

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 25, 2019 ~ Vol. 28 - No. 177 ~ 1 of 28

- [1- Lori's Pharmacy Christmas Ad](#)
- [2- McGannon Plumbing Christmas Ad](#)
- [2- Midwest Masonry Christmas Ad](#)
- [3- Olive Grove Christmas Ad](#)
- [3- Paetznick-Garner Christmas Ad](#)
- [4- Doing public business in public](#)
- [5- Winter Weather Advisory](#)
- [6- Weather Pages](#)
- [9- Daily Devotional](#)
- [10- 2019 Groton Events](#)
- [11- News from the Associated Press](#)

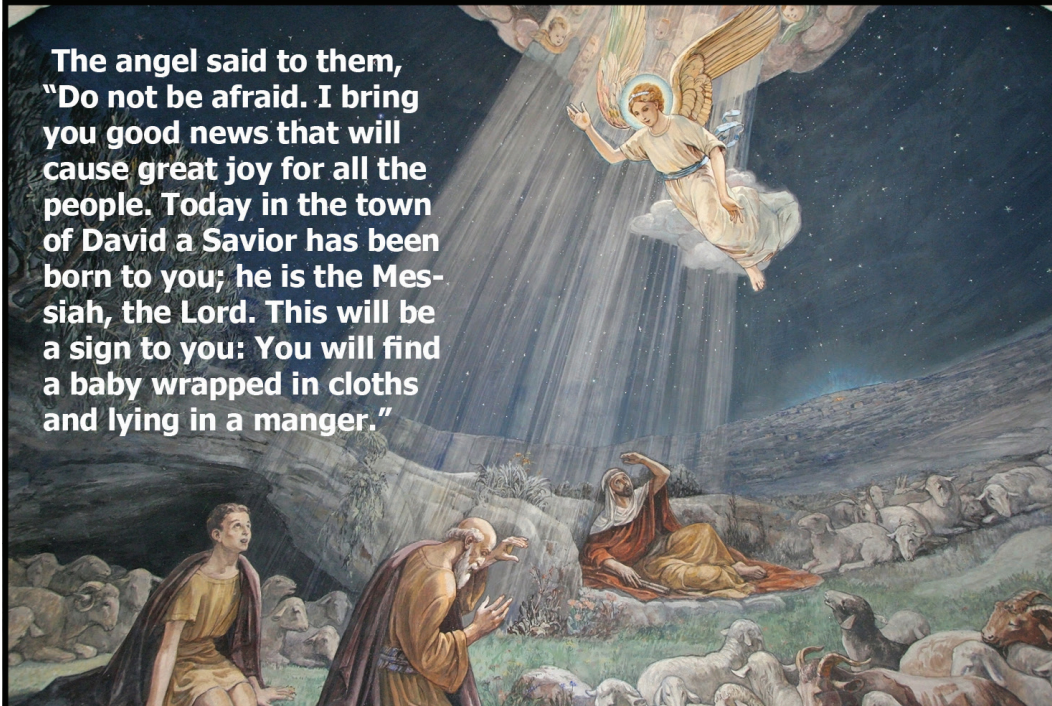
"THE WAY YOU SPEND
CHRISTMAS IS FAR
MORE IMPORTANT
THAN HOW MUCH."

-HENRY DAVID THOREAU



Chicken Soup
for the Soul

The angel said to them,
"Do not be afraid. I bring
you good news that will
cause great joy for all the
people. Today in the town
of David a Savior has been
born to you; he is the Mes-
siah, the Lord. This will be
a sign to you: You will find
a baby wrapped in cloths
and lying in a manger."



*From all of us at Lori's Pharmacy in Groton,
we wish you a very blessed Christmas!*

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located at 10 East Railroad Ave. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

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Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 25, 2019 ~ Vol. 28 - No. 177 ~ 2 of 28



**WATER FLOWS
THROUGH THE
PIPES, BUT
THE FLOW OF
CHRISTMAS
RESONATES IN
YOUR HEART.**

♥

Merry Christmas
from
**McGannon Plumbing
Heating & Cooling**
Groton



**We have a solid foundation
with the birth of Jesus.**

***Have a most
joyous
Christmas!***

**MIDWEST MASONRY &
CONCRETE PUMPING**

**New or Replaced Sidewalk
Block Walls ~ Egress Windows
Driveway ~ Garage Floors ~ Basement Floors
Stone and Brick Work**

Call for a free
quote **605/397-8383**

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 25, 2019 ~ Vol. 28 - No. 177 ~ 3 of 28

Here's to teeing off for
Christmas from the

*Olive Grove
Golf Course*

*Merry
Christmas!*



397-GOLF
Groton, South Dakota

*Star of Wonder
Star of Night*
Guide us to that
perfect light!



Merry Christmas from
Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel

Doing public business in public

Editor's Note: The following editorial was originally published in the Oct. 26 edition of the Black Hills Pioneer in Spearfish. It was written by the newspaper's editorial board.

It has been said that the news media provides the first draft of history. That role becomes more difficult to fulfill if there are people or things that impede that process.

Such was the case this week in Belle Fourche during a hearing which would determine the future of the Historic Roosevelt Events Center, formerly known as the Old Roosevelt High School.

We appreciate the city hosting a public appeal hearing on the issue, but were concerned by the strong-armed tactics of the proceeding's stenographer, Carolyn Harkins of Rapid City.

We believed the hearing was a public meeting as an extension of the Belle Fourche City Council. It came to a hearing because the building's owners, James and Provatia Pietila of Pietila Property & Repair, LLC, appealed the city's Oct. 9 condemnation of the historic building.

The city claimed the building was in decrepit condition, and that the city has an obligation to protect the public, leaving no choice but to condemn the building.

The greater Belle Fourche public took to social media after the Black Hills Pioneer's publication of a story about the condemnation, venting their contempt about the city's decision, many claiming the city was not only being unaccommodating to, but also bullying the Pietilas who were just trying to save a piece of Belle Fourche history.

Between 30 and 40 community members attended Tuesday's hearing to witness the city and the Pietilas argue their cases in front of a five-member appeals committee appointed by the city.

At one point in the hearing, Harkins realized Pioneer reporter Lacey Peterson was recording the event. The Pioneer is the designated official legal newspaper of record for Belle Fourche and Butte County.

After strongly objecting to the recording, Harkins pressed the city attorney, the attorney assisting the board, and the board to ask Peterson to stop.

She claimed her transcripts were the "official" record and nobody else needed to record alleging that it could cause an "issue" if the hearing's decision were later appealed to the circuit court.

Peterson continued her recording.

According to South Dakota Codified Law 1-25-11, "No public body may prevent a person from recording, through audio or video technology, an official meeting as long as the recording is reasonable, obvious, and not disruptive."

Why is it important the press be allowed to record open meetings and public hearings? The open meeting laws in our state embody the principle that the public is entitled to the greatest possible information about public affairs being carried about by elected officials. The law applies to all public bodies of the state or its political subdivisions.

The public's business should be done in public, affording as many community members as possible the information necessary to make their own opinions about a given topic.

That is the integral role of a community newspaper. Our news reporters are present at those meetings involving the city council, county commission, and school boards in the area, recording decisions being made by elected officials and accurately informing the public.

When members of the public are unable to attend a meeting, the newspaper works as a conduit, supplying the public with information that could have a direct impact on their lives. In essence, we work for the public.

The more people who have access to accurate news, the better they can formulate their own opinion. In order for members of the press to supply the most accurate news, recording devices are regularly used.

In this instance, there were efforts to stifle the recording of the meeting and general coverage of its outcome.

The city of Belle Fourche, who facilitated the hearing, financed the stenographer in question. When given the opportunity to uphold the legal right of the press to record a public meeting, both the city attorney and attorney representing the board, backed the stenographer's request to ask the press to discontinue recording the hearing.

The Pioneer has filed an open meetings violation complaint related to this instance.

It should not require a formal complaint — or a reminder from the newspaper — to get a city council or other public body to obey the law.

Groton Daily Independent

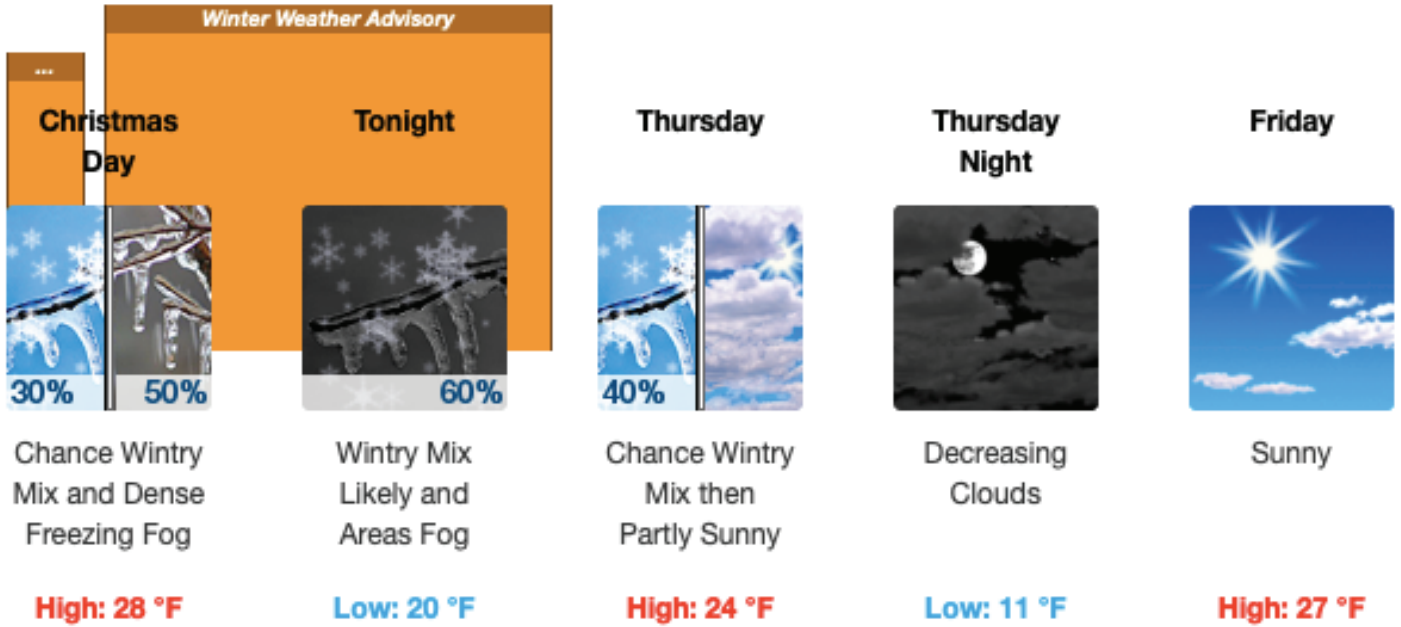
Wednesday, Dec. 25, 2019 ~ Vol. 28 - No. 177 ~ 5 of 28

...WINTER WEATHER ADVISORY IN EFFECT FROM 10 AM THIS MORNING TO 6 AM CST THURSDAY...

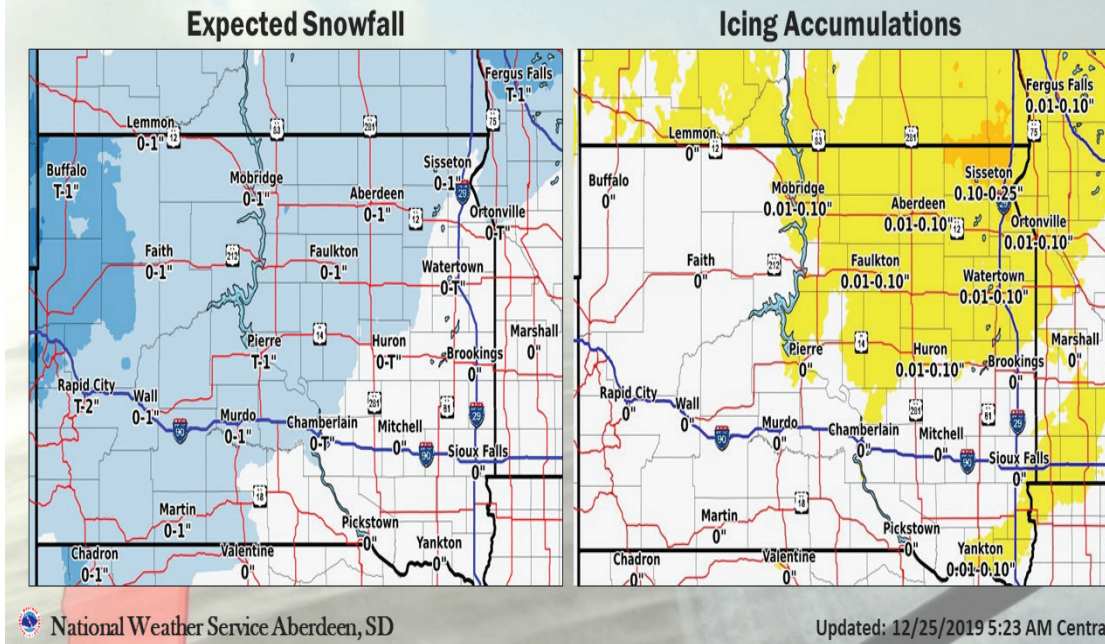
- * **WHAT...**Mixed precipitation expected. Total snow accumulations of up to one inch and ice accumulations of up to one tenth of an inch.
- * **WHERE...**Portions of central, north central and northeast South Dakota and west central Minnesota.
- * **WHEN...**From 10 AM this morning to 6 AM CST Thursday.
- * **IMPACTS...**Plan on slippery road conditions. The hazardous conditions could impact the evening commute.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 25, 2019 ~ Vol. 28 - No. 177 ~ 6 of 28



Light Snow And Freezing Precipitation Today



A small system is expected to pass through the region Christmas day. While snowfall accumulations are small, icing from freezing rain could make travel hazardous as the day progresses. Be careful of possible ice on the roads if traveling!

Today in Weather History

December 25, 1983:

Winds of 20 to 30 mph, with occasional higher gusts, combined with very light falling snow and loose surface snow to cause near-blizzard conditions and dangerously low wind chills in most of South Dakota, as well as in southwest and west-central Minnesota, from the early evening of the 23rd into Christmas morning. Visibilities were frequently near zero, and four- to five-foot drifts closed the vast majority of roads, making travel impossible. Hundreds of motorists became stranded during the evenings of December 23rd and 24th. In Minnesota, many holiday travelers heading west from Minneapolis and St. Paul drove to central Minnesota before conditions became too severe to continue. Winds and severe cold in the western part of Minnesota caused several power outages as well as the loss of livestock.

In South Dakota, at least 70 vehicles were stalled at one point over a 14-mile stretch of Interstate 90 between Kennebec and Reliance in Lyman County. The Pierre Airport in Hughes County was closed twice on the 23rd as visibility was reduced to zero. Most flights were canceled at Sioux Falls Airport in Minnehaha County, stranding numerous holiday travelers. Sub-zero temperatures, combined with gusts of over 60 mph, produced wind chill indices in the 60 to 100 below zero range. Several cases of frostbite were reported, propane gas solidified, fuel jelled, and water pipes and tanks froze as a result of the extreme cold. In Minnehaha County at Wall Lake, electrical outages of 12 hours were experienced from power lines snapping as a result of the cold and winds.

1776: Thomas Jefferson noted that the first winter snow fell on December 20th, but did not last on the ground one day. Temperatures dropped to 30 degrees or colder on Christmas Day. That night, 22 inches of snow fell. From the 25th of December until March 6, 10 snow covered the ground, and some of them were deep. The first rain came on the 9th of March. In Frederick County, two feet of snow was recorded.

1872: Since records began back in 1887, Columbia, South Carolina, only a trace of snow has been reported on Christmas Day. Before records, 13-hour sleet, and snowstorm occurred in Columbia and surrounding areas. Credit goes to Cary Mock, a USC geography professor who specializes in historical weather research. Here is a link to the newspaper article.

1974: Cyclone Tracy was a small but powerful tropical storm that devastated the city of Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia, from December 24-26th, 1974. The storm was the second smallest tropical cyclone on record, in terms of gale-force wind diameter, behind Tropical Storm Marco in 2008.

1987: Since 1894, Tucson, Arizona, has seen snow on Christmas Day four times. The most recent event occurred in 1987 when Tucson saw 2.6 inches

2002: A major snowstorm moved up the east coast on Christmas Day, 2002. Widespread snowfalls of a foot or more occurred across much of central New York and northeast Pennsylvania, with amounts as high as 30 inches reported over the northwest slopes of the Catskills.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 25, 2019 ~ Vol. 28 - No. 177 ~ 8 of 28

Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 28 °F at 4:12 AM

Low Temp: 20 °F at 9:27 PM

Wind: 16 mph at 11:05 AM

Day Rain: 0.00

Record High: 56° in 1907

Record Low: -25° in 1996

Average High: 23°F

Average Low: 3°F

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.39

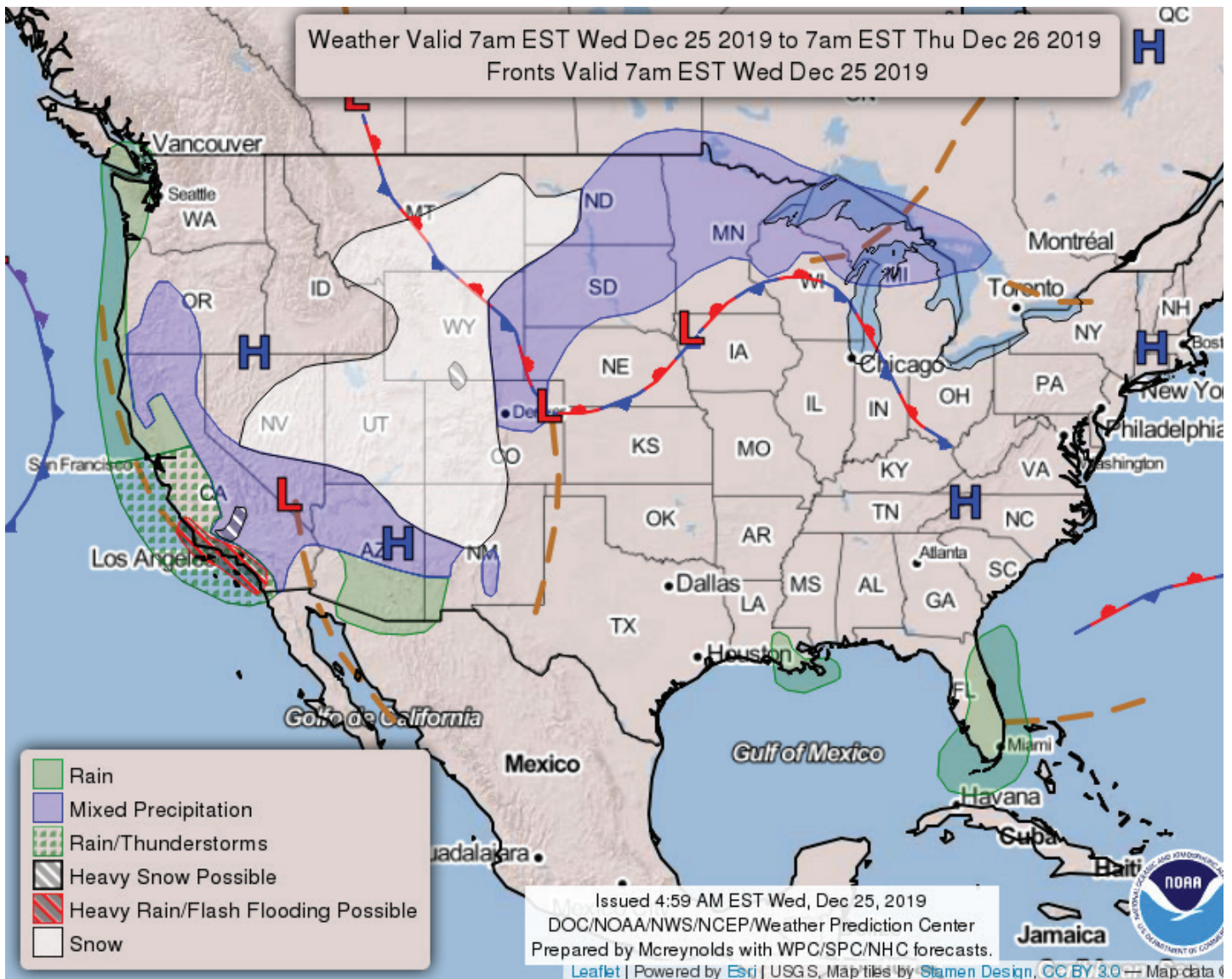
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.11

Average Precip to date: 21.59

Precip Year to Date: 28.06

Sunset Tonight: 4:55 p.m.

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:13 a.m.





THE BIRTH OF JESUS

"And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger because there was no lodging available for them.

"That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."

Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others - the armies of heaven - praising God and saying,

'Glory to God in highest heaven, and
peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.'

'When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.

'They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger."

Prayer: We lift our hearts in praise this day, Lord of Life, for the birth of Your Son, our Savior. Our minds cannot comprehend, nor our hearts contain, the generosity of Your love, mercy, grace, love, and hope that we have because of the gift of Your one and only Son. Fill our hearts with unending gratitude for Your salvation. In Jesus Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 2:6-16 I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 25, 2019 ~ Vol. 28 - No. 177 ~ 10 of 28

2019 Groton SD Community Events

12/19/2019 – Christmas Open House 10am-4pm, Wells Fargo Bank

12/20/2019 – Holiday Bake Sale & Open House 9am-4pm, Groton Community Transit

- Bingo: every Wednesday at the Legion Post #39

2020 Groton SD Community Events

- 01/26/2020 Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
- 04/04/2020 Groton Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt, 10 a.m. Sharp (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
- 04/25/2020 Fireman's Stag (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
- 04/26/2020 Father/Daughter dance.
- 05/02/2020 Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales, 8 a.m.-3 p.m. (1st Saturday in May)
- 05/25/2020 Groton American Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
- 06/8-10/2020 St. John's VBS
- 07/04/2020 Firecracker Golf Tourney (4th of July)
Groton Hosting State B American Legion Baseball Tournament
- 07/12/2020 Summer Fest/Car Show
- 09/12/2020 Fall City-Wide Rummage Sales, 8 a.m.-3 p.m. (1st Sat. after Labor Day)
- 10/10/2020 Pumpkin Fest
- 10/31/2020 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat (Halloween)
- 11/14/2020 Groton American Legion Post #39 Annual Turkey Party (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 25, 2019 ~ Vol. 28 - No. 177 ~ 11 of 28

News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Tuesday:

Mega Millions

27-37-48-63-66, Mega Ball: 11, Megaplier: 2

(twenty-seven, thirty-seven, forty-eight, sixty-three, sixty-six; Mega Ball: eleven; Megaplier: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$45 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$183 million

Prosecutors: charges dropped for principal accused of threat

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota prosecutors dropped charges on Monday against a Rapid City elementary principal who was accused of threatening a teacher with a gun.

The Pennington County State's Attorney Office filed a document in court indicating it will not pursue aggravated assault charges against 49-year-old Daniel Janklow, according to the Rapid City Journal. Prosecutors stated in the document they are not pursuing the charges because "it is in the best interests of justice." Police arrested Janklow in February after the teacher accused him of pointing a gun at her while he was recovering from back surgery.

Janklow told police at the time that he was medicated that day and had no memory of pointing a gun at anyone. Janklow's attorney told the Rapid City Journal that his client should have never been arrested and the case has caused hardship for Janklow's family and career. The principal resigned from Meadowbrook Elementary School after his arrest.

Report: Pine Ridge homicide victim shot in back of head

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A man accused in a homicide on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation shot the victim in the back of the head after telling people about his desire to kill someone, according to the federal affidavit for his arrest.

Colton Bagola, 26, is charged with second degree murder in the death of Sloane Bull Bear, 30, in a Pine Ridge apartment on Dec. 17. Bagola was arrested Friday in Rapid City after a brief standoff with law enforcement. He pleaded not guilty on Monday.

The affidavit cites witnesses who said they heard Bagola tell people he was "wanting to kill somebody" and he "needed to take a soul," the Rapid City Journal reported. An autopsy showed that Bull Bear had been shot in the back of the head at close range.

An FBI agent responding to a 911 call found a shotgun underneath the kitchen table in the apartment and a trail of blood leading from the kitchen toward the living room. He found Bull Bear on the ground with his head and chest outside the doorway and the rest of his body inside the apartment.

Notre Dame rector: Fragile cathedral might not be saved

By JEFFREY SCHAEFFER and ANGELA CHARLTON Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — The rector of Notre Dame Cathedral says the Paris landmark is still so fragile that there's a "50% chance" the structure might not be saved, because scaffolding installed before this year's fire is threatening the vaults of the Gothic monument.

Monsignor Patrick Chauvet said restoration work isn't likely to begin until 2021 — and described his "heartache" that Notre Dame couldn't hold Christmas services this year, for the first time since the French

Revolution.

"Today it is not out of danger," he told The Associated Press on the sidelines of Christmas Eve midnight Mass in a nearby church. "It will be out of danger when we take out the remaining scaffolding."

"Today we can say that there is maybe a 50% chance that it will be saved. There is also 50% chance of scaffolding falling onto the three vaults, so as you can see the building is still very fragile," he said.

The 12th-century cathedral was under renovation at the time of the accidental April fire, which destroyed its roof and collapsed its spire. With no more roof to keep the massive stone structure stable, the cathedral's surviving vaults are crucial to keeping it standing, but they are vulnerable.

Some 50,000 tubes of scaffolding crisscrossed the back of the edifice at the time of the fire, and some were damaged. Removing them without causing further problems is one of the toughest parts of the cleanup effort.

"We need to remove completely the scaffolding in order to make the building safe, so in 2021 we will probably start the restoration of the cathedral," Chauvet said. "Once the scaffolding is removed we need to assess the state of the cathedral, the quantity of stones to be removed and replaced."

Chauvet estimated it would take another three years after that to make it safe enough for people to re-enter the cathedral, but that the full restoration will take longer. President Emmanuel Macron has said he wants it rebuilt by 2024, when Paris hosts the Olympics, but experts have questioned whether that time frame is realistic.

Another reason it's still too dangerous to host religious services inside Notre Dame: The fire released tons of toxic lead dust, and authorities are working to clean it up and assess related health risks.

Notre Dame's symbolism reaches far and wide. Church officials estimated 2 million people from around the world visited the cathedral during the holiday season.

Tourists can photograph it from nearby embankments, but they can no longer hear its organs or get a close view of its stone carvings and masterpiece rose windows. The vast forecourt is barricaded, barren of its Christmas tree.

But its congregation, clergy and choir are keeping its spirit alive, and decamped Christmas celebrations to the Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois Church across from the Louvre Museum instead.

Parishioners shared sorrow about the fire, but also a feeling of solidarity.

"I remember my mother told me that she was watching TV, and that there was a fire at Notre Dame. I told her 'it's not possible,' and I took my bike, and when I arrived I was crying," said Jean-Luc Bodam, a Parisian engineer who used to cross town to attend services at the cathedral.

"We are French, we are going to try to rebuild Notre Dame as it was before, because it is a symbol," he said.

Queen Elizabeth II, close family celebrate Christmas

By GREGORY KATZ and JON SUPER Associated Press

SANDRINGHAM, England (AP) — Queen Elizabeth II and her close family celebrated Christmas with a morning service at St. Mary Magdalene Church near her rural retreat at Sandringham in eastern England.

It was a festive event Wednesday as the queen was joined for the first time by Prince George, 6, and Princess Charlotte, 4, the two eldest children of Prince William and his wife, Kate. They left 1-year-old Prince Louis at home.

George and Charlotte walked to church hand in hand with their parents. Prince Charles, their grandfather, walked next to them.

The queen arrived in a Bentley with Charles' wife, Camilla. Her elderly husband, Prince Philip, stayed at home. He was discharged from a hospital Tuesday after treatment for an undisclosed ailment. Philip, 98, has retired from public duties.

Prince Andrew, who has stepped down from royal duties because of his association with a convicted sex offender, attended an earlier church service with his brother Charles at his side.

Prince Harry, his wife, Meghan, and their 7-month-old son, Archie, did not attend. They are spending

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 25, 2019 ~ Vol. 28 - No. 177 ~ 13 of 28

the holiday in Canada with Meghan's mother, Doria Ragland.

The royals were greeted by several hundred well-wishers who had gathered outside the church grounds.

The queen's traditional pre-recorded Christmas message will be broadcast throughout Britain and the Commonwealth nations Wednesday afternoon. Excerpts released ahead of time reveal that the queen plans to acknowledge it has been a challenging year.

Talking about the need for reconciliation and forgiveness, Elizabeth says: "The path, of course, is not always smooth, and may at times this year have felt quite bumpy, but small steps can make a world of difference."

She is thought to be referring both to Britain's laborious exit from the European Union, which is now almost certainly going to happen on Jan. 31 after voters gave the pro-Brexit Conservative Party a comfortable majority in Parliament, and to the royal family's difficulties.

The problems this year included Andrew's retreat from public duties following a disastrous TV interview in which he defended his friendship with sex offender Jeffrey Epstein and failed to show empathy for Epstein's young female victims.

The family has also endured what many close observers think is a rift between William and Harry. Both Harry and Meghan have complained about constant scrutiny by the media as they settle into family life with Archie.

___ Katz reported from London.

Karma had a hand in top 5 'feel-good' sports moments of 2019

By JIM LITKE AP Sports Writer

Karma had a career year in 2019.

She draped a green jacket on Tiger Woods, handed soccer's World Cup to a tough-as-nails U.S. Women's National Team, shipped the NBA's Larry O'Brien Trophy to a cool-as-they-come rookie coach and players from the Great White North, righted a wrong that happened a quarter-mile from the finish line at the Kentucky Derby, and turned a baseball tribute to a fallen teammate into something truly unforgettable.

So if sports didn't make you smile at least once in the last 12 months, well, that's probably on you. Here are the top five feel-good stories of 2019 (and one honorable mention):

— Fourteen years after his last Masters win and 11 years after his last major, after fighting through chronic back problems, multiple surgeries, a bout with painkillers and long after just about everybody had written him off, Woods claimed his fifth green jacket in April.

"It's overwhelming, just because of what's transpired," he said afterward. "It's unreal for me to experience this."

His win was called the "greatest comeback in sports," "the feel-good story of the century" and some pundits predicted that people would forever remember where they were when Woods walked off the 18th at Augusta National.

But it might not even have been the most karmic moment in golf in 2019.

(Honorable mention) At the Phoenix Open in late January, PGA Tour pro Gary Woodland helped Amy Bockerstette, a community college golfer with Down Syndrome, finish off one of the most heart-warming pars golf has ever seen. At the U.S. Open in June, he borrowed her mantra — "I've got this" — en route to the biggest win of his career.

Playing with Woodland in front of a big practice-day crowd at the famed 16th hole, Bockerstette sensed he was more nervous than she was. So before each shot, she put Woodland at ease with the words she repeats when tackling life's other challenges: "I've got this."

Five months later, with Woodland leading the U.S. Open after three rounds, Bockerstette did it again. He'd held the 54-hole lead at a PGA Tour event seven times before and failed to seal the deal. Woodland said Bockerstette's tweet the night before the final round helped make a difference this time.

"Amy told me a million times when we were on that hole ... 'I've got this, I've got this,'" Woodland recalled after his win at Pebble Beach. "And I told myself that a million times today, 'I've got this.'"

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 25, 2019 ~ Vol. 28 - No. 177 ~ 14 of 28

— The U.S. National Women's Team hardly needed reassuring. If anything, captain Megan Rapinoe and her teammates were deemed too brash as they gallivanted across France in pursuit of their third World Cup — and second in a row. Along the way, they sparred with President Trump over politics and highlighted a gender-discrimination lawsuit against their own federation in a fight for recognition and equal pay.

They scored 13 goals against lowly Thailand in a group-stage match and caught flak for celebrating too much. They responded by celebrating subsequent tallies with snarky golf claps and tea-time toasts, remaining ruthless until the final whistle in a 2-0 championship-game win over the Netherlands. That's what happens when you send women to do a job that the better-paid men's national team has never come close to completing.

"We've done exactly what we set out to do, done exactly what we wanted to do, said what we feel," said Rapinoe. "I know sometimes my voice is louder, but everybody is in this together."

— The Toronto Raptors, on the other hand, weren't marked for greatness until that moment in Game 7 of a playoff series against Philadelphia, when Kawhi Leonard's buzzer-beating, fadeaway jumper bounced four times on the rim before capping a 92-90 win.

"It looked like it was going in the whole time to me," quipped Raptors rookie coach Nick Nurse afterward.

Lucky or not, the Raptors turned that break into a title. They outlasted Milwaukee in the Eastern Conference final and riding Leonard's masterful performances on both ends of the floor, ended the Golden State Warriors' dynastic dreams in six games.

Not long after the championship parade wound its way through Toronto, Leonard announced he was leaving town to join the Los Angeles Clippers. Undaunted, Nurse went back to work and has the Raptors back in contention. Over more than three decades, he'd coached in Great Britain, at G-League stops in Des Moines, Iowa, and Edinburg, Texas, and starting over was nothing new.

"He looks young," Raptors guard Kyle Lowery said, "but he's pretty old."

— A drenching early May rainstorm turned the Churchill Downs track sloppy even before the start of the 145th Kentucky Derby. But the real mess materialized at the end, when Maximum Security, the first horse across the finish line, also became the first winner disqualified for an in-race foul.

Track stewards pored over replays for 22 agonizing minutes before awarding the win to Country House, ruling that Maximum Security had drifted into the path of War of Will, setting off a dustup that affected at least two other horses. That decision turned the tote board upside-down and handed Bill Mott, a training legend who'd won everything else racing has to offer, his first Kentucky Derby.

"I'm glad I wasn't in their shoes," Mott said. "I'm glad I didn't have to make the decision in front of over 100,000 people and the millions of people that are watching this on TV and around the world."

— The sudden death of popular Los Angeles Angels left-hander Tyler Skaggs in early July rocked the baseball world. His death was later attributed to an overdose of opioids, sparking a rare agreement between Major League Baseball and the players union to add a treatment-based approach and evaluation protocol regarding opioid use to the current drug-testing program.

But the Angels weren't thinking long-term when they planned to honor Skaggs in their first home game — against the Seattle Mariners — after more than a week away. They wanted his teammates and fans to remember a promising young pitcher whose personality lit up the clubhouse.

The Angels players donned jerseys with Skaggs' name and his No. 45 on the back. His mother, Debbie, threw out the first pitch. Then the magic started.

Mike Trout hit a 454-foot home run to open the scoring. Pitchers Taylor Cole and Felix Pena combined to throw a no-hitter — the 11th in franchise history, which was the number Skaggs wore in high school. After scoring seven times in the first inning, the final score was 13-0, which aligned with Skaggs' 7/13 birthday.

After the final out, the Angels ventured out to the mound and laid their jerseys on the bump.

"Every time you'd go up to him, he'd have that smirk on his face. Either sarcastically, jokingly, or he was trying to put a smile on your face," Trout recalled. "We're always going to be thinking about him."

Afghan official says Taliban abducted 26 peace activists

By TAMEEM AKHGAR Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The Taliban ambushed a peace convoy in western Afghanistan and abducted 26 activists, members of a peace movement, a police spokesman said Wednesday.

The insurgents staged the ambush in the district of Bala Buluk in Farah province on Tuesday. The Taliban forced the six-vehicle convoy to a halt, then got into the cars and drove them and the activists to an unknown location, said the provincial police spokesman Mohibullah Mohib.

According to Mohib, a police operation is underway to locate and free the activists whose convoy was going village-to-village to rally for peace.

However, Bismillah Watandost of the People's Peace Movement of Afghanistan, to which the activists belong, said that 27 of their members were abducted by the Taliban in the Farah assault. The different figures could not immediately be reconciled.

The Taliban, who have been active in Farah, have not claimed responsibility for the abductions. However, Watandost also said that tribal elders in the province immediately launched an effort to negotiate with the Taliban to release the abducted activists. He added that phone lines were down in the region, making communication and getting information from the area difficult.

The Taliban today hold sway or control practically half of Afghanistan and are at their strongest since the 2001 U.S.-invasion. They continue to stage near-daily attacks targeting Afghan and U.S. forces, as well as government officials — even as they hold peace talks with a U.S. envoy tasked with negotiating an end to the 18-year conflict, America's longest war.

The latest rallies by the activists from the People's Peace Movement of Afghanistan started on Friday, first in southern Helmand province, a Taliban heartland.

At a similar series of peace rallies in October, the Taliban abducted six activists from the movement in eastern Logar province but released them the same day.

JFK letter promising Santa safe during Cold War on display

By PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — In the throes of the Cold War, the Soviet Union was planning to test a massive nuclear bomb in the Arctic Circle.

But in a letter to then-President John F. Kennedy, a young Michigan girl was most concerned about the North Pole's most famous resident.

"Please stop the Russians from bombing the North Pole," 8-year-old Michelle Rochon, of Marine City, pleaded, according to news reports at the time. "Because they will kill Santa Claus."

Kennedy's brief, but reassuring response to Rochon is part of a trove of holiday-themed archival materials being featured this month at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston.

"You must not worry about Santa Claus," the president wrote on Oct. 28, 1961. "I talked with him yesterday and he is fine. He will be making his rounds again this Christmas."

Kennedy also told Rochon that he shared her concern about the Soviet Union's test, "not only for the North Pole but for countries throughout the world; not only for Santa Claus but for people throughout the world."

Photos of the Kennedys celebrating Christmas in the White House and copies of the family's Christmas cards are among the other holiday keepsakes being highlighted in a seasonal display in the library's lobby.

Rochon, who now goes by the last name Phillips, told The Boston Globe in 2014 that she never thought the letters would resonate the way it did back then, when it turned her into something of a national sensation.

"I was just worried about Santa Claus," she told the Globe.

The Soviets, meanwhile, made good on their threat to bomb the North Pole. Two days after Kennedy penned his letter, they dropped the "King of Bombs," as it was dubbed in Russian.

Reportedly 1,570 times more powerful than the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined, it

shattered windows as far away as Norway and Finland. It's still considered the most powerful man-made explosive ever detonated.

Kennedy and other world leaders were quick to denounce the bomb test, The Washington Post reports. None of the officials statements, however, addressed Santa's fate.

Pope offers hope against darkness in Christmas Day message

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis offered a Christmas message of hope Wednesday against darkness that cloaks conflicts and relationships in large parts of the world from the Middle East to the Americas to Africa.

The pope told tens of thousands of tourists, pilgrims and Romans gathered in St. Peter's Square for the annual Christmas Day message that "the light of Christ is greater" than the darkness "in human hearts" and "in economic, geopolitical and ecological conflicts."

The traditional "Urbi et Orbi" ("to the city and to the world") Christmas message has become an occasion for popes to address suffering in the world and press for solutions. Francis was flanked by Cardinal Renato Raffaele Martino, president of the papal council for migrants, and Cardinal Konrad Krajewski, the pope's official almsgiver.

The pope cited the Syrian people "who still see no end to the hostilities that have rent their country over the last decade" as well as Israel, where Jesus "was born as the savior of mankind and where so many people -- struggling but not discouraged -- still await a time of peace, security and prosperity."

Francis also called for an easing of the crisis in Lebanon, social tensions in Iraq and "a grave humanitarian crisis" in Yemen.

He noted that a number of countries in the Americas "are experiencing a time of social and political upheaval," citing "the beloved Venezuelan people, long tried by their political and social tensions."

The pope also noted migrants forced by injustice "to emigrate in the hope of a secure life." Instead of finding acceptance, Francis said injustice continues along their journey, where they often face abuse, enslavement and torture in "inhumane detention camps" and death during dangerous sea and desert crossings.

And once migrants arrive in "places where they might have hoped for a dignified life" ... they "instead find themselves before walls of indifference," he said.

The pope offered prayers of hope for the people of Africa, including those in Congo "torn by continuing conflicts" and the people of Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Nigeria, where people have been "persecuted for their religious faith."

And in an extraordinary message, Francis along with two other religious leaders urged the rival leaders of South Sudan to maintain a pledge to form a coalition government early next year. A peace deal to end a 5-year civil war that killed close to 400,000 people was signed last year, but a November deadline to form a coalition government was extended to February as key aspects of the peace deal still need to be resolved.

The message, issued separately from the traditional papal Christmas address, was signed by the leader of the Anglican church, Archbishop Justin Welby, and the Rev. John Chalmers, ex-moderator of the Church of Scotland.

The religious leaders offered assurances "of our spiritual closeness as you strive for a swift implementation" of peace agreements and prayers "for a renewed commitment to the path of reconciliation and fraternity."

The leaders also expressed a desire to visit the East African nation.

Without access to costly opioids, Rwanda makes own morphine

By CARA ANNA and CLAIRE GALOFARO Associated Press

BUSHEKELI, Rwanda (AP) — It was something, the silence. Nothing but the puff of her breath and the scuff of her slip-on shoes as Madeleine Mukantagara walked through the fields to her first patient of the day. Piercing cries once echoed down the hill to the road below. What she carried in her bag had calmed them.

For 15 years, her patient Vestine Uwizeyimana had been in unrelenting pain as disease wore away her

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 25, 2019 ~ Vol. 28 - No. 177 ~ 17 of 28

spine. She could no longer walk and could barely turn over in bed. Her life narrowed to a small, dark room with a dirt-floor in rural Rwanda, prayer beads hanging on the wall by her side.

A year ago, relief came in the form of liquid morphine, locally produced as part of Rwanda's ground-breaking effort to address one of the world's great inequities: As thousands die from addiction in rich countries awash with prescription painkillers, millions of people writhe in agony in the poorest nations with no access to opioids at all.

Companies don't make money selling cheap, generic morphine to the poor and dying, and most people in sub-Saharan Africa cannot afford the expensive formulations like oxycodone and fentanyl, prescribed so abundantly in richer nations that thousands became addicted to them.

Rwanda's answer: plastic bottles of morphine, produced for pennies and delivered to homes across the country by community health workers like Mukantagara. It is proof, advocates say, that the opioid trade doesn't have to be guided by how much money can be made.

"Without this medicine I think I would die," said Uwizeyimana, 22.

When Mukantagara arrived, she smiled.

The small-scale production of liquid morphine that began in neighboring Uganda years ago is now being taken significantly further in Rwanda. It aims to be the first low- or middle-income country to make palliative care -- or the easing of pain from life-threatening illness -- available to all citizens, and for free.

As a palliative care worker, Mukantagara has long been a witness to death. She watched her sister die of cancer decades ago, in agony without relief.

The 56-year-old nurse settled on the edge of Uwizeyimana's bed, and they began with prayer. Uwizeyimana was feeling better. "Now I think everything is possible," she said. They held hands and prayed again, in whispers. Uwizeyimana closed her eyes.

As her visitors left Uwizeyimana blessed them, wishing for them what she might never have herself. May you get married, if you are not, she said. May you have children.

"It is hard to estimate how long someone will live," Mukantagara said, walking away. Uwizeyimana is not the youngest among the 70 patients she sees. Many have cancer. Some have HIV. A few have both.

She attends patients' funerals and thanks grieving families for their care. To relax, she sings in her church choir, and in her office by the hospital chapel she hums along with the hymns. A psychologist colleague offers her counseling.

The work is never easy, she said. But with morphine, at least, there is a chance for death with dignity.

Twenty-five years ago, the killing of some 800,000 ethnic Tutsis and moderate ethnic Hutus left this small country with an intimate knowledge of pain. Those who survived, struggled to recover from ghastly machete wounds and the cruelest of amputations.

With the health system shattered, there was little to ease the agony.

As Rwanda rebuilt itself, resilience was essential. Pain was to be endured, ideally without showing suffering; if you did, some said, you were not strong.

But medical advances meant more people were living into old age and facing diseases such as cancer. Some thought their pain was punishment from God for past sins, recalled Dr. Christian Ntuzimira, one of Rwanda's most outspoken advocates for palliative care. At the same time, health workers treating Rwandans in the late stages of AIDS pleaded for a way to ease their pain.

Many doctors were ignorant of morphine or scared to use it. When Ntuzimira was hesitant to prescribe it, early in his career, a mother fell to her knees in front of him and pleaded for mercy for her son. Ntuzimira was ashamed.

"I went home and questioned myself: 'Why study so many years if I can't help someone in pain?'" he recalled. "I didn't sleep that night."

In much of the world, the use of opioids was exploding. Consumption has tripled since 1997, according to the International Narcotics Control Board. But the increase was in expensive formulations that are profitable for pharmaceutical companies, according to an AP analysis of INCB data. The use of morphine,

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 25, 2019 ~ Vol. 28 - No. 177 ~ 18 of 28

the cheapest and most reliable painkiller, stagnated.

Administration of morphine for hospice patients is undisputed -- in 2016, when the U.S. Centers for Disease Control called on doctors to cut back on the flood of opioid prescriptions that fed the addiction crisis, it specifically exempted end-of-life patients.

But a dying person will only be a customer a few months and will not bolster the pharmaceutical industry's profits, critics say. The problem in the United States took hold when companies began campaigning to prescribe opioids for patients suffering from chronic conditions like back pain and osteoarthritis -- prospective customers for decades, said Dr. Anna Lembke, a Stanford University professor who wrote a book about how well-meaning American doctors helped facilitate the crisis and has been a witness against pharmaceutical companies.

The campaign changed the culture of opioid prescribing for a generation of doctors: The prescription rate quadrupled between 1999 and 2010. The INCB reported that some 90 percent of opioids are now consumed by the richest nations, where just 17% of people live, primarily the U.S., Canada, Western Europe and Australia.

A major study by the Lancet Commission on Global Access to Palliative Care and Pain Relief recently described the inequality between rich and poor countries as a "broad and deep abyss."

The study estimates it would cost only \$145 million a year to provide enough morphine to ease end-of-life suffering around the globe, yet millions still suffer without pain medication in the poorest places.

"Pain is a torture," said Diane Mukasahaha, Rwanda's national coordinator of palliative care. She described patients without morphine who were near starvation because they couldn't bear to eat. "People should have medication like an American person. We all are human beings. The body is the same."

Stefano Berterame, chief of the narcotic control for the INCB secretariat, said the agency has implored pharmaceutical companies to help.

Commercially made morphine is on average nearly six times more expensive in many low- and middle-income countries than it is in wealthy ones, the INCB has reported, and the price varies wildly from place to place. Experts attribute it in part to small countries with low opioid consumption lacking the negotiating power to import drugs at bulk prices, particularly for controlled narcotics that require international authorizations that tack on cost. Studies have shown that in some countries, a 30-day supply of morphine costs the equivalent of 40 days of minimum wage work.

In 2013, Stephen Connor, executive director of the Worldwide Hospice Palliative Care Alliance, made a list of all the companies that make opioids and invited them to attend a conference. It was a chance, he said, to discuss how they could help address the crushing need for end-of-life pain treatment by producing morphine as a social good.

Of more than 100 companies invited, only five came -- and none of the American companies that mass-market opioids.

And so a growing number of African countries -- Rwanda, Kenya, Malawi -- began to make and distribute morphine on their own, usually in a nonprofit and government collaboration. They looked to Uganda, where the nonprofit Hospice Africa Uganda was making liquid morphine from powder in a process so basic the solution was mixed for nearly two decades at a kitchen sink.

The Ugandan operation, though much praised, remains limited in reach. Its existence outside the government health system is precarious, relying so much on donor support that it nearly shut down this year, founder Dr. Anne Merriman said.

By putting morphine production and distribution under strict government control and covering the costs for patients, Rwanda has quietly become the new model for Africa. The liquid is produced from imported powder three times a week, about 200 bottles at a time, in a single room where a handful of workers in protective scrubs are checked before leaving to prevent the drug being smuggled out, said Richard Niwenshuti Gatera, a pharmacist and director of the production facility.

Before Rwanda's morphine production began in 2014, Gatera watched his aunt make a 12-hour journey by bus to Uganda to obtain the drug. If none was available, she would return home, wait a while and set out again. Last year she died, peacefully, while taking the Rwanda-made drug, he said.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 25, 2019 ~ Vol. 28 - No. 177 ~ 19 of 28

Like all opioids, liquid morphine can be abused, and can be addictive. But the government has direct control over the supply to prevent what happened in the United States, where drug distributors shipped millions of pills to pharmacies in tiny towns, quantities far outside justifiable medical need, said Meg O'Brien, whose Treat the Pain organization helps poor nations produce morphine. The drug is reserved for the sickest people. Only the supplier of morphine powder makes money, so there is no mass marketing effort to expand sales.

The bottles of liquid morphine are distributed to hospitals and pharmacies, where they are kept under lock and key until community workers like Mukantagara retrieve them. Then they are carried to the homes of the suffering even in some of Rwanda's most rural areas, along footpaths between rolling bean fields and banana plants.

Mukantagara arrived at the bedside of 89-year-old Athanasie Nyirangirababyeyi. She lives on a mattress in her son's home, sleeping under a poster of Jesus and the words of Psalm 23 — "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want" — though she never learned to read. She has been sick for five years and has taken liquid morphine for three.

"With pain relief I can eat. I can go outside," Nyirangirababyeyi said. "I can greet my neighbors. I can walk slowly, slowly and go to church."

But fear and confusion surrounding opioids persists.

Opioids are among the most addictive drugs on the planet, and many doctors and bureaucrats in the developing world have long hesitated to import or prescribe them. Cost, onerous regulations and cultural aversion have made it harder for patients in the poorest countries to find relief.

Dr. Zipporah Ali, executive director of the Kenya Hospices and Palliative Care Association, said she and colleagues toured the country and were shocked to find expired opioids sitting on shelves in health facilities while patients screamed in pain. After watching her brother die of leukemia without painkillers, she now works with Kenya's government to get locally made liquid morphine into hospitals.

Even in Rwanda, doctors at first were hesitant to prescribe morphine for Ange Mucyo Izere, a 6-year-old girl who is undergoing chemotherapy for bone cancer.

"She was not able to sleep, talk, pray," said her mother, Joselyne Mukanyabyenda.

The girl began sipping doses of the liquid morphine in October and has been transformed. She took a visitor's smartphone and began snapping photos, then struck poses for a camera.

"I miss school. I miss my friends," she said. If the chemotherapy helps, she is expected to return to class.

There have been no reports of abuse from nurses across the country, said Mukasahaha, the nation's palliative care director.

The health workers who prescribe morphine, including nurses and midwives, are taught to differentiate between chronic life-limiting diseases, which can be treated with morphine, and chronic pain, which cannot, at least without risk.

It is a key distinction. Critics say for-profit drug makers have blurred that line, seizing on the good intentions of hospice advocacy to market opioids to patients with common chronic conditions. It is hard for people to tell now when opioids are appropriate and when the risks outweigh the benefits, said Lukas Radbruch, a German doctor and professor of palliative medicine.

"What makes me mad is the confusion this causes," he said. "If you would have asked me two years ago, I would say we're steadily improving. But now I'm really afraid that the crisis in the U.S. is triggering a backlash which leads to rapid deterioration of the global situation."

Earlier this year, the World Health Organization rescinded guidelines that sought to expand opioid access after U.S. lawmakers alleged they were corrupted by Purdue Pharma, the maker of OxyContin.

The congressional investigation found that organizations and people with financial ties to the company had a role in crafting the 2011 document, which stated addiction occurs in less than 1% of patients -- a common marketing claim of the pharmaceutical industry that has been repeatedly debunked. The National Institute on Drug Abuse estimates that up to 29% of patients prescribed opioids for chronic pain misuse

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 25, 2019 ~ Vol. 28 - No. 177 ~ 20 of 28

them and up to 12% develop addiction.

Rep. Katherine Clark, D-Massachusetts, who authored the report, said she understands the need to address the global scourge of untreated pain. But she said the international health community cannot turn the reins over to the for-profit pharmaceutical industry that is already widely blamed for causing one epidemic.

Purdue wrote in a statement that the report is "riddled with inaccuracies," and the company denies influencing the documents. The statement maintained that the marketing of OxyContin was in line with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's approved labeling and that Purdue always complied with the agency's orders to update labels or enhance warnings "to maximize patient safety." Decisions about when to prescribe opioids, the company said, should be up to doctors and their patients.

Dr. Gilles Forte, coordinator of the WHO's essential medicines department, said the agency is putting together a panel to write new guidelines that will include a more detailed accounting of the latest scientific evidence about the risks of opioids and the cause and consequences of the American epidemic. He said they took the congresswoman's allegations seriously but found no evidence the guidelines were tainted by pharmaceutical interests.

In the meantime, poor nations don't know what to do, said Liliana De Lima, executive director of the International Association for Hospice and Palliative Care. The whole world now seems concerned about people suffering and dying from opioid addiction, she said, but not about people suffering and dying in agony without opioids.

"I asked myself, when do patients lose dignity? she said. "It's not just about how long you live. It's about how well you live until you die."

Most countries in the developing world continue to look to for-profit companies for pain relief. It is an inherently broken model, De Lima said, because companies are only interested in selling drugs they can profit from, so the neediest people in agony will never get what they need.

Rwanda offers an alternative, and hope.

The drive to provide homemade morphine is spreading across Africa, though slowly: Twenty-two of the continent's 54 countries now have affordable liquid morphine, according to Hospice Africa Uganda. Use is still badly limited by poor logistics and lack of funding.

Rwanda aimed to reach everyone who needs palliative care by 2020. But as the new year approaches, not everyone receives home visits by community health workers, Mukasahaha said. The training of those workers, thousands in all, goes on.

At a rural home near Lake Kivu, Mukantagara carried a bottle to 52-year-old Faina Nyirabaguiza, who has cancer. Each of her movements signaled pain. She walked slowly. She settled on a wooden bench and folded over herself, rubbing her wrist with her thumb.

Mukantagara increased her morphine dosage on the spot. She poured the green liquid into the bottle cap. Nyirabaguiza drank three, one after another.

"Maybe it will help me," she said, her eyes fixed on a spot in the distance. "My wish is to die. Really, I'm suffering."

Nyirabaguiza closed her eyes and prayed. Mukantagara's hand was on her back, soothing.

On the nurse's ride back to the hospital, her vehicle passed a pickup truck with a coffin in the back. Women ran alongside it, down the winding road, and sang.

The Global Opioids project can be seen here. <https://www.apnews.com/GlobalOpioids>

Lebanese help each other as economic crisis crushes lives

By SARAH EL DEEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Panic set in on a WhatsApp group used to organize Lebanese protests when one member said he intended to kill himself because he can't provide for his kids.

The desperate call came on the heels of the suicide of a father of two that had stunned the public and raised alarm over how dire Lebanon's economic conditions have become.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 25, 2019 ~ Vol. 28 - No. 177 ~ 21 of 28

So Mohamed Shkeir, one of dozens of members in the group, sprang into action. The 23-year-old architect student along with friends launched a campaign appealing for donations — for the man and for others suffering. They posted an ad on social media and, to show transparency, created a spreadsheet to track the money.

As Lebanon's protest movement enters its third month, the economic pinch is hurting everyone. Layoffs are increasing, salary cuts are the norm, banks are capping withdrawals and prices are quickly rising. The euphoria that marked the first days of the protests is being replaced with gloom.

With the entrenched political class failing to chart a way out, Lebanese are resorting to what they've done in previous wars and crises: they rely on each other, not the state.

"We got to a situation where people are not able to buy food for their kids or pay their rent," Shkeir said.

The despondent friend "said he had no money and what is the revolution doing about it and asked why the politicians are not paying attention," Shkeir said. They were able to convince him not to kill himself, though he refused to take any donations. Shkeir and his group continued their campaign, giving money, food, clothes and supplies to 58 families so far this month, including one family reduced to using candles because they can't afford electricity.

Over recent years as Lebanon's economy worsened, people turned to familiar ways to cope, like mosque and church charities or helping each other, forgiving debts or handing out food. Those means have already been getting stretched thin.

The protests — and the 24-hour news cycle focused on them — have brought a surge of help by rallying public attention to the suffering. Campaigns to collect food, winter clothes and helplines for people in economic and emotional distress are popping up everywhere, intensified by the Christmas spirit.

Stores have offered discounts and set up boxes for donations of clothes or money. Ads on TV urged Lebanese to pack bags of donations instead of suitcases for travel. Another urged Lebanese in the diaspora coming home to visit to bring "medicines, clothes and goodies" to give, because "Lebanon needs help."

Some restaurants have offered to deliver free food, and bakeries put out bread for anyone who needs. A yoga studio organized classes to fundraise for the needy. WhatsApp groups and Instagram pages shared addresses of local small businesses for shoppers to use for Christmas gifts. "We are all in this together," said one tagline. A group of web developers created an app, Khayyak or Your Brother, to coordinate between those who want to help and those in need. "Don't lose hope, you are not alone," the advertisement for the app said.

The efforts are in part driven by the famed entrepreneurial spirit that helped Lebanese get through numerous previous crises, including a 15-year civil war and several wars with Israel that wrecked the infrastructure and economy.

But the protests have also created a unique experience — "something for everybody," whether they support or oppose the revolt, said Mia Atwi, a clinical psychologist.

"People feel more that they are all suffering the same thing, the rich and the poor ... a common kind of loss," she said.

Atwi is co-founder of Lebanon's Embrace, a mental health organization operating the national suicide prevention helpline. The helpline now receives 100 calls a week, up from up to 10 before reports of suicides or attempted suicides first erupted three weeks ago.

Atwi attributed the jump to the spike of media and public attention to the issue of suicide, something she said has saved lives. Calls even come from rural areas, not just Beirut as they did in the past. Still, the government hasn't given her organization a toll-free number, despite paying \$25,000 a year for the four-digit helpline.

Many campaigns have sprung out of the protest movement. Weekly clothes donations and distributions were set up in the downtown Beirut squares at the epicenter of the demonstrations and near the Central Bank, which protesters accuse of corruption and fueling the economic crisis.

"We only have each other" proclaims the campaign's hashtag, a snub of the political class and the state.

Rim Majid, a 21-year old student, quit university in Beirut to participate in "everything revolution." After

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 25, 2019 ~ Vol. 28 - No. 177 ~ 22 of 28

hearing of news of the man's suicide in early December, she set up a griddle at a downtown protest site to make free manousheh, a traditional Lebanese flatbread. Next to the griddle is a donation box with the man's name. Someone donated enough wheat for a week of baking.

"The suffering existed before, but now we are going through a crisis, one that will only get worse," she said.

The help isn't only monetary. During a discussion one evening at a protest tent, a concerned woman asked: "What are the revolutionaries going to do when those who pay mortgages for their homes are unable to?" A young participant suggested the protesters could physically block the bank and the police from evicting people.

For Shkeir, the charity spirit reflects the principles of the protests — the rejection of an entire political elite seen as corrupt and of Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system.

Shkeir said his group's donation campaign makes sure to transcend sectarian and political divisions and offers an alternative to the patronage that politicians use to cement their power. The campaign has members from Christian, Sunni and Shiite areas. At least three donors came to them instead of established charities because, he said, they wanted to avoid donating along sectarian or political lines.

Shkeir had once planned to migrate like many others driven out by Lebanon's economic problems. The protests convinced him he has no other place to be but home, he said.

In the last two months, he said, he met people from across different classes and sects he never imagined talking to.

"Our relations are built on humanity and national unity," he said. "Our friendships are built on helping people."

Trump says North Korea may be planning nice 'Christmas gift'

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — President Donald Trump said Tuesday that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un may be planning to give him "a nice present" such as a "beautiful vase" for Christmas rather than a missile launch.

The president was asked what he will do if North Korea does conduct a long-range missile test.

The North has threatened to take unspecified action if sanctions are not eased by the end of the year, and speculation has centered on the possibility of a new missile test, possibly of an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of delivering a nuclear warhead.

The North has said that its "Christmas gift" to the United States will depend on Washington's actions.

Trump, who is in Florida for the holidays, had just finished thanking service members from each branch of the military via satellite when he was asked about North Korea. He opted for a wait-and-see approach.

"Maybe it's a present where he sends me a beautiful vase as opposed to a missile test," Trump said. "I may get a nice present from him. You don't know. You never know."

Nuclear talks between the U.S. and North Korea have been stalled since a February summit between Trump and Kim fell apart.

A new satellite image of a factory where North Korea makes military equipment used to launch long-range missiles shows the construction of a new structure.

In New York, U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric was asked whether Secretary-General Antonio Guterres had a message for Kim on Christmas Eve regarding a "Christmas gift."

"Our message is to the leadership of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to work for peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and to resume working-level talks with the United States. Diplomatic engagement is the only pathway to sustainable peace and complete denuclearization and verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," Dujarric said.

'Colors of the Mountain' author Da Chen dies at 57

By JOHN ROGERS Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Da Chen, the brilliant storyteller who drew from the hardships he suffered as a persecuted child growing up in the midst of China's cultural revolution to create the critically acclaimed memoir "Colors of the Mountain," has died at age 57.

Chen died of lung cancer on Dec. 17, his wife, Dr. Sun-Ling Chen, told The Associated Press on Tuesday from the family's home in Temecula, California.

His most recent book, "Girl Under a Red Moon," was published just three months ago.

Chen's breakthrough came in 1999 with the critically acclaimed, best-selling "Colors of the Mountain," in which he recounted the abuses he and his family suffered during the latter years of the country's Cultural Revolution.

It was a time when the Communist Party and its leader, Mao Zedong, were cementing their grip on power following the country's 1949 revolution and Chen's family, who had been prosperous landowners, became pariahs, as did many others.

Chen was bullied in school and eventually kicked out to work in farm fields as a pre-teen while his father and grandfather, college-educated intellectuals, were tortured and sent to reeducation camps.

"He watched his father being hung up by his thumbs and beaten and his grandfather stoned frequently with rocks thrown at him by children," Chen's wife said. "He would undergo a lot of humiliation parades where they would throw fruit and other things at him. Frequently he was sent to labor camps where he worked with people twice his age digging irrigation trenches in the mountains."

Eventually a kindhearted teacher sneaked Chen back into school and, after Mao died in 1976, he was allowed to take the country's college entrance exam on which he scored among the highest in the country. He was admitted to the prestigious Beijing Language and Cultural University where upon graduation he joined the faculty teaching English.

After being offered a scholarship to Nebraska's Union College, Chen recalled arriving in the United States with little more than \$30 and his treasured bamboo flute. He supported himself for a time as a waiter in a Chinese restaurant.

"He always said he was one of the best Chinese waiters in Lincoln, Nebraska," his wife recalled with a chuckle.

Soon after his arrival in Nebraska, however, he received a scholarship offer from Columbia University and headed to New York.

After earning a law degree, he went to work as an investment banker on Wall Street. That's when he also began to turn his hand to writing, inspired by the great thriller writer John Grisham.

He tried twice to write a legal thriller like Grisham's, recalled his wife who worked as his editor. She described the first effort as "awful" and the second as "mediocre."

It was after the second one, she told him, that he ought to start writing down those stories he'd told his family about his early years in China.

The result was "Colors of the Mountain," published to immediate acclaim.

A New York Times best seller, it has been published in seven languages and, like his other books, taught at schools and universities.

"Despite the devastating circumstances of his childhood and adolescence, Chen recounts his coming of age with arresting simplicity," Publishers Weekly said of the book. "Readers will cry along with this sad, funny boy who proves tough enough to make it, every step of the painful way."

Other works include "Sounds of the River," which recounted his leaving his poor south China town of Yellow Stone to attend college in Beijing.

In "Brothers: A Novel," Chen turned to fiction in addressing the Cultural Revolution, this time with the tale of two brothers, one born into wealth as the son of a general, another into poverty as the son of the general's mistress.

He also published several children's books, including, "Wandering Warrior," a fantasy story set in ancient

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 25, 2019 ~ Vol. 28 - No. 177 ~ 24 of 28

China in which he said the 11-year-old protagonist was the kind of heroic young warrior he fantasized being. His most recent work, "Girl Under a Red Moon," casts his real-life sister Xi Xi as the heroine during China's Cultural Revolution.

In addition to his wife, Chen is survived by a daughter, Victoria, a son, Michael, and four siblings. Memorial services are pending.

Trumps attend music-filled church service on Christmas Eve

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — President Donald Trump and first lady Melania Trump attended a music-filled Christmas Eve service at a Southern Baptist Convention-affiliated church before celebrating the holiday with dinner in the ballroom of his private club.

The pastor of Family Church in West Palm Beach, Florida, Jimmy Scroggins, and his family greeted the Trumps as they arrived moments into a "Candlelight Christmas Celebration." The Trumps received applause and cheers while taking reserved seats in the church's third pew. Brief sermons and readings by clergy were interlaced between traditional Christmas songs, as theatrical smoke billowed and fake snow descended from the rafters.

Attending Family Church was a change of pace for the Trumps, who had attended holiday services in the past at Bethesda-by-the-Sea, the Episcopal Church in Palm Beach at which they were married in 2005.

The Trumps then returned to his private club, where they were greeted by applause as they entered for Christmas Eve dinner. Trump, less than a week after being impeached by the House, did not respond when asked by a reporter if he prayed for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi at church, but he said, "We're going to have a great year."

Trump was seen briefly speaking attorney Alan Dershowitz, a prominent Trump defender on cable news, who was dining in the ballroom. The Harvard Law School professor emeritus has been the subject of discussions about joining the president's impeachment legal team.

Trump earlier called military service members stationed across the world to share greetings ahead of the Christmas holiday.

Speaking Tuesday by video conference from his private club in Florida, where he is on a more than two-week vacation, Trump said, "I want to wish you an amazing Christmas." The group included Marines in Afghanistan, an Army unit in Kuwait, a Navy ship in the Gulf of Aden, an Air Force base in Missouri and a Coast Guard station in Alaska.

Trump praised the armed forces for their efforts this year to eliminate the last of the Islamic State group's territorial caliphate and for killing IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. He also touted economic successes at home and a pay raise for troops kicking in in the new year.

"You make it possible for us to do what we have to do," Trump said, thanking them for their service.

Trump briefly fielded questions from troops, including an invitation to attend the homecoming of the USS Forrest Sherman when the destroyer returns next year to its home port of Norfolk, Virginia.

Trump was asked what he'd bought Mrs. Trump for Christmas. A "beautiful card," he said, and admitted that he was "still working on a Christmas present."

"You made me think. I'm going to have to start working on that real fast," he said.

On Tuesday evening, the first lady answered calls from children across the country as part of North American Aerospace Defense Command's Operation NORAD Tracks Santa program. Press secretary Stephanie Grisham said Mrs. Trump spoke with several children and heard items on their Christmas lists.

Grisham said Mrs. Trump "reminded the kids to put milk and cookies out for Santa, and wished each child and their families a very merry Christmas."

The president has been largely out of the spotlight since delivering a speech to conservative students in nearby West Palm Beach on Saturday, spending his days golfing on his private course and greeting the well-heeled members of his clubs.

Bloomberg axes company using prisoners for campaign calls

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democratic presidential contender Michael Bloomberg cut ties with a contractor that used prisoners to make calls for his presidential campaign, he said in a statement Tuesday.

The former New York mayor said that his campaign was unaware of the arrangement until a reporter sought comment. Earlier Tuesday, online news site The Intercept reported that Bloomberg's campaign contracted a New Jersey-based call center company that, in at least one instance, used Oklahoma inmates to make calls on behalf of the billionaire's campaign.

"We only learned about this when the reporter called us, but as soon as we discovered which vendor's subcontractor had done this, we immediately ended our relationship with the company and the people who hired them," Bloomberg said in the statement.

"We do not support this practice and we are making sure our vendors more properly vet their subcontractors moving forward," he said.

Bloomberg has come under fire from criminal justice reform advocates for his support for controversial tough-on-crime policies while mayor of New York. He launched his presidential campaign with an apology for his embrace of stop-and-frisk policing tactics, which give police wide latitude to detain individuals suspected of committing a crime and have been found to be used disproportionately against minorities.

Thousands mark Christmas in West Bank town of Bethlehem

By MOHAMMAD DARAGHMEH and PATTY NIEBERG Associated Press

BETHLEHEM, West Bank (AP) — Thousands of Christian pilgrims on Tuesday flocked to the West Bank town of Bethlehem, celebrating Christmas Eve in the traditional birthplace of Jesus.

Visitors converged on the town's large Christmas tree in Manger Square, near the spot believed to mark Jesus' birthplace. Uniformed Palestinian scouts wearing yellow and gold capes paraded past assembled visitors, the sound of drums and bagpipes filling the cool, clear air. Vendors hawked snacks and holiday gifts, adding to the festive atmosphere.

Roger Hoagland, a Christian educator and missionary from Louisville, Kentucky, said he had come to lead a Baptist choir for a fourth time and described his visit as the experience of a lifetime.

"We love this opportunity," he said. "We have 40 people and many of them are from the U.S. and other countries. They come to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ."

While Bethlehem is in the Palestinian-administered area of the Israeli-occupied West Bank, Israel's imposing separation barrier encloses parts of the city and is a constant reminder of the complex political reality. Most of the Christmas Eve visitors appeared to be local residents, with foreign pilgrims seeming to make up a modest portion of the crowd.

Still, the celebrations capped the most successful year in history for Palestinian tourism, according to Tourism Minister Rula Maayah.

Bethlehem — located just outside of Jerusalem — has invested heavily in tourism. It's built new hotels and tried to diversify itself by offering culinary and cultural destinations in addition to its traditional holy sites.

Maayah estimated that some 15,000 pilgrims were staying overnight in Bethlehem's fully booked hotels this Christmas. Tourists were also staying in other West Bank towns, such as Ramallah and Jericho, in addition to Jerusalem.

In all, she said the number of foreign tourists visiting the West Bank this year is estimated to reach 3.5 million people, up from 3 million last year.

Christmas festivities are typically a boost for Bethlehem's flagging economy and for the Holy Land's dwindling Christian population, which has shrunk over the decades as people fled conflict and searched for better opportunities abroad.

"Our message this year is that Christmas is a message of joy," Maayah said. "But of course we are celebrating Christmas while we are still under occupation. We hope that we will celebrate Christmas joyfully

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 25, 2019 ~ Vol. 28 - No. 177 ~ 26 of 28

next year with the end of occupation so that we could celebrate like all other nations in our independent country without occupation."

The Church of the Nativity, where Christians believe Jesus was born, hosted Palestinian dignitaries and pilgrims from around the world for a midnight Mass. The Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, was among those in attendance.

At midday Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the head Catholic cleric in the Holy Land, crossed an Israeli army checkpoint from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, where he was greeted by prominent members of Bethlehem's Christian community. He later celebrated Midnight Mass at the Church of Saint Catherine, part of the Church of the Nativity compound, which houses the grotto revered as Jesus' birthplace.

In his homily, Pizzaballa lamented the violence and deep divisions that characterize the modern Holy Land. But he also praised those who pursue what he called the "style of Bethlehem," or example of Jesus. "Celebrating Christmas also means celebrating those who still have a desire to love mankind and put themselves on the line for it," he said. "Here in the Holy Land, and not only today but every day of the year, there are still many people who celebrate the Christmas of Jesus in this way."

Celtics rookie conducts Boston orchestra's holiday concert

BOSTON (AP) — Boston Celtics player Tacko Fall made his debut as a guest conductor during the renowned Boston Pops orchestra's holiday concert.

The 7-foot-6 center took the stage to lead the orchestra in a rendition of the song "Sleigh Ride" at Boston's Symphony Hall Monday night. Fall was wearing a custom-made, size-48 double extra-long tuxedo.

Fall used a baton that was given to him by longtime conductor Keith Lockhart, The Boston Globe reported. Lockhart wrote "Congratulations to Tacko!" on the baton in green marker.

Lockhart called Fall "the tallest person to ever conduct the Boston Pops" before inviting him to come up on stage.

"Someone has come on the scene here and in a few short months has stolen everybody's hearts — not just because of his athletic ability but also because of the size of his spirit and the broadness of his smile," Lockhart said.

The audience cheered during Fall's performance as he did a spin and wiggled his arms in time with the music.

Pope marks joyful Christmas Eve after less-than-joyful year

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis assured the faithful on Christmas Eve that God loves everyone — "even the worst of us" — as he celebrated the joyous birth of Christ after a less-than-joyful year of scandals and opposition.

With a choir singing the classic Christmas hymn "The First Noel," Francis processed down the center aisle of St. Peter's Basilica late Tuesday and unveiled a statue of the newborn Jesus lying in a nativity scene at the foot of the altar.

Francis said the birth of Jesus, which Christians commemorate on Christmas Day, was a reminder of God's unconditional love for everyone, "even the worst of us."

"God does not love you because you think and act the right way," he said. "You may have mistaken ideas, you may have made a complete mess of things, but the Lord continues to love you."

At the same time though, he called for the faithful to allow themselves to be transformed by Jesus' "crazy love" and to stop trying to change others.

"May we not wait for our neighbors to be good before we do good to them, for the church to be perfect before we love her, for others to respect us before we serve them. Let us begin with ourselves," he said.

Francis has frequently emphasized his call for "personal conversion" in his reform-minded papacy, believing that true reform cannot be imposed from on high, but discerned from within. He has similarly denounced

the "holier-than-thou" attitude of doctrinal and legal purists, who have chafed at his progressive openings to gays, divorcees and people on the margins.

Those critics have seized on the sexual abuse and financial scandals that have buffeted the papacy of the 83-year-old Jesuit pope.

The scandals are likely to follow Francis into 2020, with developments in a corruption investigation involving hundreds of millions of dollars in donations to the Holy See and the release of a report on what the Vatican knew about ex-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, who was defrocked for sexually abusing adults and minors,

Francis' late-night Mass kicks off a busy few days for the pope, including a Christmas Day speech, noon-time prayers, a New Year's Eve vigil and a Jan. 1 Mass.

Pothole Christmas tree inspires pastor to write holiday song

McCOMB, Miss. (AP) — A scraggly metal Christmas tree planted in a pothole has inspired a Mississippi minister to pen a holiday song.

One bit asks, "If a man can take a pothole and bring the whole world together, the question is what are you doing to spread the Christmas joy?"

The Rev. Leon Hitchens of Webb Chapel Church in Liberty wrote "Pothole Christmas Tree" after local radio host Fern Crossley showed him the makeshift holiday scene, the Enterprise-Journal of McComb reported.

The song celebrates John Drummond, who stuck the base of a wire Christmas tree into the traffic cone sticking out of the pothole. Neighbors decorated it with tinsel, ornaments and a large star on the top. An Associated Press account went worldwide, leading to additional coverage by Fox News.

Drivers are now going out of their way to check out the pothole and its decoration.

"I was really moved by the story," Hitchens said. "All because of the spirit of Christmas and how Mr. Drummond took what was supposed to be a bad situation and made it for the good."

The city board said at last week's meeting that crews are repairing potholes as tight finances allow, and a \$3.2 million bond issue dedicated to street paving may let the city fill others.

Though many people take down their Christmas trees by New Year's Day, it's uncertain whether the city will have the pothole fixed by then.



In this Nov. 29, 2019 photo, a decorated road cone stands at a pothole in the Edgewood neighborhood of McComb, Miss. Residents of the Mississippi city are protesting the large pothole in their neighborhood by decorating it with holiday cheer.

(Matt Williamson/The Enterprise-Journal via AP)

Today in History By The Associated Press

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, Dec. 25, the 359th day of 2019. There are six days left in the year. This is Christmas Day.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 25, 2009, passengers aboard Northwest Airlines Flight 253 foiled an attempt to blow up the plane as it was landing in Detroit by seizing Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab (OO'-mahr fah-ROOK' ahb-DOOL'-moo-TAH'-lahb), who tried to set off explosives in his underwear. (Abdulmutallab later pleaded guilty and was sentenced to life in prison.)

On this date:

In A.D. 336, the first known commemoration of Christmas on Dec. 25 took place in Rome.

In 1776, Gen. George Washington and his troops crossed the Delaware River for a surprise attack against Hessian forces at Trenton, New Jersey, during the American Revolutionary War.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 25, 2019 ~ Vol. 28 - No. 177 ~ 28 of 28

In 1926, Hirohito became emperor of Japan, succeeding his father, Emperor Yoshihito.

In 1931, New York's Metropolitan Opera broadcast an entire live opera over radio for the first time: "Hansel and Gretel" by Engelbert Humperdinck.

In 1973, "The Sting," starring Paul Newman and Robert Redford as a pair of 1930s grifters, was released by Universal Pictures.

In 1977, comedian Sir Charles Chaplin died in Switzerland at age 88.

In 1989, ousted Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu (chow-SHES'-koo) and his wife, Elena, were executed following a popular uprising. Former baseball manager Billy Martin, 61, died in a traffic accident near Binghamton, New York.

In 1990, the World Wide Web, the system providing quick access to websites over the Internet, was born in Geneva, Switzerland, as computer scientists Tim Berners-Lee and Robert Cailliau (KAH'-yoh) created the world's first hyperlinked webpage.

In 1991, Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev went on television to announce his resignation as the eighth and final leader of a communist superpower that had already gone out of existence.

In 1999, space shuttle Discovery's astronauts finished their repair job on the Hubble Space Telescope and released it back into orbit.

In 2003, sixteen people were killed by mudslides that swept over campgrounds in California's San Bernardino Valley. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (pur-VEHZ' moo-SHAH'-ruhv) survived a second assassination bid in 11 days, but 17 other people were killed.

In 2006, James Brown, the "Godfather of Soul," died in Atlanta at age 73.

Ten years ago: The Taliban released a video purporting to show Pfc. Bowe Bergdahl, a U.S. soldier who'd gone missing more than five months earlier in eastern Afghanistan. (Bergdahl was released in May 2014.) Korean-American missionary Robert Park was arrested by border guards after crossing into North Korea; he was released in February 2010.

Five years ago: The black comedy "The Interview" opened in 331 locations in the U.S., culminating in the truly unprecedented move by a major studio to release a film in theaters and on digital platforms simultaneously.

One year ago: In a Christmas Day appearance in the Oval Office, President Donald Trump issued a lengthy defense of his demand for a border wall; he said parts of the federal government would stay closed until Democrats agreed to put up more walls along the U.S.-Mexico border to deter criminal elements. Pope Francis offered a Christmas wish for fraternity among people of different nations, cultures, faiths, races or ideas.

Today's Birthdays: Author Anne Roiphe is 84. Actress Hanna Schygulla (SHEE'-goo-lah) is 76. Rhythm-and-blues singer John Edwards (The Spinners) is 75. Actor Gary Sandy is 74. Singer Jimmy Buffett is 73. Pro and College Football Hall-of-Famer Larry Csonka is 73. Country singer Barbara Mandrell is 71. Actress Sissy Spacek is 70. Blues singer/guitarist Joe Louis Walker is 70. Former White House adviser Karl Rove is 69. Actress CCH Pounder is 67. Singer Annie Lennox is 65. Reggae singer-musician Robin Campbell (UB40) is 65. Country singer Steve Wariner is 65. Singer Shane MacGowan (The Pogues, The Popes) is 62. Baseball Hall of Famer Rickey Henderson is 61. The former chair of the Council of Economic Advisers, Christina Romer, is 61. Actress Klea Scott is 51. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is 48. Rock musician Noel Hogan (The Cranberries) is 48. Singer Dido is 48. Rock singer Mac Powell (Third Day) is 47. Rhythm-and-blues singer Ryan Shaw is 39. Country singer Alecia Elliott is 37. Pop singers Jess and Lisa Origliasso (The Veronicas) are 35. Actress Perdita Weeks is 34. Rock singer-musician Lukas Nelson (Lukas Nelson & Promise of the Real) is 31.

Thought for Today: "One of the most glorious messes in the world is the mess created in the living room on Christmas day. Don't clean it up too quickly." — Andy Rooney, CBS News commentator (1919-2011).

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