

SPORTS

REGION'S BEST

The Chronicle names the players on the All-Greater Houston football team.

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CORONAVIRUS

A MAN ON A MISSION

Clear Lake chaplain undeterred in serving patients, burned-out health care workers.

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HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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Courtesy

After 40 years, a slain Houston couple finally has been identified, but where is their missing baby?

Cold case gets warmer



Patrick Connolly / Contributor

Donna Casasanta and her daughter, Debbie Brooks, waited decades to learn the fates of Casasanta's son, Harold Dean Clouse, top; his wife, Tina Gail Linn; and their daughter, Hollie Marie Clouse, who's still missing.

By **St. John Barned-Smith**
STAFF WRITER

Debbie Brooks was hard at work one day back in October when her husband told her two genealogists were trying to reach her.

It was urgent, he told her. Brooks, a senior planner at a semiconductor plant in Central Florida, was thinking it had to be a scam when she responded to the call.

The genealogists had a question:

Did she have a relative who'd disappeared a long time ago?

Of course, Brooks said. Her brother, Harold Dean Clouse, had gone missing more than 40 years ago.

Hundreds of miles away, Misty Gillis had news.

"We believe we found him," she said. "He was murdered. His body was found in 1981."

They'd also found the body of a young woman, whom they were

still trying to identify.

When he left his home in Florida to build houses in Houston, life seemed promising for Harold Dean Clouse, said his mother, Donna Casasanta.

"Junior," as she called him, had grown up in New Smyrna, a beach town in Central Florida.

He'd been a good student, earning decent grades. He had a penchant for taking care of people, Ca-

Cold case continues on A6

Hostages at N. Texas synagogue are freed

None hurt, suspect dead after a 12-hour standoff

By **Jake Bleiberg**
ASSOCIATED PRESS

COLLEYVILLE – A man who held four hostages for hours inside a North Texas synagogue Saturday could be heard demanding the release of a Pakistani neuroscientist who once lived in Houston and was convicted of trying to kill U.S. Army officers in Afghanistan.

In an operation that involved more than 200 officers, FBI agents rescued the hostages from the Congregation Beth Israel and reported that the suspect was dead late Saturday.

"Prayers answered. All hostages are out alive and safe," Gov. Greg Abbott tweeted.

Abbott's tweet came not long after a loud bang and what sounded like gunfire was heard coming from the

Synagogue continues on A7

Permian hits record number of temblors

Oil regulator adds rules for saltwater disposal

By **Paul Takahashi**
STAFF WRITER

Oil companies operating in West Texas – a thousand miles from the nation's most active fault lines – are becoming more concerned about earthquakes, which reached a record number last year and are growing ever stronger.

The Permian Basin, the 86,000-square-mile oil-rich land stretching from Lubbock to Marfa and San Angelo to Carlsbad, N.M., has no major geographic faults like those that slice the West Coast. But the nation's most prolific oil field and the cities and towns within it were shaken by almost 2,000 earthquakes last year, a record number for the area.

Earthquakes measuring stronger than 2 on the Richter scale – enough to crack walls and foundations – have become an almost daily nuisance. The number of temblors has risen 74 percent from 2020 and is eight times more than in 2017, ac-

Permian continues on A8

Once-abandoned Black cemetery kept alive in Fifth Ward

By **Sam González Kelly**
STAFF WRITER

Woodrow Jones II stood at the corner of Market Street and Carroll Oliver Way in Fifth Ward looking at the historic Evergreen Negro Cemetery, which sits on a busy stretch of Lockwood Drive between a Shell gas station and a State Farm insurance office.

"You see all of these trees in here? Every one of these trees, every tree out here, I planted myself," he said, pointing to the crepe myrtles that border the cemetery.

Despite its bustling surroundings, the Evergreen Negro Cemetery imparts a sense of serenity once a visitor sets foot inside.

Small trees and shrubs are smartly arranged among scores of gray and white tombstones, some of which have chain links engraved at the top to mark the resting places of former slaves. Here lie Buffalo Soldiers, World War veterans and Fifth Ward community leaders who made the neighborhood a nexus for Houston's Black population more than 100 years ago.

But Evergreen Negro Cemetery may as well have been a forest when Jones first visited in the early 1990s. The grounds were overgrown with trees so dense they left little room to walk, and the tombstones were buried under decades' worth of vegetation, forgotten and invisible.

The city of Houston had torn through the cemetery decades earlier to expand Lockwood, displacing hundreds of buried bodies and splitting the burial ground in two. The cemetery had languished ever since.

In came Jones, 77, a mathematician and early software engineer who was developing a program to help cemeteries map their grounds with Lisa Jedkins, a computer programmer at Wilson Financial Group, which owned several Black funeral homes at the time. Together they formed Project RESPECT, a group dedicated to the preservation of neglected and abandoned cemeteries, most of

Cemetery continues on A9



Godofredo A. Vásquez / Staff photographer

Project RESPECT's Woodrow Jones walks past a recently discovered gravesite at Evergreen Negro Cemetery in Fifth Ward.



FROM THE COVER

COLD CASE

From page A1

sasanta said, recalling one time when his sisters stormed in after school, upset he'd picked up a hitchhiker on the drive home.

But he was sometimes prone to poor decisions, said Brooks, his older sister. In the mid-1970s, he'd run off and joined a cult. She said he'd dabbled with drugs.

It wasn't until he'd returned from that misadventure that he met Tina Gail Linn, his brother-in-law's sister.

He'd started working as a finish carpenter for homebuilders all over New Smyrna and the surrounding region.

Soon, he'd become totally infatuated with Linn, Casasanta recalled. But she didn't realize how serious it was until he'd walked into their home with news: They'd gotten married at the courthouse the day before.

They had Hollie soon after. Family photos from that time portray a smiling, young couple cuddling a young toddler. Clouse had a shaggy, roguish haircut and three-day stubble, while Linn had long, blond-brown hair and quiet eyes.

With responsibility for a family, Clouse told his mom that he was thinking about moving to Texas.

His bosses wanted to hire him to work full time in Houston with a well-paying job. "I can take better care of Tina and the baby!" she recalled him saying.

Casasanta agreed to let him borrow – and ultimately buy – her car. He packed the family's belongings into the vehicle, and they headed west.

For a time, letters occasionally arrived in Florida from Clouse and Linn. Then, in late 1980, the letters ceased.

A few months later, Casasanta received a call from a group of people saying they had Clouse's car and would drive it back to her from California for \$1,000.

"This is strange," she recalled thinking.

She agreed to pay the money – then talked to police who patronized the restaurant where she worked.

A trio of women showed up with the car, dressed in religious-looking robes. One appeared to be in her 30s; the other two seemed younger.

Casasanta begged them to let her speak to Clouse, to give her some information about her son.

They couldn't answer any questions about Clouse or Linn, Casasanta recalled, only told her that they'd joined a religious group and were cutting ties with the family.

"That was weird," she said. "We really got frightened, and we started searching and searching."

Unidentified remains

On a January day in 1981, a dog in north Harris County wandered out of the woods on a block near Wallisville Road. It carried a human arm in its jaws.

That grisly finding led police to the bodies of two people: a young man, beaten to death, and a woman, who died after being strangled. The remains suggested the two people had been dead for a couple of months. Both were 5 feet, 4 inches to 5 feet, 8 inches tall and had "beautiful teeth," a forensic investigator told the Houston Chronicle in 2011. A pair of green gym shorts and a bloody towel were found discarded near their bodies.

Their identities were a mystery. At the time, medical investigators hired a pastel artist to create sketches based on photos of the corpses – and several other unidentified bodies that police were trying to name.

The move was "probably our last shot," the now-deceased medical investigator, Cecil Wingo, said at the time.

But their efforts were fruitless. In Florida, months stretched into years, Casasanta and the couple's other relatives waited and wondered. They registered the couple on lists of missing persons. At first, they startled every time the phone rang, wondering if the call contained news. Every time Debbie Brooks went shopping, she watched the people around her, wondering if one of them might be Clouse.

She found herself doing double-takes as she drove down the road while passing men who resembled her brother.

Was that Junior?

"You can't lay it down, you can't put it to the side," Casasanta said.

After five years and still no information, they inquired with the Social Security Administration and the Salvation Army. They made sure the couple's names

"We know he's gone and she's gone and I know they are both in heaven."

Donna Casasanta



Patrick Connolly / Contributor

Childhood photos show Harold Dean Clouse. Clouse and his wife, Tina Gail Linn, were killed 40 years ago and recently were identified using genealogical evidence.

were on annual missing persons lists.

"We always hoped for the best," said Les Linn, Tina's brother.

But they never got any answers.

"We pretty much thought they had joined this religious group and didn't want to have contact with us," Linn said.

Years stretched into decades.

Authorities in Harris County exhumed the bodies in July 2011 to extract DNA from them – part of a broader effort to close cases that were still open but had gone cold decades before. Investigators were hoping to determine if the two were related. But that still didn't bring any breaks in the case.

The case remained stagnant until late 2021, when employees at Identifinders International, a California-based organization that performs genetic genealogy for law enforcement, contacted the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences and asked to test the remains.

In this case, the remains were in good condition and investigators had plenty of material to work with, said Misty Gillis, one of the Identifinders investigators who worked the case. They uploaded the information to Gedmatch.com, a genealogy site that allows users to share their genetic information with law enforcement agencies across the country. (Other sites, such as 23andme or ancestry.com, do not share their information with police.)

Soon, they were able to connect Clouse's DNA to that of close cousins living in Kentucky.

It had taken her 10 days to track down the identity of a man who'd been nameless for 40 years. She began searching for contact information for Clouse's cousins and other relatives, trying to find out if her hunch was right.

The break in the case was the latest in an increasing number of cold cases brought to resolution with the help of new genealogical testing. In recent years, millions of people have uploaded their DNA into genealogy testing sites such as Gedmatch.com or familytreeDNA.com. The information on the sites have helped



Courtesy

"We pretty much thought they had joined this religious group and didn't want to have contact with us," Tina Gail Linn's brother said.

people connect with long-lost relatives and learn about their origins.

Genealogy tracing has become an increasingly popular tool with homicide investigators attempting to close long-ago murders, especially after police in California used such techniques to identify the Golden State Killer, a former police officer who became a prolific serial killer responsible for the murders of at least 13 people and the rapes of 50 women between 1973 and 1986. Texas Rangers and police in Beaumont used advanced DNA testing techniques and genealogical tracing last year to help close the decades-old murder of Mary Catherine Edwards.

The investigative technique has helped bring closure to at least 40 cases in recent years, said Carol Schweitzer, with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.

Genealogy doesn't just help authorities identify remains of unknown victims – such as Clouse and Linn – but also could help families recover missing children

who disappeared decades ago, Schweitzer said.

"A missing infant that was abducted to be raised by their abductor, or a child abducted by their non-custodial family member and taken to another country, could be resolved with a lead generated by genealogy efforts," she said. "We strongly believe there are some long-term missing children out there, alive, waiting to be found, waiting to find the truth, and forensic genealogy resources could help finally reveal some long awaited answers."

In Florida, Brooks listened over the phone as Gillis and her colleague Allison Peacock broke the news – investigators believe they'd identified her brother. She learned they were still trying to identify the body of a woman they'd found with Clouse.

On the phone, Brooks absorbed the news. The woman was likely Tina, she said, explaining that Clouse had been married.

Peacock used that information to track down Florida marriage records, where they were able to

find Linn's name – and then contact her relatives, whose DNA confirmed her identity.

"To think that, something not solved in 40 years – and in an hour, I know more than anyone," Peacock recalled. "It was pretty amazing."

When Casasanta finally learned the fate of her son, the news answered the question that has agonized her for decades but brought sharp new pain.

"I totally lost it," she said. "I kept praying for God to show me what happened and where he died, but I don't know why anyone would want to hurt my son and (his) wife. We've taken it very hard."

Linn recalled his younger sister's excitement at getting married and leaving the challenging home she'd grown up in.

"She was excited to see what the future was going to bring," he recalled. That only made the news more heartbreaking. He felt confusion and guilt. Who would have inflicted such violence on his sister and her husband?

Brooks, meanwhile, had just one question: What about their baby?

The missing child

She told Peacock and Gillis that Tina Linn had given birth to a daughter shortly after the young couple got married. The baby, Hollie Marie, was just an infant when the couple went missing.

The few photos from that time show a toddler with short hair, just learning to walk. That her body wasn't found with the remains just raised more questions: Was she still alive? If she was, who ever took her likely had information about her parents' deaths – or may have even been responsible for them.

If the baby is still alive, she would be turning 42 – although she likely doesn't know anything about her true identity: her birthday, her parents, their deaths – or the dozens of relatives out there wondering what happened to her.

That will likely present significant challenges for investigators, experts said. Their best hopes likely would lie in finding a match in a genealogy database or if the child had committed a crime and had her DNA added to federal forensic databases, said Fil Waters, a former Houston police homicide detective.

"The process – especially with this DNA stuff – is only as good as the information inputted into the database," he said. But there were other steps detectives could take.

"Unless these people were hermits, I would assume there was a person out there, who knows them, who knows they had a baby and might be able to give some information regarding the child," he added.

Casasanta takes heart in the fact that she finally knows what happened to her son.

"We can lay it to rest. We know he's gone and she's gone and I know they are both in heaven," she said.

But she still wonders about Hollie.

"I hope we can find her," she said.

Joyce Lee contributed to this report.

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Patrick Connolly / Contributor

Donna Casasanta and her daughter, Debbie Brooks, show a childhood photo of Casasanta's late son, Harold Dean Clouse. Though it has been confirmed that Clouse and his wife, Tina, were killed, the family hopes Clouse's daughter, Hollie Marie, is still alive.

SPORTS

THIS BEAR IS DRIVEN

Nalyssa Smith won't stop until she wins another Big 12 title and is the No. 1 draft pick.

PAGE C1



ZEST

COLORFUL CHARACTERS

Through his cartoons, Black artist André Ramos-Woodard confronts and flips the script on racial stereotypes, columnist Joy Sewing writes.

PAGE G2



SPECIAL SECTION

GAMES, PUZZLES

Celebrate Valentine's Day with your special someone solving crosswords, Sudoku and more.

SECTION H

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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Vendors are commissioners' top givers

By Zach Despart
STAFF WRITER

Watchdog alleges 'pay-to-play system,' but county officials deny contributions influence who gets no-bid contracts

So far as any member of the public can tell, Harris County commissioners bankroll their campaigns through hundreds of donations from civically engaged constituents, many so invested in local politics they are willing to contribute more than \$10,000.

Commissioners' campaign finance reports omit a crucial piece of context, however: Most of that money comes from executives at companies awarded no-bid contracts by those commissioners.

From 2020 through 2021, commis-



County Commissioner Jack Cagle



County Commissioner Rodney Ellis



County Commissioner Adrian Garcia



County Commissioner Tom Ramsey

ONLINE: For more coverage, interactives and schedules, visit houstonchronicle.com/paytoplay

sioners relied on county vendors – through political action committees, employees and their family members – for 79 percent of their campaign contributions while steering 93 percent of engineering, architecture, surveying and appraisal work to firms who contributed.

During that two-year period, this deep-pocketed donor class gave \$5.9 million while commissioners – two Democrats and two Republicans – awarded their firms \$310 million in work from the county's engineering department and flood control district.

"If that's not a pay-to-play system, *Donations continues on A6*

CRIME

New testing techniques offer hope for unnamed hundreds



Brett Coomer / Staff photographer

An unknown person is buried in Harris County Cemetery in Crosby. Over 300 others remain unnamed in the county.

DNA, genealogy could help identify decades-old corpses in Houston

By St. John Barned-Smith and Alexandra Kanik
STAFF WRITERS

They found the body, floating face down and decaying, in Buffalo Bayou. It belonged to a short and slim man with dark hair, likely in his 20s or 30s.

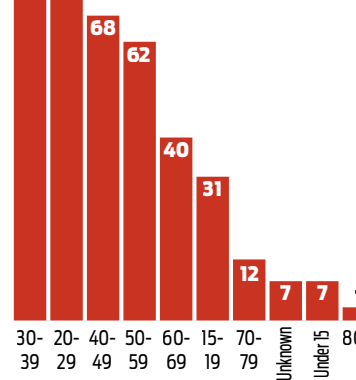
When authorities fished the corpse out of the water, it was dressed in khaki pants, a striped shirt, a belt with a cowboy buckle. And two combs, in his pocket.

Almost 65 years later, Harris County medical examiners still have no idea who he is. The man – the oldest unnamed corpse in the county's custody – is one of hundreds of people who have died in Houston and have never been identified.

More sophisticated techniques that combine DNA and genealogy are now available and are helping those who seek to put names to unidentified bodies, just

Most unidentified bodies were in their 30s

Unidentified bodies found in Harris County in 2021, by age group



Source: Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences
Alexandra Kanik graphic / Staff

as they are being used more by police across the U.S. to solve cold cases.

But every year, hundreds of unidentified bodies arrive at the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences, and despite best efforts, some never get named.

The morgue handles cases of unexpected or unexplained death. That includes homicides (intentional or unintentional) and cases where a person died under suspicious circumstances. It also includes people who die shortly after arriving at a hospital or after being seen by a physician, as well as suicides and children younger than 6. Finally, bodies discovered are handled by the morgue.

In 2021, 437 people came into the medical examiner's lab as unidentified persons, according to data analyzed by the Houston Chronicle.

When investigators arrive at a crime scene or take on a new case, their first job *Unidentified continues on A14*

Patrick rises with right wing

By Jasper Scherer and Cayla Harris
AUSTIN BUREAU

As a freshman state senator in 2007, Dan Patrick set to work on the fiercely conservative agenda he had pushed for years on his Houston talk radio show, filing bills to give pregnant women \$500 to forgo abortions and empower police to inquire about the immigration status of people they stop.



Patrick

But the GOP-controlled Legislature had little appetite for that brand of conservatism. Some of the rookie senator's new colleagues were turned off by his brash approach, with one fellow senator likening him to an "uninvited picnic guest who shows up with nothing in hand, eats all the potato salad and spoils the picnic for everyone else."

"Everything is a passion play for *Patrick continues on A8*

Clerk didn't randomly sort jurors

By Anna Bauman
STAFF WRITER

A Brazoria County district clerk who retired last year amid allegations of jury tampering spent years improperly sorting potential jurors by their race and address as she assembled jury panels, a Texas Rangers investigation found.

A grand jury in December declined to bring charges against the former clerk, Rhonda Barchak, or any of her employees who participated in or witnessed the jury selection process, said Tom Selleck, the county's district attorney.

The investigation, which was completed in November, found Barchak failed to use a random jury selection process as required by Texas statute, Selleck said. But he added that state law does not provide a penalty for violation. *Clerk continues on A13*

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FROM THE COVER

UNIDENTIFIED

From page A1

is to try to identify the victim. They look for driver's licenses, take witness statements and look for other clues.

"Most decedents are identified within a few weeks," Institute of Forensic Sciences spokeswoman Michele Arnold said.

But many times, those efforts don't pan out. Fiery car crashes leave bodies burnt beyond recognition. Corpses — abandoned or thrown into rivers — decay until they are unrecognizable. Thieves take wallets, purses, phones and other items that might otherwise provide clues for detectives.

When that happens, the body is fingerprinted and run through "the system," Arnold said. Forensic investigators examine dental records, skeletal radiographs, and use DNA analyses to try to identify the deceased, she said.

On its website, the center has a page with photographs of unidentified people, distinguishing marks on their bodies (such as a striking butterfly tattoo in one photo) and personal effects — a slim silver watch, an Astros T-shirt, a bulky pocketknife, a shoe with blue laces and red ornamentation on the toe. Along with a warning about viewer discretion, the page says: "These images are provided in hopes of identifying the deceased individuals, returning them to their loved ones, and bringing closure to families."

By the end of 2021, most of the 437 bodies that arrived at the county morgue that year were identified. Eight were not. They joined a list dating back to 1950 of more than 300 other people who remain unnamed in Harris County.

When investigators are unable to identify a corpse it is labeled "long-term unidentified" and the body is transferred to county burial.

In Harris County, unidentified men were found far more frequently than unidentified women.

More than a quarter of the unidentified remains at the morgue were later discovered to be in their 30s. About a fifth were in their 20s.

Among the dead found over the years was a young woman — the best guess investigators can make is that she was between 20 and 35 — whose body was discovered just north of Loop 610 on Woodard in late 2020. The corpse, which appeared to have lain there for months to years,



Brett Coomer / Staff photographer

An unknown person is buried in Harris County Eastgate Cemetery in Crosby. By the end of 2021, most of the 437 bodies that arrived at the county morgue that year were identified. Eight were not.

showed signs of extensive tooth decay before death.

Then there was the teen, found on Walters Road in 2012: a girl between the ages of 15 and 17. She'd been dead for three to six weeks when people finally discovered her body, lying about 20 feet from the side of Walters Road. Records from the medical examiner's office show she was between 4 feet 7 inches and 5 feet 3 inches tall. Investigators noted that she appeared to be biracial, with long, wavy/curly dark hair held back from the face with a standard bobby pin. She had a "pronounced overbite," and small dental fillings in three lower molars. When she died, she was wearing a blue and green Smurfette T-shirt, cargo pants, a black bra and pink underwear.

In 2021, seven children under the ages of 15 were brought in as unidentified bodies. Two died from injuries related to motor vehicle accidents. Three died by homicide. One investigation outlines a homeless 13-year-old boy who drowned in early August. A stillborn baby was found in a dumpster. Police still do not know the identity of the child's parents.

When someone goes missing, it leads to anguish for loved ones: worry and grief — and the question of whatever happened to them.

Jo Ann Lowitzer last spoke to her daughter, Ali, 11 years ago. Ali, 16, wanted to walk to work after

riding the bus home from school, Lowitzer recalled. Three people saw her ride the bus and turn down the street toward her workplace on a late April day in 2010. That was the last time anyone ever saw her, Lowitzer recalled. Because her daughter liked dark clothes and eyeliner, police at first wondered if she was a runaway, she said.

Frantic days turned into months, and then years.

At first, Lowitzer didn't want to even consider the worst.

"It's even hard to think about today," she said. "I would hope that she's not a Jane Doe somewhere."

As the years have passed, it's become harder to ignore that possibility, she said. Like thousands of other relatives of missing people, she's submitted her genetic material to databases, hoping for some kind of closure.

"If she is out there, and I found her by submitting our DNA, at least I would have that," Lowitzer said.

In past years, medical examiners have obtained grants allowing them to perform advanced genetic testing on some of the remains. Such was the case in 2011, when they exhumed about 25 bodies, including those of a young couple whose remains were discovered in north Harris County more than 40 years ago. But even those efforts can take years — or longer — to pan out. It wasn't until late last

year, with the help of genealogy testing, that investigators identified the young couple as Harold Dean Clouse and Tina Gail Linn, who were from Florida and went missing in late 1980.

Over the past decade, investigators have increasingly turned to genealogy testing to help resolve cases, said Carol Schweitzer, with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

The method has helped detectives identify dozens of murder victims and killers, the most famous of whom was perhaps the Golden State Killer, a former police officer who murdered at least 13 people and raped 50 women between 1973 and 1986.

In Baltimore, authorities used the technique to identify a homicide victim from 1975, Schweitzer said.

"Authorities continuously worked on that case for decades, never putting it down, yet genealogy came along and produced the tip authorities had been waiting on for 45 years," Schweitzer said.

Genealogy could also play a critical role helping track down children who went missing decades ago, she said.

"A missing infant who was abducted to be raised by their abductor, or a child abducted by their noncustodial family member and taken to another country could be resolved with a lead generated by genealogy efforts," she said.

Traditionally, investigators used short tandem repeat analysis (or STR) testing to connect DNA samples with potential perpetrators. The DNA method allows scientists to analyze small strands of DNA to see if they match those of a specific person.

In 1998 the federal government created CODIS (the Combined DNA Index System), a federal database of DNA collected at crime scenes and from criminal suspects, potentially allowing investigators from all across the country to see if DNA found at crime scenes matched that of samples collected elsewhere.

It was a monumental shift in criminal investigations, said David Mittelman, CEO of Othram Inc., a DNA testing lab focused on forensic genealogy testing.

But a fundamental problem with CODIS and STR testing was that detectives could only connect it against samples already in the CODIS database.

"If you're a victim, you're not in CODIS," Mittelman said. "So CODIS doesn't help. It doesn't work."

Now, investigators can use more advanced DNA testing to analyze far more DNA markers — and then compare those DNA samples against those added to certain genealogy databases such as gedmatch.com.

Advancements in DNA testing have also helped bring an end to cases that have remained opened for decades.

Take the case of Mary Catherine Edwards. Murdered in 1995, the young Beaumont school teacher's case sat, unsolved, for 25 years. Late last year, after advanced DNA testing, investigators were able to identify the genetic material of a possible perpetrator. They then used forensic genealogy testing to identify his relatives, then work down the family tree until they found the alleged perpetrator. He's now arrested and charged with Edwards' murder.

Detectives are increasingly able to solve murders like Edwards', Mittelman said.

"We're able to do lots of things — including use genealogy to make long-range relationship determinations," Mittelman said. With that information, detectives are now increasingly able to connect once-useless DNA with relatives of crime victims or perpetrators of violence.

In Harris County, however, hundreds of corpses lie in a paupers' graveyard, waiting to be named.

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Photos by Jon Shapley / Staff photographer

Paula Gardenhire smiles at her mom as they watch a musician perform during BLCK Market.

BLCK MARKET

From page A3

with BLCK Market, and even though her company was new, they agreed to stock her products in their Pearland store.

"Many banks and investors won't work with a company unless they have years of sales data," BLCK Market event manager Alicia East said. "We'll help founders make those sales and network so they have a strong foundation for their business."

Last year more than 15,000 people attended Black History Month markets. East hopes this

year's events will have close to 25,000 attendees.

Amanda Garner and her daughter Makenzie Wilborn, 14, attended a BLCK Market event last summer. Garner said they were thrilled to see the market's events for Black History Month.

"I love to support smaller Black vendors, but it can be hard to find them," Garner said. "I've found companies through past market events that I still buy from today."

The event also showcases Black artists, musicians and authors.

Houston author T.L. Johnson sells his series of children's books at the markets. The protagonists of his books are kid versions of the



Mayor Sylvester Turner speaks to the crowd during BLCK Market, an event to showcase Black-owned businesses held Saturday along Avenida de las Americas.

Egyptian figures Ramses, Prince Tut, Cleopatra and Nefertiti. The books teach lessons about sharing, female empowerment and self-confidence.

"I didn't have characters that looked like me in books growing up and now 30 years later, there's still not many children's books with characters that look like me," Johnson said.

Nisa Johnson's three children — Alex, 6, Sydney, 9 and Landon, 10 — were captivated by the colorful illustrations of Nefertiti, a Black girl with twists adorned in gold jewelry and a blue cape, and Prince Tut, a Black boy with golden sandals and a striped head cloth. Nisa purchased a few books for her kids.

"I want my kids to have books

with characters they can relate to," Nisa said. "Representation matters."

The next Black History Month Market is Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. at Karbach Brewing Co. Outside of February, the BLCK Market hosts a pop up every 2nd Saturday at East River HTX.

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Fort Bend officers will get bodycams, a new digital system

By Juhí Varma

STAFF WRITER

Hundreds of Fort Bend County law enforcement officers will soon be equipped with state-of-the-art body cameras and a digital evidence management system as part of a 10-year, \$22 million plan.

The county plans to supply 658 body-worn cameras to peace officers, including 441 in the Fort Bend County Sheriff's Office.

The county will also distribute 597 tasers and 424 fleet cameras for police vehicles, said Fort Bend

County Judge KP George.

About half of the FBSCO patrol will be outfitted with the new equipment in the next six to eight weeks.

"Scientists will tell you that people behave differently when they are being watched," Fort Bend County District Attorney Brian Middleton said during a news conference last week. "The people involved will have greater accountability because they know their actions are being recorded. It applies to police officers and to the public."

On the anniversary of George

Floyd's death in May, Fort Bend County commissioners unanimously approved a body-worn camera policy for law enforcement agencies.

The policy aims to address the needs of law enforcement officials and the concerns of their community in the current climate, especially transparency and accountability.

"Officer safety is paramount, and public transparency and trust is paramount," said Sheriff Eric Fagan. "You have different versions of an incident. But with these cam-

eras, we can see what actually happened. This will save time, save money, and most importantly, save lives."

Some law enforcement agencies had their own bodycam policies in place, but there were minor differences in each case.

A committee was formed in October to help craft a countywide policy to serve as a uniform guideline for all of Fort Bend's law enforcement agencies. It was approved in November.

"We need the body worn camera evidence so that not only can crimi-

nal prosecution be enhanced, but also the civil litigation that results from these actions, whether it's formulating stronger defenses or settling with families that have been done wrong," said Fort Bend County Attorney Bridget Smith-Lawson.

Recordings will be automatically stored on evidence.com and each law enforcement agency will have its own account through the deal with tech company Axon.

The body cameras will be upgraded every 30 months. The actual devices will be refreshed every five years.

DYNAMO DEBUT

Midfielder Herrera is set to play July 9.

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RAGING REPTILES

Is a return to 'Jurassic World' worth ticket?

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HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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Couple's child found after 40 years

Relatives of pair discovered slain near Houston in 1981 finally learn fate of long-lost girl

By St. John BARNED-SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Donna Casasanta got the call this week, a call she's spent half of her life praying for. It was about Holly Marie.

More than 40 years ago, her son, Harold Dean Clouse, moved to Texas from New Smyrna, Fla., taking his wife, Tina Linn, and their young daughter.

Then, they'd all abruptly vanished, a disappearance that stretched from weeks, to months, to decades.

The questions over that time never ceased.

"You can't lay it down," Casasanta said earlier this year. "You can't put it to the side."

Then in October, genealogists called Casasanta and her relatives with painful and disturbing news: Police had discovered the couple's bodies, back in 1981, dumped in a cove of trees in east Harris County.

They died violently, the genealogist explained.

Dean was beaten to death. The woman with him — later identified as Tina — had been strangled.

There was no sign of their baby, Holly Marie.

This week that changed. Holly Marie is alive and well in Oklahoma, where she lived after being adopted by a family there.

Investigators from the Texas Attorney General's Office



Brett Coomer/Staff file photo
Christopher Casasanta and mom Donna pray in March.



Courtesy
Holly Marie Clouse was left at a church in Arizona.

walked into Holly's workplace on Tuesday and told her who she was.

Hours later, Holly and her grandmother and aunts and uncles met in a raucous Zoom call.

It was Tuesday, the day that her father would have turned 63.

"Finding Holly is a birthday present from heaven since we found her on Junior's birthday,"

Baby continues on A9



Texas Attorney General's Office Cold Case Unit via FHDForensics
Holly Marie Clouse holds a picture of herself as a baby with her parents, Tina Gail Linn and Harold Dean Clouse, whose bodies were found in 1981 but not identified until 40 years later.

Teens work 'to end a crisis ... we didn't start'

By Cayla HARRIS
AUSTIN BUREAU

Hundreds of Texans will gather in Houston on Saturday to rally in favor of new gun safety measures, just 2½ weeks after a gunman killed 21 people at a Uvalde elementary school.

Hundreds more will protest in San Antonio. And Austin. And Dallas. And Wichita Falls. And Pharr. And Frisco. And Longview. And Rock-

wall.

Young activists affiliated with March for Our Lives have organized more than 300 local rallies across the nation, including at least 13 in Texas — a coordinated series of protests by an organization launched after the 2018 shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla.

They've been pulling the events together since two days after the Uvalde shooting, making calls

and counting heads for the group's first major march in four years.

"We have grown up with school shooter drills," said George Tataris, the 18-year-old executive director of the group's Houston chapter. "You keep imagining: What if this is not just a drill? What if this is reality? And it is the reality for so many of us. And we truly believe that our generation is pivotal in changing this."

They've heard the stories and the death tolls all their lives, too — 13 people at Columbine High School in 1999; 27 at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012; 17 at Stoneman Douglas, 10 at Santa Fe High School in 2018, two months after the first march.

And now, 19 children and two teachers at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde on May 24, 2022.

"These kids are like us — they're waiting for

summer break, they're worried about their test next period, and they're worried about graduating," said 18-year-old James Thompson, a movement organizer based in McKinney. "That was one thing that hit me hard about the Uvalde shooting — that I was graduating that same week, and these kids will never be able to graduate and will never be able to celebrate that accom-

Rallies continues on A9

Panel blames riot on Trump

By Lisa MASCARO,
Mary Clare Jalonick
and Farnoush Amiri
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — The chairman of the House committee investigating the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection and Donald Trump's effort to overturn the 2020 election declared at Thursday's prime-time hearing that the attack was an "attempted coup" that put "two and half centuries of constitutional democracy at risk."

Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., said "the world is watching" the U.S. response to the panel's year-long investigation into the Capitol riot and the defeated president's extraordinary effort to stop Congress from certifying Joe Biden's election victory. He called it a "brazen attempt" to overturn the election.

"Democracy remains in danger," Thompson said. "We must confront the truth with candor, resolve and determination."

The committee presented never-before-seen 12 minutes of video of the deadly violence that day and also of Trump administration officials in the chilling backstory as the defeated president, tried to overturn Biden's election

Hearing continues on A6

Deputies helped kill mass shooter

By Guillermo CONTRERAS
STAFF WRITER

Two sheriff's deputies from Zavala and Uvalde counties helped Border Patrol officers end the May 24 mass shooting at Robb Elementary School, the San Antonio Express-News has confirmed.

Zavala County Sheriff Eusevio Salinas Jr. said Thursday he learned that one of his deputies, Jose Luis Vasquez, was among the "stack" of officers who went into two classrooms at the end of the massacre and fired at the gunman, Salvador Ramos.

Salinas, who also went



Pete Luna/Uvalde Leader-News file
Two teachers and 19 students were killed on May 24 in the mass shooting at Robb Elementary in Uvalde.

MORE INSIDE

House passes "red flag" legislation. **A4**

Out-of-town officers find tensions running high. **A6**

to the scene and helped evacuate students from classrooms in other buildings, has not spoken to his deputy about the incident, but was told by state police investigators

that they took Vasquez's M4 military-grade service rifle to examine it as part of the investigation. "I know he went in," Salinas said. "I know because they recovered his weapon. He fired some rounds at him and that's why they took his weapon."

It had been widely reported that a Border Patrol tactical team ob-

Uvalde continues on A7

NASA joining push to research UFOs

By Andrea LEINFELDER
STAFF WRITER

NASA is taking UFOs — now called UAPs for unidentified aerial phenomena — seriously.

The agency is commissioning an independent study it hopes will transform this largely classified area of research into a public database ripe for discovery.

Learning about observations that cannot be identified as aircraft or known natural phenomena could have implications for national security, air safety and overall science.

"Don't ever underestimate what nature can do," Thomas Zurbuchen, NASA's associate administrator for science, said during a news conference. "Sometimes

we have this assertion that we understand the natural world, and everything that's not explained with the laws of nature that we have right now is somehow not natural. I just really believe that there's a lot to learn still."

Thursday's announcement is the latest in a string of government initiatives focused on unidentified aerial phenomena.

And while there is currently no evidence that UAPs are extraterrestrial (aka aliens), Zurbuchen didn't shy away from discussing NASA's congressional directive to look for life on other planets, whether it be tiny extinct lifeforms that once lived on the surface of Mars or current intel-

NASA continues on A6



BABY

From page A1

Casasanta said in a statement released by a family spokeswoman. "I prayed for more than 40 years for answers and the Lord has revealed some of it."

On Thursday, First Assistant Attorney General Brent Webster announced the information at a news conference in Austin.

Dean Clouse grew up in New Smyrna, a beach town in central Florida. Casasanta remembered him as a good student and a wanderer. Dean — that's what most people called him, except for his mom, who called him "Junior" — had a thick mop of brown hair and an easy smile.

He was a searcher, a rascal, a bit of a vagabond. In the mid-1970s, he'd run off and joined a cult.

He was working as a carpenter for a construction company, when he met Tina Gail Linn. Soon, the two were in love and married in a surprise courthouse wedding.

They had Holly soon after.

Clouse told his mom he wanted to move to Texas. His bosses promised better pay, money he could use to support Tina and Holly.

He borrowed Casasanta's sedan, and in 1980, the family headed west.

She heard from them for a time — letters arriving from their home in Lewisville, a Dallas suburb. The last letter came in October of that year. Then, silence.

She wondered what had happened, why the letters had stopped.

The only clue she had was a call, a few months after his disappearance, someone who said he was in California and had her car. The caller asked for money to bring the car back to Florida; Casasanta agreed.

Three women dressed in white robes drove it back to Florida. They met at the Daytona Speedtrack late at night. The leader of the trio, "Sister Susan," told Casasanta that Dean had joined a cult, renounced his worldly possessions, and wanted nothing to do with his family or his past.

"The police reportedly took the women into custody," Webster said at the news conference,



Patrick Connolly/Contributor file photo

Donna Casasanta and daughter Debbie Brooks stand in front of a painting of Harold Dean Clouse, Tina Gail Linn and Holly Marie.

"but there's no record of a police report on file."

That's not uncommon given the age of the case, he said. Investigators are still "on the hunt" for that report, he said.

And he said the car that the cult members returned was indeed Casasanta's 1978 two-door Red Burgundy AMC Concord.

Casasanta said the encounter frightened the family, "and we started searching and searching."

Worry turned to panic, then that faded to grief. The questions never ceased, however.

A terrible discovery

Just a couple of months after the last letter from Tina and Dean, a German shepherd in east Harris County trotted back to its owner's house, a decomposed human arm in its jaws. It was Jan. 6, 1981.

Police began searching the area, bringing prison inmates to help sweep the quiet patch of land about 11 miles east of downtown Houston.

A week later, investigators found the bodies of a young man, beaten to death, and a woman, who'd been strangled. The remains suggested the two people had been dead for some time. They found a pair of green gym shorts and a bloody towel discarded near their bodies.

In the months after the discovery, medical investigators hired a pastel artist to create sketches based on photos of the corpses.

The move was "probably our last shot," the now-deceased medical investigator, Cecil Wingo, said.

In Florida, Casasanta and the couple's other relatives inquired with the Social Security Administration and the Salvation Army. They registered the names on annual missing persons lists.

They hoped for the best, in spite of the long silence.

"We pretty much thought they had joined this religious group and didn't want to have contact with us," said Les Linn, Tina's brother.

Forty-two years after Dean and Tina went missing Casasanta got a call from her daughter, Debbie Brooks. A pair of genealogists had news — they'd finally found Dean.

Identifinders International, a California-based organization that performs genetic genealogy for law enforcement, had asked officials at the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences for permission to test remains of the John and Jane Doe discovered near Wallisville Road.

They uploaded the genetic information into Gedmatch.com, a genealogy site that allows users to share their data with law enforcement agencies across the country in the hopes it might help solve such crimes. (Other sites, such as 23andme or ancestry.com, do not share their information with police.)

They quickly were able to connect Clouse's DNA to relatives in

Kentucky — who ultimately helped point them to Casasanta's daughter, Debbie Brooks.

It had taken them 10 days to track down the identity of a man who'd been nameless for four decades.

In Florida, Casasanta and her children absorbed the news with shock. The woman found with Dean was likely Tina, they told the genetic investigators, an assumption that was soon confirmed.

"I totally lost it," Casasanta said, in January after the news became public. "I kept praying for God to show me what happened and where he died, but I don't know why anyone would want to hurt my son and (his) wife."

The news brought a certain kind of closure — but also raised a whole new reservoir of questions: While police had found Dean and Tina's corpses amid the palmettos and live oaks in that isolated spot out by Wallisville Road, they'd never found any of Holly Marie's remains.

What had happened to her? Had scavengers carried the young girl's body off? Had someone murdered the couple in order to abduct the toddler?

In March, Donna and her children, Tess, Cheryl and Debbie, and her son, Chris — now themselves middle-aged — as well as Les Linn, Tina's brother, traveled to Houston.

They went first to the site where police had found the bodies, then to the paupers cemetery where the couple were buried.

It was hard standing out there, grieving again the fact they'd never gotten to say goodbye.

Investigation restarts

With the new information, officials in the Texas Attorney General's Office took over the case.

They set about trying to find out what they could learn about Holly Marie.

Casasanta wondered if she would be able to find Holly — assuming her granddaughter was still alive — before old age took her.

And then it happened. Investigators found Holly. She was living Oklahoma, with her husband of more than 20 years. She has five children and two infant grandchildren.

Holly was left at a church in

Arizona by two women who were barefoot and wearing white robes, Webster said Thursday. He did not disclose at which church they left Holly.

"The beliefs of their religion included the separation of male and female members, practicing vegetarian habits and not using or wearing leather goods," Webster said. The women also said they'd "given up a baby before at a laundromat."

Investigators believe the group the women belonged to traveled around the southwestern United States, including Arizona, California and possibly Texas, and had been spotted around Yuma, Ariz., in the early 1980s asking townspeople for food.

Webster said the family who raised Holly were not suspects in the case.

Relatives described finally seeing Holly on the Zoom call earlier this week.

"After finally being able to reunite with Holly, I dreamed about her and my sister, Tina, last night. In my dream, Tina was laying on the floor rolling around and laughing and playing with Holly like I saw them do many times before when they lived with me prior to moving to Texas. I believe Tina's finally resting in peace knowing Holly is reuniting with her family."

"I personally am so relieved to know Holly is alive and well and was well cared for, but also torn up by it all. That baby was her life," said Sherry Linn Green, Holly's aunt.

Unanswered questions

Two puzzles in this grand jigsaw are now solved. But the revelation has only raised new questions. Who were the people who took Holly to Arizona?

Did Dean and Tina actually join a cult? Who were the women who had Casasanta's car? Did they know anything about Tina and Dean's murders?

Who killed the pair? How did a couple living near Dallas end up in the woods near Houston?

But Casasanta has kept her pledge to find her granddaughter.

And Holly Marie Clouse has found her grandmother, her family and her past.

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RALLIES

From page A1

plishment."

"I think it's being able to relate to the stories — that these youth are being killed, and we are youth. And I think that's what motivates a lot of our work."

The Uvalde massacre renewed nationwide pleas for gun regulations, and young advocates have been leading the grassroots work to inspire change.

They're asking for a host of reforms — banning assault-style weapons or raising the age to purchase one from 18 to 21; outlawing high-capacity magazines that can hold many rounds of ammunition; implementing "red flag" laws to temporarily remove firearms from individuals deemed a danger to themselves or others; expanding background checks to include all gun sales; and establishing a "cool-off" period for someone seeking a firearm.

In the two weeks since the attack on Robb Elementary School, located 85 miles west of San Antonio, Texas' top GOP lawmakers have shut down those proposals, instead focusing on mental health resources and school security. They say they don't want to restrict law-abiding gun owners, and that those intent on such violence will get guns no matter what.

But Thompson feels this time is different. The nation is reeling from a string of mass shootings in Buffalo, N.Y., and Tulsa, Okla., and "people are realizing that enough is enough," he said. "I think they're acknowledging that maybe something can be done."

It's mostly teenagers organizing the local rallies,



Elizabeth Conley/Staff

George Tataris, 18, is executive director of the Houston chapter of March for Our Lives.

assuming jobs that could be considered full-time advocacy work if they were out of school.

Levi Langley, a 16-year-old high school student, is organizing the Austin march at the Texas Capitol, where she's expecting more than 2,000 people.

She's interested in the big changes but also the small ones, too. Persuading Gov. Greg Abbott to form a committee on gun violence prevention would be a victory, she said.

"We are the next generation of voters, and people who are supposed to be in charge ... aren't really doing their jobs," she said. "Young people have to grow up fast and demand action ourselves because we're in these schools where the shootings are happening."

She's made a number of executive decisions over the past few days, including applying for permits, working with the League of Women Voters to register people to vote at the rally, and finding community leaders who can speak to the crowd. It's a similar story elsewhere across the state as organizers rally people to come out in 100-plus degree heat.

"This was a really short time frame that we were given," Tataris said. "We've been working long hours, we have late-night calls, we have to keep daily communication with everyone on our team. We're high school students. Some of my colleagues are still in school; they haven't finished their spring semester. It's working to balance that and hopefully putting up a successful march on Saturday."

But the real challenge will emerge when the people clear the streets and take their signs home, as activists hope to keep pressure on lawmakers after the news cycle fades.

"Young people are exhausted," said 20-year-old Luis Hernandez, the co-founder of the New York-based advocacy group Youth Over Guns, which focuses on marginalized communities. "We don't want to spend our Saturdays and our after-school hours working to end a crisis that we didn't start."

Hernandez added that his organization and others "do this work when it's not popular" — and, most of the time, young Black and Brown people have been leading the charge.

"Marches like this are definitely important for bringing awareness and attention to this issue, but this work continues even after attention dies down," said Mariana Meza, a 19-year-old activist from El Paso. "I would say it's more important to bring attention to the smaller community violence intervention organizations in the underrepresented areas that are being affected. ... This violence continues even after you stop hearing about mass shootings."

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TEXAS DOE PROJECT

No resting in peace

Hundreds of Texas bodies remain unidentified despite new technology

By St. John BARNED-SMITH and Alexandra KANIK
STAFF WRITERS
and Cecilia GARZELLA
CORRESPONDENT

The last time anyone saw Patricia Elaine Thomas-Wardell was back in the summer of 1970. The 18-year-old new mother had hopped on a bus headed to downtown Houston,

where she was studying to become a court reporter. Patty didn't come home that night of July 17. Her family walked their northeast Houston neighborhood. Her mother filed a police report. She called the FBI. The family contacted reporters, spoke to radio stations, hired a private investigator, even contacted true-crime TV shows, urging them to in-



Marie D. De Jesús/Staff photographer
The remains of Cynthia Wardell's mother, Patricia Thomas-Wardell, weren't identified for decades.

Block walking in Houston led to a Texas law helping to ID remains. **A31**

Key to a Fort Bend cold case was hiding in plain sight for decades. **A32**

investigate the case. Patty's sister, Maxine Hines McNeely, went to the local office of the Social Security Administration, asking to see if anyone was using Patty's Social Security number.

No tips or leads panned out. The family didn't

know it then, but Harris County deputies recovered skeletal remains of a young woman six months later, just a few miles from where Patty lived. They weren't able to identify the corpse, however, and the remains went unnamed, listed as "ML71-0299."

The corpse sat in the morgue for five years before it was buried in a pauper's grave.

Tens of thousands of families across America suffer similar anguish, **Unidentified continues on A30**

AL★DS

EXTRA-ORDINARY!



Shortstop Jeremy Peña celebrates with Jose Altuve after Peña's solo home run in the top of the 18th inning lifted the Astros past the Mariners 1-0 in a marathon Game 3 of the American League Division Series on Saturday in Seattle. The win gave the Astros a sweep of the the Mariners and put them back into the American League Championship Series for the sixth straight year. For full game coverage, go to houstonchronicle.com/sports

KAREN WARREN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Trumpian veterans set sights on House

By Jonathan Weisman
NEW YORK TIMES

In early 2019, as the Defense Department's bureaucracy seemed to be slow-walking then-President Donald Trump's order to withdraw all U.S. forces from Syria, Joe Kent, a CIA paramilitary officer, called his wife, Shannon, a Navy cryptologic technician who was still in Syria working against the Islamic State group.

"Make sure you're not the last person to die in a war that everyone's already forgotten about," Kent said he told his wife. "And that's exactly what happened," he added bitterly.

The suicide bombing that killed Kent and three other service members days later set off a chain of events — including a somber encounter with Trump — that has propelled Kent from a storied combat career to single parenthood, from comparing notes with other antiwar veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan to making increasingly loud pronouncements that the 2020 presidential election was stolen and that the Jan. 6, 2021, rioters are political prisoners.

In five weeks, Kent, 42, a candidate for a House seat in Washington state that was long represented by a soft-spoken moderate Republican, may well be elected to **Veterans continues on A25**

ELECTION 2022

Abbott's turn further right tightens race for 3rd term

Decades-long broad appeal fades as he shores up conservative support

By Jeremy Wallace
AUSTIN BUREAU

Greg Abbott is seeking a record-tying third term as governor amid a rightward shift in Republican politics that had him overseeing one of the most conservative stretches in Texas political history.

While always a conservative's conservative through three decades in Lone Star State politics,

not even his past campaigns could foretell how he would transition from solid Republican to conservative culture warrior.

"I'm governing from my principles," Abbott said during a debate in Edinburg last month when asked about his shift to the right.

In the last year, he's signed a complete ban on abortions in Texas, even in cases of rape and incest.



Jon Shapley/Staff photographer
Gov. Greg Abbott has signed a total ban on abortions and restrictions on what is taught in public school.

He's ordered Child Protective Services to investigate parents of transgender children for possible child abuse. And he twice called special sessions to mandate how teachers in Texas can talk about racism and slavery in the classroom.

It's a far cry from his first run for governor in 2014 when he promised to free teachers from Austin mandates, talked about women having months to make a decision about abortion before the state would get involved, and touted his successes on bi-

partisan issues.

Abbott says he's not the one who has changed, it's the left: Liberals have intruded into all kinds of areas of public life, he says, forcing Republicans to respond. Nowhere is that more apparent than in public schools, he said.

"It's completely different now," he said. "It's like everything has completely changed. There was no teaching or attempt to teach anything like critical race theory or some of these provocative progress-

Abbott continues on A14

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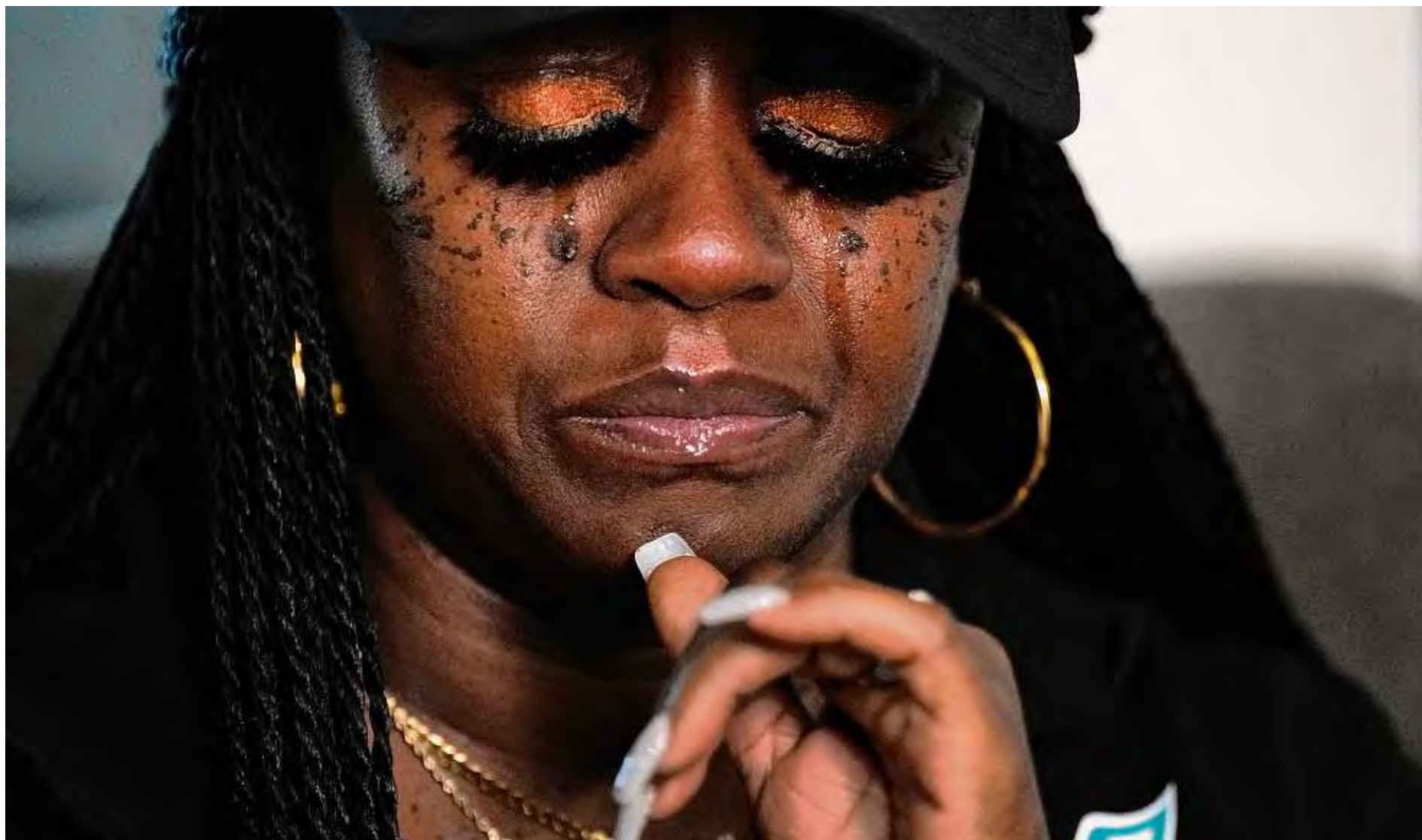
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**Good luck
Houston Astros!**

TEXAS DOE PROJECT



Marie D. De Jesús/Staff photographer

Cynthia Wardell gets emotional as she talks about her mother, Patricia Thomas-Wardell, who disappeared in 1971 when she was an 18-year-old new mother.

UNIDENTIFIED

From page A1

part of a silent mass disaster. Some 600,000 people go missing every year, authorities estimate. At least 1,800 unidentified bodies lie in morgues and pauper's graves across Texas, according to the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs), a voluntary federal database created to track missing persons, unidentified remains and unclaimed bodies.

In recent years, genetic testing and other investigative resources have brought light to cases that had gone unsolved for decades: Dean and Tina Clouse, a young couple from Florida, whose corpses were discovered east of Houston; John Almandarez, a beloved Houston father who disappeared in 2002 but wasn't identified until 2014; and Peggy Anne Dodd, a Fort Bend woman who disappeared in late 1984 but wasn't identified until earlier this year.

A Houston Chronicle investigation found that while advances in forensic science now offer hope for answers in once unsolvable cases like these, a host of obstacles leaves families across Texas and elsewhere in the U.S. suffering, while the dead are laid to rest nameless.

Texas (government) forensic labs aren't equipped to perform more advanced tests necessary to conduct genetic genealogy.

Police departments focus on fresher cases, meaning old cases often languish.

While experts estimate Texas has at least 20,000 unsolved homicides, most of the state's police departments don't have cold case units or detectives.

The state's largest departments have backlogs of 500 to 1,000 cases — but only one or two detectives tasked with investigating them.

Relatives of missing persons report not being taken seriously or being told that "it's not illegal" to leave one's situation, family or community.

Record-keeping is often incomplete or outdated.

Lack of communication between departments hampers investigations, leading to cases where remains of missing persons are discovered just miles from where they disappeared.

Texas' fragmented death reporting system (with hundreds of elected justices of the peace) leads to further communication breakdowns.

While government officials have passed laws to address the problem by entering missing persons cases or unidentified remains into NamUs, the Chronicle found a number of instances of cases where counties apparently are not following those laws.

NamUs is not well known, even among law enforcement.

Many departments have



Marie D. De Jesús/Staff photographer

Patricia Thomas-Wardell's brother, Raymond Thomas, wears a T-shirt with a photo of his sister. The youngest of 10 siblings, Patricia had married the year before she disappeared.

yet to establish policies or funding to embrace new forensic testing techniques, leaving individual detectives to search for grants or other resources to solve old cases.

The federal government has spent hundreds of millions clearing out untested sex-assault kits — but allocated only \$4 million for genetic genealogy to dig into nameless dead cases.

The result: Cases go unsolved unless civilian investigators pick up the slack, identifying possible matches and teaming up with true crime podcasts or other commercial entities to reopen old cases or perform DNA testing and analysis on remains that have languished for decades.

The Houston Chronicle requested information on unidentified remains from the state's 800 justices of the peace and medical examiner's offices from more than a dozen of the largest counties in Texas. Reporters interviewed families of missing persons, investigators, forensic anthropologists, lawmakers and medical examiners and reviewed hundreds of pages of related documents. The families' stories made clear the scope and cost of the failures in the system.

Many, many walks

The youngest of 10 siblings, Thomas-Wardell had married just a year before and was raising her infant daughter, Cynthia Denise. Her father worked as a barber, grocer and landscaper. A small army, the kids came with him to work, bagging groceries at his store, or raking leaves and pushing lawnmowers.

They weren't rich, but most of Thomas' children made their ways into middle-class careers at local chemical companies or in public service jobs, as educators and firefighters.

Thomas-Wardell was determined to improve herself,

Hines McNeely said. Every day, she'd head to Durham's Business College for her stenography class, returning hours later to her daughter.

But not that day. Her brother, Leroy Thomas, heard the news when he stopped at his mother's house after his shift at Houston Fire Station 42 for a morning cup of coffee.

"How can she be missing," he recalled thinking, "It confused me."

Over the years, Thomas walked the Texas Killing Fields in League City, wondering if his sister's body was among the remains that had been found there over the years.

"I went on many, many walks," he said. "I walked them Killing Fields until my feet were sore."

When they went to the police, they were met with skepticism, he said. She'd probably run away, they told him. She could be "doing anything and everything," he said. She was probably on drugs.

"It really made me mad," he recalled. "This is my sister — they didn't want to do anything."

Patty's parents adopted and raised her baby daughter, Cynthia Denise Wardell.

She didn't learn about her mother's disappearance until she was 7, when her grandparents sat her down and told her that her absent father wanted to visit her.

"It bothered me all my life," she said. She looked through newspapers, wrote letters to God, prayed, always wondering what happened to her mother.

Creating NamUs

In 2007, decades after ML71-0299's body had been buried in a pauper's grave, the Department of Justice created NamUs — housing it at the University of North Texas in 2011 — to track missing persons, name-

less dead and unclaimed bodies. The voluntary database allows law enforcement, medical examiners and the public to enter details about missing persons and unidentified bodies and cross-reference them to try to match the puzzle pieces together. Law enforcement and others credit the database with helping resolve thousands of cases across the U.S..

But many law enforcement agencies don't make use of NamUs, and other issues continue to make identifying Jane and John Does difficult, including lack of communication among agencies. A 2015 investigation from the public radio investigative program and podcast "Reveal" found a host of problems hinders the identification of Jane and John Does.

"We just don't communicate well," Rodriguez acknowledged.

Until 2021, just 12 states required law enforcement and medical examiners to enter their nameless dead into NamUs. Texas passed a law last year, but its legislation did not require departments to add old cases, meaning that if someone died and was unidentified in Texas before the John Doe law went into effect, they don't need to be retroactively added to the NamUs system. Further, lawmakers didn't create any accountability mechanisms to ensure that departments comply.

While Congress recently passed The Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains Act, lawmakers didn't actually set aside any money for that task or require the sharing of information among federal databases.

One more try

In 2016, Hines McNeely decided to call the Houston Police Department again.

"I never got any peace," Hines McNeely recalled. "I wanted to find out what hap-

pened to my sister."

Two patrol officers arrived at her home on Seeker Street and took a report. They couldn't find any past records on Wardell-Thomas.

Hines McNeely kept calling. Eventually, she and her family met with HPD Missing Persons Detective Darrin Buse, who took over the case on Oct. 16, 2016.

He met with the family and took DNA from Hines McNeely, one of Thomas-Wardell's brothers, and her daughter. After he left that meeting, he logged on to NamUs and found two cases that looked promising.

He sent the family DNA samples to the University of North Texas, which, at the time, housed NamUs. In March 2017, he learned that the first lead had not panned out. He waited for the lab results on the other set of remains: a body found in January 1971 in a vacant lot in northeast Harris County.

There hadn't been much there: a decayed purse, some sandals with chunky heels, and the skeletal remains of a young woman. The skull had a missing tooth and was damaged, perhaps by a blow to the head.

Years went by with no update. Every February, he filed a report noting that he was still assigned to the case. Then, early this April, he received another email from a forensic analyst at the North Texas lab.

"A Missing Persons DNA Association has been issued for this Missing Person case," he wrote in a report detailing the developments.

He was finally able to speak with Hines McNeely on April 15 — it was Good Friday — and gave her the news: They'd found her.

"It spanned six years, waiting on DNA," he said. "I really don't know why it took so long to get a hit on it."

Chronicle findings

Several factors lead to such delays in identification, the Chronicle found, among them lack of funding, lack of urgency in investigating such cases, lack of knowledge about resources available, lack of investigative expertise.

But a year after Texas required counties to enter information about unidentified persons into NamUs, many are not complying.

In response to its requests, the Chronicle received 274 records from justices of the peace, medical examiners and district attorneys' offices across the state. At least 13 unidentified bodies found after John and Joseph's Law took effect still were not entered into NamUs.

For example, Maverick County's Precinct 3 Place 1 justice of the peace sent records of seven nameless dead found after September 2021. Yet the county's most recent case regis-

Unidentified continues on A31

TEXAS DOE PROJECT

Block walk led to bill to help ID remains

By St. James Barned-Smith
STAFF WRITER

State Rep. Lacey Hull initially became aware of the thousands of unidentified bodies in Texas while block-walking on her first political campaign.

The Houston Republican knocked on the door of David Fritts and learned he is the father of a Joseph Fritts, a young Houstonian whose remains were discovered in 2017 two days after he disappeared but weren't identified until close to two years later.

Fritts told Hull about NamUs, a national database of unidentified bodies that can help police and families search for missing persons — and how law enforcement agencies weren't required to use it.

"I was shocked," she recalled. "Because there's no requirement to use it ... and people assume it's something that's already happening."

After Hull's election, she called Fritts back and ultimately sponsored HB419, known as "John and Joseph's Law," named for John Almandarez and Joseph Fritts.

The law requires police to enter missing persons reports into NamUs within 30 days and for justices of the peace and medical examiners to enter nameless dead cases within 60 days of the death being reported.

But the bill requires entry of cases only after it took effect in September 2021. Advocates for the nameless dead say that could leave relatives of unidentified older Jane and John Does in the lurch, their cases unexamined. And they noted that the bill doesn't have any accountability metric to ensure police or medical examiners do as required. But one analysis of the law found that the number of missing persons cases doubled after it went into effect.

"The hope was that they would do the right thing," Hull said. "And what we've seen is a



Melissa Phillip/Staff photographer

State Rep. Lacey Hull said she was "shocked" to learn that there's no requirement for law enforcement agencies to use the national database of unidentified bodies.

huge uptick in the reporting."

Nevertheless, the Chronicle's analysis showed that some counties are not entering information about unidentified or missing persons into NamUs.

Federal legislation

Still, Texas has done more than the federal government, where lawmakers have failed to pass legislation that would require data collection at the Department of Justice, such as integrating NamUs with the National Crime Information Center. Proposed legislation known as "Billy's Law" would mandate that local departments enter nameless dead cases into NamUs and NCIC.

The first effort to pass Billy's Law went down in flames in 2010, recalled former NamUs spokesman Todd Matthews.

"It was devastating," he recalled. "It's a setback and loss of uniformity."

In late 2020, federal lawmakers finally passed a bill

that addressed some issues for unidentified bodies. The Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains Act, introduced by Sen. John Cornyn, is aimed at preventing migrant deaths and improving efforts to identify missing persons and nameless dead found along the border. The legislation authorizes the government to distribute grant money to help improve reporting of missing persons to federal databases such as the Combined DNA Index System and NamUs.

Matthews now is trying to get laws passed at the state level, a process that promises to take far longer. When Texas lawmakers passed John and Joseph's Law in 2021, it was only the 12th state to do so.

Unfunded mandates

Investigators say the Texas bill brought its own set of problems: a mandate that added extra work for investigators without any financial or logistical support and the lack of a

retroactive entry requirement.

"For smaller agencies, it's not a big deal," said Darrin Buse, a longtime missing persons investigator who recently retired from the Houston Police Department. "But for big agencies, that's a lot of time away for an investigator to be entering data when they could be investigating cases."

When the Chronicle asked justices of the peace across Texas for information about their nameless dead, many JPs in smaller counties said they did not know of any cases, even though they'd been listed in NamUs.

In Austin County, Precinct 4 Place 1 Justice of the Peace Bernice Burger said she had not handled any nameless dead case in her precinct. But her records are not computerized, she said. Nor are they even in her office.

"If you want something from before 2015, it will take quite some time and research, which will incur a \$25 fee," she

wrote in response to the Chronicle's questions. "Let me know if you wish to proceed."

NamUs shows two active cases listed in Bee County, but officials in July told the Chronicle there were none there.

"Unfortunately, we do not have any cases fitting your description/request," they wrote. "If you have any questions, please feel free to contact our office."

The lack of a retroactive entry requirement also has been criticized by families and advocates. But such a requirement would have torpedoed the bill, Hull said.

"Trying to get something like that passed, it was just the cost," she said.

The costs associated with identifying remains are high. Each John Doe case ends up costing about \$7,500, said Misty Gillis, a civilian genetic genealogist who works with medical examiners' offices across the U.S. That cost figures in extracting DNA from remains and having them sequenced, then analyzing the results using genealogy websites to home in on a match.

In the years since police in California used genetic genealogy testing to identify the notorious Golden State Killer in 2018, federal authorities have awarded just over \$833,000 to academics to study the technique. This past year, the Department of Justice announced new grant funding of about \$4.4 million available for law enforcement across the United States to try to identify remains of nameless dead. The funding is far below the levels that would be needed to begin to address the issue.

"There's such a backlog," said Alice Almandarez, whose father's body was discovered in Houston in 2002 but not identified for another 12 years. "Cases are sitting in desk drawers — but that's someone's family."

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UNIDENTIFIED

From page A30

tered in NamUs is from 2017.

Lubbock County District Attorney's Office sent the Chronicle 25 unidentified cases, but two-thirds did not reference the date the body had been found, making it impossible to tell whether the county is in compliance with the new law. Only two cases for the entire county are listed in NamUs.

Many of the 800 justices of the peace contacted by the Chronicle either did not respond to the Chronicle's requests or noted that they did not have to comply with them because the judiciary is not subject to the Texas Public Information Act. (Medical examiners, on the other hand, are required to make such information public.)

In other cases, many JPs in smaller counties said they did not know of any cases, even though they'd been listed in NamUs.

In Austin County, for example, Precinct 4 Place 1 Justice of the Peace Bernice Burger said she had not handled any nameless dead case in her precinct. But her records are not computerized, she said. The documents aren't even in her office.

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The lack of communication between jurisdictions is a common problem.

The discovery in 1971 of Patty Thomas-Wardell's body was handled by the Harris County Sheriff's Office, but her family had reported her disappearance to the Houston Police Department. The agencies either hadn't communicated or hadn't taken the missing persons reports seriously, leaving Hines



Marie D. De Jesús/Staff photographer

Patricia Thomas-Wardell's siblings, from left, Raymond Thomas and Maxime McNeely, and her daughter, Cynthia Wardell, talk about Patricia's disappearance.

McNeely and her siblings in limbo for more than half a century.

Houston Police Homicide Sgt. Richard Rodriguez said he couldn't speak to how the case was handled when Thomas-Wardell first went missing, but "looking back on these old reports, and these old cases, it was a lot different than what it is now."

"We're required to get a lot more data now," he said.

Harris County Sheriff's Homicide Lt. Robert Minchew said the outcome — at the time — reflected the reality of trying to investigate those cases in an age when technology was much more limited.

"This was pre-internet, pre-computer, pre-fax machine, missing persons posters were put up at police stations and on telephone poles in neighborhoods. The sheriff's office had very little chance of knowing about this with the limited information they had," he said.

To make matters worse, the sheriff's office had only skeletal remains — which a medical ex-

aminer had said, back then, belonged to a white female.

The lack of reliable, accessible records is widespread. When the Chronicle requested information from the Galveston County Medical Examiners' Office, officials said their records from 1993 to 2010 were available only in old handwritten journals/log books that are searchable only by flipping page by page, line by line to find unidentified cases.

In several of the cases the Chronicle reviewed, investigators weren't able to find initial missing persons reports.

At the Houston Police Department, the state's largest municipal police department, homicide detectives have only just started seeking forensic genetic genealogy testing in some of its Doe cases, said Rodriguez, the cold case sergeant. The department does not have any dedicated funding for such testing — leading him and his peers to seek outside grants from nonprofits, the Department of Public Safety or elsewhere.

"Before I got here, it was not discussed," he said. "It wasn't being used here."

The toll

For relatives of the missing, a sudden disappearance can lead to unending agony, a trauma that freezes them in time, said Vaile Wright of the American Psychological Association.

"In these kinds of experiences, what you end up sometimes having happen is this sense of not being able to really live one's life," she said. "There's this constant sense of, 'what else is bad is going to happen?'"

That's a feeling that Alice Almandarez remembers all too well.

She last saw her father, John Almandarez, in June 2002, when she was 16. After he disappeared, her family filed a missing persons report. Like Thomas-Wardell's family, they spent days scouring their neighborhood, talking to anyone who would listen.

At the Houston Police Department, investigators told

her they couldn't do anything.

"They told me that maybe my father didn't want to be found or that maybe he turned away from the life he had been living," she told the podcast documentary series "Reveal" in 2015.

Almandarez never stopped searching.

"There's no normal day for you," she recalled recently. "Everyone else keeps living. I felt stuck at 16."

In 2014, she learned about NamUs, pored through its records, and found the remains of someone who she thought might be her father. She donated a sample of her DNA to UNT for entry into CODIS (Combined DNA Index System, a program that operates local, state and national databases of DNA profiles from convicted offenders, unsolved crime scene evidence, and missing persons), facilitated by NamUs, hoping they could compare it to the remains.

More than a decade after her search began, she got an answer: the John Doe was her father.

First responders had pulled John Almandarez's corpse from Buffalo Bayou just a few weeks after his disappearance. His remains had decomposed, leaving him unrecognizable, and he'd been listed as a John Doe.

For Hines McNeely, the relief at finally getting an answer was tempered by other feelings: frustration, rage.

Her sister's body had been discovered just a year after she went missing. It had sat in cold storage for five years, then been buried in a pauper's grave a few years later. It had been right there, waiting to be identified.

She thought of her mother, who had wondered about her youngest daughter's fate until she died in 1984.

Not knowing "was really hard on her," she said. "She would have had some peace."

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TEXAS DOE PROJECT

Key to cold case was hiding in plain sight

By **St. John Barned-Smith**
STAFF WRITER

It came down to a few strands of hair on a hairbrush sitting in an evidence room for almost 40 years.

Fort Bend County deputies had found her body — little more than a skeleton — in a pasture east of FM 762. She'd had a pair of red denim shorts, an "Ocean Pacific" T-shirt, a yellow cigarette lighter, two athletic bags. She'd had some dental work done, but her teeth were natural and in good shape.

They guessed she was around 5 feet, 3 inches. At the morgue, medical examiners couldn't find any obvious signs of foul play.

No one claimed the body. Eventually, it was buried in a cemetery on Williams Way, where it has lain for decades.

Then in 2020, Fort Bend County Sheriff's Detective Scott Minyard began rummaging through the department's cold case backlog.

Minyard had joined the sheriff's office in 2014 after a career in the U.S. Navy and then stints at law enforcement agencies in Wyoming and Austin County.

He had been set to retire but become intrigued when then-Sheriff Troy Nehls sought experienced law enforcement officers to join the department as investigators.

He had helped resolve two cold cases during his time in Austin County. Fort Bend had a backlog of about 75 cold cases. When he pulled out the evidence, he found the gym bags, the clothes — and an old hairbrush, full of hair.

"OK, I got hair," he recalled thinking. "What can I do with hair?"

Hot cases over cold cases

Were it not for Minyard, the case might well have been overlooked.

"You can't do 'hot cases' and cold cases at same time," he said. "Why is that? ... When a murder goes down, it's all hands on deck ... Everyone's running hot. And heavy. And if you're working (on those), you can't dedicate the time that's required to really do justice to these things."

As police departments in Texas and elsewhere are grappling with a surge in homicides, they've seen their success at clearing those crimes fall — even when they know who the victims are.

When the Texas Attorney General's Office stood up a statewide cold case unit two years ago, officials surveyed hundreds of the state's law enforcement agencies. About 90 percent responded that they did not staff a cold case division, said Mindy Montford, a senior prosecutor in the unit.

Huge backlog of cases

The Texas Attorney General's Office cites a statewide backlog of more than 20,000 cold case homicides dating back to 1980, but when the Chronicle asked for a breakdown by county, officials there said one does not exist.

"The OAG does not maintain state-wide data pertaining to cold cases," a records officer wrote in response to the Chronicle's request. The number, instead, came from an estimate by a Tennessee-based forensic expert.

Cold cases, including those involving unidentified victims, often take lower priori-



Blake Kennedy and her daughter, Jenny Estes, recently learned that the remains of Blake's sister, Peggy Anne Dodd, had been found and identified.

Mark Mulligan/Staff photographer



Detective Scott Minyard points out what he believes to be the final resting place of Peggy Anne Dodd to Dodd's sister, left, and niece at the San Gabriel Cemetery in Richmond.

Mark Mulligan/Staff photographer

ty. Most departments don't even have cold case units — or investigators — and even the largest cities in Texas, besides Houston, have only one or two detectives assigned to these types of cases.

Departments across the state report staggering backlogs. In Houston, four to six cold case detectives must grapple with more than 560 cold cases, according to information obtained via a records request.

At the department's Missing Persons unit, nine to 11 investigators have juggled annual caseloads of nearly 10,000 missing persons cases for the past five years.

The lone, part-time, Harris County Sheriff's Office homicide investigator tasked with reviewing cold cases has a backlog of more than 650. Almost 40 of those are nameless John and Jane Does.

That's far fewer detectives than were working cold cases in 2012, when the department shuttered its cold case squad, said Lt. Robert Minchew.

"Back then, we were actively reviewing cases," Minchew said. "Now ... there's not enough hours in a day."

He sometimes passes cases to reserve deputies willing to investigate. But the toll is clear: Families don't get closure. And when cases go unsolved, murderers don't get

caught.

"It feels like no one cares," he said.

The Fort Worth Police Department's backlog tops more than 1,000 open cold cases, according to a department records officer. Since 2015, the department has had one investigator assigned to review those cases. And in 2019 and 2021, they asked a couple of reserve officers to help look at old cases as well.

A lone Bexar County Sheriff's detective works a backlog of about 180 cold cases. Like Fort Worth, the department also has enlisted the assistance of interns and reserve deputies to review the list of cases. Numbers from the Dallas Police Department were unavailable, despite repeated requests over a period of more than two months.

In lieu of any statewide policies to address the issue, civilian investigators have picked up the slack, poring through NaMus, identifying possible matches and teaming up with true crime podcasts or other commercial entities to flag possible cases for departments to re-examine.

A dead end — then 'bam'

In Fort Bend, Minyard sent the hair to a nonprofit forensic lab in Utah. The first efforts failed; the hair had no roots. Then, they tried another

method — and that one worked.

"And bam, they got a DNA profile," he said.

He turned the profile over to a genetic genealogist who uploaded the profile to a family tree website and began looking for possible relatives. Weeks later, they told him they'd found a possible brother, living in Nebraska, and a woman who might be a sister. She lived in nearby Damon.

He called a man who could be the victim's brother with a question: Had a relative of his gone missing?

Yeah, the man responded. His sister, Peggy Anne Dodd. She had been missing since 1984.

"That's it," Minyard recalled thinking, clapping his hands at the memory. "Got it."

Later, he spoke with a woman he believed was Dodd's sister, Blake Kennedy.

Kennedy was 68, living in Needville — not far from where the woman's body had been discovered.

When he spoke to her, Kennedy told him they had grown up together in the '60s and '70s, in Fort Bend and elsewhere.

Their mother worked to support them, selling subscriptions for the Wall Street Journal. But she commuted daily from Fort Bend to downtown Houston and was rarely

home.

Kennedy joined the U.S. Army and by 1973 was married, a union that would last nearly 50 years before her husband — a longtime operator at local petrochemical plants — died of cancer in 2021.

Peggy's life took a much different tack: She was sweet and kind, Kennedy recalled. A talented athlete who loved to draw. Pictures from the time showed her smiling and relaxing, reclining on a couch with their mother.

But the trouble — there was a lot of that, beginning as a teen.

She skipped school. She fell in with the wrong crowd. She'd hitchhike. There were a lot of drugs. Stays in private psychiatric facilities. She married and had a son, but the union fractured after five years, and she lost custody of the child.

"She was 'a blessing,' for a long time," Kennedy said. "She was just a real lost soul."

Their mother did all she could to help, she recalled. But soon, Dodd was grappling with serious mental health and substance abuse issues. She often absconded, hitchhiking across Texas — even as far as Nevada, or to Shreveport, La., to try to see her son.

She kept returning to Rosenberg and the Richmond area — and then leaving again.

Then, Dodd went missing sometime after Easter in 1984.

Kennedy remembers her mom saying her sister had disappeared again.

"What else is new," she recalls thinking, assuming Dodd would resurface, the way she always did.

Her mother reported Dodd's disappearance to the Houston Police Department.

But this time, Dodd didn't return. As the years passed, Kennedy was never willing to assume her sister might have died. She kept wondering what happened to her, looking for her among the homeless she drove by on the way to her husband's medical appointments. Her siblings gave up. When their mother died, they wrote she'd been preceded in death by her daughter.

"I was so upset," Kennedy said. "Why would I think she had died? She was always hitchhiking. She was always disappearing."

News hits like a punch

Then came Minyard's call, in late March.

He wanted to collect DNA and see if his Doe was Kennedy's sister.

A rancher had found the remains in December 1984 while searching for his cattle. There hadn't been much left; a skull and some other bones scattered beneath the pecan tree, along with the clothing and gym bags.

Minyard uploaded Kennedy's DNA into an ancestry website, and the genealogist he was working with reviewed the sample. Weeks after the initial call, he had an answer.

"That was the final confirmation we needed," he said. He called Kennedy back. The remains were her sister's.

Dodd had died just shy of her 29th birthday.

Decades later, the news still hit like a punch. Kennedy had held out hope, even though her sister had disappeared from everyone's radar years before.

They weren't sure what happened, and the medical examiner listed the cause of death as "undetermined." She didn't have any water bottles with her — she likely died of dehydration, Minyard said.

Kennedy wonders about her sister's demise. About why it took so long to connect the dots. How all this could have been solved with better communication between Fort Bend and Houston.

And then the shock of learning her sister was buried in the cemetery over on Williams Way, just a few miles away.

"Here she'd been in plain sight," she said. "We had no idea."



Mark Mulligan/Staff photographer

A picture of Peggy Anne Dodd, right, sits on a table at her niece Jenny Estes' home in Damon.



Mark Mulligan/Staff photographer

A temporary grave marker for Dodd, who disappeared in 1984, was put down by the detective who helped identify her remains.

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ON THE REBOUND

After falling to Alabama, UH beats No. 2 Virginia on the road.
PAGE C1



SUNDAY

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BEST BIG SCREENS

Where to grab some popcorn and enjoy films indoors and out.
PAGE G1

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School vouchers fight heads to House

Advocates argue tide is turning in Texas as educators accused of liberal indoctrination

By Edward McKinley
AUSTIN BUREAU

Private school vouchers were within a handful of votes of becoming Texas law in May 2005. Former Rep. Carter Casteel still remembers the constituent who confronted her in her office that day.

“He kind of threatened me,

not to harm me, but that I wouldn't be re-elected if I didn't vote for the vouchers,” Casteel, a New Braunfels Republican, said in an interview. A public school teacher and school board member before she served in the Legislature, Casteel is and was a staunch opponent of private school vouchers.

“I explained to him my posi-

tion, and he wasn't very happy, I remember that,” she said. “If you want your child to go to a private school, then that's your choice and you spend your money, but you don't take taxpayer dollars away.”

Debate on the floor of the Texas House stretched on for hours, and the voucher bill was gutted following a series of back-and-forth, close votes. Casteel voted no, saying publicly that she was willing to lose her House seat over it.

In a dramatic capstone to the proceedings, Rep. Senfronia Thompson ran across the floor and yanked the microphone out of the bill author's hand, yelling for attention to a procedural mistake in the bill that led to its death.

That day was the high-water mark in efforts to pass private school vouchers in Texas.

In the years since, policies often have passed the state Senate, but they have been blocked by a powerful coalition of Democrats

and rural Republicans in the House. In fact, the House has routinely and overwhelmingly supported a statement policy that outright bans taxpayer funds from going to private schools in sessions since.

But advocates for vouchers believe that those legislative dynamics that have been frozen for the last 17 years finally might be thawing.

As Republicans for the past year have raised alarms over
Vouchers continues on A9

MY FAMILY'S MYSTERY

Houston Chronicle reporter St. John Barned-Smith spent months investigating missing persons cases, except the one in his own family ... until now

By St. John Barned-Smith STAFF WRITER

Frances St. John Smith arrived at breakfast dressed for class in a simple orange dress, tan shoes and a brown coat lined with skunk fur. It was the beginning of the spring semester at Smith College in western Massachusetts: Friday, Jan. 13, 1928.

That unseasonably warm, mid-winter day marked the last time anyone saw my great-aunt alive.

Over the course of the next 14 months, there'd be a frantic search to find her, sparked in part by unfounded fears about a serial kidnapper prowling the Smith campus.

Eventually, it died down.

But, nearly a century after her disappearance, unsolved elements of Frances' case continued to nag at my family and me.

Given my job as a crime reporter, this personal experience inspired me to write numerous stories about Texas' missing and unidentified dead, including one on the identification, after 40 years, of a young Florida couple murdered in 1981 — and the finding of their baby daughter, now an adult who is alive and well.

Through it all, I kept coming back to the great-aunt I never
Mystery continues on A11

\$1,000 REWARD

Missing Smith College Student



Frances St. John Smith

A Freshman at Smith College disappeared Friday, January 13, 1928. As no motive can be found for her leaving, it is thought she may have met with an accident. The girl's father, St. John Smith, offers above reward for information leading to the finding of the Girl.

She is described as follows:

18 years old, 5 feet 5 inches high, 130 lbs. Light brown hair running to reddish, blue-grey eyes, had on an orange flame Jersey dress with tan collar and cuffs, tan shoes and tan stockings, and a terra cotta (red) coat with brown fur collar. On the fourth finger of the right hand she wore a small ring with black enamel vine.

Send all information to
JOSEPH V. DALY, State Detective
Northampton, Mass. Phone 76

Or SMITH COLLEGE
Phone 825-W
CHIEF OF POLICE, Northampton, Mass.

A \$1,000 reward, raised to \$10,000 days later, was offered for information on Frances St. John Smith.

PVAMU, new leader share goal

By Samantha Ketterer
STAFF WRITER

History is part of what drew Tomikia LeGrande to 146-year-old Prairie View A&M University, and like many of the administrators before her, it defines her goals for the school.

LeGrande, who is Prairie View's next president, said she was moved on a recent walk around campus by the reminders of the people who were enslaved on the former Waller County plantation. It signified how the same grounds became a place of opportunity, and she wants to build on that — sending more students forth in graduation gowns despite their initial barriers to education.

“I have dedicated my career to institutions that have really focused on serving individuals
LeGrande continues on A12

‘Stupidity’ triumphs in Putin's war

NEW YORK TIMES

They never had a chance.

Fumbling blindly through cratered farms, the troops from Russia's 155th Naval Infantry Brigade had no maps, medical kits or working walkie-talkies, they said. Just a few weeks earlier, they had been factory workers and truck drivers before being drafted in September. One medic was a former barista who had never had any medical training.

Now, they were piled onto the tops of overcrowded armored vehicles with Kalashnikov rifles from a half-century ago and virtually nothing to eat, they said. Russia had been at war most of the year, yet its army seemed less prepared than ever. In interviews, members of the brigade
Russia continues on A23

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MYSTERY

From page A1

knew. What had happened to her? With some trepidation — did I really want to reopen this Pandora's box? — I logged on to Newspapers.com and typed Frances' name. There were more than 5,000 stories.

Dreamlike

Frances came from East Coast privilege. Her father, St. John Smith Sr., grew up in Maine, where his ancestors had started a successful grocery business in Portland. He'd moved to New York, where he worked as a stockbroker, living in a brownstone at 129 E. 70th St. with his wife, Florence Howland, and two children, Frances and St. John Jr., my grandfather. They spent summers in western Massachusetts on a rustic, 77-acre farm that they'd nicknamed "The Ledges."

In one childhood photo, my grandfather and his sister walk hand-in-hand on a wooded path. The sepia-toned picture has a dreamlike quality to it, the children looking calm and inquisitive.

Just a few years later, Frances enrolled at Smith, the elite women's college founded in 1871.

Frances' friends and Smith officials realized she'd disappeared on Jan. 14, the day after her final breakfast at Dewey House on campus. Her best friend, Joy Kimball, came looking for her after leaving a note that went unanswered the day before.

"I have (not) see(n) you for so very long!" she wrote in the note, preserved in the Smith archives. "I wish you would come over just for a second after lunch to show me you are alive and kicking!"

When police arrived, they found Frances had left her dorm without packing any clothes or taking money. But she'd made her bed, tidied up her closet.

Her parents rushed to Smith. They stayed at the Northampton Hotel, attempting to lead the search even as they were "prostrated" by grief, newspapers wrote at the time. At Smith, the school newspaper carried a brief note about Frances, saying her disappearance was "a source of great worry to the college." Beyond Smith, the story landed on dozens of front pages on papers across the nation: A young, attractive, wealthy college coed had gone missing on Friday the 13th. And she'd vanished two years after another Smith student — Alice Corbett — had disappeared, also on a Friday the 13th.

Were the two related? Was a serial kidnapper prowling western Mass?

The disappearance proved a nightmare for Smith President William Allan Neilson. Reporters noted Frances' disappearance was at least the fifth in 42 years.

Neilson received so many letters from scores of anxious parents (at least one removed his daughter from the school) that the school's alumni association sent out letters to families to debunk the more egregious rumors and reassure them of their children's safety.

The search

My great-grandfather, St. John Smith, immersed himself in the search. News photographers snapped photos of him in a black suit and a black bowler, looking very much the stockbroker. He offered a \$1,000 reward but within days had raised it to \$10,000. He did interviews with reporters and hired private investigators.

State troopers and Northampton police scrambled to find the missing freshman.

In Massachusetts, the Boston Globe reported possible sightings in towns across the state: Deerfield. Westfield. Portland. Lynn. A train conductor in Canada claimed he'd seen her and she was planning to go live in a convent. Stories reported sightings in Michigan, Florida, Missouri — and at least one in Paris.

Frances' mother wrote heartbreaking appeals in newspapers across the state.

"We want you to know we are thinking of nothing but your safety and happiness,"



Boston Globe

The Jan. 16, 1928, front page of the Boston Globe featured the disappearance of Frances St. John Smith from Smith College days earlier. Her case made front pages in newspapers across the U.S.

she wrote. "If you are safe and wish to make a different life for yourself we do not want to interfere. ... We only want to care for you and to know you are safe. We get through the days only because we hope every hour to hear from you."

As the story spread, tips flooded in, and detectives ran down tips of possible sightings across the country, responding to telegrams from Louisiana, Washington, D.C., Iowa and elsewhere.

Smith employees used grappling irons to drag Paradise Pond, wondering if Frances had plunged through the ice. Police enlisted the aid of local Boy Scout troops to comb nearby woods.

State Police searched by air. They looked along and in the Connecticut River.

My great-grandfather hired an inventor from Indiana equipped with an underwater light to again search Paradise Pond and eventually drained the whole thing in the hopes of finding Frances' body. Later, they considered dynamiting the river to try to dislodge remains on the riverbed — in the chance that's where she'd met her demise.

Dozens of psychics, spiritualists and mediums also sent notes. Some claimed she was dead; others wrote of having had visions or dreams and knew where she was.

On Jan. 20, a Globe story revealed a tip from a psychic in Malden, who claimed Frances ran away with the family chauffeur.

It was a blizzard of information, most of it junk.

At the hotel in Northampton, my great-grandparents rifled through the letters, at times more than 50 a day. Some were from readers moved by the story, sending prayers and tips. Others came from detectives, private investigators or trackers.

None of the leads panned out.

Worse still were the ransom notes, extortionists hoping for a quick payout.

"Smith girl is somewhere in Phila.," one read. "She will be returned safely if \$5,000 is left at the NE corner 5th Wallace Street at 1230 a.m. no later than Feb 1. 1928. — If not, well, you know the consequences — don't forget harm will come to



Smith family photo

A family photo shows Frances St. John Smith and her younger brother, St. John Smith Jr., in the 1920s.

her if any of us are captured by the cops."

Another stomach-churning letter demanded \$50,000 delivered to P.O. Box 515 in Northampton.

Frances' father mentioned the note to a friend a few days later in a letter that hinted at the fury and pain he must have felt.

"They did not even promise to return Frances," my great-grandfather wrote. Police soon caught the ransom-note writer, a silk worker who lived near Smith. But a federal grand jury refused to indict him because there wasn't a federal statute outlawing blackmail.

It felt like poor justice, for someone to add to their torment and walk away without consequence.

An investigation

This past October, 94 years after my great-aunt's disappearance, I traveled to Smith. In the special collections wing of Neilson Library — yes, the same President Neilson who dealt with the furor over Frances' disappearance — I found files full of letters from the public to my great-grandfather; correspondence with the private detectives he'd hired and a trove of other documents.

In one folder, I found my great-aunt's journal and other items investigators had found in her desk — letters from an admirer at nearby Amherst College, thank-you notes she'd started writing to her aunt and

uncle, and notes friends had left for her. She filled her agendas with to-do lists. One entry, on Sept. 30, 1927, showed plans to go to chapel with her friend Joy and later have lunch with a friend named Sally — and at 4:30 p.m. that day, tea with another friend.

At first, my great-grandfather wrote to his private detectives about advertisements in local newspapers — how to describe his daughter, what strategies might be most successful in finding her.

The tone shifted as the weeks passed. "As time goes on, Mrs. Smith and I feel that there is less and less that we can do," he wrote four months after Frances' disappearance, "and our discouragement increases. Mrs. Smith however still hopes Frances is alive and will be found."

Over the course of my career, I'd interviewed many families whose relatives died or disappeared. I ask relatives to tell me stories about their loved ones: their favorite music, their favorite foods, lessons they've learned from the missing and the dead.

Now, I had full access into the inner thoughts of the people at the center of the story, my family's story.

I found myself undone, reading my great-grandfather's letters, holding those pages, taking in the long, looping lines of his cursive. He always ended those with a formal "Very sincerely yours," but for me they seemed to vibrate with tension and worry.

It put into perspective the pain of those about which I'd written.

I thought of all the Houstonians I'd interviewed over the years whose relatives had disappeared: the parents of a reporter kidnapped in Syria. The union worker whose mother disappeared when she was just a baby. The woman whose father vanished in 2002, when she was 16, but who wasn't identified until 2014.

"There's no normal day for you," she'd told me. "Everyone else keeps living."

That must have been how St. John and Florence felt — the world moving forward for everyone else, but they remained frozen in time. Every ring of the doorbell, every letter, every telegram must have brought a



Boston Globe

A Jan. 19, 1928, front page of the Globe includes a photo of people searching for Frances along the Connecticut River.



St. John Barned-Smith/Staff

Frances' student agenda shows notes from her freshman year at Smith College in western Massachusetts.

fleeting stab of hope, just as quickly dashed.

Searching for a reason

Reporters and police searched for an explanation for Frances' disappearance.

Reporters dug up an article Frances had written for the Milton Magus, her high school newspaper, in which she'd said her idea of "unalloyed bliss" was to run away.

Joy told a detective that Frances seemed "more than absent-minded," and very depressed. "Frances told her what a failure she was and that there was nothing for her to do but three things — "to jump in the river, to run away, or to go home."

Her friends and family suffered in agony.

Classmate Anne Morrow wrote to her mother the day after her disappearance.

"I can't understand tragedy like this," Morrow said. "I feel convinced that it was suicide. ... She was depressed ... and she had so few friends and did not confide in anyone."

She blamed herself. "If only I had talked to her after vacation," she wrote. "If only I had gone up to her room."

It would not be the last time Morrow would lose a loved one to a tragic disappearance. She married Charles Lindbergh in May 1929. Less than two years after their son's birth, the infant was kidnapped and murdered.

Friends said Frances felt isolated at Smith. She'd wanted to room with Joy, her high school friend. But school officials had placed her in Dewey House. The structure, a stately, three-story wood building that now houses Smith's philosophy department, was the dorm for the school's most affluent students.

While Frances had been a star student in high school, winning prizes for her musical talents, she struggled at Smith. That was one clue school officials and relatives seized on.

"Nothing seems to matter," Neilson quoted her as saying, "and I wish I was dead."

Her poor grades got her a scolding from her mother.

"She was a delicate, sensitive soul," my great-grandmother told reporters. "I believe she ran away because she felt certain she would fail in her mid-year examinations. I am sure she is hiding somewhere and that we will hear from her."

But recently, Frances had seemed to be finding her stride, writing about how surprised she'd been to get B's in history and French.

"If only I had not been lazy before," she'd written. "But there's no use regretting and the marks show that it is more than possible for me to get the registrar's (honors) list."

The search ends

As the weeks passed, hope that Frances might be alive faded.

Searchers returned to Paradise Pond and then turned their attention to the nearby Connecticut River.

In letters, Frances' father returned again and again to the river, and there was a plan from his advisers of using dynamite to dislodge Frances' body.

The search would end 14 months later, on March 29, 1929, in the river's swirling currents, 19 miles south of Smith, near an aviation field in the town of Longmeadow.

Two factory workers were trawling the river, looking for the body of a friend of theirs who'd fallen in days before.

Instead, they found the body

From page A11

of a young woman, caught in the branches of a willow tree. The remains were badly decomposed, one of the fingers missing. There was a scrap of fabric clinging to the body.

Decades later, the airfield is long gone, replaced by agricultural fields. Piles of spoiled eggplant and squash lined the fields' edges when I visited in October. A farmhand pointed me toward the river, which was blocked by dense forest. A narrow path twisted through maple saplings and towering oaks and beech trees. Unmowed grass, mixed with lady's mantle, reached to my knees.

I bushwhacked through thorn-covered vines, dodging discarded mattresses and hopping over fallen logs grown musty with age. After a few hundred yards, the river came into view, shrouded in mist. A few sticks drifted in the clear water. Looking north, I saw a low-hanging branch popping a few yards out into the water.

I wondered if that could be the tree where searchers found the body.

Identification

Florence and St. John at first denied the possibility it was their daughter.

The body pulled from the river weighed a bit more than Frances had. The lone piece of clothing on the corpse was the wrong color. Detectives said pollution could have changed the color and worn the rest of the clothing away.

Others argued that no body could have remained intact that long in the river. Fourteen months in the tumultuous currents, trips over dams, and bottom-feeding catfish or other creatures surely would have destroyed the cadaver.

But a local police chief and a medical examiner both said they believed it to be Frances. The next day, the family's dentist, Dr. Carleton Wood, examined the body.

The dentist found "two strands of platinum wire linking the cuspids of the lower jaw, and used to straighten the teeth between" — essentially a retainer.

The work was his, he said, matching it with an earlier version she'd worn. With that,



Kay BARNED-SMITH

St. John BARNED-SMITH is the great-nephew of Frances St. John Smith, who is buried alongside her parents at a cemetery in Amherst, Mass. Her body was found later in the Connecticut River.

Frances' parents dropped their objection. They'd have to take the word of the dentist.

They never recovered. My great-grandmother died four years later of a heart attack. What must those years have been like? Empty, waiting for answers that never came. Searchers had found a body — but hadn't been able to answer

any of the central questions of her daughter's disappearance.

When I read her will, I found she'd made a provision setting aside funds for Frances, should she ever "reappear or make her whereabouts known."

Frances' friends had said she was absent-minded or forgetful. Had she suffered from some mental condition that

could have been treated more effectively today? I could identify with the loneliness her friends said she suffered from; the depression that's stalked me over the years. I found myself looking for other similarities: her love of the outdoors and music.

I wasn't prepared for the intense sadness that would sur-

face as I pored through those old letters or during conversations with relatives. At the same time, I felt grateful for the sense of connection I'd felt learning about part of my family that had long been a mystery to me.

The grave

I went to visit my great-aunt at a cemetery in Amherst with my parents in mid-October. We found her at the back of a sloping hill, amid a copse of maples, pines and sweet gums. Her mother's and father's tombs lay next to hers, and a few yards beyond, her younger brother's — my grandfather.

Moss and lichen covered parts of the grave markers, and moisture had aged the stone in other places, turning the cement gray nearly black.

As I scraped the stones clean, I felt another wave of grief. The force of it surprised me, this sorrow for ancestors I'd never met.

The trees' leaves had turned a brilliant yellow, and the whole area seemed to glow as bright sun filtered through the tree cover.

Frances' marker was perhaps 4 feet high, a concrete cross sitting atop a stone plinth.

The back read "Beloved daughter of Florence and St. John Smith." Her name was etched on the other side, with the dates of her birth and death.

Below, they'd left an epitaph: Child of Grace.



St. John BARNED-SMITH/STAFF

Frances' disappearance left her parents heartbroken. Her mother died four years after her body was found in March 1929.



Kay BARNED-SMITH

St. John BARNED-SMITH photographs his father, St. John Smith, during their trip to the Connecticut River near Longmeadow.

LEGRANDE**From page A1**

who have been historically under-served," she said. "Prairie View being a historically Black college resonated with me personally, from my past experiences as a student and as an administrator. The mission of the institution aligned with me."

The Texas A&M System Board of Regents earlier this month unanimously approved LeGrande, 42, to lead the land grant institution. Currently serving as vice president for strategy, enrollment management and student success at Virginia Commonwealth University, she will begin this summer at Prairie View under a charge to increase enrollment and improve student success measures, including graduation and retention rates.

While the university has made significant gains in fundraising and research under current President Ruth J. Simmons, Prairie View A&M enrollment has fluctuated over the past five years. First-year retention has remained steady, with 73 percent of the 2021 cohort returning the next fall. Graduation rates were much lower, with 20 percent of the 2018 cohort graduating in four years, and 51 percent of the 2016 cohort graduating in six years, according to the university.

Commitments to change have earned LeGrande some buzz from students, faculty, alumni and members of the wider community. A town hall last week drew dozens of people from around the university, and leaders of the Faculty Senate said they are optimistic after meeting with LeGrande.

"When you're around a strong leader, it tends to rub off on you," said Tabitha S. Morton, vice speaker of the Faculty Senate. "She's very confident, she's very powerful. The way she carried herself, the way she spoke, the way she listened to us was a way we haven't really experienced before. ... She created these lines between faculty and

administration right from the very beginning."

Commitment to service

LeGrande's ascension in higher education has taken her through both predominately white universities and historically Black colleges and universities — but she said it's important to know that she started her own journey at an HBCU.

Picking up from her parents, who attended Savannah State University but didn't graduate, LeGrande earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry from the same institution and a master's degree from North Carolina A&T State University.

After earning a doctorate of education in higher education administration from Texas Tech University, she returned to North Carolina A&T as a graduate recruiter. That spring-boarded her into a career focused on admissions and student success, taking her to Winston-Salem State University and the University of Houston-Downtown in rising positions.

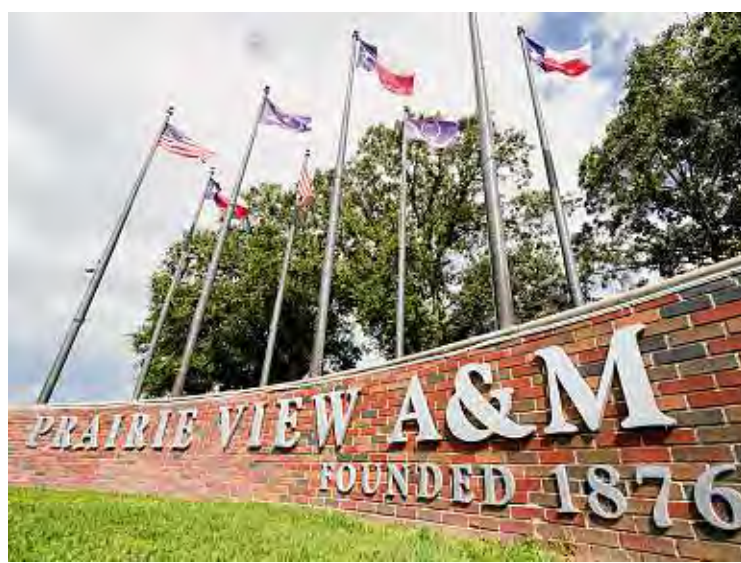
Since 2018, LeGrande has been at Virginia Commonwealth University, where administrators said she has championed student success and college accessibility initiatives.

Aashir Nasim, VCU's vice president for institutional equity, effectiveness and success, called LeGrande a "visionary" who sees her plans 10 or 15 years in the future. At VCU, she also developed a financial services model that has helped reduce the amount of debt that students hold upon graduation.

"It's not just rhetoric with her," he said.

A 14-member search committee at the A&M System selected LeGrande along with two other candidates as their preferred choices to follow Simmons as president, said David Rembert, speaker of the Faculty Senate and a member of the committee.

LeGrande blew the committee away in interviews, he said. Chancellor John Sharp in November announced her as the sole finalist to be Prairie View's ninth president, and the board



Melissa PHILLIP/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The next president of Prairie View A&M University wants to turn the institution into a top-ranked historically Black college.

approved her less than a month later.

She said she feels well-positioned to succeed: Simmons, an innovator in higher education and the first Black president of an Ivy League school, came out of retirement to become Prairie View's president in 2017 and bolstered the university's fundraising efforts and research status during her five years in the role. Simmons announced in March that she would be stepping down after a long career, having only "anticipated a brief stint at the helm."

"Who wouldn't want to follow Dr. Simmons? She's a trailblazer," LeGrande said. "When I think about the opportunity to receive a baton from somebody, to take the institution to its next leg of the race, I consider that to be a privilege."

Goal to be a top HBCU

Much of her first year in office will be spent listening to students, faculty and staff, LeGrande said. But she has at least one specific goal: transforming Prairie View into a Top 15-ranked HBCU.

The school is currently ranked 26th in the U.S. News and World Report rankings, and LeGrande said investing time in student success initiatives, research and fundraising can help



LeGrande

the university make the jump.

She added that she feels Prairie View has room for more partnerships with area companies and universities, and she is open to exploring new programs — especially interdisciplinary ones — that might fit the needs of the Houston-area workforce. She's also hoping to financially bolster programs that focus on student leadership and culture, such as the Marching Storm Band.

LeGrande said she will also explore opportunities to improve financial aid packages, although she said she doesn't know how that might take shape. At Virginia Commonwealth, she created a "culture of care" model, which takes into account the whole student and removes barriers to education that relate to a person's myriad identities, including race, ethnicity, sexuality and religion.

"Students that we serve today are very different than those long ago, but many institutions were constructed, their processes and systems were constructed 100 years ago," she said. "So it's time to change them a little bit."

LeGrande said she was equal-

ly attracted to Prairie View as the A&M System was to her. She wasn't on a one-track mission to become a university president, she said, but she wanted to be Prairie View's president in particular. On top of the school's history and commitment to underserved populations, she felt the university was perfectly located near an economically thriving city and within a system that has resources to lift students higher.

"I've always had my eye on Prairie View," she said.

LeGrande's term will begin toward the end of the upcoming legislative session, but pushing for more higher education funding often falls to presidents — and she said she's prepared for that duty, especially given she has a background in advocacy. (Other higher education issues are expected to surface this session, with Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick planning to end eligibility for tenure at public universities, and add the teaching of critical race theory as cause to remove tenure.)

Rembert, the Faculty Senate speaker, said he isn't too worried that LeGrande seems to be focused more heavily on student success than faculty initiatives. Simmons left them in a good place with research growth, and LeGrande has already floated ideas on how faculty can keep the momentum going, he said.

But LeGrande will especially have to prove her stated commitment to shared governance, a long-standing principle in higher education that faculty should be involved in decision-making at every step of the process, Rembert said.

"We've got administrators who don't quite ... we're not sure if they're for or anti-shared governance at this time," he said.

Prairie View is the second-oldest public higher education institution in Texas. LeGrande would oversee about 9,000 students and a \$312 million budget, according to the university's latest enrollment and budget data.

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