to the circle for some exercises and then return to class. If they don't cooperate, they're sentenced to either in-school suspension—in a separate classroom at BAC—or sent to juvenile probation. "They know that once they come to me, things can go either way," Saucedo says.

Nearly all the DIs were in the military, but Saucedo is one of only two with combat experience. He's a Brownsville native who served in Desert Storm, then worked in traditional public schools before learning about Salinas' new boot camp in the 1990s. He hired on a few months after the school opened and hasn't left. It's a rare opportunity, he says, to keep up the military lifestyle—from the pageantry to the *esprit de corps*—without remaining in the service. He can go home to his family every night.

Saucedo says it's "80 to 90 percent" like the real thing, but the drill instructors at BAC are part drill sergeant and part counselor. They talk a lot about tough love, knowing when to push and when to back off.

Principal Guerra credits the people he works with, like Saucedo, for helping the kids who come through BAC. "We can't use a cookie-cutter approach for these kids. They all have their own personalities, their own things that set them off," Guerra says. "A lot of these

kids, what they need is a lot of encouragement.

"I've seen some of the most hardcore of them come in, and we talk to them, and they break down in tears. ... We start getting to the main issue, their problems at home and things like that, it's what's bringing them here indirectly. Because of what's going on at home, they misbehave in school."

A little before noon, the kids march back outside to the courtyard. Most days this is the time for more exercise, but on Fridays it's time for awards. It's bright out, with sounds of nearby construction and a warm, humid breeze blowing in.

Cadets arrange themselves in five platoons, hands clasped behind their backs. A drill instructor faces each group. The honor guard, four students in all-black uniforms, marches in bearing flags and fake rifles. Guerra appears in a navy suit, tie-less with a light blue shirt. He calls students forward in small groups to receive awards for perfect attendance or exemplary reading. He gives the "Principal's Award" to a girl from the honor guard who impressed him with an essay she wrote about being pulled out of class for a talk with a DI, and how their conversation gave her hope she'd never felt before.

Last, Guerra calls the names of 25 cadets who step forward from the ranks dressed in white T-shirts and jeans, their dress uniforms all bagged in plastic on the ground, boots traded for sneakers. They are leaving BAC for their home campuses next week.

Because BAC takes all out-of-school suspensions, and not just expulsions, return rates are now higher than they were in Salinas' day. One student is on his fourth tour of the year. Critics like Rocco, the pediatrician, doubt that 45 days is long enough to make a meaningful impact on a troubled kid, but Guerra notes that the time limit is set by state law. Kids stay longer only if they get in trouble again, so he says staff tries to instill motivation, self-esteem and discipline, the things they'll need to avoid coming back. It's a lot to expect from any school, even an extreme one like this.

That's one of the last thoughts Guerra leaves with the outbound cadets, some lined up in formation for the last time: "Now," he says, "begins the hard part." ❏

**"GET 'EM TO BELIEVE THE BEST THING TO HAPPEN TO THEM IS A PAIR OF ARMY BOOTS, AND I HAVE A PROBLEM WITH THAT. GIVE THEM A STETHOSCOPE. WHAT'S WRONG WITH THAT?"**

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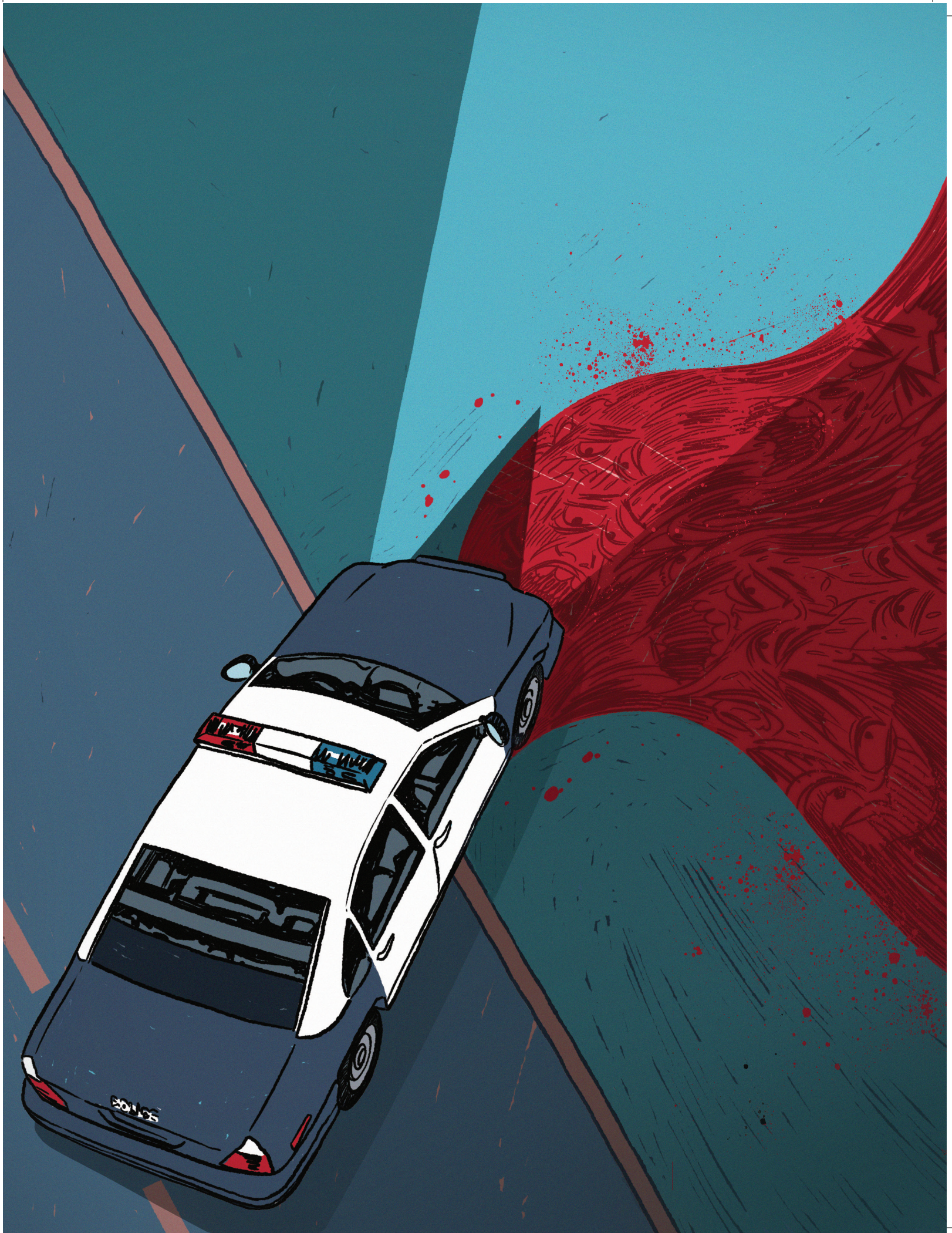
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PULLQUOTES:

**<hed>The Passage of Nathan Pierce**  
**<subhed> At 32, Nathan Pierce was turning his life around. Then he sought help from Texas' mental-health system.**

By Diana Claitor



# FOR NATHAN PIERCE, THE CRISIS CAME QUICKLY. IN JULY 2012, HE BEGAN SUFFERING NIGHTMARES AND FEELING INCREASINGLY ANXIOUS AND DEPRESSED.

At 32, Pierce lived with his mother and two nieces in a mobile home on a hardscrabble road on the edge of Sherman, Texas, in the rural community of Southmayd. Pierce was trying to turn his life around and was studying to become a welder, but his deteriorating mental state made it tough. His symptoms soon worsened. He endured terrifying hallucinations and suicidal urges. So on the morning of July 12, his mother, Barbara Pierce Todd, drove him to the Texoma Community Center, the local mental health clinic, for an evaluation. A caseworker and a supervisor declared that he needed treatment at the North Texas State Hospital, an in-patient facility in Wichita Falls, two hours away. Though Pierce was voluntarily seeking hospitalization, a magistrate issued an emergency detention order that same day and, as is standard practice, the clinic notified the county sheriff's department to deliver Pierce to the state hospital. He never made it.

Pierce hadn't been diagnosed with a mental-health disorder, though he had a history of drinking, and getting into trouble, and spent several stints in jail. Since his last release, he had helped Todd raise her daughter's children, 8-year-old Makaylah and 9-year-old Chealsey. "When I was away at work, he'd help them with their homework and feed them and put them to bed," Todd says. "He even took them to the father-daughter dance at their school."

The family traces its roots to southern Oklahoma. Pierce, and his sister and mother carried the ID card known as the CDIB—Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood—and are proud to be on the tribal rolls and hold a piece of registered land in the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. In the summers when he was a kid, Pierce would return to southern Oklahoma to stay with his grandmother and great-grandfather, a Choctaw healer. Pierce built a tree house with his cousin and fished in the stock ponds. "He was always outside," Todd says. "He loved it over there."

In his teens, Pierce began drinking, and later on,

his drinking led to arrests. He expressed remorse each time, but would continue drinking. He was held in the Grayson County Jail on minor charges more than once, and at one point, served a short sentence in prison for an assault that friends described as "a fight between drunks." After that, Pierce apologized to his mother for causing her worry and vowed to start a new life. The Choctaw tribal government helped out by paying for his treatment in rehab in 2011. After treatment, he stayed sober, enrolled in welding classes and began to imagine a career. "He had had problems, but he'd made up his mind to change," says Michael West, owner of Fight Time Fitness, where Pierce had learned kickboxing and trained since he was 15. "We had some long heart-to-hearts. ... We saw him getting better."

After dropping Pierce at the clinic on July 12, Todd received a call from a caseworker to notify her of the decision to send her son to the state hospital. She remembers feeling relieved that Pierce had sought help and hopeful he would benefit from treatment.

The Grayson County Sheriff's office dispatched Corporal Steven Robert Sloan to drive Pierce to the hospital. The national office of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) reports that across the country, law-enforcement officers often transport people with mental illness, especially those in crisis.

Sloan, who worked at the county jail, drove to the clinic, where Pierce waited with a crisis worker. Sloan placed Pierce in cuffs and leg irons, and when Pierce asked the reason—since his was a voluntary commitment—Sloan told him that sheriff's department policy mandated the use of restraints in all transports.

The two-hour drive to Wichita Falls went smoothly until Pierce requested a bathroom break. Sloan pulled over at a picnic area five miles outside Henrietta and un-cuffed one of Pierce's hands so that he could urinate. When he started to re-cuff Pierce, Sloan says, Pierce struggled with him, and though Pierce was still partially restrained, he wound up in



possession of the deputy's Taser.

Sloan would later say that he began backing away to get out of range. He claims Pierce kept coming toward him, aiming the Taser at him. Sloan then shot Pierce in the chest with his 9mm service weapon.

At first, Sloan couldn't call 9-1-1 because his radio wasn't functioning and his cell phone had no service. A passerby managed to get through to Clay County deputies, who came to the roadside park. Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) arrived at 4:12 p.m. to find Pierce on the ground, "in leg irons and handcuffed, left hand only."

Pierce was rushed by ambulance to a Wichita Falls hospital, arriving at 4:45 p.m. He was taken into surgery and died on the operating table at 7:13 p.m. During the three hours preceding Pierce's death, nobody bothered to notify Barbara Todd that her son was in critical condition.

"I could have at least held his hand," she says. "I could have seen him once more."

At 10:30 that night, about 11 hours after leaving Nathan at the clinic, Todd heard a knock on her front door. Seeing a Department of Public Safety trooper standing there, Todd's first thought was that there had been a wreck. Then another officer, this one wearing the Grayson County Sheriff's uniform, stepped into view. They asked her to come outside to the porch, and they told her that Nathan was dead, that there had been a struggle and "he had passed away." Then the Grayson County deputy had a question for her.

"Do you know where you want the body shipped?"

Todd searched for words to describe how it felt to be asked such a question seconds after being told her only son had been shot to death.

"Like dirt," she says. "They treated me like dirt."

**IN TEXAS, MENTALLY ILL PATIENTS** and their families must navigate a complicated and barely functioning public mental-health system that often interfaces with the criminal justice system. It helps

**"He had had problems but he'd made up his mind to change. ... We saw him getting better."**

immensely to have money. As one higher-up at the Texas Department of State Health Services says, "If you're going to have a psychotic break, be sure and have some money." Big bucks allow you to go to a cushy private clinic in your hometown—unless you have a low IQ or you have a special need, like deafness, or unless you do something *too* psychotic. The private clinics offer the best treatment and they cherrypick, and Nathan Pierce was no cherry.

There was, however, more than one way to transport him to the nearest state hospital. According to the Texas Health and Safety Code, a mentally ill person can be transported by a relative, friend, mental health administrator, mental health officer, or, if none of those are available, law enforcement officer. That the Texoma Community Center either didn't know about, or didn't care to use, one of those first four options points to a large gap between regulations and reality for Texans with mental illness.

As in many states, community mental health clinics in Texas use law enforcement officers to transport patients, according to several clinicians around the state. Shelley Smith, CEO for West Texas Centers, the mental-health agency for a 23-county area, says that during an emergency commitment in her area, patients are always transported by law enforcement officers. "Transports are going on during the day, night, weekends—constantly," she says, noting that it's a big drain on Texas counties and sheriffs' offices.

Sheriffs' departments and mental health providers shackle everyone during transport, despite another regulation that requires written justification and documentation of use of restraints. Nathan Pierce's

**Nathan Pierce growing up.**  
PHOTO COURTESY OF  
THE PIERCE FAMILY

questioning why Sloan needed to restrain him hints at his uneasiness, especially considering his otherwise taciturn and near-somnolent behavior as described by his caseworker at the clinic.

The shackling of patients points to another poorly understood aspect of commitment, which is that when a judge issues an emergency detention order, a voluntary patient becomes an involuntary commitment. So, Pierce may have entered the system voluntarily, but once under that order, he slid over an invisible line into custody. And while technically not a prisoner, he was still treated like one. (Pierce was repeatedly labeled “a prisoner” in some reports and news stories, to the distress of family and friends.)

In large, urban districts, law-enforcement agencies hire specially trained mental health officers to transport patients, but most Texas counties don’t have, or don’t allocate, enough funds for that. So whoever transports your mentally ill loved one may have taken only “Basic Jail Certification Course For Sworn Texas Peace Officers,” a 32-hour course extremely light on the subject of mental illness. The course curriculum includes an introduction by a retired sheriff who warns new jailers about the presence of career criminals and foreigners in Texas jails. He fails to mention the estimated 25 percent of county jail inmates

with mental disorders.

“Most officers in all states will spend more of their career dealing with the mentally ill than they will armed, assaultive or fleeing individuals,” says Kevin Elliott, a retired Los Angeles sheriff’s officer who’s now a PhD candidate in criminal justice policy at Texas State University. “Yet most law enforcement officers, including sheriffs’ deputies, receive only a few hours, compared with more than 150 hours of firearms, self-defense and physical fitness training.”

The transporting of mentally ill patients to hospitals isn’t mentioned in the basic course for Texas jailers. And while the state doesn’t collect statistics on the number of transports, the Texas Department of State Health Services reports there were 14,487 people admitted to state hospitals in 2012. The majority of the admissions were transported by law enforcement officers, according to a staffer who wishes to remain anonymous.

The Grayson County Sheriff’s Office refused to answer questions about the Pierce case or about its policies on transporting mentally ill patients.

**THE DEATH OF NATHAN PIERCE** made little news and has so far resulted in no accountability. The storied

Texas Rangers have responsibility for investigating all officer-involved shootings. Ranger Jay Foster was dispatched to investigate the shooting at the roadside park on Highway 82 in Clay County last summer.

By the time Foster got to the scene, Pierce had been taken to the hospital, but Department of Public Safety troopers and Clay County deputies were still there, along with the shooter.

Sloan showed Ranger Foster the locations of the struggle and shooting, and the ranger examined the officer’s gun and ammunition, and then released it back to him. He took custody of Sloan’s Taser X-26; the safety was in the down or off position, and later tests proved it had never been fired. Sloan told Foster that he had previously transported mental patients on numerous occasions.

Three days later, another Texas Ranger, Brad Oliver, was assigned to the investigation. On July 16, four days after Pierce’s death, Oliver interviewed Sloan and the two Texoma Community Center mental health workers who had assessed Pierce. During the ranger’s 80-minute interview of Sloan, which was videotaped, the deputy sheriff was afforded privileges that most civilians wouldn’t receive when questioned after killing someone.

First of all, the ranger’s respectful and detailed questions about Sloan’s military background, work history and training in law enforcement served to establish his bona fides. Most important, when it came to Sloan’s account of the shooting, the ranger asked leading questions and even injected his own editorial comments to support certain conclusions. His most effective technique was to repeat key answers and then elaborate, making Sloan’s largely inarticulate responses into something more substantive.

Foster: “If that Taser was deployed on you, what were you thinking that could happen to you?”

Sloan: “That I was gone.”

Foster: “What do you mean, gone?”

Sloan: “Gone as in not here anymore. I was dead.”

Foster: “OK. ‘The Taser would have incapacitated me so he’d shoot me.’ So this is running through your mind as this happens?”

Sloan agrees, and then describes Nathan advancing on him holding the Taser: “I’m backing up...um, at that time I got to as far as possible that I could back up.”

Foster: “Why is that?”

Sloan: “I’d a been in the highway.”

Foster: “What other problems would you have if you’d got into the highway?”

Sloan: “Could have been hit by a car.”

Foster: “OK, so what’s going through your mind the whole time he’s pointing this Taser at you?”

Sloan: “The things going through my mind are everything—you’re in a situation you got to get out of.”

Foster: “What kind of situation did you think you was in?”

Sloan: “I was in a life-and-death situation. I mean it was my life or his life ...”

That carefully coached testimony by the only witness to the shooting led to this conclusion in the Texas Rangers’ report: “The deputy was forced to shoot Pierce one (1) time.”



Nathan Pierce with his niece.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF  
THE PIERCE FAMILY

**“Most officers in all states will spend more of their career dealing with the mentally ill than they will armed, assaultive, or fleeing individuals.”**

The Texas Rangers’ report was completed 39 days after Nathan Pierce’s death, on August 20, 2012. The report noted several unresolved questions, including what exactly happened during the struggle, how Pierce could have gotten the Taser and whether he actually threatened Sloan, and the officer’s possible history with Pierce during prior incarcerations in the county jail. Despite all that, the Rangers’ report exonerates Sloan of any wrongdoing. Since the recommendation of the Texas Rangers is usually followed, it wasn’t surprising that a Clay County grand jury failed to indict Sloan last fall.

There was no indictment, no published reports of investigations or follow-up in the media, and apparently no consequences for the officer, leaving the friends and family of Nathan Pierce with unsettled feelings and unanswered questions. What exactly happened at that rest stop outside Wichita Falls last summer remains a mystery.

“He had voluntarily turned himself in and he was

wanting to get help,” said John Sanders, a friend of Pierce’s who had talked to him just days before he was killed. “There’s things about the way it went down that don’t make sense.”

In early 2013, Barbara Todd hired Dallas attorney Jay English to represent her in a lawsuit against the county. “This was a young man who admittedly had some emotional problems,” English said. “But he had his lifetime ahead of him. It’s a terrible tragedy that Nathan Pierce, who wasn’t even under arrest, was killed.” He said that he and Todd were planning a lawsuit in federal court.

However the lawsuit goes, this case illustrates the confusion and lack of coordination within our mental health care system. Shouldn’t anyone transporting of person suffering from mental illness be required to have special training?

Yes, says Gregory Hansch, policy coordinator for National Alliance on Mental Illness and fellow at the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health. He often sees police responding to psychiatric emergencies and says, “That’s why Crisis Intervention Team programs are so important, both for training the police and also for other first responders such as EMTs.”

Meanwhile, every few weeks, Barbara Todd Pierce drives over to the country cemetery near Unger, Oklahoma, to put flowers on a grave. “Now Nathan is buried over there in the old Indian cemetery in the middle of a cow pasture,” she says. “There’s a wrought-iron fence around it—it’s the place where my mom, grandpa and grannie are buried.” Todd

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# CULTURE



## Sighting in with the NRA by Emily DePrang

**T**HIS IS THE MOMENT WHEN I KNEW THE WORLD I HAD ENTERED WAS different from the one I'm used to. It was midday on Friday, May 3, the first day of the three-day gunstravaganza that was the National Rifle Association's Annual Meetings & Exhibits in Houston. I was at the Jotto Desk booth checking out the NRA Home Defense Cabinet, a tall, wall-mounted mirror that slides away to reveal a recessed gun safe featuring, a sign indicated, "proprietary biometric security." ¶ The salesman was explaining its features to an attendee wearing the unofficial NRA uniform: a T-shirt tucked into blue jeans with a braided leather belt. The salesman then turned to me and narrowed his eyes.

An NRA Annual Meetings and Exhibits attendee peruses a wall of guns at Houston's George R. Brown Convention Center on May 3.  
PHOTO BY JEREMY SMITH

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“Would you like a press release?” he asked. He was proud of having figured out I was press. After seeing several NRA members recoil when they read the big black badge identifying me as “MEDIA,” I’d started carrying a sheaf of pamphlets in front of my chest. But the fact that I was a youngish woman was a dead giveaway. Most attendees were men of retirement age. Middle-aged women made up perhaps a quarter of attendees, with young men maybe another quarter. Largely absent were young women. The crowd was overwhelmingly white.

“Sure,” I said.

The NRA Home Defense Cabinet was cool. I’m sure there are people who don’t love a secret door or a hidden passageway, but I have nothing to say to them. The cabinet looked like a perfectly normal dressing mirror. No thief would suspect it hid weapons, and even if he did, he couldn’t steal them because of the aforementioned “proprietary biometric security.”

“So, a thumbprint,” I said.

“Not just a thumbprint,” the salesman stressed. “It’s *proprietary biometric security*.”

I looked at the cabinet. It held one handgun and one rifle. Near the top was a little black box with a sensor to read your fingerprint.

I wasn’t trying to be rude. I just didn’t get it. “So, how is this not just a thumbprint?”

The salesman looked exasperated. “It reads the cells and blood and stuff,” he said. If the intruder cuts off your thumb, he explained, and presses it to the thumbprint reader, the proprietary biometric security will see that the thumb is dead and reject the print.

With the NRA Home Defense Cabinet, enemies can’t take your guns even *with* your cold, dead hands.

The exhibit hall of Houston’s George R. Brown Convention Center wasn’t packed Friday morning—only a fraction of the weekend’s eventual 86,000 attendees had arrived—but it was full-ish, and the thousands of people who moved past its 500-plus booths ambled mostly in quiet pairs, hands in pockets, a gesture that looked in this setting more like self-control than disinterest.

The exhibit hall was like an alternate world in which deadly weapons are everywhere but no one is scared. When I entered, I spotted a young man with a slim neck and a baseball cap peering toward me through the magnifying scope of a semiautomatic pistol. Normally, finding myself in a stranger’s crosshairs would be bad. On this day, the chillness of the masses around me, strolling so slowly it was almost just oscillation, kept me calm.

Here’s a list of nearly all of the objects for sale that were not guns: laser scopes; taxidermy services; zombie targets that “bleed” green when shot; knives and sharpeners; gun cleaners; goggles; safes; flashlights; holsters; protective clothes; freeze-dried food; seat



TOP: Taking aim at a practice target with laser-sighting technology. BOTTOM: NRA exhibitor Vertex Tactical Aviation offered an Aerial Hunting Safety course for \$35. PHOTO BY JEREMY SMITH

covers; sculptures of wildlife; ear protection; and no more than a handful of T-shirts saying things like, “Buy a gun, annoy a liberal.” There was a helicopter, but it was not for sale. It was a prop for selling travel packages to hunt wild hogs via helicopter, an activity I was disappointed to see is not called pork-chopping.

Everything else was guns. The exhibits covered 382,000 square feet with almost no breaks or seating, just footpaths and firearms. The stuff listed above functioned like the coffee beans you’re supposed to smell between perfume samples so your brain doesn’t just give up and pick Wonderstruck by Taylor Swift.



**NRA CEO Wayne LaPierre addresses the membership on the convention's opening day.** PHOTO BY JEREMY SMITH

Pretty soon, the sight of rows upon rows of guns becomes normal. I don't know what I expected. The term "gun culture" gets used a lot of different ways, but it's rarely meant as simply as, for example, "car culture." When you go to a car show, you expect a whole lot of cars and car accessories, and maybe some cheesecake calendars. When you go to a gun show—okay, when *I* went to a gun show, which is basically what the NRA exhibits were—I expected something more political. I expected a tea party rally with heavy security. Or at least an information booth on outfitting your bunker for the coming race wars.

But no. The NRA exhibits were nerdy good times for people who think guns are interesting. Antique weapons, historically accurate replica weapons, and especially pretty weapons drew big crowds. I read later that someone was selling practice dummies that looked like Barack Obama, and that someone else offered ex-wife-themed targets. I saw neither. They, and the C-list country band that sold a Confederate flag koozie, were statistically insignificant.

The NRA exhibits were, far more than I would have thought possible, apolitical. I heard zero people talking about "O-Bummer" or discussing a power grab by the United Nations. They were too busy geeking out over a pearl-handled six-shooter that was, objectively, gorgeous.

On Saturday, the NRA announced that after a busy day at the convention's new membership desk, the organization had surpassed five million members. That's more than the population of half the states

**I expected something more political. I expected a tea party rally with heavy security. Or at least a breakout session on outfitting your bunker for the coming race wars.**

and Puerto Rico. Ten percent of those members had signed up in the last six months—which is to say, mostly since the massacre at Newtown.

NRA CEO Wayne LaPierre announced this milestone on Saturday morning at the Annual Meeting of Members.

"The state of the NRA is stronger and larger than it has ever been," LaPierre crowed. "Our commitment to freedom is unwavering and our growth is unprecedented. ... By the time we're finished, the NRA must and will be 10 million strong!"

LaPierre's call to double the NRA's membership, and his phrase "by the time we're finished," seemed odd. The NRA is a 141-year-old organization founded by a Union general and colonel who were appalled by how badly their troops shot during the Civil War. The group has since promoted marksmanship, youth programs, training and education, hunting safety, and self-defense. While any organization wants to grow, those

goals don't require 10 million members, and they're ongoing objectives, not the kind of thing one "finishes."

But LaPierre wasn't talking about the NRA's youth, self-defense, or hunting programs. He was referring to the group's opposition to new gun-control legislation.

"We are in the midst of a once-in-a-generation fight for everything we care about," LaPierre said. "We have a chance to secure our freedom for a generation, or to lose it forever."

It would be a waste of space to quote even a smattering of the bombastic, elliptical, dubious, amusing, boring, irrelevant and fantastical claims made over the weekend for television cameras by a relentless who's who of Republican also-rans: ex-Gov. Sarah Palin, ex-Sen. Rick Santorum, ex-Rep. Asa Hutchinson, ex-Ambassador John Bolton, and—hey, remember Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal? He was there, too. So were Texas Gov. Rick Perry and Sen. Ted Cruz, the former receiving a somewhat dutiful welcome, the latter an ecstatic one.

You can listen to these speakers online, but I'll save you time. Each message boiled down to this: these are the Second Amendment's End of Days, and the only thing standing between America and annihilation of one kind or another is the courage of the God-fearing NRA.

To the exact degree that guns were the focus in the exhibit hall, they were neglected in the auditorium. Speech after speech concerned itself with liberty, tyranny, freedom, evil, the Founding Fathers, the Constitution, democracy, secularism, terrorism, abortion, the culture wars, the malicious media, the craven political elite, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's soda ban and Benghazi. If anyone at a podium talked about background checks, waiting periods, or magazine sizes, I missed it.

When non-NRA members think of the National Rifle Association, they probably think of LaPierre nonsensically blaming the Newtown shootings on video games like *Mortal Kombat*, a martial arts-based game with few guns in it. They probably think of the NRA's lobbying wing, the Institute for Legislative Action, which so effectively helped kill universal background checks in April. And they probably think of the parade of FOX News personalities who drum up ratings and book sales by peddling gun-seizure paranoia.

That's what I thought of before I attended the NRA convention. Now I remember the group that takes veterans on free wilderness tours and the old guys who drove an RV several hundred miles to gaze lovingly down at a U.S. Navy Model 1837 caplock pistol under glass. In other words, now I think of the NRA's members, not its leadership.

On Saturday morning, at the business component of the conference, members voted for a no-compromise stance on any new gun-control legislation, extant or hypothetical. The move was meant to repudiate polls showing widespread support among NRA members for universal background checks. But the NRA has five million members. The convention had 86,000 visitors. And in the auditorium, when that vote was taken, only 3,000 people were present.

Everyone else was over in the exhibit hall, looking at all the guns. ■

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# THE BOOK REPORT

## American Autopsy

by Anis Shivani

IN HIS NEW NONFICTION OPUS *THE UNWINDING*, AUTHOR AND *NEW YORKER* staff writer George Packer ties together the various strands of American decline in a way that no contemporary novelist has managed. *The Unwinding* is an apt title, since the book unfolds at a measured pace and with great attention to the connections between apparently unrelated occurrences: deindustrialization in the Midwest is bound to Wall Street shenanigans; an energy sector too beholden to the past meets an information technology sector just as delusional about the future.

Thus does Packer paint a picture of the competing push-and-pull forces that cause the imbalances and inequalities to which we're becoming accustomed. *The Unwinding's* compelling virtue is that it refrains from the didacticism of recent books on American decline (by Morris Berman, Chris Hedges, Matt Taibbi, Chalmers Johnson, James Howard Kunstler, et al.) and adopts instead a novelist's open-mindedness toward ideologies in contest. Packer is skeptical enough about his own liberal political tradition to give us entree into the emotional lives of his four main subjects and their conflicting convictions.

And what a cast of idiosyncratic characters Packer follows through years of disappointment and success. There's Dean Price, descendant of North Carolina farmers and believer in Norman Vincent Peale's philosophy of positive thinking, who comes around to the idea of sustainable energy prompted in part by worries about "peak oil." His Red Birch Energy becomes a pioneer in producing biofuels from local waste products and holds great promise, especially as the price of oil rises—but Price can't catch a financial or political break. There's always some vicious fossil-fuel competitor trying to push him out of business, and the government—despite Obama's promise to emphasize green energy, and visionary Virginia congressman Tom Perriello's determined support—seems always behind the curve. Dean is left with shattered dreams, unable to scale his big idea to profitability, and we're left to wonder if perhaps optimism itself is a sickness.

Another of Packer's entrepreneurs—with considerably more success to his credit—is Peter Thiel, born to German immigrants in Palo Alto, California, and embodying that region's geekiness, at times useful (as with his roles in PayPal and Facebook), at times kooky (as with his funding of life-extension projects). Thiel starts off as an Ayn Rand acolyte at Stanford, and while Packer is hardly a sympathizer, he gives Thiel's evolving libertarianism a respectful hearing.

In fact, Packer never resorts to easy demonization—even of figures like Alan Greenspan, Dick Cheney, or the head of Goldman Sachs—to explain American decline. If Packer's protagonists share no particular ideology, they do hold in common that things don't seem to work in America anymore. And his unwinding is more than a temporary "malaise"—to use President Carter's infamous 1979 phrase. The booming 1980s and 1990s, in Packer's view, were likely just temporary reprieves from a decline that began in the 1970s and has reasserted itself in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This part of the story is brought out most trenchantly in Packer's sustained profile of Tammy Thomas, an African-American resident of Youngstown, Ohio, descended from slaves, whose town, like so many in the Rust Belt, has been devastated by the erosion of traditional manufacturing—steel, in Youngstown's case. Thomas' grandmother, who raised her, worked as a maid for one of the town's elite families, owners of a mill, and Thomas witnesses, within her lifetime, that family's unraveling. With the mill's closure, the widowed matriarch is left with only Thomas' grandmother at her side. Thomas' childhood memories of time spent in the family's doomed mansion add a human dimension to the class schism in which she grew up.

Thomas' subsequent road to success is rocky, but with help she gets there. Despite having a child at age 15, she becomes the first in her family to pursue higher education. After years on the assembly line at Packard Electric, she finds her true vocation as a community organizer. She turns out to have great leadership skills, and fosters the skills of others. Through her story, and the story of Youngstown's collapsing housing market and industrial economy, Packer creates a portrait of a once-vibrant city succumbing to international dynamics well beyond the frame of individual responsibility.

Finally, there's Jeff Connaughton, a bright Alabama native who becomes an admirer of Joe

Biden when the articulate young senator visits Connaughton's university advocating an arms treaty, and who sticks close to Biden as a staffer through three decades of Washington ups and downs. Connaughton later becomes a successful lobbyist, though whenever he can—once for Clinton, once for Obama—he returns to public service pushing financial-service reform, his particular bailiwick. Ted Kaufman, who replaced Biden when he assumed the vice presidency, tries hard to give financial regulation teeth after the economic collapse of 2008, but fails, bringing a disappointing end to Connaughton's lifetime of political ambition.

Packer's is a sprawling story, cutting across vast differentials of region and class. He unifies his disparate strands by borrowing John Dos Passos' collage technique—called "Newsreel" in the latter's *U.S.A.* trilogy—for inserting news headlines and song lyrics into the narrative flow. Capsule biographies of celebrities Sam Walton, Oprah Winfrey, Colin Powell, Robert Rubin, and Alice Waters (an early proponent of the health-food movement in California) similarly add cohesion.

These longer biographies reveal the distance between the lives of celebrities and ordinary citizens and undermine the value liberalism places in rags-to-riches stories. Nothing makes this clearer than Packer's tracking of the continuing reverberations of Walmart's ascendancy, responsible—along with deindustrialization—for emptying America's main streets and eviscerating its middle class, the foundation of a functioning democracy.

But illustrative ground zero for the destabilizing forces of two generations is Tampa, Florida, Packer's case study in corruption. Developers connive with local government—both aided by Wall Street sharks eager to securitize lousy mortgages in pursuit of outsized profits—to bring middle-class investors to their knees. This tale has been oft-told, but Packer's skill in deploying novelistic depth of characterization makes the connections between high and low—normally segregated classes—all too apparent.

Along the way, Packer's liberal convictions run up against paradox: If America buys into global connectedness, what can be done when industry moves abroad? Can we support economies of scale and still honor and enable the petite bourgeoisie? Can we maintain individualism without succumbing to tea party zealotry?

There is a larger conceptual paradox still. Once the institutional forces of the global political economy are in play, what room is left for individual initiative? Liberalism reinforces faith in entrepreneurship and activism, while Marxism sees science and technology—and in turn the economy—as drivers of social change. Packer, who explored the liberal faith of his ancestors in *Blood of the Liberals*, is caught on the horns of this dilemma.

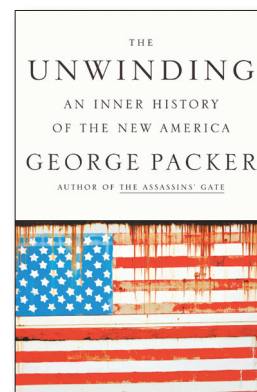
A lot of well-meaning, even noble, characters in *The Unwinding* feel betrayed by selfish elites who

If America buys into global connectedness, what can be done when industry moves abroad? Can we support economies of scale and still honor and enable the petite bourgeoisie? Can we maintain individualism without succumbing to Tea Party zealotry?

wear the resplendent cloak of liberalism, yet Packer is too jaded to issue calls for public-spiritedness, or cries to save the decaying commons. He also seems to realize that his identification of the sources of American misery isn't likely to break through the clutter of information saturation. Even the Occupy movement, prompted by spectacle, fizzled, as Packer relates in the moving story of young Brooklyn activist Neelini Stamp's disillusionment.

It may well be that liberalism has run out of ideas. In the context of Packer's open-ended curiosity, that may not be the worst fate in the world. ■

*Anis Shivani is a freelance writer, novelist, and poet in Houston.*



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DIRECT QUOTE

## Tinkering the Ivories as told to Jen Reel

**P**RISCILLA RAPPAPORT IS A MASTER PIANO builder—a *klavierbaumeister*. After performing as a symphony oboe player in her early 20s, she left the United States for Europe to learn piano-building at Vienna's Bösendorfer piano factory. After returning to the U.S. in 1979, Rappaport and her husband, Joel, established a business in Round Rock, where she builds, repairs, and tunes pianos in her barn-style workshop. Though she recently begun playing violin, she has never learned to play piano.

"I was always interested in piano work as a kid. My sister played piano, and it was horribly out of tune, so I thought I'd try to do something about it. I got involved as a 12- or 13-year-old trying to fix some out-of-tune piano, which meant using my father's lineman's pliers, which is not the right tool. Every Sunday my parents and two sisters would go visit friends, and I didn't like going with them, so I'd say, 'I have lots of homework to do.' So I quickly opened up the thesaurus and the dictionary and my notebooks so it looked like I would be studying, but then I'd go get the lineman's pliers in the basement and fool with it for two hours until my parents would come home. I was studying physics in school and I thought it was pretty neat to learn about frequency and strings and tension and woods and different things like that.

"I got a second [chair] oboe position with the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra in Birmingham, Alabama, and was elected to play with the Baltimore Symphony, principal second. We went to Carnegie Hall and I played all kinds of tremendous symphonies, Beethoven and Brahms and violin concertos and piano concertos. The piano concertos were awesome in the sense that the sound of the concert grand caught my attention because the vibrations coming out of the back of the instrument were right in line with my seat. So I heard all these frequencies and harmonics and I thought, 'Man, I can tune, but I need to build these things.'

"We were in Carnegie Hall and I met the tuner who came to tune the piano for us. I said, 'How do you learn piano building?' Ruby [the tuner] said to me,

'If you want to build pianos, you have to go to the old country. Germany.'

"So we [Priscilla and her husband, Joel] sold all our possessions, got a Eurail pass, bought tickets to Germany, and looked up some piano factories in Europe. After a 12-hour flight, we got on the night train and slept a bit and got to Vienna at 6 o'clock in the morning. We walked into this archway which used to be an old monastery which Bösendorfer had for a long time. A gentleman came over to us and said, in German, 'Can I help you?' Panic struck us; we didn't understand. And he immediately said, 'May I help you?' in English. And I blurted out, 'We want to work here.'

"I was the first woman in the Bösendorfer factory. And they said, 'That's not going to work,' and I said, 'Well, I don't see why not.' They even asked Joel, 'Is it all right if your wife earns the same amount of money that you do?' [Five years later] I built my [first] piano with Pfeiffer [another manufacturer], and from that factory I finished my degree and then I came back to the States.

"What people need to realize in piano construction is there is no quick anything, you have to put in your time and do it right and know what you're doing before you start. And one has to have a long attention span, because these things can take a year to do.

"It's about doing a job well because it makes you happy and you're making someone else happy. Plus, it's about honoring a fine instrument that other people before you built, one that's been played by a lot of people, because it has something to say." ❏

*Interview has been edited and condensed.*



# POSTCARDS



## Hook, Line and Sinker by Ian Dille

**B**EFORE THE SUN HAS RISEN ON THE morning of March 25, 12 men who catch and release fish for a living stand aboard their boats at the Zapata County boat ramp on Falcon Lake. They fuss in the darkness with thick bundles of fishing rods and rubbery lures. They cinch heavily logoed jackets tight against the frigid air. They think about where the fish are, what the fish are doing.

Of the 12 men, culled from 100 competitors, two stand the best chance of winning the Bassmaster Elite Series tournament's \$100,000 first-place payout. Keith Combs, a rising star from Huntington, Texas, has topped the four-day tournament's leader board since Day 1, when he reeled in five bass (the tournament's daily limit) weighing a cumulative 34 pounds and 13 ounces. Rick Clunn, a quirky 67-year-old and one of bass fishing's most revered anglers, known to fans as the "Zen Master," has landed bigger and bigger fish each day, closing on Combs. Today, the tournament's last, Clunn is just a pound behind

Combs in total weight.

As the anglers wait for the official 7:30 a.m. start, Combs appears anxious, Clunn calm and composed. Combs, who's 38 but looks a decade younger, wears a nervous smile while an ESPN2 cameraman films him chatting with fans. Clunn, face obscured with a scruffy white beard, dark sunglasses, and a hat pulled low on his forehead, peers stoically across the calm water.

After speakers play the national anthem, the tournament announcer bellows introductions into his microphone. The fishermen fire up the hulking outboard motors on their sleek 21-foot bass boats and shoot out onto Falcon Lake one at a time.

Combs points his boat southwest, toward Falcon Dam, the concrete barrier responsible for this 40-mile reservoir on the Rio Grande. Clunn heads for a thicket of underwater trees just a mile from the boat ramp.

Other anglers race toward fishing holes on the Mexico side of the international border—an imaginary line running down the middle of Falcon Lake—in spite of warnings from local law enforcement. At a meeting prior to the start of the tournament, officers

Pro angler Brandon Card fishes in Mexican waters.  
PHOTO BY DONALD DILLE

from the Zapata County sheriff's department, Border Patrol and Texas Parks & Wildlife—all of whom patrol Falcon Lake—told the anglers, “We can't help you once you cross into Mexico.”

The anglers have certainly heard about Falcon Lake's Mexican pirates—the issue was a weeklong fetish of cable TV news a few years back—and of American jet-skier David Hartley, allegedly gunned down by the Zetas cartel in 2010. They also know the lake's bass receive less fishing pressure on the Mexico side. They see fewer artificial lures there. They more frequently take the bait.

**IN 1953, DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER** and Mexican President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines dedicated Falcon Dam—named for the border town it flooded—to the people of both countries for irrigation, flood control and hydro-electricity. As the backed-up Rio Grande swelled over its banks, the towns of Zapata, in Texas, and Guerrero, in Mexico, were relocated to higher ground.

Twenty-two years later, Texas Parks & Wildlife stocked the lake with 750,000 Florida largemouth bass, a notoriously feisty sport fish that can grow up to five pounds larger than native Texas largemouths. The bass flourished. When the lake periodically recedes, mesquite and wild olive trees prevalent to this South Texas brush country sprout on the damp shoreline. When the lake rises, that swamped foliage makes ideal habitat for bass.

Falcon soon gained a local reputation for monster bass as big as 15 pounds. But because of Falcon's remoteness—50 miles from Laredo, the nearest city of consequence—few fishermen beyond Texas were in on the secret.

Then, in 2008, the world's biggest fishing tournament rolled into dusty little Zapata, population 5,089. The Bassmaster Elite Series unloaded a sprawling expo center and a giant weigh-in stage. Bassmaster veteran Paul Elias broke the tournament's all-time weight record, landing 132 pounds and 8 ounces of fish. Suddenly everyone wanted a piece of Falcon Lake's bass.

Anglers from Missouri and Michigan and Minnesota bought vacation houses along Falcon's shores. Tom Bendele, who'd fished Falcon since he was a kid, and in 2008 opened a tackle shop across the street from the county boat ramp, says business increased by a “gazillion.” Visiting fishermen gobbled Mexican food at local restaurants and parked expensive fishing rigs at the local Holiday Inn.

Across the border in Mexico, a bloody drug war gripped the state of Tamaulipas as the rival Gulf and Zetas cartels battled over smuggling routes for drugs, guns, cash and humans. In 2010, stories of rogue cartel members robbing American fishermen on the lake began to surface.

On May 17, 2010, the Texas Department of Public Safety posted an advisory detailing three incidents on Falcon Lake over the span of a month—one of

which allegedly occurred in U.S. water. A press release called the robbers “pirates,” and reported them boarding boats and demanding guns, drugs and money. In one account, men who called themselves *federales*, but wore no uniforms, took \$200 from fishermen who had gone ashore in Mexico to explore the ruins of Old Guerrero, which rises from the lake when the water recedes. Another report described a Mexican pirate armed with an AR-15 boarding an American boat near the same ruins. “During the incident, he chambered a round in the rifle and told the fishermen that he would shoot them if they did not give him money,” the advisory stated. DPS recommended that boaters keep to the U.S. side of the lake.

Then, on September 30, a young couple from McAllen, Tiffany and David Hartley, set out on personal watercraft to take photos of the partially submerged church in Old Guerrero, seven miles up the Salado River in Mexico. Tiffany later said that shots rained around them, and that David took a bullet in the back of his head. As she tried to drag David aboard her Sea-Doo, Tiffany said, the shooters circled in their boat, but didn't fire. Unable to save her husband, she fled back to the U.S.

National media swarmed Zapata. County Sheriff Sigi Gonzalez, founder of the Texas Border Sheriff's Coalition, who one law enforcement official told me “likes the spotlight,” touted the murder as an example of his region's lack of security (and thus its need for increased federal funding). In 2011 Gonzalez testified before the House Committee on Homeland Security, claiming that unnamed informants had alerted him to cartel turf wars and attempted kidnappings in Zapata. (Gonzalez didn't mention that his county's crime rate is one-fifth the national average.)

As word of the danger spread, fishing tourism dwindled. Rooms at hotels and lakeside lodges went unrented. Bendele says his sales dropped by half. Last April, when *Bassmaster* magazine ranked Falcon Lake the best bass-fishing lake in the U.S., the

Falcon Lake's bass receive less fishing pressure on the Mexico side. They see fewer artificial lures there. They more frequently take the bait.

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The pirate chambered a round in the rifle and told the fishermen that he would shoot them if they did not give him money.

FROM LEFT: Second-place finisher Rick Clunn fished the same spot for eight straight hours; a cautionary sign erected by former Sheriff Sigi Gonzalez at the Zapata County boat ramp; a spectator watches Rick Clunn cast for big bass.

PHOTOS BY DONALD DILLE

publication noted, “Falcon is without a doubt your best shot at a 10-pounder, but it has also gained a reputation as a good place to be, well, shot.”

Paco Mendoza, president of the Zapata Chamber of Commerce, chafed at the negative publicity. “These people sitting in news stations hundreds of miles away never thought about the damage they were causing our community,” he told me. “A couple years ago this place was a ghost town.”

This year, for an undisclosed fee (\$60,000 is the word at the tackle shop), Zapata County Commissioners made a successful bid to bring the Bassmaster tournament back, and with it, the county hoped, positive national exposure.

**BACK AT THE BOAT RAMP** on the tournament’s final day, I climb aboard a Bassmaster media boat with local fishing guide Tim Griffin. A big man with a closely cropped red mustache and a well-worn “Texas B.A.S.S.” (Bass Anglers Sportsman Society) baseball cap, Tim says he grew up in Zapata, fishing Falcon Lake.

After high school he’d made a good living working the area’s abundant gas wells, but with natural gas prices at a record low, Tim now guides full time, charging \$400 a day to help fishermen find and land Falcon’s bass. He knows every inch of the lake and nearly every tale ever told on its water.

“Ever ridden on a boat before?” Tim asks me.

“Of course,” I reply.

“Good,” he says, throwing the throttle forward and putting the boat on plane. As we skim across the lake at 70 miles per hour, the wind makes my eyes water and my cheeks jiggle.

Moments later, we’re one of several spectator boats floating quietly a few hundred feet from Clunn, who’s casting an RC 2 Luck-E-Strike Square Bill Crankbait of his own design into a grove of skinny trees sticking a few feet out of the water. Tim tells me

bass congregate near the trees, and Clunn is trying to land his lure on one’s head. But the water is cold and the fish aren’t hunting yet. We move on.

Next Tim trolls our boat near pro angler Brandon Card, who yells over to us, “I need some luck.” On the Mexican shore, just beyond Card’s boat, I spot a small fishing camp comprising weather-beaten shacks and small white motorboats. The camp’s men fish for sustenance, stringing nets that capture tilapia, gar, crappie and bass (to the annoyance of many sport anglers).

Then Card gets a bite. His rod arches in a large upside-down U and quickly snaps straight again, the line broken. “No!” he shouts, pounding the butt of the rod against the boat’s deck, looking for answers in the cloudless blue sky.

“That was a freaking pig,” Tim shouts to Card. Come back to this spot later, Tim says, and Card might catch the same luncker with the snapped-off lure still hanging from its lip. He’s seen it happen before.

We take off again, and after a long, high-speed, cold ride, we arrive at the mouth of the Salado River, just a few miles from the infamous Old Guerrero Church. Here we watch a young Louisianan, Cliff Crochet, aka “The Cajun Baby,” make cast after fruitless cast.

Eventually I ask Tim, “So, what about those pirating incidents?”

“Dude...” Tim draws. In his version of events, there were never any machine guns or cartel members. Some Mexicans had stolen a BassCat fishing boat and figured they could scare Americans into giving them money. They pretended to be stranded in the center of the lake, and when American fishermen sidled up to help, the Mexicans yelled, “*Dame tú dinero puta!*” Tim mimics the panicked fishermen, hurriedly fumbling through pockets and tossing wallets. Tim tells me he’d seen the BassCat abandoned on the Mexican shore. He says he knows the guy who later drove to Mexico to pick it up.

But what about Hartley? I ask. Life insurance scam,



Tim says. They never found a body. Tim says he knows a cop who'd shared a few drinks with a guy from the Zapata County District Attorney's Office who told him the DA's position is that Hartley is alive in Mexico; authorities were just waiting for the wife to collect the insurance money before they nabbed him.

I'd read on a Texas bass-fishing forum about the theft of fishing rigs from Zapata hotel parking lots around the time of the alleged pirating incidents, and a CNN program about the Hartley murder had raised the possibility of a life-insurance scam. But when I later mentioned the theory to a former employee of the DA's office, he scoffed. In October, Mexican authorities arrested Zeta cartel boss Salvador Alfonso Martinez Escobedo, who they claimed was responsible for Hartley's murder.

Tim makes another point: "Even if someone did actually die on this lake, how many drunk people die on Lake Travis every year?"

As we watch Crochet cast in vain, our boat snags something under the surface and rocks from side to side. Tim stumbles but quickly regains his balance. "Ever fallen off before?" I ask him.

"Naw, dude," he says. "I can't swim."

**AROUND NOON I TAKE A BREAK** from the boats and spend a few hours touring Zapata. At El Paraiso ("The restaurant that made Zapata famous") I eat a thick chicken-fried steak that flops over the edge of the plate, with sides of soup, French fries, beans, rice, salad, bread, and a cereal-sized bowl of cream gravy. It costs \$8.

I tour the Frontier Museum, an adorably kitschy building with a large collection of rusty ranch relics and a live rattlesnake display. The gregarious owner, Myrna Manson, tells me she moved to Zapata from Minnesota 40 years ago. I buy a T-shirt bearing an image of the city's namesake, Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, and the motto, "*Prefero morir de pie ... que vivir de rodillas...*" ("It is better to die on my

feet ... than live on my knees...").

The strikingly modern Zapata County Museum of History is closed, so I walk across the street, through a park honoring Zapata's veterans of foreign wars, to the county courthouse, whose gold-shingled dome is being refurbished. I'd filed a public information request about the Falcon Lake pirating incidents with the sheriff's department, and I wanted to check on its status.

Last fall, Sheriff Sigi Gonzalez opted not to run for reelection after 18 years in office. Gonzalez had publicly feuded in the local newspaper with one of the town's most influential businessmen, Renato Ramirez, the 72-year-old CEO of Zapata's IBC Bank. Ramirez accused Gonzalez of over-hyping border violence—at the expense of local businesses—in pursuit of grant money to buy fancy toys for the sheriff's department, like a fleet of shiny new pickups and SUVs and a "mobile command center" (which was prominently displayed at the county boat ramp).

Ramirez, who knows Falcon Lake intimately, vouches for its safety. As a kid he swam in the Salado River while visiting his grandmother in Old Guerrero, before the town's flooding. The key to avoiding trouble on the lake, Ramirez told me, is to stay away from the Guerrero ruins, a known staging area for cartel drug runs. Ramirez says Gonzalez didn't run for reelection "Because he knew I would come out full-blast against him, and he couldn't win." (Gonzalez said he bowed out for reasons of his own.)

At the office of the new sheriff, Alonso Lopez, I sit down with Chief Deputy Raymundo del Bosque Jr., a stout man wearing a felt cowboy hat and a gold star affixed to his crisp white shirt. Del Bosque, who took command of the department Jan. 1, says he's working to get me the Hartley report. But, he says, "For those other dates and incident descriptions you sent us"—the pirating reports—"we don't have anything."

I'm confused. I had clipped detailed descriptions of the incidents from the DPS advisory, which cited law

"Falcon Lake is without a doubt your best shot at a 10-pounder, but it has also gained a reputation as a good place to be, well, shot."

enforcement officials and investigators as sources, and pasted them into my public information request.

"Nothing?" I ask.

"Nothing," he says. "No reports, no calls, nothing."

"And it's your department that would handle that, right?" I ask.

"Yes," he says. "Anything that happens on the lake is our business."

"So where did all these pirate stories come from?" I ask.

"I have no idea," del Bosque tells me.

**WHEN I RETURN TO THE BOAT RAMP** for the final weigh-in at 3 p.m. Monday afternoon—45 mph wind gusts on Sunday forced Bassmaster officials to postpone the tournament's finale by a day—about a hundred people

are gathered at the shore. On my way to the dock I see a large sign stating, "WARNING, CROSSING INTO MEXICO COULD BE DANGEROUS"—one of six placards Sheriff Gonzalez put up around the lake after the Hartley incident.

Soon I spot an armada of anglers racing down the lake toward the ramp. The guys with big fish pull right onto the shore, where fans and photographers wait. Anglers with meager hauls tie up farther down the shore, out of sight. I overhear competitor John Crews saying he caught an eight-and-a-half-pounder on his final cast. As he pulls the fish out of his boat's live well to place it in a rubber sack, a cluster of fans snap photos and exclaim, "Oh, that's a hog," and "Damn, frickin' swamp donkey."

One by one the anglers take the stage and place their fish on the scales. Crews' last-minute fish gives him the lead, and he moves to the "hot seat" (a stool, stage left). As Brandon Card faces the crowd to raise his two biggest bass above his head, the fish in his right hand squirms free and dives for the floor. Card catches the bass in mid-air by pinning it against the side of the podium. "Party foul," he says, looking embarrassed.

Gary Klein, a 30-plus-year veteran of the sport, who's earned nearly \$2 million in Bassmaster winnings, comes to the stage and says hi to his daughters, Lakota and Canyon, who are watching the weigh-in via Bassmaster.com's live stream. "Seems like the only time I get to see them is on the Internet," Klein says. He's caught just one fish, which weighs only a pound.

Then Zen Master Clunn raises his bag of fish with both hands and sets it on the scale. The crowd quiets. "Twenty-three pounds and three ounces!" the announcer shouts. Clunn, expressionless, takes Crews' place on the hot seat.

Combs, who started the final day just one pound ahead of Clunn, will need more than 22 pounds and 3 ounces to win the tournament. On his way back from Falcon Dam, he'd hit one last sweet spot and hooked a 7-pound fish in the final 10 minutes of competition.

The 7-pounder makes the difference. Combs' bag weighs 28 pounds, 2 ounces. The announcer hands him a giant trophy topped with a golden bass. Combs kisses the faux largemouth on the lips. His girlfriend, Jennifer Reid, throws up her arms and lets out a shrill scream. (The pair met when they were assigned to fish together at a couples fishing tournament.) Clunn claps politely.

As Combs signs autographs and poses for photos, I chat with Celia Balderas, Paco Mendoza's only employee at the Chamber of Commerce. The national media exposure on Bassmaster.com and ESPN2 will prove invaluable to the county's reputation, she says. But just one news crew out of a half-dozen Laredo and McAllen channels showed up at the weigh-in. "They come running when something bad happens," Cecilia complains. "Where are they now?"

A Bassmaster pontoon boat named "Live Release" shuttles bass from the stage back out into the lake. Anglers get docked a quarter-pound if a fish dies. Of the thousand-plus fish caught over four days, fewer than a dozen don't make it.

On the way out of Zapata, I pass a sign bearing the town's logo—a cowboy riding a largemouth bass like a bucking bronco—and wonder if Falcon Lake's pirates are just another fish tale, exaggerated with each retelling. When I later asked DPS for the source of the



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information in their advisory, the agency cited “intelligence” from various law-enforcement agencies. Former Sheriff Gonzalez told me Parks & Wildlife game wardens had filed the incident reports, not him. So I contacted Parks & Wildlife Captain Fernando Cervantes. Cervantes said he did write an official report on the alleged piracy incident involving the

AR-15-wielding Mexican, which occurred in Mexican waters, but has asked that the state Attorney General block its release. He couldn’t recall the other incidents described in the DPS advisory.

Whatever their sources, they seem to have gotten away. 📌

*Freelance journalist Ian Dille lives in Austin. He last*

REVIEW

## Reporter Seeks Source

by **Debbie Nathan**

**W**HEN A STORY PRESENTS A MYSTERY and solves it at the end, it’s called a whodunit. Alfredo Corchado’s new journalism memoir, *Midnight in Mexico*, is a whydunit. And the secret revealed at its conclusion is more compelling than *Citizen Kane*’s “Rosebud.”

Corchado is the *Dallas Morning News* bureau chief in Mexico. He covers drug-trafficking-related corruption and violence in that country and, often more tellingly, its roots in this one. In 2004 he was the first major-media reporter to expose the role of a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement informant in helping Mexican cartels commit murders in Ciudad Juarez. Corchado also discovered and reported that the Zetas, a vicious Mexican paramilitary group, were orchestrating major crimes in Texas. For stories like these you need really good sources. *Midnight in Mexico* begins with one.

It’s late one evening in 2007 in Mexico City when Corchado gets a call from a U.S. government investigator. The Zetas “plan to kill an American journalist in 24 hours,” the investigator warns. “I think it’s you. I’d get out.”

Instead, Corchado remains in Mexico for days, researching the death threat and infuriating his worried partner (herself a reporter). His delay raises the question the rest of the book grapples with: why does he put himself in constant danger to cover the drug war in Mexico—one of the most treacherous countries in the world for reporters?

Inching toward an answer, Corchado detours past the usual cops-and-robbers, guts-and-gore, drug-policy litanies of a literary world clotted with titles like *Drug Lord*, *The Last Narco*, *Gangland*, and *Murder City*. Like these, *Midnight* includes data, interviews, political analysis and, yes, gore. But Corchado also explores his deeply personal relationship to the current tragedy unfolding in Mexico. In so doing, he takes readers on the all-American journey of an immigrant child with high hopes for his future in a new country, and terrible regrets about leaving the old one.

“Mexico has never been foreign to me,” Corchado writes. He has lived in the U.S. since he was 6, but was born in a town a few hundred miles south of El Paso, with no paved roads and no opportunity for schooling beyond the sixth grade. During World War II his father worked in the U.S. as a *bracero*, or contract farm worker. That status enabled the Corchados to immigrate legally when Alfredo was a young child. He left his homeland

kicking and screaming, and intent on returning.

Why?

The book’s early explanations fail to convince. One is that his umbilical cord was buried in Mexico, and it’s calling him back. Another is that his Uncle Delfino, an inveterate nationalist, inculcated little Alfredo with talk about Mexico’s grandeur and the perfidy of the United States.

But millions of Mexican immigrants have left umbilical cords buried in their *tierra natal*. It’s a folk tradition. And what Mexican doesn’t have an Uncle Delfino?

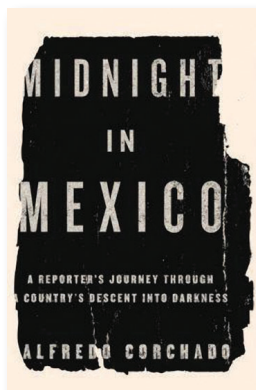
Maybe the answer has more to do with Corchado’s early life in America. In the 1980s and 1990s, his parents ran a café in El Paso, three blocks north of Ciudad Juarez. *Midnight* recounts how friendly, chatty smugglers would leave contraband in the restaurant for safekeeping, and describes one of Corchado’s distant relatives running money for a cartel. Starry-eyed with hope, Corchado’s mother donated food to Mexican democracy protesters conducting a weeks-long sit-in on an international bridge, little knowing that Mexican democracy would soon be stained by horrific violence. Childhood experiences like these are extremely rare among U.S. reporters covering Latin America. They’ve taught Corchado that midnight in Mexico isn’t black—it’s endless shades of gray.

But even darkness has its rewards. Before moving to Texas, the Corchados labored in the fields in California. Once, when Alfredo was 13, a reporter doing a piece on child labor tried to ask him questions. The way he recently told the story to an audience in El Paso, Corchado himself was a child laborer. His mother feared deportation if that fact were revealed, so Corchado pretended he didn’t speak English. The experience prompted him to study journalism. He has long lived and worked in the interstice between fear and inspiration.

Corchado wears a suit these days, and keeps a home in an upscale Mexico City neighborhood. He loves Mexico, but he mourns it, and it’s the mourning that’s behind his “why?” The question gets answered as the book wraps up, and I won’t spoil the ending here, but you will shiver when you get there, and you may even weep. Either way, you will understand Corchado’s need to stay in Mexico, and his need to bring us stories that we need to read. 📌

*Freelance journalist Debbie Nathan is the author of Women and Other Aliens: Essays from the U.S.-Mexico Border, and Sybil Exposed: The Extraordinary Story Behind the Famous Multiple Personality Case.*

Midnight in Mexico isn’t black—it’s endless shades of gray.



**MIDNIGHT IN MEXICO:**  
A Reporter’s Journey  
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FILM

# The Meaning of *Mud*

by Josh Rosenblatt



Nothing in a Jeff Nichols movie happens for no reason, and nearly every object is a loaded gun. Especially a loaded gun.

Matthew McConaughey (left) and Tye Sheridan (right) star in Jeff Nichols' *Mud*.

PHOTO BY JAMES BRIDGES

**T**HERE ARE TWO IMMUTABLE LAWS IN THE modern movie universe. The first, known as Chekhov's Gun, states that a loaded gun seen in the first act should be fired before the credits roll. The second, which I'll call McConaughey's First Law of Sartorial Dynamics, demands that if Matthew McConaughey appears in a movie, Matthew McConaughey must take his shirt off in that movie. About 20 minutes into *Mud*, the latest feature from Austin writer-director Jeff Nichols (*Take Shelter*), I realized that I was about to witness the miraculous blending of these two laws into a perfect mélange of cinematic foreshadowing and upper-body flaunting. At last, McConaughey has found a movie that makes taking off his shirt meaningful.

Nichols loves imbuing objects with meaning. Nothing in a Jeff Nichols movie happens for no reason, and nearly every object is a loaded gun. Especially a loaded gun. And a button-down shirt with talismanic powers. Like *Take Shelter* before it, *Mud* is filled with auguries, good-luck charms, bad-luck prophecies, divinations, and metaphor.

The man with the gun and the shirt is Mud, a mysterious, weather-beaten outlaw who, to avoid arrest, has taken up residence on an otherwise-unoccupied island in Arkansas' stretch of the Mississippi River. (No matter the movie, the beach is McConaughey's most natural environment.) Two 14-year-old boys—Ellis (played by the frustratingly handsome and talented Tye Sheridan from *The Tree of Life*) and his best friend, Neckbone (played by newcomer Jacob

Lofland)—come upon Mud when they go to the island searching for a boat that ended up in a tree after a flood. Menacing but charming, Mud convinces the boys first to bring him food, then to help him get the boat out of the tree and repair it, and finally to arrange a meeting between Mud and his "girlfriend," Juniper, who may or may not want to see him, and who is being menaced by the family of a man Mud killed.

In the meantime, Ellis watches the slow dissolution of his parents' marriage. His mother is fed up with life on a shoddy houseboat with Ellis' father, an unsuccessful fisherman bubbling with disappointment and self-contempt. Ellis being 14 (and a Jeff Nichols movie being a Jeff Nichols movie), he compounds two romantic scenarios in his head and believes he can fix one by enabling the other. His desire to help Mud get Juniper back is fueled by the anger and confusion he feels over the end of his own parents' love and the budding romantic desires he's feeling for the first time. This leads to all kinds of convenient thematic parallels and coincidences that would never exist outside of a movie script, and too often *Mud* feels like the product of an overeager film-school student. Every impulse Ellis feels in one part of his life is reflected perfectly in another, and every moment he experiences echoes with a kind of symbolic meaning that real life is rarely generous enough to provide.

Still, just because Nichols can't resist the Biblical metaphor of a snakebite signaling the end of innocence (and just because he can't resist foreshadowing that snakebite barely 10 minutes into the movie) doesn't mean that *Mud* isn't an affecting look at the death of

childhood illusions and the sad realities of early adolescence. At its best, *Mud* is as insightful and honest as any movie ever made about the horrors and revelations of early adulthood—right up there with *The 400 Blows* and *Rushmore*. At its worst, *Mud* is a collection of cinematic contrivances and conveniences that pounds meaning into viewers' heads, one bird tattoo, one snakebite, and one loaded gun at a time.

Late in the movie, Neckbone's older brother, who makes his living diving for oysters, tells Ellis to be wary of Mud: "This river brings a lot of trash down

it," he says. "You gotta know what's worth keeping and what's worth letting go." That's not the kind of thing people say; it's a line written for a movie trailer, a desperate grasp for meaning and thematic cohesion in a world that Jeff Nichols should be smart enough to know is lacking in both. Leaned on too heavily, foreshadowing becomes predictability, and metaphor becomes a bludgeon. ■

## A HOME BIRTH

### by Norma Edwards Koontz

When I was born at home  
Black and female in 1930s Texas,  
Expectations were not high  
It was presumed that I'd be:

Dumb, undernourished, perpetually poor  
Underprivileged, poorly educated  
Lazy, unattractive, worthless

But I surprised everybody by becoming:

Thick-skinned and waterproof  
Impenetrable by insults  
Impervious to put-downs  
Unsinkable

Able to vault over viciousness with my pride intact  
Strong-willed and determined  
Undeterred by threat, or the possibility of failure

The only correct assumption about me  
Was that I AM female.  
Obviously, gender trumped race, even back then.

Born at home, but feeling alienated for years.  
Feeling out of place in a place  
That was not ready for all the things I am:

Energetic, creative, intelligent  
Inquisitive, brilliant, productive  
Beautiful  
Female  
Black

*Norma Edwards Koontz is a retired human resources executive who currently travels the world and writes poetry from Houston.*

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# BILL MINUTAGLIO

## STATE OF THE MEDIA

### As Goes The *Texan*...

**I**F YOU LIVE ANYWHERE BUT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS' AUSTIN CAMPUS, YOU might not care a whit about the fate and future of *The Daily Texan*, the university's struggling, 113-year-old, student-run newspaper. ¶ But you should, if only because it has been a wellspring for some of the best progressive journalists in American history. Before they went on to create or lead *The Texas Observer*, for instance, student editors Ronnie Dugger, Kaye Northcott and Willie Morris used *The Daily Texan's* pages to blister the university over segregation, waste, and the school's cozy relationship with Big Oil.

Once, when the university squelched a Morris editorial attacking the state's natural gas titans, Morris famously left the editorial page blank.

It was that kind of heroic stand that drew scores of idealistic young people to the paper, and to the profession. Old-guard legends like Bill Moyers started at *The Daily Texan*. So did new-guarders like Leah Finnegan, who helps assign and edit pieces on the op-ed page of today's *New York Times*.

Even heavy-hitting political insider Mark McKinnon once served as the paper's editor, and found himself jailed over a First Amendment squabble. Years after that crusade, he abandoned his progressive politics and became the media mastermind behind George W. Bush's presidential campaigns.

The *Texan's* influence is almost impossible to quantify. The paper has produced hundreds of journalists, some good, some bad, and some who have gone on to take the reins at prominent media, lobbying and consulting outlets. (Morris went on to *Harper's*, where he published some of the finest American writers of the 20th century.) By dint of sheer longevity and size, the paper has helped define the landscape of American media.

But most of all, *The Daily Texan* has always been the best prism through which to view the massive Austin campus. Student editors and reporters hone their chops on a university bigger than many towns—an always-evolving beat that the understaffed *Austin American-Statesman* increasingly can't cover.

But now there's a chance that the largest university publication in the nation, the one that claims to have garnered more journalism awards than any other student newspaper in America, might simply disappear.

"Advertising, which makes up the bulk of *The Daily Texan's* revenue, is declining at an alarming rate, and expenses haven't fallen quickly enough. That's the heart of it," says Robert Quigley, a UT journalism professor who works with the Texas Student Media

Board, which helps administer the paper.

The paper has been under the gun all year, facing proposals that would have knocked the five-days-a-week publication schedule to four days. Instead, the paper's board voted to maintain the print schedule, but to cut tuition reimbursements for some student managers.

In March, students learned that the paper's veteran "professional adviser"—Doug Warren, a highly skilled fixture who spent a combined several decades at *The Miami Herald* and *The Boston Globe*—is resigning his position effective in June. For years, Warren has been the unsung spirit guide of *The Daily Texan*, letting the students run their own shop but autopsying every journalistic faux pas along the way.

There are going to be plenty of *Texans* who simply don't care about these changes. But they should, even if they never went to UT. Here's one reason why: over the last few years, *Texan* staffers (particularly Collin Eaton and Jordan Rudner) have done the best work in the state investigating the often-controversial University of Texas Investment Management Company, the nonprofit corporation that oversees the UT system's investments. In January, the *Texan* broke a story revealing that even as UT-Austin banned smoking on campus, it continues to profit from investments in several tobacco companies.

Here's another reason to care: "The *Texan* remains a powerful voice for the students, and it's clear that the university's administration reads and responds to the articles and editorials," says Quigley. "You just have to look at the *Texan's* coverage of the UT System's Board of Regents to see that it still strongly serves a watchdog role."

Watchdogging is a skill, and the *Texan* has always been a place where student journalists learn by doing. Now more than ever that opportunity needs protecting. Not just to preserve history, or tradition, but to give our next generation of watchdogs teeth sharp enough for the job. ▣

Student reporters hone their chops on a university bigger than many towns—an always-evolving beat that the understaffed Austin American-Statesman increasingly can't cover.



# FORREST WILDER

## FORREST FOR THE TREES

### Rick Perry and the Sin of Bigotry

**H**ERE WE ARE IN 2013, AND PUBLIC OPINION IS RAPIDLY SHIFTING IN favor of gay rights. More states and more Americans, especially young people, are endorsing marriage equality. Unvarnished homophobia is becoming taboo. But Rick Perry is still at it. ¶ In early May, the Texas governor participated in a webcast to promote his opposition to lifting the Boy Scouts' ban on gays. In the video, Perry said lifting the ban would allow "pop culture" to "tear up" tradition for "the flavor of the month." He compared (his own?) opposition to gay rights to Sam Houston's resistance to Texas joining the Confederacy. This isn't the first time Perry has engaged in a round of gay-bashing.

In 2005, Perry signed a state constitutional amendment restricting marriage to one man and one woman. He chose as the bill-signing venue a conservative church school in Fort Worth. Rod Parsley, a pastor from

Ohio, spoke at the signing, calling gay sex "a veritable breeding ground of disease." Later, when asked about gay Iraq War veterans, Perry suggested they move to "some other state that has a more lenient view than Texas." In his bizarre 2008 book on the Boy Scouts, Perry compared homosexuality to alcoholism and begged for tolerance... for those who are "proponents of traditional values." And during the presidential campaign, he complained in a widely mocked TV ad that "gays can serve openly in the military, but our kids can't openly celebrate Christmas."

Perry, like a lot of politically conservative Christians, would like us to believe that his views are all about loving the sinner and hating the sin. But being gay is no sin, and hating the way someone is can be destructive, as I saw growing up.

When I was in high school in a small Texas town, a close friend of mine—one of the most intelligent and charismatic people I've ever known, a person I'll call "John"—came out. To his friends, it was like discovering that the sky was blue. We knew. But for his family and many in the evangelical church he and I attended, it was a scandal. Gay men, our church taught, are weak, mentally diseased, feminized, hedonistic and materialistic—the very opposite of the masculine Jesus that we had all had a "personal relationship" with.

Homosexuality was a special sin, a mental disorder that required more than just repentance; it necessitated conversion. To this day, the church offers gay-to-straight counseling, a thoroughly discredited and destructive practice that has been condemned by the American Psychiatric Association. The church leadership teaches that same-sex attraction for men—lesbians are conspicuously absent—arises from the lack of a strong male father figure and the

overbearing presence of mothers during childhood.

"We were disconnected from other boys and were often called upon to provide emotional support to our mothers," reads a pamphlet advertising group same-sex therapy sessions. "Many of us lived in shame and secrecy always fearful that others would discover our pain. We were trapped in a seemingly hopeless state."

These are the poisonous waters in which John and his parents—all of us in the church—swam. The "counseling" the church offered, you'll be shocked to learn, didn't scare John straight, but it did poison his faith, poison his relationship with his dad and drive him to the destructive habits that "conversion" was supposed to fix. I can't imagine what it was like for John. Even at a comfortable emotional distance, I found the church's efforts deeply revolting.

When we were in college, John's dad—let's call him Mike—was diagnosed with a brain tumor. He was dead within a year, still struggling to make peace with his son. At his funeral service, one of the pastors of the church gave the eulogy. First, the pastor praised at length the relationship Mike had with John's younger (straight) brother: sports, fishing, Christian missionary work—the model (straight) son. "And then there was [John]," he said chuckling and smiling along with the audience. "[John] and [Mike] didn't see eye to eye. [John] was a little *different*."

Here was this crisply dressed, well-respected worship leader—someone I'd once admired—smearing a grieving son at his father's funeral. The pastor's hurtful words, the knowing chuckles in the church that day, are seared into my memory. I think about them often. I think about them every time the governor of Texas says that non-straight Texans are undeserving of equal treatment. ❏

Perry compared (his own?) opposition to gay rights to Sam Houston's resistance to Texas joining the Confederacy.

## EYE ON TEXAS Spencer Selvidge



### **TK** Blanco

I grew up in an extended family of bowlers, but once I went off to college bowling was pretty much out of my life. While I was earning my master's degree in photojournalism at the University of Texas, a professor suggested I drive out to Blanco to check out a cafe with an old bowling alley in the back. It was the start of a nearly two-and-a-half-year undertaking that eventually became the capstone project of my degree. I learned about centuries of bowling history and how 9-pin bowling came to both thrive and struggle in the primarily German enclaves of Bexar, Comal, Guadalupe and Blanco counties. I grew to really appreciate the Blanco Bowling Club members' sense of community and tradition. I am drawn to this image in particular because most everyone I met over the course of my time working on the project, and many others I didn't meet, are here with their families and friends doing what everyone in Blanco has been doing since the late 1940s.

*See more of Dallas photographer Spencer Selvidge's work at [www.texasobserver.org/eyeontexas](http://www.texasobserver.org/eyeontexas). CALL FOR ENTRIES: Seeking Texas-based documentary photography that captures the strangest state. Please send inquiries to [eyeontexas@texasobserver.org](mailto:eyeontexas@texasobserver.org)*



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