

SPORTS

WINNING MOVES

Cougars dominate Grambling State even after starting QB went down in first quarter.

PAGE C1



ONLINE

ACTIVATE YOUR DIGITAL ACCOUNT

Take full advantage of your subscription and get unlimited access to the latest news online, read the digital replica of the newspaper and more.

HOUSTONCHRONICLE.COM/ACTIVATE



CORONAVIRUS

WAITING FOR CARE

As COVID patients overwhelm hospitals, those with other medical issues delay treatment.

PAGE A29

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 2021 • HOUSTONCHRONICLE.COM • VOL. 120, NO. 341 • \$4.00 ★★

HOUSTON CHRONICLE INVESTIGATION: IN CRISIS

‘HELP ME! HELP ME!’



Photos by Mark Mulligan / Staff photographer

Elizabeth Waller tears up as she shares memories of her son, Stetson Hoskins, at her resale shop in Flint.

A 24-year-old man gave authorities a life-or-death warning, but the mental health system failed him

By Alex Stuckey STAFF WRITER

FLINT – The giant tin “S” that hangs front and center on the wall of Elizabeth Waller’s resale shop is only \$10, but she refuses to sell it.

Situated between shabby chic picture frames and worn, wrought-iron wall art, the “S” is in great condition and stands at least a foot tall.

But in the year that Elizabeth has owned her shop in East Texas, the “S” has never left the wall – no matter how many people ask to buy it.

“My son’s name was Stetson,” Elizabeth tells shoppers when they look at her, confused. “I can’t bear to part with it.”

The past tense hangs in the air. An awkward silence punctuates the room.

Elizabeth sits down at whatever recently painted table and chairs are showcased



MORE ONLINE

Elizabeth Waller had begged her son, Stetson Hoskins, to take medication for his illnesses. In December 2019, she recorded one of their many conversations about the matter. Listen to it at houstonchronicle.com/Stetson

at the front of her shop, grabbing a framed photograph of her middle son that always sits on some piece of furniture.

And she begins to tell a story.

A story of a charming young man who excelled at school and sports, who loved God and put family above all else.

A story of a descent into mental illness that started with the death of a beloved grandmother and spiraled into paranoia and voices no one else could hear.

A story of how a 24-year-old man gave doctors and police officers a life-or-death warning, but the Texas mental health system still failed him.

Elizabeth’s desperation clings to her throat – a desperation to help her son that started years ago and continually slammed into the reality of mental health

Stetson continues on A11

Dems see reckoning for GOP in 2022

Party believes a shift to right will lose voters

By Jasper Scherer STAFF WRITER

Two years ago, Texas’ Republican leaders agreed to boost public education spending by billions of dollars, setting aside most of the incendiary social issues that had derailed similar efforts in the past.

But the GOP’s fixation on bread-and-butter issues – seemingly driven, at least in part, by a painful 2018 midterm election – proved to be fleeting. After Democrats fell flat in their lavishly funded attempt to retake the Texas House in 2020, Republicans responded by adopting a parade of conservative priorities this year, including the nation’s strictest anti-abortion law and an overhaul of Texas elections that prompted Democrats to leave the state for over a month to stall it.

While Republicans have touted their string of policy wins over the

After Democrats fell flat in their lavishly funded attempt to retake the Texas House in 2020, Republicans responded by adopting a parade of conservative priorities this year.

last few months, Democrats are already predicting a reckoning in the 2022 midterms, arguing that the state’s hard shift to the right went too far and will fuel Democratic gains at the polls.

“There is such a thing as a Republican who publicly – in their social groups, maybe at church – will profess to be hard-line about something, but when they finally get it, they realize that is not the world that they want,” said state Rep. Diego Bernal, D-San Antonio. “They might be pro-Second Amendment, but they may not like permitless carry. They may be pro-life, but they recognize the dangers of having an outright ban on abortion, especially without exceptions for rape and incest.

“Democrats don’t have to spin those issues. They just have to make sure people are aware of *Midterms continues on A27*

County’s attempts to cut case backlog see limited success

By Zach Despart and Samantha Ketterer STAFF WRITERS

The number of criminal cases pending before Harris County courts stands at more than 94,000.

That includes 41,000 misdemeanors and 53,000 felonies, numbers so high that if prosecutors stopped filing criminal charges tomorrow, it would take misdemeanor judges a year to clear their dockets; felony judges would need 19 months,

based on their average pace for closing cases since 2017.

Forty-six percent of these cases are considered backlogged – defined as misdemeanors pending more than six months and felonies older than one year – beyond which the likelihood of conviction plummets as investigators retire, victims withdraw and witnesses’ memories fade.

“As the county recovers from natural disasters and navigating a public health



Elizabeth Conley / Staff photographer

Case backlogs long have plagued Harris County courts, which have more than 94,000 cases pending.

crisis, it has put our justice system in a crisis state,” said Ana Yáñez Correa of the Harris County Justice Administration Department. “All county partners are diligently working to

address this backlog which is counter to what procedural justice should look like.”

The backlog is so high that the Justice Management *Courts continues on A6*

Spending bill full of Biden’s agenda

By Jim Tankersley NEW YORK TIMES

WASHINGTON – No president has ever packed as much of his agenda, domestic and foreign, into a single piece of legislation as President Joe Biden has with the \$3.5 trillion spending plan that Democrats are trying to wrangle through Congress over the next six weeks.

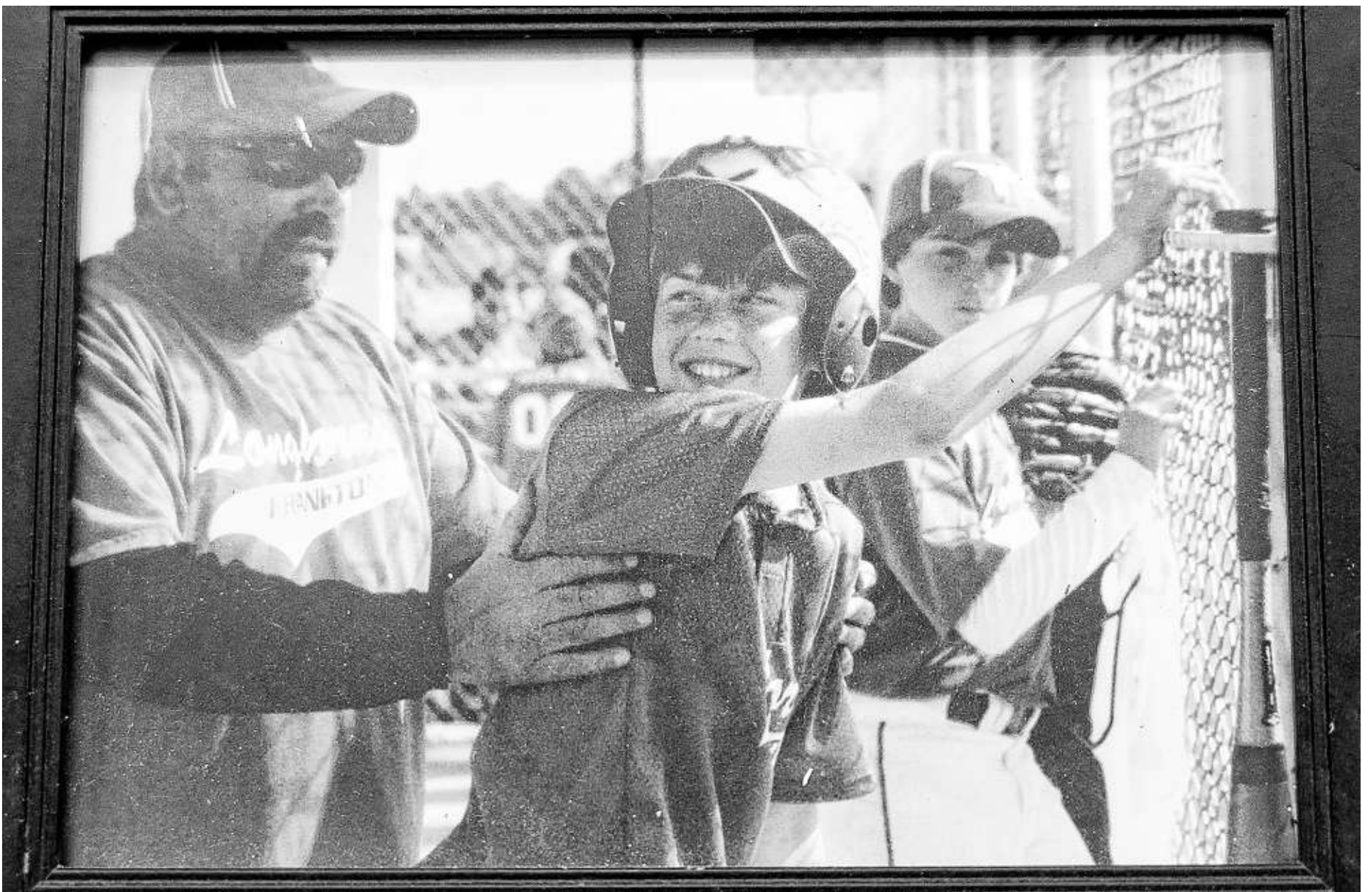
The bill combines major initiatives on the economy, education, social welfare, climate change and foreign policy, funded in large part by an extensive rewrite of the tax code, which aims to bring in trillions from cor-

porations and the rich. That stacking of priorities has raised the stakes for a president resting his ambitions on a bill that could fail over the smallest of intraparty disputes.

If successful, Biden’s far-reaching attempt could result in a presidency-defining victory that delivers on a decadeslong campaign by Democrats to expand the federal government to combat social problems and spread the gains of a growing economy to workers, striking a fatal blow to the government-limiting philosophy of President Ronald *Biden continues on A27*



IN CRISIS



Mark Mulligan / Staff photographer

Stetson Hoskins loved playing baseball as a kid and dreamed of playing professionally. This is Elizabeth Waller's favorite picture of her middle son.

STETSON

From page A1

care in the state, which is strained beyond capacity. A Houston Chronicle investigation found that there aren't nearly enough beds – private or state-funded – to help everyone in need, forcing mentally ill Texans to seek out crisis care through emergency rooms and, often, the criminal justice system. Though the state has tried in recent years to fund the addition of hundreds of psychiatric beds to lighten the load, there still were about 1,500 people waiting to get into a state-run hospital as of May.

Shoppers often stand in front of her, thrifty finds in hand and mouth agape as Elizabeth shares the highlights of the worst three days of her life. And that's when she realizes she has to start at the beginning.

"It all started in 2018," she says as her shoppers sit down beside her.

**AUG. 7, 2018
WACO**

Elizabeth was resting in her bedroom at the apartment she shared with her son, Stetson, when he walked in clutching his head and squinting his eyes.

"Mom. My head. It hurts," Stetson said, his 6-foot-tall body hunched over in pain. "It feels like my brain is being zapped."

Stetson Hoskins had always been Elizabeth's strongest kid. The second of three sons, he won a President's Education Award in fifth grade. On the baseball field, he was a brick wall between second and third base: Absolutely nothing got past him. At age 10, he wrote a letter to his adult self:

"If I read this later on I want myself to know. In every sport I play, give 100% and never give up. If I give up I will be giving 0% and

that sucks. I will never give up my dream to be a pro-baseball player. For example if I get hurt keep playing. You get 1 life and don't screw it up."

This was now the second time in less than a month Elizabeth had taken Stetson to an ER because of severe head pain.

But it still shocked Elizabeth to hear Stetson say he was hurting. She grabbed her keys and made for the front door.

"I want to kill myself," he told her. "I want to stab myself in the stomach."

She rushed him to the Crisis Treatment Center in Waco, run by the Heart of Texas Region Mental Health Mental Retardation Center in collaboration with the Providence Healthcare Network. Doctors there recommended inpatient care, but they determined he was too agitated and aggressive to be admitted to a psychiatric setting.

So they placed him under an emergency detention order. Security escorted him to Providence Healthcare Network's emergency room two-tenths of a mile down the street.

The air was thick with humidity as Elizabeth waited for Stetson to be seen by doctors. They placed him on the waitlist for a bed at Austin State Hospital, one of the state's 10 publicly funded psychiatric facilities.

The placement, though, was futile. At that time, there were 657 people waiting for a bed at one of these hospitals.

But then, a stroke of luck. Cedar Crest Hospital, a 68-bed psychiatric hospital in Belton, said it could take him. Before noon the following morning, he was transferred.

Elizabeth didn't know what was wrong or why he had been transferred. Because Stetson was an adult, Elizabeth didn't go back to see the doctor with her son. She didn't have a right to see his medical records.

So Elizabeth believed him

when he said he was fine – that he didn't need to take the medication doctors prescribed.

But weeks later, she found his emergency room discharge papers strewn across the dining room table.

"Patient reports having 'something in his head,' but denies hearing voices," the medical records read. "Patient has already been diagnosed with bipolar disorder."

The papers shook in her hands as she flipped the page. The word schizophrenia stood out.

Bipolar disorder is like waking up to a sunny day and going to bed in a thunderstorm – sometimes, Stetson would wake up happy and upbeat only to go to bed horribly depressed. He'd hear a man talking but look around and see no one there. The voices were mean, and the only way to respond was by shouting at them, or punching them.

Elizabeth had always assumed Stetson was bound for college, but his grades had started to slip his senior year in high school. He got into drugs. Two months before graduation, he'd been expelled for showing up to school high.

As the years progressed, Stetson was charged multiple times for drug possession and once for assault after throwing objects at his aunt and injuring her knee.

Then Nanny Bobby, Elizabeth's mother, died in 2016. Stetson was so distraught, he couldn't bear to attend the funeral. His cousin often heard him mumble under his breath: "I don't have a Nanny anymore, so f--- it."

Since then, he'd struggled to hold down a job for more than a week or two, constantly getting into fights with other employees.

Unable to afford a place on his own, Stetson had moved back home. "He reports this (has)

been an issue for 6 months now," Elizabeth read.

It made sense. Six months ago, Stetson had started shouting curse words at random. Doctors initially diagnosed it as Tourette syndrome.

Elizabeth's sister had spent six weeks at a state hospital after suffering a mental breakdown. Her cousin had frequent psychotic episodes that left him wandering Fort Worth searching for himself. Her aunt had died at a mental hospital.

Should I have seen this coming?

**SEPTEMBER 2018
LANEVILLE**

Ashley Waggoner stood with her back against the bedroom door, shakily forcing the lock into place.

Her three children sat on the bed, wide-eyed and scared, listening to the curse words now muffled by the closed door.

"Goddamn it!"

"Motherf---!"

Ashley didn't know what to do. This wasn't the Stetson she knew and loved.

Stetson, who was always outgoing and funny.

Stetson, who played make believe with her kids.

Stetson, who would never hurt a fly.

Ashley was the oldest female of nine cousins. She became a mother hen of sorts, chasing the little ones around Nanny Bobby's house.

So when Stetson called from a McDonald's in Palestine – an hour's drive away – asking for a ride and a place to stay, she dropped everything, left work and picked him up.

But the man who got into her gray Ford Edge that day was terrifying. His sentences were fragmented. His eyes were dark. He wouldn't stop shouting. It was like he had no soul.

As she braced herself against the bedroom door, Ashley's mind raced back to the third grade. Her mother, Elizabeth's sister, had been acting strangely, paranoid about everything and everyone. She had a confused, dark look in her eyes – almost like she was possessed.

It was the same look Stetson had given her before she locked herself and her children in the bedroom.

Tears welled in her eyes. She picked up the phone and called a short-term housing facility for the homeless in Nacogdoches. They could take him the next day.

She sat down on the bed next to her children, gripping their little hands and offering a slight smile: They'd only have to make it through one night.

**FEB. 23, 2019
FLINT**

Colton White absentmindedly scrolled through Facebook, checking in on his friends from high school – their new jobs,

their new friends, their new lives.

But his thumb suddenly stopped when Stetson's name caught his eye. A familiar sense of dread filled his chest.

What did Stetson post this time?

The 19-year-old had always idolized his brother, five years his senior.

Where Stetson was goofy and outgoing, Colton was quiet and reserved. Stetson begged for pictures; Colton shrank away from the camera.

When Stetson made a big play on the baseball field, he danced. He waved his arms up and down to encourage cheers from the crowd. When Colton did the same, his cheeks would flush at his mother's shouts. He'd pull his cap farther down over his brows and stare at the ground.

The two brothers couldn't have been more different. But they were inseparable. Stetson taught Colton how to talk to girls. How to catch a fly ball. How to be a man.

But the brother Colton loved so much was slowly disappearing.

His taste in music changed. His stories made no sense. He was quick to anger.

Some nights, Stetson would scream curse words for hours in his empty room. Colton would bury his head beneath his pillow, crank his music and try to sleep.

Colton forced himself to read the post.

"Stop or keep going. Im on such a roll. Lol imma do it for the people who aint got s--- and just wanna be left alone without prosecution or judgement. Ya heard me. Where yall at. Im coming home dont worry. Just coolin right now. Haha cant wait to meet my long lost family that dissapeard in australia when i was born."

Colton knew he would soon be fielding questions from friends and family about his brother's nonsensical words. Everyone thought Stetson was on drugs. Colton wasn't sure he disagreed.

He clicked on his brother's profile, scrolling farther down the posts.

"I'm the master of puppets. I do not give a f---. I will f--- your whole life up and catch your whole house and everybody in it on fire."

Colton shook his head.

What is happening to my brother?

**OCT. 5, 2019
WACO**

The thought of Stetson sitting in jail, unmedicated and shouting, left Elizabeth on edge.

She drummed her fingers on the kitchen table at her house in Waco, staring at the blank piece of paper in front of her and trying to put her feelings into words.

Stetson continues on A12



Jon Shapley / Staff photographer

Elizabeth Waller listens to a song written by her youngest son, Colton White, at her home in Tyler. Colton, who wants to be a rapper one day, wrote the song about his brother, Stetson.

IN CRISIS



Mark Mulligan / Staff photographer

Elizabeth Waller and her youngest son, Colton White, are able to smile as they look through family photographs at Elizabeth's resale shop in Flint.

STETSON

From page A11

Eight months earlier, he had shown up on the doorstep of the dad of a childhood friend, desperate for a place to stay. The dad said no. He ordered Stetson off his property.

Instead, Stetson stole the white Chevy Silverado sitting outside the man's home. He'd been in jail ever since.

His letters from jail were the ramblings of a sick man: He'd swing from telling Elizabeth how much he loved her to hurling curse words her way and calling her a villain. He'd scrawl his confabulations across disciplinary paperwork, the blank spaces filled with half-completed hangman games and scribbles so thick and dark the paper was nearly perforated by the pen.

"I'm glad you stepped in when I needed you to. You're truly a queen and a hard working mom that nobody can f--- with when it comes down to it. You're a bad b---," Stetson wrote in one letter. On the flip side of the page, his tone changed: "HA-HA you're a bad person. I just figured that out. I like villains. F--- you're like me I prefer being the bad guy. Its a lot more funner that way. I think we just became closer. That's good mom. I'm just bored and need to breath so you're hearing my sad talk."

In the letters and phone calls, Stetson told his mom he wasn't taking any medications.

She just wanted her son to get help. Since being diagnosed the year before, Stetson had been hospitalized a dozen times. But each time, he was released within a day or two, prescription in hand.

He never filled the prescriptions, ranging from Ativan for anxiety to Haldol for schizophrenia to oxcarbazepine for bipolar disorder. The drugs made him feel groggy and empty inside. He didn't think he needed them.

In September, Stetson had been removed from the courtroom for causing a ruckus.

Elizabeth knew jail wasn't where Stetson needed to be. He needed to be committed to a mental hospital long-term, where he would be forced to take his medication and get better.

She sat down at her desk and penned a letter to the judge handling Stetson's case, Henderson County 3rd District Court Judge Mark Calhoon.

"If his court-appointed lawyer would have taken the time to meet with my son before his court date, he would have been aware of his condition," Elizabeth wrote. "I am begging you to please look into his medical records and his disruptive behavior while he has been incarcerated before sentencing him to state jail or granting him time served, and consider court ordering him to long term treat-

ment at a (state hospital) and court order him medication."

"I truly believe that would be his only chance at leading a normal life."

Elizabeth's letter went unanswered.

NOV. 22, 2019
CORSICANA
9:24 P.M.

Stetson sat next to Elizabeth in her friend's car, punching his fist into his hand over and over and shouting obscenities.

"You know I could put a cigarette out on your face right now?" he shouted at his mother. "I tell you what, you step on those damn brakes like that again, see what happens!"

Elizabeth was terrified. She pressed her body against the driver's side door, trying to get as far away from her son as possible, and veered into a Shell gas station off Texas 31 in Corsicana, just an hour southeast of Dallas.

She clambered out of the car, trying to keep the panic at bay.

"I have to go to the bathroom."

But she didn't. She was just trying to figure out what to do.

Forty minutes earlier, she had picked Stetson up from the Henderson County Jail after Calhoon had ignored her pleas to commit him to a mental hospital and instead released him on time served.

He'd been threatening her life ever since – his eyes wild and his movements erratic.

I'm not going to make it home alive if he stays in the car, she thought. How do I get him out of the car?

But then, Stetson, a goofy grin plastered to his face, hopped out of the car like a little kid and all but skipped into the McDonald's next door.

"I'm going to get ice cream. They don't have ice cream in jail."

Elizabeth waited a beat. Then she jumped back into the car, careening out of the parking lot and back onto Texas 31.

And then she dialed 911.

"911. What's your emergency?"

"My son is bipolar and schizophrenic. He just got out of jail after 10 months. He's unmedicated, and he's on the rampage."

When officers arrived, Stetson repeatedly told them he was out of control – that he wanted to kill himself and harm others. They transported him to Medical City Green Oaks Hospital, a 124-bed psychiatric facility in Dallas.

DEC. 11, 2019
LANEVILLE

Ashley had just returned home from her sales job when her cellphone buzzed in her pocket.

"You're my favorite cousin," Stetson said on the other end of the line. "How are you doing?"

Ashley was glad to hear from him. If Stetson was calling, he



Jon Shapley / Staff photographer

Stetson wound up at the Crisis Treatment Center in Waco on Jan. 7, 2020, after finally deciding that he needed help.

wasn't in jail. He wasn't in a mental hospital. What's more, he sounded coherent.

But she knew how quickly that could change. Her mother had been hospitalized numerous times over Ashley's 31 years of life. She thought back to the vivid memory of her mother sprinting out the doors of a mental hospital, screaming "HELP ME! HELP ME!" before Ashley's father whisked his daughter away.

"Stay safe and behave, Stetson," Ashley said. "Don't get into trouble."

"I love you cuz," Stetson said. "I love you, too."

That same day, Stetson got on Facebook.

"2 + 2 = eat s---."

DEC. 16, 2019
GHOLSON

Elizabeth looked around her apartment near Waco feeling defeated. She was being evicted again because of Stetson's constant screaming.

She'd had to move every three or four months since he was diagnosed. Neighbors were always complaining about the stream of profanities that seeped through their walls every hour of the day and night.

She'd managed to find a spare bed at her friend's house in Mexia, about 50 miles away. But her friend wouldn't let Stetson come.

He was too disruptive, she said: Too scary. She didn't know what he would do.

So Elizabeth found him a motel room in Waco and paid for a full month.

As she packed up her things, Elizabeth begged Stetson to take medication – to go to a mental hospital and get real help.

Stetson started ranting. Elizabeth reached for her phone and pressed record.

"I know you know that medicine won't help me," Stetson said matter-of-factly.

"Yeah it will help you! How do you know it won't?"

Stetson stumbled over his words, his voice erratic and jumbled. He'd start sentences and never finish them. At certain points, he'd address someone who wasn't there or interrupt his thoughts by screaming "God-damn it" so loud Elizabeth jumped in surprise.

"These people that are in the head, that control the f----- world and everything we f----- do, they're the ones that are hurting me!" Stetson started to shout. "It's not a goddamn medical problem! They're in my f----- head preying on my f----- head talking to me all the f----- time, making me hurt all the time!"

When Stetson was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, his mother hadn't truly understood what it meant – or how sick he really was. He'd never told her he was hearing voices or that there were people living inside his head.

And then he closed his fist and started hitting his skull.

"Sometimes I get some relief. Just because why? Because they turn it off. Whatever the f--- they're doing up there, they turn it off and I get ahhh, some relief."

Elizabeth started to cry, even as Stetson disparaged her for it.

Stetson believed medicine wouldn't fix him – the only way the voices would stop is if the people in his head hit a button and turned it off. They were trying to fix him, he said, because he was special.

DEC. 20, 2019
WACO

The bed was on cinder blocks. The TV was busted. There were roaches everywhere. But Stetson was in high spirits when Elizabeth and Colton showed up to visit him at his motel.

"Colton, come look at my room, it's pretty nice," he said. "They promised to fix the TV and everything."

There wasn't a hint of the Stetson who had talked about people living in his head just days ago. Instead, he was being silly, cracking jokes and teasing his brother. It was almost as if Stetson wasn't sick.

Except when he started talking about how he was a god; how he raised mountaintops. He'd stop mid-sentence and stare at the ceiling, only to return to the conversation 30 seconds later.

"Man, what are you doing?" Colton finally asked.

"It's raining in my head."

Still, Stetson was calm throughout the visit – a rarity as of late.

"I love you, bro," Stetson said, closing the grimy door.

"I love you, too."

JAN. 7, 2020
CRISIS TREATMENT CENTER, HEART OF TEXAS REGION MENTAL HEALTH CENTRAL RETARDATION CENTER WACO
10:52 P.M.

Stetson got right in the security officer's face, shouting loudly and threatening to punch him.

An employee at the Crisis Treatment Center – which provides intensive mental health care ranging from community-based treatment to short-term residential care – had just informed Stetson that he was going to be discharged soon.

And Stetson wasn't happy about it. He needed more intensive care, he shouted at the security officer.

The security officer had tried to calm Stetson down. Stetson shoved him. As security officers restrained him, the crisis center called Waco Police.

Earlier in the day, Stetson had called Elizabeth: "Mom, I'm getting help. I'm going to go to a long-term mental hospital. I'm going to get better."

Elizabeth was relieved when her son explained where he was. He might finally have a chance at a real life.

She told her son she loved him.

"I love you too, ma."

But now, in the pitch black of night, sitting outside the Crisis

Stetson continues on A13