

COLUMN ONE

Her long journey ends in tragedy

A transgender migrant from El Salvador fled violence to start anew in Houston. Months later, her friend sent a reporter a sad request.

BY MOLLY HENNESSY-FISKE
REPORTING FROM HOUSTON

As Mayela Villegas crossed the bridge from Matamoros, Mexico, to Texas, she looked like a success story. Defying the odds, she had been allowed into the United States to pursue her asylum claim. That was a year ago today: Oct. 5, 2019. We had met days before in the Mexican border tent camp where she had been living with about 2,000 others after migrating from El Salvador. White crosses on the nearby banks of the Rio Grande memorialized parents and children who had recently died trying to cross the river illegally. A 27-year-old transgender woman, Mayela had been kidnapped and raped in Mexico and El Salvador. She told me those stories alone, in her tent, with the opening zipped tight against eavesdroppers. In the camp, a migrant woman from Honduras had threatened to gut her with a knife. Mayela secretly recorded the threat on her phone, found a witness and reported it to Mexican authorities. That became grounds for her successful U.S. asylum claim, which allowed her to enter the U.S. legally and settle with relatives in [See Mayela, A7]



PRESIDENT TRUMP waves Sunday as his motorcade drives past supporters outside Walter Reed medical center in Bethesda, Md. His treatment for COVID-19 includes taking a steroid, signaling lung damage. ALEX EDELMAN AFP/Getty Images

TRUMP'S ILLNESS APPEARS MORE SERIOUS

President, sick with virus, stages drive-by event as doctors say he's on a steroid after oxygen levels dipped.

BY LAURA KING
AND CHRIS MEGERIAN

WASHINGTON — President Trump, hospitalized with COVID-19, received supplemental oxygen on Saturday — a previously undisclosed episode — and is being treated with a powerful steroid amid indications that his lungs may have suffered some damage, the White House physician said Sunday. As questions continued about the severity of his illness and its progression, Trump late Sunday afternoon staged a motorcade drive-by outside Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and could be seen through the window of his massive black SUV, masked and waving to supporters who gathered outside. The brief trip drew sharp criticism from medical experts who said Trump had endangered the Secret Service agents in the vehicle with him. Earlier, at a briefing in front of the hospital, doctors treating Trump continued to be upbeat about his condition. One of his physicians said the president could be discharged as soon as Monday, but another conceded they had not been fully forthcoming in their initial medical briefing Saturday. Trump's hospitalization, the most serious medical episode involving the country's chief executive since President Reagan was shot in 1981, has roiled the presidential race a month before the Nov. 3 election. It also represents a setback to the Trump campaign strategy of turning attention away from the pandemic that has killed nearly 210,000 Americans. Former Vice President Joe Biden's campaign announced Sunday evening that he had tested negative for the virus. Biden had a similarly negative test Friday. At Sunday's briefing, the White House physician, Dr. Sean Conley, provided several significant new pieces of information about the 74-year-old president, saying that he had experienced a "high fever" Friday morning and had received supplemental oxygen for about an hour before being transported to the military hospital in suburban Bethesda, Md., later that day. [See Trump, A6]

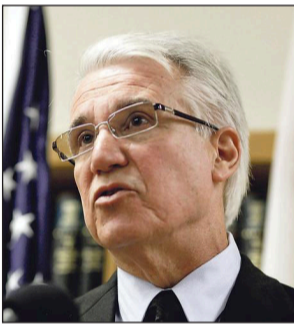
From cop to police reformist

In D.A. race framed by protests, a spotlight on Gascón's past

BY JAMES QUEALLY

Less than two years into his career as a Los Angeles police officer, George Gascón said, he saw a suspect reach for his partner's gun as they struggled to arrest him. At the time, most LAPD officers carried their weapons in what is known as a pancake holster. Gascón said he knew the suspect wouldn't be able to pry the gun loose if he squeezed the holster tight, so he grabbed for the soft leather casing instead of drawing his own weapon. Deadly force would have been justified, but Gascón said he didn't want to take a

life if he could avoid it. The LAPD disagreed, according to Gascón, who said he received a disciplinary letter questioning his tactics. The incident would come to shape his thinking on the culture of policing, as an officer and later as district attorney in San Francisco. "That really had an impact on me over the years," Gascón said. "A police officer should use force when they should, not just because they can." At a time when police violence is under scrutiny and many are calling for an overhaul of the criminal justice system, Gascón's image as a reform-minded law enforcement veteran has given life



MICHAEL MACOR S.F. Chronicle
GEORGE GASCÓN was San Francisco's D.A. after a long police career.

Garcetti flips his D.A. endorsement

Mayor backs Gascón's challenge. CALIFORNIA, B3

to his bid to unseat Jackie Lacey as Los Angeles County's district attorney this November. But the attention also has led some to spotlight decisions Gascón made as a police officer that critics contend belie his progressive rhetoric. Gascón's policing career spans three decades. After joining the Los Angeles Police Department in 1978, he rose through the ranks and became an assistant chief in 2003 before leaving to serve as chief of police in Mesa, Ariz., in 2006. He was hired as San Francisco's top cop in 2009 before being appointed as district attorney. Public records and inter- [See Gascón, A8]



AL SEIB Los Angeles Times
WENDY KATAGI, left, and Isaac Brown of Stillwater Sciences, a consulting firm specializing in river restoration, walk along the L.A. River flood channel.

Concrete and steelhead

Biologists and engineers envision an L.A. River passage for trout to reach spawning grounds

BY LOUIS SAHAGÚN

Biologists and engineers are setting the stage for an environmental recovery effort in downtown Los Angeles that could rival the return of the gray wolf, bald eagle and California condor. This time, the species teetering on the edge of extinction is the Southern California steelhead trout and the abused habitat is a 4.8-mile-long stretch of the L.A. River flood-control channel that most people only glimpse from a freeway. The brutal vista of concrete and treated urban runoff exists as an impenetrable barrier to ancestral spawning grounds in the San Gabriel Mountains for the estimated 400 federally endangered Southern Califor-

nia steelhead left on Earth. The Los Angeles River Fish Passage and Habitat Structures Design Plan, which is being championed by Mayor Eric Garcetti, aims to change all that with a carefully calibrated retrofit. On a hot and hazy morning recently, scientist Wendy Katagi gazed across a sheet of murky water strewn with trash and slick with algae near the confluence of the river and the Arroyo Seco. "We're going to turn this place into a trout stream again," she said. "We're going to roughen the bottom with pebbles and deepen the notch along the center of the channel by at least 2 feet," said Katagi, a senior manager at Stillwater Sciences, a consulting firm specializing in restoring rivers and [See Trout, A10]

High court begins an uncertain month

Early cases in new term may reveal how conservative majority will rule on key issues.

BY DAVID G. SAVAGE

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court opens a new term on Monday and within weeks is set to hear cases on healthcare and religion that may give a preview of how the conservative majority will wield its power. But the eight justices also face a month of unusual uncertainty. They will wait to see whether a new justice is confirmed, whether Presi-

dent Trump is reelected in early November, and whether they are called upon to decide any disputes that arise if the election is very close. The outcome of the election will surely shape the term ahead, even though many of the cases are already set. The justices will find themselves weighing cases on immigration, the census and healthcare from a triumphant conservative administration, or a series of last-gasp appeals from a defeated president. Either way, the term's initial cases will be heard by a court with a conservative majority — 6 to 3 if Trump's [See Court, A6]

Better late than never for the Rams

Cooper Kupp's fourth-quarter score saves the day in the 17-9 victory over the New York Giants. **SPORTS, D6**

Missed handoff sinks Chargers

Justin Herbert's epic day ends as the Buccaneers come back to win, 38-31. **SPORTS, D7**

Weather: Mostly sunny and hot. L.A. Basin: 92/64. **B6**



WALLY SKALIJ Los Angeles Times

LAKERS DROP GAME 3

With 10 seconds left, they gave up in an unsightly loss to Miami, Bill Plaschke writes. **SPORTS, D1**

In L.A. River, concrete and steelhead

[**Trout**, from A1] flood plains. “Some areas will be terraced, and boulders up to 5 feet in diameter will be anchored to create pools where steelhead can rest and bulk up during their migratory journeys.”

In one of nature's most theatrical displays, southern steelhead, a species of salmon that grows up to 36 inches in length and 8 pounds, mature in the Pacific Ocean and return to local rivers to spawn again.

Unlike salmon, which stop eating and die after spawning in their specific natal streams and rivers, steelhead can spawn multiple times in various streams throughout their region.

The modifications, combined with floodwaters in winter, would provide safe passage through downtown for steelhead that began their migratory journey in the brackish, mile-long soft-bottom mouth of the river in Long Beach, 20 miles to the south.

The fish passage, designers say, will serve as a pilot for similar efforts along the roughly 50-mile channel, as well as the L.A. River watershed, which drains 834 square miles of land bounded by the San Gabriel, Santa Monica and Santa Susana mountain ranges.

The flood-control channel is operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and L.A. County Public Works engineers. Biologists and city officials hope to see the project completed before the start of the 2028 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles.

In an interview, Garcetti said: “It has been a long time coming, but we’re going to welcome steelhead back home. Doing that will mean a restoration of nature literally down the very spine of this great city.”

The velocity of the water remains the crux of the problem — for fish and for humans. The measure of safety provided by the non-erodible flood-control channel is a cornerstone of the region's economy.

“The L.A. River channel was designed exclusively to flush water to the ocean as quickly as possible and keep people dry,” said Nathan Holste, a hydraulic engineer with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

It can contain a discharge of about 104,000 cubic feet per second during a 100-year flood event.

“Trouble is, even flows of 5 feet per second are above the cruising speed of steelhead trout,” he said. “So, our goals include controlling the flows and offering plenty of places for fish to rest.”

“Steelhead swim upstream at an average speed of about 7 miles per day,” he added. “We believe that steelhead will be able to reach the passage in about three days — then swim through it without scraping their bellies on concrete.”

Re-creating self-sustaining native plant communities will need to take the physical peculiarities of the channel into account. For example, south of 1st Street, the east bank provides slightly more shade than the west bank because the channel there runs slightly southeast.

In the meantime, there are myriad permitting hurdles to clear before altering the crucial flood-control system to assist steelhead without affecting adjacent freeway overpasses, historic bridges and levees, utility and fuel lines, and railroad tracks and trestles.

That is, if there's a will — and money.

Design phases of the project are being funded by the California Wildlife Conservation Board under a Proposition 68 grant of \$1.3



AL SEIB Los Angeles Times

BIOLOGISTS, engineers and city officials do field work in the L.A. River flood-control channel. The Los Angeles River Fish Passage and Habitat Structures Design Plan aims to return the federally endangered Southern California steelhead trout to the waterway.



AL SEIB Los Angeles Times

“WE’RE GOING to turn this place into a trout stream again,” says scientist Wendy Katagi, here visiting the river on a recent morning.

million. The city of Los Angeles, the nonprofits Council for Watershed Health, Friends of the Los Angeles River and Arroyo Seco Foundation, and other partners are providing in-kind services as matching funds.

The estimated cost of the fish passage project has yet to be determined, but its designers say it will be in the tens of millions.

The project would complement river restoration efforts proposed or underway throughout the L.A. River watershed.

They include a long-awaited river revitalization project north of downtown approved by the Army Corps of Engineers. That project is still in the planning stages and estimated to cost \$1.3 billion. Lower L.A. River projects are proposed in Bell, Cudahy, Downey, Long Beach and other cities.

So why the focus on steelhead now?

The Endangered Species Act requires the government to take action to prevent extinction of species listed as endangered. The Southern California steelhead was listed as federally endangered in 1997.

Steelhead, which begin life as native rainbow trout, once packed local spawning pools. For still unknown reasons, some migrate to the ocean and become steelhead after undergoing physical changes that allow them to return to spawn in freshwater gravel beds.

But the explosive growth of Los Angeles after the turn of the last century, followed by catastrophic flooding in

1914 and 1938, prompted civic leaders to transform the river channel into a concrete floodwater channel to protect the burgeoning flatlands.

Much of the work began in 1938, a reclamation job of mammoth proportions designed to manage the river's rambunctious hydrology. It included construction of check and debris dams to stabilize creeks flowing from the San Gabriel Mountains, and flood-control and storage basins such as the Hansen and Sepulveda dams.

Today, the L.A. River is managed by one of the most extensive systems of controls for any river its size in the world. Nearly the entire river bottom was paved over, except a few spots where the water table was too high.

But the engineering feats that straightened the river and keep it in place affected steelhead in a fundamental fashion. River flows of treated urban runoff were too shallow, rapid and devoid of vegetation and pools in which to rest during crucial periods when the fish shifts from fresh water to salt, or vice versa.

Scientists say the southern steelhead population has plummeted from an estimated 36,000 to 46,000 adults to fewer than 400 scattered across coastal waters between San Luis Obispo and the Mexican border.

The last one seen in the L.A. River was caught off a Glendale bridge in 1940 after that stretch of the river was paved for flood control.

The fish that scientists know as *Oncorhynchus mykiss* — a distant cousin of salmon — still shows up in small numbers in places such as Ballona Creek, Malibu Creek, San Juan and Trabuco creeks, and three Ventura County rivers, scientists say.

But even some optimists wonder: If the fish passage is built, will steelhead come?

Holste, the federal hydraulic engineer, doubts that steelhead would be able to reach the passage without similar modifications installed along the other 16 miles of channel between it and the sea.

But Mary Larson, coordinator of steelhead recovery at the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, believes that under certain conditions, “steelhead will use it.” Construction of additional projects later would improve its viability, she said.

“After years of studying their behavior, I can tell you that these fish are extraordinarily resilient and do things we wouldn't think possible,” Larson said. “For instance, they can sense the precise path of least resistance to spawning grounds needed to continue their genetic lineage.”

Rosi Dagit, a senior biologist for the Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains, agreed. “Building this fish passage would be a historic step toward saving steelhead,” she said, “and helping every other native aquatic species that no longer feels at home in the L.A. River.”

tain of their situation, and the airline “made the decision to fly based upon the facts.”

Delta spokeswoman Gina Laughlin told the Minneapolis Star Tribune that the flight was less than 40% full and that no one left the plane before it took off to protest the men's presence. Another Delta spokesman, Anthony Black, told the Associated Press on Saturday that he did not know what other passengers on the flight were told about the situation.

Black confirmed the air-

Among them are rare species that take refuge in remote sections of the watershed such as the Santa Ana sucker, arroyo chub, unarmored three-spine stickleback, speckled dace, red-legged frog, southwestern pond turtle and arroyo toad.

Many cities around the world have revitalized rivers that had suffered from a disconnect between communities and their waterways.

In South Korea, the Cheonggyecheon, which was covered for years, now meanders through the capital city of Seoul. The San Antonio River Walk is a popular network of city parks and walkways edging the San Antonio River one story beneath the streets of San Antonio. The San Diego River Park Foundation recovery effort was launched by concerned citizens in 2000 after the largest sewage spill in California's history dumped 34 million gallons of untreated sewage into the 49-mile-long waterway.

“If all goes smoothly,” said Michael Affeldt, L.A. RiverWorks director in the mayor's office, “the fish passage project will put some natural heart and soul back into the L.A. River, too.”

The Council for Watershed Health has launched a webpage allowing people to keep up with the progress of the fish passage project and learn more about the ecological problems it aims to solve, said Andrea Dell'Apa, project manager at the council.

Awareness of the river as a natural resource and potential economic power-

house began to grow in the 1980s when environmental groups pressured the county and Army Corps of Engineers. Ever since then, the waterway has been slowly transforming into a greenbelt of parks, trees and bike paths linking new development including apartments and breweries.

In 2010, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency deemed the river navigable and subject to the protections of the Clean Water Act. A year later, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers permitted kayaking along a soft-bottom stretch about 17 miles north of downtown.

The river has always been a catalyst for change that helped transform the sleepy village of Los Angeles into a metropolis of about 4 million people.

The first settlers who arrived here in 1781 put down their roots along the Los Angeles River precisely because of the water that was available there. The principal source was the river's “narrows,” a spot below the bluffs where the 110 Freeway now crosses the concrete channel near Elysian Park.

There, near where the concrete ends north of downtown and the 11-mile soft-bottom portion begins, you can hear the rustle of leaves again.

The cackle of ducks and warble of migrating birds blend with the din of railroads and freeway traffic and echo off the channel's slanted concrete walls.

Cottonwood saplings, sycamore trees and weeds sprout from the edges of the river's perennial cargo of warm, green treated runoff that carries the odor of old socks. Beneath the ripples, a steady parade of leeches, algae, silt and trash floats downstream.

The return of spawning steelhead populations in the area would trigger one of the most unlikely sport-fishing opportunities in modern history.

But angling for steelhead would be out of the question until there are enough of them to warrant the lifting of their endangered species protections. For now, there are more pressing concerns.

“We have to be successful with the steelhead recovery effort,” said Sandra Jacobson, director of the southwest region for the nonprofit California Trout, “before it goes extinct.”

3 lawmakers criticized for travel after Trump contact

Minnesota politicians flew on Delta 2 days after sharing Air Force One with president.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

MINNEAPOLIS — Three Minnesota congressmen are facing backlash over taking a commercial flight home from Washington, D.C., on Friday night just two days after they shared Air Force One with President Trump.

U.S. Reps. Pete Stauber, Tom Emmer and Jim Hagedorn all were on the same Delta Air Lines flight despite the airline's restrictions on passengers recently exposed to COVID-19. Trump announced early Friday he had tested positive for the virus.

Delta's policy says customers who know they were exposed to the virus in the last 14 days cannot travel on the company's aircraft. The airline defines exposure as face-to-face contact with someone carrying the virus, or sustained contact for

more than 15 minutes less than six feet apart.

Ken Martin, chairman of the state Democratic Party, said the three Republican congressmen put the health and safety of other passengers at serious risk.

Hagedorn pushed back in a post on his campaign Facebook page Saturday morning, saying the three men had tested negative and had not been exposed to someone carrying the virus longer than 15 minutes and closer than six feet. He said the men also informed the airline and the flight's cap-

tain of their situation, and the airline “made the decision to fly based upon the facts.”

Delta spokeswoman Gina Laughlin told the Minneapolis Star Tribune that the flight was less than 40% full and that no one left the plane before it took off to protest the men's presence. Another Delta spokesman, Anthony Black, told the Associated Press on Saturday that he did not know what other passengers on the flight were told about the situation.

Black confirmed the air-

plane was held for about an hour until the airline's operations center in Atlanta cleared it to fly. He said Delta was reviewing the matter to see whether proper procedures were followed.

A top Minnesota Republican who greeted Trump at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport on Wednesday said he tested negative for the coronavirus. State House Minority Leader Kurt Daudt said in a statement that he got tested Friday morning and obtained the results Saturday afternoon.