

COURTS

Teen accused in killing may be tried as adult

Sentencing options far lighter if case stays in juvenile court

BY JON WILCOX JWILCOX@VICAD.COM

A 15-year-old accused of fatally shooting another Victoria teen in August could face a 99-year prison sentence if prosecuted as an adult or as few as 10 years of probation if he stays in juvenile court. Although prosecutors have not

yet determined how to proceed, Assistant District Attorney Christian Villanueva, who serves as the office's juvenile prosecutor, said he was leaning toward juvenile court.

"At this time, we are proceeding forward with both options, but I think it would probably be in the

state's and the juvenile's best interest to keep it in the juvenile system," Villanueva said.

While the charges remain the same, those convicted in juvenile and adult court in Texas face drastically different punishments. But for defendants between the ages of 14 and 17 who

face severe charges, such as first-degree murder, prosecution in either court is possible.

The Victoria teen accused of killing Jerimiah Hernandez, 16, is charged with first-degree murder and tampering with evidence.

SEE JUVENILE, A5

SPECIAL REPORT

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT



ANGELA PIAZZA/APIAZZA@VICAD.COM

After giving her daughters a bath, Angelica Castaneda applies prescription ointment to Tiana Crane while infant Jasmin Crane awaits her turn. Castaneda suspects her family is being made ill by mold infesting her home since Hurricane Harvey. Since the storm, her daily routine includes an intensive cleaning process and the use of various ointments and prescriptions to treat skin and respiratory ailments. Learn more about how Harvey has affected Castaneda's family and other Crossroads residents inside Your Life, Page E1.

After Hurricane Harvey, obstacles to rebuilding are often hidden from those who aren't facing them: "The mentality is, 'I'm OK, so everybody else must be OK,'" said Kim Pickens, a case manager helping people recover. The Victoria Advocate series "Hidden in Plain Sight" will explore inequality and how Harvey exposed the gap between the people who could afford to rebuild - and everyone else.

To read the first part of this series, see Page E1.

\* This project was produced as part of the University of Southern California Center for Health Journalism National Fellowship. It was also made possible by the nonprofit Report for America, which deploys emerging journalists in local newsrooms like the Victoria Advocate. This project will be available in both English and Spanish through a partnership with Revista de Victoria.

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

Visit VictoriaAdvocate.com/hidden.

PUBLIC SAFETY



MATTHEW WESTMORELAND/MWESTMORELAND@VICAD.COM

A member of the Victoria Fire Department walks past the site of a fatal rollover on U.S. 59 South.

Woman dies in rollover wreck

BY AMBER ALDACO AALDACO@VICAD.COM

A Victoria woman died after a vehicle rollover on U.S. 59 on Saturday.

Kelvin Toliver, 53, of Victoria, was traveling eastbound on U.S. 59 in a red 1999 Ford Explorer with his wife,

Shirley Johnson Toliver, 63, also of Victoria, just before 4 p.m. Saturday when he lost control of the vehicle, said Sgt. Ruben San Miguel, a spokesman with the Texas Department of Public Safety. Toliver overcorrected, San

Miguel said, causing the Ford Explorer to roll over. A 1999 Chevrolet Cavalier that was being towed by the Ford Explorer also flipped, San Miguel said.

Shirley Johnson Toliver

SEE WRECK, A5

BUSINESS

Contract for Texas Mile remains under negotiation

BY KATHRYN CARGO KCARGO@VICAD.COM

Victoria Regional Airport officials and Texas Mile owners are still negotiating the event's contract, five months after they initially began.

Airport executive director Lenny Llerena sent a letter in early April to Texas Mile co-owner Shannon Matus terminating the event's 10-year contract between the airport and J&S Matus Inc. Officials and event owners have been renegotiating the new contract since, but Llerena expects to have the contract finalized by the next airport commissioners meeting Sept. 27. Commissioners are expected to vote on the contract.

Llerena sent a draft to Matus a few

Opinion: Airport, Texas Mile bring entertainment, business to Crossroads Viewpoints, D4

weeks ago to review and make any comments if she has any, he said. The next step would be to create a final draft based on her comments or use the current one if she doesn't have any.

Llerena didn't provide a reason for the lengthy negotiation but said "it takes time to form a contract."

"From what I can tell you, 90 percent of the contract is about the same," he said.

On the terminated contract, the event organizers collected 100 percent of the

SEE MILE, A5

WEATHER

TODAY

Humid with times of cloud and sun



89

TONIGHT

Partly cloudy and humid



73

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INEQUALITY

“It’s been pretty bad. //  
But we’re trying to do the best we can.”

ANGELICA CASTANEDA, Refugio resident, mother of three, Hurricane Harvey survivor

# OVERLOOKED

## HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

Hurricane Harvey revealed the gap between people who had the resources to rebuild – and everyone else. But today, the obstacles to rebuilding are often hidden in plain sight from those who aren’t facing them: “The mentality is, ‘I’m OK, so everybody else must be OK,’” said Kim Pickens, a case manager helping people recover. Advocates like Pickens contend rebuilding will take commitment, compassion and creativity from residents and government leaders. Through the continuing series “Hidden in Plain Sight,” the Victoria Advocate will examine inequality and rebuilding after Harvey. This project was produced with the University of Southern California Center for Health Journalism’s National Fellowship.



In what used to be her children’s playroom, Angelica Castaneda, 30, mops up bleach and water while barefoot. She cleans three times a day to protect her family from the opportunistic organisms that infested the home as a result of Hurricane Harvey. Sometimes, the cleaning chemicals and kicked-up grime make her ill.

## Hurricane Harvey lays bare the painful divide between residents who can afford to rebuild – and everyone else

STORY BY MARINA STARLEAF RIKER AND PHOTOS BY ANGELA PIAZZA ● MRIKER@VICAD.COM AND APIAZZA@VICAD.COM

**B**leach fumes make Angelica Castaneda’s eyes burn, but watery eyes are better than her children falling ill because of mold.

Wearing athletic shorts and a teal T-shirt, the 30-year-old splashes a gallon of bleach onto baseboards in what used to be her children’s play area – a room, now covered in water stains, where a fan dangles precariously from the ceiling. The mother of three doesn’t like using the harsh chemicals, but she learned the hard way that a normal cleaning routine isn’t enough.

This summer, her doctors diagnosed her then 6-month-old baby, Jasmin, with a respiratory infection – an ailment blamed in part on organisms that infested the walls and floors after Hurricane Harvey soaked her home in Refugio, a once-booming oil town along the Texas Gulf Coast.

After a course of antibiotics, Jasmin is healthy again. But her mother can’t stop worrying: Was the mold also the culprit behind her toddler, Tiana’s, allergies?

And almost 10 months earlier, was the stress from ripping out soaked walls and floors the reason Castaneda went into early labor four times, then eventually delivered Jasmin a month and a half early?

Sometimes, she feels anxious just thinking about it. So more than one year after Harvey, fans



Despite the air vents being cleaned the day before, what Angelica suspects is mold grows in the Refugio home she owns with her husband, Leonard Crane. She said the air ducts have holes in them since Hurricane Harvey, and it will cost about \$2,800 to replace them.

blow in every room of her home – all day, every day. The kitchen and playroom floors are mopped with bleach at least twice a day, and sometimes again about 3 a.m. when she lets her dogs out. Carpets are vacuumed twice a day. Air vents are wiped every other day. The bathroom closet is scrubbed for mold every other day.

“It’s been pretty bad,” says Castaneda. “But we’re trying to do the best we can.”

The mother, however, didn’t always spend half of her waking hours cleaning. Her home didn’t always smell like a mix of newborn baby, bleach and mold.

That was before Hurricane Harvey slammed the Texas Gulf Coast as a Category 4 hurricane Aug. 25, 2017, causing an estimated \$125 billion in damage. Since then, recovery

### DONATE OR VOLUNTEER

Most charities that are helping residents rebuild are looking for materials and money to do so. They are also looking for volunteers to get the work done – especially skilled workers such as carpenters, plumbers and electricians.

■ **In Victoria**, call the Victoria County Long-Term Recovery Group at Dolly Stokes at 361-578-3561 or send donations to P.O. Box 354, Victoria TX 77902.

■ **In Refugio**, contact the Refugio County Volunteer Reception Center at 361-230-1154 or [refugiovolunteers@gmail.com](mailto:refugiovolunteers@gmail.com). You can also contact the Coastal Bend Disaster Recovery Group, which is working to help Refugio in addition to several other counties like Aransas and Nueces. To donate funds and materials, contact 361-587-5005 or [coastalbenddrrg@gmail.com](mailto:coastalbenddrrg@gmail.com).

■ **In Calhoun**, contact the Calhoun Long-Term Recovery Group at 361-434-0682 or email [calhounltrg@gmail.com](mailto:calhounltrg@gmail.com).

■ **In Austwell and Tivoli**, call Rusty Cindy Ministries at 512-297-7596.

### GET HELP

Regardless of where you live, first try dialing 2-1-1.

■ **In Victoria**, dial 2-1-1 or contact the Victoria County-Long Term Recovery Group at 361-703-5567 to find out how to apply for assistance. You can also fill out a form online from the Victoria County LTRG.

■ **In Refugio**, dial 2-1-1 or contact the Refugio County Volunteer Reception Center at 361-230-1154 or [refugiovolunteers@gmail.com](mailto:refugiovolunteers@gmail.com).

■ **In Calhoun**, dial 2-1-1 or contact the Calhoun Long-Term Recovery Group at 361-434-0682 or email [calhounltrg@gmail.com](mailto:calhounltrg@gmail.com).

**Need crisis counseling?**  
Crossroads residents can speak to someone for support and help finding local assistance through the Texans Recovering Together program, which runs through the end of October. Call 361-573-0731.

**Need legal help?**  
Call Texas RioGrande Legal Aid. To view a list of offices near your home, visit [VictoriaAdvocate.com](http://VictoriaAdvocate.com).

### FIND MORE ONLINE

**VA** Our interactive e-edition provides more content than ever! Go online to [VictoriaAdvocate.com](http://VictoriaAdvocate.com) and click on this story to find:

- Video detailing the struggles of Refugio county case manager Debbie Montalvo as she works to help residents find resources and rebuild after Harvey.
- Photo galleries from the Advocate’s hurricane coverage.
- A digital outlet to share your story of recovery and join in the community conversation.

PAGE DESIGNER/COPY EDITOR: NICOLE CRAPPS, NCRAPPS@VICAD.COM

## OVERLOOKED: Gap between rich, poor exacerbated by Harvey's destruction



Tiana Crane, 2, draws on a glass storm door with a marker while her mother isn't looking. The front door of her home is left open to let light into the living room in August.

### CONTINUED FROM E1

in many communities, particularly rural ones, has been erratic – and excruciatingly slow for some families like Castaneda's without the finances needed to rebuild.

More than one year later, no one is tracking exactly how many families are whole again. No one knows how many people are still fighting with insurance companies or how many still need help.

But one fact is clear: Along with toppling mobile homes and blowing roofs off houses, Hurricane Harvey revealed a deep divide between the people in South Texas who could afford to rebuild – and everyone else.

A survey conducted in Harvey's wake by the Episcopal Health Foundation and Kaiser Family Foundation found that almost one-quarter of affected residents say the hurricane worsened their financial situation. And even without the complications of a Category 4 hurricane, a growing amount of research has shown that climbing up the economic ladder has become more and more difficult in America.

Across the nation, the gap between the richest and poorest Americans has grown dramatically since the late 1970s, a phenomenon that experts warn will slow economic growth, according to the Economic Policy Institute, a Washington, D.C.,-based think tank.

By no fault of their own, many people are born into poverty – but hard work isn't always enough to push them out. People working low-wage jobs often find it nearly impossible to pay monthly bills, let alone save for retirement. Pay for typical workers has stagnated, and debt – mortgages, student loans or credit cards, for example – is rampant.

The problems that come with wealth inequality are long-entrenched in the Texas Gulf Coast, where people like Castaneda are struggling to rebuild.

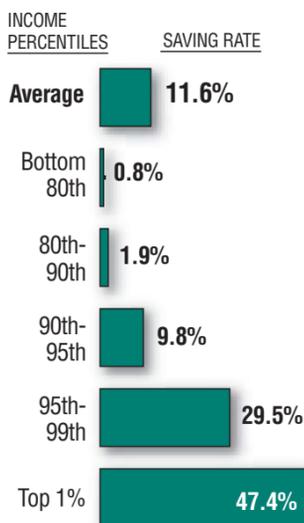
In Victoria, a regional hub for about 200,000 residents in seven rural counties nestled between Houston, Austin and San Antonio, the rich and poor live in vastly different realities. During the 1920s, Victoria was famous for its roses, lavish homes and cattle kings. It also was said to have more millionaires per capita than any other U.S. city.

Almost a century later, data shows that wealth hasn't trickled down: A study using 2016 data found Victoria was among the top 11 percent of most unequal counties in the nation. On average, families in Victoria's top 1 percent earned almost 21 times more than families in the bottom 99 percent.

Then Harvey struck. Natural disasters, researchers find, often widen the economic gap between those who have the resources to rebuild and those who don't. A recent study by researchers at the University of Pittsburgh and Rice University found that people who are privileged in terms of race, ed-

### INCOME and SAVING

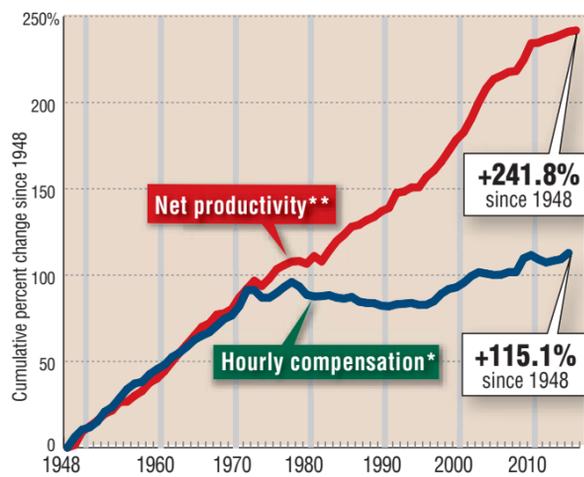
Saving rates by income percentiles, 1989-2013



\*Significant figures rounded to 0.1%

### PRODUCTIVITY and WORKERS PAY

Productivity growth compared with hourly compensation growth, 1948-2016



\*Wages and benefits of production/nonsupervisory workers in the private sector. \*\*The growth of output of goods and services less depreciation per hour worked.

SOURCES: ECONOMIC POLICY INSTITUTE; BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS; BUREAU OF ECONOMIC ANALYSIS  
KIMIKO FIEG/KFIEG@VICAD.COM

ucation or homeownership generally see their wealth increase in disasters' aftermaths, in part because governments and citizens invest in their communities through government-funded projects and insurance payouts.

In contrast, less-privileged people are more likely to lose jobs, be forced to move and pay higher rents because of housing shortages, according to one of the study's authors. Vulnerable families – especially people of color, renters and those who are less educated – often lose wealth in the long term, making the gap between the people who can afford to rebuild and those who can't even wider.

### HARVEY'S WAKE

It's not even noon, but Castaneda already has vacuumed her entire three-bedroom house; mopped the kitchen and former playroom; scrubbed the bathroom; and started a load of laundry. At least today, she doesn't have to clean the black-colored mold from the air vents – she finished that the day before.

Her toddler, however, is growing impatient. Tiana, wearing a sparkly princess dress that her mother bought off Facebook for \$2, cries from her high chair in the living room.

"It has to get done," Castaneda says while trying to appease her daughter with a sippy cup of juice. "You can't let it go more than two days because of the kids."

Castaneda tries her best to put her children first because she knows what it's like to have a mother who wasn't always there. As a teen, she regretfully left school in San Antonio to move with her mother to Mexico, where she took over the role as parent for her three younger siblings. A few years later, Castaneda and her siblings moved back to Texas, where she began working multiple jobs at nursing homes and caring for an elderly man to support her two sisters and brother.

More than a decade later, she credits her rough upbringing as the reason why she has coped with the stress of Harvey's aftermath. When the water heater stopped working, for example, she wasn't bothered by taking cold showers for weeks. Even when she was pregnant, her belly growing and feet swelling, she didn't mind ripping out moldy flooring and wall paper. When she went into early labor four times, she was calm enough to drive herself 48 miles along a rural highway to the doctor when her husband was busy working. "All my life, I've been busy, busy, busy," she says, broom in hand while standing in her kitchen. "So when (Harvey) happened, it didn't get to me like it got to my husband because I'm used to cleaning up, getting up, falling down, then getting up."

Although her husband, Leonard Crane, spends almost all his time working as a truck driver, his paychecks haven't been enough to fix the home. The year before Harvey hit, the family's income was on par with the median family income in Refugio, which was about \$57,000 per year. But after the hurricane, the family's annual income dropped roughly \$10,000, in part because Castaneda's husband couldn't work for a few weeks.

His situation is not unique: A survey conducted by the Episcopal Health Foundation and Kaiser Family Foundation three months after Harvey found that nearly half of those surveyed or someone else in their household lost job-related income because of the hurricane.

SEE OVERLOOKED, E3



### WANT TO HELP BLOOMINGTON LITTLE LEAGUE?

Theresa Martinez hopes to raise between \$1,100 and \$1,500 to get the Little League charter back. She also hopes to raise about \$800 to pay for Bloomington to start its own charity, which could mean the community could seek grants to pay for activities like the Little League program. To help, contact Martinez by calling 361-218-4752 or emailing theresamartinez2468@gmail.com.

### REBUILDING COMMUNITY

## 'You have to rebuild their lives – not just their homes'

BY MARINA STARLEAF RIKER  
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Theresa Martinez can still remember the sound of parents' cheers and the smell of pizza and nachos sold at the concession stand at the Little League field in Bloomington, a rural community deep in the heart of South Texas.

She played on that field as a child, and coached her own children in games there decades later.

Martinez, now 50, remembers how on one particular day, a little boy hit a home run – and instead of sprinting to home plate, he ran home, literally, to a mobile home about a block away.

"He had hit the ball, and I was saying, 'Go! Go!'" she recalled. "And he took off and he ran. And after third base, he ran home!"

Even though it happened more than 25 years ago, Martinez laughs just thinking about that day.

But that happened at a time when children still played on Bloomington's Little League field. It wasn't overgrown with grass and weeds. Buzzing cicadas and the occasional passing train weren't the only signs of life there.

Yet residents estimate it's been at least five years since any Little League team played on that field, a sad reality community members say needs to change.

Because in previous decades, the grassy lot was more than just another Little League field. Like in many of America's small towns, the field was once the heart of Bloomington, a community of 2,500 residents nestled between ranches, cotton and corn fields in rural Victoria County.

Today, however, the Little League field is largely forgotten, a sad reflection of the town itself. Like many South Texas small towns in oil-rich Gulf Coast, life started to change for Bloomington when the oil industry crashed in the 1980s. In the decades since, businesses abandoned buildings downtown, young adults fled to larger cities and residents struggled with the harsh realities

SEE REBUILD, E3

Vines grow up chain-link fence surrounding a littered dugout. Overgrown grass covers the baseball diamond.



Case manager Debbie Montalvo, 51, checks repair work left to do written on Post-it notes stuck to a wall at the volunteer reception center.

## OVERLOOKED: 'There's just so much to be done here,' case manager says

### CONTINUED FROM E2

Castaneda's family got roughly \$5,000 from home insurance, but that didn't cover all of Harvey's damage to the three-bedroom, one-bath house. The couple didn't want to rack up debt, so they emptied their savings account to pay to repair other damage. But that still wasn't enough to fix it all.

The home's foundation shifted, a repair that's estimated to run up to \$10,000. Part of the air-conditioning system must also be replaced, which comes with a \$2,800 price tag. And that doesn't even include the soaked flooring, wallpaper and electrical wiring that also need to be fixed.

The mother of three doesn't know how her family will scrape up roughly \$20,000 needed to finish repairs. If another hurricane hits, Castaneda says, her family will cut their losses, pack up and start renting a home in a city farther from the coast.

Her family's financial future, however, didn't always seem so bleak. As she nurses Jamin from a bottle, she explains that she always donated used clothes and toys to other families in need. But this summer, scraping up enough money for diapers, baby wipes, medication, food, utilities, gas and school supplies is more than she can handle.

She isn't alone. After Harvey, many people, particularly those who are black, Hispanic or have lower incomes, reported having problems paying for food or borrowing money from friends and relatives to make ends meet, according to the survey conducted a year after Harvey. One-third of affected residents also say they fell behind in paying rent or mortgages.

That situation is all too familiar for Castaneda. Desperate, she called 2-1-1, a resource line that links families in need with resources. That's when she was told about a local group working to help Refugio County recover after Harvey.

She was told that, maybe, the group would be able to help her.

### 'I'M NOT GOING TO STOP'

A woman with a long, blonde braid emerges from a white Toyota 4runner parked in front of Castaneda's home. Armed with a clipboard, rubber gloves and a face mask, the woman introduces herself as Debbie Montalvo, a case manager for the Refugio County Volunteer Reception Center. The group is one of the only agencies based in Refugio that's working to help residents rebuild after Hurricane Harvey. Montalvo wears bright blue eyeliner that matches the color

of her T-shirt that reads, "We will rebuild" – a slogan that she came up with. With a warm smile, Montalvo, 51, asks Castaneda to show her the home, while asking a series of questions about mold, insurance payouts and government assistance – the latter of which the family got very little of.

If you met Montalvo on the street, there would be no way of telling that just months ago, she was living out of the same SUV parked in front of Castaneda's light-blue home.

After Hurricane Harvey shattered windows and ripped off the roof of Montalvo's home in a town 6 miles away, she found herself sleeping in the bathroom, often with crippling anxiety because it was the smallest room to heat on cold nights after she gutted the moldy drywall and insulation.

"I had two blankets ... I had to use blue jeans for a pillow," Montalvo recalls. "And that's how I slept."

Eventually, even that came to an end.

By early 2018, she was living from her car and desperate for help. One day, she was driving along U.S. 77 through Refugio – population 2,866 – when she saw a sign for the Refugio County Volunteer Reception Center. She didn't know what it was, but pulled over and went inside. A woman greeted her, and they began talking about the months since Harvey.

"I just broke down," Montalvo says. "And I said, 'I need help.'"

After their conversation, Montalvo decided to become a volunteer. Within weeks, she learned

that helping others made her feel better – her anxiety lessened, and for the first time, she felt comfortable talking with strangers. Two months later, she was offered a full-time job as a case manager.

Montalvo is now tasked with piecing together lives, like Castaneda and her family, that were fractured by Harvey.

For Montalvo, it's personal – she grew up in the 1970s in Refugio, which she remembers as a thriving small town where doors were left unlocked and neighbors shared meals together. But in the decades since then, the town's population dropped by nearly 40 percent, the effect of a steady exodus as oil and gas production dwindled.

That trend has continued in recent years, and since 2000 alone, the county's labor force dropped about 16 percent, according to state data.

It is in this town where Montalvo spends much of her time driving from home to home, photographing damaged houses and documenting their occupants' struggles. She knows many of the people she meets. Often, they went to the same high school.

She tries to give them hope by holding their hands, praying and laughing with them. But the stories are grim. In the office tucked away in a church where she works, there are hundreds of multicolored Post-it notes stuck to a wall, each representing a family who needs help.

SEE OVERLOOKED, E4

## REBUILD

### CONTINUED FROM E2

that come with limited job opportunities in town.

Then Harvey hit, displacing an estimated 35 percent of the town's residents. One year later, residents fear those in power may forget the unincorporated town, where there isn't a local government to fight for grant money or resources to rebuild.

But local residents won't let Bloomington be forgotten if they can help it. They know that homes must be rebuilt. Businesses need to reopen. But they also realize that rebuilding Bloomington is going to take a lot more than simply repairing leaking roofs or replacing soaked drywall.

"You have to build the community," said Danny Garcia, who grew up in Bloomington. "You have to rebuild their lives – not just their homes."

And that's where the Little League field comes in.

### 'IT ALL STARTED AT THE LITTLE LEAGUE FIELD'

As a child in the 1960s, Garcia, who now serves as the community's county commissioner, remembers Bloomington as a town not unlike Mayberry from "The Andy Griffith Show."

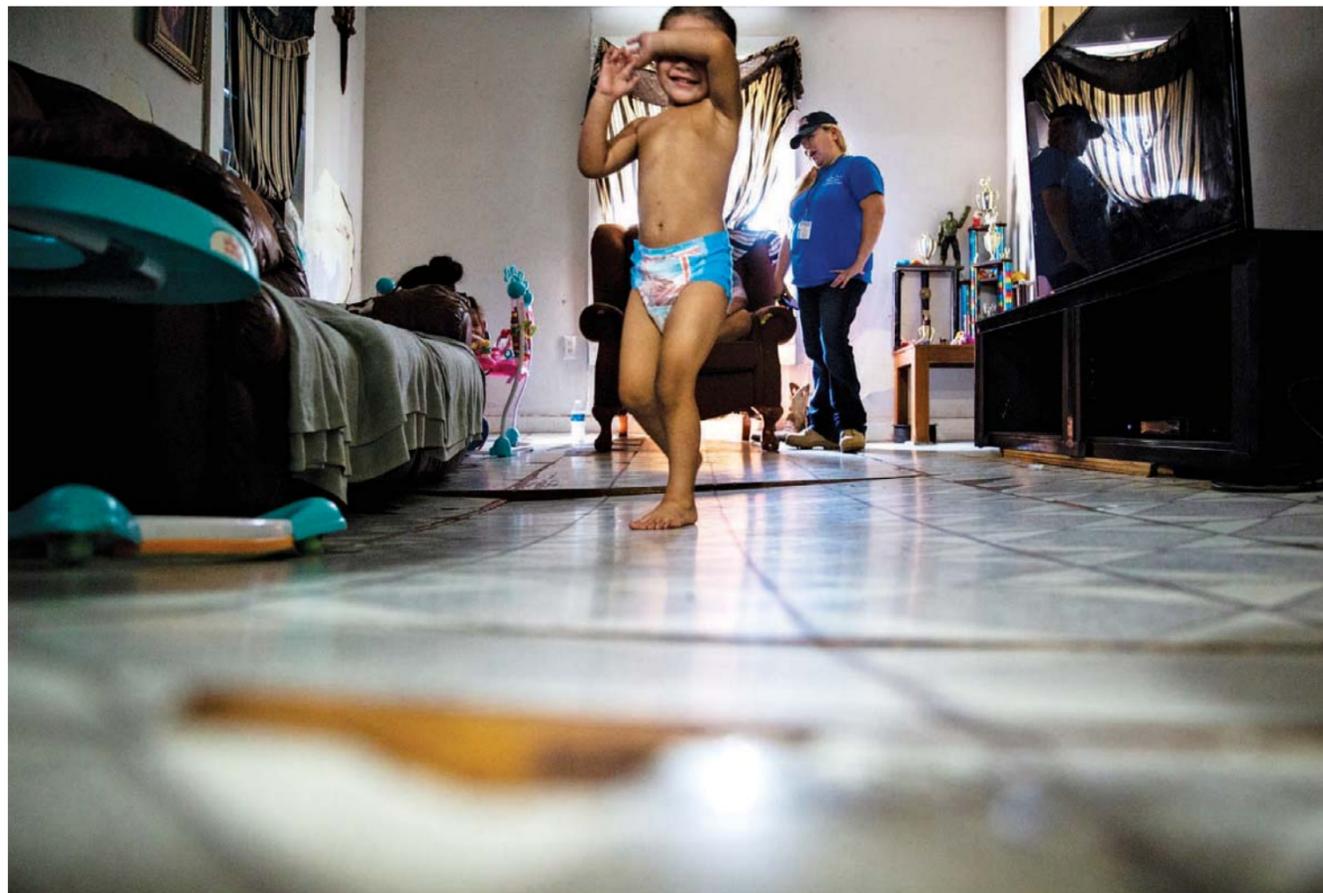
Plants like DuPont and Union Carbide had recently moved to the area, offering decent-paying jobs that didn't require a college degree. At that time, Bloomington's downtown was home to at least a dozen businesses, including a movie theater, post office, dry cleaner, grocery store, cafe, drug store and several gas stations, said Garcia.

It was during that era that Garcia learned to win – and lose – on the baseball field. Back then, Little League was so popular that there wasn't enough room for all the families to park around the field; it seemed as if every child in town played, no matter the parents' financial status.

Decades later as an adult, Garcia also took his son and daughter to the same field. During one particular game, he was roped into joining the Parent Teacher Association. Eventually, he was spurred to run for local school board – and won.

"It all started at that Little League field," Garcia said. "Little League is the easiest way I've seen to bring people together."

SEE REBUILD, E4



During a home visitation, Montalvo talks to Star Cervantes, 13, while Colbie Berlanga, 3, runs across sagging floors. A family of seven lives in the hurricane-damaged Refugio home. "I wish I was a millionaire because then I would help everybody," Montalvo said after checking several of her cases in the area.

## OVERLOOKED: Despite hardships, family counts blessings after hurricane

CONTINUED FROM E3

“There’s just so much to be done here,” says Montalvo. “And I’m not going to stop.”

Montalvo feels guilty she can’t help all the families — especially since she was one of the few lucky homeowners selected by a nonprofit that rebuilds homes.

One of her most heart-wrenching cases is a 70-year-old Vietnam veteran who still lives in his car.

Then, there’s the family in Tivoli, a rural town of 500 residents, who didn’t have running water almost nine months after Harvey.

And during the summer, she spoke with a family who has an adult son with a disability; they flipped a coin each night to decide who sleeps in the only bed they have left.

Those stories underscore the reality of life after Hurricane Harvey — without something close to a miracle, people who didn’t have the resources to begin with are not able to rebuild.

### ‘HEALTHY AND TOGETHER’

Baby pictures and a photo of Castaneda’s wedding hang neatly from clothespins tied to a bulletin board in her kitchen, just below a Post-it note with Montalvo’s phone number written on it.

The note serves as a daily reminder that weeks have passed since Montalvo came by the home, where she took notes about the damage and filed the information away with dozens of other tragic stories. So far, few volunteers have come to Refugio, a county of just 7,300 people that must compete with larger communities like Houston and Rockport for resources to rebuild.

The agency in charge of recovery in Refugio has received only \$825,000, but estimates it needs roughly \$4 million to help all of the families become whole.

Despite Montalvo’s best efforts, that means many families, like Castaneda’s, will see little help until more volunteers and funding arrive.

“Refugio doesn’t get much help,” says Castaneda, who sits on the couch next to her 11-year-old son and infant in a bouncer to catch a breath between cleaning and making lunch for her children.

Raising an infant, toddler and preteen is exhausting, but today she feels especially tired. The



**ABOVE:** Angelica administers six medications to her three children for ailments most likely caused by mold growing in their home. All five members of the family suffer from some sort of respiratory issue.

**RIGHT:** Jasmin Crane is shown in the hospital after her premature birth.



night before, she was up past 2 a.m. after a long day that included driving her son 90 miles round trip to a doctor’s appointment, then returning to Refugio to make dinner for her husband before he hit the road for work. After dinner, she drove another 90 miles round trip to go grocery shopping in a bigger city, where the produce is less likely to spoil than when it’s bought at the lone grocery store in her rural town. Then she spent the rest of the evening finishing her militant cleaning routine.

This is her reality after Harvey. When she starts to feel overwhelmed, she reminds herself: It could be worse. She could have lost her entire home and all her belongings, as did many other families in Refugio.

Local officials estimate almost 60 percent of the Refugio’s 3,700 housing units were severely damaged or destroyed by Harvey — including one of the largest affordable housing complexes — in a county where an estimated one-fourth of children lived below the poverty level before the storm.

“I told my husband, ‘Don’t feel bad we’re living paycheck to paycheck,’” says Castaneda. “At least we’re healthy, and we’re together.”

But it’s still hard, she says, no

doubt. Every once in a while, she’s been forced to borrow \$10 from her neighbor to buy milk for her children — a stark difference from life before Harvey, when she used to buy each of her children a new toy each month. She hasn’t even begun to think about replacing her own clothes after Harvey ruined everything except three pairs of pants, two dresses and pajamas.

With every passing week, she’s finding it harder and harder to believe that her family will get the help they need to rebuild. Because no matter

how hard she cleans, it won’t be enough to reverse the damage that Harvey caused. No matter how many hours her husband works, his paychecks won’t be enough to pay for all the repairs any time soon.

Still, she tries to set a good example for her children, neatly making their beds and reminding them to finish chores, even if the walls around them are infested with mold. Because one day, she hopes, life for her family will return to normal.

Maybe one day, the American Dream will be in reach.

## REBUILD

CONTINUED FROM E3

But decades later, neither the Little League field nor Bloomington is what it once was. In the town, there are no doctors’ offices or banks. And even though an estimated 17 percent of the town’s residents live below the poverty line, there are very few programs for children — not even a daycare or after-school program. The closest programs are almost 15 miles away.

It wasn’t always that way. Martinez, who now works as a case manager helping people recover from Hurricane Harvey, remembers playing Little League, volleyball, basketball and track when she was a child. And once she became a mother, she coached all five of her children in Little League practices and games.

After her children grew up, she kept volunteering to run the Little League program. She made sure the team had a charter, which allowed it to participate in official Little League events. Besides roping her two sons into coaching, she also maintained the field, painted the concession stand, ordered uniforms, made up game schedules and collected fees.

Starting about a decade ago, however, involvement from parents in the town dwindled. Today, many Bloomington families teeter on the poverty line, and don’t have \$40 needed to sign up each of their children, she said.

Because some of those families have few resources makes it all the more important to support their kids, she said. Sports teach children about teamwork, leadership and sportsmanship — lessons that help kids succeed in school and later as an adult.

And once children are involved, their parents will follow, too. Those are the parents who will host fundraisers, coach teams and be involved with the schools. They will help their children exercise and hopefully grow a healthier Bloomington.

That’s why Martinez is again taking things into her own hands, organizing a group of community members to try to boost programs for children. They’re starting with soccer — which is cheaper than trying to get the Little League charter back. It won’t fix all of Bloomington’s problems, she said, but it’s a start.

“If we would all just come together, we would have something good for these kids,” said Martinez.

## HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

The next installment in the Victoria Advocate series “Hidden in Plain Sight” will explore historic inequities in Victoria and examine whether small towns will survive Harvey’s aftermath. Visit [VictoriaAdvocate.com](http://VictoriaAdvocate.com) for the latest on recovery efforts.



Angelica kisses her daughter Jasmin while son, Andrew Castaneda, watches from the living room.