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SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA WILDFIRES



ED CRISOSTOMO — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Families who lost all face bleak Christmas

The ashes: Survivors are grateful to have each other, but life as they knew it is gone

By Brenda Gazzar
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Marolyn Romero-Sim had her family's Christmas decorations up, their presents wrapped, their menu planned and was thinking about how to dress up their 1-year-old Teacup poodle, Coqueta, for the holiday.

But they lost nearly everything on Dec. 5 after the motor home they lived in stalled outside Casitas Springs in Ventura County. They were trying to flee the ferocious Thomas fire.

Romero-Sim's husband, Hugo Romero-Rodriguez, said he burned his arm while trying to save Coqueta, who ran back inside the motor home and hid in her large crate. The tiny dog died in the blaze.

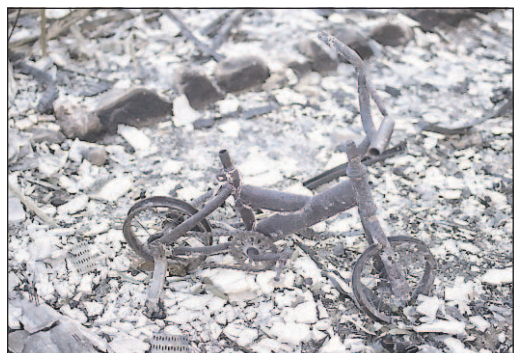
"We had everything prepared for Christmas this year ... and it's all gone," an emotional Romero-Sim said Wednesday from the American Red Cross shelter at a Ventura County Fairgrounds warehouse, where she and her family had been living on cots for weeks.

"I get sad when I hear about that," her daughter Milagros, 9, said later after playing games with a Red Cross volunteer. "I

FAMILIES » PAGE 5

Above: Hugo Romero-Rodriguez spends time with his wife, Marolyn Romero-Sim, and daughter Milagros Romero-Sim, 9, at the Ventura County Fairgrounds American Red Cross shelter in Ventura on Wednesday. They have been staying at the shelter since Dec. 5.

Right: A bike that was a Christmas present for Cory and Jennifer Lagusker's son. The Lagusker family lost its home on Gold Creek Road in Sylmar during the Creek fire.



HANS GUTKNECHT — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



KEVIN SULLIVAN — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Orange County Fire Authority firefighter Chris Finley gives a quick hug to Capt. Brian Woods after returning from working the Thomas fire in Ventura to Station 21 in Tustin on Tuesday.

Best holiday gift of all: A firefighter home safe

When your partner in life makes his or her living walking into wildfires, the worst fear is about what you don't know.

"It's the wondrous," confesses Melissa Holaday, whose husband, Orange County Fire Authority Capt. Paul Holaday, was scheduled to come home Christmas Eve after a



David Whiting
Columnist

long stint of firefighting in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties.

But, in truth, that return wasn't assured. Holaday has no idea when she will see the man she married 18 years ago.

Up on the fire line, the feeling is different. They are smoky, sooty, exhausted, but at least they know they are alive.

For fire families, the worst day (so far) of this month's fires came Dec. 16, when word spread that a fire-

WHITING » PAGE 5

Inside: Funeral held in San Diego on Saturday for Cory Iverson, who died battling the Thomas fire. PAGE A6

HIGHER EDUCATION

Ex-foster kids given a lifeline in college

Campus programs offer emotional, financial aid

By Beau Yarbrough
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"When I was here at Cal State, I was homeless for three months," Sharon Luisjuan said, looking west across the Cal State San Bernardino campus.

"I would go to the bottom of the bridge, right there," she said. "There were a couple of other homeless people who I made friends with, and they'd try to help me out. They'd say, 'Hey, go to school, go to school, go to school.'"

A former foster youth who had aged out of the system, Luisjuan beat the odds and earned a college degree with the help of CSUSB's Renaissance Scholars program. Cal State and University of California campuses offer such programs across the state. They provide former foster youths with educational support, peer support, counseling, housing assistance, financial support and even food.

Luisjuan received her bachelors. FOSTER » PAGE 8

AUDIT REPORT

LB shelter's resources and animals under strain

By Courtney Tompkins
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The Long Beach animal shelter has been without a clear system for housing, caring for and treating impounded animals, which has resulted in "inconsistent decision-making" and "changes being implemented without proper direction or explanation," according to an audit of the city-run facility.

The first phase of a two-part audit of the Animal Care Services bureau includes 173 recommendations (short- and long-term) to improve conditions at the shelter and outcomes for the animals.

It is the first comprehensive analysis of shelter operations, according to City Auditor Laura Doud, who hired a consultant with expertise in animal welfare to do the study.

The report, done by JVR Shelter Strategies, made recommendations across 14 categories, including animal care, veterinary services and euthanasia practices. Among them are suggestions to create a system to track animals as well as a plan for each one, upgrade housing conditions for cats,

SHELTERS » PAGE 6

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OBITUARY

Legendary LBCC track coach Joe Lanning dies at 90

By Mike Guardabascio
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@Guardabascio on Twitter

Joe Lanning, who coached track and field at Long Beach City College and became an institutional figure in the history of Long Beach sports, died Dec. 12. He was 90.

Lanning taught and coached at LBCC for more than four decades, from 1955-1996, coaching the first-ever state championship track and field team at LBCC in 1963. Lanning was a head or assis-

tant coach on a total of 15 state champion LBCC track teams, as well as an assistant coach on the school's 1960 and 1962 national champion football teams.

Lanning is a member of the California Community College Track and Field Hall of Fame, as well as the Long Beach Century Club Hall of Fame and the LBCC Hall of Champions.

"He was also the best math teacher in the entire college," said Ron Alice, his longtime friend and colleague.

Alice ran for Lanning at LBCC before going on to his own Hall of Fame coaching career in the sport at Long Beach State, LBCC, and USC as well as his alma mater, Long Beach Poly.

"I left Long Beach State as a head coach and came to LBCC, and the reason I did was that Joe talked me into it," Alice said. "He said he'd come out of retirement — he was with me the next 16 years."

After that Alice departed for USC, and Lanning would come out of

retirement a second time to work with his former athlete from 1999 until 2004. In five years at USC, he coached three national champion hurdlers and two future Olympic medalists.

"That's how good he was," Alice said. "He was the best at everything because he was a great teacher; he knew how to make it simple."

Over the course of his career, Lanning coached every event, including some of the best athletes in city history, fa-

mous names like Earl McCullouch, John Rambo, and Dee Andrews.

"He wanted the best out of everyone," said McCullouch, who went on to hold the world record in the 110-meter hurdles as well as a seven-year NFL career.

Like many of the athletes he coached, McCullouch speaks of Lanning more as a member of his family than as a former coach.

"Joe coached my two oldest boys; they were both hurdlers, too," said Mc-



COURTESY PHOTO

Long Beach City College track and field coach Joe Lanning

ADOPT-A-FAMILY



ROBERT CASILLAS — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

"I am speechless for the help I have been given; I am so thankful," said Lennox resident Ermila, center, with her children Greco and Alva, about the Christmas gifts they've received through the Long Beach Guidance Center Adopt-a-Family program.

SEASON'S GIVINGS

Long Beach program brings warmth and cheer to local families

Life has been a struggle for most of Ermila's 38 years, as she has dealt with domestic abuse, financial insecurity and a fear of what horrors or problems come next.

But this Christmas will be a little brighter for this single mother and two of her children, Alva, 19, and Greco, 11, thanks to help from donors to the Long Beach Guidance Center's Adopt-a-Family program.

"I am speechless for the help I have been given; I am so thankful," an emotional Ermila said in Spanish as her daughter Alva translated in their small apartment in Lennox. Alva and Greco nodded in agreement.

The Adopt-a-Family program anonymously matches community members and local businesses



Rich Archbold
Columnist

with families who are clients of the Guidance Center clinics in Greater Long Beach.

Adopted families come from different backgrounds and face complicated issues, including domestic abuse and

copied with a loss in their family. Guidance Center therapists see persons who are overcoming trauma and mental health conditions in addition to working to survive the year financially.

"The holidays can be especially difficult for these families," said Patricia Costales, Guidance Center CEO. "Our Adopt-a-Family program helps change that, but the gifts are about more than just spreading holiday cheer. These gifts provide hope to our clients now and for the new year."

CARSON

Recycled water fee heading to court

Suit alleges West Basin district has been illegally charging ratepayers for 26 years for something they don't use

By Megan Barnes
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The West Basin Municipal Water District has been illegally charging South Bay residents a tax — for 26 years — for recycled water they don't use, according to a lawsuit.

The 61-page complaint filed Nov. 22 in Los Angeles Superior Court challenges a "standby charge" billed to 345,000 property owners from Malibu to the Palos Verdes Peninsula every year.

West Basin, a public agency headquartered in Carson, sells imported water from the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California to local utilities that supply it to nearly 1 million mostly South Bay residents.

It also operates a water-recycling plant in El Segundo that produces 40 million gallons of water a day purchased by commercial customers for industrial use and to water parks, medians and golf courses.

The standby charge, which ranges from \$16 to \$120 depending on property size, was introduced in 1991 to pay down debt service for the Edward C. Little Water Recycling Facility. It appears on property tax bills and generates about \$9.7 million for West Basin every year.

But three ratepayers allege the charge is actually a fraudulently disguised tax that should have been approved by voters under Proposition 218. And because West Basin acts as a middleman between the MWD and water utilities, they say the district can't charge property owners directly in the first place.

"West Basin, in calling this tax a 'standby charge,' has been misrepresenting to the world for 26 years what it's been doing," said Paul Heidenreich, a taxpayers' rights attorney in Redondo Beach who filed the lawsuit on behalf of Mikel Rastegar, Henry Porter and Eman Khoubian, who live in different parts of West Basin's service area.

Porter has been questioning the standby charge for years.

"According to West Basin's website, the sale of recycled water is their most profitable product," Heidenreich said. "West Basin has been acting illegally and stealing from people who don't get a drop of recycled water. Nobody gets an iota of benefit."

The proposed class-action lawsuit seeks to recover the past three years' worth of the tax plus next year's assessment — the amount allowable under the statute of limitations — or about \$38 million. The plaintiffs are asking a judge to find the charge illegal and order West Basin to put it on a ballot before voters as a tax.

The suit also calls for an accounting of revenue raised by the charge, alleging it actually goes to a "slush fund."

Manuel Serpa, an attorney for West Basin, said the lawsuit is misleading and irresponsibly and wrongly characterizes the standby charge.

"The standby charge is entirely lawful and valid and it was properly enacted," he said. "We feel very strongly that the complaint is really baseless and is a frivolous case that we're going to vigorously defend the district on."

Serpa said West Basin's elected board of directors reviews the charge every year in a transparent manner

LAWSUIT » PAGE 4

"West Basin has been acting illegally and stealing from people who don't get a drop of recycled water. Nobody gets an iota of benefit."

— Paul Heidenreich, taxpayers' rights attorney

CHRISTMAS

LB firefighters, police make it a season for giving



Long Beach firefighters and police officers, along with Santa, make their way through the streets of Long Beach on Saturday, handing out toys to the community as part of the annual Spark Of Love Code 3 ride, above and below.



A young girl gets a skateboard during the Spark of Love Code 3 ride by the city's police and firefighters.



Long Beach Officer Ben Hearst puts police badge stickers on stuffed animals during the toy giveaway along Long Beach streets Saturday. Residents, local businesses and volunteers contribute time and gifts to the annual program.



Lanning

FROM PAGE 3

Cullouch. "That touched my heart — they loved him, too."

It's no coincidence that Lanning is spoken of as a member of the family. He and his wife, Jean, celebrated their 70th anniversary in August. The couple always welcomed LBCC athletes and coaches into their home, near El Dorado Park, and team dinners became a time-honored tradition.

Jean Lanning died about six weeks ago.

"They took that part of it very seriously," said Jaima Bennett, one of the couple's three children. "It was just part of our family, having athletes at the house for

dinner."

Joe and Jean met at Pepperdine University, where Joe was on the basketball team. They married at 20 years old. As Joe's star rose, Jean became a fixture in the Long Beach track world as well, attending every meet while also working as an educator — and hosting many of the notable names in Long Beach sports over several decades.

When that tradition began in the 1950s and 1960s, it wasn't the norm for black athletes to be dining with white coaches, but Bennett said it was important to her father that everyone be part of the same family.

"Dad loved all his athletes, but he was particularly proud of being able to help athletes who weren't

always getting a fair shake in those years," she said.

Lanning is survived by daughter Janice Allen and son-in-law Jim, daughter Jaima Bennett and son-in-law John, son Joe III, granddaughters Jenny and Jessica, grandson J.J. and his wife, Kelly, as well as great-grandchildren Kourtney and Grant.

The family will be holding a private graveside service on Thursday, and a public memorial is being planned for next summer, which will honor both Joe and Jean.

A permanent tribute is being planned for Lanning at LBCC. Donations can be made in his name to the LBCC Foundation, 4900 E. Conant St., Long Beach, CA 90808.



COURTESY PHOTO

Long Beach City College track and field coach Joe Lanning, pictured with his wife, Jean, has died at age 90. A permanent tribute is being planned for Lanning at LBCC.

Archbold

FROM PAGE 3

Ermila was born in El Paso, Texas but was raised across the border in Juarez, Mexico. She had a rough childhood before getting married at 21 and having three children. The marriage was an unhappy one, with the children witnessing their parents arguing and fighting, according to Guidance Center therapist Bernice Contreras.

"There was constant moving to different cities and living with various family and friends," Contreras said. In Southern California the mother, now divorced with no child support, had to work at two full-time jobs, while her daughter Alva helped hold things together at home while going to three different high schools: Hawthorne High, Banning High and, finally, Cabrillo High in Long Beach, where she received her diploma.

She is attending El Camino College now and would like to have a career in nursing. She works part time as a caregiver in an assisted care facility in Redondo Beach.

"Thank God, my life is better now," she said tearfully. Her brother Greco is a sixth-grader at Lennox Middle School. Another brother has moved out.

Ermila credited Contreras, her therapist with helping to turn her life around.

"She tells me than I am strong, that I am not a bad mother," Ermila said. "She gives me advice and gives me confidence. Before, I felt small; now I feel strong and don't get depressed as much as I used to. I have better communication with my children. We talk more about everything."

Although she has never met them, Jeanine Scott, a donor, was pleased to hear about the positive reaction Ermila and her children had to gifts donated by Scott, who works for the Social Security office in Lakewood.

Families make a wish list so donors have some idea what they want. Scott donated clothes for everyone in Ermila's family and a beautiful, warm, woolen blanket for Ermila.

A surprise gift was tickets to Disneyland which Ermila and her children said was very welcome and excited about using.

"I added the Disneyland tickets because I think going there is a perfect way to bring a family together," Scott said.

"There are so many families that need assistance, not just in the holiday season but all year long. The Adopt-a-Family program is just one way of our giving back."

Another interesting donor was the "Sole Sisters," a group of 12 teachers, administrators and other employees tied to Jefferson Leadership Academies (formerly Jefferson Middle School).

"Everyone in our group is an educator and we see the need to help families on a daily basis," said Stephanie Sasaki, a physical education teacher.

"We see the good work the Guidance Center does for our students and wanted to show support for their work."

The Sole Sisters get their name by staying connected with after-school urban hikes and weekend runs. This is the first year the Sole Sisters adopted a family, which includes seven members.

There is no question that families appreciate the gifts they receive during the holiday season, according to Katherine Lambert, a Guidance Center communications specialist.

One typical response, she said, came in a thank you card from a youngster, Alexa Gutierrez, whose family was helped last year. Alexa wrote: "Dear family that gave us presents, you made us so happy. I really don't believe in fairy tales, but to me you are my fairy godmother who made this Christmas the most magical and special Christmas ever."

Lawsuit

FROM PAGE 3

— and that Proposition 218 actually grandfathered the charge in.

Fernando Paludi, West Basin's co-general manager, said the agency relies on the standby charge because government funding wasn't sufficient to cover the recycling plant's \$600 million-plus price tag, which includes more than 120 miles of pipeline.

"We're still paying the principal and interest of \$24 million on the debt," he said. Even though recycled water has not been approved for drinking and is not delivered to homes, West Basin officials say residents still benefit from the operation.

"Every gallon of recycled water frees up potable water to be used, contributes to water security and reduces pollution," Serpa said.

Recycled water is one way West Basin is trying to get the region less de-

pendent on imported water from Northern California and the Colorado River.

An environmental impact report for a proposed \$380 million ocean water desalination plant on the border of Manhattan Beach and El Segundo is expected to come out in the spring.

West Basin is also revisiting its rate structure to find out how to make up for revenue lost to the efforts of consumers to conserve water during the drought.



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