

RESIST



FEBRUARY | 2017

OBSERVER

*Four Texans
on How to Fight
Back in the
Age of Trump*
by

Ronnie Dugger

•
Sarah Slamen

•
Greg Casar

•
Glenn Smith



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PHOTO BY STEPHEN LOVEKIN/ZUMA

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OBSERVER ONLINE

The 85th Texas
Legislature is in
session — and no
one is safe. Visit
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as it unfolds in
all its terrifying
wonder.

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OUR MISSION

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

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DIALOGUE

Remember Their Names

Can you imagine fleeing such violence, poverty or crime that you would risk traveling across a desert with only a small backpack (“Introducing ‘I Have a Name/Yo Tengo Nombre,’” December 8, texasobserver.org)? These were real men, women and children. Every person should have a hearing, whether they are seeking a better job, fleeing violence, or seeking political asylum. Our immigration system needs real, bipartisan solutions.

Kim Moss-Allen

ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO

Bathroom BS

THIS WILL ALSO HAVE A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON DISABLED CITIZENS (“Patrick, Kolkhorst Unveil ‘Deeply Divisive’ Anti-Trans Bathroom Bill,” January 5, texasobserver.org). My friend, who lives in Austin, has ALS (Lou Gehrig’s disease) and recently commented that his wife and daughters are his caregivers and they have to take him into the women’s restroom when they are out. If this bill is passed, his freedom will be limited by law as well as his disease.

Susan Andrew Lizenby

DALLAS

SO MANY THINGS TO FIX IN TEXAS, AND OUR LEADERS ARE worried about a nonexistent problem. If they were really concerned about the welfare of women they would have addressed the rape of women by heterosexual men, and the backlog of untested rape kits, high maternal death rates, or the lack of access to affordable birth control.

Lisa Gowan

POSTED ON FACEBOOK

Remembering Guy Clark

I WAS ALWAYS IMPRESSED BY THE REVERENCE GUY Clark brought to a song and the almost piety of his audience (“The Troubadour,” December issue). Sitting through his performance was a journey into a man’s soul — there was little room for anything but truth, and I came away believing I had witnessed a testimonial to the unwavering pursuit of integrity and honesty. His songs revealed a deep reverence for music, words, people and the love he had given all three.

J. Gallerano

POSTED ON TEXASOBSERVER.ORG

Our Biggest Fan

I HATE THIS LIBERAL RAG, BUT I READ IT TO FIND OUT how you people think. But I also don’t like Perry much (“Get Ready, America: Rick Perry’s Environmental and Energy Record is Awful,” December 14, texasobserver.org). Dude is nuttier and slimier than a fruitcake in a dumpster.

Matthew Keith Baker

POSTED ON FACEBOOK

Welcome, Y’all

THIS IS NOT THE TIME FOR THE TEXAS LEGISLATURE TO outlaw sanctuary cities (“Faith Leaders Pledge to Offer Sanctuary to Immigrants Facing Deportation,” December 1, texasobserver.org). In fact, there is never such a time. History is too full of “human roundup” photos, movies, documentaries and books. The Texas Legislature, instead, should urge cities to welcome at least a fraction of the world’s 50-60 million migrants and refugees. South Texas legislators should lead the opposition in Austin to this cruel proposal.

Eugene “Gene” Novogrodsky

BROWNSVILLE

Sound Off

editors@texasobserver.org
or comment on [Facebook.com/texasobserver](https://www.facebook.com/texasobserver) and texasobserver.org

Many parents and children at Walnut Springs Elementary School in Dripping Springs, including those shown here, have rallied around a trans girl targeted by social conservatives.

PHOTO BY HOLLY
DAWSON DRIGGERS



LGBT RIGHTS

Haters Get Flushed

FOR TEXAS VALUES, A RIGHT-WING ADVOCACY GROUP, THE small, relatively conservative community of Dripping Springs may have seemed like a good target for its latest anti-transgender bathroom campaign.

But three months after the group stormed into town, Dripping Springs ISD officials were standing firm in their decision to allow a 9-year-old trans girl to use restrooms according to her gender identity.

Soon after Texas Values launched its campaign, a large group of parents formed to support the third-grade student and defend the district. Organized as “Many Stripes, One Tiger,” the group plans to take its fight to Austin to lobby against Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick’s anti-trans bathroom bill.

“We’re trying to get the message out that our school district is doing just fine without Dan Patrick coming in and regulating our bathrooms,” said Andy Hutton, whose son attends Walnut Springs Elementary School with the trans student.

Like many residents, Hutton got wind of the controversy in late September, when a text message began circulating among parents of students at Walnut Springs, one of the town’s three elementary schools. Hutton said the trans girl’s parents, who haven’t been publicly identified, requested the accommodation after she used single-stall restrooms in previous years. Soon, there was an action alert from Texas Values alleging that Dripping

Springs ISD was “allowing boys in girls’ bathrooms.”

“Parents were not notified of the administration’s decision and are very concerned for the privacy and safety of all students,” the group wrote, calling on its supporters to contact school board members and speak at an upcoming meeting.

Hutton accused Texas Values of spreading misinformation and trying to “fundraise off the back of our district and this child.”

Texas Values President Jonathan Saenz didn’t respond to a request for comment.

Hutton said he believes Texas Values chose Dripping Springs for its proximity to the Capitol and its status as a rural district in which few have been exposed to the debate over LGBT rights. But he doesn’t think the group anticipated the backlash it would receive from parents who personally know the trans girl and trust the judgment of school officials.

“I don’t think anybody questions that her gender identity is true and heartfelt and sincere,” Hutton said, adding that “even a lot of social conservatives” stand behind the girl.

With the school board refusing to place the matter on its agenda, Texas Values staged a news conference in November with about a dozen parents as well as state Representative Jason Isaac, R-Dripping Springs.

Many Stripes, One Tiger responded with a petition to the school board that garnered 529 signatures, and a December news conference that featured more than 50 parents, some of whom read statements from the girl’s parents.

“I am taking the time to write this because there is an outside special interest group with their own agenda that will negatively impact my innocent child, and also shape the future of the type of community we live in,” the girl’s father said in his statement. “There is no danger to anyone in this situation — except to an innocent child who is loved by all.”

—JOHN WRIGHT

DETENTION NATION

Folding Tent City

WHEN THE WILLACY COUNTY CORRECTIONAL CENTER opened in 2006 to detain undocumented immigrants, local officials banked on the promise of jobs and revenue for the struggling South Texas county. As long as the federal government kept locking up immigrants, the money would roll in. What could go wrong? The answer: plenty.

A decade later, Willacy County is left with a destroyed shell of a prison and more than \$100 million in debt. In February 2015, the prison was torched during an uprising, the culmination of a decade of

complaints from detainees about overcrowding, maggots in the food, beatings from guards and allegations of sexual assaults. Afterward, its 2,834 inmates were transferred to other facilities and 400 employees were laid off. The prison has sat empty ever since.

Now county leaders are blaming the riot on the private contractor that ran the prison. In December, Willacy County sued Utah-based Management & Training Corp. (MTC) for causing the riot due to its “abysmal mismanagement of the prison.”

The facility earned the nickname “Tent City” for its unusual construction — 10 windowless “tents” made of Kevlar stretched over steel frames. Each tent held 200 men, often with just one guard. Some called it “Ritmo,” a riff on Gitmo, the nickname for the Guantanamo Bay military base.

Tent City’s demise was a decade in the making. Built in just 45 days during a Bush-era deportation frenzy, it was constructed with a \$65 million no-bid contract that would lead later to indictments against two Willacy County commissioners for taking kickbacks.

In 2011, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) turned over the facility to the U.S. Bureau of Prisons (BOP), which expanded it to 3,000 beds and turned Tent City into a “criminal alien requirement” prison to house noncitizens serving time for low-level offenses, including crimes related to crossing the border.

To finance the BOP expansion, Willacy County dug itself further into debt, refinancing its bonds.

As part of the deal, the county received \$2.4 million a year, said Willacy County Commissioner Eliberto “Beto” Guerra. That was enough to fund a quarter of the county’s annual operating budget.

“It was a very good contract,” said Guerra.

BOP also offered a bonus to MTC if it filled Tent City to capacity. That provision would eventually be the jail’s undoing, according to the county.

“Two hundred inmates slept in each housing pod, there was insufficient room between beds, and new inmates were forced to stay in solitary confinement because of overcrowding,” the county states in its lawsuit.

Now Willacy County is teetering toward default on its bonds, which have been downgraded to junk status. The lawsuit against MTC could take years to wind its way through the courts. “We’re stretched to the limit with county services,” said Guerra.

But he said the cash-strapped county hasn’t given up on the prison economy. “The tents won’t be rebuilt,” Guerra said. “But I think the jail will be reopened again under President Trump. This time it will be brick and mortar. ICE is going to need a lot of places to hold all of the illegal immigrants.”

—MELISSA DEL BOSQUE

In November, the United States Geological Survey announced that a West Texas oilfield known as the Wolfcamp shale is the biggest ever discovered in the United States, containing approximately 20 billion barrels of oil and 16 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. But oil is not a modern discovery. Native Americans in Texas are said to have used it for hundreds of years, with records showing that they told European explorers it had medicinal qualities.

When the Spanish explorers of Hernando de Soto’s expedition, led by Luis de Moscoso Alvarado, found oil floating on the water along the Texas coast in 1543, what did they use it for?

- To trade with the Karankawa
- To caulk their boats
- To waterproof their beards
- Chapstick

ANSWER: b. After the explorers were forced ashore along the Texas coast between Sabine Pass and High Island, Moscoso reported that they used the oil to caulk their boats.

#FAKENEWS

“Regardless whether the *Texas Tribune* or other members of the mainstream media likes it, we will continue to post things we find newsworthy, interesting, thought-provoking, funny, or controversial and let our followers decide whether its [sic] news, satire, or something else. As they say over at Fox News. We report. You decide!”

—Texas Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller on Facebook, December 3, responding to a *Texas Tribune* story analyzing his social media use.

“In an age where you can get information in an instant, rather than slam ‘fake news sites,’ how about encouraging folks to do their own due diligence and fact check what they’re being told?”

—An article on former U.S. Representative Allen West’s website, November 16.

“The liberals want to distract us with charges of ‘fake news,’ but we should demand that lawmakers take swift action on the real problem of fake voters stealing elections.”

—Michael Quinn Sullivan of Empower Texans in an email newsletter, December 13.

“This is indeed part ‘fake’ news, and the St. Edward’s University study should not be relying on misleading data prior to the filing of the actual bills.”

—State Senator Paul Bettencourt in a press release, December 9, regarding a study finding that a so-called transgender bathroom bill could cost up to \$8.5 billion in economic losses.

WATER WARS

A Big Whoop

FOR A BRIEF PERIOD IN 2013, IT LOOKED LIKE THE ARANSAS Project, a small environmental nonprofit, would fundamentally change Texas’ byzantine water rights system. In March of that year, a federal judge in Corpus Christi agreed with the group that the state of Texas had violated the Endangered Species Act by depriving the whooping crane population that winters on the Texas coast of freshwater critical to its habitat.

In the dry winter of 2008-2009, a record 23 whoopers starved to death at the Aransas Wildlife Refuge. The Aransas Project blamed their deaths on a lack of freshwater inflow to the refuge’s estuaries. The state had issued too many permits to withdraw water from the San Antonio and Guadalupe rivers, decimating the blue crabs and wolfberries the whoopers depend on for protein, the group argued.

The court victory was welcome news for the whooping cranes and their fans. Over the last seven decades, conservationists have coaxed the majestic birds, with their 7-foot wingspans and almost-comical mating dances, back from extinction. The ruling was also a watershed in Texas water law. If it had held, the state

would’ve been finally forced to take into account the environment when allocating water rights — at least in the San Antonio and Guadalupe rivers. However, the conservative 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled against the Aransas Project in 2014.

But the story doesn’t quite end there. That same year, the Aransas Project approached one of its courtroom adversaries, the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority (GBRA), which manages the two rivers.

“We agreed that litigation wasn’t the way to go,” said Ann Hamilton, a whooping crane conservationist and Aransas Project board member. “We felt we’ve fought long enough — let’s find a better way.”

Eager to avoid another round of expensive litigation, GBRA officials agreed to work with the conservationists. In late 2016, the two groups signed an agreement to expand whooping crane habitat in an effort to increase the population. About 300 whooping cranes make the 2,400-mile journey from Canada to the Texas Gulf Coast each year. Advocates and researchers hope to more than triple the population to 1,000.

Hamilton says that goal could be met if the cranes had more protected areas along the coast free from the threat of development. The two groups hope to buy land outright or convince landowners to put their property in a land trust that would protect it from development.

For now, the agreement is mostly a paperwork exercise. Todd Votteler, an executive with GBRA, said the water authority is “keenly interested” in helping secure habitat for whoopers, but that they won’t pay for it out of their budget. Instead, Votteler said, GBRA hopes to convince landowners who have already set aside around 10,000 acres in the water

About 300 whooping cranes make the 2,400-mile journey from Canada to the Texas Gulf Coast each year. Advocates and researchers hope to more than triple the population to 1,000.

authority's land trust to permanently allocate the land for whooper habitat.

The Aransas Project is also looking at purchasing water from GBRA to ensure healthy stream flows during droughts. Hamilton's next major task is to raise money — lots of it. Purchasing water rights and land will cost millions of dollars. Money the non-profit currently doesn't have.

"We'll be doing fundraising, you bet," she said. "It's going to take at least a decade to bring this to its final resolve."

—NAVEENA SADASIVAM

IMMIGRATION

Here to Stay

ON A SATURDAY MORNING IN DECEMBER, A TEAM OF immigration attorneys herded volunteers to and fro beneath the high wooden ceilings of a South Austin church. Outside, a line of mostly Latino immigrants snaked its way from the church's entrance down the front sidewalk.

Around 40 volunteers and 50 immigrants had shown up for a "Know Your Rights" clinic held by Texas Here to Stay — a new coalition of attorneys and advocates formed to educate immigrants about their rights and help them avoid deportation.

"By midnight on election night, we were already flooded with inquiries from our clients," said Justin Estep, director of immigration legal services at Catholic Charities of Central Texas. "People were immediately panicked — even people with no reason to fear."

Texas Here to Stay came together three days after Trump's election, when a group of 35 immigration attorneys, advocates and concerned citizens gathered in a downtown Austin conference room. The mood was one of "disappointment and anger," Estep said.

The group shared notes about what legal worries they were hearing from clients and hatched a plan to protect as many immigrants from deportation as possible before Trump's inauguration on January 20.

Over the next month, Texas Here to Stay held four emergency clinics in Austin, each one in a different location. Each clinic combined Know Your Rights presentations with one-on-one legal consultations. In all, the coalition provided consultations for 170 immigrants, with 50 to 75 percent potentially qualifying for a form of relief.

Megan Sheffield, an attorney with the Equal Justice Center, said those covered by Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) — the Obama executive action that shields more than 700,000 immigrants with clean records who arrived as children — are at particular risk from Trump.

"No one knows for sure what's going to happen with DACA," Sheffield said. Trump has suggested he would swiftly cancel the executive action. But in December, he cryptically told *Time* that he would "work something out" for Dreamers, as those covered by DACA are called.

Estep pointed to another, less headline-grabbing form of damage that Trump could wreak: His administration could eliminate waivers that allow an undocumented person who marries a citizen to reside in the United States while their application for legal status is processed.

At the clinic, a young woman came for help with her asylum case. Last summer, she fled El Salvador with her young son after gang members threatened to kill her if she didn't pay them extortion money.

The woman couldn't afford an attorney and was close to being deported. Her asylum application had been filled out by a family member who speaks English. Texas Here to Stay was able to connect her with an attorney, giving her at least a fighting chance to stay.

Sheffield said she hopes to organize clinics around the state, particularly in rural areas where legal services are lacking. In the Austin area, Texas Here to Stay will launch another round of clinics in January.

—GUS BOVA

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WAKE UP, DEAD MEN:
A RETROSPECTIVE OF BRUCE JACKSON'S
PRISON FARM PHOTOGRAPHY, 1965-1975
ON KLRU.ORG



The short film by Deborah Esquenazi showcases Jackson's photography tracing the roots of the prison farm into today's massive prison system and industrial prison complexes.

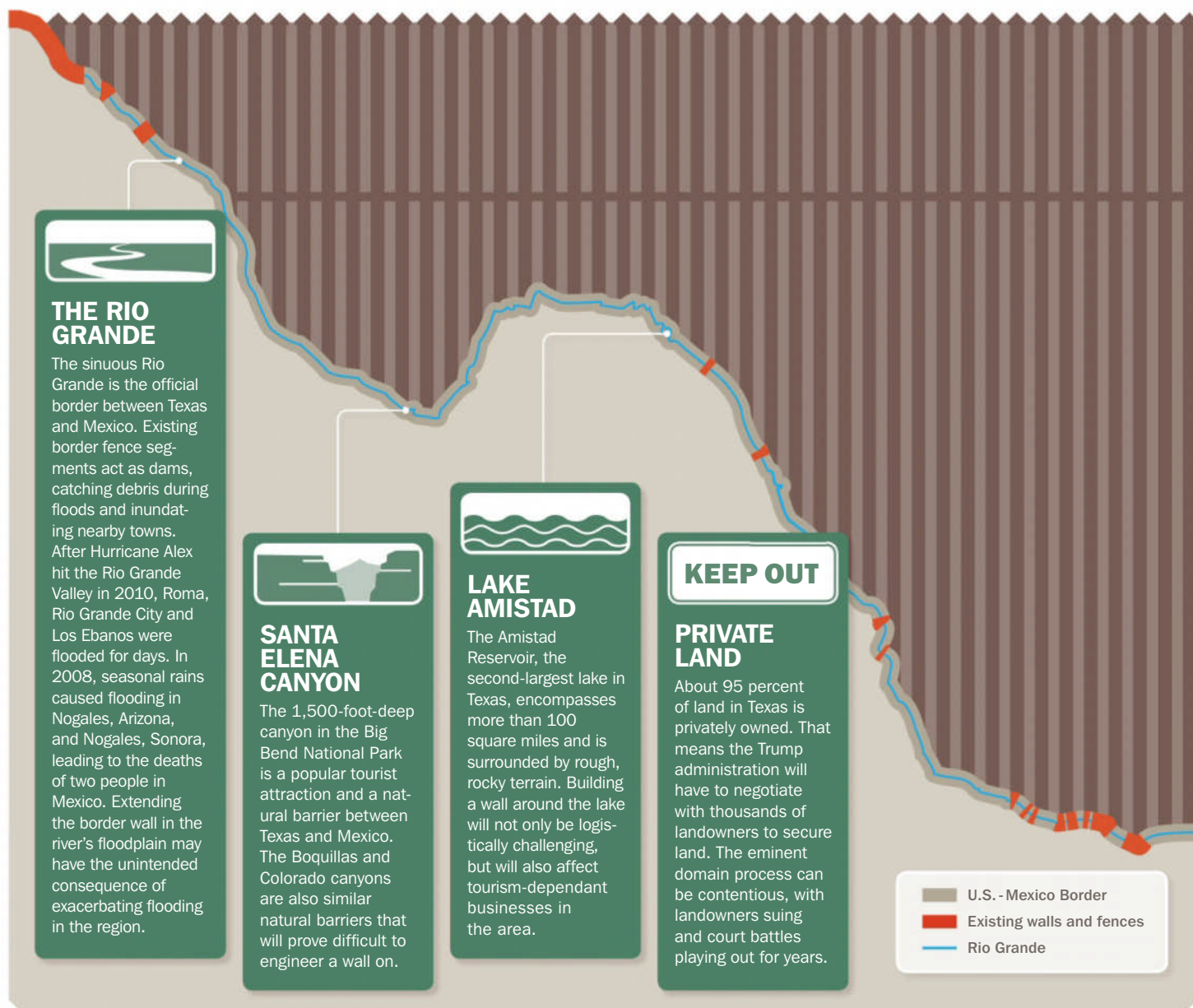
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STATE OF TEXAS: Building Trump's Border Wall

DURING HIS CAMPAIGN for office, President Donald Trump told voters that if elected he would build a “big, fat, beautiful wall” from coast to coast. Along the 1,250 miles of Texas-Mexico border, 110 miles of fencing already exist. If the Trump administration decides to construct more fencing along the rest of the Texas border, it will have to navigate deep canyons, a national park, an ever-shifting river and a treaty with Mexico that requires binational consent before structures can be built in the river’s floodplains. In some parts of the border, the wall has aggravated flooding and resulted in diminished property values for landowners.

— NAVEENA SADASIVAM



Number of Miles of the U.S.- Mexico Border with Fencing: 670 of 1,933



Cost estimates:



\$2.4 billion
already spent

→ **Trump estimates \$8 billion more** →

→ **Washington Post estimates \$25 billion more** →



CHRIS HOOKS

LEFT HOOKS

The Left Needs its Own Tea Party

By creating a circuit where politicians such as Ted Cruz and Dan Patrick could speak directly to conservative activists, tea party groups changed the future of the state simply by existing.

M

ANY PROGRESSIVES REMEMBER THE TEA PARTY REVOLUTION OF 2009-2010 as an extended exercise in unreason. That's not wrong. But it was also, quite possibly, the most successful political organizing movement in the last half-century of American politics. The tea party transformed the GOP from a broken and battered political party to a ruthlessly effective organ in the body politic — all in the space of about 18 months. As Democrats plot a path out

of the wilderness, it's important to consider how the right did it. ¶ In those years, the tea party was full of scorn for Barack Obama's background as a community

organizer, and the feared name of Saul Alinsky was never far from conservative activists' lips. But these right-wing rabble-rousers were much better organizers. For decades, the American left has dreamed about building a national movement of self-organizing cells by unifying political neophytes with disparate beliefs into a single, broad cause, and operating both within and outside its host political party. Conservatives realized that model. It worked. And Democrats still have nothing like it.

In Texas, there were tea party groups at the county, city and even neighborhood level. They were hyperlocal organizing engines whose events also offered camaraderie. They often met in churches, and many were involved with their own politically active congregations.

By creating a circuit where politicians such as Ted Cruz and Dan Patrick could speak directly to conservative activists, tea party groups changed the future of the state simply by existing. It became more important to tailor messages and political activity to these small crowds. The network was also an excellent way to train activists in more complex forms of organizing, such as block-walking and voter outreach, and a way for big conservative groups to reach local folks. It was all stunningly successful.

Democrats are supposed to be the party of the collective, but Democratic politics is intensely atomized, and many of its would-be voters are alienated from politics. Unions are capable of creating some energy, which is one reason they've been so intensely targeted by the GOP. Same with groups like ACORN. But they've all been decimated.

The social function of tea party groups was just as important as their organizing ability. It's in linking and threading social groups together that politics can become a part of a person's life, as it is in many other countries, instead of something to be argued about online. It's here where Democrats truly have nothing. In part, that's because there is no broader goal at the

moment. Democrats have no fleshed-out answer to the exceptionally effective motivating ideologies of the tea party, no worldview that constitutes a cause.

There's been ample and often deserved criticism of Obama for letting his own grassroots vehicle, Organizing for America, molder, and of the Democratic Party for losing sight of precinct-level activity. But the tea party wasn't the invention of the GOP. It couldn't be. Activists did it themselves.

I've often wondered if the key difference here is cognitive — maybe conservatives, who value tradition, hierarchy and in-group identities, are simply better at this than centrists, who care about little but the status quo, and the left, inherently wary of power and each other. The 2016 Democratic primary changed my mind, partly. There's evidently a tremendous hunger on the left, particularly among young people, to *take part* in something politically meaningful.

One organizing group, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), has seen its dues-paying membership quintuple since the start of Bernie Sanders' campaign. They've seen growth in unlikely places like El Paso. Their chapters offer the social experience of the tea party, as well as focusing energy on local races, such as precinct chairmanships and community college trusteeships. But DSA is tiny, and the left needs a mass movement.

Many in the Democratic Party innately distrust this kind of talk. Some hated or distrusted Sanders. They hold essentially centrist policy beliefs, and find ideological talk icky. Their fear is misguided. The party needs all of the energy it can generate, and many different approaches can exist simultaneously. The belief that Donald Trump's party is too stupid or evil and will necessarily self-destruct is terrifically dangerous and must be quashed. (Texas Democrats have been using that line on each other since I was in elementary school.) The Trump era is something new in American politics, and only a new approach can counter it. The clock is ticking. ■

STRANGEST STATE

NOTES FROM FAR-FLUNG TEXAS by Rose Cahalan



WHITE SETTLEMENT // A months-long battle between a city council member and a cat ended in the feline's favor. In June, the White Settlement City Council voted 2-1 to remove Browser, the local public library's resident cat, after Council Member Elzie Clements spoke up. "City Hall and city businesses are no place for animals," Clements said at the time. Browser's fans protested, citing "his pest control abilities, his ability to draw children to the library and the fact that he is loved by the people of the city," as the *Grizzly Detail* reported, and he was reinstated. But in December, at Clements' final meeting as a council member, he put Browser's removal on the agenda again — but this time, the council voted to let the cat stay. "My view hasn't changed," Clements told the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*.

NOLAN COUNTY // A reindeer escaped a car crash rattled but uninjured in December. His handler, Robert O'Neil, told KATB that he hit a patch of ice en route from Burleson to Eunice, New Mexico, with Dasher, who makes appearances at holiday parties. "Yeah, I'm an elf," he added. "Most people don't believe that." Sweetwater police responded and helped change a tire so Dasher could continue his journey.

EL PASO // A city council member lost his temper when he found out he hadn't been invited to the grand opening of a steakhouse. After learning that county commissioners and the mayor had made the guest list, but council members hadn't, Jim Tolbert fired off an email with the subject line "Very Disappointed" to the manager of El Paso's new Ruth's Chris Steakhouse. "You slapped Council in the face," he wrote, adding, "As this news spreads to other city council representatives, it is hard to find anyone too supportive of Ruth's Chris." Tolbert later told the *El Paso Times* that sending the message was "not the brightest thing I've ever done."

DALLAS // After spotting a stolen dog she recognized from a stranger's Facebook post, Alyssa Sanderford chased the thief on foot for more than a half hour, running barefoot when her flip-flops slowed her down. She enlisted the help of strangers along the way and eventually succeeded in wrangling Wiley, a 95-pound Lab/Chesapeake Bay retriever mix, away from the dognapper. When Wiley arrived home after 24 hours away, he recovered by drinking a large amount of water and sleeping for more than a day. "It sounds a little silly, but it restores your faith in humanity," Wiley's owner, Angela Ream, told the *Dallas Observer*.

COLLEGE STATION // College applicants are always looking for a way to stand out from the crowd, and that's what one prospective Texas A&M University student achieved by adding a colorful string of battery-powered lights to his or her application. The admissions office employee who opened the package was startled to see wires and a note instructing the recipient to flip a switch, and soon university police had evacuated the building and issued a campus-wide emergency "Code Maroon." A bomb squad robot took the suspicious package outside, where, *The Eagle* reported, "it was rendered safe with a water cannon."

SAN ANTONIO // Fire ant queso, toasted mealworm salsa and waxworm guacamole were on the menu at the debut Insecta Fiesta dinner hosted by the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. Billed as a "night of gourmet entomophagy," the event was designed to promote insects as a sustainable, healthy meal option. "I have succeeded in eating a waxworm," guest Julia Jonas told KSAT. "It was, surprisingly enough, not bad. A little crunchy."

AUSTIN // In December, the city of Austin's health department tried a festive new tactic to encourage safe sex: decorating the trees of a city park with condoms. Staffers hung baggies containing condoms, lube and safe-sex pamphlets in tree branches at Walnut Creek Park — an area known as a hookup hotspot. Akeshia Johnson-Smothers, a program manager for the department, told KXAN that the effort came from the desire to try "something creative, something unique." The city soon backpedaled, with a spokesperson replying to a comment on social media site Reddit with the statement, "We are no longer engaged in this particular type of outreach."

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EDITORIAL

Poking Holes in Trump's Wall

IN JUNE 2015, THE TRAVELING CIRCUS THAT WAS the Trump campaign came to Laredo for a little political *pachanga*. That was about 6,492 news cycles ago, but perhaps you'll recall Trump's theatrics. Just a month earlier, he'd referred to Mexican immigrants as "rapists" while promising to have Mexico pay for a border wall from sea to shining sea.

By coming to Laredo, Trump said he was putting himself in "great danger" — as if he were in Sinaloa banging on El Chapo's front door rather than visiting one of the safest cities in the United States. He traveled the streets of Laredo with dozens of motorcycle cops in tow. After the Border Patrol union rescinded its offer to give Trump a tour, he spent all of four hours in Laredo. Of his border security plans, Trump had virtually nothing concrete to offer. However, he did make one tiny admission: "You have to have a wall. In certain sections."

Those three wiggly words — "in certain sections" — barely registered, but they indicate that Trump knew he would never be able to build his ludicrous wall as advertised. In a sense, the slogan of a "big, beautiful wall" was just that — a symbol, a xenophobic crowd-pleaser, the political equivalent of "Freebird."

The critics were right, of course. Building a wall (or, more accurately, a fence) across the 1,933-mile

Southwestern border is preposterous (as this issue's "State of Texas," Page 6, illustrates). But what they — we — missed is that most of his supporters will settle for less. They do expect him to do something. And that something is likely to be an even more inept repeat of George W. Bush's Secure Fence Act of 2006 — the last time a Republican administration bowed to nativist pressure to contain immigration.

That law authorized 700 miles of fencing and allowed the secretary of Homeland Security to suspend any federal statutes that stood in his way and legally bulldoze any citizen or local government that objected. Landowners had their acreage seized through eminent domain, and vital wildlife refuges were desecrated. The fence causes flooding, it's expensive to maintain and binational communities consider it an insult to their way of life. It's also pointless. Desperate people find a way — around, through or under.

Not that any of this will matter to Trump and his people. The president promised a wall, and a wall (or something resembling it) he must deliver. The advantage to opponents this time is that they've been down this road before. Not only that, the Bushies took all the plum locations. The key is for border folks, *fronterizos*, to find their voice. Those "certain sections" of which Trump speaks are someone's home.

—FORREST WILDER

In a sense, the slogan of a "big, beautiful wall" was just that — a symbol, a xenophobic crowd-pleaser, the political equivalent of "Freebird."

LOON STAR STATE Ben Sargent



THE INTERVIEW

BORDER CRUSADER

Beto O'Rourke

The El Paso congressman is a new breed of Texas maverick.

Interviewed by **Melissa del Bosque**

"I think there's a golden opportunity for the Democratic Party to set itself apart and renounce big money. It means you leave some big bucks on the table, but I think it could be inspirational."

BETO O'ROURKE SHOULD'VE BEEN A LONG SHOT WHEN HE took on Silvestre Reyes in 2012. Reyes had been El Paso's congressman for eight terms. During the Democratic primary campaign, O'Rourke drew criticism for his bold comments on drug policy. In 2009, as an El Paso City Council member, he had sponsored a resolution proposing "an honest, open national debate on ending the prohibition on narcotics" as a way to reduce violence on the border. The resolution was promptly vetoed, but it brought national attention to El Paso and to O'Rourke, who co-authored a book on the subject.

A fourth-generation Irish American who speaks fluent Spanish, studied English at Columbia University and worked in tech before entering politics, O'Rourke is now in his third term. He spoke with the *Observer* about how the Democratic Party can save itself by giving up on Big Money, and the challenges of speaking up for immigrants.

Q:

How does the Democratic Party move forward? You voted to replace Nancy Pelosi as head of the House Democratic leadership.

We've been unable to effectively listen to and talk with the people who have been the bedrock of Democratic support for the better part of 70 years. I think that should cause us to assess whatever we've been doing.

Nancy Pelosi has been able to leverage what is, relatively speaking, a weak negotiating position into significant concessions on funding bills. She's also a terrific fundraiser. Congressional elections have become multimillion-dollar affairs, and she's been able to pump a lot of money into the party.

But this is all a pretext for what I'm going to say next. We need to do a much better job of listening to the people we represent and understanding their anxieties, and then be able to craft a legislative agenda and talk about it in a way that connects with constituents. I don't know that the same leadership team that's been in there for more than a decade and through four congressional cycles of loss can effectively do what's necessary for change.

You mentioned how incredibly expensive congressional elections have become. Do you see this as a real barrier to reform?

I remember my first official meeting at the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee — I'd just been sworn in. Steve Israel, who was the chair and a member of Congress from Long Island, laid out for [newly elected members] how we should do our job. When you broke down his daily agenda as to how we should be spending our time, more than half of it was fundraising. It showed me just how screwed up the place was. Because the opening conversation wasn't, "Hey, I know you came here to improve [health care] access for veterans or pursue a smarter foreign policy or fix health care" — it was all about how to stay in office. It was absolutely disgusting to me. It's probably disgusting to Steve Israel. I don't think anybody likes it.

But it's the system into which people were elected. I think that's the way most people look at it: to be re-elected and to have any weight with the caucus they need to do these things, even if they find them distasteful. I spent about a half-session trying to figure out how to play that game, and then I gave up and stopped taking PAC checks. I decided I was going to sacrifice my ability to be a player in that large-dollar world and just focus on the issues I was excited to be there for.

I think with America's disgust with politicians in general and congressional members in particular, and part of that connected to the obsession with money and with being re-elected, I think there's a golden opportunity for the Democratic Party to set itself apart and renounce Big Money. It's counter-intuitive. It means you leave some big bucks on the table, but I think it could be inspirational and could become the brand that will set us apart.

What do you expect will happen in the first congressional session under the new Trump administration?

I'm very concerned by some of his nominees. Jeff Sessions is a perfect example of someone who in every way is opposed to the promise that immigration and communities like El Paso and Texas hold for the rest of the country.

One thing I've learned is that very rarely does the moral argument, which is the compelling one for me, persuade anybody. So I try to make the strongest economic argument that immigration is in America's self-interest. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals beneficiaries, for example, will earn \$4 trillion in taxable income over their lifetimes, and I've looked at what it would cost to deport them and what it would do to our economy should we lose them.

Those are things hopefully I can get Republicans to pay attention to. No state would be hurt more than Texas should we take a draconian turn on immigration enforcement, and it's hard to imagine a more draconian turn than what we saw during the Obama administration, which deported more people than any previous administration.



Congressional leaders will often tour the border, have a positive experience, then go back to Washington and use a lot of negative political rhetoric. Why do so many politicians beat up on the border region?

It's a question I've become obsessed with [laughs]. I was attending a U.S.-Mexico summit the summer before last when the Trump phenomenon was emerging, and one of the Mexican senators, Gaby Cuevas, said, "Look, what bothers us most in Mexico is that so many people in America believe the hateful and malicious things about Mexicans being said by Trump — it seems to resonate with what people by and large already feel."

And this goes a long way back. When Susie Byrd and I were working on a book on the drug war from the El Paso perspective, we came upon this article from 1913 about a Mexican who had murdered someone in El Paso and it was blamed on his ethnicity and his use of marijuana, and this resonated with the fear in America at the time of immigrants who were not like the dominant culture. I found another news article from 1982 warning of a Libyan hit squad in Juarez that was coming to get Americans.

So Trump talking about Mexican rapists... it's not new. It's been in our vocabulary about minorities for a long time. The new obsession with ISIS training camps in Juarez is just like the fears of Libyan death squads in the '80s in Juarez.

As a country, we project our anxieties, fears and sometimes disappointments at losing jobs or not being as competitive, and instead of looking inward and thinking about what we could do different, it is so much easier politically to blame the outsider.

And the outsider, for us, begins at the U.S.-Mexico

border. Canadians for the most part look like us, but really Mexico is our connection to the rest of the world. For me that's a very positive and beautiful thing, but that's probably because I live here. And you're right. Politicians can come and see all these positive things at the border, but their constituents don't see it. And they want to get re-elected and it's so easy to push those buttons and touch on those anxieties rather than have rational and logical conversations about the issues.

Will there ever be any traction on immigration reform in Congress?

I don't know. On any rational immigration proposal that is in any way connected to the border, both Democrats and Republicans alike will say, "It makes a lot of sense. We would love to work with you on that, but first we need to secure the border."

It's a rhetorical fix that we're in. Because the border will never be secure enough. You'll never have zero immigrant apprehensions or zero drug smuggling. It's fool's gold. And if you were to try and get there by building more walls and further militarizing the border, you would deeply damage the United States, the economy and our way of life, and deeply decimate border communities like El Paso or Brownsville.

We've got to dispense with this insecurity myth about the border and take reasonable precautions, remain vigilant and know that if we're spending \$19.5 billion a year, which is a record amount, on the border — where the problem is not — then we're not keeping an eye on international airports, the northern border and our own homegrown radicals. ■

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

"Trump talking about Mexican rapists... it's not new. It's been in our vocabulary about minorities for a long time."

Beto O'Rourke in El Paso
PHOTO BY CHRIST CHAVEZ



WHEN PEOPLE FIND OUT I WORK AS A RIDE-HAILING driver in Austin for the mobile app Fasten, they rarely ask for my opinion about the \$10 million election rift over driver regulations that made national headlines last spring. More often they want to hear about my worst passengers.

I'll tell you about them, but to keep this from too quickly becoming the open diary of a misanthrope, let me first tell you about my favorite passengers.

Among the best passengers I've had (so far) was a wickedly funny woman who delighted in profanities and wore her multiple sclerosis like a ball gown. She was unable to drive herself to and from work and told me that ride-hailing services such as Uber, Lyft and the numerous cypcats that emerged following the aforementioned rift were a blessing for people like her who had endured irritable cab drivers for years.

She told me about a pair of earrings that her husband — a computer-security expert — gave her that could also be used to pick locks. That's hilarious.

Then there was the guy in brilliantly shined cowboy boots who was on his way to a country dance hall.

He had worked with high-profile college athletes, and the man spoke thoughtfully about the difficulty of helping young people weather not only sudden stardom, but also the pain of simply becoming adults.

I love such brief encounters, and they would never occur had I not been pushed into the "sharing economy" out of desperation. During rides like these, it feels as if I might actually be providing a worthwhile service.

But the fares aren't always so likable, and the freedom of the sharing economy isn't all it's cracked up to be.

I STARTED DRIVING THIS SUMMER AFTER I LEFT A SALARIED job at the Center for Investigative Reporting in California to return to graduate school for journalism at the University of Texas at Austin. Bills needed to be paid. I had a smartphone and a no-frills 2008 Subaru Forester with an obligatory NPR bumper sticker. No ass-warmers or even window tint.

That's enough to do what thousands of other people have done for money in recent years: endure repeated encounters with often inebriated strangers in my personal vehicle.



Fare Game

Lessons I learned from hustling for a living in the brave new 'gig economy'

By **G.W. Schulz** PHOTOS BY JENA WEBER

This so-called sharing economy has proved to be massively “disruptive” (a relished term in Silicon Valley these days) to traditional business systems while confounding regulators. In fact, the self-image of industry leaders as economic disruptors requires that they define themselves outside of traditional regulatory schemes.

As the lowest-ranking member of the sharing economy — the independent driver — for me there were to be no quirky but luxurious Silicon Valley retreats to encourage ideas for new revenue streams. No holiday parties or yoga meetups. No colleagues I felt compelled to impress. Not even health insurance or retirement savings. Only the passengers were available for watercooler chatter, and they're not always the best company.

For a while, my worst passenger was a fraternity brother who turned to the friend seated next to him and attempted to explain why a young woman they mutually knew would no longer speak to him. Seems they'd had sex together, and Romeo soon supplied his fellow fraternity brothers with a complete account. She was not pleased, as you might imagine. “But I was

rushing at the time, you know,” Romeo offered as an explanation.

Then there was the wine-giddy woman who loudly sang along to Mazzy Star's “Blue Light,” which happens to sound better in the original. And the unassuming tech worker who insisted on stopping at an ATM from his bank to avoid paying service charges. I thought this at least meant the possibility of a tip for the long drive across town. When we pulled up to the Perfect 10 Men's Club, it became clear why he wanted cash so badly. There was no tip.

In fact, no one ever tips, partly as a result of Uber assuring riders that tips are incorporated into the fare. Fasten didn't institute in-app tipping for drivers until September. The apps in general seek a frictionless experience for the riders, but Fasten reacted to survey data showing that riders and drivers wanted the ability to tip through the app. Nonetheless, the strippers I once had in my car from another club across town didn't tip, and I'll hazard a guess that they had cash.

More recently, the title holders for worst passengers were two powerfully intoxicated women who concluded that I had a chip on my shoulder because I was not overtly excited enough to have “hot babes” in my car. Closely behind were three young men on New Year's Eve who were archetypes of every bad guy in an '80s John Cusack movie. Surely they had names like Johnny or Troy. One threw his half-empty Miller Lite onto the roof of the hotel where they were staying before climbing into the car, while another openly sneered at my nerdy Subaru wagon.

While Uber and Lyft's brazen disregard for everyone else has drawn backlash from voters, drivers and bureaucrats alike, the fact of the matter is that ever-fewer people can imagine life without ride-hailing

companies, including me and the rest of the sudden army of working-class people trying to stay afloat with endless gig economy side hustles.

WHEN I STARTED DRIVING AT THE BEGINNING OF THE SUMMER, Austin voters had just dealt Uber and Lyft a humiliating defeat at the polls. For those unaware of the larger narrative taking place in the Texas capital city these days, a great number of Austinites are frightened. They're wondering if San Francisco's stratospheric rents will become a reality for them as the cost of living in Central Texas continues its own relentless ascent amid a seemingly boundless tech economy.

Uber and Lyft are both based in San Francisco and boast charming, Google-like office cultures with otherworldly fringe benefits and a deep association in the minds of many with new,

bloated condo development.

So it's hardly shocking that Austin voters were in an unwelcoming mood when Uber and Lyft spent over \$10 million attempting to rewrite city ordinances and target local elected leaders for recall in an effort to throw out enhanced requirements for fingerprint-based background checks.

While Uber and Lyft, like other aging tech titans in Silicon Valley, cling to the startup misnomer, the two companies have reported paper valuations — Uber somewhere in the tens of billions and Lyft above \$5 billion — that are greater than the entire city of Austin's \$3.7 billion annual budget. The number of drivers they together “employ” across the United States alone could fill the 100,000-capacity Darrell K Royal-Texas Memorial Stadium several times over.

Uber and Lyft surely viewed themselves over the course of the dispute with Austin as benevolently disruptive startups innovating on behalf of a better planet. But a blizzard of campaign material in the lead-up to the election, including text blasts, relentless home mailings and slick TV ads, was apparently not well-received. Despite shattering every previous record for spending in an Austin city election, the measure lost by more than 10 percentage points.

Nonetheless, Austin had eagerly embraced the sharing economy, and after the election, demand for ride-hailing services continued apace without Uber and Lyft.

I happened to need money just as Uber and Lyft were leaving town. So I became approved to drive for both Boston-based Fasten and Phoenix-based Ride Fare. Later, as this story was going to print, I started driving for Ride Austin, a growing nonprofit ride-hailing company.

Over the summer, neither Fasten nor Ride Fare gave the impression, in messages through the driver-side app or in email notifications, that fingerprinting was urgently required, or that the failure to promptly become fingerprinted would result in a suspension of driving privileges. It's possible such

warnings appeared in the app's fine print, but consumer research shows that mobile users rarely, if ever, scrutinize an app's terms of service. (I eventually went on my own to become fingerprinted so my passengers would feel a little safer.)

Ride-hailing companies view themselves as a service that merely connects mobile users to one another, as opposed to a local transportation-service company that employs drivers and maintains a fleet of vehicles, such as a traditional taxi company. While some 30 states formally define companies such as Uber, Lyft, Fasten and Ride Fare as “transportation network companies,” the larger sharing economy frames itself in sharply different terms. Fasten's user agreement, for example, opens with the explicit insistence that it is simply a technology company and that its drivers are treated “as customers, not commodities.”

I've never been made to feel like an employee of Fasten or Ride Fare. While the companies urge businesslike conduct, it's clear they wish to see the arrangement as no more than an app connecting driver and passenger.

Yet the underlying technology can fail spectacularly. Drivers and riders alike experienced intermittent outages and issues while using ride-hailing apps on New Year's Eve in Austin. For me, the Fasten app seized up for long lengths of time or simply left it unclear whether fares were processing. Or the app wouldn't transmit ride requests to drivers; I watched people on the street staring at their phones while attempting to submit ride requests following a fireworks show at Auditorium Shores.

The signup process for Fasten and Fare was otherwise completed entirely through a driver-side app. I submitted my name and date of birth and used my phone to take photos of my driver's license, insurance and registration. A criminal background check verified my Social Security number and driver's license information and included searches of my name in a global watch list, a database of sex offenders and national, federal and county-level criminal databases. With that, I was on the road and picking up fares in my chosen chariot.

Since becoming approved to drive, I've had only a handful of exchanges with Fasten, and they are generally direct messages through the app to tech support personnel.

It didn't take long to understand that volume was king. There was little I could do on many days other than give as many short, low-fare rides as possible while praying for a better fare across town.

What many passengers don't realize is that drivers can't see their destinations when we're asked whether to “accept” a fare through the app. If we could, a lot of boozy weekend brunch-goers would never make it to the next bar a short distance away where *Oh my God they have amaaazing Bloody Marys on Sundays have you tried their Bloody Marys, driver person?! You haaave to try them soooo good can we listen to something fun!?*

The alternative was to drive aimlessly around the city with no passengers as I burned up time and gas.

Drivers can conduct only a hasty assessment of the potential fare before the ride is passed on to another driver. I built a spreadsheet of all 252 rides I gave



Ride-hailing companies advertised their services on Austin telephone poles after Uber and Lyft pulled out in spring 2016.

over the summer for Fasten, and more than 70 of them were for distances of fewer than 2 miles. The result each time was another fare from \$2 to \$6 from yet another chatty bearded fellow who wanted to know if my Subaru was a turbo.

No, it is not a turbo. Will you tip if I pretend it is on this exit ramp?

I am still stunned by the number of people who try to hop into the front seat when they're not part of a group, as if we're comrades from the war and I'm picking them up for the funeral of our chief gunner. Some riders reach for my backpack in the passenger seat to toss into the rear so they can sit up front, oblivious to my too-subtle clue.

TO BE SURE, THIS IS THE EXPERIENCE OF ONE driver. Others have turned ride-hailing into an art form and devised elaborate strategies for landing the best fares possible. They drive exclusively during rush hour, when people will often pay extra money to be moved higher in the queue of waiting riders. Others build mutually beneficial relationships with passengers who regularly rely upon ride-hailing services. Drivers hover near the airport, or they plan ahead and locate concentrations of people downtown for major events.

I rely on a crude mix of such strategies, but more often than not I find myself fantasizing that a dream fare will arrive at any moment. My white whale. It's become an almost pornographic fantasy in which someone has no other way to get to Tallahassee. I've heard cab drivers swap tales of such passengers.

Ride Fare sends out encouraging weekly emails to drivers listing top earners — \$2,500 in one week during October, according to the company. They spotlight a driver of the month. In October, it was “Brandon,” who in his profile pic sported a button-down shirt and tie and was praised as “always near or in our top 10 earners list. Riders always compliment Brandon on his positive attitude and professionalism.”

Reader, this may shock you, but I'm not certain passengers always think of me as a crowd-pleaser like Brandon.

Over time, one of my strategies for trying to land better fares became ignoring or canceling rides after realizing the requestor would take too long to reach. I always feel guilty about it. The passenger is just someone who wants to get across town. But sometimes I know enough about a time and place of pickup that I can safely guess the ride just isn't worth accepting.

I learned to assume that if the request came from anywhere near Zilker Park on the day each month of the Blues on the Green summer concerts, it was a team of 20-somethings who wanted a short, air-conditioned ride over the Lamar Boulevard Bridge. The fare would be maddeningly small, traffic near the destination would be gridlock and the likelihood of a tip was nonexistent.

Fasten portrays the ability to ignore or cancel rides as an empowering feature that puts drivers in greater control over their working conditions. The company nonetheless felt compelled to send out an email to drivers over the summer delicately asking that they not cancel too many rides without good reason.

It's clear some people can earn significant sums as full-time experts in the sharing economy, but I've had a slightly different experience. After 252 trips with Fasten over the summer, I earned a gross total in fares of \$2,114.91. That works out to an average of \$8.39 per ride.

Before expenses.

According to my receipts, I spent \$373.22 on gas, car washes and car insurance, and another \$40 on fingerprinting fees. Fasten seeks to distinguish itself from competitors by charging the driver a flat rate of 99 cents per ride, even if the passenger pays extra to receive faster service. Fasten, then, took \$239.58. That dropped my total earnings to \$1,462.11, resulting in a net per-ride average of \$5.80.

Not included in the expenses column are the gas receipts I was in too much of a hurry to retrieve from the cashier when the pump was out of paper. Or the taxes I'll be contending with in April. Perhaps I can write off the ungodly quantities of black coffee, Topo Chico, Clif Bars and cigarettes.

I don't know what my numbers say about the abil-

All I can do each day is aim for a fantasy earnings target and try not to be discouraged by a string of heartbreakingly low fares. My daily goal is usually somewhere around \$100 to \$150 across a shift of five to six hours or longer, but it often comes in closer to \$80.

ity of other drivers to earn a living this way. Fasten brags to would-be drivers that they are not forced to accept ride requests they don't want, and claims that drivers can earn more per ride than other apps.

All I can do each day is aim for a fantasy earnings target and try not to be discouraged by a string of heartbreakingly low fares. My daily goal is usually somewhere around \$100 to \$150 across a shift of five to six hours or longer, but it often comes in closer to \$80.

It's a highly frustrating way for the cash-poor to make money when it's urgently needed, but the 21st century convenience of the app itself is highly attractive to would-be drivers. It's easy to see why so many people have turned to it despite the risk of dismaying fares, the long-term wear on their personal vehicles and the laborious independent contractor taxes.

There are still moments when I genuinely like being a ride-hailing driver. There's my favorite passenger you've already heard about. But I also can't forget about the two politely rambunctious educators in town to see Def Leppard, REO Speedwagon and Tesla. They giddily listed off one hair-metal band after another they'd seen together over the years. Then there was the conservative-looking woman in workout attire whom I never imagined would be delighted when she realized I was streaming audio through the car stereo of Austin police radio chatter: “I should listen to that at home!” 📺

G.W. Schulz is an Emmy-winning journalist and graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin.

SO YOU WANT A

FOUR TEXANS
ON HOW TO
FIGHT BACK IN
**THE AGE
OF TRUMP**

ILLUSTRATION BY
ADAM MAIDA

REVOLUTION

“WE ARE DOOMED.” Such are the watchwords of this moment, the casual but sincere belief of too many Americans. Even in this era of casually hyperbolic opinionating, many reasonably believe that the threats of a Trump presidency are too great to overcome. Just to name a few: run-

away climate change, a new nuclear brinkmanship, a dangerously destabilized world order. Trump seems not only constitutionally incapable of rising to complex global challenges, but also hell-bent on reviving old crises and creating new ones. The line between alarm and paralysis is thin.

At home, the nation faces an unraveling of the social fabric and the rise and mainstreaming of a racist movement almost unthinkable just a few years ago. Congressional Republicans are eager to get to work jackhammering the remaining cornerstones of the Great Society and the New Deal.

In Texas, we’re going on three decades of near-total one-party rule, with no end in sight. The public sphere has shrunk and become increasingly the domain of short-sighted ideologues who play to the worst instincts of their base. Lieutenant Governor

Dan Patrick is the personification of the current regime — all circus, no bread. He distracts with demagoguery about trans people haunting restrooms while he also squeezes the lifeblood out of public schools. All in all, it’s a grim time.

And yet... the world has not ended, nor will it. The time for conviction and action is now. The Trump agenda can be stopped. Our problems can be solved, or at least mitigated. The radical right in Texas can be sidelined. The big question facing us now is not “Should we?” Rather it is “How?” We’ve asked four Texans — an elected official, an activist, a political consultant and a journalist (our founding editor, no less) — to address a simple question: How do we move forward? What follows is an attempt at reasoning together in the interest of spurring action. The quickest way to shake off that sense of doom is to get to work.

ESSAYS BY
RONNIE DUGGER
SARAH SLAMEN
GREG CASAR
AND **GLENN SMITH**



America's 'Ox-Bow' Moment

We cannot be passive in the face
of great peril.

BY GLENN W. SMITH

IF YOU WANT TO UNDERSTAND THE MORAL CIRCUMSTANCES that Americans face in the dawning Trump era, you could do worse than *The Ox-Bow Incident*, a novel by Walter Van Tilburg Clark. The book was published in 1940 and a film version starring Henry Fonda was released in 1943. It's no coincidence that these were the years of the fight against fascism.

The story, set in 1885, is this: A pair of cowboys, Gil Carter (played by Henry Fonda in the movie) and Art Croft (played by Harry Morgan), ride into the town of Bridger's Wells, Nevada, just as word is received that a popular local cowpoke has been murdered. The sheriff is, of course, out of town. A posse led by a strongman glory-seeker ignores

the pleadings of the town's shopkeeper-with-a-conscience and rides out to the Ox-Bow, a bend in a river, looking for vengeance. Carter and Croft go along.

We expect the story to develop into a conventional "horse opera" in which heroic Western individuality prevails over evil. But author Clark and director William Wellman are all about confounding

expectations. And they don't flinch.

The posse finds three men asleep at a campsite. The surprised campers plead their innocence. Though Carter, Croft, the shopkeeper and a few others protest meekly, the posse is not persuaded. None of the uneasy ones, despite moral misgivings, summon the courage to stop what happens next.

The mob hangs the three men. Later, it's discovered that the alleged murder victim is very much alive. The hanged men were innocent after all.

This bare-bones account doesn't adequately convey the dark theme. The film, reviewer Manny Farber wrote, "shows the failure of liberal men, inspired by justice, when they are opposed by irrational and powerful men of anger."

Wallace Stegner, in his introduction to the Modern Library edition of Clark's novel, calls the story "a probing of the whole blind ethics of an essentially false, imperfectly formed, excessively masculine society."

America has entered an Ox-Bow moment. Trump was dangerous as a candidate and he'll be dangerous

as president. This is not politics as usual. He has already named a white nationalist agitator, Steve Bannon, to a top advisory role. His ugly scapegoating of large segments of society as well as his public brags of sexually assaulting women tell us what he thinks of a majority of Americans.

Trump publicly pushed his rally goers to violence against protesters. His assertion, as president-elect, that a president "can't have a conflict of interest" when asked about his business ties to foreign governments also signals the uncharted territory we have entered.

Trump has Republican majorities in the House and Senate. He will get at least one Supreme Court appointment. At the state level, allies like Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick promise to march in lockstep with the new regime. Texas is one of 25 states in which the Republican Party controls the state House, the state Senate and the governor's office.

It's in this context that Americans and their elected representatives need to think deeply about how to respond to what is already a crisis of American democracy. This is not the time for officials to comply with Republican demands so they can get meager pork barrel rewards for the folks back home. Monuments to their service — streets named for them, buildings with their names upon them — are beside the point.

Here in Texas, a stubborn lawmaker risks (gasp!) making *Texas Monthly's* list of 10 worst legislators if he or she regularly stands on principle to the point of obstruction. But collegiality and a kind of value-free, mediator's neutrality are poor measures of legislative success. Generally, they do little more than improve one's re-election chances. No, without consideration of the moral substance of efforts or achievements, such scales are justice-free.

In his novel, Clark writes that the rumored murder victim possesses "a gentle, permanent reality that was in him like his bones or his heart, that made him seem like an everlasting part of things." A sentimentalist might refer to America's "greatness" in just such an anthropomorphic way.

Like the power-mad leader of the posse in *The Ox-Bow Incident*, Trump tells us that national greatness has been destroyed. But that's a lie, and we don't have to wait for the end of this terrifying tale to know it. One hopes that real American greatness, the kind we celebrate in the usual tales of the mythic Old West where true hearts always prevail, will arrive just in time. But that's not how the world works.

Clark's story is a cautionary tale about passivity in the face of evil. We all know how hard it is to put it on the line, even when the line is in schoolyard chalk and the risk is minor. When faced with ostracism, ridicule from pundits or physical threats, the temptation to do nothing can be almost too much to overcome.

Here we are at the Ox-Bow. The consequences of passive compromise are not hard to see.

At the end of the book, Carter, the character played by Fonda in the film, has some tough words for himself. "I've thought of all the excuses. I told myself I was the emissary of peace and truth, and that I must go as

One hopes that real American greatness, the kind we celebrate in the usual tales of the mythic Old West where true hearts always prevail, will arrive just in time. But that's not how the world works.

such. ... I was righteous and heroic and calm and reasonable." It was, Gil says, "all a great, cowardly lie."

We have the advantage here, though. Unlike Carter, we know ahead of time what's coming. The rest of the story is up to us. ■

Glenn W. Smith, a longtime political journalist and consultant to progressive causes and organizations, is the author of The Politics of Deceit and Unfit Commander.

The Resistance Begins in Texas

There's no better time than now to continue the South's tradition of fighting for justice.

BY GREG CASAR

THE RESISTANCE AGAINST DONALD TRUMP and everything he represents should have its headquarters in Texas.

We are the largest state in America governed by a Trump-aligned regime. Trump's government will have the support of the state Capitol as our leaders act to dismantle public education, destroy our social safety net and tear apart families.

There are many of us in Texas who will likely be their first targets. Our state is home to more refugees and undocumented immigrants than almost anywhere else in the nation. It's for this very reason that Texans must take center stage in the Trump resistance.

During the civil rights movement, many Northerners made great sacrifices and played critical roles in defeating Jim Crow. But the true battle was fought and won in the South, where organized resistance and civil disobedience challenged segregation and Klan violence. Alabama was home to both Bull Connor and Rosa Parks. Georgia was home to both Lester Maddox and Martin Luther King Jr. There's no better time than now to continue the South's strong history of resistance.

We've all been told to "give Trump a chance." Many leaders and talking heads, including Trump, are calling for healing and unity. I believe that's wrong. There will be no healing for families who will be impoverished or torn apart by Trump. We can't "give him a chance" to take away health care from people who will die without it.

In Texas, many of us who have advocated for policy change have gotten used to cutting deals, respecting the other side and playing nice. Things have changed. Trump's followers will not go easy on us for playing nice. There is no compromising with hate and fear.

Texas' right wing may have gerrymandered districts to deny representation to our communities,

suppressed voter participation and handed public policymaking over to corporate interests — but even still, there are millions of progressive Texans with real political, economic and electoral power in our cities.

The lion's share of local elected officials in San Antonio, Houston, Austin, Dallas, El Paso and throughout South Texas are left of center. That's because, even though a majority of those throughout the state who go to the ballot box vote Republican, the hearts of Texans — especially in our cities — are populist, progressive and thirsting for change.

The progressive movement in Texas, more than ever before, can take the bold action necessary to inspire the residents of our cities to become a part of the Trump resistance. This is a movement moment. Fighting for expanded workers' rights, immigrants' rights and environmental protections may

sound risky in the face of Abbott, Patrick and Trump. But our families will face greater, long-term risks if we do not expose the Republican Party for the discriminatory, misogynist, anti-democratic, anti-American institution it has become.

In Austin, we're getting started on that work. In the weeks following Trump's election, immigrants' rights advocates won a commitment from the City Council to fund nonprofit legal services and deportation defense services for our immigrant community.

Last year, Austin activists successfully demanded a review of the city's policing practices before any budget funds could go toward new police officers. Formerly incarcerated people advocated for anti-discrimination policies so that people with criminal histories have a better chance at getting a job, and their work led to Austin becoming the first city in the South to pass a Fair Chance Hiring ordinance.

Low-wage service workers won a union at Austin's airport, and they're on the way to winning in Houston, too. El Paso passed new laws to hold employers accountable for shorting workers their fair pay. Dallas County's sheriff bravely limited cooperation with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and Travis County's new sheriff promised to go even further toward justice.

These local victories, and the progressive wins to come, are a direct rebuke to the politics of Trump. We're gaining momentum, and we know Trump and his sympathizers will do whatever they can to slow us down.

This is a call to action: Build the resistance against Trump in your city. Trump may have won our state's 38 electoral votes, but that doesn't mean he's won Texas.

Now is the time to get involved. Go to a protest. Call, visit or write your city council members, county

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commissioners, mayor and state representatives and demand that they openly resist Trump, and then support them if they do so. Make a donation to, or volunteer for, a progressive movement-building organization in your community.

Act in solidarity with your neighbors, follow the leadership of those whose lives are most at risk and mobilize with them to defend everyone's rights against vigilante violence or government violence — especially people of color, Muslims, immigrants and others who will be scapegoated. And even when despair and cynicism seem rational, keep hope in your heart instead. We'll need it. There's a long fight ahead. ■

Greg Casar serves as a member of the Austin City Council, and he is the youngest person ever elected to that office. A former community organizer, he is a native Texan and the son of Mexican immigrants.

Bringing the Fight Back

It's long past time in Texas for straight talk, starting with the blunt facts about the nullity the Texas Democratic Party has become.

BY RONNIE DUGGER

THE PRESIDENCY OF DONALD TRUMP IS AN emergency for the United States. Now is the time for each ethics-seeking American citizen to fight for democracy in a nonviolent revolution.

With the nation now ruled by Trump and Texas run by the likes of Governor Greg Abbott, Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick and Attorney General Ken Paxton, what do we do next?

This moment is not about Trump — we've had too much of that. Now it is about us, free people in a still-free state and a still-free country. It's long past time in Texas for straight talk, starting with the blunt facts about the nullity the Texas Democratic

Party has become. What else can be said honestly about it in a state where the major cities vote Democratic for president but Democrats haven't won a single statewide office for 20 years? Even in the state's most liberal city the Democrats can't get it

right. When a friend and I arrived at the 2016 Travis County Democratic Convention — in a county won by Bernie — we were handed programs listing the convention committees, all of which were stacked with known supporters of Clinton. And then speeches, speeches, drivel-on speeches. Not once were we, the Democratic delegates, expected to do anything

but say (and vote), "Yes sir. Yes ma'am." Liberal Democrats have been beaten down so much that they've given up at exactly the wrong time.

Even more tellingly, precinct organizing at the neighborhood level is all but abandoned, even though it was responsible for the history-changing ascendancy of liberals in Texas from the '50s to the '90s. Where are Frankie Randolph and U.S. Senator Ralph Yarborough when we need them? Randolph, who helped start this very magazine in 1954 and hired me as editor, was the chief organizer of precincts in Houston and the inspiration to organizers in other cities. Yarborough was the fighting Texas senator in the great liberal tradition who led the precinct-rooted Democratic revival in Texas. Among many achievements, Yarborough was responsible in part for two of the most liberal federal judges in Texas history, Wayne Justice and Woodrow Seals.

Randolph and others led the Harris County Democrats as they integrated silently and became a model in the other big cities. Her recurring four-word speech to the hundreds of Democratic meetings she addressed was, "Work in your precincts." African Americans, Hispanics, women, white liberals, gays, *citizens*, waged a nonviolent revolution to launch a Texas Democratic Party that was ready to take over the state, and did govern, for a while, with the election of Ann Richards as governor. Where and who now are the Henry B. Gonzalezes? One night in 1957, I stayed up all night in the Texas Senate chamber listening to Gonzalez filibuster segregation bills. "Who speaks for the Negroes? What about them?" he roared. "Is Texas liberty only for Anglo-Saxons?"

And so many others: Senator and Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, the most eloquent leader in the drive to impeach President Nixon; Bob Eckhardt, the representative and congressman whose faithful drive was "to advance my views," and many's the time he did; Mickey Leland, the brilliant black congressman headed for the U.S. Senate until he went down in a crashing airplane. And always Yarborough, a model of progressive integrity who kept orating on the stump, "Let's put the jam down on the lower shelves where the people can reach it."

By contrast, the leaders of today are following the advice of mercenary campaign consultants. Until late in Wendy Davis' 2014 gubernatorial campaign, you'd have thought she didn't even know the state GOP was (and still is) actively denying 1.1 million low-income Texans health insurance through Medicaid, health care that would be almost entirely paid for by the federal government. As Davis has admirably confessed, "One of the things I learned during my gubernatorial race was that allowing ourselves to be message-managed is not the right direction to take. People are looking for authenticity, even if they don't agree with everything you say."

I posit that taking back Texas will require three initiatives: (1) we reorganize as Democrats from the precincts up, starting with each one of us in our own precinct; (2) young people run for public office to rebuild a strong movement inside the Democratic Party, starting with city council, school board and mayor; (3) we fight for a bold new agenda that

We owe, each of us and all of us, as much time and effort as we can practically give to advance our deepest values and convictions.

requires courage to advance in the face of right-wing reactionaries.

What are some of the issues that will give millions of oppressed Texans more reasons to vote in order to improve their own and their children's lives? Democrats must fight, fight, fight for those billions of tax dollars offered back to us by our federal government for Medicaid. (And resist the GOP's efforts to destroy the health care system.) Fight racism at every turn and opportunity. Go to the mat for a \$15 state minimum wage, especially since the GOP may abolish Medicare and Medicaid while calling it reform. Create a statewide health insurance program for everyone; make worker's compensation mandatory (we're the only state that doesn't); institute a state income tax so we will have enough money to educate all our citizens well and pay our teachers respectably; refuse to give state money to religious schools; ban gerrymandering, which disempowers minorities by concentrating them in wiggly-waggly districts. Oh, and radically democratize the Electoral College by instructing our state's electors to cast their votes for the winner of the national election.

We owe, each of us and all of us, as much time and effort as we can practically give to advance our deepest values and convictions. Our democracy is at stake. Democracy itself is at stake. It's up to us. ■

Ronnie Dugger is the founding editor of the Texas Observer. He lives in Austin and is working on his poems and a book about nuclear war.

A Texan's Practical Guide to Resisting Trump

Activism isn't always grand or heroic.
There is no task too small or out of reach.

BY SARAH SLAMEN

TO FIGHT TRUMP, WE MUST FIGHT HIS brand of corruption and state-sponsored bigotry at home, too. We must beat back his appeasers and appointees, and, more important, resist local and statewide politicians who enact micro versions of the Trump agenda. Increasingly, it appears that many of our very worst Texan politicians will be exported to Washington in the form of cabinet appointees. If you never found time to resist Rick Perry and Sid Miller while they were on the rise here, the responsibility lies in your hands in this moment. A tolerance for indignities, small and large, in daily Texan life has ballooned into a crude, international offense to us all.

It's time to question yourself, your social network, your places of worship, the businesses and institutions you patronize or work for. Donald Trump's conflicts of interest make Rick Perry's Texas Enterprise Fund look like the model of public rectitude. Ask yourself, "Can I afford to spend money at businesses that enrich the Trump agenda?" One Texan resister, Debra Haas of Austin, has been participating in #grabyourwallet, a boycott of all Trump family products and hotels, since before Election Day. She dutifully avoids any outlet that carries Trump products or supports the administration.

It may be awkward, but standing with neighbors who are vulnerable to indefinite detention means no longer buying meals prepared or services rendered by neighbors who welcome his agenda.

Just before the holidays, I watched as an Austin Energy employee called out her employer on social media. She listed all the reasons why it was disingenuous for her company to assert before City Council that every poor family knew how to navigate paying late bills. She clearly spelled out all the ways a customer could fall through the cracks.

Demand critical thinking, confront racial and religious scapegoating and threaten estrangement if your demands are not met. In January, Jan Chamberlin of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir provided

a great example of spiritual resistance when she resigned from the choir after she could not reconcile performing for the Trump inauguration with Christ's teachings.

Applauding or sharing your thoughts on social media is not enough anymore. Offline, attending protests unattached to any real demand and engaging only people we already know is no longer enough either. Commit to making local politics a weekly (if not daily) exercise. Issue advocacy is a great way to learn how bills are crafted and passed in your

cities, counties and state capital. Look up a local, active, transparent advocacy group dedicated to your issue of choice and ask them if you can become a citizen lobbyist. The Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty runs an excellent training program every legislative year. NARAL Pro-Choice Texas, which is tasked with protecting reproductive rights and resisting injustice around the state, also holds training for Texans across suburbs and major cities.

The possibilities for participation are endless, but one certain way to challenge abusive power at home is for progressives to start winning elections again. In Texas today, we face a true crisis of even the most basic civic participation. We must take our voting rights in local elections more seriously — if not for ourselves, then for those disenfranchised masses trapped in

Democrats in major Texas cities must move beyond making ActBlue donations and voting straight ticket every presidential election.



It's time to question yourself, your social network, your places of worship, the businesses and institutions you patronize or work for.

immigrant detention and those incarcerated for non-violent drug offenses or mental illness. Every year, politicians run unopposed up and down our state ballots. To gain a healthy bench of candidates, we must

strengthen parties other than the GOP at home and in Washington, D.C.

Democrats in major Texas cities must move beyond making ActBlue donations and voting straight ticket every presidential election. A small group of people have been doing the work of the Texas Democratic Party for almost 30 years, and it shows. Relieve them in your resistance. For Texas Democrats, this means showing up to county executive meetings, club meetings and county conventions. (I took my own advice in 2016 and joined the leadership of the Texas Young Democrats so I could start taking responsibility for the choices I was asking voters to make.) Reject alienation by becoming a precinct block captain or filling one of the thousands of empty precinct chair positions across the state. Doing so will give you access to your neighbors who have been showing up to vote or who voted eight years ago and haven't been back to the polls since. Talk to each other and figure out why most of the people in your community aren't voting. Your

answers are more valuable than the pundits who told a different story for the last 18 months.

There are alternatives to the current party in power and the Democratic Party in Texas. However, voting for a third-party candidate every four years is not building an alternative. The Green Party of Texas, Democratic Socialists of America and the Libertarian Party all exist and can be contacted today. By writing to them or contacting them online, you can join in building infrastructure that could rival the votes and dollars of the major parties.

It will not all be grand, heroic gestures in our Texan resistance. There is no task too small or out of reach. If you have social anxiety or are confined to home, find a way to research bills online. Make yourself available to support the volunteer work of those who are ready to be on the ground by giving rides across our sprawling cities or hosting meetings for those who need escape from conservative communities where they can't gather openly yet. Every hour we dedicate early on to this resistance and its support network will help us find more Texans to carry on the work for the next four years. Stepping out in your suburban community today will empower the closeted progressive down the street to enter the fray. There is much resistance to sow across these 254 counties. I hope to see you out there. 🇺🇸

Sarah Slamen is an activist and organizer in Houston.

PHOTO BY PATRICK MICHELS



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Bargaining In

How a felon with a fake name convinced a federal agency and the state Land Office to fast-track a controversial project in Port Aransas.

BY NAVEENA SADASIVAM

WHEN MIKE EDWARDS WALKED INTO THE CORPUS CHRISTI office of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers one June afternoon in 2014, he came prepared. His task: convince six state and federal agencies, including the Army Corps and the Texas General Land Office, to sign off on a plan to build a barge mooring facility in an ecologically sensitive part of the Texas coast.

He was flanked by two towboat captains and state Representative Todd Hunter, whose district includes Port Aransas. Hunter is also a powerful lieutenant of Texas House Speaker Joe Straus. The problem, Edwards and his crew told the agencies' representatives, was that the Port of Corpus Christi had gotten so busy that barges were backed up. While waiting for room at the port, they were idling in Lydia Ann Channel, a small pass tucked just inside San Jose Island on the bay side of Port Aransas. The barges, they said, were nosing up on the shoreline, running their engines and killing seagrass. The proposed temporary mooring facility would stretch for a mile and a half and keep the barges tied up in deeper water, away from the shoreline and off the seagrass.

As a sales pitch, the meeting evidently worked wonders. Six months later, in January 2015, Lydia Ann Channel Moorings LLC had its permit from the Army Corps and a lease from the General Land Office (GLO), which owns submerged lands along the coast. The Army Corps allowed Edwards and his partners to skip public notice and an environmental assessment, even though the project lies within a state scientific area and hosts several endangered species. As Port Aransas would quickly point out, Lydia Ann Channel lies within casting distance of an extensive black mangrove estuary made up of tidal channels and flats popular with fishermen stalking redfish, speckled trout and flounder.

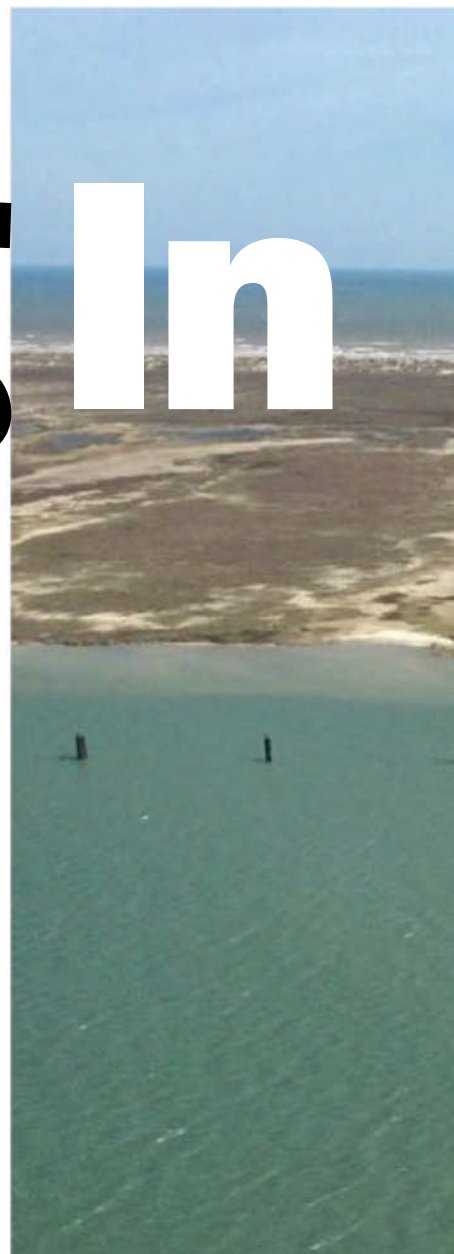
For months, Edwards and the principals in the

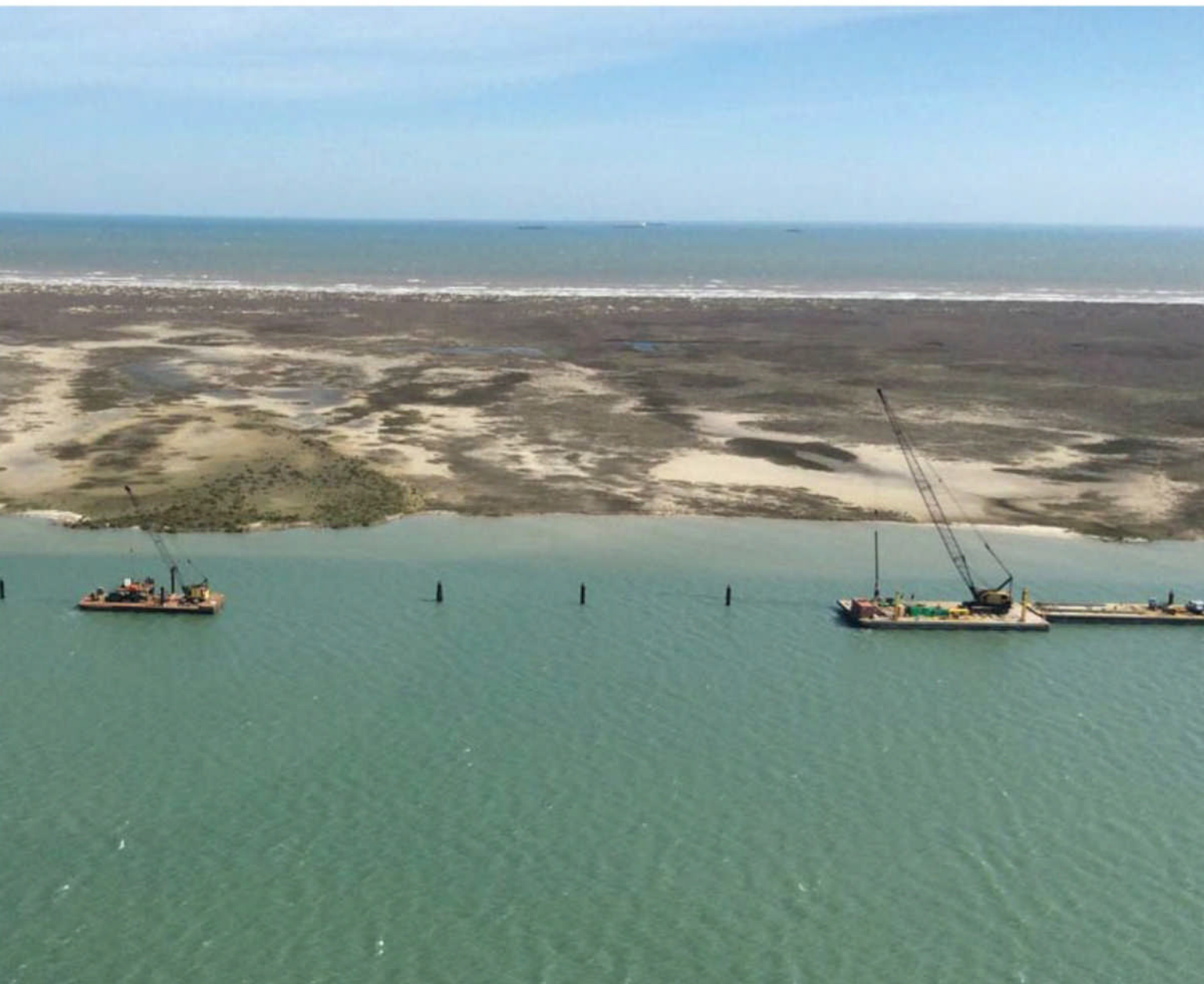
The barge fleeting facility was billed as a project to help protect the San Jose Island shoreline pictured above.
VIA TEXAS GENERAL LAND OFFICE

company — his son-in-law Todd Pietsch and Bryan Gulley, an orthodontist and well-known local developer — pressured the Army Corps to fast-track their application. In July 2014, when the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department asked how the developers planned to protect seagrass that might be affected, Edwards told them in an email there was “NO sea grass.” When a member of the towing industry wrote to the Corps expressing worry about the facility’s effect on other ships and barges passing through the channel, he called the man to convince him otherwise.

But not all was as it seemed. Edwards and his crew would violate the terms of their permit by building a large-scale docking operation, more elaborate than the one they’d pitched the Corps. And Mike Edwards wasn’t actually Mike Edwards. His real name is Everett Michael Skipper, and Everett Michael Skipper has a rap sheet.

Only months later, long after the permit was issued and the dock was in operation, would the residents of





Port Aransas discover the truth. For the locals, who have since sued the Corps for granting the facility a permit, the state and federal agencies' behavior is puzzling. How did a felon talk a \$4.6 billion federal agency into fast-tracking a project with so many red flags?

FOR MOST OF THE 2000S, SKIPPER WAS A WHEELER-DEALER in the construction business in Corpus Christi. He functioned as a one-man shop for putting together bars and nightclubs, including Aria Sky Terrace & Lounge, a swanky downtown spot owned by Pietsch.

Skipper took on the role of designer, construction manager, government liaison and all-around problem-solver for these projects, drawing up the plans for the businesses himself and then paying a local engineer to rubber-stamp them. He almost never had employees of his own, choosing instead to hire subcontractors paid off the books.

But Skipper's business came to an abrupt halt in 2007 when he was rounded up in a bribery sting.

Mike Edwards wasn't actually Mike Edwards. His real name is Everett Michael Skipper, and Everett Michael Skipper has a rap sheet.

Desperate to get a new nightclub opened in time for a highly anticipated baseball game, Skipper gave a city inspector a small Red Bull refrigerator and offered a fire marshal an airline ticket to Hawaii. The fire marshal refused, but the incident brought federal agents knocking on Skipper's door. A probe would later reveal that not only did Skipper try to bribe city officials, he had signed off on a fire protection permit using his alias, Mike Edwards. The name, he would tell investigators, was his DJ name, which he had used since 1976.

In 2009, Skipper pleaded guilty to bribery. Though he was now a felon, Skipper wasn't deterred from

hustling new business. He just made sure to keep his real name off the paperwork. Though Skipper coordinated behind the scenes with officials at the Army Corps, Pietsch and Gulley signed the Army Corps permit and the GLO lease.

When the *Observer* told GLO staff in a meeting in October that Edwards' real name was Everett Michael Skipper and that he was a felon, the room fell silent. An attorney for the agency said it doesn't conduct background checks or look into the personal histories of applicants.

Still, if officials with the Corps or GLO were curious about Mike Edwards, all they had to do was Google his name.

"Whether caused by incompetence, the good-boy system, apathy, agency capture, corruption, or hostility toward environmental regulatory obligations," the Port Aransas claim in their lawsuit, permitting the facility was "a grand mistake."



Everett Michael Skipper, who used his DJ name while coordinating with the Army Corps, pleaded guilty to bribery charges in 2009. FACEBOOK

ON A FRIDAY EVENING IN PORT ARANSAS, retirees cruise the streets on golf carts and fishermen returning from a day on the water stop at one of the many cook-your-catch joints for dinner. A beach town lined with bait stands and seafood joints, Port Aransas takes its salty living seriously.

In 2015, when folks in Port Aransas noticed barges with construction cranes in Lydia Ann Channel, there was an uproar. Residents quickly organized, set up a Facebook group and began looking into their legal options. Many of them had grown up in Port Aransas or spent summers in the area, fishing, kayaking and duck hunting. The sight of large metal pilings being driven aground in the channel upset them.

"I've spent countless hours going up and down the shoreline with my friends, fishing, catching bait or crab," said Aldo Dyer, a spokesperson for Friends of Lydia Ann Channel. "This is not a collection of tree-hugging environmentalists like some people want to allege. ... It's people who want to see what we experienced as kids preserved."

A young oil and gas attorney, Dyer was also upset that he and the others had never received so much as a notice that Lydia Ann Channel Moorings was planning on building a barging facility. In 2015, Dyer and a handful of wealthy Port Aransas formed the Friends of Lydia Ann Channel and put up about \$350,000 to hire an Austin law firm and sue the Army Corps of Engineers. The Corps, they allege, used "an improper and hurried process" reserved for noncontroversial projects to permit the facility, and grossly failed to protect the Lydia Ann Channel. In court the group would discover that the Corps had decided the project was "minor" because the company had claimed it was a "temporary" facility and therefore didn't require public notice or an environmental review.

At one point, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department wrote to the Corps pointing out that the area

around the facility is home to marine mammals and sea turtles and recommending that the company set up a monitoring program. The agency also suggested that the company "compensate for the potential impacts to seagrass beds in the immediate project vicinity."

Seagrass prevents erosion, improves water quality and provides a habitat for marine life from plankton to gamefish; uprooting it in protected areas is illegal under Texas law. But when the Corps passed on the recommendations to Skipper, he responded, "there are NO sea grass" [sic] in location of moorings to be installed" and ignored the suggestion to set up a monitoring program. The Corps didn't pursue the point either. In fact, some within the Corps were apparently in such a rush to get the mooring facility permitted that they didn't wait for their colleagues to weigh in.

By about mid-January, officials in the regulatory department had grown impatient with the Corps' operations division, which was looking into whether the facility would obstruct ship traffic.

"The applicant has been very patient" and we "owe the applicant a permit decision," one regulatory division staff member wrote.

Kim McLaughlin, the Corps' regulatory section chief in Galveston, chimed in too.

"We need to move out on this," she wrote. "Please provide a response ASAP otherwise we will make a permit decision mid-week."

A few days later, McLaughlin approved the permit before the operations department provided its OK.

The Corps declined to comment for this story, citing the ongoing litigation. However, in a blistering review of the events produced after the federal lawsuit was filed, Army Corps Col. Lars Zetterstrom blamed Lydia Ann Channel Moorings for misleading the agency. He wrote that the company "failed to accurately describe the scope of its operations," which resulted in "an inappropriately narrow scope of review."

To complicate matters, the official story is full of small but crucial contradictions. On the most basic facts, the agencies, Port Aransas residents and Lydia Ann Channel Moorings can't seem to agree.

For example, the GLO denies that the facility is in the Redfish Bay State Scientific Area, a zone designated by the state to protect seagrass from being uprooted. But a spokesperson for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, which established the area, confirmed to the *Observer* that most of the facility falls inside the scientific area.

Another major point of contention is how long the barges had been disturbing the Lydia Ann Channel and whether the company was behind the activity. The Port Aransas residents argue that the company "fraudulently created the 'industry practice' of grounding barges on the banks of the channel" and used it "as an environmental *bête noir* [sic] to obtain exemptions from environmental laws."

"I firmly believe these guys were calling their buddies and saying, 'Start nosing up here,'" said David Smith, an attorney for the group of Port Aransas residents suing the Corps. If the court issues an injunction and stops the company from operating, "They're going to say, 'Start pushing up again,'" Smith said. "That's BS on so many different levels."

Skipper and Gulley's most effective strategy was to present the project as an environmental savior. In meetings and conversations, they emphasized that barges were already haphazardly pushing up against the shoreline and said that a docking facility would help keep the barges organized and tied up away from the shore.

The strategy worked. The GLO, for instance, still claims the goal of the fleeting project is to "reduce the impact on seagrass." The agency told the *Observer* that it received several calls from concerned citizens, but it wasn't able to provide any record of those calls.

On the other hand, longtime residents of Port Aransas say they only started seeing barges about a year or two before the company proposed the facility. Their suspicion is that Skipper, Gulley and Pietsch used their connections to fast-track the project and avoid public scrutiny. Dyer, for one, is convinced that there was backroom dealing that helped Gulley and Skipper seal the deal on the lease, though he has no concrete evidence to prove it.

Gulley is certainly well-connected. He served on the Corpus Christi economic development board and has been a regular contributor to local and state elected officials. Gulley gave \$1,000 to Land Commissioner George P. Bush in 2014. Since 2010, he's given Representative Todd Hunter about \$8,000. Hunter attended the crucial June 2014 meeting and voiced his support for the project, though his involvement otherwise is unknown. (Hunter did not respond to multiple requests for comment.)

Gulley had worked with the GLO in 2010 and 2012 to secure leases in Corpus and was likely familiar with staff at the agency. He was also a fishing buddy and friend of Rene Garcia, a GLO field biologist. Garcia at one point signed off on a noncompliance notice sent to the company, but the GLO told the *Observer* that it was incidental and that he will be precluded from work involving Gulley's leases.

In an emailed statement sent through a public relations firm, Todd Pietsch told the *Observer* that Skipper "in no way lobbied anyone to fast-track the project" and that the crime his father-in-law committed nine years ago "is completely unrelated and irrelevant to the Lydia Ann Channel project."

Pietsch said his group evaluated 10 potential sites for the docking facility before settling on the Lydia Ann Channel site because it satisfied several criteria for barge and environmental safety. If the facility were shut down, "the livelihoods of 29 employees is [sic] at risk" he said, and "the practice of grounding barges against the shorelines of Lydia Ann Channel would begin again immediately."

IN SEPTEMBER 2016, IN RESPONSE TO THE LAWSUIT, THE Army Corps revoked the facility's permit for "not accurately" describing the scope of the operation and misleading the agency about "the underlying need for the project from a public interest review perspective." Soon after, the GLO told the company its lease was in default and could be terminated immediately.

However, the fleeting facility is still operating. The company has also secured another lease for land on the other side of the channel from the Aransas



Crossing Lines

Andrew Hawkins, an attorney for the Texas General Land Office, denied that the facility is within Redfish Bay State Scientific Area, saying "the [eastern] boundary [of the state scientific area] runs through the middle of the channel." It does not. MAP DATA VIA GOOGLE

County Navigation District, but claims that it doesn't plan to construct another fleeting facility there.

At a November hearing, Judge Janis Graham Jack, the federal judge presiding over the case, seemed annoyed with the Corps for not stopping the company from operating, calling the agency's defense "a circular argument of the most bizarre."

"So, who is in charge of them doing this?" she asked the attorney for the Corps. "I mean, [the company's] whole argument is that, 'It's already here, so don't mess with it.' ... What is the point? I'm still not understanding the point of the permitting process."

The Corps has told the company that it can still reapply for a fresh permit, and the company is working with the Corps in an attempt to re-permit the

"This is not a collection of tree-hugging environmentalists like some people want to allege. It's people who want to see what we experienced as kids preserved."

facility, this time posting a public notice and conducting a more thorough environmental review. Its attorney made the case at the hearing that if the facility were removed, barges would once again begin grounding into the shoreline.

At best, Dyer and Smith say, Skipper and the rest of his crew hoodwinked state and federal agencies, manipulating the process to suit their needs. At worst, the agencies willingly helped the company sidestep environmental and administrative process laws. The truth, however, might lie somewhere in between.

"These guys from the moorings company are very defiant," said Dyer. "They took the shortcut, they got the cheap lease, they thought they were clever. They didn't count on local citizens and homeowners and everybody here getting organized." ■



ANDREA GRIMES

THE GRIMES SCENE

Who's the Boss?

But let me just ask the good folks in Matt Krause's district one question: Of all your concerns, where do you rank *My neighbors' ability to extricate themselves from an unsustainable, unwanted or otherwise untenable marriage?*

EVERY OTHER YEAR, TEXAS LAWMAKERS HOOFF IT DOWN TO THE STATE Capitol to spend 140 days either getting right what they got wrong the last time or, more likely, making things a hell of a lot worse. ¶ There's already a lot of rank tomfoolery this session as our leaders gear up to whine about solutions in search of problems and ignore problems in dire need of solutions. Hey, maybe those dead and dying foster kids will bootstrap their own selves out of state care this year! In the meantime, Fort Worth Republican state Representative Matt Krause is not sure you grown adult people of Texas really know what you're doing with this whole divorce thing. ¶ Krause, whose past achievements in small gub'minting include a failed attempt to require the state to appoint an attorney to represent

the fetuses of clinically brain-dead people, wants to use his 140 days to eliminate no-fault divorce in Texas. In December, he filed House Bill 93, which would require all divorce filings to be fault-based, as well as House Bill 65, which would lengthen the waiting period for divorces from 60 to 180 days. There are a lot of reasons this legislation is an astoundingly stupid proposition. That it would empower abusers to effectively hold their spouses hostage and drive up the cost of divorce are two of many likely negative consequences.

But let me just ask the good folks in Matt Krause's district one question: Of all your concerns, where do you rank *My neighbors' ability to extricate themselves from an unsustainable, unwanted or otherwise untenable marriage?* Does the end of other people's marriages chap your asses more than, say, your student loan payments? Or local regulations on fracking? Or the quality of your children's education? Would you really rather Matt Krause use your money to stomp and flail about strangers' relationships than see him bringing home dough for roads, schools, maybe a business incentive or two?

My guess is, you don't give the first shit about making it harder for Texans to get divorces. My guess is, the idea hasn't even crossed your mind. My guess is, you're more worried about your health care, your job or your mortgage, because you're not a good-for-nothing gossip transported here from the year 1950 with nada better to do than snoop around in other people's private lives. My guess is, the prospect of forcing sad, split-up people (and their kids) to spend more time in front of a judge (and more time cutting checks to lawyers) actually sort of pisses you off. And my guess is, that goes for the members of Krause's own Republican Party as much as it does their liberal neighbors.

That big pink building in Austin is as much yours as it is Matt Krause's, or anyone else's, so this is the part where you do something about it: You extend your involvement in the political process beyond yelling on Facebook, beyond signing an online petition, beyond voting. You've got a phone? Use it to call your representatives and tell them what to stop wasting your money on. You've got a computer? A literal pen and paper? Write letters — often! You don't have to shrug away representation you don't agree with; in fact, you have every right to demand representation that *represents you*.

Blessedly, this process works with just about any of our elected officials' awful ideas. The onus is on us to not only vote, but to keep up with our leaders' goals and positions — and *especially* not to presume that because they're a member of your preferred party that they're doing what's in our best interest, or what's in anything close to our interest, period.

People, particularly conservatives, say they want government to be run like a business, but we so often get the power structure backwards. Democracy isn't a vote-and-done deal. Voting is just the start — it's the hiring process, and you're the boss. Think of the first day of the Legislative session as the first day of work for your new employees. You don't hire a bunch of new graduates and tell them you'll check back in a year to see if they got your product designed, manufactured, produced and shipped out; you check in every day and give them direction and advice.

Matt Krause, and so many of his fellow lawmakers who've been hired to make Texas government less intrusive, could use a little bossing around. Don't be afraid to do it. ■

Andrea Grimes is a freelance writer and reluctant Tex-pat living in California.



TED LYON

The trial team to turn to

For nearly four decades, Ted Lyon and his legal team have represented clients injured through the negligence of others. The firm has tried cases throughout Texas and across the nation, helping people rebuild their lives after complex litigation cases, including motor vehicle, truck and bus accidents, personal injury and wrongful death accidents, products liability and business dispute cases.

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Doorways Between Worlds

What will the nation's first fully bilingual university look like?

by **Daniel Blue Tyx**

THE QUESTION OF THE DAY IS: ARE you smart?" professor José Saldívar announced at the start of class. "Don't just give me a yes-or-no answer. Tell me why." Seated in a sparkling new classroom at the University of

Texas Rio Grande Valley's Edinburg campus, with rolling chairs in the school colors — blue, green and burnt orange — students inched closer together to debate the value of innate ability versus hard work. Their conversations might have occurred in any first-year seminar, but for one key difference: They took place in both English and Spanish, often at the same time.

The bilingual course I visited is a pilot for an initiative known around campus as B3 — "bilingual, bicultural, biliterate" — that aims to transform the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) into the United States' first comprehensively bilingual public university. The project's goals, proponents say, are far-reaching: to not only produce the bilingual professionals in high demand along the Texas-Mexico border, but also to begin to redress a historical legacy of what queer Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, a Valley native, calls "linguistic terrorism" against border Spanish speakers denied the legitimacy of their native tongue. As the initiative moves from rhetoric to reality, though, UTRGV finds itself grappling with questions of identity: What does it mean to be a bilingual and bicultural university?

"It's about being much more aware of the language that is being spoken, and making sure that the space is safe for my students," Saldívar told me after class in his office, which is decorated with an oversized pennant from Stanford, his alma mater. Saldívar, who in the fall of 2016 taught the first of what is expected to be dozens of bilingual or Spanish courses, has plenty of common ground with his students. Now in his late 30s, he grew up in the rural South Texas community of Edcouch-Elsa; his parents were punished

in school for speaking Spanish and encouraged him to speak only English at home. Language could play a role in helping students feel a sense of comfort and belonging at the university, Saldívar said, but he wanted to impress on me that *what* the students were talking about was as noteworthy as *how* they chose to say it. "I think the American ethos is you pull yourself up by your bootstraps in order to be successful," he said. "And that's great. But I want my students to recognize the challenges and the disparities. And when faced with those challenges, ask: 'What do we do?' Because I want them to be able to handle that."

For the class I visited at UTRGV's Edinburg campus, students had read an article called "I Always Knew I Was Gifted: Latino Males and the Mestiz@ Theory of Intelligences." It led with an epigraph from Anzaldúa: "Theorists-of-color are in the process of trying to formulate 'marginal' theories that are partially outside and partially inside the Western frame of reference (if that's possible), theories that overlap many 'worlds.'"

The critical theory made for challenging reading for first-year students in what has often been taught as a remedial course. Before class, I'd heard several students grumbling bilingually about the article's length. Still, as I listened in on their conversations, I observed that for several students in particular, the topic seemed to have struck a chord. "They would only pay attention to the smart ones, to the APs," Julissa Lopez said of her high school teachers. "With the people who spoke Spanish, they were simple. They talk to you like you're stupid. Like a baby."

"¿En-ti-en-des lo que es-toy di-ci-en-do?" Sara Nuño interjected, mimicking a teacher's condescending tone. Moving back and forth between Spanish and English, she explained that in high school, she and her mother would line up at 5 a.m. to walk across the international bridge from their home in Reynosa so she wouldn't be late for class in Pharr. "*Yo, todas las mañanas*, I would cross the border, since sixth, seventh grade, till senior year. *Todas las mañanas*, 5 a.m. *El sacrificio que haces por venir aquí.*"

After class, Saldívar said that Sara was a shy student at first, but that the bilingual aspect of the class helped her find her voice. "I remember the first time she spoke, she was really hesitant, and she tried speaking in English," he said. "Then she said, '*No, no, bueno, en español.*'" and she just took off. Now, I can always count on Sara to talk in class."

Another student, Ethan Treviño, said a scheduling glitch had randomly placed him in the bilingual pilot section, even though he doesn't speak Spanish.



“It may be top down, but this is the percolating of sentiment in the community to say, ‘We need to right the wrongs. We need to be about having permission, unfettered, to raise our children differently.’”

While initially apprehensive, he’d come to see the placement as an opportunity. “Going through high school, there were a lot of people in my classes who mainly spoke Spanish,” he said. “I never got a chance to hang out with them because of the language barrier. This class is allowing me to learn what I couldn’t in high school. It wasn’t the type of Spanish that we talk here; they wanted us to learn ‘proper,’ like what they’re speaking in Spain. It didn’t allow me to lose that barrier here where I live.”

THE BILINGUAL INITIATIVE WAS BORN OUT OF A MESSY DIVORCE and a shotgun marriage. In 2011, Texas Southmost College, a community college, and the University of Texas at Brownsville (UTB) severed ties in a dispute over unpaid rent, precipitating a fiscal crisis. At the behest of the University of Texas System Board of Regents, then-UTB President Juliet Garcia convened a planning committee. The blueprint they created, known as UTB 2.0, included the bilingual program’s principles. “Universities are always trying to identify what they’re going to be uniquely good at,” Garcia told me. “We felt that we should embrace our geography, embrace our unique positioning with the issues of language and culture, and produce historians, teachers, physicians and engineers who could do this work in at least two languages.”

Then-UT System Chancellor Francisco Cigarroa, a Laredo native, was enthusiastic but skeptical of the economics. “I don’t care how optimistic we are — at the end of the day, a vision isn’t going to become reality without a realistic business plan,” he said. Cigarroa proposed merging UTB with the University

of Texas-Pan American (UTPA), 70 miles west in Edinburg. The creation of a new university allowed both campuses to draw on the Permanent University Fund, a \$17.5-billion fund historically built on oil and gas. Acting quickly, the regents adopted a set of guiding principles that drew heavily on UTB 2.0. The bilingual program was principle number five.

“I saw that, and I just about fell out of my seat,” said Francisco Guajardo, the executive director of the newly formed B3 Institute at UTRGV. “I said, ‘What, are you serious?’ You know the makeup of regents — they’re all appointed by very conservative governors. They were probably thinking *folklorico* and *mariachis*.” His booming laugh filled the dining room of the historic Echo Hotel, a few miles south of UTRGV’s Edinburg campus, where we discussed the origins of B3 over breakfast tacos.

Guajardo’s roots in the Valley run deep, and his interest in bilingual and bicultural education is as personal as it is academic. He was born in Reynosa, where — according to family lore — his grandfather, a *bulega* (bootlegger), fled after killing a rival who snitched on him to the Texas Rangers. In December 1968, when Guajardo was 4 years old, his family moved to Edcouch-Elsa. A month earlier, 140 Edcouch-Elsa High School students had walked out to protest discrimination against Mexican Americans. Three years later, as a first-grader, Guajardo became part of a pilot bilingual education class, the first of its kind in the Valley. “I’m from around here,” he said. “I’ve experienced a lot of these kinds of things around language and culture, and around the valuing or the devaluing of both.”

The Edinburg campus of UTRGV, where 90 percent of the student body is Hispanic.
PHOTO BY BRAD DOHERTY

“We have this national climate that is very ‘English-only,’ anti-Spanish, anti-immigrant. I think this initiative has a lot of potential to undo the racism and oppression that earlier generations had to experience, and that a lot of us are still experiencing.”

I met Guajardo after he gave a community talk at the Museum of South Texas History called “From Taming a Wild Tongue to Building a Bilingual University.” The title borrowed from a chapter in Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* in which she remembers that as a student at Pan American University — now UTRGV’s Edinburg campus — she was required to take speech classes to “correct” her accent in English. She argues that “ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity — I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself.”

After the talk, a UTRGV professor stood up to inquire if B3 was a top-down initiative. “It is,” Guajardo allowed. Before he could elaborate, a Mexican-American man in his 60s came to his defense. “It may be top down,” the man said, “but this is the percolating of sentiment in the community to say, ‘We need to right the wrongs. We need to be about having permission, unfettered, to raise our children differently.’”

In 2015, Guajardo traveled with four faculty members to the University of Ottawa, the largest bilingual university in North America. “It’s a 150-year-old institution that is sitting on a bilingual zone as a matter of public policy,” Guajardo said. “We see that. We think to ourselves: ‘This is so inspiring. Could we do it in a place that tamed a wild tongue?’” In the spring, the university will expand the bilingual pilot from one to five sections. A few programs, including an MFA in creative writing and an MBA, are already offered in Spanish or bilingually. Soon, Guajardo hopes, UTRGV will be able to offer the entire core curriculum bilingually, with more complete degree plans to follow.

But becoming the nation’s first bilingual university will mean more than just offering classes in both languages. It will also require a dramatic shift in the way that the university, and the Valley as a whole, thinks about matters of history and identity, in a place where a century of systemic language and ethnic discrimination has too often gone unacknowledged, and where even today bilingual education is viewed primarily through a remedial lens.

In addition to directing the B3 Institute, Guajardo is at work on a book of oral histories documenting the history of bilingual education in the Valley. “Invariably, each of the elders will tell the story of how they were punished, spanked, chastised, for speaking Spanish in school,” he said. “It is no accident that this region is much more conservative in terms of bilingual education, because of a historical trauma that people experienced.

“This,” Guajardo said, “is a social change experiment.”

UTRGV’S NEWLY DRAFTED VISION STATEMENT BEGINS, “To be the nation’s premier Hispanic-serving institution and a highly engaged bilingual university.” The admissions page on the university’s website — soon to be fully bilingual — prominently features the program as a selling point. “It is a priority,” Provost Havidán Rodríguez told me when we met on the Brownsville campus, which, unlike Edinburg’s, is right on the border. (On my way to campus, I passed under a sign warning me not to take firearms into Mexico, before exiting onto University Boulevard.)

“This is not a marketing scheme. We’re putting in place the organizational structure, the staff, the funding and the faculty that we need to make this happen. I think that speaks louder than words, right?”

Overt opposition of the kind you might expect elsewhere — “English-only” rhetoric and the like — has been largely nonexistent in the Valley. All of the students I met, from freshmen to graduate students, from monolingual English speakers to recent immigrants from Mexico, expressed an interest in taking



the bilingual classes. “Honestly, I’m not really concerned,” Rodríguez responded when I inquired about student interest. “Students know this is important.”

The most insistent criticism has come from students and faculty who think the university is not going far enough. As the university considers starting a football team and scrambles to deal with the fallout from a December decision by its accreditor to put the university on probation — UTRGV says the violations are related to the contentious separation from Texas Southmost College — skeptics worry that the university may lack sufficient commitment to follow through on its ambitious agenda.

Stephanie Alvarez, the founding director of the Center for Mexican American Studies at UTRGV, has been one of the most vocal critics. We spoke on a lime-green couch at the center, which Alvarez had a hand in designing, asking that the planned cubicles be eschewed in favor of an open lounge. Behind us, a group of students sat talking while they cut out materials for a Day of the Dead altar project the center was facilitating at area elementary schools.

For Alvarez, who in 2015 became the first faculty member in the history of the University of Texas System to receive a prestigious U.S. Professor of the Year Award from the Carnegie Foundation, the focus on bilingualism obscures a lack of commitment to programs such as Mexican-American studies that turn a critical eye on the history and culture of the borderlands. “It’s easy to sell bilingual in some ways,” Alvarez said. “Many, many people speak Spanish in the Valley. It’s not threatening. Whereas [with] Mexican-American studies, you have to have difficult conversations. You’re possibly producing new knowledge that disrupts the dominant narrative, which for some people makes them very uncomfortable.”

Professor José Saldívar at the UTRGV campus in Edinburg.
PHOTO BY BRAD DOHERTY



TOP: Francisco Guajardo speaks with two UTRGV alumni at a meeting in Edinburg about the bilingual program.

BOTTOM: Stephanie Alvarez outside her office on the Edinburg campus.

PHOTOS BY BRAD DOHERTY



Growing up Cuban American in Miami during the Mariel boatlift, a time of heightened anti-Cuban sentiment, “I really had no appreciation for my culture,” Alvarez said. “I wanted to distance myself as much as possible.” In high school, she didn’t read books. “Ever. The worst thing you could ever tell me was that I would have to read.” She went to college

to play basketball and ended up a Spanish major by default, since it required the fewest courses to graduate. Then, during her senior year, she was required to take a Latin-American literature course. The first entry in the anthology was a magical realist story by Puerto Rican writer Rosario Ferré. For Alvarez, it was a moment of academic awakening. “I realized that this was the first time I’d ever read anything that I connected to,” she said.

When Alvarez came to teach at UTPA in 2006, the only ethnic studies degree plan was called Mexican-American Heritage, and it had graduated just three students in 30 years. Eighteen credit hours were in Spanish grammar, “indicating much of what Anzaldúa says about ‘linguistic terrorism,’ but on the Spanish side, which was to ‘correct’ the students’ Spanish,” Alvarez said. She joined an informal group of Latina junior faculty members that began developing a revised curriculum that would become the basis for Mexican-American studies at UTRGV.

Alvarez is particularly outraged that no other degree plan at the university requires a Mexican-American studies course. “If you get a degree in English, you never have to take a class in Mexican-American literature,” Alvarez said. “It is an option. But it cannot be an option if we are going to be a bicultural university. If you are going to be an English teacher, 90-something percent of your students are going to be Mexican American. Those teachers have no access to the literature that represents their students.”

Hiring is another issue. Alvarez pointed out that the Mexican-American studies department has only two faculty members; previous efforts at joint hires with other departments have gone nowhere. “People always think there’s an urgency for, I don’t know, ‘I desperately need a medievalist.’ But at this moment,

at this university, we desperately need someone who can do bilingual and bicultural. This is what will make UTRGV stand out from any other university.”

Guajardo is acutely sensitive to the critiques voiced by Alvarez and others. “Without the infusion of culturally appropriate, culturally relevant approaches, I think that we don’t touch the spirit of

the region,” he said. At one point, he was interrupted by a phone call; someone from the MBA program was looking for a course taught in Spanish to fulfill a breadth requirement. He pitched a Mexican-American studies class. “Stephanie would be great for the MBA students,” he told the person on the other line. “She would turn [the business students] upside down with all kinds of Chicano studies stuff that they would do well to know.”

As for hiring and resources, Guajardo told me, “If I have an issue, and this is a personal critique, it’s that I hoped the investment would have been so much greater. It’s not because people don’t want it. In fairness to my immediate supervisors, they’re trying, they’re working it. But you know, it’s never enough. A lot of this is the faith that we have in certain people.”

ON NOVEMBER 2, THE DAY OF THE DEAD, I JOINED A group of 15 UTRGV students, faculty and community members at Gloria Anzaldúa’s gravesite in the Valle de la Paz Cemetery in Hargill, the one-convenience-store-town north of Edinburg where she grew up in a family of migrant farmworkers. Organized by the Center for Mexican American Studies, the annual pilgrimage symbolically “returns” Anzaldúa to the Valley and her alma mater, where her work, in spite of widespread acclaim elsewhere, was largely unrecognized

at the time of her death in 2004. Now in its 10th year, the event and others like it have catalyzed local interest, and Anzaldúa’s writing, which moves fluidly between English and Spanish and poetry and prose, is foundational to the bilingual program.

“If we don’t want to reproduce the ‘linguistic terrorism’ that Anzaldúa experienced at Pan American University, then we need to embrace initiatives like B3,” Lupe Flores, a graduate student in anthropology and Mexican-American studies, told me. Flores first encountered Anzaldúa in one of Stephanie Alvarez’s classes and organized the pilgrimage this year. “Outside the university, we have this national climate that is very ‘English-only,’ anti-Spanish, anti-immigrant — they kind of go hand in hand,” he said. “I think this initiative has a lot of potential to undo the racism and oppression that earlier generations had to experience, and that a lot of us are still experiencing.”

On the tombstone, emblazoned on either side by bilingual passages from Anzaldúa’s work, participants placed *ofrendas* of sugary *pan de muerto* and magenta bougainvillea leaves. One student had brought a bundle of *cenizo* (sage), which she lit and passed around with a conch shell underneath to catch the ashes. For 15 minutes or so, everyone stood in silence, except for the sounds of birdsong, dogs barking and a rooster crowing in the distance.

Then, one by one, those gathered began to offer *testimonios* describing how Anzaldúa’s work embracing the linguistic and cultural richness of the borderlands had shaped their own lives. Flores spoke about his grandmother, a Pentecostal Christian whose family has lived on the same riverfront *rancho* for almost two centuries. Estranged first by a language barrier and later because of his homosexuality, Flores said that reading Anzaldúa had helped him reconnect with his grandmother and the culture of the border more broadly. “Seeing my grandmother think through her positions, I could see that even though she’s this very religious, God-fearing woman, she has her own borderlands, her own ways of articulating and accepting things,” he said.

Toward the end of the ceremony, members of an undergraduate poetry collective offered a choral reading of an excerpt from Anzaldúa’s work. At the text’s instruction, they invited those gathered to turn their gaze to the east, south, west and north, then to the underworld, and lastly to the sky, as they read:

*We are ready for change.
Let us link hands and hearts
together find a path through the dark woods
step through the doorways between worlds
leaving huellas for others to follow,
build bridges, cross them with grace,
and claim these puentes our
“home”
si se puede, que asi sea, so be it,
estamos listas, vámonos.*

Now let us shift.

*contigo,
gloria* 🇲🇽

Daniel Blue Tyx is a freelance writer based in McAllen.

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UTRGV graduate student Lupe Flores reads a passage by Gloria Anzaldúa at the author’s gravesite in Hargill as part of an annual pilgrimage. PHOTO BY MARK MORENO



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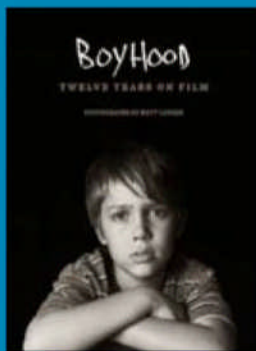
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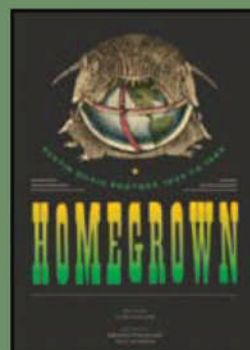
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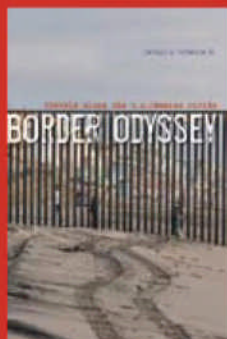


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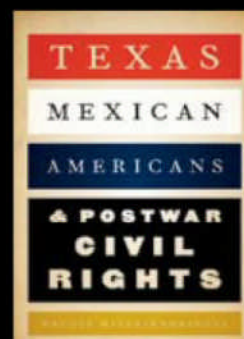


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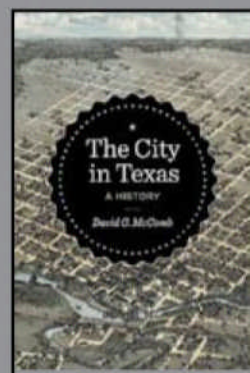
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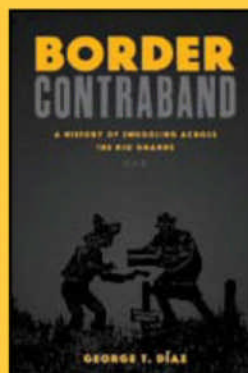
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by **José Skinner**

O

N JANUARY 31, 1938, SOME 10,000 PECAN PLANT WORKERS walked off their jobs in San Antonio. The strikers — primarily Mexican-American women — were fed up with toiling in the city's stuffy, tuberculosis-inducing pecan-shelling plants, shredding their fingers for 6 cents a pound. Activist Emma Tenayuca, nicknamed "La Pasionaria" for her fiery personality, spearheaded the strike. In an era when the voices of Mexican Americans and women were routinely silenced, Tenayuca was an unlikely leader. She was only 21 at the time, but was already well-versed in civil resistance; her first arrest came at 16, when she played hooky from high school to



BLUE TEXAS: THE MAKING OF A MULTIRACIAL DEMOCRATIC COALITION IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

by Max Krochmal

544 PAGES; UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA PRESS

join the picket line of a cigar workers' strike. Over the two-month pecan shellers' uprising, police beat and tear-gassed the strikers, who responded by blowing out the tires of police cars with tacks and vandalizing shipments. In the end, "Pecan King" Julius Seligmann gave in to most of their demands. It was the dawn of the Mexican-American social justice movement, and it changed Texas politics forever.

The pecan shellers' strike is just one of many lesser-known stories Max Krochmal brings to life in his new history of civil rights movements in Texas. In *Blue Texas*, the Texas Christian University history professor recounts how four different forces — the Mexican-American civil rights movement, the African-American civil rights movement, white organized labor and white liberal political activism — came together. This coalition overthrew Jim Crow and Juan Crow, solidified the political careers

Texas State Federation of Labor finally realized that African-American workers might well form a crucial part of its future, the union resoundingly elected Freeman Everett, a veteran of the black stevedore's union, as vice president. The only problem? The federation held its annual meeting in a segregated hotel. Everett and 25 black union leaders, blocked at the door, sneaked in via freight elevator.

Missteps notwithstanding, the four groups knew they needed one another. The 1950s, Krochmal writes, were a time of "patient base-building and interethnic experimentation," a victory largely forgotten by Texans today. By 1959, a goal that had seemed outlandish — forging a diverse alliance to strengthen the Texas Democratic Party — was within reach, and organized labor was the key.

Drawing on reports by *Texas Observer* founding editor Ronnie Dugger and the papers of longtime labor leader George Lambert, Krochmal describes the strike by the Mexican-American women of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union against the Tex-Son garment factory in San Antonio. It was met with the same violent repression as the pecan strike 20 years earlier, dragged on for three years and was ultimately defeated, but it set the stage for the Chicano movement of the '60s and '70s.

Coalition-building was strengthened even during losses. The special election of 1961 to fill Lyndon B. Johnson's Senate seat had been a disaster for liberals: Henry B. González and Maury Maverick Jr. split the liberal vote, mostly along racial lines, and this

If progressives today are to triumph over Trumpism, they are going to have to build truly united and lasting grassroots organizations and not merely encourage disparate groups to show up at the voting booth.

of progressive legends Henry B. González and Ralph Yarborough, and energized grassroots activism throughout the state.

The process was not without bumps. A decade after the San Antonio uprising, when the lily white

made the election a contest between two archconservatives, Dixiecrat William Blakley and Republican John Tower. Tower won, becoming the first Republican senator in Texas history and the first in the South since Reconstruction. So a month after that election, a diverse group of labor, Chicano and black activists met in Austin as the Democratic Coalition to see what they could do to avoid another such disaster. Krochmal finds the “most prescient reporting on the alliance” to be that of Willie Morris in the *Observer*, who described it as “a complex of groupings that includes the Latinos and labor, the Negroes and independent liberals, and the Democrat brasscollars at the forks and beside the creeks.”

The first victory for a coalition-backed candidate came in 1962 with the election of González as Texas’ first Mexican-American congressman. About 95 percent of the registered voters on San Antonio’s heavily Chicano West Side turned out to vote, 93 percent of them casting ballots for González. On the same ticket, the Republicans fielded a conservative Mexican American for state representative against a white coalition candidate, but the Hispanic Republican got only 22 percent of the West Side vote, “confirming,” as Krochmal writes, “that politics, ideology and class could trump ethnic allegiances alone.”

The title *Blue Texas* is a little misleading in that the blue/red scheme is a relatively recent television media convenience to demarcate Democratic territory from Republican, while the book ends in 1966, when Republicans barely had a toehold in Texas. Back then, “reds” were what the Dixiecrats called liberals within their own party, and the coalition’s most fanatical enemies were fellow Democrats, such as Governor John Connally. (To give an idea of how conservative a Democrat could be back then, in the 1950s Governor Allan Shivers urged the Legislature to pass a bill making membership in the Communist Party a death penalty offense.) So Texas was solidly “blue,” but not because, as today’s readers might imagine, it had prevailed over conservatism.

Blue Texas underscores some lessons for progressives in the age of Trump, one of which is that demography is not necessarily destiny. In 1938, the League of United Latin American Citizens — a relatively conservative, middle-class civil rights organization, and Texas’ largest — did not support the pecan shellers’ strike, and many even denounced it. Ethnic groups are not monolithic. In Texas, 19 percent of the Latino vote went for Trump, according to the polling firm Latino Decisions. But Krochmal also shows that intraracial conflict leads to interracial solidarity. Another takeaway is that the more militant the tactics, the more effective the movement: The pecan workers won.

In Krochmal’s view, if progressives today are to triumph over Trumpism, they are going to have to build truly united and lasting grassroots organizations

and not merely encourage disparate groups to show up at the voting booth. They need to be more confrontational and not shy away from demands for immediate social justice. White liberals need to get out on the front lines with immigrant-defense groups and Black Lives Matter, not shrink from them the way the Hillary Clinton campaign did. Progressives need to revive precinct caucuses and get block workers walking the neighborhoods. And they would do well to remember an old labor slogan: An injury to one is an injury to all. ■

José Skinner’s most recent book is The Tombstone Race. He volunteers at the Workers Defense Project.

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ESSAY

Beyond Tex-Mex

For centuries, Texas' first food has been invisible. Now chefs and activists are putting it back in the spotlight.

by **Adán M. Medrano**

GROWING UP, I REMEMBER MY AMÁ making corn tortillas by hand. Mom would flip a ball of corn masa back and forth between her hands, fashioning it into a perfectly round thin disk. Then she'd roll it off her palm onto a hot *comal*, a cast-iron griddle. It sizzled.

I remember *apá* seated at the table, taking a big bite from a green, plump serrano chile that lay next to jicama, carrots and radishes. He was enjoying fish soups that had chunks of tomato, and behind him, on the stove, steam rose from a skillet of *carne guisada*, my favorite beef stew.

These are memories of Texas Mexican food. It is a style of cooking, a collection of recipes, a cuisine of and by the Mexican-American community of Texas, whose ancestors are the Native Americans who first lived here more than 12,000 years ago. Though the traditions of the Tejas, Karankawa, Coahuiltecan and other indigenous communities are largely forgotten, their style of cooking endures, served every day in homes and small cafes across Texas. But in the public culinary landscape it is invisible.

When I attended the Culinary Institute of America in San Antonio, I enjoyed studying and cooking food from France, the Mediterranean, Argentina, Peru, Brazil and Mexico, but I found it strange that we did not study the food that I enjoyed at home. I wanted

to delve into the salsas, tortillas, shrimp cakes, pasta/*fideo* and seafood stews that my mother learned from her mother and grandmother.

While learning about dishes from Oaxaca and Yucatán, Mexico, I asked myself how the food of my family and ancestors could be completely invisible. My mostly Mexican-American classmates and I questioned why the cooking style we grew up with was absent from the mainstream culinary scene.

This invisibility is due partly to the many food writers who ignore us in their reporting. Likely because they are almost exclusively from outside the Mexican-American community, they are uninformed about the history and the nuances of the Mexican food indigenous to Texas. Meanwhile, Tex-Mex — a much younger cuisine that was popularized by Anglos — is dominant. Tex-Mex is a distinct tradition in its own right, beloved by millions. But when we forget Texas' first food, we also forget our history.

TEXAS MEXICAN CUISINE CANNOT BE DESCRIBED AS “south-of-the-border.” One of a variety of regional Mexican styles of cooking, such as Oaxaca Mexican and Puebla Mexican, it developed north of the Rio Grande long before the river became a border. Texas Mexican didn't cross the border, the border crossed it — and in doing so helped erase its history. Evidence of ancient cooking techniques can be found all across Texas, including San Antonio, where near the Olmos Dam archaeologists have uncovered a 4,000-year-old earth oven. The collective evidence indicates that humans have continuously inhabited what is today San Antonio for at least 10,000 years and probably 15,000 years.

Because these original Texans were hunters and gatherers, Texas Mexican cooking is intrinsically local and seasonal. Chiles are essential, selected more for their flavor, color and aroma than for heat. Roots and vegetables are integral, as are pinto beans, though unlike in Tex-Mex, they are pan-roasted and stewed with very little grease. Deer, quail, ducks and turkeys abound, as does seafood.

When Anglo settlers arrived in Texas, they overlooked this food even as they enjoyed and profited from it. In the 1880s, indigenous businesswomen, who were expert cooks, sold food at open-air stands in downtown San Antonio. It was *casero*, home-cooking: *carne con chile*, beans, enchiladas, tamales, chile verde and tortillas. The food was so delicious that the women and their stands transformed the city's center into a tourist destination.

Newspaper writers labeled these entrepreneurial women “chili queens,” a term which to this day many Mexican Americans find offensive. In his book *Planet Taco*, historian Jeffrey Pilcher explains that “Like the loyal Southern ‘mammy,’ the chili queen served to naturalize racial hierarchies and justify white domination.” It was a stereotype that was good for tourism. They were sirens serving delicious food for a night of enjoyment.

Though these cooks boosted the San Antonio economy, they were not appreciated by the business and political establishment. The health department eventually forced the women to envelop their stands with mesh, as a way of protecting the city

Inside a San Antonio chili stand in the 1930s.

COURTESY UTSA SPECIAL COLLECTIONS/
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from their perceived uncleanness. After years of debate, the women were expelled from the city center in the early 1940s. On the surface, the arguments were about safety and cleanliness, but to the Anglo immigrants of Texas, the idea of Mexican food and of Mexicans was a transgression, though an enticing one. This story shows how the forces of gender inequality and ethnic exclusion play out in the food industry — a reality we still live with today.

CHEFS ARE USED TO BEING INTERVIEWED BY FOOD WRITERS, but most find it hard to explain what their food says about them, their culture and their ethics. Food writers, who tend not to be a very diverse crowd, draw from their limited experiences. Many repeat the mistake made by British cookbook author Diana Southwood Kennedy. Kennedy visited Central and Southern Mexico and settled into a preference for those regional cuisines. Northeastern Mexico and South Texas remain terra incognita to her. In her cookbook, she admits she had no idea *chile con queso* was Mexican until she saw it in Coahuila. Likewise, many food writers wrongly call our food “south-of-the-border” or say that it is Mexican food married to Anglo sensibilities. These statements are widely repeated, though they have no historical basis. Just because you like it doesn’t mean you originated it.

Thankfully, a growing number of Mexican Americans are, at long last, writing with an insider perspective about family recipes and *casero*-style cooking. Among them is Sylvia Casares, the “Enchilada Queen,” a celebrity chef and much-acclaimed Houston restaurateur. Casares did not choose her moniker. A food writer first called her by that name in 2004 and, as Casares says, “the name stuck.” She spun the term to her marketing advantage and wholeheartedly embraces it.

Hailing from Brownsville, Casares is one of many chefs today who claim this land as their native home and are giving it fresh culinary expression. Her focus is on fresh ingredients and vibrant flavors, and the menu at Sylvia’s Enchilada Kitchen features sauces from McAllen and Crystal City, Monterrey and Chihuahua. “No sleepy flavors, please!” she says. “I like to honor and give credit to the classic recipes of my mom, my grandmother, and all mothers, aunts and grandmothers who prepared this food for us.”

There are also other voices that, writing from an outsider perspective, take the time to delve into family stories and techniques. J.C. Reid in Houston, MM Pack in Austin and Kim Pierce in Dallas are among those whose research leads them to make cultural links and to credit chefs who otherwise would not be noticed.

Chicana and Chicano line cooks, long unsung and invisible, are eschewing that line and becoming chef/owners. Their family style cuisine thrives in Texas barrios, but in the mainstream, where the money is, it has often been co-opted by those with more economic, social and political standing.

No one recorded the names of the line cooks who helped Dean Fearing take on the title “Father of Southwestern Cuisine,” given to him by food writers. In a 2003 *D Magazine* interview, Fearing confesses that when he decided to concentrate on Southwest cuisine, he relied on his Mexican-American line cooks.

“We had to learn about all the fresh and dried chilies and how to handle lime juice and mangoes,” Fearing said. “I learned about all this stuff from the line cooks.”

With the mention of only Amador Mora, Fearing’s sous chef, the *D Magazine* writer says no more about this team of line cooks. Their names are lost to history.

“We need more chef/owners,” says San Antonio chef Johnny Hernandez of La Gloria, The Fruteria and El Machito. He is part of the new vanguard of Texas Mexican chefs who rely on memory and family traditions, and who emphasize that hospitality is the context for their food.

The guiding triad is “*familia, cultura y comida*,” says Michael Cortez, a third-generation member of the Cortez family, owners of Mi Tierra in San Antonio, founded in 1941. He finds it unthinkable to ignore the link that any recipe, old or new, has with family cooking traditions. Also unthinkable is to dis-

associate food from culture. “*Todos comemos de la misma tortilla*” (We all eat from the same tortilla) is the slogan heard among the staff of Mi Tierra. Through food we are all bound together.

We renew by remembering. San Antonio chef David Arciniega of Amaya’s Tacos serves flour tortillas that are handmade in front of you. He uses only vegetable fats, and sparingly. When he flavors pinto beans, he never uses bacon or lard, but prefers root vegetables such as onions and carrots — paying tribute to pre-1500 flavors, as well as to 1830, when his great-great-great grandfather was mayor of San Antonio. “We want to reclaim our lost land and culture,” he says, “and that’s why we opened this little restaurant and are cooking for our community.”

Vegan dishes are on his menu, a hearkening back to the native techniques of pounding pine nuts, berries and herbs to make dried pellets, the precursors of today’s energy bars.

All food is memory, and Texas Mexican food has nourished and celebrated the Mexican-American community of Texas for centuries. My dad biting into a serrano chile and my *amá* crafting corn tortillas are memories that are shared widely in families and barrio restaurants throughout Central and South Texas. When this cuisine is honestly studied, reported and honored, we will better understand Texas history, foodways and cultural differences. As a cook, I believe that those differences are what ultimately make for new, creative and delicious dishes that can be enjoyed at a table where we are family and all are welcome. ■

Adán Medrano is a chef and food writer based in Houston. The author of Truly Texas Mexican, he is at work on a second book about Texas Mexican food.

Adán Medrano buys chiles at the Houston Airline Farmers Market.
PHOTO BY LYNN LANE



Texas Mexican food didn’t cross the border, the border crossed it — and in doing so helped erase its history.



POSTCARDS

A Fork in the Road

Can the local food movement help Elgin reclaim its farming roots? by **Robyn Ross**

JUST EAST OF THE ROAD THAT MARKS THE boundary between Travis and Bastrop counties, the Austin Community College-Elgin building rises from the Blackland Prairie. Behind it, a 30-acre field set to become the school's sustainable farm stretches toward the blocky two-story houses of a subdivision. Signs at campus entrances remind visitors they're not in the city anymore: *Poisonous snakes and insects inhabit the area. Alert: Bee hives on campus for academic purposes.*

In late November, dozens of leaders in the Central Texas sustainable food movement braved those hazards and packed into a conference room in

solve related problems of rural Texas: the dearth of farmers, the loss of agricultural land and the uneven distribution of nutritious local food.

"We need to get to a place where people know there's opportunity in rural areas," Salerno told the crowd. "Sometimes we don't recognize that our Texas roots are in agriculture — that's where we come from, and it's time to take it back."

Elgin, at least, knows its roots. Founded as a railroad town and known for its brick plants and sausage, the city has been a farming hub since it was settled. Once dominated by cotton, area fields now produce corn, sorghum and wheat. But as housing prices in Austin, a half-hour west, squeeze residents to the suburbs, that soil is being paved over with subdivisions and strip malls. Elgin's population grew by 43 percent from 2000 to 2010, and its current population of roughly 10,000 is expected to double by 2030.

Combine harvesters still shuttle across fields outside of town, but those fields are shrinking. Much of the land around Elgin is leased rather than owned by the farmers who work it. The landowners typically haven't lived in Elgin for a long time and are hard-pressed to decline lucrative offers from developers. Meanwhile, low commodity prices coupled with weather problems make it difficult to earn a living through agriculture alone. The children of today's middle-aged farmers are not, for the most part, following in their parents' footsteps.

Elgin's leaders have been thinking seriously about how the city can preserve its agricultural identity in the face of such drastic change. In 2010, residents voted to join the Austin Community College (ACC) taxing district, a deal that netted the city the shiny, LEED-certified campus. In addition to general education classes, ACC-Elgin offers specialized courses in veterinary technology and sustainable agriculture.

Beginning in 2011, the city won several grants to study food as an economic development strategy. From these efforts emerged the Elgin Local Food Network, a few dozen residents who met for several years to find opportunities in Elgin's food economy. The Texas Center for Local Food is the latest development. The project's executive director, Sue Beckwith, wrote several of the grants and has been immersed in Elgin agriculture for the past 10 years. The center will help connect established farmers



Produce from the Bernhardt farm.
PHOTO BY JEN REEL

the building for a celebration of Elgin's burgeoning local food scene. The occasion was a visit from native Texan Lillian Salerno, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) deputy undersecretary for rural development. She'd come from Washington, D.C., to announce that the city was one of 13 communities nationwide to receive funding from a USDA program that bolsters rural economies. The idea is to connect farmers with outlets for their harvest, including nearby restaurants and grocery stores. The recipient of the seed funding was the Texas Center for Local Food, an Elgin nonprofit formed in 2015 to



with markets for their products, help new farmers find land and resources, and offer expertise to rural economic development staff across Texas.

“When you look at a map of Texas, you see big cities, and around those are towns that have agricultural heritage that are becoming peri-urban or suburban bedroom communities and losing their community identity,” Beckwith said. “Where we are now with Elgin is a tipping point of being a regional center for local food and agricultural enterprise.”

ON A WARM WINTER SUNDAY, ALEX BERNHARDT IS HAWKING his wares at the farmers market in Austin’s Mueller development. Napa cabbage and red peppers flank jars of daikon kimchi and cucumber-zucchini relish made with ingredients grown on his farm outside Elgin.

After 20 years in the food and beverage industry, Bernhardt got into farming when he and his wife moved to the family land to look after his aging father. Now his 6 acres produce table grapes, strawberries, shallots, endive, five types of kale, Star of David okra and a bounty of other fruits and vegetables. He also partners with the Auguste Escoffier School of Culinary Arts in Austin on a program that sends students to visit and work on area farms.

“Hopefully they gain an appreciation of all the hard work that goes into producing food locally and organically,” he said. “When they go on to become chefs, hopefully they understand the ups and downs of sourcing from local farms.”

Small farms like Bernhardt’s are scattered throughout Travis, Bastrop, Lee and Williamson counties in Central Texas. Many have foregone organic certification because of the expense, but avoid chemical fertilizers and pesticides. They sell at farmers markets or through community-supported agriculture subscriptions. This is the kind of farm the Texas Center for Local Food is most likely to help.

It’s a different model from the farming that dominates Elgin today: large-scale, conventional production of one or two crops at a time, often for animal feed. Farmers in both categories say the two circles don’t overlap much. But they face the common foes of harsh weather, irrigation challenges and the rising cost of land. “The value of the land has gotten too expensive for a farmer to even think about buying it and paying for it growing crops,” said Don Lundgren, 55, who grows conventional corn on mostly leased land. “When land goes out of production or changes hands, it’s not going to another farmer but to a subdivision.”

Having witnessed these struggles, the younger generation is not rushing into farming. Though Elgin High School annually enrolls more than 500 students in its roughly 15 agriculture courses, agriculture teacher and Future Farmers of America adviser Becky Maass knows few students who plan to return to the family farm after graduation. They are more likely to go into veterinary medicine, agricultural marketing or teaching.

“The grass is greener on the other side of the fence,”

Elgin farmer Alex Bernhardt uses large-scale hoop houses to minimize the effects of harsh weather, allowing him to harvest a wide variety of crops in late December.

PHOTO BY JEN REEL

Sarah Jones uses local produce to teach children how to prepare food in an after-school class on local food and agriculture at Elgin Elementary School.

PHOTO BY JEN REEL



Maass said. “They don’t see farming as a money-making opportunity.”

And it’s difficult for adults like Bernhardt to make a midlife switch into farming. The up-front cost of infrastructure and equipment, plus the steep learning curve, can be prohibitive. That’s one reason city leaders asked ACC to start the sustainable agriculture program at the Elgin campus. Its curriculum is aimed at complete beginners and emphasizes hands-on experience in courses like soil science and small farm business planning.

Of course, even after they find land and learn the trade, farmers have to make a profit. That’s where Beckwith’s work comes in, one small, specific solution at a time. For instance, when produce doesn’t sell at a farmers market — because bad weather keeps shoppers away, or because every farm has a bumper crop of the same vegetable — the farmer loses money.

“If it’s the right temperature and all the stars align, every farmer suddenly has more cucumbers than they know what to do with,” said Bekki Callaway, who grows vegetables and raises chickens and pigs on 13 acres near Elgin. “You go to the farmers market and, ‘Wow, who do I buy cucumbers from?’ So farmers go home with excess product, and if they can’t do something with that, it’s going to the pigs. And you’ve spent a lot of time, money and effort harvesting it.”

But if extra or misshapen produce can be turned into a product such as a relish or jam, it gets a shelf life and diversifies the farmer’s income stream. Beckwith is coordinating a team that develops recipes, designs labels and calculates the potential profits from such products. One example is a spicy fermented cucumber relish that combined Callaway’s excess onions with unsold cucumbers from Bernhardt’s farm. Beckwith’s next step is visiting Austin stores to discuss the viability of selling such a small-batch product that’s only available sporadically.

The pilot project could help Elgin growers satisfy Austinites’ desire for local food products, Beckwith said, adding that many Texas-made relishes, jams

and sauces sold with “local” labels are made from ingredients grown outside Texas. “If those products are not using Texas-grown ingredients, they are not supporting Texas agriculture,” she said. “They are supporting Texas small-batch manufacturing and entrepreneurship and small business development, and they bring in sales tax, which is huge for rural areas. But they’re not supporting Texas farmers.”

The sale of truly local value-added products would help recapture some of the food dollars that leave Texas. Beckwith compares the \$25 billion in total Texas agricultural receipts with the \$56 billion Texans spend on food each year. “Even if we could eat most of what we grow — which is not the case — we’re still leaking billions,” she said. “If we shifted just 3 to 5 percent of our food dollar to locally grown and made food, that’s money in the pockets of Texans.”

THE DAYS ARE GETTING SHORTER, AND THE BRIGHT LIGHTS IN the Neidig Elementary School cafeteria make the institutional space feel cozy compared with the darkening parking lot outside. A dozen third- and fourth-graders cluster around a table for their weekly after-school lesson about local food and agriculture. The leader, Sarah Jones, a former science teacher who gardens and keeps bees on 10 acres, asks for the group’s attention.

“I’m going to show you some ads, and you tell me what you think the ad is trying to say,” she says. She holds up a page, cut from a magazine, that advertises a canned pasta product. The photo is of a grinning youngster holding an oversize bunch of carrots, and the caption reads, “Behold the mythical veggie-loving kid.” Jones reads the copy aloud, then turns to her audience and asks, “Do you think this ad is written for kids or parents?”

“Parents!” the kids yell.

“I like vegetables,” a bespectacled fourth-grader named Leilani announces. “I don’t,” whispers third-grader Hussein.

Next, Jones passes out plastic chef’s knives and cutting mats, collard green leaves, carrots and chunks

of cabbage. She demonstrates how to chop the carrots and cabbage and wrap them, burrito-style, into a collard leaf.

As Jones explains that the vegetables come from Bernhardt's farm, Leilani absently tears off pieces of her collard leaf and pops them into her mouth. "It's like Brussels sprouts leaves," she says, and a few kids nod; two weeks earlier, the group had learned to chiffonade four kinds of leaves Bernhardt had provided. The arugula was too spicy for the children's palates, but the Brussels sprouts leaves were a favorite.

The after-school program is one of several initiatives to connect the 4,300 students in the Elgin district with local food and farms. Neidig Elementary students also tend a school garden and learn to prepare healthy meals at mobile kitchen carts that can move from classroom to classroom. Older students learn about nutrition as part of chemistry lessons.

Getting more produce into schools is a hedge against the health problems that plague Bastrop County, where nearly one-third of adults are obese and more than 10 percent have diabetes. It's also part of the school district's effort to prevent hunger; 75 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price school meals.

Long term, the programs may also shape the perception of local food and who consumes it. The local and sustainable food movements can appear lofty and inaccessible. In a survey conducted by University of Texas students last year, longtime Elgin residents of color said they understood that local food was better for the environment but weren't sure it was something they'd actually buy.

"There was that sense of, 'Yeah, I see the benefits of local, but I don't think it's for me,'" said Kevin Thomas, an assistant professor of marketing and public relations at UT. Thomas co-taught the class, called Food and Urban Change, with Naya Jones; the two started the organization Food for Black Thought, which examines food justice through black experience. Respondents in the initial eight interviews suggested they liked the idea of local food, but found it to be expensive, less convenient and less likely to include foods they considered culturally appropriate.

Can Elgin shift the connotation of "local food" from consumer luxury to economic engine? One encouraging case study is the Coyote Creek Organic Feed Mill, which opened in Elgin in 2007. The only certified organic feed mill in the state, Coyote Creek has become a key piece of local food infrastructure both for grain farmers who supply it and livestock producers who patronize it. CEO and General Manager Cameron Molberg says the mill sells about \$1.5 million of feed in the Austin area each year, a figure that multiplies into \$3.4 million of eggs and livestock sold by small family farms. Some area chicken farmers have started raising organic chickens specifically because they can get organic feed nearby. Molberg sources organic grain from a few farmers within 100 miles, but he says the opportunity is much larger, if he can find more farmers willing to transition to organic methods. The local food system is "a big spiderweb, and we're missing a lot of the connecting points, but we're getting there," Molberg says.

Since adopting local food and agriculture as its small-town brand, Elgin has also seen the Elgin Agrarian Community break ground. One of the state's

first "agrihoods," the 80-home development will be built around a small farm and include a brewery that uses local products in its beers. The city has attracted businesses including ATX Homemade Jerky and soul food restaurant Eva Mae's with incentives. Companies that create jobs paying at least \$13.50 per hour are eligible for city grants.

Local jobs are a game-changer for Elgin, where the majority of the workforce commutes to Austin on a toll road. In those circumstances, a \$13.50-per-hour job is barely sustainable. But eliminate the commuting costs and time, and things start to look better. Stress decreases. Maybe there's more time to cook. Maybe there's money left over to shop at the farmers market.

"You become a part of the fabric of your own community," Beckwith said. "There's a distinct economic savings for the family, and there's a distinct economic advantage and a community advantage."



But working with small businesses is complicated. Pickle company Hat Creek Provisions moved its production to Elgin last fall amid great local fanfare. But less than two months after Hat Creek opened its new space, its attempt to scale up quickly left it with extra inventory and no extra cash — a common problem for packaged food companies trying to grow. The company's CEO opted to outsource production to an Austin facility to improve efficiency. "I feel a ton of excitement about the potential of food manufacturing in Elgin, but it will take a united front of people that are committed to the economics of the cause," then-president of Hat Creek Martha Pincoffs said. "It's harder to make your own food. It's more expensive and it's more labor intensive."

SUCH SETBACKS DON'T DETER SUE BECKWITH, WHO ATTRIBUTES her optimistic disposition partly to growing up in Florida. "I was raised on Disney and NASA," she said. "So there's this idea that 'We can do anything if we try hard enough' — and I believe that."

Beckwith was a project manager for the city of Austin before coming to Elgin in 2007 to help the team launching the World's Best Eggs chicken farm and the Coyote Creek Organic Feed Mill. After a stint in poultry farming, she became a grants administrator for

Bernhardt's harvest will be sold at local farmers markets. He also donates produce to after-school programs in Elgin elementary schools.
PHOTO BY JEN REEL



Sue Beckwith, executive director of the Texas Center for Local Food, talks with a worker at ATX Homemade Jerky in downtown Elgin.

PHOTO BY JEN REEL

Elgin, helping win money for the value-added product pilot and the Texas Center for Local Food.

Beckwith, whose warmth lies just behind a businesslike exterior, is respected at City Hall, on farms and throughout the Elgin community. But she can't be everywhere, which is why she applied for the USDA grant announced in November. When combined with private donations, the \$75,000 seed funding will let Beckwith hire a full-time "value chain coordinator" to expand the painstaking, deal-by-deal connection of Central Texas farmers to buyers and consumers.

The USDA program is meant to bridge markets and suppliers, said USDA agricultural economist Jim Barham. A region might need more "hard infrastructure": processing facilities, delivery trucks, all-weather farmers markets. But just as important is "soft infrastructure," the people who know all the players and can connect them. "These people are generally undervalued in the food system," Barham said. "They don't have a truck, they aren't the farmer or the chef, they are under the radar, but they're actually the ones that make this all happen."

Beckwith is already looking ahead to the next big project: the Elgin Local Food Center, a planned downtown building. The center will include a commercial kitchen and small-batch copacker, or food manufacturer, where staff will produce foods for multiple companies using those companies' recipes and ingredients. The arrangement will serve farmers who occasionally have excess produce they want to preserve, but who can't spend their own time pickling or canning. It will also benefit entrepreneurs who have outgrown their home kitchen but don't yet have the volume to work with a commercial copacker.

While the facility will serve Central Texas, it aims to be a prototype for other towns around the state.

"We believe we can bring back the farming middle class," Beckwith told supporters at the November press conference, to hearty applause. But a note of urgency seeped into the celebration.

"The average farmer and the average USDA employee is 60 years old," Salerno emphasized. "We need to act quickly to make the crossover to the economy we want."

As the dignitaries left the ACC-Elgin campus, they followed County Line Road north. On one side of the road is the land that will become the student farm, mostly a Johnson grass-dotted field with a greenhouse and a small area in cultivation. After years of being used for only hay, the soil is leached of nutrients, and it will take a few years of active management for them to return. In the private land on the other side of the road, a sign in the cultivated field lets developers know the parcel is for sale. ■

Contributing writer Robyn Ross has written for *Texas Monthly* and *The New York Times*.

RISISTANCE by Steve Wilson

Within morning's unsettled light,

students stride out
into the streets,

shocked by
their hopefulness,

the dark wine

of their defiance —

comrades, gathering
to breach the battlements.

— San Marcos, Nov. 2016

Steve Wilson is the author of three poetry collections, most recently The Lost Seventh. He teaches at Texas State University.

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION.

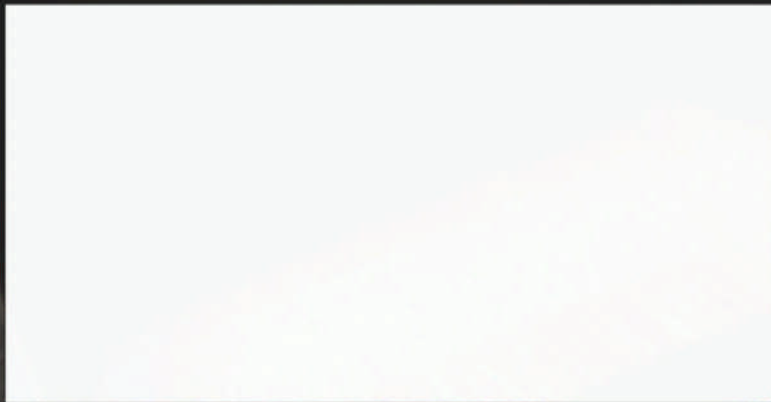
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EYE ON TEXAS Ray Whitehouse



I met Vaughn Neville, a conservative activist known on social media as the Man Spot, at the third-annual Texas Firearms Festival in October. Held in Liberty Hill, the festival attracted gun enthusiasts from across the United States. Merchants offered the opportunity to fire more than 200 kinds of guns during the three-day event. Many recognized Neville as he walked around the festival with his headdress and custom-made axe. He told me that through his shooting, he was able to “spread some freedom.”

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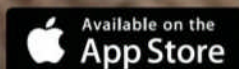


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