

METRO AND STATE NEWS

Caverns discovered by St. Mary's students celebrating 50 years. **Page 5B**

CENSUS: S.A. 16TH IN NATION FOR POPULATION GROWTH **2B**

Change urged in anti-bias policies

Alamo Colleges students want sexual orientation included.

BY MELISSA LUDWIG
mludwig@express-news.net

PROTEST: UTSA students upset about tuition increases. **Page 8B**

The lessons in discrimination that Alicia "Ethan" Palmer learned while living as a man at Northwest Vista College are enough to fill a book.

In fact, she plans to write one. Her transgender experiment, which ended Tuesday night, also moved her to speak out at the Alamo Colleges board meeting and urge trustees to change the district's anti-discrimination policies to include sexual orientation.

"If diversity is our core value, then we need to stand by it," said Palmer, 24.

A group of students from the Gay and Lesbian Association at San Antonio College also lobbied for a sexual-orientation protection clause, saying most Fortune 500 companies and colleges and universities in Texas already have such policies in place.

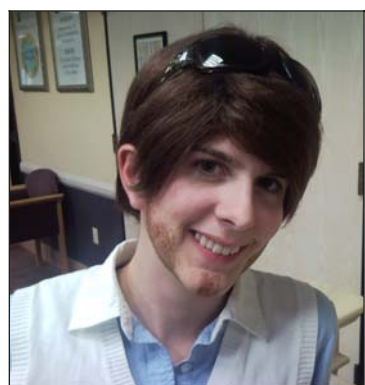
"It's time for a change. It's 2010," said Amanda Benton, the club's president.

Richard Farias, an English professor at SAC and the club's faculty adviser, told trustees that as a gay man, he would like to feel his job is not subject to the potential biases of administrators.

"I am living my dream job, and I literally thank God every day for the opportunity to engage students in critical thinking," Farias said.

Palmer, who addressed the board in an argyle vest, a wig, and hair carefully pasted onto her face, is a lesbian activist and

See COLLEGES/2B



MELISSA LUDWIG/
mludwig@express-news.net

Alicia "Ethan" Palmer lived as a man at Northwest Vista College for nearly two months in a transgender experiment.

LAUGHTER DURING LUNCH



JERRY LARA/glara@express-news.net

Suzie Humphreys makes a point at the Cancer Center Council's luncheon at Pearl Stable. Humphreys told stories about her days at Alamo Heights High School and beyond.

Cancer fundraiser takes a positive tone

Motivational speaker's funny stories keep crowd gathered for serious subject laughing.

BY ELIZABETH ALLEN
eallen@express-news.net

The lesson in confidence that speaker Suzie Humphreys took from "that rotten marriage in Hereford, Texas" wasn't born of knowing she could accomplish something.

"It comes from knowing how to get out of it," she told a crowd at the Cancer Center Council's annual fundraising luncheon.

The women who put together the volunteer group's spring luncheon normally strive to bring in a celebrity speaker whose life has been touched by cancer.

This year, they chose Humphreys, a humorist and motivational speaker, not only because she is a breast cancer survivor but because they wanted to show their guests a good time.

"We just thought it would be a lot of fun," said event chairwoman Carrie Sinkin.

See CANCER/5B

"This, I think, got the message across that there is hope in a very positive way."

CAROLINE SEAY
Cancer Center Council

SCHOOL FUNDING

Panel talks of total revision

Property taxes may be replaced

BY JENNY LACOSTE-CAPUTO
jcaputo@express-news.net

AUSTIN — A joint select committee on school finance met Tuesday and lawmakers, educators and business leaders agreed on one thing: The state's school funding system is complicated, convoluted and needs more than a makeover.

It needs a total re-build. "Here's what I think is clear," said committee member Sen. Dan Patrick, R-Houston. "We cannot continue long term to depend on property taxes to fund public education. We have to come up with a different source of money, and we have to come up with a better system for distributing that money."

The committee, made up of members appointed by House Speaker Joe Straus, R-San Antonio, and Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, is charged with conducting a comprehensive review of funding formulas under the public school finance system and making recom-

See SYSTEM/5B

Senator wants State Board of Education gone

McAllen Democrat says he'll file a proposal for its abolishment.

BY GARY SCHARRER
gscharrer@express-news.net

AUSTIN — It's time to consider abolishing the State Board of Education because its distractions over cultural wars are hurting public education, Sen. Juan "Chuy" Hinojosa, D-McAllen, said Tuesday.

He said he plans to file legislation to get rid of the 15-member elected board when the Legislature returns to its regular session in January.

The panel has seven Republican social conservatives, three moderate-to-conservative Republicans and five Democrats.

They argued over the teaching of evolution

See SBOE/3B

Racist attitudes spawn danger, later regrets

Add Rep. Ciro Rodriguez to the list of targets of racist epithets hurled in the heat of the health-care reform debate.

Rodriguez, D-San Antonio, was called a "wetback" at a recent town hall meeting in his district by an opponent of health-care reform, which the congressman supports. The incident surfaced in a Washington Post blog after Rodriguez told other members of Congress about it. He declined to discuss it other than to confirm that it happened.

Rodriguez joins African American members of Congress who were called the "n" word on their way to the House of Representatives last week and Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., a gay lawmaker who was tagged with a homophobic epithet.

Attacks like those won't hold up well over time. To under-



SCOTT STROUD

stand that, you only need to ask Elwin Wilson. But more on him in a moment.

Although much of the ugly rhetoric is coming from opponents of the reform bill, I don't agree with the many commentators trying to hold the Republican Party, or even the tea party movement, responsible. The ones responsible are those who say such things — or hit the 'send' button.

Along those lines, the volume of racist e-mails circulating now



mySA.com
Keyword: Columnists
For more of Scott Stroud's commentary.

is as high as I've seen it. One of the worst landed in my inbox March 11, a cutesy song about President Barack Obama called "The Great Reneger." It was a way to tag the president with the "n" word couched as something else.

Sharing such things isn't just disgusting, it's dangerous. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center's recent "Year in Hate and Extremism" report, active hate groups nationwide are at record levels. Discoveries of people hoarding caches of dangerous weapons are commonplace.

What's scary is that some people don't distinguish well between hateful rhetoric and ac-

tion. That's why more domestic terrorism isn't hard to imagine, which should alarm commentators and politicians who play to our baser instincts.

It's also self-defeating. When we in the media are distracted by racism, we're not writing about the valid questions raised about the health-care reform measure Obama signed Tuesday. Several articulate, young conservative voices emerged during the homestretch of the debate but they were hard to hear over the din.

So there are good reasons to condemn such vitriol, and when it's shouted or egged on by members of Congress, all the more. They should be telling people to channel their anger toward the ballot box.

Beyond that, though, I think anyone who engages in such behavior will come to regret it,

which brings me back to Wilson.

He lives in Rock Hill, S.C. In 1961, he was part of a mob that beat a young John Lewis and other anti-segregation demonstrators riding buses across the South. After an article about the incident appeared last year, Wilson phoned the Rock Hill Herald to find out how to reach the congressman. He identified himself in a photograph as a man smirking in the background as a black man wiped egg off his hat.

A meeting was arranged, and Wilson, at the age of 72, apologized to Lewis. His explanation was a straightforward testament to the regret that stays with those who do something they know is wrong.

"I thank God he let me stay here long enough to get this out of me," he said.

jstroud@express-news.net

Judson ISD terminating some staff positions

Workers might be offered other jobs in district.

BY LINDSAY KASTNER
lkastner@express-news.net

The Judson Independent School District is eliminating several positions that were duplicated at Judson High School's dual Red and

Gray campuses but will no longer be needed when the schools are consolidated.

Superintendent Willis Mackey said staff planned to meet with nine paraprofessionals today to discuss the elimination of their jobs. He said he informed "less than 10" contract employees about two weeks ago that their jobs were being eliminated.

"We're not saying they're going to be rified," Mackey said, using jargon for a reduction in force, "because we're trying to offer them other positions in the district."

The growing district is opening a new elementary school in the fall and turning the Judson Gray Campus into a middle school. Both of those campuses

will have vacancies that need to be filled, but Mackey acknowledged that some employees from the high school won't have the necessary certifications to fill elementary and middle school jobs.

"That's the only thing that's going to hurt them," he said.

A secretary at the Judson Red Campus who

asked that her name not be used said she received a letter just before the district went on Spring Break last week notifying her that her job was being eliminated at the end of the school year.

"I fell out the chair," said the employee, who has worked for the district for four years. "They said I'm welcome to apply for an-

other position, but it may be at a lower pay. I can't afford to cut pay."

School board President Gilbert Flores said he was aware of the staff cuts but did not know much about the decisions, other than that they were made based on seniority. Trustees could discuss the issue at their regular meeting Thursday.



DEBORAH CANNON/AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Travis Wuest, vice president of Natural Bridge Caverns, stands in front of the natural bridge at the entrance and talks about his family's development of the natural landmark in the early 1960s. "It's a fun business to be in," he said. "I've got a family of my own now, and it's fantastic to be a part of other families' vacations and memories."

50 years later, still exciting find

Austinite recalls day he and friends discovered Natural Bridge Caverns.

BY PATRICK GEORGE
Austin American-Statesman

NATURAL BRIDGE CAVERNS — On March 27, 1960, cave explorer Orion Knox had what he now calls the biggest adrenaline rush he will have in his life.

Knox and three friends from St. Mary's University were in a cave below the Wuest family cattle ranch west of New Braunfels. The spelunkers had explored the caves there three times before. Knox, then 19, was the smallest in the group, so he was often tapped to crawl through tight spaces.

Armed with a rock hammer and a carbide light on his helmet, he inched through a narrow crawlway.

Once out, an expanse of darkness greeted him.

"I said, 'Hey, we may have something here,'" Knox said.

Knox and the others likely were the first humans to set foot in what is now called Natural Bridge Caverns, the largest known caverns in Texas and one of the state's top tourist destinations.

The Wuest family and other friends of the caverns are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the caverns' discovery on Saturday. To commemorate the event, a series of Discovery Days will be held this summer. The events will include discounts on admission and special activities.

The caverns offer insight to a unique underground world of sweeping tunnels and bizarre rock formations that lie as deep as 180 feet below the ground. The caverns are named for a bridgelike rock formation on top of the cave entrance.

Travis Wuest, the vice president of Natural Bridge Caverns, said ge-

If you go

WHAT: Natural Bridge Caverns

WHERE: 26495 Natural Bridge Caverns Road, west of Interstate 35

HOURS: Typically open daily from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

HOW MUCH: Admission starts at \$17.95 for adults and \$9.95 for children.

INFO: The caves are 70 degrees with high humidity, and guests are advised to wear lightweight clothing and comfortable walking shoes with good traction for steep, wet surfaces. For more information, visit www.naturalbridgecaverns.com or call (210) 651-6101.

ologists think the cave began to form about 140 million years ago. Water flow from Cibolo Creek likely shaped the space and its rock formations.

When Knox and fellow students Al Brandt, Preston Knodell and Jo Cantu announced their discovery, Clara Wuest, a widow who farmed cattle and goats on the ranch, was initially skeptical. The family had always known about the natural bridge, the sinkhole entrance and the caves within but, to their knowledge, no one had ever ventured as deep inside as Knox's group, her grandson Travis Wuest said.

After Travis Wuest's father confirmed what Knox and the others had seen, Clara Wuest, who died in 1997, "became convinced that she had a spectacular natural feature on her property," Knox said.

About 1961, Travis Wuest said, his grandmother remarried and began to discuss ways to develop the property and turn it into a tourist attraction.

She went to the state and national park agencies, but for various reasons they weren't interested in developing the caves. So Wuest decided to do it herself, mortgaging her ranch to fund the development. It was very risky. Had the venture failed, Travis Wuest said, the family would have lost its home and only source of income.

"She transformed herself from a shy ranch wife into an entrepreneur and businesswoman," Wuest said. He said he doesn't know how much the development cost.

Knox dropped out of college to help with the two-year effort to develop the caves. Knox, avid caver Jack Burch and others worked 14-hour days to excavate a route into the caverns, creating paths and tunnels for tourists to move through. The caverns are so large that development didn't disturb most natural features.

The caves opened to the public in 1964, quickly becoming a boon to the state's then-fledgling tourism industry, Knox said. They were made a registered U.S. natural landmark in 1971.

Knox now lives in Central Austin and likes to reflect on his discovery.

"This was a life-changing event for me," he said. "Anytime I go to the cave and see people enjoying it, it's such a rewarding feeling."

As for the Wuests, the caverns have become the family business. Travis Wuest's brother Brad is the president and CEO of the attraction. They hope to expand access farther into the caverns, add more tours and possibly create an on-site museum or theater.

This Spring Break period was the busiest they've ever had, Travis Wuest said.

"It's a fun business to be in," he said. "I've got a family of my own now, and it's fantastic to be a part of other families' vacations and memories."

CANCER

CONTINUED FROM 1B

The mostly well-heeled crowd practically guffawed at Humphreys' anecdotes, starting with her academic fiascos at Alamo Heights High School and tripping on through the marriage, bluffing her way into jobs, and other escapades.

Tales of misadventure are Humphreys' bread and butter but in an interview before her talk, she said she always tries to extract the good from them.

Being positive may take work, but "it's the best thing in the world that

you can work on," Humphreys said. "When you're around somebody who lifts you up and makes you feel good about yourself, guess what? That's who you want to be around."

Caroline Seay, a council board member who volunteers on the information desk at the Cancer Therapy and Research Center, said the speaker was a gift to the audience, which got to feel good about doing good but also got to feel good in general.

"I think so often you go to some of these luncheons — all very worthy causes — but I think sometimes (when) they deal with the reality of the

disease or whatever they're dealing with, that it's a little bit of a downer," Seay said. "This, I think, got the message across that there is hope in a very positive way."

Sometimes that hope is channeled through volunteers, and sometimes through good friends. Humphreys talked about a long period of joblessness during her 30s when a 70-year-old friend let her stay in his spare room for several months. Every day when she pulled into his driveway, she said, "every blind on that street flew up."

That ended with an offer to fill in for the traffic reporter at a Dallas radio

station, a job Humphreys took even though she admits not knowing north from south. A disastrous first flight was punctuated by Humphreys' use of the forbidden word "wreck" on the airwaves when she finally spotted an accident, along with a colorful quip about why nobody who wasn't in it would care where it was — since she didn't know.

Humphreys then described a scene in which "all across Dallas-Fort Worth, men were sitting in their cars and said, 'Dear God, that's my wife up there.'"

And callers to the station who said, "Have her on again."

Phones down after line cut

Interruption stretched from Fredericksburg to Marble Falls.

BY DAVID S. RAUF
drauf@express-news.net

Damage to an AT&T fiber-optic line caused a widespread phone and Internet outage in parts of the Hill Country on Tuesday. Service was restored just after 8 p.m., AT&T said.

AT&T spokesman Mike Barger confirmed that a fiber-optic line was cut around 1 p.m.

"The cut was caused by a third-party contractor working to fix drainage along a roadside," Barger said in a statement.

The outage affected all of the company's services, he added.

The damaged AT&T fiber line also affected landline service for Verizon customers in Blanco, Marble Falls and Fredericksburg, said Verizon spokesman Lee Gierczynski.

Time Warner Cable customers in the Hill Country and customers at Smithson Valley-based phone and cable firm GVTC Communications did not experience any outages, company spokesmen said.

Damaged fiber-optic

lines in the telecommunications business are not unusual, Sprint spokesman John Taylor said. The fiber lines, which carry phone and Internet traffic, are commonly buried underground, along highways and even on the floors of oceans and are usually damaged when digging occurs and "somebody didn't check to see where the cable is buried," Taylor said.

Repairing the fiber lines is a delicate process that requires crews to dig up the cable, find the cut and splice the broken fiber strand by hand, he said.

"It can take several hours to repair," he said.

Boerne Police Chief Gary Miller said his agency's landlines went down midday. His dispatcher center, which serves Kendall County, was receiving emergency calls from other affected areas by cell phone and relaying them back to the other counties by radio.

Staff Writer Zeke MacCormack contributed to this report.

SYSTEM

CONTINUED FROM 1B

mendations to the Legislature on how to improve it.

After hearing a two-hour presentation to explain how the current school funding system works, Sen. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, said it might be time to start from scratch.

"We just spent the better part of two hours trying to figure this out, and I guarantee you we have more questions now than we did when we started," said Shapiro, co-chair of the committee along with Rep. Rob Eissler, R-The Woodlands. "We've got to find a way that makes more sense so we can be more responsive to taxpayers."

The Texas school funding system, after numerous court-ordered overhauls, has evolved into complex, multi-tiered formulas that are difficult for even education experts to understand.

The last overhaul in 2006 was in response to a state Supreme Court order and resulted in a new business tax designed to ease property taxes, but the revenue generated fell short of expectations.

Districts across the state are dealing with budget shortfalls — San Antonio's North East Independent School District has declared financial exigency and is cutting \$63 million from its budget over the next three years — and growing resource inequity among school systems could lead to another school finance lawsuit.

Most districts — including North East and San Antonio's largest, Northside — are frozen at 2006 funding levels,

which means revenue from increases in property values in the past four years went to the state, not the local school district.

Committee member Larry Kellner, former CEO of Continental Airlines, asked: "Has there been any talk in the past to throw the whole system out and start all over?"

Shapiro asked committee members to brainstorm what a new system would look like for consideration at the next meeting.

Patrick thinks Texas has to stop relying on property taxes, a move he sees as ultimately lethal to the state's economy. He's suggesting increasing the sales tax by 2 percentage points and eliminating some sales tax exemptions while reducing property taxes by 30 percent to 40 percent.

He estimates that someone who makes \$60,000 a year would pay about \$200 more a year in sales tax under his plan.

"I have not talked to a homeowner or a business owner that would not swap \$200 a year more in sales tax for lower property tax," he said.

North East Superintendent Richard Middleton, who also sits on the committee, said Texas has to come up with a more transparent way to fund public education.

He said trying to explain to constituents why he's having to make drastic budget cuts even as their property values go up and they pay more taxes is next to impossible.

"We can't explain it," he said. "We try very hard to tell our constituents... the way we used to generate revenue no longer exists."