

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 1 of 74

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [1- Truss Pros Help Wanted](#)
- [2- 2022 FCCLA members recognized](#)
- [7- Legion Coach Wanted](#)
- [8- Winburn retires after 33 years at Groton](#)
- [9- Jumbo Graduation Cards](#)
- [11- Dakota Layers Donates 6,480 Eggs to Feeding South Dakota](#)
- [11- Severe Weather Awareness week scheduled for April 25-29.](#)
- [11- Registration Still Open for \\$20,000 Lesson Learned Teen Safe Driving Campaign](#)
- [12- COMMUNITY BACKYARD TOURS](#)
- [13- Weather Pages](#)
- [17- Daily Devotional](#)
- [18- 2022 Community Events](#)
- [19- Subscription Form](#)
- [20- News from the Associated Press](#)



UpComing Events

Thursday, April 21

3 p.m.: JH Track Meet in Groton (Schools Attending: vs. Aberdeen Christian, Aberdeen Roncalli, Britton-Hecla, Dakota Hills Coop, Frederick, Langford, Northwestern, Warner, Webster Area High School, Wolsey-Wessington @ Groton Area High School)
School Breakfast: Stuffed bagels.
School Lunch: Chicken fries, mashed potatoes.
Senior Menu: Ham and raisin sauce, sweet potatoes, mixed vegetables, crazy cake, dinner roll.

Friday, April 22

School Breakfast: Waffles.
School Lunch: Pizza, green beans.
Senior Menu: BBQ beef sandwich, potato salad, carrots and peas, fresh fruit.

Saturday, April 23

GHS Prom, 7 p.m.
Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am

Groton Daily Independent
PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445
Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460

Truss Pros Help Wanted

Truss Pros in Britton is looking to hire a CDL driver to deliver trusses in the tri-state area. Home every night. Competitive wage! Full benefit package!

To apply call 605-277-4937 or go to www.uslbn.com/careers and search for jobs in Britton, SD.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

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Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 2 of 74

2022 FCCLA members recognized



Quilters

The quilters this year were Alyssa Thaler, Julianna Kosel, Emilie Thurston, Trista Keith, Riley Leicht, Maddie Bjerke, Advisor Lindsey Tietz, Allyssa Locke, Brooklyn Imrie, Megan Flihs and Kelsie Frost. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



2021-22 FCCLA Officers

The outgoing officers are Kelsie Frost, public relations officer; Brooklyn Imrie, historian; Claire Heinrich, treasurer; Maddie Bjerke, president; Kaylynn Overacker, vice president; Abby Jensen, secretary; and Ashtyn Bahr, social media officer. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



2022-23 FCCLA Officers

The FCCLA officers for the 2022-23 school year are Emma Bahr, vice president; Emily Overacker, public relations officers; Claire Heinrich, treasurer; Abby Jensen, secretary; KayLynn Overacker, president; Anna Fjeldheim, social media officer; and Carly Guthmiller, historian.

(Photo by Paul Kosel)



FCCLA Awards

Brooklyn Hanson was awarded the Rookie of the Year award, Maddie Bjerke was awarded the Officer of the Year award and Carly Guthmiller was awarded the FCCLAer of the Year.

(Photo by Paul Kosel)



Senior Service Awards

Maddie Bjerke, Allyssa Locke, Kelsie Frost and Brooklyn Imrie. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 5 of 74



The quilters pictured with the sewer are Advisor Lindsey Tietz, Trista Keith, Emilie Thurston, Riley Leicht, Julianna Kosel, the sewer Dawn Breedlove, Allyssa Locke, Allyssa Thaler, Maddie Bjerke, Brooklyn Imrie and Kelsie Frost. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

**Top Quilters
Maddie Bjerke and
Allyssa Locke.** (Photo by
Paul Kosel)



Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 6 of 74



Julianna Kosel is pictured with her quilt. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

Senior Legion Coach Wanted



Groton Legion Post #39 is seeking qualified applicants for Head Coach for the Groton Legion Post #39 Senior Baseball Team. The applicant must have previous coaching experience. The application period will close on April 29, 2022.

Applications can be picked up at Groton City Hall and mailed to:
Doug Hamilton
411 N. 4th St.
Groton, SD 57445

Winburn retires after 33 years at Groton

By Dorene Nelson

Deb Winburn, third grade teacher in the Groton Area School District, is retiring at the end of the current school year after having taught here for 33 years.

"After graduating from Britton High School, I attended Northern State University where I received a degree in Elementary Education and Special Education as well as an endorsement in Gifted Education," Winburn explained.

"Before teaching in Groton, I taught first, second, and third grade for seven years in Watertown," Winburn said. "That was my first interview and my first job!"

"During my seven years of teaching in Watertown, I also worked at Roy Lake State Park during the summer as a naturalist," she added.

"Then I married Alan Winburn and taught kindergarten in Barnard," Winburn smiled. "Throughout my teaching career, I have taught kindergarten, special and gifted education, title reading, second grade, and third grade."

"When I started teaching in the Groton district, I was first hired as half-time special ed and half-time gifted education," she stated. "For twenty-two years, I was also the coordinator for Odyssey of the Minds and Destination Imagination as well as the Future Problem-Solving team coach."

"All of these programs give students the chance to think creatively, problem solve, and work with others," Winburn listed. "These are all important skills for students to have."

"My daughter Rylee was in Destination Imagination for a few years, and I saw that the skills she gained from that program helped her with projects and assignments in school," she added.

"I moved into the classroom when there was a second grade opening in 1998," Winburn explained. "I taught second grade with Sheryl Keup."

"When the Groton school district reorganized with Bristol in 2004, I moved to third grade and have been there ever since," she said. "I have enjoyed teaching with Kristi Anderson for fourteen years and the last four with Missi Smith."

"Altogether I have taught for forty-one years and really like working with children," Winburn smiled. "I love to see the excitement on their faces when they learn something new. I especially love finding new ways to teach a skill that engages my students. Every day is a new day filled with many adventures!"

"I always wanted to be a teacher and love working with children," she admitted. "It is so wonderful to see their enthusiasm and excitement in the classroom when they are learning new things. I have also been very fortunate to teach in a great school system and community!"

"I have one daughter Rylee who is an ER nurse at Essentia Hospital in Fargo," she stated proudly. "She will graduate with her Family Nurse Practitioner Degree in June."

"I now have one granddaughter, Emmy, who was born on March 16 in Fargo," Winburn smiled. "She has already brought so much joy to our family."

"During my retirement I am looking forward to spending time with my granddaughter," she admitted. "I also want to spend more time with my 86-year-old mother who lives in Veblen. I do plan on subbing next fall."

Winburn lives in Houghton with her husband Alan. He hauls gravel to townships as well as to private groups.



Deb Winburn

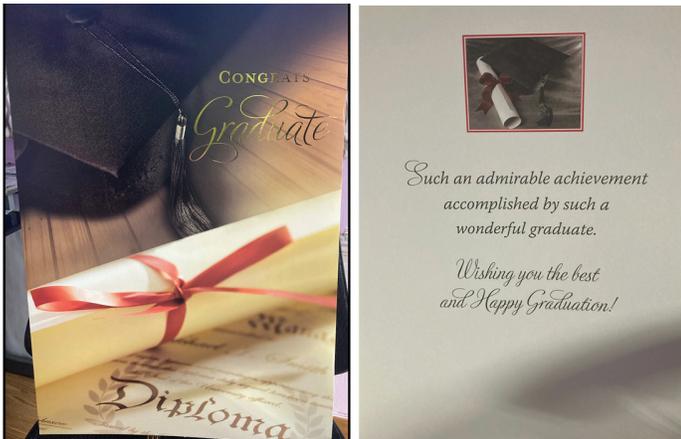
Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 9 of 74

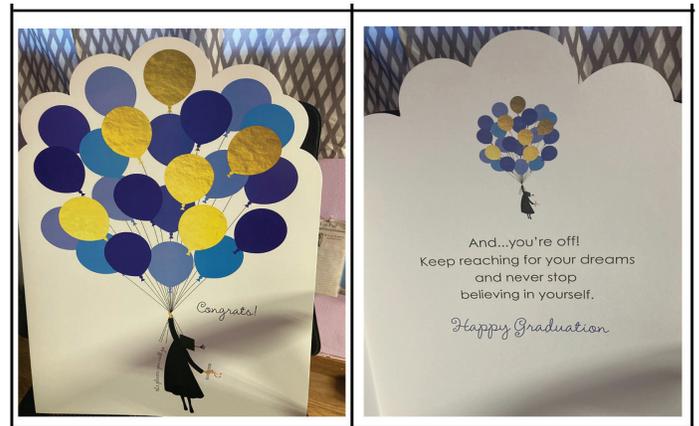
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Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 10 of 74

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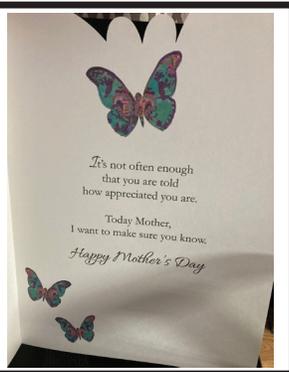
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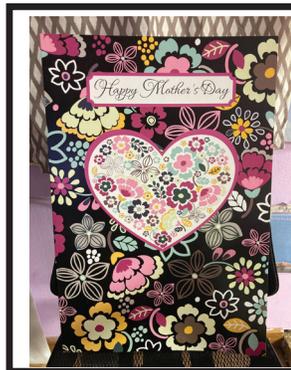
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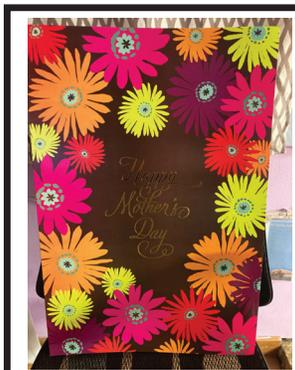
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Dakota Layers Donates 6,480 Eggs to Feeding South Dakota

Dakota Layers donated 6,480 eggs to Feeding South Dakota as the result of a partnership with South Dakota State University Men's and Women's Basketball teams. The company committed to donate one dozen eggs for every free throw made in Frost Arena this past basketball season.

This year, 462 free throws were made, including the WNIT games. To show their continued support in the fight against hunger, Dakota Layers increased their total donation to 540 dozen or 6,480 eggs.

"Eggs are a good source of protein and a valuable nutritional product," said Jason Ramsdell General Manager of Dakota Layers. "We are proud of our continued partnership with SDSU which incorporates fun and team spirit as a way to ultimately give back to our communities across South Dakota."

Dakota Layers is a family-owned egg farm located just outside of Flandreau, SD. In addition to the SDSU Athletics partnership donation, they are an on-going supporter of Feeding South Dakota and have donated over 5 million eggs to the organization since 2008.

"These eggs are donated to our community members through our Mobile Distributions that take place across the state," shared Lori Dykstra, CEO of Feeding South Dakota. "The generosity of Dakota Layers ensures that what we can provide healthy foods to people who may not always have access to them. We are grateful for donations like this that help us in the fight to end hunger in our state."

This donation was made to Feeding South Dakota's Sioux Falls Distribution Center on Tuesday, April 19.

Severe Weather Awareness week scheduled for April 25-29.

During the week Brown County will be testing our entire network of outdoor warning sirens across the county. This is scheduled to happen on Wednesday April 27, 2022.

Sirens will be activated at approx. 10:30am CDT

Please remember these are outdoor warning sirens and are only designed to alert those who are outside that something dangerous is happening in your area. Once you hear the siren activated you should go inside and turn to local media or NOAA weather radio to get more information.

If severe weather is in the area that day, we will not be doing the test.

Please take the time to review your severe weather awareness plans, evacuation plans, storm shelter location and supplies.

Schools and businesses are encouraged to take part in the tornado test and practice their drills.

Registration Still Open for \$20,000 Lesson Learned Teen Safe Driving Campaign

PIERRE, S.D. – South Dakota high school students still have time to enter this year's Lesson Learned teen safe driving campaign where they can win \$10,000 for themselves and another \$10,000 for a school-sponsored activity or program.

Lesson Learned is in its sixth year and is held in April during Distracted Driving Awareness Month. It is sponsored by the South Dakota Office of Highway Safety and the South Dakota Broadcasters Association, which provides the prize money.

The deadline to enter is April 30. To participate, students must complete a two-minute safe driving quiz at <https://drivesafesd.com/lesson-learned>. Once completed, their names will be entered into the drawing. They can also share the quiz with friends to get extra entries. The website also tracks participation rates of South Dakota schools.

Last year's winner was Austin Faw, a senior at Edmunds Central High School in Roscoe. He donated the \$10,000 school share to his school's athletic department.

The South Dakota Office of Highway Safety is an agency of the state Department of Public Safety.

COMMUNITY BACKYARD TOURS

The 2022 summer is fast approaching and plans are being made for a new community project. The plan is to host a day of "Backyard Tours". Weather permitting, June 25, 2022 from 2:00 - 5:00 p.m. has been selected as the day of tours. Lemonade, cookies and bars will be offered by the Garden Club members to the touring guests. The club members are asking that any Groton residents who would like to offer support to the Groton Community Garden Club by showing off their hard work and pride in their back yards are encouraged to call Marjorie Overacker, 605-397-8562 or Linda Gengerke, 605-397-8184.

The Groton Community Garden Club was started in 1951. There are currently 15 members. The Garden Club meets monthly to work on projects to beautify the City of Groton. For many years they have chosen the "Yard of the Week" recipients. This project proved to be a positive inspiration to our town. The Groton community can be proud of their town, as many people work very hard to improve their yards on a yearly basis.

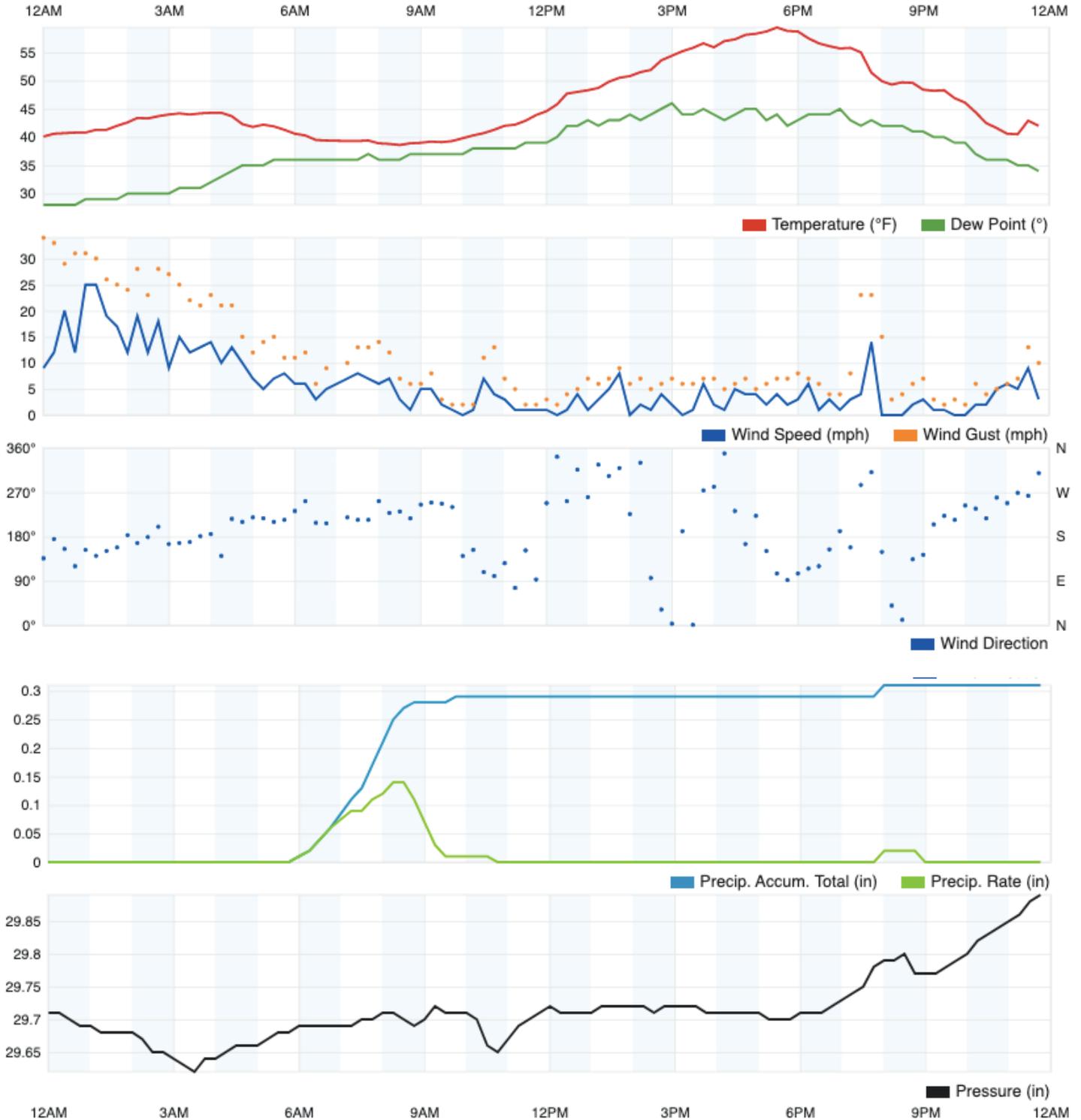
Club projects also include maintaining the circle of flowers at the city park. Also each year on Arbor Day a new tree is planted in the community. Trees have been planted at the City Park, Olive Grove Golf Course, Avantara Nursing Home, Baseball Park, Emmanuel Lutheran Church and the historical Episcopal Church. Main Street is decorated Each fall during homecoming with fall flowers, pumpkins and decorations.

Please support you community and OFFER your yard on this years new project "Backyard Tours".

Groton Daily Independent

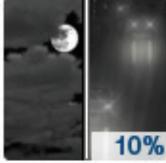
Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 13 of 74

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Broton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 14 of 74

Today	Tonight	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
				
Mostly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy then Slight Chance Rain and Breezy 10%	Chance Rain and Breezy 40%	Rain and Breezy 80%	Chance T-storms and Breezy 50%
High: 55 °F	Low: 43 °F	High: 62 °F	Low: 55 °F	High: 67 °F

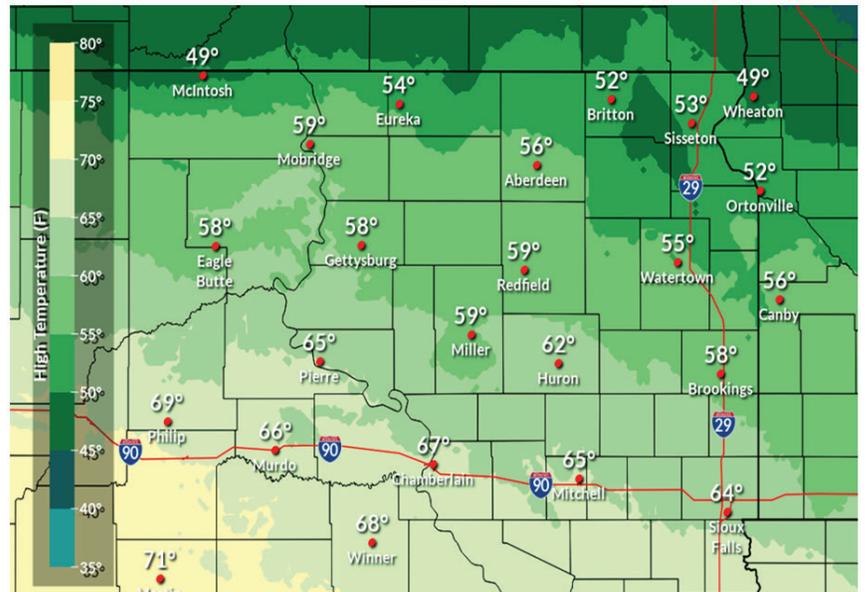


Thursday's High Temperatures

April 20, 2022
2:14 PM

Overview for Thursday

- Partly to Mostly Sunny
- Dry conditions
- Light winds in the morning, increasing some in the afternoon



NORR National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Dry and mild on tap for Thursday! #sdwx #mnwx

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 15 of 74

Today in Weather History

April 21, 2007: Heavy rains of 2 to 2.50 inches caused flash flooding in and around Watertown. Many streets were flooded in town, along with several roads outside of town. A warm front extending across the region was the focus for heavy rain, along with severe weather, during the evening across far north-east South Dakota. Hail up to the size of quarters, along with heavy rains of over 2 inches, caused some flooding mainly in Codington and Hamlin counties.

1885: A tornado struck the town of Denison, Texas in 1883 that destroyed a church. The congregation rebuilt the church. On this date, a second tornado destroyed the newly rebuilt church.

1958 - Portions of Montana were in the midst of a spring snowburst. Snowfall amounts ranged up to 55 inches at Red Lodge, 61 inches at Nye Mine, and 72 inches at Mystic Lake. (David Ludlum)

1967 - Severe thunderstorms spawned 48 tornadoes in the Upper Midwest. Hardest hit was northern Illinois where sixteen tornadoes touched down during the afternoon and evening hours causing fifty million dollars damage. On that Friday afternoon tornadoes struck Belvidere IL, and the Chicago suburb of Oak Lawn, killing 57 persons. (David Ludlum)

1980 - The temperature at International Falls MN hit 90 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1987 - Unseasonably warm weather prevailed from the Gulf of Mexico to New England and the Great Lakes Region, with twenty-nine cities reporting record high temperatures for the date. Afternoon highs of 82 degrees at Caribou ME, 94 degrees at Mobile AL, 95 degrees at Monroe LA, and 93 degrees at New Orleans LA, were records for the month of April. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - After having had just twelve rainouts in the previous twenty-six years at Dodger Stadium, a third day of heavy rain in southern California rained out a double-header at Dodger Stadium which had been scheduled due to rainouts the previous two days. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - The temperature at Las Animas, CO, soared to 100 degrees to establish a state record for April. Twenty-two cities in the central and southwestern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. Eight cities equalled or exceeded previous April records. (The Weather Channel) (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Afternoon and evening thunderstorms produced golf ball size hail in Oklahoma, and also caused some flash flooding in the state. Thunderstorms over the Southern High Plains produced golf ball size hail at Roswell NM and El Paso TX. Easterly winds and temperatures near zero produced wind chill readings as cold as 50 degrees below zero for the spring festival (Piuraagiaqta) outdoor events at Barrow AK. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2007 - The South Plains and Panhandle of West Texas were hit by an outbreak of severe thunderstorms. Between the hours of 5 and 6 pm, several thunderstorms developed across the western South Plains. Around 7 pm, a supercell produced a tornado which touched down around Fieldton (southwest of Olton) and then moved just south and east of Olton, doing damage to several structures and equipment. The thunderstorm continued to move northeast across northeast Lamb, northwest Hale, southeast Castro and southwest Swisher Counties, producing a long-lived tornado (along with hail up to the size of tennis balls). By 7:45 pm, the storm approached the town of Tulia in Swisher County. A tornado touchdown was reported in the town, causing major damage. The tornadic thunderstorm continued to move northeast across Swisher County over open country through about 8:30 pm. (NWS Lubbock, TX)

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 16 of 74

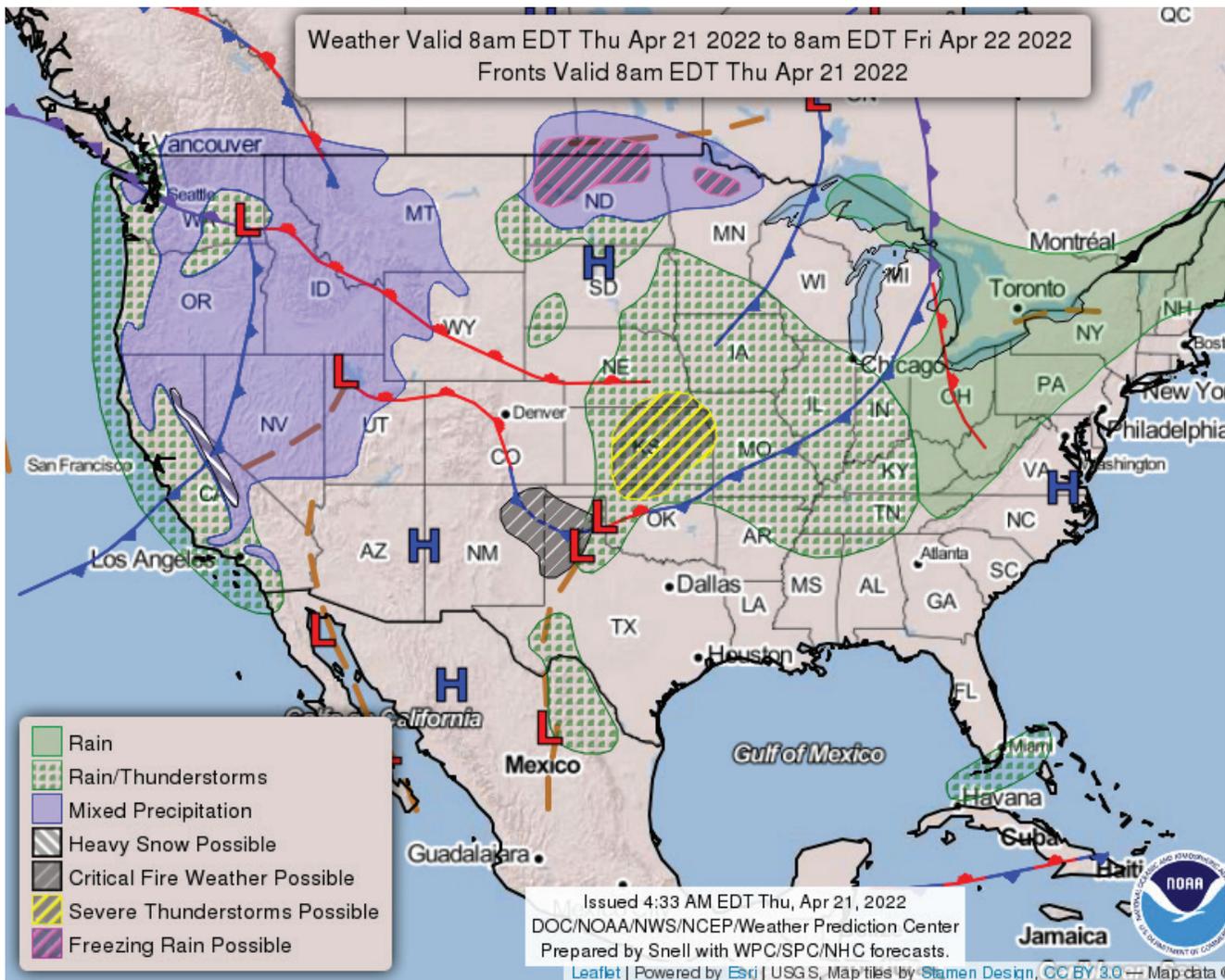
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 60 °F at 5:23 PM
Low Temp: 39 °F at 8:25 AM
Wind: 33 mph at 12:13 AM
Precip: 0.31

Day length: 13 hours, 53 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 97 in 1980
Record Low: 16 in 1936
Average High: 60°F
Average Low: 33°F
Average Precip in April.: 1.12
Precip to date in April.: 2.10
Average Precip to date: 3.18
Precip Year to Date: 3.90
Sunset Tonight: 8:27:41 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:32:43 AM



Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 17 of 74



Why Worship God?

Worship is as important to the believer as oxygen is to life. We know that without oxygen we could not live. In fact, if a person goes too long without oxygen, it causes serious damage. After one minute without oxygen, brain cells begin to die; after three minutes serious brain damage is likely, and after ten minutes, brain cells have died. After fifteen minutes without oxygen, a person's recovery is virtually impossible.

If we use that information and compare it to believers worshipping God, we see an amazing similarity. It is possible for the believer to go without worshipping God for hours or days. We've all done that. But the longer we refrain from worshipping God, the more likely we are to die spiritually.

Psalm 138 is a Psalm of Thanksgiving and Worship. In the seventh verse, David reminds us of the importance of worshipping God: "Though I am surrounded in the midst of trouble, You preserve my life; You stretch out Your hand against the anger of my foes, with Your right hand You protect me."

What we pledge our lives to, or whom we deeply and reverently love, becomes what or whom we worship. It can be God or a person, place or thing. Whatever or whoever is at the center of our lives becomes that which we worship. It's logical to David that the one who protects and preserves us is the one we are to worship. So, the danger we face is that all too often we look at what God has given us as our god and replace Him with things, and then die spiritually.

Prayer: Help us realize, Father, that we can easily become dependent on the gifts You give us instead of You. Please fix our focus. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Though I am surrounded in the midst of trouble, You preserve my life; You stretch out Your hand against the anger of my foes, with Your right hand You protect me. Psalm 138:7

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 18 of 74

2022 Community Events

- 01/30/2022 84th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
01/30/2022 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am – 1pm, Groton Community Center, 109 N 3rd St, Groton,
04/07/2022 Groton CDE
04/09/2022 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
04/09/2022 Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
04/23/2022 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/24/2022 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/07/2022 Lions Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
St John's Lutheran Church VBS 9-11am
05/30/2022 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
Transit Fundraiser at the Community Center 4-7pm (Thursday Mid-June)
06/17/2022 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 12pm Start
06/18/2022 Groton Triathlon
Ladies Invitational at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration 10am Start
07/04/2022 Firecracker Couples Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration, 10am Start
(4th of July)
07/10/2022 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar 11am-1pm at the Groton Legion
Baseball Tourney
07/21/2022 Pro Am Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
Ferney Open Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Start
How can we... "Love Groton"? United Methodist Church 9:30am
Moonlight Swim at the Swimming Pool 9-11pm for 9th grade to age 20
Golf Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course 11a-1pm
08/05/2022 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course 6pm
08/12/2022 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
United Methodist Church VBS 5-8pm
Groton Firemen Summer Splash Day 4-5pm GHS Parking Lot
09/10/2022 Lions Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
6th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 3:30-5pm
09/11/2022 Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 12pm
Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
10/14/2022 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am (2nd Friday in October)
10/01/2022 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
10/31/2022 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
10/31/2022 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
11/12/2022 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party 6:30pm (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/24/2022 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
12/03/2022 Tour of Homes & Holiday Party at Olive Grove Golf Course
Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-12pm
01/29/2023 Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 19 of 74

The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 20 of 74

News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) _ These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Wednesday:

Dakota Cash

06-12-13-19-27

(six, twelve, thirteen, nineteen, twenty-seven)

Estimated jackpot: \$20,000

Lotto America

01-03-25-29-30, Star Ball: 6, ASB: 5

(one, three, twenty-five, twenty-nine, thirty; Star Ball: six; ASB: five)

Estimated jackpot: \$11.62 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$22 million

Powerball

20-30-45-55-56, Powerball: 14, Power Play: 2

(twenty, thirty, forty-five, fifty-five, fifty-six; Powerball: fourteen; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$370 million

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. April 18, 2022.

Editorial: AG's Impeachment: A Winding Road Ahead

Last week's impeachment of South Dakota Attorney General Jason Ravensborg in connection with a fatal 2020 highway accident produced a couple of new wrinkles in this protracted, twisted, tragic and frustrating story.

The vote came one week after a House select committee recommended that impeachment charges not be filed against Ravensborg, arguing essentially that he wasn't actually acting in his role of attorney general when the accident happened and when he was subsequently providing sometimes-conflicting information to investigators.

The vote also came hours after the attorney general sent out two letters on the eve of the House decision in which he urged the lawmakers to vote against impeachment.

"In a few hours, your vote will set a precedent for years to come," the attorney general wrote. "No state has ever impeached an elected official for a traffic accident."

He also criticized Gov. Kristi Noem, who injected herself into the scenario by calling for his resignation, by releasing video of Ravensborg's interrogation and by working to sway lawmakers to file impeachment charges against the AG.

It was all dramatic stuff, and the 36-31 House vote to impeach last week set the stage for a trial June 21-22 that will be one of the most watched legal proceedings this state has seen in many years.

At this juncture, the closeness of the House vote, which required only a simple majority, may bode well for Ravensborg. The Senate needs a two-thirds majority of 24 votes to convict the attorney general. If the House vote is any indication, that higher threshold could be difficult to reach.

Also, it will be interesting to watch what happens between now and mid-June. As we've already seen (and as Ravensborg alluded to in his letters), the governor has not been shy in voicing her preference on this matter, so it stands to reason that she — or others acting in her interest — will apply pressure to sway senators prior to the trial. (While that may not sound appropriate, this is, on one level, a political battle, and that aspect will almost certainly come into play.)

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 21 of 74

An intriguing sidebar is that Ravensborg is seeking reelection, and the Republican State Convention, which will nominate the party's attorney general candidate, will take place in Watertown two days after the trial is scheduled to end. Former AG Marty Jackley — who is, like Ravensborg, a Republican — has already announced his desire to return to the job. Ravensborg's conviction would likely settle the outcome, but an acquittal would put the matter in a different light. If Ravensborg is acquitted and then denied re-nomination, what message would that send? Of course, the same may be asked if he is acquitted and then re-nominated after all that's happened the past 18 months.

Last week's impeachment vote merely sets up the final act in this political drama. But we still have a long, winding road ahead until the end is reached.

Avera will to build state's largest pickleball facility

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Avera Health has plans to build South Dakota's largest pickleball facility.

The health care provider will construct 12 outdoor courts at its Avera on Louise Health Campus in Sioux Falls at a cost of about \$1.5 million.

Pickleball is a sport that's recently grown in popularity, especially during the coronavirus pandemic. It combines elements of tennis, badminton and ping-pong. It's played indoors or outdoors on a badminton-sized court with a slightly modified tennis net. Two or four players can play with simple equipment that involves paddles and a plastic ball with holes.

Jason Askew is executive director of Sports Medicine for Avera and said the organization wants to appeal to people of all ages.

"Being able to offer something for adults that is growing by leaps and bounds in popularity, both here in Sioux Falls and around the country, is a lot of fun to be able to announce," Askew said, South Dakota Public Broadcasting reported.

Askew said construction will take a few months, and Avera anticipates the free courts will open to the public by early August.

New Study Shows Summit Carbon Solutions Will Drive Economic Growth Across the Midwest

AMES, Iowa, April 20, 2022 /PRNewswire/ -- A new study shows that Summit Carbon Solutions' proposed carbon capture, transportation, and storage project will create jobs, generate new tax revenue for local communities, support local suppliers, and strengthen the Midwest regional economy. Ernst & Young, a global leader in accounting and professional services, conducted the study.

Summit Carbon Solutions has partnered with 32 ethanol plants across the states of Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota, to develop the largest carbon capture and storage project in the world. This multi-billion-dollar infrastructure project will have the capacity to capture and permanently store 12 million tons of carbon dioxide every year, while opening critical new markets for ethanol producers and bolstering the bottom line of corn growers.

"From the outset of this project, Summit Carbon Solutions has been committed to driving the future of agriculture by expanding economic opportunities for ethanol producers and by strengthening the marketplace for farmers in the Midwest," said Jake Ketzner, Summit Carbon Solutions Vice President of Government and Public Affairs. "In addition to those benefits, the latest analysis shows the overwhelmingly positive impact of this multi-billion-dollar private investment, including the creation of thousands of new high-quality jobs, the utilization of local suppliers and main street businesses, and tens of millions of dollars in new tax revenues that will help local communities fund our roads, hospitals, first responders, and more."

Several key highlights include the following:

Project-Wide Findings (Construction Phase)

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 22 of 74

Total Investment: \$3.7 billion
Total Average Annual Jobs Created: 11,427
Total Federal, State, Local Taxes Paid by SCS: \$371 million
Expenditures to Suppliers, Contractors, and More: \$2.1 billion
Total Right-of-Way and Other Landowner Payments: \$309 million

Project-Wide Findings (Operations Phase)
Annual Expenditures: \$170 million
Total Jobs Supported: 1,170
Expenditures to Suppliers, Contractors, and More: \$78 million
Total Federal, State, Local Taxes Paid by SCS: \$97 million

State-by-State Findings (Construction Phase)
Total Iowa Investment: \$987 million
Total Labor Income in Iowa: \$389 million
State and Local Taxes Paid by SCS (Iowa): \$73 million
Total North Dakota Investment: \$898 million
Total Labor Income in North Dakota: \$392 million
State and Local Taxes Paid by SCS (North Dakota): \$61 million
Total South Dakota Investment: \$795 million
Total Labor Income in South Dakota: \$440 million
State and Local Taxes Paid by SCS (South Dakota): \$74 million
Total Minnesota Investment: \$462 million
Total Labor Income in Minnesota: \$276 million
State and Local Taxes Paid by SCS (Minnesota): \$45 million
Total Nebraska Investment: \$541 million
Total Labor Income in Nebraska: \$249 million
State and Local Taxes Paid by SCS (Nebraska): \$41 million

State-by-State Findings (Operations Phase)
Annual Iowa Expenditures: \$64 million
State and Local Taxes Paid by SCS (Iowa): \$42 million
Annual North Dakota Expenditures: \$18 million
State and Local Taxes Paid by SCS (North Dakota): \$8 million
Annual South Dakota Expenditures: \$37 million
State and Local Taxes Paid by SCS (South Dakota): \$15 million
Annual Minnesota Expenditures: \$22 million
State and Local Taxes Paid by SCS (Minnesota): \$14 million
Annual Nebraska Expenditures: \$29 million
State and Local Taxes Paid by SCS (Nebraska): \$16 million

Summit Carbon Solutions will strengthen the corn market and, by extension, positively impact the economy in all of the counties and communities across the Midwest. The report from Ernst & Young also includes county-level data showing the company's total investment and the forecast for incremental annual property taxes generated.

The full report along with state-by-state fact sheets can be found at www.SummitCarbonSolutions.com.

Summit Carbon Solutions is driving the future of agriculture by expanding economic opportunities for ethanol producers, strengthening the marketplace for Midwest-based farmers, and creating jobs. In developing the largest carbon capture and storage project in the world, the company seeks to lower greenhouse

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 23 of 74

gas emissions by connecting industrial facilities via strategic infrastructure to store carbon dioxide safely and permanently in the Midwestern United States. For more information, visit: www.SummitCarbonSolutions.com.

View original content to download multimedia: <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/new-study-shows-summit-carbon-solutions-will-drive-economic-growth-across-the-midwest-301529001.html>

SOURCE Summit Carbon Solutions

Putin tries to claim Mariupol win but won't storm holdout

By ADAM SCHRECK Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin tried to claim victory in the strategic port of Mariupol on Thursday, even as he ordered his troops not to storm the last pocket of Ukrainian resistance in the war's iconic battleground.

Russian troops have besieged the southeastern city since the early days of the conflict and largely pulverized it — and top officials have repeatedly indicated it was about to fall, but Ukrainian forces stubbornly held on. In recent weeks, they holed up in a sprawling steel plant, and Russian forces pounded the industrial site and repeatedly issued ultimatums ordering the defenders to surrender.

"The completion of combat work to liberate Mariupol is a success," Putin said. "Putting such an important center in the south as Mariupol under control is a success."

But the Russian leader said that, for now, he would not risk sending troops into the warren of tunnels under the giant Azovstal plant, instead preferring to isolate the holdouts who have captivated the world's attention "so that not even a fly comes through." His defense minister said the plant was blocked off, while giving yet another prediction that the site could be taken in days.

Putin's order may mean that Russian officials are hoping they can wait for the defenders to surrender after running out of food or ammunition. Bombings of the plant could well continue.

Even though Putin painted the mission to take Mariupol already a success and said the city had been "liberated," until the plant falls, he cannot declare a complete victory.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said about 2,000 Ukrainian troops remained in the plant, which has a labyrinth of tunnels and bunkers that spread out across about 11 square kilometers (4 square miles). Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that about 1,000 civilians were also trapped there.

Russian-backed separatists in the area previously seemed bent on taking every last inch of the city, which has seen some of the most dramatic fighting of the war and whose capture has both strategic and symbolic importance.

The scale of suffering in the city on the Azov Sea has made it a worldwide focal point, and its definitive fall would deprive Ukraine of a vital port, complete a land bridge between Russia and the Crimean Peninsula, which Moscow seized in 2014, and free up Russian troops to move elsewhere in the Donbas.

Russian officials now say capturing the Donbas, Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland, is the war's main goal. This week, Moscow's forces opened a new phase of the war, in a deadly drive along a front from the northeastern city of Kharkiv to the Azov Sea. Detaching the region from the rest of Ukraine would give Putin a badly needed victory two months into the war, after the botched attempt to storm the capital, Kyiv, and amid mounting Russian losses.

Britain's Defense Ministry said that Russia likely wants to demonstrate significant successes ahead of Victory Day on May 9, the proudest moment on the annual calendar marking its critical role in winning World War II.

"This could affect how quickly and forcefully they attempt to conduct operations in the run-up to this date," the ministry said.

Retired British Rear Admiral Chris Parry described Putin's remarks as reflecting a change in "operational approach" as Russia tries to learn from its failures in the eight-week conflict, which turned from initial hopes of a lightning fast invasion of a neighbor into a war of attrition with ever mounting casualties and costs.

"It seems to me that the Russian agenda now is not to capture these really difficult places where the

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 24 of 74

Ukrainians can hold out in the urban centers, but to try and capture territory and also to encircle the Ukrainian forces and declare a huge victory," Parry said.

In the meantime, Western powers are doubling down on their support of Ukraine, moving to push more military hardware in, heightening geopolitical stakes.

The latest in a long line of Western leaders venturing to Kyiv, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen said Thursday: "One of the most important messages today is that Denmark is considering sending more weapons. That is what is needed."

Several Western officials have promised similar in recent days.

With global tensions running high, Russia reported the first successful test launch of a new type of intercontinental ballistic missile, the Sarmat, on Wednesday. Putin boasted that it can overcome any missile defense system and make those who threaten Russia "think twice." The head of the Russian state aerospace agency called the launch out of northern Russia "a present to NATO."

The Pentagon described the test as "routine" and said it wasn't considered a threat.

On the battlefield, Ukraine said Moscow continued to mount assaults across the east, probing for weak points in Ukrainian defensive lines. Russia said it launched hundreds of missile and air attacks on targets that included concentrations of troops and vehicles.

The Kremlin's stated goal is the capture of the Donbas, the mostly Russian-speaking eastern region that is home to coal mines, metal plants and heavy-equipment factories.

In a video address, Zelenskyy said the Russians were not "abandoning their attempts to score at least some victory by launching a new, large-scale offensive."

The Luhansk governor said Russian forces control 80% of his region, which is one of two that make up the Donbas. Before Russia invaded on Feb. 24, the Kyiv government controlled 60% of the Luhansk region.

Analysts have said the offensive in the east could become a war of attrition as Russia faces Ukraine's most experienced, battle-hardened troops, who have fought pro-Moscow separatists in the Donbas for eight years.

Russia said it presented Ukraine with a draft document outlining its demands for ending the conflict — days after Putin said the talks were at a "dead end."

Moscow has long demanded Ukraine drop any bid to join NATO. Ukraine has said it would agree to that in return for security guarantees from other countries. Other sources of tension include the status of both the Crimean Peninsula, seized by Moscow in 2014, and eastern Ukraine, where the separatists have declared independent republics recognized by Russia.

This Earth Day, Biden faces 'headwinds' on climate agenda

By MATTHEW DALY and CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — One year ago, Joe Biden marked his first Earth Day as president by convening world leaders for a virtual summit on global warming that even Russian President Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping attended. Biden used the moment to nearly double the United States' goal for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, vaulting the country to the front lines in the fight against climate change.

But the months since then have been marred by setbacks. Biden's most sweeping proposals remain stalled on Capitol Hill despite renewed warnings from scientists that the world is hurtling toward a dangerous future marked by extreme heat, drought and weather.

In addition, Russia's war in Ukraine has reshuffled the politics of climate change, leading Biden to release oil from the nation's strategic reserve and encourage more drilling in hopes of lowering sky-high gas prices that are emptying American wallets.

It's a far cry from the sprint toward clean energy that Biden — and his supporters — envisioned when he took office. Although Biden is raising fuel economy standards for vehicles and included green policies in last year's bipartisan infrastructure legislation, the lack of greater progress casts a shadow over his second Earth Day as president.

Biden will mark the moment on Friday in Seattle, where he'll be joined by Gov. Jay Inslee, a fellow

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 25 of 74

Democrat with a national reputation for climate action. Biden also is scheduled to visit Portland, Oregon, on Thursday as part of a swing through the Pacific Northwest, a region that has often been on the forefront of environmental efforts.

Administration officials defend Biden's record on global warming while saying that more work is needed. "Two things can be true at the same time," said Ali Zaidi, the president's deputy national climate adviser. "We can have accomplished a lot, and have a long way to go."

Zaidi acknowledged that "we have headwinds, we have challenges," but also said the president has "a mandate to drive action forward on this."

Kyle Tisdell, climate and energy program director with the Western Environmental Law Center, said Biden has not lived up to the promise of last year's Earth Day summit.

"Climate action was a pillar of President Biden's campaign, and his promises on this existential issue were a major reason the public elected him," Tisdell said. "Achieving results on climate is not a matter of domestic politics, it's life and death."

Biden had hoped to pass a \$1.75 trillion plan for expanding education programs, social services and environmental policies. But Republicans opposed the legislation, known as Build Back Better, and it failed to get the unanimous support necessary from Democrats holding a slim majority in the Senate.

The final blow came from Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., who owes his personal fortune to coal and represents a state that defines itself in large part through mining that fossil fuel. Democrats hope to revive the bill in some form, but it's unclear exactly what Manchin would support, putting any possible deal in jeopardy.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said this week that negotiations were ongoing even though Biden wasn't publicizing them. "Just because he's not talking about it doesn't mean those conversations are not happening behind the scenes," she said.

Administration officials are expected to speak Saturday at a rally outside the White House as climate, labor and social justice groups urge Congress to pass climate legislation before Memorial Day. Similar events are planned in dozens of cities as activists stress the need for major investments to boost clean energy and create jobs.

The White House wants to win approval for more than \$300 billion in tax credits for clean energy that advocates describe as crucial for meeting Biden's goal of reducing emissions by up to 52% from 2005 levels by 2030.

Without the tax credits, "I don't see a pathway," said Nat Keohane, a former Obama energy adviser who is now president of the independent Center for Climate and Energy Solutions. Reaching the midterm elections in November without them "would amount to a failure on the promise of the first year," he said.

Asked if Biden's goal of reducing emissions is still achievable, Psaki said, "We are continuing to pursue it, and we are going to continue to do everything we can to reach it."

Psaki noted that the \$1 trillion infrastructure law includes an array of climate policies, including funding for the construction of 500,000 electric vehicle charging stations. However, an analysis by the consultancy McKinsey estimates that nearly 30 million chargers are needed by 2030.

The Ukraine war has worsened the political challenges at home by sending shockwaves through global energy markets and increasing gas prices.

It's also caused Biden to change his tune on oil drilling. Last week, Biden moved forward with the first onshore sales of oil and gas drilling leases on public land, a move that environmental groups blasted even though the administration said it was only doing so under a court order.

Although the legal battle is ongoing, in the meantime Biden is encouraging new domestic production. "The bottom line is if we want lower gas prices we need to have more oil supply right now," Biden said in March.

The leasing plan "is an ugly betrayal of Joe Biden's campaign promises and his administration's rhetoric on environmental justice and climate action," said Collin Rees, U.S. political director at Oil Change International.

"Biden is choosing to stand with polluters over people at the expense of frontline communities and the future of the planet," he added.

The war in Ukraine has also frustrated diplomatic efforts to address climate change.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 26 of 74

John Kerry, Biden's international climate envoy, has focused much of his efforts on prodding China, the world's top consumer of coal, to transition to clean energy more quickly. But that work "is harder now" amid China's defense of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Kerry said Wednesday.

"Some of the differences in opinion between our countries have sharpened and hardened, and that makes diplomacy more difficult," he said during an online discussion on climate finance with the Center for Global Development.

Kerry's aides have downplayed talk he might leave the administration now that he's served more than a year, and he remains a loyal defender of Biden's climate efforts. But his tone has become more pessimistic recently, especially as Biden's climate proposals remain stalled in Congress.

The administration was also rattled by recent reports that Biden's domestic climate adviser, Gina McCarthy, plans to step down. McCarthy called the reports "simply inaccurate" and said she is "excited about the opportunities ahead."

Another one of Biden's climate-related efforts could divide the environmental community. His administration plans to offer \$6 billion in funding to prevent financially distressed nuclear power plants from closing. Although the facilities produce carbon-free electricity, they're viewed warily by some activists because of concerns about how to dispose of nuclear waste and the potential for devastating accidents.

"We're using every tool available to get this country powered by clean energy by 2035," Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said in a statement.

Abigail Dillen, president of the environmental group Earthjustice, said that "spirits have dimmed" after the failures of the past year. Although she praised some of the policies that Biden has achieved so far, she said that "it's not at the scale of climate action we need — full-stop."

Now Republicans are poised to retake control of at least one chamber in Congress in November's mid-term elections, meaning there's a limited window for making progress. Dillen and some other activists have suggested that Biden declare a climate emergency and use the Defense Production Act to boost renewable energy.

"It's time to pull out all the stops," she said.

2 months after Griner's arrest, mystery surrounds her case

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — For another person in another country at another time, the case might have been a minor matter: an American citizen detained at an airport for allegedly possessing a cannabis derivative legal in much of the world.

But the circumstances for Brittney Griner couldn't have been worse.

Griner, a WNBA All-Star and two-time Olympic gold medalist, was arrested in Russia, where the offense can mean years in prison, and at a moment when tensions with the U.S. were rising to their highest point in decades. She is a prominent gay, Black woman facing trial in a country where authorities have been hostile to the LGBTQ community and the country's nationalist zeal has raised concerns about how she will be treated.

"There are many countries around the world where you do not want to get in trouble, and Russia is one of them," said Clarence Lusane, a Howard University political science professor who specializes in criminal justice and drug policy.

As extraordinary as her circumstances are, the details surrounding Griner's case remain a mystery as a crucial court date approaches next month. Russian prosecutors have offered little clarity and the U.S. government has made only measured statements. Griner's legal team has declined to speak out about the case as it works behind the scenes.

Griner is easily the most prominent American citizen known to be jailed by a foreign government, but in many ways her case isn't unusual. Americans are frequently arrested overseas on drug and other charges and U.S. authorities are limited about what they can say or the help they can offer. The State Department generally can't do much to help beyond consular visits and helping the American get an attorney. It also

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 27 of 74

can't say much unless the person arrested waives privacy rights, which Griner hasn't fully done.

In some cases, U.S. officials do speak out loudly when they're convinced an American has been wrongly detained. But Griner's case is barely two months old and officials have yet to make that determination. A State Department office that works to free American hostages and unjust detainees is not known to be involved.

The Phoenix Mercury star was detained at a Moscow airport in mid-February after Russian authorities said a search of her luggage revealed vape cartridges that allegedly contained oil derived from cannabis — accusations that could carry up to 10 years in prison, though some experts predict she'd get much less if convicted. She was returning to the country after the Russian League, in which she also plays, was taking a break for the FIBA World Cup qualifying tournament.

U.S. officials have said they are tracking the case but have not spoken extensively about it, in part because Griner has not signed a full Privacy Act Waiver. The statements so far have been careful and restrained, focused on ensuring she has access to U.S. consular affairs officials — she had a meeting last month — rather than explicitly demanding her immediate release.

There's little the U.S. government can do diplomatically to end a criminal prosecution in another country, particularly in the early days of a case. Any deal that would require concessions by the U.S. would seem a nonstarter, especially with Russia at war with Ukraine and the U.S. coordinating actions involving Russia with Western allies.

"It's a trial lawyer's nightmare since you have to conduct a trial when the larger political environment is negative," said William Butler, a Russian law expert and professor at Penn State Dickinson Law.

The State Department has been "doing everything we can to support Brittney Griner to support her family, and to work with them to do everything we can, to see that she is treated appropriately and to seek her release," spokesman Ned Price said last month. Last week, he said the U.S. was in frequent contact with her legal team and "broader network."

That's a more restrained posture than the Biden administration has taken with two other Americans jailed in Russia — Paul Whelan, a corporate security executive from Michigan sentenced to 16 years in prison on espionage-related charges his family says are bogus, and Trevor Reed, a Marine veteran sentenced to nine years on charges that he assaulted a police officer in Moscow as he was being driven to a police station after a night of heavy drinking.

The State Department has pressed Russia for their release. In contrast to Griner's case, it has described both as unjustly detained.

Race and gender issues are front and center in the Griner case.

Lusane, the Howard University professor, said under Putin "there's been a hyper nationalism in Russia, so basically anyone who's not considered Slavic is considered an outsider and a potential threat."

He added, "She fits into that category."

On the other hand, he said, there could also be an opening for Putin to build "an inroad into the African American community" by ordering her released as a humanitarian gesture.

Some Griner supporters, including Democratic Rep. Cori Bush of Missouri, have maintained that her case would be getting more attention if she weren't a Black woman.

The president of the WNBA players' association, Nneka Ogwumike, said in a "Good Morning America" interview that Griner was in Russia because WNBA players don't earn enough in the U.S.

"She's over there because of a gender issue, pay inequity," Ogwumike said.

Many of Griner's fellow WNBA players have remained circumspect for fear of antagonizing the situation, though her coach and some of her teammates have made clear in interviews that the 6-foot-9 center is on their minds.

"I spent 10 years there, so I know the way things work," Phoenix guard Diana Taurasi said of Russia. "It's delicate."

Griner recently had her detention extended to May 19. More information about her case may emerge then. But regardless of the factual allegations against her in court, it's impossible to divorce the legal case from the broader political implications.

"Russians are great chess players," said Peter Maggs, a research professor and expert in Russian law at the University of Illinois College of Law. "The more pawns you have, the greater your chance of eventual victory. And since things are not going their way, obviously, in Ukraine, any pawns they have they want to hold on to."

Gaza violence intensifies as Jerusalem clashes resume

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Israel's air force and Palestinian militants traded fire across the Gaza frontier early Thursday as clashes erupted again at Jerusalem's most sensitive holy site, worsening an escalation that has been eerily similar to the lead-up to last year's Israel-Gaza war.

The violence along the Gaza front, fueled by the unrest between Israeli police and Palestinians in Jerusalem, appears to be the heaviest-cross-border fighting since last year's 11-day war and comes despite efforts to prevent a repeat. A rocket fired from Gaza this week shattered a months-long period of calm that followed the war.

Palestinian militants fired two rockets toward Israel from the Gaza Strip late Wednesday and early Thursday, and Israeli aircraft hit militant targets in the seaside, Hamas-ruled enclave. One rocket landed in the southern Israeli city of Sderot, a frequent target, and another fell short and landed in Gaza, the Israeli military said. The launches set off air-raid sirens across parts of southern Israel, disrupting the quiet of the Passover holiday week.

Early Thursday, Israeli warplanes conducted airstrikes in the central Gaza Strip, local media reported. Social media posts by activists showed smoke billowing in the air. The Israeli military said the airstrikes were aimed at a militant site and the entrance of a tunnel leading to an underground complex holding chemicals to make rockets.

The military later said its planes attacked another Hamas compound after an anti-aircraft missile was fired from Gaza. It said the missile failed to hit its target and no injuries or damage were reported.

The latest Israeli-Palestinian tensions boiled over after a series of deadly attacks by Palestinians against Israelis, which then sparked days-long, sometimes lethal, arrest raids by the military in a flashpoint West Bank city and spread into daily clashes in Jerusalem. This year, the Muslim holy month of Ramadan has coincided with Passover, a time of heightened religious observances and visits by large numbers of people to Jerusalem.

Israeli police said dozens of masked protesters holed up in the Al-Aqsa Mosque early Thursday, sealed the doors and began throwing rocks and firecrackers. Police said they attempted to disperse the Palestinians using "riot dispersal means," without elaborating, and that forces did not enter the mosque itself.

A Palestinian official from the Waqf, which administers the site, said large numbers of police used stun grenades to clear out the site. He said police also fired stun grenades and rubber-coated bullets against Palestinians who had sealed themselves inside the mosque. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the incident with the media.

The Palestinian Red Crescent said 20 people were injured, one critically.

Similar clashes have taken place throughout the week, while fiercer ones broke out at the site earlier this month, wounding more than 150 Palestinians and three police officers.

The Palestinians have accused Israeli police of using excessive force at the holy site, and Palestinian social media have been filled with videos showing Israeli forces striking what appear to be unarmed Palestinians, including women. Police say Palestinians instigate the violence and have released their own videos showing young Palestinian men throwing rocks and fireworks toward the security forces. Police say the Palestinians are desecrating their own shrine and putting others at risk.

Jordan, which administers the Al-Aqsa Mosque, on Thursday held an emergency meeting of a regional committee over what it called "illegal Israeli policies and measures" in Jerusalem.

The committee includes member countries who have recently normalized ties with Israel, including the

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 29 of 74

United Arab Emirates. The country's top diplomat, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid spoke by phone Thursday. Al Nahyan called for stability according to the United Arab Emirates' state-run WAM news agency.

A U.S. State Department delegation is also in the region in a bid to secure calm.

The scenes of rocket fire and repeated violence in Jerusalem recall the run-up to last year's war. Last year, the violence also spread to mixed Jewish-Arab cities, which hasn't happened in the current wave of unrest.

On Wednesday, hundreds of flag-waving Israeli ultra-nationalists marched toward predominantly Palestinian areas around Jerusalem's Old City, a demonstration of Israeli control over the disputed city seen as a provocation by Palestinians. Last year's war erupted during a similar march, when Gaza militants, declaring themselves the guardians of Jerusalem, fired a barrage of rockets toward the holy city.

Those events, along with other developments, led to an 11-day war between Israel and Hamas that killed over 250 Palestinians and 14 people in Israel, causing extensive damage in Gaza.

This year, Israeli police closed the main road leading to the Damascus Gate of the Old City and the heart of Muslim Quarter. After some pushing and shoving with police, the marchers rallied near the barricades, waving flags, singing and chanting.

Israeli nationalists stage such marches to try to assert sovereignty over east Jerusalem, which Israel seized in 1967, along with the West Bank and Gaza, and annexed in a move not recognized internationally. The Palestinians seek an independent state in all three territories and consider east Jerusalem their capital.

The hilltop shrine in the Old City is the emotional ground zero of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the center of previous rounds of violence. Known to Muslims as the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, it is the third holiest site in Islam. It is also the holiest site in Judaism, revered by Jews as the Temple Mount, the site of their biblical temples.

Israel says it is maintaining a decades-old status quo at the site, which prevents Jews from praying there. But during the Passover holiday this year, visits by Jews have skyrocketed and in some cases Jews have been praying at the compound. Palestinians view the visits, under police escort, as a provocation and possible prelude to Israel taking over the site or partitioning it.

For Palestinians, the mosque compound, administered by Muslim clerics, is also a rare place in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem where they have a measure of control.

Palestinian militant groups in Gaza — the ruling Hamas and the smaller Islamic Jihad — have positioned themselves as defenders of the Jerusalem holy site. On Wednesday, Hamas said Israel would bear "full responsibility for the repercussions" if it allowed the marchers "to approach our holy sites."

Many say Biden not tough enough on Russia: AP-NORC poll

By NOMAAN MERCHANT and HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Many Americans still question whether President Joe Biden is showing enough strength in response to Russia's war against Ukraine, even as most approve of steps the U.S. is already taking and few want U.S. troops to get involved in the conflict.

A poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research shows 54% of Americans think Biden has been "not tough enough" in his response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Thirty-six percent think his approach has been about right, while 8% say he's been too tough.

But as the war has dragged on, Americans' desire to get involved has waned somewhat. Thirty-two percent of Americans say the U.S. should have a major role in the conflict. That's ticked back down from 40% last month, though that remains slightly higher than the 26% who said so in February. An additional 49% say the U.S. should have a minor role.

The results underscore the conundrum for the White House. As images of Russian attacks on civilians and hospitals are shared around the world, there's pressure to stop Russian President Vladimir Putin and help millions of Ukrainians under attack in their home country or fleeing for safety. But Biden must also manage the threat of escalation with Putin, who has raised the alert level on using Russia's nuclear weapons, and prevent the U.S. from getting involved in a much larger conflict.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 30 of 74

"Given the potential desperation of President Putin and the Russian leadership, given the setbacks that they've faced so far militarily, none of us can take lightly the threat posed by a potential resort to tactical nuclear weapons or low-yield nuclear weapons," CIA Director William Burns said in a recent speech at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

Burns added that "so far we haven't seen a lot of practical evidence" of Russian nuclear escalation.

The White House has authorized more than \$2 billion in weapons and led Western sanctions that have crushed the Russian economy. Biden has ruled out sending U.S. troops — a decision supported by a majority of Americans.

The U.S. has also held back some weapons and defensive systems sought by Ukraine and placed early limits on intelligence sharing that have been loosened throughout the conflict.

The poll and follow-up interviews with respondents indicate many Americans, responding to images of Ukrainians being killed and Russian forces allegedly committing war crimes, want to see more action to stop Putin. A majority — 57% — say they believe Putin has directed his troops to commit war crimes. Just 6% say he has not, while 36% say they aren't sure.

"I know that we're not directly responsible," said Rachel Renfro, a 35-year-old from Nashville, Tennessee. "But we've always been the kind of people that insert ourselves into these kinds of situations and I don't understand why we're not doing that now to a bigger degree."

Renfro wants to see the U.S. accept more refugees and provide more aid to Ukraine. Sending troops should be "an absolute last resort," she said.

Most Americans are in favor of the U.S. sanctioning Russia for the invasion, providing weapons to Ukraine and accepting refugees from Ukraine into the U.S. More Americans also support than oppose deploying U.S. troops to Eastern Europe to support U.S. NATO allies in response to Russia's invasion, and about two-thirds say NATO membership is good for the U.S.

But public support stops short of deploying U.S. troops to Ukraine to fight against Russian forces. Only 22% say they favor deploying U.S. troops to Ukraine to fight against Russian forces, while 55% are opposed; 23% say they are neither in favor nor opposed.

Michael Gonzalez, a 31-year-old from Fort Collins, Colorado, said Biden's response was "about right," citing wide-ranging sanctions on Russian banks, oligarchs, and government officials and their families.

"In a perfect world, I wish we can go out there with the troops," said Gonzalez, whose father served in the Cuban military and whose stepfather worked as a private contractor during the U.S. war in Afghanistan. "I feel like we shouldn't be policing the world and going everywhere. I wish we could help them, but we've been fighting for a while."

Biden faces other significant political challenges heading into the midterms with inflation at a four-decade high and soaring energy prices exacerbated by the war. The poll suggests the balance in the tradeoff between sanctions on Russia and the U.S. economy might be shifting. By a narrow margin, Americans say the nation's bigger priority is sanctioning Russia as effectively as possible over limiting damage to the U.S. economy, 51% to 45%. Last month, more said they prioritized sanctioning Russia over limiting damage to the economy, 55% to 42%.

Anthony Cordesman, emeritus chair in strategy at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies, noted that Americans broadly support many actions the White House is already taking. Building up Ukraine's air defense or sending more tanks and airplanes also requires setting up logistics, including radar and maintenance capabilities, that take far longer than many people would expect, Cordesman said.

The White House making that case to people who want more action carries its own risk.

"If you start communicating the limits to what we can do in detail, you may or may not reassure the American people, but you're providing Russia with a lot of information that you scarcely want to communicate," Cordesman said.

Biden drug control plan stresses harm reduction, treatment

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 31 of 74

By CARLA K. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

President Joe Biden is sending his administration's first national drug control strategy to Congress as the U.S. overdose death toll hit a new record of nearly 107,000 during the past 12 months.

The strategy, released Thursday, is the first national plan to prioritize what's known as harm reduction, said White House drug czar Dr. Rahul Gupta. That means it focuses on preventing death and illness in drug users while trying to engage them in care and treatment.

The strategy calls for changes in state laws and policies to support the expansion of harm reduction.

"All too often, these drugs wind up in communities where naloxone isn't readily available," Gupta said Wednesday, referring to the medication that can revive users who have overdosed, "where harm reduction services are restricted or underfunded, where there are unacceptable barriers to treatment."

The American Medical Association has advocated for naloxone to be made available over the counter. Test strips that prevent overdoses by checking drugs for fentanyl and clean syringe programs are other examples of harm reduction.

Harm reduction prevents overdoses, reduces the transmission of infectious diseases and "as declared in a recent congressional commission report, it has bipartisan support," Gupta said.

The first physician to head the Office of National Drug Control Policy, Gupta will oversee the strategy, which also includes:

- Targeting the financial activities of transnational criminal organizations that manufacture and traffic illicit drugs in the United States.

- Reducing the supply of illicit drugs smuggled across U.S. borders.

- Improving data systems and research that guide drug policy.

- Making sure the people most in danger of overdose can get evidence-based treatments, including people experiencing homelessness and those in prison or jail.

"Everyone who wants treatment should be able to get it," Gupta said.

Benedict XVI turns 95 as book focuses on anomaly of 2 popes

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI turned 95 this past weekend, a significant milestone on its own but even more given he has now been a retired pope longer than he was a reigning one.

To mark the occasion, a new book sets out to examine the current state of Vatican affairs not so much through the lens of Pope Francis' nine-year papacy, but via Benedict's nine-year retirement. And it isn't pretty.

Veteran Italian commentator Massimo Franco's "The Monastery," published in Italy on Thursday, shifts the focus of most books about the Holy See by using Benedict's retirement home in a converted monastery in the Vatican gardens as the prism to view the unprecedented anomaly of having two popes, one reigning and one retired, living together in the Vatican.

In real-life scenes befitting the Netflix drama "The Two Popes," the book paints a picture of two papal courts that started out on excellent terms: Francis referred to Benedict as a "wise grandfather" to whom he turned for advice, and Benedict treated Francis with the deference owed to a pope.

But in retelling the past nine years with unusual access to Benedict's team and his allies, Franco notes that Vatican turf wars and the progressive shift of the church in places like Benedict's native Germany have essentially turned "The Monastery" into the symbolic headquarters of the Francis opposition. And Benedict, he writes, has become the unwitting point of reference for right-wing, Catholic traditionalists who loathe Francis.

"The Monastery is the place where people hurt by Francis go to be healed," Cardinal Gerhard Mueller, who himself was sacked by Francis early on as the Vatican's doctrine chief, told Franco.

The book takes as its starting point Benedict's 2013 revolutionary decision to retire — the first pope in 600 years to do so. Benedict stepped down because he said he no longer had the strength to carry on. But the book traces many of the problems afflicting the church today to the unhealed "trauma" that his

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 32 of 74

departure, and unexpectedly long retirement, have caused.

The problems "are not Francis' fault or Benedict's fault," Franco said in an interview. "It's the byproduct or the inevitable, unavoidable product, of The Resignation."

For a church that prizes unity and sees in the figure of the pope Christ's vicar on Earth, confusion about who is really pope or the specter of a parallel papacy is no small thing. And most Vatican watchers agree that Benedict's experiment with resignation will have to be corrected and regulated with a set of norms before any future pope decides to follow in his footsteps.

Franco, a columnist with leading daily *Corriere della Sera*, recounts some of the key hiccups that have characterized the last nine years, starting with Benedict's refusal in 2018 to endorse an 11-volume set of books about Francis' theology because it included authors who had criticized his own papacy. Benedict's endorsement had been sought by Francis' then-communications guru, Monsignor Dario Vigano, precisely to show the continuity between the two popes and to quiet traditionalist critics who considered Francis' theology wanting.

A scandal erupted because Vigano manipulated a photograph of Benedict's letter declining to endorse the project to make it seem like he was on board with it. Francis reluctantly accepted Vigano's resignation in the aftermath.

The other main strain in relations came two years later, when Benedict co-authored a book with a Francis critic affirming the need for priests to remain celibate, precisely at the time that Francis was considering allowing married men to be ordained to alleviate a priest shortage in the Amazon.

A previous pope-theologian weighing in on an issue that was currently under study by the current pope was the nightmare scenario of a "parallel magisterium" predicted by canon lawyers and theologians in 2013. They faulted Benedict's decision then and his decision to keep the white cassock of the papacy and call himself "Emeritus Pope" rather than revert back to his birth name.

The book episode, Franco writes, was something of the final straw and an epilogue to the Vigano debacle, both of which saw Archbishop Georg Gaenswein, Benedict's longtime secretary, as a key behind-the-scenes player. Gaenswein had served as a bridge between the two popes by also acting as head of Francis' papal household. But after the 2020 book disaster, Francis removed him as prefect of the papal household, though he remains in charge of The Monastery and Benedict's team.

"Francis, understandably irritated, was pushed by his allies to cut the ambiguous umbilical cord with that monsignor (Gaenswein) who moved as easily in the Vatican halls as he did in the salons of the aristocracy," Franco writes.

Benedict had said he was retiring to a lifetime of prayer because he no longer had the strength of body or mind to carry on the rigors and travel of the 21st-century papacy. Gaenswein told Vatican News on his birthday on April 16 that Benedict "is in good spirits, naturally he is physically relatively weak and fragile, but rather lucid."

His 95th birthday falls as Francis, who in December turned 85, is himself slowing down: Francis' bad knee has made walking, stairs and getting up from his chair painful, and he can no longer stand for long periods of time. But he nevertheless has a grueling travel schedule planned for the coming months and has shown no indication he plans to retire anytime soon.

'We found nothing:' Thousands of IS victims still missing

By BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — For journalist Amer Matar, a decade-long search for his younger brother has defined him and changed the course of his life, now dedicated to researching and documenting crimes committed by the Islamic State group in Syria.

His brother, Mohammed Nour Matar, vanished in Syria's northern city of Raqqa in 2013 while reporting on an explosion that hit the headquarters of an insurgent group. His burnt camera was found at the scene of the blast, and his family soon after got word he was in an IS prison. But there has been no other sign of him since.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 33 of 74

Mohammed Nour is among thousands of people believed to have been seized by the Islamic State, the extremist group that in 2014 overran large parts of Syria and Iraq, where it set up a so-called Islamic Caliphate and brutalized the population for years.

Three years after its territorial defeat, thousands are still missing and accountability for their captors remains elusive. Families of the missing feel abandoned by a world that has largely moved on, while they struggle alone to uncover the fate of their loved ones.

"These violations may constitute crimes against humanity, war crimes, and even genocide in some cases," the Washington-based Syria Justice and Accountability Center said in a report published Thursday. "These families have the right to know the truth about the fate of their loved ones."

The rights group says that between 2013 and 2017, when IS ruled much of northern and eastern Syria, the militant group detained thousands who remain missing and whose families continue to live in a state of grief and uncertainty.

In its report titled "Unearthing Hope: The Search for the Missing Victims of ISIS," SJAC said that approximately 6,000 bodies have been exhumed from dozens of mass graves dug by IS in northeast Syria, and retrieved from buildings destroyed by airstrikes of the U.S.-led coalition during the military campaign that eventually brought down IS.

This may amount to approximately half of the total number of missing people in the northeast, according to the group, although estimates of the missing vary.

Mohammed Nour Matar had become a citizen journalist during Syria's civil war, and he was often out with his camera documenting the conflict. He went missing on Aug. 13, 2013 while covering an explosion in Raqqa that went off outside the offices of the Ahfad al-Rasoul faction, one of several insurgent groups that were rivals of IS. He was 21 at the time and was working on a documentary about Raqqa and its residents' opposition to IS.

Four months later, Raqqa became Syria's first provincial capital to fall under the full control of IS. When the extremists declared a so-called caliphate in June 2014, the city became their de-facto capital. The group ruled Matar's hometown of Raqqa with fear, setting up scores of detention centers in different parts of the city, brutalizing opponents and even placing heads of beheaded victims in the city's Naim Square — Arabic for "Paradise."

In the report, SJAC documented for the first time the vast web of detention facilities that were central to IS disappearances. Different wings of the IS security apparatus systematically used this network of 152 police stations, training camps, and secret security prisons to detain kidnapped civilians and members of rival armed groups, in some cases before issuing death sentences or summarily executing them.

It listed 33 detention facilities in the city of Raqqa alone.

SJAC says alleged perpetrators who may hold evidence necessary to identify remains are languishing in prisons of the U.S.-backed Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces "with no fair judicial procedures in sight." It says other former IS members live in their home countries where they returned after the group was defeated.

"The permanent defeat of ISIS cannot be secured without justice for the victims of the organization's crimes, including those who remain missing," it said.

Amer Matar, who now lives in Berlin with his parents and siblings, said they were told at one point that Mohammed Nour was being held in a jail in the city. Some former prisoners who had seen him there provided personal details that only the family knew.

But as of 2014, the family lost any proof of life.

Amer Matar has traveled to Syria several times over the past years to try get information about his brother, even going to mass graves as bodies were being removed.

The International Commission on Missing Persons has started collecting DNA samples from families of the missing but they are moving slowly, and Matar said his family has not given samples yet.

Also a journalist, Matar began a few years ago collecting thousands of IS documents and 3D photographs of IS detention centers. He now works with activists from Syria, Iraq, Germany, France, Japan and the U.S. to set up a virtual museum about the extremists.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 34 of 74

He said the aim is to have a platform where the families of the missing can find information about their loved ones, where they can walk virtually inside the jails, see names of detainees, read documents and witness sites of mass graves and information about those buried there, whether in Syria or in Iraq.

Asked if his family has hope, Matar said that "the most difficult question is about hope. Sometimes I lose hope because logic says there is no hope."

Asked if in his research he found evidence about Mohammed Nour, Matar said, "My mother asks me this question every month or every few weeks. My answer regrettably is, 'We found nothing.'"

Forecasters: Strong wind could lead to explosive fire growth

By FELICIA FONSECA Associated Press

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) — Lisa Wells looked out the window of her home office and saw a plume of smoke. Before long, the smoke blackened, the wind intensified and entire trees were consumed by flames.

In what felt like seconds, her family moved Tuesday from a get-ready-to-go status to go now. She managed to gather important medication and move their horses, alpacas and dogs to safety.

The home they bought 15 years ago on the outskirts of Flagstaff didn't survive. Fierce winds picked up embers that hopped across neighborhoods, destroying some homes and leaving others unscathed.

"It was a miracle that people got out because we had so little time," Wells said Wednesday, standing in a parking lot that has become a gathering spot for the evacuated communities.

Residents haven't been able to fully survey the damage, partly because the forecast has even stronger winds in store that experts say could lead to more explosive fire growth.

And the risk isn't limited to Arizona. The 30 square-mile (77 square-kilometer) blaze outside Flagstaff is one of a half-dozen major wildfires that have raced across Arizona and New Mexico the last few days.

State and federal officials were scrambling to get more crews on the front lines before the wind forecast worsens Friday — gusting up to 70 mph (112 kph) in some parts of northern New Mexico.

At a community meeting in Flagstaff on Wednesday evening, Brian Klimowski of the National Weather Service declared the start of the fire season and said "it's going to be a long one this year."

Hundreds of people have been evacuated because of wildfires burning in New Mexico, Arizona and Colorado. Popular lakes and national monuments have been closed — some because fire has moved directly over them.

U.S. 89, the main route between Flagstaff and far northern Arizona, and communities on the Navajo Nation, remained closed.

Resources to fight the wildfires are tight. Four of the 16 top-level national fire management teams are dedicated to the Southwest — something fire information officer Dick Fleishman said is rare for April.

In Flagstaff, erratic winds have grounded air resources.

Residents around Flagstaff questioned how a small blaze reported northeast of the college town Sunday afternoon ballooned to more than 30 square miles (77 square kilometers) by Wednesday afternoon. Matt McGrath, a district ranger on the Coconino National Forest, said firefighters had corralled the wildfire Sunday and didn't see any smoke or active flames when they checked on it again Monday.

By Tuesday, the wind was firmly in control. Flames emerged and jumped the containment line, leaving firefighters and McGrath to ask themselves if they could have done something differently, he said.

"I can't tell you for sure, but I don't think so," McGrath said. "And I know that's not a satisfying answer when people are going through what they're going through right now."

The cause of the fire is under investigation.

Another big fire southeast of Taos, New Mexico, also has burned more than 30 square miles (77 square kilometers), but it's in a rural area where no structures have been destroyed and a small number of evacuations ordered.

In Colorado, new wildfires prompted evacuations in Monte Vista, a city of about 4,150 people in the southern part of the state, and near Longmont. An undetermined number of structures burned but no one was injured, authorities said.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 35 of 74

"We struggled at times to stay in front of this fire and stay out of the way of it because the winds and stuff were so strong," said Monte Vista Police Chief George Dingfelder.

The number of acres burned in the U.S. so far this year is about 30% above the 10-year average, according to the National Interagency Fire Center. Above-average temperatures and below-average precipitation have combined with spring winds to elevate the chances for more catastrophic fires.

Rocky Opliger, the incident commander on a wildfire that has burned about 3 square miles (7 square kilometers) and forced evacuations south of Prescott, Arizona, said the conditions are some of the worst he's seen in nearly five decades of fighting wildland fires.

"This is very early to have this kind of fire behavior," he said. "Right now we are on the whims of weather."

About 25 structures have been lost in the Flagstaff-area fire. Coconino County officials late Wednesday pointed residents to a system where they could seek help with food, temporary housing and other needs. Some 765 homes were evacuated.

Wells described her home as unique, a quirky one that had horizontal studs held together by tongue-and-groove boards. Her husband, Bill, had been remodeling it little by little.

The wildfire reduced it to ashes and also destroyed a barn, although it spared a guest house where her daughter's family lived on the same property.

The only thing they've been able to recover from the ashes was a gray porcelain dove that Bill Wells gave his wife as a gift. It was part of a set of collectibles.

"It was the only thing we found so far, but it means a lot, and we will keep it," said Lisa Wells, holding the item.

She thought, too, about the decades of photographs she left behind and the baby grand piano that was built in 1890 that her grandmother, who was an opera singer, gave her. Those are gone, too.

"It's just stuff, you realize it's all just stuff and what's important is your family," she said, holding her blue heeler, Bandit, on a leash. "We think day to day, we know it will all work out."

Bitcoin's new puzzle: How to ditch fossil fuels and go green

By AMY BETH HANSON Associated Press

HELENA, Mont. (AP) — For the past year a company that "mines" cryptocurrency had what seemed the ideal location for its thousands of power-thirsty computers working around the clock to verify bitcoin transactions: the grounds of a coal-fired power plant in rural Montana.

But with the cryptocurrency industry under increasing pressure to rein in the environmental impact of its massive electricity consumption, Marathon Digital Holdings made the decision to pack up its computers, called miners, and relocate them to a wind farm in Texas.

"For us, it just came down to the fact that we don't want to be operating on fossil fuels," said company CEO Fred Thiel.

In the world of bitcoin mining, access to cheap and reliable electricity is everything. But many economists and environmentalists have warned that as the still widely misunderstood digital currency grows in price — and with it popularity — the process of mining that is central to its existence and value is becoming increasingly energy intensive and potentially unsustainable.

Bitcoin was created in 2009 as a new way of paying for things that would not be subject to central banks or government oversight. While it has yet to widely catch on as a method of payment, it has seen its popularity as a speculative investment surge despite volatility that can cause its price to swing wildly. In March 2020, one bitcoin was worth just over \$5,000. That surged to a record of more than \$67,000 in November 2021 before falling to just over \$35,000 in January.

Central to bitcoin's technology is the process through which transactions are verified and then recorded on what's known as the blockchain. Computers connected to the bitcoin network race to solve complex mathematical calculations that verify the transactions, with the winner earning newly minted bitcoins as a reward. Currently, when a machine solves the puzzle, its owner is rewarded with 6.25 bitcoins — worth about \$260,000 total. The system is calibrated to release 6.25 bitcoins every 10 minutes.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 36 of 74

When bitcoin was first invented it was possible to solve the puzzles using a regular home computer, but the technology was designed so problems become harder to solve as more miners work on them. Those mining today use specialized machines that have no monitors and look more like a high-tech fan than a traditional computer. The amount of energy used by computers to solve the puzzles grows as more computers join the effort and puzzles are made more difficult.

Marathon Digital, for example, currently has about 37,000 miners, but hopes to have 199,000 online by early next year, the company said.

Determining how much energy the industry uses is difficult because not all mining companies report their use and some operations are mobile, moving storage containers full of miners around the country chasing low-cost power.

The Cambridge Bitcoin Electricity Consumption Index estimates bitcoin mining used about 109 terrawatt hours of electricity over the past year — close to the amount used in Virginia in 2020, according to the U.S. Energy Information Center. The current usage rate would work out to 143 TWh over a full year, or about the amount used by Ohio or New York state in 2020.

Cambridge's estimate does not include energy used to mine other cryptocurrencies.

A key moment in the debate over bitcoin's energy use came last spring, when just weeks after Tesla Motors said it was buying \$1.5 billion in bitcoin and would also accept the digital currency as payment for electric vehicles, CEO Elon Musk joined critics in calling out the industry's energy use and said the company would no longer be taking it as payment.

Some want the government to step in with regulation.

In New York, Gov. Kathy Hochul is being pressured to declare a moratorium on the so-called proof-of-work mining method — the one bitcoin uses — and to deny an air quality permit for a project at a retrofitted coal-fired power plant that runs on natural gas.

A New York State judge recently ruled the project would not impact the air or water of nearby Seneca Lake.

"Repowering or expanding coal and gas plants to make fake money in the middle of a climate crisis is literally insane," Yvonne Taylor, vice president of Seneca Lake Guardians, said in a statement.

Anne Hedges with the Montana Environmental Information Center said that before Marathon Digital showed up, environmental groups had expected the coal-fired power plant in Hardin, Montana, to close.

"It was a death watch," Hedges said. "We were getting their quarterly reports. We were looking at how much they were operating. We were seeing it continue to decline year after year — and last year that totally changed. It would have gone out of existence but for bitcoin."

The cryptocurrency industry "needs to find a way to reduce its energy demand," and needs to be regulated, Hedges said. "That's all there is to it. This is unsustainable."

Some say the solution is to switch from proof-of-work verification to proof-of-stake verification, which is already used by some cryptocurrencies. With proof of stake, verification of digital currency transfers is assigned to computers, rather than having them compete. People or groups that stake more of their cryptocurrency are more likely to get the work — and the reward.

While the method uses far less electricity, some critics argue proof-of-stake blockchains are less secure.

Some companies in the industry acknowledge there is a problem and are committing to achieving net-zero emissions — adding no greenhouse gases to the atmosphere — from the electricity they use by 2030 by signing onto a Crypto Climate Accord, modeled after the Paris Climate Agreement.

"All crypto communities should work together, with urgency, to ensure crypto does not further exacerbate global warming, but instead becomes a net positive contributor to the vital transition to a low carbon global economy," the accord states.

Marathon Digital is one of several companies pinning its hopes on tapping into excess renewable energy from solar and wind farms in Texas. Earlier this month the companies Blockstream Mining and Block, formerly Square, announced they were breaking ground in Texas on a small, off-the-grid mining facility using Tesla solar panels and batteries.

"This is a step to proving our thesis that bitcoin mining can fund zero-emission power infrastructure,"

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 37 of 74

said Adam Back, CEO and co-founder of Blockstream.

Companies argue that cryptocurrency mining can provide an economic incentive to build more renewable energy projects and help stabilize power grids. Miners give renewable energy generators a guaranteed customer, making it easier for the projects to get financing and generate power at their full capacity.

The mining companies are able to contract for lower-priced energy because "all the energy they use can be shut off and given back to the grid at a moment's notice," said Thiel.

In Pennsylvania, Stronghold Digital is cleaning up hundreds of years of coal waste by burning it to create what the state classifies as renewable energy that can be sent to the grid or used in bitcoin mining, depending on power demands.

Pennsylvania's Department of Environmental Protection is a partner in the work, which uses relatively new technology to burn the waste coal more efficiently and with fewer emissions. Left alone, piles of waste coal can catch fire and burn for years, releasing greenhouse gases. When wet, the waste coal leaches acid into area waterways.

After using the coal waste to generate electricity, what's left is "toxicity-free fly ash," which is registered by the state as a clean fertilizer, Stronghold Digital spokesperson Naomi Harrington said.

As Marathon Digital gradually moves its 30,000 miners out of Montana, it's leaving behind tens of millions of dollars in mining infrastructure behind.

Just because Marathon doesn't want to use coal-fired power anymore doesn't mean there won't be another bitcoin miner to take its place. Thiel said he assumes the power plant owners will find a company to do just that.

"No reason not to," he said.

Scholar uses trash as treasure to study life in North Korea

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — When the waves wash trash onto the beaches of front-line South Korean islands, Kang Dong Wan can often be found hunting for what he calls his "treasure" — rubbish from North Korea that provides a peek into a place that's shut down to most outsiders.

"This can be very important material because we can learn what products are manufactured in North Korea and what goods people use there," Kang, 48, a professor at South Korea's Dong-A University, told The Associated Press in a recent interview.

He was forced to turn to the delicate information-gathering method because COVID-19 has made it much harder for outsiders to find out what's going on inside North Korea, one of the world's most cloistered nations even without pandemic border closures.

The variety, amount and increasing sophistication of the trash, he believes, confirms North Korean state media reports that leader Kim Jong Un is pushing for the production of various kinds of consumer goods and a bigger industrial design sector to meet the demands of his people and improve their livelihoods.

Kim, despite his authoritarian rule, cannot ignore the tastes of consumers who now buy products at capitalist-style markets because the country's socialist public rationing system is broken and its economic woes have worsened during the pandemic.

"Current North Korean residents are a generation of people who've come to realize what the market and economy are. Kim can't win their support if he only suppresses and controls them while sticking to a nuclear development program," Kang said. "He needs to show there are some changes in his era."

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Kang regularly visited Chinese border towns to meet North Koreans staying there. He also bought North Korean products and photographed North Korean villages across the river border. He can't go there anymore, however, because China's anti-virus restrictions limit foreign travelers.

Since September 2020, Kang has visited five South Korean border islands off the country's west coast and collected about 2,000 pieces of North Korean trash including snack bags, juice pouches, candy wrappers and drink bottles.

Kang said he was amazed to see dozens of different kinds of colorful packaging materials, each for

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 38 of 74

certain products like seasonings, ice cream bars, snack cakes and milk and yogurt products. Many carry a variety of graphic elements, cartoon characters and lettering fonts. Some still can seem out of date by Western standards and are apparent copycats of South Korean and Japanese designs.

Kang recently published a book based on his work titled "Picking up North Korean Trash on the Five West Sea Islands." He said he's now also started to scour eastern South Korean front-line beaches.

Other experts study the diversity of goods and packaging designs in North Korea through state media broadcasts and publications, but Kang's trash collection allows a more thorough analysis, said Ahn Kyung-su, head of DPRKHEALTH.ORG, a website focusing on health issues in North Korea.

Kang's work also opens up a fascinating window into North Korea.

Ingredient information on some juice pouches, for instance, shows North Korea uses tree leaves as a sugar substitute. Kang suspects that's because of a lack of sugar and sugar-processing equipment.

He said the discovery of more than 30 kinds of artificial flavor enhancer packets could mean that North Korean households cannot afford more expensive natural ingredients like meat and fish to cook Korean soups and stews. Many South Koreans have stopped using them at home over health concerns.

Plastic bags for detergents have phrases like "the friend of housewives" or "accommodating women." Because the assumption is that only women do such work, it could be a reflection of the low status of women in male-dominated North Korean society.

Some wrappers display extremely exaggerated claims. One says that a walnut-flavored snack cake is a better source of protein than meat. Another says that collagen ice cream makes children grow taller and enhances skin elasticity. And yet another claims that a snack cake made with a certain kind of microalgae prevents diabetes, heart disease and aging.

Kang has been unable to verify the quality of former contents inside his trash.

North Korean snacks and cookies have generally become much softer and tastier in recent years, though their quality still lags behind that of South Korea's internationally competitive products, according to Jeon Young-sun, a research professor at Seoul's Konkuk University.

Noh Hyun-jeong, a North Korean defector, said she was "ecstatic" about the South Korean bread and cakes that she ate after her arrival here in 2007. She said the confectionaries and candies she had in the North were often bitter and "as hard as a rock."

Kang Mi-Jin, another defector who runs a company analyzing North Korea's economy, said that when she had South Koreans try new North Korean cookies and candies in blind taste tests, they thought they were South Korean. But Ahn, the website head, said the North Korean cookie he obtained in 2019 was "tasteless."

Kang said his trash collection is an attempt to better understand the North Korean people and study how to bridge the gap between the divided Koreas in the event of future unification.

In 2019, Kang said he was denied entry at Shanghai's airport, apparently because of his earlier, mostly unauthorized work along the China-North Korea border. During a previous period of inter-Korean detente that ended in 2008, Kang said he visited North Korea more than 10 times but could only buy limited goods that didn't help him understand the country.

Picking up trash on the islands, about 4-20 kilometers (2.5-12 miles) from North Korean territory, is a tough job. He most often visits Yeonpyeong, an island shelled by North Korea in an attack that killed four South Koreans in 2010.

On some trips, South Korean marines quizzed Kang because residents who saw him collecting trash thought he was doing something suspicious. He was sometimes stranded when ferry services were canceled because of bad weather. Kang said he occasionally cried in frustration on the beach when he failed to find North Korean trash or received calls from acquaintances jeering or doubting his work.

"But I was heartened after collecting more and more trash ... and I determined that I must find out how many goods are in a country where we can't go and what we can find from that trash," Kang said. "When the wind blew and the waves ran high, something always washed ashore and I was so happy because I could find something new."

Surprisingly low Shanghai COVID death count spurs questions

By HUIZHONG WU and DAKE KANG Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — Lu Muying died on April 1 in a government quarantine facility in Shanghai, with her family on the phone as doctors tried to resuscitate her. She had tested positive for COVID-19 in late March and was moved there in line with government policy that all coronavirus cases be centrally isolated.

But the 99-year-old, who was just two weeks shy of her 100th birthday, was not counted as a COVID-19 death in Shanghai's official tally. In fact, the city of more than 25 million has only reported 25 coronavirus deaths despite an outbreak that has spanned nearly two months and infected hundreds of thousands of people in the world's third-largest city.

Lu's death underscores how the true extent of the virus toll in Shanghai has been obscured by Chinese authorities. Doctors told Lu's relatives she died because COVID-19 exacerbated her underlying heart disease and high blood pressure, yet she still was not counted.

Interviews with family members of patients who have tested positive, a publicly released phone call with a government health official and an internet archive compiled by families of the dead all raise issues with how the city is counting its cases and deaths, almost certainly resulting in a marked undercount.

The result is a blurred portrait of an outbreak that has sweeping ramifications for both the people of Shanghai and the rest of the world, given the city's place as an economic, manufacturing and shipping hub.

An Associated Press examination of the death toll sheds light on how the numbers have been clouded by the way Chinese health authorities tally COVID-19 statistics, applying a much narrower, less transparent, and at times inconsistent standard than the rest of the world.

In most countries, including the United States, guidelines stipulate that any death where COVID-19 is a factor or contributor is counted as a COVID-related death.

But in China, health authorities count only those who died directly from COVID-19, excluding those, like Lu, whose underlying conditions were worsened by the virus, said Zhang Zuo-Feng, an epidemiologist at the University of California, Los Angeles.

"If the deaths could be ascribed to underlying disease, they will always report it as such and will not count it as a COVID-related death, that's their pattern for many years," said Jin Dong-yan, a virologist at the University of Hong Kong's medical school.

That narrower criteria means China's COVID-19 death toll will always be significantly lower than those of many other nations.

Both Jin and Zhang said this has been China's practice since the beginning of the pandemic and is not proof of a deliberate attempt to underreport the death count.

However, Shanghai authorities have quietly changed other standards behind the scenes, in ways that have violated China's own regulations and muddied the virus' true toll.

During this outbreak, Shanghai health authorities have only considered virus cases where lung scans show a patient with evidence of pneumonia as "symptomatic," three people, including a Chinese public health official, told the AP. All other patients are considered "asymptomatic" even if they test positive and have other typical COVID-19 symptoms like sneezing, coughing or headaches.

This way of classifying asymptomatic cases conflicts with China's past national guidelines. It's also a sharp change from January, when Wu Fan, a member of Shanghai's epidemic prevention expert group, said that those with even the slightest symptoms, like fatigue or a sore throat, would be "strictly" classified as a symptomatic case.

Further adding to the confusion, the city has overlapping systems to track whether someone has the virus. City residents primarily rely on what's called their Health Cloud, a mobile application that allows them to see their COVID-19 test results. However, the Shanghai health authorities have a separate system to track COVID-19 test results, and they have the sole authority to confirm cases. At times, the data between the systems conflict.

In practice, these shifting and inconsistent processes give China's Centers for Disease Control and Pre-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 40 of 74

vention “wobble room” to determine COVID-related deaths, said the Chinese health official, allowing them to rule out the coronavirus as being the cause of death for people who didn’t have lung scans or positive test results logged on their apps. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive topic.

In response to questions about Shanghai’s COVID-19 figures, China’s top medical authority, the National Health Commission, said in a fax that there is “no basis to suspect the accuracy of China’s epidemic data and statistics.” Shanghai’s city government did not respond to a faxed request for comment.

Statements from the authorities are little comfort to the relatives of the dead. Chinese internet users, doubting the official figures, have built a virtual archive of the deaths that have occurred since Shanghai’s lockdown based on firsthand information posted online. They have recorded 170 deaths so far.

Chinese media reports on the unrecorded COVID-19 deaths have been swiftly censored, and many criticisms of Shanghai’s stringent measures expunged online. Instead, state media has continued to uphold China’s zero-COVID approach as proof of the success of its political system, especially as the world’s official death toll climbs past 6.2 million.

Earlier this month, doubts over the data burst into public view when a Shanghai resident uploaded a recording of a phone conversation he had with a CDC officer in which he questioned why city health authorities told his father he had tested positive for COVID-19 when data on his father’s mobile application showed up as negative.

“Didn’t I tell you to not look at the Health Cloud?” said the official, Zhu Weiping, referring to the app. “The positive cases are only from us notifying people.”

Others skeptical of the data include relatives of Zong Shan, an 86-year-old former Russian translator who died March 29. Despite testing positive and being moved to a government quarantine facility, online test results showed Zong supposedly was negative for COVID-19 on the day of her death.

“My relative, like most of the other people in Shanghai who were notified as positive, all reported negative results” on the Health Cloud app, one of Zong’s relatives said, declining to be named for fear of retribution.

Zong was taken to a government quarantine facility from the Donghai Elderly Care Hospital on March 29, and died there that night. The family was told by hospital staff she was being transferred after she tested positive for COVID-19. But they didn’t think the virus was the biggest threat to her health — rather, it was the dearth of nursing care at the quarantine facility. Zong needed to be fed liquids and couldn’t eat without assistance.

She had been in stable condition before the transfer, said a relative. When the family asked for the cause of death, doctors didn’t give a clear answer.

“They gave me very vague answers. One minute they said it was stroke, then they said this was also just a hypothesis,” said the relative. “But on one point, they were very clear, they said it had nothing to do with COVID. Her lungs were clear.”

Lu, who was also transferred from the Donghai hospital, would have celebrated her 100th birthday April 16; her relatives had ordered a cake and gotten permission to host a small celebration Thursday. But when she tested positive, the family made mental preparations for her death, acknowledging she had lived a long life.

But the strange thing, a relative said, was the night before she died, the doctor had specifically called the family to let them know Lu was now testing negative for COVID-19. Ultimately, the doctor said she died because the virus had worsened her underlying illnesses, said the relative, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the issue.

Further, the family knew of another patient from the same hospital, a neighbor, who died the day after being transferred to a quarantine facility on March 25 and also had not been counted.

Jin, the Hong Kong virologist, noted the potential political benefits of Shanghai’s low official COVID-19 death toll.

“They might claim this is their achievement, and this is their victory,” Jin said.

Israel, Gaza militants trade fire as Mideast tensions mount

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 41 of 74

By ILAN BEN ZION Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Palestinian militants fired several rockets into southern Israel from the Gaza Strip early Thursday and Israeli aircraft hit militant targets in Gaza, part of an escalation that was eerily similar to the run-up to last year's Israel-Gaza war.

The cross-border strikes came against the backdrop of Israeli-Palestinian tensions that have been boiling in Jerusalem.

On Wednesday, hundreds of flag-waving Israeli ultra-nationalists marched toward predominantly Palestinian areas around Jerusalem's Old City, a demonstrative display of Israeli control over the disputed city seen as a provocation by Palestinians.

Police closed the main road leading to the Damascus Gate of the Old City, the epicenter of last year's unrest preceding an 11-day war between Israel and Hamas. After some pushing and shoving with police, the marchers rallied near the barricades, waving flags, singing and chanting.

A hilltop shrine in the Old City is the emotional ground zero of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and a flashpoint for previous rounds of violence. Known to Muslims as the Al Aqsa Mosque compound, it is the third holiest site in Islam. It is also the holiest site in Judaism, revered by Jews as the Temple Mount, the site of their biblical temples.

For Palestinians, the mosque compound, administered by Muslim clerics, is also a rare place in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem where they have a measure of control. Palestinians seek east Jerusalem, captured by Israel in the 1967 Mideast war, as a future capital.

Palestinian militant groups in Gaza — the ruling Hamas and the smaller Islamic Jihad — have positioned themselves as defenders of the Jerusalem holy site. On Wednesday, Hamas said Israel would bear "full responsibility for the repercussions" if it allowed the marchers "to approach our holy sites."

Several rockets were fired from Gaza overnight. Four rockets fired early Thursday were intercepted by Israel, the military said. There were no immediate reports of casualties or damage, and no one claimed the rocket strikes. Israel holds Hamas responsible for all rocket fire.

Early Thursday, Israeli warplanes conducted a series of airstrikes in the central Gaza Strip, local media reported. Social media posts by activists showed smoke billowing in the air. The Israeli military said the airstrikes were aimed at a militant site and an entrance of a tunnel leading to an underground complex holding chemicals to make rockets.

The military later said its planes attacked another Hamas compound after an anti-aircraft missile was fired from Gaza during the initial airstrikes. It said the missile failed to hit its target and no injuries or damage were reported.

Tensions have surged in recent weeks after a series of deadly attacks inside Israel, Israeli military operations in the occupied West Bank and repeated clashes between Israelis and Palestinians at the Al Aqsa compound.

Last May, Palestinian militants in Gaza fired rockets toward Jerusalem as a much larger group of thousands of Israelis held a flag march to the Old City following weeks of protests and clashes in and around Al-Aqsa. Those events led to an 11-day war between Israel and Hamas.

Israeli nationalists stage such marches to try to assert sovereignty over east Jerusalem, which Israel seized in 1967, along with the West Bank and Gaza, and annexed in a move not recognized internationally. The Palestinians seek an independent state in all three territories and consider east Jerusalem their capital.

Biden set to announce new military assistance for Ukraine

By AAMER MADHANI and DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is set to announce plans to send additional military aid to help Ukraine fight back against the Russian invasion, according to a U.S. official.

The official, who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity, said Biden will deliver a Thursday morning address at the White House detailing his plans to build on the roughly \$2.6 billion in military assistance the administration has already approved for Ukraine.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 42 of 74

The new package is expected to be similar in size to the \$800 million package Biden announced last week. It includes much needed heavy artillery and ammunition for Ukrainian forces in the escalating battle for the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine.

Earlier this week, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau also said his country will send heavy artillery to Ukraine. And Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte told Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy that the Netherlands will send more heavy weapons, including armored vehicles.

A senior U.S. defense official on Wednesday said training of Ukrainian personnel on American 155mm howitzers has begun in a European country outside Ukraine.

Biden on Wednesday lauded U.S. military officials for "exceptional" work arming Ukraine as he gathered the nation's military brass for their first in-person group meeting at the White House of his presidency.

It's an annual tradition that had been put on hold because of the coronavirus pandemic but is now being resurrected as the U.S. arms Ukraine to help it fight back against Russia's invasion.

"I don't know about you, but I've been to Ukraine a number of times before the war ... and I knew they were tough and proud but I tell you what: They're tougher and more proud than I thought," Biden told military commanders. "I'm amazed at what they're doing with your help."

Biden brought together the Pentagon's top civilian and uniformed officials amid the most serious fighting in Europe since World War II. Russia's nearly two-month-old invasion of Ukraine was at the center of wide-ranging talks with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and combatant commanders.

Biden also used the gathering to reflect on his administration's efforts to diversify Pentagon leadership. Hicks is the first Senate-confirmed woman to hold her role. Biden also chose Gen. Jacqueline Van Ovost of the Air Force as commander of United States Transportation Command and Lt. Gen. Laura Richardson of the Army as commander of United States Southern Command. They are just the second and third women to lead combatant commands.

"It's an important milestone," Biden said. "I think that speaks to how we're harnessing the strength and diversity of our country."

Following the meeting, Biden and first lady Jill Biden hosted the military leaders and their spouses for dinner in the White House Blue Room.

Such a gathering was last held in October 2019. Donald Trump was president at the time and was facing a House inquiry that would lead to his first impeachment, which centered on allegations that he withheld military assistance from Ukraine as part of an effort to pressure Zelenskyy to dig up dirt on Biden's adult son's business dealings in Ukraine.

Justice Dept. to appeal order voiding travel mask mandate

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department is filing an appeal seeking to overturn a judge's order that voided the federal mask mandate on planes and trains and in travel hubs, officials said.

The notice came minutes after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention asked the Justice Department to appeal the decision handed down by a federal judge in Florida earlier this week.

A notice of appeal was filed Wednesday in federal court in Tampa.

The CDC said in a statement that it is its "continuing assessment that at this time an order requiring masking in the indoor transportation corridor remains necessary for the public health."

It remained unclear whether the Biden administration would ask the appeals court to grant an emergency stay to immediately reimpose the mask mandate on public transit. An emergency stay of the lower court's ruling would be a whiplash moment for travelers and transit workers. Most airlines and airports, many public transit systems and even ride-sharing company Uber lifted their mask-wearing requirements in the hours following Monday's ruling.

A federal judge in Florida had struck down the national mask mandate for mass transit on Monday, leading airlines and airports to swiftly repeal their requirements that passengers wear face coverings. The Trans-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 43 of 74

portation Security Administration said Monday that it would it will no longer enforce the mask requirement.

The CDC had recently extended the mask mandate, which was set to expire Monday, until May 3 to allow more time to study the BA.2 omicron subvariant, which is now responsible for the vast majority of U.S. cases. But the court ruling Monday had put that decision on hold.

The CDC said it will continue to monitor public health conditions to determine if a mandate would remain necessary. It said it believes the mandate is "a lawful order, well within CDC's legal authority to protect public health."

Justice Department spokesman Anthony Coley said Wednesday night that the department was filing the appeal "in light of today's assessment by the CDC that an order requiring masking in the transportation corridor remains necessary to protect the public health."

Biden's administration has offered mixed messages in the wake of the Monday ruling. While officials said Americans should heed the CDC's guidance even if it was no longer a requirement, Biden himself suggested they had more flexibility on masking-up during transit.

"That's up to them," Biden declared during a Tuesday visit to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. The White House nonetheless continues to require face coverings for those traveling with him on Air Force One, citing guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Wednesday that Biden still is encouraging Americans to wear masks when traveling and that he had been "answering the question quite literally" a day before.

"People are not legally bound to wear masks," she said, after the court order. "So, it is a point in time where it is up to people — it is their choice, in that regard.

After a winter surge fueled by the omicron variant that prompted record hospitalizations, the U.S. has seen a significant drop in virus spread in recent months, leading most states and cities to drop mask mandates.

But several Northeast cities have seen a rise in hospitalizations in recent weeks, leading Philadelphia to bring back its mask mandate.

The appeal drew criticism from the U.S. Travel Association, which along with other industry groups had been pressuring the Biden administration for months to end the mask mandate for travel.

"Masks were critically important during the height of the pandemic," said Tori Emerson Barnes, the group's executive vice president of public affairs and policy, "but with low hospitalization rates and multiple effective health tools now widely available, from boosters to therapies to high-quality air ventilation aboard aircraft, required masking on public transportation is simply out of step with the current public health landscape."

Parachute demo at Nats Park causes brief Capitol evacuation

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. Capitol was briefly evacuated Wednesday evening after police identified an aircraft that they said posed "a probable threat" — but the plane was actually carrying members of the U.S. Army Golden Knights, who then parachuted into Nationals Park for a pregame demonstration.

The alert from the U.S. Capitol Police sent congressional staffers fleeing from the Capitol and legislative building around 6:30 p.m.

The incident suggested a stunning communications failure between the military, the Federal Aviation Administration and the Capitol Police, all the more remarkable because of Washington's focus on improving security since the January 6, 2021, attack on the building by supporters of then-President Donald Trump.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi blamed the FAA in a statement Wednesday night, saying its "apparent failure to notify Capitol Police of the pre-planned flyover Nationals Stadium is outrageous and inexcusable." The FAA did not respond to a request for comment.

Kelli LeGaspi, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Army Recruiting Command, which was behind the Golden Knights demonstration, released a statement saying, "We are reviewing all aspects of the event to ensure all procedures were followed appropriately to coordinate both the flight and the parachute demonstration."

Many who work on Capitol Hill have remained on edge more than a year after hundreds of pro-Trump rioters pushed their way past overwhelmed police officers, broke through windows and doors and ransacked the Capitol as Congress was voting to certify Joe Biden's electoral win.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 44 of 74

In Wednesday's incident, the aircraft, a twin-engine plane, took off from Joint Base Andrews in Maryland and had been circling inside heavily restricted airspace close to the Capitol when the alert was sent. Radar tracking data shows the plane, a De Havilland Twin Otter, remained clear of the prohibited airspace over the Capitol Building and other government complexes at all times. Air traffic control recordings capture the army plane coordinating its flight with the control tower at nearby Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport.

Investigators were still working to determine why the event wasn't properly coordinated with law enforcement officials in Washington, two people familiar with the matter told The Associated Press. Multiple federal agencies began scrambling officials as the plane circled overhead.

The capital region is defended by several surface-to-air missile sites, as well as military aircrews on round-the-clock alert. It did not appear that any of those systems were scrambled.

Officials believe, based on a preliminary review, the pilot may have not properly reported taking off or had appropriate clearance, the people said. They were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity.

Pelosi said, "Congress looks forward to reviewing the results of a thorough after-action review that determines what precisely went wrong today and who at the Federal Aviation Administration will be held accountable for this outrageous and frightening mistake."

The plane landed back at Andrews around 6:50 p.m. after the parachutists descended into the middle of the field at Nationals Park. The stadium, home of the Washington Nationals baseball team, is a little more than a mile away from the U.S. Capitol.

One witness to the chaos at the Capitol was Eireann Dolan, the wife of Nationals pitcher Sean Doolittle. "I was walking the dogs past the Dirksen Senate Office Building," Dolan tweeted. "People started streaming out all at once. They told me to turn around and get away as fast as possible. Some people were calm but many were genuinely panicked. I know I was."

Buildings on the Capitol complex were reopened a little after 8 p.m.

Oldest Texas death row inmate faces execution in cop's death

By JUAN A. LOZANO Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — Texas' oldest death row inmate faces execution Thursday for killing a Houston police officer nearly 32 years ago during a traffic stop.

Carl Wayne Buntion, 78, was sentenced to death for the June 1990 fatal shooting of Houston police officer James Irby, a nearly 20-year member of the force.

Buntion had been on parole for just six weeks when he shot the 37-year-old Irby. Buntion, who had an extensive criminal record, was a passenger in the car Irby pulled over. In 2009, an appeals court vacated Buntion's sentence, but another jury resentenced him to death three years later.

Before his death, James Irby had talked of retirement and spending more time with his two children, who were 1 and 3 years old at the time, said his wife, Maura Irby.

"He was ready to fill out the paperwork and stay home and open a feed store," Maura Irby, 60, said. "He wanted to be the dad that was there to go to all the ballgames and the father-daughter dances. He was a super guy, the love of my life."

Various state and federal courts have turned down appeals by Buntion's lawyers to stop his execution. The Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles on Tuesday rejected his clemency request.

Buntion's attorneys say he is responsible for Irby's death and "deserved to be punished severely for that crime."

But they argue his execution would be unconstitutional because the jury's finding he would be a future danger to society — one of the reasons he was sentenced to death — has proven incorrect. Also, they said, his execution would serve no legitimate purpose because so much time has passed since his conviction. His attorneys describe Buntion as a geriatric inmate who poses no threat as he suffers from arthritis, vertigo and needs a wheelchair.

"This delay of three decades undermines the rationale for the death penalty ... Whatever deterrent effect

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 45 of 74

there is diminished by delay," his attorneys David Dow and Jeffrey Newberry, wrote in court documents.

If Buntion is executed, he would become the oldest person Texas has put to death since the Supreme Court lifted its ban on capital punishment in 1976. The oldest inmate executed in the U.S. in modern times was Walter Moody Jr., who was 83 years old when he was put to death in Alabama in 2018.

Buntion would also be the first inmate executed in Texas in 2022. Although Texas has been the nation's busiest capital punishment state, it's been nearly seven months since it carried out an execution. There have been only three executions in each of the last two years, due in part to the pandemic and delays over Texas' refusal to allow spiritual advisers to touch inmates and pray aloud in the death chamber.

In March, the U.S. Supreme Court said states must accommodate such requests, and Texas prison officials have agreed to allow Buntion's spiritual adviser to pray aloud and touch him while he is being executed.

Maura Irby said she had believed Buntion would die of old age on death row.

"I had stuffed so much of it away in a big trunk and shut the lid on it in my mind, in my heart because I didn't think anything was really going to come of it," Irby said.

While the pending execution has stirred up painful memories for her, Irby said it has also reminded her of her advocacy work in public safety after her husband's death, including helping put together legislation that allowed victim impact statements at trials.

Irby said she and her two children are hoping with the execution, a painful chapter in their lives can finally come to an end.

"So, I hope Jimmy will finally rest in peace and then we can all kind of breathe a sigh of relief and just keep him in our prayers now and in our hearts," Irby said.

More Cubans immigrating to the US by crossing from Mexico

By GISELA SALOMON Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — For years after leaving Cuba, the mother of two tried to get her children and parents into the U.S. through legal channels.

Finally, she decided she wouldn't wait any longer: She paid more than \$40,000 dollars to someone to help them sneak in through Mexico.

"I said to myself, 'Enough. I am going to risk everything,'" said the 30-year-old woman, who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals from U.S. authorities.

Her family's story is an example of what tens of thousands of Cuban immigrants looking to escape political and economic troubles are going through as more risk their lives and arrive illegally in the United States. It's a very different reality from years ago, when Cubans enjoyed special protections that other immigrants did not have.

Her children and parents undertook a 20-day journey, starting with a plane ride from Havana to Managua, Nicaragua. From there, they took buses, vans and taxis across Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico, until they arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border.

"I saw that other people were coming through the border and they were happy, and I, who had done things legally, was still waiting for my children," the woman said.

CUBA AND NICARAGUA

U.S. border authorities encountered Cubans almost 32,400 times in March, according to figures released Monday. That was roughly double the number in February and five times the number in October.

The increase coincided with Nicaragua's decision starting in November to stop requiring visas for Cubans to promote tourism after other countries, such as Panama and the Dominican Republic, began mandating them.

After flying to Nicaragua, Cubans travel by land to remote stretches of the U.S. border with Mexico — mainly in Yuma, Arizona, and Del Rio, Texas — and generally turn themselves in to Border Patrol agents.

The Biden administration has been leaning on other governments to do more to stop migrants from reaching the U.S., most recently during a visit this week to Panama by Secretary of State Antony Blinken

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 46 of 74

and Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas. The actions of Nicaragua, a U.S. adversary, complicates that effort.

Cuban and U.S. officials will meet Thursday in Washington for immigration talks — the first in four years. U.S. Customs and Border Protection stopped Cubans more than 79,800 times from October through March — more than double all of 2021 and five times more than all of 2020. Overall, the Border Patrol stopped migrants of all nationalities more than 209,000 times in March, the highest monthly mark in 22 years.

Cubans who cross the U.S. border illegally face little risk of being deported or expelled under a public health law that has been used to deny asylum to thousands of migrants of other nationalities on the grounds of slowing the spread of COVID-19.

Barely 500 Cubans stopped in March, or about 2%, were subject to Title 42 authority, named after a public health law. The Biden administration plans to end Title 42 authority on May 23.

Jorge Duany, director of the Cuban Research Institute at Florida International University, and other experts estimate the number of Cubans leaving could exceed other mass migrations from the island, including the Mariel boatlift of 1980, when more than 124,700 Cubans came to the U.S.

“There are several intertwined factors that have produced a perfect storm for the intensification of the Cuban exodus,” Duany said.

For one, Cuba is experiencing its worst economic crisis in decades due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the tightening of U.S. sanctions.

Massive street protests on July 11, 2021, and the government’s response also have played a role. Non-governmental organizations have reported more than 1,400 arrests and 500 people sentenced to up to 30 years in prison for vandalism or sedition.

Havana has not said how many Cubans have left and has accused the United States of manipulating the situation and offering perks that encourage departure.

“What hurts? That there are young people who find that their future plans can’t develop in the country and have to emigrate,” Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel said early this month. “There are people who want to prove themselves in another world, who want to show they aren’t breaking with their country, that their aspiration is also to improve a little and later return.”

THE CUBAN FAMILY TIRED OF WAITING

The 30-year-old woman who tried to bring her family to the U.S. through legal avenues had arrived in Florida in a raft in 2016. Under the “wet foot, dry foot” policy, Cubans could stay if they made it to U.S. land, but they were sent back if apprehended at sea.

Former President Barack Obama ended that policy in 2017, and she petitioned for immigration for her children the next year.

Every month, she sent her family \$500 for medicine and food, along with boxes of clothes and other items, she said from her home in Tampa, Florida.

Finally, she decided to pay \$11,000 to smugglers for each relative -- her two children, ages 8 and 10, and her mother and father.

Her parents sold everything, including their house and furniture, before embarking on the journey with both children, explained the single mother.

In Managua, they met 200 other migrants -- Cubans, Haitians, Venezuelans and Nicaraguans -- at a hotel. “That same day they start a caravan by car, truck, or any kind of vehicle. In one night, they got into more than 10 different cars,” the woman said.

After 20 days, they arrived in Mexicali, Mexico, crossed the Colorado River at night and surrendered to Border Patrol agents in Yuma, Arizona.

They were separated. The grandparents, 45 and 62 years-old, were released in two days; their grandchildren were detained 11 days, the woman said.

THE CUBAN MAN WHO FEARED FOR HIS LIFE

Other Cubans say they left because they felt persecuted.

Ariel, 24, worked doing blood tests at a laboratory in a hospital in Cienfuegos, on Cuba’s south coast.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 47 of 74

During the pandemic, he led a protest demanding masks, gowns and disinfectants and criticized the government on Facebook for the lack of medical supplies.

He told the AP in a phone interview that he decided to leave in November after receiving threats and being beaten. He requested that only his middle name be used because his mother and 14-year-old sister in Cuba could face reprisals.

His whole trip "was a nightmare," Ariel recalled, but he said that he was "willing to do whatever it took" to leave Cuba.

He made his way to Mexicali, with help from an aunt in Florida, and paid a smuggler \$300 to take him across the Colorado River.

He joined about 100 migrants, 90 of them Cubans, who boarded a truck at midnight, he said.

The river was calm, but deep. Water covered his waist. He helped a Cuban mom by carrying her child on his shoulders.

The smuggler gave them directions to a place where Border Patrol agents would pick them up.

They waited two days at a migrant camp with 1,000 other people, eating bread and canned food. Border Patrol agents picked them up in groups of 12 and took them to a center in Yuma that Ariel said "seemed like a prison."

After his release, he called his aunt to let her know that he was ready to fly to St. Petersburg, Florida.

LIVING IN THE U.S.

Many Cubans who crossed illegally say they now feel like they are in limbo.

"The most difficult situation is going to be here, not when crossing (the border)," said Dr. Raúl González, a Cuban American who owns a clinic that helps new arrivals with paperwork to receive assistance for a few months. "They are like stranded here."

It can take some time for asylum seekers to obtain a work permit.

At Gonzalez's clinic, Cubans lined up to secure one of the 20 appointments available each day.

"It is sad what they are going through," said the doctor. "Many tell me, 'Don't give me food stamps, I would prefer that they let me work.'"

A gun, a phone cord spur heated talk at Kardashian trial

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A smashed gingerbread house, a phone cord wrapped around the neck and a gun grabbed from a nightstand were at the center of disputed testimony Wednesday in a trial over former reality television star Blac Chyna's lawsuit against the Kardashian family.

During all-day testimony in a Los Angeles courtroom, Chyna said she wrapped the charging cord around then-fiancé Rob Kardashian's neck and grabbed his always-unloaded gun in jest on an evening in 2016 when the two were celebrating the renewal of their reality show, "Rob & Chyna." She said she later got justifiably angry when their all-night celebration went sour because of his jealous accusations.

"I smashed a gingerbread house, because I was really upset," she said. "Then I damaged a TV."

The lawyer for the four Kardashian women who are defendants in the case cast all the events as displays of anger and aggression that made them frightened for their son and brother.

"You're saying to the jury that you stood behind him with a phone cord and wrapped it around his neck, and that was a joke?" attorney Michael G. Rhodes said.

"Yes," answered Chyna, who generally remained composed under heated questioning.

He later asked, "Grabbing a gun is funny?"

"It was a joke," she said.

"To you," Rhodes replied.

"To him too," Chyna said.

In her \$100 million lawsuit, Chyna alleges that Kardashian's mother Kris Jenner and her daughters Kim Kardashian, Khloe Kardashian and Kylie Jenner, who watched the testimony in court, misrepresented the events of Dec. 14 and 15, 2016, to get her show canceled and ruin her TV career.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 48 of 74

Chyna and Rob Kardashian had begun dating in January 2016, got engaged in April, and in November had a daughter and began the show together.

Under questioning from her own attorney, Lynne Ciani, Chyna described the gleeful celebration they had on Dec. 14 when the "Keeping Up With the Kardashians" spinoff was greenlit for a second season.

"It was exciting, we were throwing money and having fun, being silly," Chyna said. Footage shot for the show of the money-throwing was shown in court.

She testified that she ripped Rob Kardashian's shirt, "from us like playing and trying to not be sexy and take the shirt off, but just doing silly stuff with my fiancé."

Later, he was playing video games and ignoring her when she wrapped the cord around his neck, she said.

"I came up behind him, doing that jokingly," she testified, "to get his attention."

Later, when Rob Kardashian was having a FaceTime conversation in the bedroom, she entered and picked up his gun.

Asked by the defense attorney Rhodes, "What on Earth possesses you to grab a gun?" she replied, "He was already messing with it, that's why I grabbed it, I was being funny while he was on FaceTime with his friends."

Neither slept that night, Chyna testified.

Rob Kardashian was prone to bouts of jealousy, she said. His doubts about being the father of their newborn daughter, Dream, led to a paternity test that was filmed for the show.

She testified that on the morning of the 15th, he grabbed her phone, shut himself in a closet and searched for signs of communication with other men.

Chyna said she couldn't handle the accusations and unfair scrutiny anymore.

"In the past there had been a cycle of him taking my phone and posting things from it, and I was really getting sick of it," she said.

She then smashed the gingerbread house and TV, but pressed by the defense, she denied she ever went beyond damaged property.

"Your testimony under oath is that not one time that whole day, did you hit him?" Rhodes asked, his voice rising to a shout.

"Nope," Chyna said.

"Not one time that whole day?"

"Nope," she said.

Chyna testified that she moved out of the house that day.

Rhodes said in his opening statement Tuesday that the relationship ended then, and that was why the producers at the E! network canceled the show that was all about that relationship.

Chyna's lawsuit alleges the cancellation came from Kris Jenner telling the people with power over the show that Chyna had physically abused her son, and enlisting her daughters to do the same.

Rhodes suggested Wednesday that she filed the lawsuit to enhance her own celebrity.

"Is this trial a publicity stunt?" he asked.

"No not at all," Chyna said.

"But your career benefits from the attention that you get because of this trial," Rhodes said.

"No not at all," she replied, "it's actually been very negative."

'Days or hours left': Russia tightens the noose in Mariupol

By ADAM SCHRECK Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russian forces tightened the noose around the defenders holed up Wednesday in a mammoth steel plant that represented the last known Ukrainian stronghold in Mariupol, as a fighter apparently on the inside pleaded on a video for help: "We may have only a few days or hours left."

With the holdouts coming under punishing new bombing attacks, another attempt to evacuate civilians trapped in the pulverized port city failed because of continued fighting.

Meanwhile, the number of people fleeing the country topped 5 million, the Kremlin said it submitted a

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 49 of 74

draft of its demands for ending the war, and the West raced to supply Ukraine with heavier weapons to counter the Russians' new drive to seize the industrial east.

With global tensions running high, Russia reported the first successful test launch of a new type of intercontinental ballistic missile, the Sarmat. President Vladimir Putin boasted it can overcome any missile defense system and make those who threaten Russia "think twice," and the head of the Russian state aerospace agency called the launch out of northern Russia "a present to NATO."

The Pentagon described the test as "routine" and said it wasn't considered a threat.

On the battlefield, Ukraine said Moscow continued to mount assaults across the east, probing for weak points in Ukrainian defensive lines. Russia said it launched hundreds of missile and air attacks on targets that included concentrations of troops and vehicles.

The Kremlin's stated goal is the capture of the Donbas, the mostly Russian-speaking eastern region that is home to coal mines, metal plants and heavy-equipment factories. Detaching it would give Putin a badly needed victory two months into the war, after the botched attempt to storm the capital, Kyiv.

The Luhansk governor said Russian forces now control 80% of his region, which is one of two that make up the Donbas. Before Russia invaded on Feb. 24, the Kyiv government controlled 60% of the Luhansk region.

Gov. Serhiy Haidai said the Russians, after seizing the small city of Kreminna, are now threatening the cities of Rubizhne and Popasna. He urged all residents to evacuate immediately.

"The occupiers control only parts of these cities, unable to break through to the centers," Haidai said on the messaging app Telegram.

Analysts say the offensive in the east could devolve into a war of attrition as Russia runs up against Ukraine's most experienced, battle-hardened troops, who have fought pro-Moscow separatists in the Donbas for eight years.

Russia said it presented Ukraine with a draft document outlining its demands for ending the conflict — days after Putin said the talks were at a "dead end."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that "the ball is in their court, we're waiting for a response." He gave no details on the draft, and it was not clear when it was sent or if it offered anything new to the Ukrainians, who presented their own demands last month.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said he had not seen or heard of the proposal, though one of his top advisers said the Ukrainian side was reviewing it.

Moscow has long demanded Ukraine drop any bid to join NATO. Ukraine has said it would agree to that in return for security guarantees from a number of other countries. Other sources of tension include the status of both the Crimean Peninsula, seized by Moscow in 2014, and eastern Ukraine, where the separatists have declared independent republics recognized by Russia.

In devastated Mariupol, Ukraine said the Russians dropped heavy bombs to flatten what was left of the sprawling Azvostal steel plant, believed to be the city's last pocket of resistance.

A few thousand Ukrainian troops, by the Russians' estimate, remained in the plant and its labyrinth of tunnels and bunkers spread out across about 11 square kilometers (4 square miles). Zelenskyy said about 1,000 civilians were also trapped there.

A Ukrainian posted a video plea on Facebook urging world leaders to help evacuate people from the plant, saying, "We have more than 500 wounded soldiers and hundreds of civilians with us, including women and children."

The officer, who identified himself as Serhiy Volynskyy of the 36th Marine Brigade, said: "This may be our last appeal. We may have only a few days or hours left." The authenticity of the video could not be independently verified.

The Russian side issued a new ultimatum to the defenders to surrender, but the Ukrainians have ignored all previous demands.

All told, more than 100,000 people were believed trapped with little if any food, water, medicine or heat in Mariupol, which had a pre-war population of over 400,000.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 50 of 74

Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said the latest effort to open a safe corridor for women, children and the elderly to escape failed because the Russians did not observe a cease-fire. Many previous such agreements have fallen apart because of continued fighting.

A Zelenskyy adviser, Mykhailo Podolyak, said on Twitter that he and other Ukrainian negotiators were ready to hold talks without any conditions to save the lives of trapped Mariupol defenders and civilians. There was no immediate response from Russia.

U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken warned of horrors yet to be revealed in Mariupol, given the death and destruction left behind in Bucha, near Kyiv, after the Russians retreated.

"We can only anticipate that when this tide also recedes from Mariupol, we're going to see far worse, if that's possible to imagine," he said.

Mariupol holds strategic and symbolic value for both sides. The scale of suffering there has made it a worldwide focal point of the war. Mariupol's fall would deprive Ukraine of a vital port, complete a land bridge between Russia and the Crimean Peninsula, and free up Russian troops to move elsewhere in the Donbas.

As Russia continued to funnel troops and equipment into the Donbas, Western nations rushed to boost the flow of military supplies to Kyiv for this new phase of the war, which is likely to involve trench warfare, long-range artillery attacks and tank battles across relatively open terrain.

U.S. President Joe Biden was set to announce plans Thursday to send more military aid to Ukraine, according to a U.S. official.

The official, who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity, said Biden will detail his plans to add to the roughly \$2.6 billion in military assistance the administration has already approved. Canada and the Netherlands also said they would send more heavy weaponry.

Also, a senior U.S. defense official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the Pentagon's assessment of the war, said the training of Ukrainian personnel on American 155 mm howitzers has begun in a European country outside Ukraine, and the first of 18 promised such weapons began arriving on the continent.

Putin, meanwhile, boasted that the Sarmat missile has "no equivalents in the world." The Sarmat is intended to eventually replace the Soviet-built missile code-named Satan by NATO as a major component of Russia's nuclear arsenal.

It will "make those who, in the heat of frantic, aggressive rhetoric, try to threaten our country think twice," the Russian leader said.

Looking for a path to peace, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres requested meetings with Putin and Zelenskyy in their capitals to discuss how to stop the fighting. The U.N. received no immediate response.

Wright resigns as Villanova coach, Neptune takes over

By DAN GELSTON AP Sports Writer

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Jay Wright shocked college basketball Wednesday night with his immediate resignation at Villanova, the Big East program he led to two national championships and four Final Fours in a Hall of Fame career.

The 60-year-old Wright guided Villanova to titles in 2016 and 2018 and just led the Wildcats to the Final Four, where they lost to national champion Kansas. He went 520-197 in 21 seasons at the school and 642-282 overall, also coaching Hofstra from 1994–2001.

"It's time for us to enter a new era of Villanova basketball," Wright said in a statement. "After 35 years in coaching, I am proud and excited to hand over the reins to Villanova's next coach. I am excited to remain a part of Villanova and look forward to working with (Villanova) and the rest of the leadership team."

Kyle Neptune, who served on the Villanova coaching staff before accepting the head coaching position at Fordham in 2021, returned to replace Wright.

"When looking for a successor, we wanted a candidate who could navigate the changing landscape of collegiate athletics and keep Villanova in a position of strength — now and in the future," Villanova athletic director Mark Jackson said. "After meeting with several exceptional candidates, we found all those

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 51 of 74

attributes and more in Kyle Neptune. Kyle quickly stood out for his basketball knowledge, recruiting savvy and natural ability to connect with student-athletes and coaches.”

Wright’s decision was unexpected and there was no immediate word the move was health related or that he was leaving for the NBA. He was inducted into the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame in 2021.

Wright will remain at Villanova and stay involved in fundraising, advising, education and more.

He joined North Carolina’s Roy Williams and Duke’s Mike Krzyzewski as the third coach with multiple championships to step down over the last two years.

Before he arrived, Villanova was known for upsetting Georgetown in the 1985 national championship game and the occasional trip to the NCAA Tournament.

Wright needed three years to build a foundation before Villanova broke through with a trip to the 2005 Sweet 16. An Elite Eight appearance followed the next year and the Wildcats reached the Final Four in 2009.

Villanova won its first national title under Wright in 2016 on Kris Jenkins’ buzzer-beater and decimated the NCAA Tournament field in 2018, winning every game by double digits on its way to the national title.

He was selected AP coach of the decade in 2020.

The 37-year-old Neptune was on Wright’s staff for the 2009 Final Four team, then later spent three seasons as an assistant at Niagara before he returned to the Wildcats in 2013. He went 16-16 in his lone season at Fordham.

“I think he’s more ready to be a head coach than most young guys X’s and O’s-wise and I think he’s got great character, great leadership skills, I think he’s going to be an outstanding head coach,” Wright said when Neptune was hired at Fordham.

Wright’s decision comes after another successful season:

- He reached 25 or more victories for the 10th time in his 22 seasons.
- The Wildcats have won a regular-season or postseason conference championship in each of the nine seasons since the Big East reconfigured in 2013.
- The Wildcats earned a No. 1 or No. 2 seed in the NCAA Tournament for the eighth time under Wright.

During Wright’s tenure, he coached several future NBA stars, including Kyle Lowry, Jalen Brunson, Mikal Bridges, and Saddiq Bey.

“Ohhhhhhh that’s tough !!! @kyleneptune WELL DESERVED,” Bridges, now a star with the Phoenix Suns, tweeted.

Wright was hired as head coach at Hofstra and went 207-122 with two NCAA Tournament appearances in seven seasons. Hired in 2001 to replace Steve Lappas, the Wildcats went to the NIT in Wright’s first three seasons.

“Simply a remarkable career,” said former Villanova AD Vince Nicastro, who hired Wright. “Will be regarded as one of the best coaches in college basketball history - and even better person. Has won with integrity, class and grace. And has served as a great role model for his players and colleagues.”

The Wildcats finished 30-8 this season and Wright’s final game was an 81-65 loss to Kansas in the Final Four.

Wright, a Churchville, Pennsylvania native, played college basketball at Bucknell and started as an assistant at Rochester and Drexel. He spent five seasons at Villanova as Rollie Massimino’s assistant, then followed him to UNLV for another two years before taking the head coaching job at Hofstra in 1994.

He rejected numerous NBA and other college overtures through the years and remained steadfast in his dedication to the Wildcats. Wright had stints coaching teams in the Pan American Games and World University Games; and served as an assistant coach under San Antonio Spurs coach Gregg Popovich for Team USA.

Wright was scheduled to discuss his decision at a press conference on Friday.

Justice Dept. to appeal order voiding travel mask mandate

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department is filing an appeal seeking to overturn a judge’s order

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 52 of 74

that voided the federal mask mandate on planes and trains and in travel hubs, officials said Wednesday. The notice came minutes after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention asked the Justice Department to appeal the decision handed down by a federal judge in Florida earlier this week.

A notice of appeal was filed in federal court in Tampa.

The CDC said in a statement Wednesday that it is its "continuing assessment that at this time an order requiring masking in the indoor transportation corridor remains necessary for the public health."

It remained unclear whether the Biden administration would ask the appeals court to grant an emergency stay to immediately reimpose the mask mandate on public transit. An emergency stay of the lower court's ruling would be a whiplash moment for travelers and transit workers. Most airlines and airports, many public transit systems and even ride-sharing company Uber lifted their mask-wearing requirements in the hours following Monday's ruling.

A federal judge in Florida had struck down the national mask mandate for mass transit on Monday, leading airlines and airports to swiftly repeal their requirements that passengers wear face coverings. The Transportation Security Administration said Monday that it will no longer enforce the mask requirement.

The CDC had recently extended the mask mandate, which was set to expire Monday, until May 3 to allow more time to study the BA.2 omicron subvariant, which is now responsible for the vast majority of U.S. cases. But the court ruling Monday had put that decision on hold.

The CDC said it will continue to monitor public health conditions to determine if a mandate would remain necessary. It said it believes the mandate is "a lawful order, well within CDC's legal authority to protect public health."

Justice Department spokesman Anthony Coley said Wednesday night that the department was filing the appeal "in light of today's assessment by the CDC that an order requiring masking in the transportation corridor remains necessary to protect the public health."

Biden's administration has offered mixed messages in the wake of the Monday ruling. While officials said Americans should heed the CDC's guidance even if it was no longer a requirement, Biden himself suggested they had more flexibility on masking-up during transit.

"That's up to them," Biden declared during a Tuesday visit to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. The White House nonetheless continues to require face coverings for those traveling with him on Air Force One, citing guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Wednesday that Biden still is encouraging Americans to wear masks when traveling and that he had been "answering the question quite literally" a day before.

"People are not legally bound to wear masks," she said, after the court order. "So, it is a point in time where it is up to people — it is their choice, in that regard.

After a winter surge fueled by the omicron variant that prompted record hospitalizations, the U.S. has seen a significant drop in virus spread in recent months, leading most states and cities to drop mask mandates.

But several Northeast cities have seen a rise in hospitalizations in recent weeks, leading Philadelphia to bring back its mask mandate.

The appeal drew criticism from the U.S. Travel Association, which along with other industry groups had been pressuring the Biden administration for months to end the mask mandate for travel.

"Masks were critically important during the height of the pandemic," said Tori Emerson Barnes, the group's executive vice president of public affairs and policy, "but with low hospitalization rates and multiple effective health tools now widely available, from boosters to therapies to high-quality air ventilation aboard aircraft, required masking on public transportation is simply out of step with the current public health landscape."

Macron attacks Le Pen on Russia, Muslim headscarf ban pledge

By JOHN LEICESTER and SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — French President Emmanuel Macron tore into his far-right challenger Marine Le Pen in a television debate Wednesday for her ties to Russia and for wanting to strip Muslim women of their right to cover their heads in public, as he seeks the votes he needs to win another 5-year term.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 53 of 74

In their only head-to-head confrontation before the electorate has its say in Sunday's winner-takes-all runoff vote for the presidency, Macron took the gloves off.

He argued that a loan that Le Pen's party received in 2014 from a Czech-Russian bank made her unsuitable to deal with Moscow. He also said plans by the anti-immigration candidate to ban Muslim women in France from wearing headscarves in public would trigger "civil war" in the country that has the largest Muslim population in western Europe.

Le Pen, in turn, sought to appeal to voters struggling with surging prices amid the fallout of Russia's war in Ukraine. She said bringing down the cost of living would be her priority if elected as France's first woman president and she portrayed herself as the candidate for voters unable to make ends meet.

She said Macron's presidency had left the country deeply divided. She repeatedly referenced the so-called "yellow vest" protest movement that rocked his government before the COVID-19 pandemic, with months of violent demonstrations against his economic policies.

"France needs to be stitched back together," she said.

The evening primetime debate drove home the yawning gulf in politics and character between the two candidates again vying for the presidency, five years after Macron handily beat Le Pen in 2017.

Polls suggest that Macron, a pro-European centrist, has a growing and significant lead over the nationalist firebrand. But the result is expected to be closer than five years ago and both candidates are angling for votes among electors who didn't support them in the election's first round on April 10.

"I am not like you," Le Pen said as they clashed about France's energy needs.

"You are not like me," Macron said. "Thank you for the reminder."

The French leader was particularly mordant in his criticism of the 9-million euro (\$9.8 million) loan that Le Pen's party received in 2014 from the First Czech-Russian Bank. Macron argued that because of the debt, Le Pen's hands would be tied when dealing with Russian President Vladimir Putin, should she win on Sunday.

"You are speaking to your banker when you speak of Russia, that's the problem," Macron charged. "You cannot correctly defend France's interests on this subject because your interests are linked to people close to Russian power."

"You depend on Russian power and you depend on Mr. Putin," he said.

Le Pen bristled at Macron's suggestion that she is beholden to Russia. She described herself as "totally free" and said Macron "knows full well that what he says is false."

She said her party is repaying the loan and called the president "dishonest" for raising the issue. Le Pen repeated what she has previously said: That her party went to the FCRB after French and European banks refused to lend it money. The loan has dogged her far-right party for years, along with her ties to Putin.

Just hours before Wednesday's debate, imprisoned Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny also raised the issue of the loan and stepped into the French presidential campaign, urging voters to back Macron and alleging that Le Pen is too closely linked to Russia.

In a long thread on Twitter, Navalny said the bank is tied to Putin and "is a well-known money-laundering agency."

He did not cite any evidence other than his own investigations into corruption in Russia. But he argued the loan could be dangerous for France if Le Pen wins.

"This was not just a 'shady deal,'" he tweeted. "How would you like it if a French politician took a loan from Cosa Nostra? Well, this here is the same thing."

Because she is trailing in polls, Le Pen needed to land a knockout blow in the debate. But she made an inauspicious start: Having been picked to speak first, she started talking before the debate's opening jingle had finished playing. Inaudible because of the music, she had to stop and start again. She apologized.

Once the verbal jousting began, Macron quickly put Le Pen on the defensive. He zeroed in on her voting record as a lawmaker and questioned her grasp of economic figures. Le Pen appeared most comfortable talking on topics that have long been centerpieces of her politics and her appeal to far-right voters: combatting what she called "anarchic and massive immigration" and crime.

Usually a powerful orator, Le Pen occasionally struggled for words and fluidity. She also at times lacked

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 54 of 74

her characteristic pugnacity. She has sought in this campaign to soften her image and cast off the extremist label that critics have long assigned to Le Pen and her party.

Macron appeared particularly self-assured in contrast, bordering at times on arrogance — a trait that his critics have highlighted. He sat with his arms crossed as he listened to Le Pen speak.

Macron emerged ahead from the April 10 first round. But Le Pen, who has gained ground this year by tapping anger over inflation, has significantly narrowed the gap in public support compared to 2017, when she lost with 34% of the vote to Macron's 66%.

In 2017, a similar debate struck a damaging blow to her campaign, with a subpar performance from her.

Both candidates need to broaden support before Sunday's vote. Many French, especially on the left, say they still don't know whether they will even go to the polls.

Macron said the choice for voters between the two is clear.

"I fight your ideas," he said. "I respect you as a person."

Russia's Navalny accuses Le Pen of Kremlin ties before vote

By ELAINE GANLEY Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Imprisoned Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny stepped abruptly into France's tight presidential campaign Wednesday, urging voters to back incumbent Emmanuel Macron and alleging that far-right challenger Marine Le Pen is too closely linked to Russia.

Le Pen has faced scrutiny before over a 9 million euro (\$9.7 million) loan that her party received in 2014 from the First Czech-Russian Bank.

Questions about Le Pen's ties to Moscow arose during her presidential bid five years ago that she lost to Macron, and they have emerged again amid Russian President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine. She reiterated during a debate between the two candidates Wednesday evening that the Feb. 24 Russian invasion was "inadmissible."

The tweet by Navalny's team, hours before the critical debate, threatened Le Pen's relatively smooth ride toward Sunday's runoff against Macron.

During the debate, Macron attacked Le Pen as being dependent on Russia.

"You are speaking to your banker when you speak of Russia, that's the problem, Madame Le Pen," Macron said.

Le Pen bristled at the suggestion she is beholden to the Kremlin, saying she was a "totally free woman."

Earlier in the campaign, she dismissed questions about the loan to her National Front party, which has been rebranded as the National Rally. The bank has since been dissolved.

Navalny, who is Putin's chief domestic foe, said in the long Twitter thread in French that he wanted to tell Le Pen's supporters about corruption in Russia and how it has tainted banks like the FCRB.

"This bank is a well-known money-laundering agency created at the instigation of Putin," Navalny tweeted, although he did not cite any evidence other than his own investigations into corruption in Russia. "This is selling political influence to Putin."

In an unusual appeal that reflected the force of his belief, but might itself be construed as interference, Navalny said: "Without any hesitation, I call on the French to vote for Emmanuel Macron."

A 2019 study by the Washington-based Alliance for Securing Democracy at the German Marshall Fund found that the FCRB bank had been a "a key cog in Moscow's attempt to swing political contests overseas — and how this bank sought to use existing campaign finance loopholes to achieve political objectives."

Le Pen's anti-immigration party was a focus of the study, saying the bank had been involved in being a "vehicle for money-laundering by corrupt elites on a massive scale." It also cited "Russian state-sanctioned interference in the Western political system" in the form of the loan to the National Front.

Le Pen reiterated during the debate with Macron that her party went to the FCRB after French and European banks refused to lend it money. The loan has dogged the far-right party for years, along with her ties to Putin. A photo of the two meeting in 2017 was posted on social media by her opponents during the campaign.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 55 of 74

Le Pen, charging back at Macron's insinuations of her dependence on Russia, pointed a finger at him. "You received Mr. Putin with great fanfare at Versailles ... You received Mr. Putin at Bregancon, your vacation place," and told him what she has been saying, that Russia must re-align with Europe, she said. Le Pen has said she wants a rapprochement with Russia once the Ukraine war ends.

At a news conference before Navalny's tweets, Le Pen again defended herself against suspicions of being beholden to the Kremlin. She told reporters earlier this month that she doesn't believe the FCRB was under the orders of Russian leaders.

She added that her party is still paying off the loan, without clarifying who the creditors are.

She said the loan was no sweetheart deal.

"This loan didn't come with a friendly interest rate. It was signed at 6%," she said.

"I am, of course, available for any bank, American, from South America, that would want to take over this loan," she said.

In a dig at the French banking establishment, she added: "If a French bank wants to buy this loan, it would, of course, be at the same conditions, very advantageous terms for the bank."

French law now forbids loans to political parties from non-European Union countries. Le Pen's National Rally party has taken out a loan from a bank in Hungary, headed by Viktor Orban, a Le Pen ally.

Navalny last month was sentenced to nine years in prison on fraud and contempt of court charges top of a 2½-year sentence for what he says are politically motivated convictions. The 45-year-old activist, who is imprisoned in a penal colony east of Moscow, in 2020 survived a poisoning with a nerve agent that he blames on the Kremlin.

Over the past year, Putin has cracked down on opposition figures like Navalny, along with his supporters, other activists and independent journalists in a bid to stifle all dissent.

Navalny's team has stepped up efforts to put international pressure on Putin, speaking at EU venues and calling for sanctions against Moscow.

Russia has for generations held a fascination for the Le Pen family, starting with Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine's father and co-founder of the old National Front. Marine Le Pen's niece, Marion Marechal, a far-right politician, has visited Russia and Marine Le Pen has visited Russia several times, but only once met with Putin.

Michigan lawmaker's forceful speech rebuts 'grooming' attack

By DAVID EGGERT Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — Republican Sen. Lana Theis opened a Michigan Senate session with an invocation by claiming children are being attacked by "forces" that want to indoctrinate them with ideas their parents do not support.

Three Democrats walked out of last week's meeting to protest her apparent reference to how schools address sexual orientation and gender identity and critical race theory. Within days, one who tweeted criticism of the prayer was targeted by Theis in a fundraising email.

Theis called Sen. Mallory McMorrow a liberal social media "troll" and accused her of wanting to "groom" and "sexualize" kindergartners and teach "that 8-year-olds are responsible for slavery."

McMorrow responded Tuesday with a forceful, impassioned floor speech that resonated nationwide.

"I am a straight, white, Christian, married, suburban mom" who wants "every kid to feel seen, heard and supported — not marginalized and targeted because they are not straight, white and Christian," she said.

The salvos were among the latest to draw widespread attention in the country's ongoing culture wars, as conservatives push to make education a political wedge issue. They have said they are trying to prevent "grooming," a term used to describe how sex offenders initiate contact with their victims.

"What a horrible thing to say to somebody and not care about the consequences," McMorrow told reporters Wednesday.

Theis, who declined to speak after the session, released a statement in which she did not apologize. She again accused Democrats of trying to undermine parents as the primary decision-makers in their child's

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 56 of 74

education.

McMorrow's 5-minute speech found an engaged audience on social media. The video racked up millions of views across Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. A tweet thread from McMorrow about her remarks amassed some 74,000 retweets.

Prominent Democrats outside Michigan including Hillary Clinton urged their social media followers to watch, as did political groups such as the pro-Democratic PAC Meidas Touch, the anti-Trump PAC The Lincoln Project and the popular liberal meme page Occupy Democrats.

The video also was shared online by activists, celebrities and journalists including Maria Shriver, Mia Farrow, MSNBC's Joe Scarborough and CNN's Don Lemon.

McMorrow, who said she thought of most of the speech while giving her daughter a bath, said a conservative Christian woman from Texas and a gay man who grew up in rural Indiana were among those who contacted her office to thank her.

Asked why the speech resonated, McMorrow said: "There is a difference between politics and outright hate. I think people are frustrated that elected officials haven't done enough to call that out, that maybe Democrats are afraid of talking about religion and faith openly and honestly and calling hate what it is. I think we have to."

Accusations of grooming and pedophilia are "straight out of the QAnon playbook," she said, referring to the conspiracy theory. She noted how the debunked "pizzagate" conspiracy theory ended with real-world consequences when a man fired his assault rifle inside a Washington, D.C., restaurant.

She said she has "felt incredibly frustrated that people have been weaponizing religion and Christianity and frankly white, suburban moms and claiming to speak on behalf of all of us. ... They don't."

Both McMorrow, of Royal Oak, and Theis, of Brighton, are up for reelection in different districts. Former President Donald Trump is backing a primary challenger over Theis after a Republican-led legislative committee she sits on determined there was no widespread or systemic fraud when Joe Biden won Michigan in 2020.

Republicans' use of "grooming" rhetoric comes as one of their own, former state House Speaker Lee Chatfield, is under investigation for allegedly sexually assaulting his future sister-in-law starting when she was a minor.

Florida Senate passes bill to end Disney self-government

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — The Florida Senate on Wednesday passed a bill to repeal a law allowing Walt Disney World to operate a private government over its properties in the state, escalating a feud with the entertainment giant over its opposition to what critics call the "Don't Say Gay" law.

The proposal could have huge tax implications for Disney, whose series of theme parks have over the decades transformed Orlando into one of the world's most popular tourist destinations. And Democrats have warned that the move could cause local homeowners to get hit with big tax bills if they have to absorb bond debt from Disney — although such details are far from clear.

The measures, pushed by Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis, comes as the governor battles with Disney after the company's criticism of a new GOP law barring instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through third grade as well as instruction that is not "age appropriate or developmentally appropriate."

The bill would eliminate the Reedy Creek Improvement District, as the Disney government is known, as well as a handful of other similar districts by June 2023. The measure leaves room for the districts to be reestablished, with a Republican legislative leader signaling a likely restructuring of a 1967 deal that lawmakers struck with the company that allows it to provide services such as zoning, fire protection, utilities and infrastructure.

"By doing it this early, we have until next June or July to this put together, so we're actually giving ourselves more time to be thoughtful," Republican Senate President Wilton Simpson told reporters after the vote. "I don't know how the end will come, but I know that this is a very worthy process that we're taking

and I think whatever comes out of it will be better than what we have today.”

Still, the move represents the latest blow in a culture war harnessed by DeSantis as he runs for reelection and bolsters himself as a potential 2024 GOP presidential candidate through staunch opposition to liberal policies on race, gender and abortion.

“If Disney wants to pick a fight, they chose the wrong guy,” DeSantis wrote in a campaign fundraising email Wednesday. “As governor, I was elected to put the people of Florida first, and I will not allow a woke corporation based in California to run our state.”

Democrats, the minority party in the Legislature, have railed against the proposal as clear retaliation against a company that has been a major economic driver in the state.

“Let’s call this what it is, it’s the punitive, petulant political payback to a corporation who dared to say the emperor has no clothes, but if they behave this next election cycle, maybe we’ll put it back together,” said Sen. Gary M. Farmer, a Democrat.

Disney did not return an email seeking comment. The company is one of Florida’s biggest private employers and last year said it had more than 60,000 workers in the state. It is not immediately clear exactly how Disney or neighboring governments would be affected if the district was dissolved.

The push to punish Disney came after it announced it would suspend political donations in the state and said it was committed to supporting organizations working to oppose the state’s new law limiting sexual orientation or gender identify instruction in the classroom.

DeSantis and other Republicans have lashed out at Disney and other critics of the law, arguing that the policy is reasonable and that parents, not teachers, should be addressing such topics with children.

The creation of the Reedy Creek Improvement District, and the control it gave Disney over 27,000 acres (11,000 hectares) in Florida, was a crucial element in the company’s plans to build near Orlando in the 1960s. Company officials said they needed autonomy to plan a futuristic city along with the theme park. The city never materialized, however; instead, it morphed into the Epcot theme park.

The Florida House of Representatives is expected to take up the bill Thursday.

Johnny Depp testifies Heard attacked him, he never hit back

By MATTHEW BARAKAT and BEN FINLEY Associated Press

FAIRFAX, Va. (AP) — Actor Johnny Depp scoffed at the notion during court testimony Wednesday that his constant quarrels with ex-wife Amber Heard would ever prompt him to hit her, and insisted on cross-examination that her allegations devastated his career.

“Violence isn’t necessary,” Depp said from the stand during his libel lawsuit against Heard, his second day of testimony. “Why would you hit someone to make them agree with you?”

Heard has accused Depp of physically and sexually assaulting her on multiple occasions before and during their brief marriage. The former “Pirates of the Caribbean” star sued after Heard, who is also an actor, made an indirect reference to those accusations in an op-ed piece she wrote for The Washington Post.

Depp addressed Heard’s accusations in detail Wednesday. Heard has said the first time she was assaulted was when Depp slapped her in 2013 after she made fun of a tattoo he had — one that used to say “Winona Forever” when he was dating the actress Winona Ryder that he altered to “Wino Forever” after they broke up.

“It didn’t happen,” he said of the alleged assault. “Why would I take such great offense to someone making fun of a tattoo on my body? That allegation never made any sense to me.”

Later, he addressed an alleged assault on a private plane flight in 2014 from Boston to Los Angeles. Heard has said Depp became blackout intoxicated and assaulted her on the plane ride.

Depp testified he took two oxycodone pills — an opiate to which he admits he was addicted at the time — and locked himself in the plane bathroom and fell asleep to avoid her badgering.

Depp testified he drank only a glass of Champagne as he boarded the plane. But according to evidence introduced at a similar trial in England where Depp sued a British tabloid — a lawsuit he lost — Depp texted his friend, actor Paul Bettany, and referenced drinking half a bottle of whiskey, “a thousand Red

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 58 of 74

Bull vodkas” and two bottles of Champagne before the flight.

Depp also discussed a violent argument in 2015 — shortly after they were married — in Australia that resulted in the tip of his middle finger being cut off. He said Heard was irate that Depp’s lawyers had asked her to sign a post-nuptial agreement.

He said she threw two vodka bottles at him, the second of which exploded where he had placed his hand on a basement bar, severing the finger to the point where bone was exposed.

“I don’t know what a nervous breakdown feels like, but that’s probably the closest I’ve ever been,” he said.

Depp said he began to write on the walls in his own blood to recount lies in which he had caught Heard.

Depp told hospital doctors he had injured himself, and contemporaneous text messages introduced as evidence refer to Depp injuring himself. Depp testified he lied about the cause of the injury to protect her. Heard’s lawyers have said the laws of physics don’t support Depp’s story and they will introduce evidence to prove that.

Depp also gave a graphic description of a final fight as the couple drifted toward divorce, accusing Heard and her friends of pretending that he was assaulting her. Soon after, Heard sought a restraining order and was photographed with marks on her face.

He testified that Heard was on the phone with a friend shouting, “Stop hitting me Johnny!” even though he was standing nowhere near her.

The fight had started as Depp said he’d realized it was time for the couple to split. The argument intensified, he said, as Depp accused her of leaving human fecal matter on his side of the bed in the penthouse they’d shared. He said Heard kept denying it, blaming it on their small dogs, but he was convinced she was lying.

Depp met Heard on the 2011 film “The Rum Diary.” The two married in 2015 and she filed for divorce a year later.

Depp said things began to change in his marriage when he felt that he “was suddenly just wrong about everything” in Heard’s eyes.

Violence would often ensue, sometimes with a slap or a shove from Heard or his wife throwing a television remote control or a glass of wine in his face, Depp said.

“There were times when I would just go and lock myself in the bathroom or a place where she couldn’t get to,” Depp said.

Depp said he used drugs and drank alcohol as a way to cope with Heard’s abuse and said she was also a heavy drinker. Depp said he at one point stopped drinking to try to save the relationship, but Heard refused to abstain.

Depp sued Heard after she wrote a 2018 op-ed piece in The Washington Post in which she referred to herself as a “public figure representing domestic abuse.”

She never mentioned Depp by name, but Depp’s lawyers said it was a clear reference to accusations Heard made in 2016 when she sought a restraining order against him.

Depp said the accusations and the article contributed to an unfairly ruined reputation that made him a Hollywood pariah and cost him his role in the lucrative “Pirates of the Caribbean” movie franchise.

He said he was pulled from the franchise just days after the Post piece ran. On cross-examination, Heard’s lawyer pointed to evidence that Disney made that decision months before the article’s publication.

Heard’s lawyers say the article is accurate and doesn’t defame him. They say Depp’s ruined reputation is due to his own bad behavior.

Depp was cross-examined only briefly at the end of the day Wednesday. Cross-examination will continue Thursday.

Years of fruitful relations between Disney, Florida at risk

By MIKE SCHNEIDER and CURT ANDERSON Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — The idea was presented to Florida lawmakers in a movie house outside Orlando 55 years ago, with Walt Disney, who had died less than two months earlier, helping make the pitch from the

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 59 of 74

screen: Let Disney form its own government and in exchange it would create a futuristic city of tomorrow.

That city never materialized, but Walt Disney World became an economic juggernaut with four theme parks and two dozen hotels, while its government retained unprecedented powers in deciding what and how to build, issuing bonds and holding the ability to build its own nuclear plant if it wanted.

Now, five decades later, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis is asking lawmakers to end Disney's government in a move that jeopardizes the symbiotic relationship between the state and company. The high-profile attack by a politician from a GOP party that has historically championed its ties to business follows the company's opposition to what critics have dubbed the "Don't Say Gay" law barring instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through third grade.

Republican Rep. Randy Fine, sponsor of the bill to scrap the Reedy Creek Improvement District, as the Disney government entity is known, said it is time for a change.

"You kick the hornet's nest, things come up. And I will say this: You got me on one thing — this bill does target one company. It targets the Walt Disney Co.," Fine said. "You want to know why? Because they are the only company in the state that has ever been granted the right to govern themselves."

In an email fundraising pitch Wednesday, DeSantis, a potential Republican presidential candidate in 2024, put it this way:

"Disney has gotten away with special deals from the state of Florida for way too long. It took a look under the hood to see what Disney has become to truly understand their inappropriate influence," the governor's email said.

"If Disney wants to pick a fight, they chose the wrong guy," the email added.

Disney, based in Burbank, California, had more than \$67 billion in revenue in 2021 and has declined comment on the Florida legislation, which passed the state Senate on Wednesday and is being considered by the House in a special session of the Republican-dominated Legislature. The effective date of the measure would be June 2023, leaving time to develop a compromise short of completely abolishing the district.

Before Reedy Creek became Disney's government, it was a drainage district created to help manage the 27,000 acres (10,926 hectares) that the company secretly acquired parcel by parcel in the mid-1960s.

At first, news accounts speculated that "a new and large industrial complex" might be coming to the area. Some reports linked it to the Kennedy Space Center about an hour's drive away in Cape Canaveral. Finally, on Oct. 21, 1965, the Orlando Sentinel broke a story with this headline: "We Say: 'Mystery Industry' is Disney."

A few days later, then-Gov. Haydon Burns confirmed the Disney plan, saying it would be "the greatest attraction in the history of Florida."

That would prove true over the decades as metro Orlando became the most visited destination in the U.S., attracting 75 million tourists annually before the pandemic. The metro area, which added Universal and SeaWorld theme park resorts, grew from 305,000 residents in 1970, the year before Disney World opened, to almost 2.7 million residents last year.

In some ways, the Reedy Creek Improvement District was built on a misrepresentation when company officials came to Florida lawmakers with their plans to build an East Coast Disneyland. After the company's first theme park in southern California was built in the 1950s, motels and tourist shops encroached around the property, and Walt Disney wanted to make sure the same thing didn't happen in Florida.

Along with a theme park, Disney officials led by Roy Disney, Walt's brother, told Florida lawmakers in 1967 that they planned to build a futuristic city — the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow, also known as Epcot.

The proposed city would include a rapid transit system and urban planning innovations, so Disney needed autonomy in the district for building and deciding how to use the land, they said. The futuristic city never materialized, and instead Epcot morphed into a second theme park that opened in 1982.

"They said they were going to do one thing and they did another," said retired Rollins College political scientist Richard Foglesong, whose book, "Married to the Mouse" recounted the formation of Reedy Creek. "In that respect, it was legally infirm. I think that is a factual argument."

Reedy Creek was allowed to build its own roads, run its own wastewater treatment plants, operate its

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 60 of 74

own fire department, set its own building codes and inspect Disney buildings for safety. In the current budget year, the district had \$169 million in revenues and \$178 million in expenditures.

Reedy Creek essentially runs a midsize city. On any given day, as many as 350,000 people are on Disney World property as theme park visitors, overnight hotel guests or employees. The district has to manage the traffic, dispose of the waste and control the plentiful mosquitoes in a territory once called Mosquito County.

Even though Reedy Creek's primary task is to operate Disney World, it is home to less than 50 residents living in manufactured homes in two tiny communities, Bay Lake and Lake Buena Vista. The two municipalities were formed to support the legal framework of the Reedy Creek Improvement District, which is governed by a five-member Board of Supervisors with four-year terms. The supervisors must be landowners within Reedy Creek, and to qualify, Disney gives them a small piece of land that they must give back once they leave the board.

That's not the only thing Disney has given out over the decades.

Disney has been a major political player in Florida and the country. The Center for Responsive Politics, which tracks political campaign spending, reported that in the 2020 campaign cycle, Walt Disney Co. and affiliates made more than \$20 million in political contributions to both Republicans and Democrats.

That year, the most recent in which figures are available, Disney-related entities funneled \$10.5 million to the America First Action committee, which supports former President Donald Trump. Disney also contributed \$1.2 million to support President Joe Biden's campaign.

"I think Disney is stuck a bit," Foglesong said. "They had tried to play it both ways, making contributions to what you can only call right-wing Republicans. They thought they could have it both ways -- be the company of motherhood and apple pie and fund these reactionary Republican politicians."

Rio's Carnival parade is back, as street bands ache to party

By DAVID BILLER Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — Rio de Janeiro's Mayor Eduardo Paes on Wednesday ceremonially handed control of the city to King Momo, a ritual representing the upheaval of the status quo -- but it remains to be seen how much post-pandemic partying is in store during the first Carnival in two years.

Samba schools' elaborate floats and feather-festooned dancers will parade between packed bleachers starting Wednesday night. As for the more than 500 street parties that usually run wild through the city, City Hall refused to grant them authorization, claiming it lacked sufficient time to prepare.

That dissonance has sparked debate over whether City Hall is stifling Carnival's essence, and if denizens should seize the streets as their own. Some organizers couldn't care less what is allowed; they will turn out anyway — part party, part protest — and Mayor Paes, a confessed Carnival enthusiast, has said he will refrain from deploying the Municipal Guard.

"City Hall won't impede people from being in public spaces, from celebrating, but it's impossible that it happen at such (large) size," Paes said in response to a reporter's question after giving King Momo the city's key.

His statement echoed comments on Sunday while visiting samba schools that were putting finishing touches on their floats. The competing schools were corralled from the streets into the Sambadrome in the 1980s, and became Rio's quintessential Carnival display for tens of thousands of attendees willing to shell out for tickets. Their parades will run through Sunday night.

In the Sambadrome's shadow are the free parties known as "blocos", which stream through streets and pour into plazas, many of whose members relish subverting established order. What blocos lack in glamour they make up for with glitter and grit. Costumes range from racy to outlandish, and are sometimes clever digs at authority figures.

Blocos had largely vanished as samba schools claimed the spotlight, but their resurgence in the 1990s dovetailed with redemocratization after two decades of military dictatorship, according to André Videira, a sociology professor at the Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro who has studied blocos.

Later, they began assuming forms akin to U.S. brass bands, without the need for sound trucks or drum

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 61 of 74

sections that hindered mobility. Blocos were free to roam.

"They are important vehicles for the democratization of access to culture and access to the city," Videira said.

Since 2010, more than 150 blocos have refused City Hall's institution of a registration process, with many viewing it as an attempt to formalize something inherently informal, Videira said. They insist celebrating Carnival isn't contingent on authorities' consent — not this year, nor any other.

On April 13, dozens of musicians marched through downtown blasting their horns, banging their drums and demanding to be heard. The euphoric protest was organized by Ocupa Carnival, a group which days earlier drafted a manifesto denouncing perceived attempts to commodify and repress blocos that was signed by more than 125 of them.

"It's important to be collectively pressuring the government, so Carnival is recognized and supported like it should be," Karen Lino, 29, said while sporting a jaguar-print outfit that reflected her role as a dancer in the Friends of the Jaguar bloco. But she is also a member of the troupe that will lead the reigning samba school champion, Viradouro, through the Sambadrome this year. "It's hypocritical of the government to not give attention to other sectors."

On Tuesday, a columnist in the city's main newspaper, O Globo, wrote that City Hall was washing its hands of policymaking duties by leaving blocos in legal limbo.

"Apparently prohibition didn't make much sense, as the blocos bring the soul of carnival to the streets and are fundamental for the city's spirit," wrote Leo Aversa. "If he (Paes) thinks it can't be done, isn't possible, the coherent thing would be to prohibit it seriously. If he thinks there's no problem, the right thing would be to free them with conviction."

Paes fired back on Twitter: "The correct thing is not having blocos! They aren't authorized and we won't have the structure for the party."

In Carnival's 2020 edition, just before COVID-19 reached Brazil, more than 7 million people partied in the so-called "Street Carnival," according to city figures. Crowds are densely packed, bottles are shared around and kissing is custom. Which is to say: a paradise for partiers, and a vector for viruses.

Blocos had little desire to turn out last year as Brazil's catastrophic second COVID-19 wave took shape. It was the first time in a century Rio's pre-Lenten festivities were canceled, and Paes bestowed the city's key to health workers instead of King Momo. With the omicron variant spreading in January, Paes proposed blocos be relegated to enclosed, controlled spaces to check proof of vaccination upon entry.

That idea ran counter to blocos' freewheeling nature, plus some organizers expressed worry it was a further attempt to "privatize" Carnival by yoking them with corporate sponsorship. Most demurred. But with daily COVID-19 deaths near-zero for over a month and the mask mandate lifted, people want to party. Some blocos played last weekend, and schedules of their unsanctioned performances are circulating widely on WhatsApp.

The spokesperson for Rio's tourism promotion agency, Cecilia de Moraes, defended the city's decision to deny authorization, saying it takes months to coordinate and contract provision of fencing, portable toilets and extra dump trucks to prevent street parties from becoming party fouls.

"When things (with COVID-19) improve and people survive, the blocos see it's going well, they want to come out. But we can't flick a switch," she said.

Rio's bigger blocos, which draw tens and hundreds of thousands of revelers, have fallen into line. They utilize sound trucks and rely on the city for traffic detours, garbage cleanup and more to limit disruption. Rita Fernandes, who leads the Sebastiana association of blocos, said they are holding fire for 2023.

"We don't want to come out at any cost, our sponsor canceled, we were discouraged by omicron. In the end, everything was demobilized," Fernandes said by phone. "We don't think the city will support over four days the volume of blocos that there are. We don't want to create chaos in the city."

Others are unconvinced, like Tomás Ramos, a saxophonist and member of the group that organized the April 13 protest. He cited a municipal ordinance that came into effect last year determining support for Carnival as a "guaranteed right," and said City Hall had no plan B to ensure that without its key sponsor, Brazilian brewer Ambev.

At the end of the protest, Ramos shouted to musicians and spectators gathered at the steps of Rio's municipal theater, rallying them for full-bore Carnival festivities.

"Down with the turnstiles that transform the city into big business, where profit prevails over life, where money is freer than people!" he boomed, and the crowd echoed his words. "As they capitalize on reality, we socialize dreams! Long live the energy of rebellion!"

Court halts South Carolina plan for firing squad execution

By MICHELLE LIU Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — South Carolina's highest court on Wednesday issued a temporary stay blocking the state from carrying out what was set to be its first-ever firing squad execution.

The order by the state Supreme Court puts on hold at least temporarily the planned April 29 execution of Richard Bernard Moore, who drew the death sentence for the 1999 killing of convenience store clerk James Mahoney in Spartanburg.

The court said in issuing the temporary stay that it would release a more detailed order later.

Attorneys for the 57-year-old inmate had sought a stay, citing pending litigation in another court challenging the constitutionality of South Carolina's execution methods, which also include the electric chair. Moore's lawyers also wanted time to ask the U.S. Supreme Court to review whether Moore's sentence was proportionate to his crime.

It has been more than a decade since the last firing squad execution in the U.S. The state of Utah carried out all three such executions in the nation since 1976, according to the Washington-based nonprofit Death Penalty Information Center. The most recent was in 2010, when Ronnie Lee Gardner faced a five-person squad.

The South Carolina Supreme Court on Wednesday also set a May 13 execution date for Brad Sigmon, 64, who was convicted in 2002 of the double murder of his ex-girlfriend's parents in Greenville County.

A state judge agreed last week to examine a legal challenge brought by Moore, Sigmon and two other death row inmates who have mostly exhausted their appeals. Their lawyers argue that both electrocution and the firing squad are "barbaric" methods of killing. The prisoners' attorneys also want the judge to closely examine prisons officials' claims that they can't get hold of lethal injection drugs, citing executions by that method carried out by other states and the federal government in recent years.

South Carolina's last execution was in 2011. State officials have attributed the decadelong hiatus to an inability to secure lethal injection drugs after the state's last batch expired in 2013. Efforts to contact manufacturers and compounding pharmacies have proved unfruitful, Corrections Department officials have repeatedly said.

A 2021 law intended to solve that problem made the electric chair the default execution method instead of lethal injection, and also codified the firing squad as an alternative option for condemned inmates.

Moore's execution date was set after corrections officials disclosed last month that they had completed renovations on the state's death chamber in Columbia to accommodate the firing squad and also developed new execution protocols.

Though Moore elected execution by firing squad earlier this month, he maintained in a written statement that he was forced to make a decision by a deadline set by state law and still found both options unconstitutional.

Moore is also separately asking a federal judge to consider whether the firing squad and the electric chair are cruel and unusual.

South Carolina is one of eight states that still use the electric chair and one of four — including Mississippi, Oklahoma and Utah — to allow a firing squad, per the Death Penalty Information Center.

Moore has spent more than two decades on death row after he was convicted in 2001 in the fatal shooting of convenience store clerk James Mahoney. Prosecutors said at his trial that he entered Nikki's Speedy Mart in Spartanburg looking for money to support his cocaine habit. He then got into a dispute with Mahoney, who drew a pistol that Moore wrestled away from him. Mahoney pulled a second gun, and

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 63 of 74

a gunfight ensued, with Mahoney shooting Moore in the arm and Moore shooting Mahoney in the chest. Moore's lawyers have said Moore couldn't have intended to kill someone when he entered the store because he didn't bring a gun with him.

Wimbledon bans players from Russia, Belarus over Ukraine war

By CHRIS LEHOURITES AP Sports Writer

LONDON (AP) — Tennis players from Russia and Belarus will not be allowed to play at Wimbledon this year because of the war in Ukraine, the All England Club announced Wednesday.

Among the prominent men's players affected by the ban are reigning U.S. Open champion Daniil Medvedev, who recently reached No. 1 in the ATP rankings and is currently No. 2, and No. 8 Andrey Rublev. The women's players affected include No. 4 Aryna Sabalenka, who was a Wimbledon semifinalist last year; Victoria Azarenka, a former No. 1 who has won the Australian Open twice; and Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova, the French Open runner-up last year.

Medvedev, Rublev and Pavlyuchenkova are from Russia; Sabalenka and Azarenka are from Belarus.

Wimbledon begins on June 27. The All England Club confirmed in March that it was having discussions with the British government about whether Russians should be able to play in the grass-court Grand Slam tournament.

"It is our responsibility to play our part in the widespread efforts ... to limit Russia's global influence through the strongest means possible," the All England Club said in a statement first posted on Twitter. "In the circumstances of such unjustified and unprecedented military aggression, it would be unacceptable for the Russian regime to derive any benefits from the involvement of Russian or Belarusian players with The Championships."

Russian athletes have been prevented from competing in many sports following their country's invasion of Ukraine. Belarus has aided Russia in the war.

Soccer, figure skating and track and field all banned Russian and Belarusian athletes and teams from their events because of the war. The Russian men's national soccer team was excluded from last month's World Cup qualifying playoffs, forcing them to miss a chance to reach this year's tournament in Qatar.

Wednesday's move signals the first time a tennis tournament has told players from Russia and Belarus they are not welcome — and the ATP was quick to criticize the All England Club for what the men's tennis tour called a "unilateral decision" and "unfair."

"Our sport is proud to operate on the fundamental principles of merit and fairness, where players compete as individuals to earn their place in tournaments," the ATP said in a statement, adding that the decision "has the potential to set a damaging precedent for the game."

The WTA also said it was "very disappointed" with the decision.

"As the WTA has consistently stated, individual athletes should not be penalized or prevented from competing due to where they are from, or the decisions made by the governments of their countries," the women's tour said in a statement. "The WTA will be evaluating its next steps and what actions may be taken regarding these decisions."

The seven groups that run the sport around the world decided March 1 that players from those countries would be allowed to compete in WTA, ATP and Grand Slam tournaments but not under the name or flag of Russia or Belarus. Those two nations also were kicked out of the Billie Jean King Cup and Davis Cup team competitions; Russia had been the reigning champion in both.

The French Open, which starts on May 22, will be the first Grand Slam tournament held since Russia invaded Ukraine in February and is expected to permit Russian and Belarussian players to compete — just as so-called "neutral" athletes who may not represent their countries.

The U.S. Tennis Association, which runs the U.S. Open, said Wednesday it has not made a decision about whether players from Russia and Belarus can compete at the year's last Grand Slam tournament, which begins on Aug. 29.

The All England Club said that if "circumstances change materially between now and June," it would

"respond accordingly."

"We recognise that this is hard on the individuals affected, and it is with sadness that they will suffer for the actions of the leaders of the Russian regime," All England Club chairman Ian Hewitt said.

"We have very carefully considered the alternative measures that might be taken within the UK Government guidance but, given the high profile environment of The Championships, the importance of not allowing sport to be used to promote the Russian regime and our broader concerns for public and player (including family) safety, we do not believe it is viable to proceed on any other basis at The Championships."

Some current and former tennis players from Ukraine — including two-time Grand Slam semifinalist Elina Svitolina and the recently retired Sergiy Stakhovsky — put up a statement on Twitter on Wednesday that called on the WTA, ATP and International Tennis Federation to ask players representing Russia and Belarus whether they support the invasion of Ukraine.

"In times of crisis, silence means agreeing with what is happening," the posts said. "We noticed that some Russian and Belarusian players at some point vaguely mentioned the war, but never clearly stating that Russia and Belarus started it on the territory of Ukraine."

Ohio doctor found not guilty in 14 hospital patient deaths

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — An Ohio doctor accused of ordering excessive amounts of painkillers that led to multiple patient deaths at a Columbus-area hospital was acquitted of 14 counts of murder Wednesday following a weeklong trial.

Dr. William Husel, 46, was accused of ordering the drugs for patients in the Mount Carmel Health System. He was indicted in cases that involved at least 500 micrograms of the powerful painkiller fentanyl.

Prosecutors said ordering such dosages for a nonsurgical situation indicated an intent to end lives. Husel's attorneys argued he was providing comfort care for dying patients, not trying to kill them.

Franklin County Judge Michael Holbrook told jurors before the start of deliberations that they could also consider lesser charges of attempted murder. They deliberated for six days.

Husel would have faced a sentence of life in prison with parole eligibility in 15 years had he been found guilty of just one count of murder.

Prosecutors presented their case beginning Feb. 22 and put on 53 prosecution witnesses before resting on March 29. Those witnesses included medical experts who testified that Husel ordered up to 20 times as much fentanyl as was necessary to control pain.

Husel gave enough fentanyl to some patients to "kill an elephant," testified Dr. Wes Ely, a physician and professor of medicine at Vanderbilt University.

Other prosecution witnesses included medical experts, Mount Carmel employees, investigators, and family members of all 14 patients.

By contrast, defense lawyers called a single witness — a Georgia anesthesiologist — to testify that Husel's patients died from their medical conditions and not Husel's actions. The defense rested on March 31 after one day.

The age of the patients who died ranged from 37 to 82. The first patient death was in May 2015. The last three died in November 2018.

During closing arguments April 11, David Zeyen, an assistant Franklin County prosecutor, told jurors that regardless of how close a patient is to death, it's illegal to speed up the process.

Husel's attorney Jose Baez during a remote news conference after the verdict repeated his assertion that prosecutors didn't produce "a shred of evidence" to back up their claims. He called Husel an "incredible doctor" who with his family are "incredibly relieved the nightmare is over."

"I'm deeply saddened William had to go through this," Baez said.

The Franklin County Prosecutor's Office released a brief statement that concluded: "We accept the jury verdict."

Husel was fired by the Mount Carmel Health System. It concluded he had ordered excessive painkillers for about three dozen patients who died over several years. He was initially charged with 25 murder counts, but the judge agreed to dismiss 11 of those counts in January.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 65 of 74

Husel's colleagues who administered the medications weren't criminally charged, but the hospital system said it fired 23 nurses, pharmacists and managers after its internal investigation and referred various employees to their respective state boards for possible disciplinary action.

Mount Carmel has reached settlements totaling more than \$16.7 million over the deaths of at least 17 patients, with more lawsuits pending.

One patient, 82-year-old Melissa Penix, was given 2,000 micrograms of fentanyl and died a few minutes later. Dr. John Schweig of Tampa Bay General Hospital testified for the prosecution that Penix "definitely was not terminal, nor was continuing medical care futile."

"She was a fighter," said Penix's daughter, Bev Leonhard, of Grove City, according to The Columbus Dispatch. "She didn't deserve to die the way she did."

Mega dance company bred culture of sex, silence, dancers say

By JULIET LINDERMAN, MARTHA MENDOZA and MORGAN BOCKNEK Associated Press and Toronto Star
LOS ANGELES (AP) — Every year, one of the world's leading dance competition companies sells the dream of Hollywood fame to hundreds of thousands of ambitious young dancers hoping to launch careers on television, in movies and on stage.

But behind the bright lights and pulsing music, some dancers say they were sexually assaulted, harassed and manipulated by the company's powerful founder and famous teachers and choreographers, according to a joint investigation by The Associated Press and the Toronto Star.

The problems date back to the founding of Los Angeles-based Break The Floor Productions; as the company has grown into an industry powerhouse, its leaders perpetuated a culture of sex and silence, according to interviews with dozens of former and current staff and students.

Break the Floor's reach extends across the entertainment industry to some of the biggest names in music, television and social media. Alumni and faculty have danced on stage with Lady Gaga and Taylor Swift, at the Oscars and the Super Bowl. Company instructors have appeared on "Dancing with the Stars," "Dance Moms" and "So You Think You Can Dance." When COVID-19 lockdowns suspended in-person workshops, Break the Floor enlisted social media superstar Charli D'Amelio, whose TikTok account has around 10.5 billion likes, to record instructional videos.

This story was reported as a partnership between The Associated Press and the Toronto Star

The company was launched 22 years ago by a charismatic dancer, Gil Stroming, who came to fame in the 1990s, performing in the off-Broadway show "Tap Dogs," described in The New York Times as a "beefcake tap-a-thon."

Break The Floor now draws around 300,000 dance students, some as young as 5, to packed hotel ballrooms across the U.S. and Canada for weekend workshops and competitions.

But in January, as the AP and the Star were investigating allegations of sexual misconduct against him and others involved in the company, Stroming announced that he had sold Break the Floor and stepped down as CEO.

The new owner, Russell Geysler, said the allegations have nothing to do with the current company, and that people involved with purported misconduct no longer work for Break The Floor. In his first 10 days as CEO, he said four people were "let go."

Allegations of sexual misconduct first hit the dance company in October, when the Toronto Star revealed allegations of widespread sexual harassment and predatory behavior by Break the Floor instructors.

A Toronto-born teen alleged a famous choreographer propositioned her for sex just hours after judging her at a 2012 Break the Floor convention. An Ottawa dancer working as an assistant for the company said the same choreographer groped him in public.

An ongoing investigation by the Star in partnership with the AP now has uncovered alleged sexual misconduct that stretches back to the dance company's early years, and involves Stroming himself.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 66 of 74

Stroming was allegedly involved in a series of inappropriate relationships with students of the dance program he was running, according to more than a dozen former staff and students.

Of these sources, four say he sometimes brought young Break the Floor participants to parties or company events, where they were introduced as his girlfriend. Seven sources say they saw Stroming interact with students in ways that appeared intimate and inappropriate. One staff member said Stroming showed him a nude photo of one of the students.

All of these sources spoke on the condition of anonymity in fear of retaliation and damage to their careers in the tight-knit professional dance community.

One dancer said she met Stroming when she was a 16-year-old high school junior attending one of Break the Floor's first events with her parents. Stroming was three years older, she said, a magnetic 19-year-old running the whole show. At her first company event, when she was 17, she and Stroming had oral sex, she said.

A year or so later, shortly after her 18th birthday, Stroming flew the dancer to New York, where he told her he had lined up potentially career-launching dance auditions, she says. That night, they had sex in his apartment. The next morning, Stroming left abruptly for Las Vegas and handed her \$40 for a cab ride back to the airport. She says she didn't attend any auditions, and returned home devastated.

The AP and the Star spoke to the dancer's father, who said that in the years following, she told him about these sexual interactions with Stroming, which left her deeply upset.

Stroming declined repeated interview requests. But during a 2020 in-house training, a recording of which was reviewed by the AP and Star, Stroming addressed his own past misconduct.

"I was definitely inappropriate myself in a lot of ways," he told his staff. "As a student I was in inappropriate relationships with teachers, and vice versa, and just looking back I was like, oh wow, I think a lot of us don't even realize at first the power that we have in the dance world."

In a written statement, he told the AP and Star, "I have been very upfront that when I first started the company at 19, over 20 years ago, there were issues of inappropriateness." He didn't respond to the specific allegations.

While not all of the complainants in this story were involved with Break the Floor at the time of the alleged incidents, the instructors and executives accused of wrongdoing have played key roles in growing the company's revenue and popularity.

One dance instructor said she warns the children and teens she brings to conventions today to be watchful and aware of the potential for abuse of power. About two decades ago, when she was a dance teacher accompanying her students to a Break the Floor event, she said she refused Stroming's \$500 offer to join him in his hotel room.

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT, 'CONVENTION BOYFRIEND'

Break The Floor hosts conventions in cities across North America, putting on events in hotel ballrooms every weekend over the course of a six-month season. Hundreds of studios and schools from smaller communities bring teams of dancers to the events, branded by Stroming as JUMP, NUVO, 24seven, RADIX and DancerPalooza. The ultimate goal is winning first place under the spotlight at the annual Dance Awards.

In addition to competitions with cash prizes, Break The Floor conventions — which cost between around \$200 to \$350 per student — offer dozens of workshops, under strobing lights and thumping music. They typically end with parents on the sidelines shooting photos of their beaming children in leotards and makeup, striking poses alongside famous choreographers and dancers.

Jeremy Hudson, now a professional dancer, came of age on the convention circuit and won Outstanding Dancer of the Year at the first JUMP Nationals in 2004. Break the Floor helped launch his career, but an alleged assault by one of its star dancers continues to haunt him.

At 16, Hudson looked forward to the festive weekend gatherings. But he was uncomfortable when a dance teacher, Mark Meismer, in his early 30s, repeatedly told him how attractive he was. Still, he accepted a sought-after opportunity to assist Meismer as they toured various studios and conventions together. A year later, Hudson stayed with Meismer when he joined Break The Floor's fledgling NUVO convention as part of its original lineup of instructors.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 67 of 74

"He called me his convention boyfriend," recalled Hudson. "I didn't know how inappropriate that was." Meismer asked the young dancer, then 17, to come to his home.

Hudson said he was optimistic. This might just be his lucky break into professional dance. After all, Meismer was already an icon; he had toured with Britney Spears, Madonna and Paula Abdul.

But at Meismer's house, they didn't discuss work. Hudson alleges Meismer pushed him against a wall and performed oral sex on him. Meismer shushed him, he remembers, warning that someone was asleep in a nearby room.

In the years that followed, Hudson said Meismer continued to pursue him for sex. In dance studios, Hudson says Meismer would guide him into bathroom stalls for oral sex. On planes, Meismer would grope him in his seat, Hudson alleges. To surprise him, Hudson said Meismer would buy them matching outfits.

"I just didn't know myself enough to understand how harmful it was," Hudson said.

Hudson is now a famous dancer, with a resume that spans mega tours with Pink, Lady Gaga and Kylie Minogue, and appearances in more than a dozen films including "La La Land" and "FAME." For 17 years, he kept to himself about what happened with Meismer. But after speaking with the AP and the Star in February, Hudson went public and shared his experience in an emotional Instagram video, without naming Meismer.

"I took the word of this choreographer, and thought he was helping me build a dance career. Which in fact, he wasn't," Hudson said in his video, viewed over 6,300 times.

The next day Meismer was removed from NUVO's website and abruptly left the tour. He is no longer with the company, according to Break The Floor. Meismer didn't respond to repeated requests for comment. His representatives at the MSA Agency also said they had no comment on his behalf.

Marci A. Hamilton, a University of Pennsylvania professor who founded CHILD USA and is the author of "Justice Denied: What America Must Do to Protect its Children," said dance is one of the last forums where adults have unsupervised access to younger students.

"Dance organizations create wide opportunities for adults to single out a child, groom them and then get them alone to sexually abuse them," she said. "The dance world, it's not like it's different than any other world, it's just that they've been able to keep their secrets longer."

Hamilton also said perpetrators in many youth-focused organizations use hotel rooms — away from home — to exploit the power imbalance between teachers and students.

That's what Gary Schaufeld says happened to him. He was a teen in 2004, assisting a successful tap dancer named Danny Wallace, who wasn't with Break the Floor at the time, but would go on to run one of its subsidiary conventions. Schaufeld had fallen in love with tap at 7 years old, and assisting Wallace offered a chance to raise his profile and learn from one of the best.

One night, Schaufeld said, Wallace pushed him up against the wall of a hotel room they shared with a female assistant and forced oral sex on him.

"I was frozen in my own skin, I didn't know what to do," Schaufeld said.

Afterwards, Schaufeld said Wallace told him never to say anything; it would be bad for both of their careers. And so Schaufeld stayed quiet. But the secret ate away at him. His mental health deteriorated. He stopped eating and sleeping, and suffered from panic attacks, he said. In 2018, 14 years later, he decided to tell his family, and confront Wallace directly.

In a series of text messages between Schaufeld and Wallace, reviewed by the AP and the Star, Schaufeld laid out his accusations and Wallace said that although he couldn't remember anything, he "couldn't be more sorry."

"I'm not a monster but I feel like one," Wallace wrote, adding that he has "a lot of hazy memories and a huge list of regrets/mistakes" from that time period.

In an interview earlier this year with the AP and the Star, Wallace denied Schaufeld's allegations and said nothing sexual or physical ever transpired between them, though he said he remembered having an "inappropriate attraction" to Schaufeld. He referred reporters to his lawyer, who didn't respond.

Schaufeld stopped dancing years ago and has no plans to return to the studio.

"It was my church," he said, but now "the whole dance scene feels dirty and tainted."

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 68 of 74

CODE OF CONDUCT

By the mid-2000s, dance exploded into the mainstream with the debuts of popular television shows like *So You Think You Can Dance* and *Dancing With The Stars*.

Gil Stroming's company capitalized on all of that studio growth, an industry that reached about \$4 billion in value by 2021, employing more than 120,000 people, according to market research from analysts at IbisWorld. He added new conventions, and new locations, branching into Mexico, Costa Rica and Canada.

The televised dance shows brought fame to dancers Nick Lazzarini, Travis Wall and Misha Gabriel, who became big name attractions as *Break The Floor* instructors. Each of them has since left the company amid allegations of sexual misconduct.

Stroming picked up Lazzarini at the height of his fame to join the convention circuit, teaching hundreds of thousands of aspiring young dancers. In 2019, Stroming quietly fired him after he posted, then quickly removed, a video of himself masturbating on Instagram, as the *Star* previously reported.

The *Star's* prior investigation uncovered allegations that Lazzarini had subjected at least six dancers to unwanted sexual advances at *Break The Floor* events. Three of these dancers were under 18. One said Lazzarini groped him through a hole in his pants. Another said Lazzarini texted her a nude selfie when she was 16. A third said he and Lazzarini exchanged nude photos when he was 17.

Gabriel, another famous dancer and choreographer, allegedly sent a nude photo on Snapchat to a 16-year-old dancer who says she was so horrified she threw her phone across the room. Gabriel — who has performed with Mariah Carey, Christina Aguilera, Beyoncé and more — was recently removed from the *JUMP* faculty. His picture and profile disappeared from the website, though there was no formal announcement of his departure.

Lilli Maples had taken classes with Gabriel since she was 10 years old. She said once she turned 18, Gabriel, 29 at that time in 2017, invited her to his hotel room in a text message with a shirtless photo. After Maples showed the screenshots to friends who shared them on social media, Gabriel sent her a message threatening to ruin her career, she said.

Gabriel, when asked about Maples' accusation, said in a written statement that he had been drinking heavily that night to control fears about serious health problems in his family. He said he must have passed out and has no recollection of sending the text. He apologized and said he himself was a victim of abuse as a teen, and that his texts to Maples were a "one time ever brief exchange."

The AP and the *Star* haven't seen these messages because Maples said they'd been deleted. Maples' mother, however, told the news organizations that she saw the photos when they appeared on shared photo albums on their family's home computer.

"My heart dropped," she said.

As for the other allegation from the then 16-year-old, Gabriel denied sending the photo, saying he would never engage in "inappropriate behavior that would ever lead to sending something like this" to a teen.

Sexual abuse pervades the dance world, according to child advocates and industry leaders.

The combination of hyper-sexual dance content and the close contact between adult teachers and the young dancers creates an atmosphere ripe for abuse, said Jamal Story, a professional dancer who is co-chair of the National Dance Committee for The Screen Actors Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA).

"Professional dancers suffer a wide swath of sexual predation from irritating flirtation to full-out devastating attacks. And what's egregious about seeing it in the context of conventions is that it happens to kids. Nowhere in the world of education should students feel they are underneath the predators," he said.

Former *Break The Floor* instructors have been accused of abusing young dancers in other settings. Former *DancerPalooza* instructor, Eric Saradpon, has been charged by the Riverside County District Attorney with perpetrating lewd acts on minors in a private dance studio, and is awaiting trial. And five dancers are suing former Boston Ballet star Dusty Button and her husband, alleging sexual abuse and assault. Button taught at *Radix* conventions. Lawyers for Saradpon and the Buttons didn't respond to requests for comment.

At least four people removed from *Break The Floor* for alleged misconduct have continued to work around kids in other settings.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 69 of 74

Earlier this year, after Geysler took the helm as CEO, Break The Floor published a new code of conduct. It banned inviting students to hotel rooms and said instructors shouldn't call students their "daughter" or "son." And it encourages discretion online regarding "Religion, Social Justice, Discrimination, Politics, Love and Romance, Abuse, Mental Health, Bullying, and Terrorism."

The new code of conduct also says educators are considered mandated reporters regarding suspected child abuse: "If you witness anything concerning, it is your duty to report it to the appropriate authorities."

Ukraine war refugees top 5 million as assault intensifies

By MONIKA SCISLOWSKA and RAFAL NIEDZIELSKI Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — After spending weeks with no electricity or water in the basement of her family's home in Ukraine, Viktoriya Savyichkina made a daring escape from the besieged city of Mariupol with her 9- and 14-year-old daughters.

Their dwelling for now is a huge convention center in Poland's capital. Savyichkina said she saw a photo of the home in Mariupol destroyed. From a camp bed in a foreign country, the 40-year-old bookkeeper thinks about restarting her and her children's lives from square one.

"I don't even know where we are going, how it will turn out," Savyichkina said. "I would like to go home, of course. Maybe here, I will enjoy it in Poland."

With the war in Ukraine approaching eight weeks, more than 5 million people have fled the country since Russian troops invaded on Feb. 24, the U.N. refugee agency reported Wednesday. When the number reached 4 million on March 30, the exodus exceeded the worst-case predictions of the Geneva-based office of the U.N. high commissioner for refugees.

The even bigger milestone in Europe's biggest refugee crisis since World War II was reached as Russia unleashed a full-scale offensive in eastern Ukraine that will disrupt and end more lives.

The millions of people who left Ukraine because of the war "have left behind their homes and families," U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi tweeted Wednesday. "Many would do anything, and some even risk going back, to see their loved ones. But every new attack shatters their hopes. Only an end to the war can pave the way for rebuilding their lives."

Ukraine had a pre-war population of 44 million, and UNHCR says the conflict has displaced more than 7 million people within Ukraine along with the 5.03 million who had left as of Wednesday. According to the agency, another 13 million people are believed to be trapped in the war-affected areas of Ukraine.

"We've seen about a quarter of Ukraine's population, more than 12 million people in total, ... have been forced to flee their homes, so this is a staggering amount of people," UNHCR spokesperson Shabia Mantoo told The Associated Press.

More than half of the refugees, over 2.8 million, fled at least at first to Poland. They are eligible for national ID numbers that entitle them to work, to free health care, schooling and bonuses for families with children.

Although many of have stayed there, an unknown number have traveled on to other countries. Savyichkina said she is thinking about taking her daughters to Germany.

"We hope we can live there, send children to school, find work and start life from zero," she said inside the vast premises of the Global EXPO Center in Warsaw, which is providing basic accommodations for about 800 refugees.

If "everything goes well, if the children like it first of all, then we will stay. If not..." Savyichkina said.

Further south, Hungary has emerged as a major transit point for Ukrainian refugees. Out of more than 465,000 who arrived, some 16,400 have applied for protected status, meaning they want to stay. Many are members of the ethnic Hungarian minority in Ukraine.

Hungary's government says it has provided around \$8.7 million to several charitable organizations and is giving subsidies to companies that employ Ukrainians granted asylum.

In March, a non-governmental organization, Migration Aid, rented an entire five-story building in Budapest, a former workers' hostel, to provide temporary accommodation for people escaping the war in Ukraine.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 70 of 74

It has helped some 4,000 refugees so far.

Tatiana Shulieva, 67, a retired epidemiologist who fled from Kharkiv in eastern Ukraine and wants to travel on to Egypt, said the night she spent in the hostel was "like a fairytale" after having sheltered in a basement for weeks to escape constant shelling.

Neighboring Romania has received over 750,000 refugees from Ukraine. Oxana Cotus, who fled the southern Ukrainian city of Mykolaiv with her four small children, initially decided to go to Denmark but ended up in Bucharest because she speaks Romanian and didn't want to be far from Ukraine.

She praised the help she received from the International Red Cross in helping her relocate and get settled.

The European nations hosting refugees say they need international help to manage the challenge, especially now as Russia has intensified attacks in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region.

"If we have a second wave of refugees, then a real problem will come because we are at capacity. We cannot accept more," Warsaw Mayor Rafal Trzaskowski told The Associated Press.

About 300,000 war refugees are in the city of some 1.8 million, most of them staying in private homes, Trzaskowski said. Warsaw residents expected to host refugees for a few months, but not indefinitely, he said.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki was in Lviv, Ukraine, on Tuesday, visiting a refugee center made of mobile modules that the governments of Ukraine and Poland jointly built to house displaced individuals who do not want to leave Ukraine.

Organizations for refugees say the best help would be for the war to stop.

"Unfortunately, without an immediate end to the fighting, the unspeakable suffering and mass displacement that we are seeing will only get worse," UNHCR's Mantoo said.

Data from Poland show that some 738,000 people have crossed back into Ukraine during the war. Some of them shuttle back and forth to do shopping in Poland, while others return to Ukraine to check on relatives and property, electing to either stay or depart again depending on what they find.

More than half of the refugees from Ukraine are children, according to UNHCR. Thousands of civilians, including children, have been killed or wounded in shelling and air strikes.

Mantoo called the "outpouring of support and the generosity" shown to arriving Ukrainian refugees has been "remarkable."

"But what is important is that it is sustained and that it is channelled across to ensure that refugees are enabled to receive that support while the fighting continues, while they are unable to return home," she said.

Climate change, big agriculture combine to threaten insects

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

Climate change and habitat loss from big agriculture are combining to swat down global insect populations, with each problem making the other worse, a new study finds.

While insects may bug people at times, they also are key in pollinating plants to feed people, making soil more fertile and they include beautiful butterflies and fireflies. Scientists have noticed a dramatic drop both in total bug numbers and diversity of insect species, calling it a slow-motion death by 1,000 cuts. Those cuts include pesticides and light pollution.

Big single-crop agriculture that leaves less habitat and leafy food for bugs plus higher temperatures from climate change are huge problems for insects, but a new study in the journal Nature Wednesday based on more than 750,000 samples of 18,000 different species of insects says it's not just those two threats acting on their own. It's how habitat loss and climate change interact that really smashes bug populations.

In about half the cases where numbers of insects had plummeted, researchers found climate change and habitat loss from agriculture magnifying each other. In more than a quarter of the cases of biodiversity loss, meaning fewer species, the same dynamic was at work.

"We know insects are under threat. We're now getting a much bigger handle on what they are threatened by and how much," said study author Charlotte Outhwaite, an ecologist at the University College of London.

"In this case, the habitat loss and climate change can often be worse than if they were acting on their own, as one can make the impact of the other worse and vice versa," Outhwaite said. "We're missing part

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 71 of 74

of the picture if we are only looking at these things individually.”

For example, monoculture agriculture often reduces tree shading, making it hotter in a given spot. On top of that comes climate change, she said. Then insects that need heat relief or need to move north for cooler climates can run into problems with lack of proper habitat from large farms.

It’s especially a problem in countries like Indonesia and Brazil, where forests are being cleared and temperatures are heating up higher than other parts of the globe, Outhwaite said.

That’s hard on insects like the pesky midge.

“Cocoa is pollinated primarily by midges and people don’t like midges. You know they’re the annoying ones that bite you, they pester you at picnics,” Outhwaite said. “But if you like chocolate you should be appreciative because without them we would have a lot less cocoa.”

The same can be said about bees, which are having a hard time with warming from climate change and single-crop farming, Outhwaite said.

Insect pollinators are responsible for about one-third of the human diet, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. And 2 out of 5 species of invertebrate pollinators, such as bees and butterflies, are on the path toward extinction, a 2016 United Nations science report said.

What makes this study important is that it’s the first to link climate change and industrialized agriculture together in explaining harm to insects, said University of Connecticut entomologist David Wagner, who wasn’t part of the study. Because the study used so many different samples and species and looked around the world, that gives its findings more credibility, Wagner said.

Michelle Yeoh shows Asian immigrant women are ‘Everything’

By TERRY TANG Associated Press

Michelle Yeoh was adamant about one script change before committing to “Everything Everywhere All At Once.”

The main character’s name had to go. She was named Michelle as a love letter to her from the directors. “I’m like ‘No, no, no’ because I believe this person, this character that you’ve written so rich, deserves a voice of her own. She is the voice of those mothers, aunties, grandmothers that you pass by in Chinatown or in the supermarket that you don’t even give a second glance to. Then you just take her for granted,” Yeoh told The Associated Press. “She’s never had a voice.”

At 59, Yeoh commands the lead of the genre-twisting flick by playing someone often invisible — the Asian immigrant wife and mother trying to be everything for everyone. “An independent film on steroids” as she puts it, “Everything Everywhere All At Once” recently went into wide theatrical release. It ranked fourth in this weekend’s domestic box office, bringing in nearly \$6.2 million, according to figures compiled by Comscore.

Yeoh’s performance is drawing raves at a time when Asians and Asian Americans of all age ranges continue to be the target of pandemic-fueled racism in Chinatowns, cities and suburbs across the U.S. But reports have found Asian women have experienced these hate crimes at a higher rate.

After decades first as a star in Hong Kong cinema and then more mainstream hits like “Tomorrow Never Dies” and “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon,” the Malaysian-born Yeoh has grown into a movie queen. She’s had integral roles in what have been the first large U.S. studio movies in years with all-Asian casts—Marvel Studios’ “Shang-Chi and The Legend of The Ten Rings” and “Crazy Rich Asians.”

“So much weight was on (‘Crazy Rich Asians’) ... What if we weren’t as successful as that? Did that mean that we don’t deserve to be up there?” Yeoh said. “It exploded and the way it did made everyone realize, ‘Hey, we’ve been neglecting this very major part of our society for so long.’”

As much as those films mean to her, she was a polished supporting player in them. “Everything Everywhere All At Once” is a whole otherworldly experience where she gets to play “an aging Asian woman.”

Written and directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert (known as the Daniels), the story centers on a glammed down Yeoh as Evelyn Wang, a frazzled laundromat owner preparing for an IRS audit. Meanwhile, she is struggling with an unhappy husband (Ke Huy Quan), her critical father (James Hong) and an openly

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 72 of 74

lesbian daughter (Stephanie Hsu). She is literally upended when another version of her husband pops up claiming to be from another universe. Evelyn ends up jumping through the multiverse and picking up skills possessed by her otherworldly counterparts.

The story is a wild laundry list of action, sci-fi, comedy and family drama that includes people with hot dogs for fingers and a giant everything bagel. The first word that came to Yeoh's mind after reading the script was "insane."

"I was blown away that they had the courage to write the script and put all these kinds of things. Because it wasn't just about the wackiness. The familial connections was so powerful," she said.

The movie puts the spotlight on the other actors as well. It marks a Hollywood homecoming for Quan. He charmed audiences as a child playing Short Round in "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom" and Data in "The Goonies." Funnily enough, "Crazy Rich Asians" is what made him want to return to the screen after more than 20 years. Yeoh is attached to the sequel and agreed it would be a great full-circle moment to find a role for Quan.

"We are so grateful that made him think because he never really left the film industry," Yeoh said.

Hong, 93, gets to chew plenty of scenery too. He made headlines in 2020 when famous friends successfully campaigned for him to get a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. He will receive the honor later this year.

"He's got a heart of gold. You know, he truly loves what he does," said Yeoh, who is reuniting with Hong on a new Disney+ series, "American Born Chinese." "He deserves it."

The film has hit a nerve with audiences but especially Asian Americans. Across social media, many describe crying during the film's last hour as the relationship between Evelyn and daughter Joy hits a make-or-break juncture. Some say they feel like they're watching their own immigrant mother become the hero of her story for the first time. Others say they've gained a better understanding about parents who typically don't wear their emotions on their sleeve.

"I think especially Asian parents, they tend to be more critical. But they show their love—they'll save you the best part of the meat, they'll make sure that you're well fed," Yeoh said. "That is their way of showing love and care."

For Asian American women, the movie is a breath of fresh air. Hate incidents like last year's Atlanta spa shootings renewed conversations about the propensity to sexualize or dismiss Asian women. But in this movie, Yeoh gets to show a wide range—from comedic and martial arts chops to heartwrenching angst. The actress promises she will never give up on proving women can be the leads in parts that are more than stereotypes.

"Why is it men can get to a certain age and keep pushing forward with all these kinds of things and women sort of like get left behind?" Yeoh said. "With the new sustainable development goals, one of the things up there is gender equality, equal opportunities. And that's all what we're asking for."

Shanghai allows 4 million out of homes as virus rules ease

By JOE McDONALD Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Shanghai allowed 4 million more people out of their homes Wednesday as anti-virus controls that shut down China's biggest city eased, while the International Monetary Fund cut its forecast of Chinese economic growth and warned the global flow of industrial goods might be disrupted.

A total of almost 12 million people in the city of 25 million are allowed to go outdoors following the first round of easing last week, health official Wu Ganyu said at a news conference. Wu said the virus was "under effective control" for the first time in some parts of the city.

Under the latest changes, more than 4 million people are included in areas where the status shifted from closed to controlled, said Wu. He said some are not allowed to leave their neighborhoods and large gatherings are prohibited.

Meanwhile, the IMF reduced its forecast of Chinese growth this year to 4.4% from 4.8% due to the shutdowns of Shanghai and other industrial centers. That is down by almost half from last year's 8.1%

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 73 of 74

growth and below the ruling Communist Party's 5.5% target.

China's case numbers in its latest infection surge are relatively low, but the ruling party is enforcing a "zero-COVID" strategy that has shut down major cities to isolate every case.

On Wednesday, the government reported 19,927 new cases in China's mainland, all but 2,761 of which had no symptoms. Shanghai accounted for 95% of the total, or 18,902 cases, of which 2,495 had symptoms.

The Shanghai city health agency reported seven people who had COVID-19 died Tuesday but said the deaths were due to cancer, heart disease and other ailments. All but two were over 60.

Shanghai shut down businesses and confined most of its population to their homes starting March 28 after a spike in infections. That led to complaints about lack of access to supplies of food and medicine. People in Shanghai who test positive but have no symptoms have been ordered into quarantine centers set up in exhibition halls and other public buildings.

Official data this week showed economic growth in the first three months of this year declined compared with the final quarter of 2021.

The lockdowns in China "will likely compound supply disruptions elsewhere" and might add to pressure for inflation to rise, the IMF said in a report.

The ruling party has promised tax refunds and other aid to businesses but is avoiding large-scale stimulus spending. Economists say that strategy will take longer to show results and Beijing might need to spend more or cut interest rates.

Chinese leaders have promised to try to reduce the human and economic cost of anti-disease controls by shifting to a "dynamic clearing" strategy that isolates neighborhoods and other smaller areas instead of whole cities. However, many areas appear to be enforcing more stringent controls after Shanghai officials were criticized for not acting aggressively enough.

Also Wednesday, the Ministry of Agriculture ordered local officials to avoid any measures that might interfere with spring planting by farmers who feed China's 1.4 billion people. The order followed warnings that production of wheat and other crops might be disrupted, which would boost demand for imports and push up already high global prices.

The government reported 26,760 people who tested positive but had no symptoms were released Wednesday from observation. That included 25,411 in Shanghai, where some residents of quarantine centers have complained they are unsanitary.

Other industrial and trading centers including Changchun, Jilin and Shenyang in the northeast, the port of Tianjin east of Beijing and Shenzhen and Guangzhou in the south have closed businesses, imposed travel restrictions or told residents to stay home.

Global automakers and other manufacturers reduced or stopped production because suppliers couldn't deliver.

This week, Volkswagen AG announced its Changchun factory resumed production and the automaker was considering when its Shanghai facility would reopen. BMW AG said its factory in Shenyang reopened.

While some cities were easing controls, the the government of Harbin, a city of 5.3 million in the northeast, suspended bus and subway service on Wednesday and barred the public from moving between districts.

Today in History: April 21, Queen Elizabeth II is born

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, April 21, the 111th day of 2022. There are 254 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 21, 1975, with Communist forces closing in, South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu resigned after nearly 10 years in office and fled the country.

On this date:

In 1649, the Maryland Toleration Act, providing for freedom of worship for all Christians, was passed by the Maryland assembly.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 21, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 288 ~ 74 of 74

In 1836, an army of Texans led by Sam Houston defeated the Mexicans at San Jacinto, assuring Texas independence.

In 1910, author Samuel Langhorne Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, died in Redding, Connecticut, at age 74.

In 1926, Britain's Queen Elizabeth II was born in Mayfair, London; she was the first child of The Duke and Duchess of York, who later became King George VI and the Queen Mother.

In 1930, fire broke out inside the overcrowded Ohio Penitentiary in Columbus, killing 332 inmates.

In 1976, clinical trials of the swine flu vaccine began in Washington, D.C.

In 1980, Rosie Ruiz was the first woman to cross the finish line at the Boston Marathon; however, she was later exposed as a fraud. (Canadian Jacqueline Gareau was named the actual winner of the women's race.)

In 1998, astronomers announced in Washington that they had discovered possible signs of a new family of planets orbiting a star 220 light-years away, the clearest evidence to date of worlds forming beyond our solar system.

In 2015, an Egyptian criminal court sentenced ousted Islamist President Mohammed Morsi to 20 years in prison over the killing of protesters in 2012. (Morsi collapsed and died during trial on espionage charges in June 2019.)

In 2016, Prince, one of the most inventive and influential musicians of modern times, was found dead at his home in suburban Minneapolis; he was 57.

In 2018, Barbara Bush was remembered as the "first lady of the Greatest Generation" during a funeral in Houston attended by four former U.S. presidents and hundreds of others. Actor Verne Troyer, best known for his role as "Mini-Me" in the "Austin Powers" movies, died in Los Angeles at the age of 49; a coroner later ruled that the death was suicide by alcohol intoxication.

In 2020, researchers reported that a malaria drug that had been widely touted by President Donald Trump for treating the coronavirus showed no benefit in large study of its use in U.S. veterans hospitals.

Ten years ago: Charles W. "Chuck" Colson, 80, described as the "evil genius" of the Nixon administration who served seven months in prison for a Watergate-related conviction, then spent the next 35 years ministering to prison inmates, died in northern Virginia. Phil Humber threw the first perfect game in the majors in almost two years, leading the Chicago White Sox to a 4-0 victory over the Seattle Mariners.

Five years ago: A San Francisco power outage blamed on the massive failure of a circuit breaker that sparked a fire at a power substation stranded people in elevators and left tens of thousands in the dark.

One year ago: A Black man, Andrew Brown Jr., was shot and killed by sheriff's deputies in North Carolina while they were serving drug-related warrants at his home in Elizabeth City. (A prosecutor cleared the deputies, saying they were justified because Brown had struck a deputy with his car while ignoring commands to show his hands and get out of the vehicle.) President Joe Biden announced new employer tax credits and other steps to encourage people who were reluctant to be inoculated to get the COVID-19 vaccine. An Indonesian submarine with 53 crew members aboard disappeared after its last reported dive off the resort island of Bali; officials later concluded that the sub sank and broke apart, killing all those on board.

Today's Birthdays: Britain's Queen Elizabeth II is 96. Actor-comedian-writer Elaine May is 90. Anti-death penalty activist Sister Helen Prejean is 83. Singer-musician Iggy Pop is 75. Actor Patti LuPone is 73. Actor Tony Danza is 71. Actor James Morrison is 68. Actor Andie MacDowell is 64. Rock singer Robert Smith (The Cure) is 63. Rock musician Michael Timmins (Cowboy Junkies) is 63. Actor-director John Cameron Mitchell is 59. Rapper Michael Franti (Spearhead) is 56. Actor Leslie Silva is 54. Actor Toby Stephens is 53. Rock singer-musician Glen Hansard (The Frames) is 52. Actor Rob Riggle is 52. Comedian Nicole Sullivan is 52. Football player-turned-actor Brian White is 49. Olympic gold medal pairs figure skater Jamie Sale (sah-LAY') is 45. Rock musician Dave Brenner (Theory of a Deadman) is 44. Actor James McAvoy is 43. Former NFL quarterback Tony Romo is 42. Actor Terrence J is 40. Actor Gugu Mbatha-Raw is 39. Actor Christoph Sanders is 34. Actor Frank Dillane is 31. Rock singer Sydney Sierota (Echosmith) is 25.