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MILITARY

‘I would do it again  
in a heartbeat’



MARK RIGHTMIRE — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Giovanni Roman rests in his bedroom at home in Garden Grove on Tuesday in front of a flag that was signed by Ukrainian soldiers he fought with while volunteering to serve on the front lines in that country’s war against Russia.

Orange County Marine who volunteered for a tour of duty in  
Ukraine and was wounded in an attack doesn’t regret service

By Hanna Lykke  
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In the dark, there was a staccato beat of sound — a thundering, unplaceable boom. Then there was the pain, sudden and unyielding.

Giovanni Roman was hit.

It was just before midnight on a frigid February evening in the eastern Donetsk region of Ukraine when the 29-year-old Marine from Garden Grove was struck by a Russian rocket while inside a Humvee on the front-lines.

Blood soaked through his vest. Pain electrified him. The impact shattered part of Roman’s skull, claimed his right eye and jettisoned shrapnel into an arm and hand. But somehow, Roman stayed awake. He remembers it all.

“I’ve always believed as a man you should be willing to die for something,” Roman said. “I have no problem dying helping someone out and helping the defenseless, and that is exactly what was going on there.”

The hours leading up to the attack were as normal as they could be in the embattled country, where Roman vol-

MARINE » PAGE 15



Roman, a Marine Corps veteran, was badly injured in Ukraine when the vehicle he was traveling in was hit by a rocket fired by Russian forces. The impact jettisoned shrapnel into one of his arms and a hand and eventually led to the loss of his right eye. “I don’t regret going,” he said of his decision to aid Ukrainian forces.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GIOVANNI ROMAN

TEXAS

Shooting  
suspect  
is still on  
the run

Widening manhunt in killing of 5 neighbors grows in scale, but ‘we have zero leads,’ FBI agent says

By Juan A. Lozano  
The Associated Press

CLEVELAND, TEXAS » A widening manhunt for a Texas man suspected of fatally shooting five neighbors continued to come up empty Sunday as officers knocked on doors, the governor put up \$50,000 in reward money and the FBI appeared no closer to catching the suspect after nearly two days of searching with a team that has grown to hundreds of people.

“I can tell you right now, we have zero leads,” James Smith, the FBI special agent in charge, told reporters while again asking the public for tips in the rural town of Cleveland, where the shooting took place just before midnight Friday.

The search for the suspect near Houston has grown in scale: Authorities said that by Sunday evening more than 200 police from various jurisdictions were searching for Francisco Oropeza,

GUNMAN » PAGE 14

PUBLIC HEALTH

Dementia cases  
double in less  
than a decade in  
Orange County

In some shadowy tangle between past and present, my grandfather would wipe down the walls of our kitchen. “Good?” he’d eagerly ask.

It was the 1970s, but my grandfather was stuck in the 1920s. He had just crossed the ocean on the S.S. Italia and was working as a busboy in New York City, trying so hard to please the boss. Sometimes he’d suddenly snap back to the present, stare at the dish towel in his hand and cry.

New number crunching from Alzheimer’s Orange County estimates that the number of folks enduring this sort of heartbreak has essentially

SFORZA » PAGE 6



Teri Sforza  
Columnist

HOLLYWOOD BOWL

Stars come out for Willie Nelson

Singer’s 90th birthday bash  
a song-filled extravaganza

By Peter Larsen  
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Three hours into a celebration of Willie Nelson’s 90th birthday at the Hollywood Bowl, the birthday boy had yet to be seen. He was hanging out backstage as friends such as Lyle Lovett, Miranda Lambert, Chris Stapleton and Beck sang classic songs from his vast catalog.

But then, a little after 10 p.m., as Neil Young sang “Are There Any More Real Cowboys?” with Stephen Stills on guitar, out from the wings walked the man of the hour, and the fans that packed the Bowl on Saturday for the first of two birthday shows erupted into cheers and applause.

“I’d like to thank all the artists that came out to help us celebrate whatever we’re celebrating,” Nelson said as he settled into a chair at the center of the stage, his sons Micah and Lukas Nelson, who’d performed earlier in the evening, on either side of him.



PHOTO BY JOSH TIMMERMANS FOR BLACKBIRD PRESENTS

Willie Nelson, right, plays with Snoop Dogg during an all-star 90th birthday celebration for Nelson at the Hollywood Bowl on Saturday.

Then it was on with the show, as country star George Strait came out to play a pair of songs with Nelson, then Snoop Dogg for one, and finally the entire lineup for the finale of the first night of Long Story Short: An All-Star Celebration of Willie Nelson’s 90th.

The night opened with young country artist Billy Strings, with whom Nelson recently collabo-

rated on Strings’ single “California Sober,” out to do “Whiskey River” and “Play a Little Longer,” and the party was underway with 40 songs and more than 30 guest artists over the next three-plus hours.

Many of the performers shared a memory or two about Nelson or the song they’d chosen before singing. Singer-songwriter Edie Brick-

NELSON » PAGE 14

SACRAMENTO SNAPSHOT

Bill aims to boost  
homeless housing

Cities, counties would  
include proposals as  
part of zoning plans

Editor’s note: Sacramento Snapshot is a weekly series during the legislative session detailing what Orange County’s representatives in the Assembly and Senate are working on — from committee work to bill passages and more.

By Kaitlyn Schallhorn  
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Should California cities and counties include homeless-serving housing proposals as part of their zoning plans to meet projected housing needs?

That’s the intent behind legislation from state Sen. Catherine Blakespear that cleared a second committee last week. Her bill would

mandate cities and counties provide plans for homeless-serving housing as part of the Regional Housing Needs Allocation plans.

The bill also creates funding for local governments to execute these plans should they be approved by the state.

The goal, Blakespear said, is to eliminate encampments in public spaces, streets, canyons and riverbeds.

“Every city has an unsheltered population,” Blakespear said. “There should be a specific plan to house people.”

A freshman senator, Blakespear now represents southern Orange County, including Mission Viejo and San Juan Capistrano, in the statehouse. Prior to her 2022 election, she was the mayor of Encinitas,

BLAKESPEAR » PAGE 6

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# Sforza

FROM PAGE 1

doubled since 2014 in the O.C. That’s a startling jump, from 84,000 to 164,000 people, which works out to about 5% of our total population.

Yikes. We’re not statisticians, but that struck us as scary high. Other estimates of how many Americans are affected by dementia have hovered around 2% of the total population. Surely this can’t be right!

But that was before the latest census. And the rapid aging of the boomers. And new studies examining cognitive impairment by race and ethnicity.

“The new number is believable, especially if a difference from the previous estimate is the inclusion of mild cognitive impairment as a category,” said Dr. Joshua D. Grill, a noted Alzheimer’s researcher at UC Irvine. “Orange County is ‘grayer’ than the rest of the country, so we do expect relatively more people living with cognitive impairment here.”

UCI epidemiologist and demographer Andrew Noymer concurs. An aging population and increased ascertainment — meaning that the comparisons are not really like for like, he said.

**Gulp**

Jim McAleer, chief executive officer for Alzheimer’s Orange County, walked us through the startling new numbers.

“Rather than going door to door and asking who has dementia, we take the population totals from the census, we break it down by age group, and we apply the prevalence num-



ISTOCKPHOTO

Some 84,000 people in Orange County, or about 5% of the population, are living with dementia or mild cognitive impairment, according to county statistics and the organization Alzheimer’s Orange County.

bers found in the studies we decide to use — in this case a very well respected study from Columbia University,” he said by email.

That Columbia study found a disproportionate burden of dementia and mild cognitive impairment among older Black and Hispanic adults, as well as those with lower education levels.

The study — the first nationally representative study of cognitive impairment prevalence in more than 20 years — found that almost 10% of U.S.

adults ages 65 and older have dementia, while another 22% have mild cognitive impairment.

That’s 1 of every 3 older Americans. Gulp. Or, about 3.3% of the total population. And, as one might expect, the prevalence is highest in the oldest people.

“Our society has aged greatly in the past eight years — particularly in the O.C.,” said McAleer. “The identification of mild cognitive impairment is much improved. We now know from the study referenced

that up to 22% of seniors over 65 experience some form of MCI. We did not have that information 10 years ago. We only knew then the presumed incidence of dementia.”

Plus, the ethnic mix in Orange County has deepened, and communities of color are more at risk of developing dementia, he said.

He estimates that 34,780 Orange County Latino residents age 65 and older have dementia, compared with 16,749 White residents and 9,919 Asian residents.

**Grayer**

Within the broader aging boom, the fastest growing cohort is the oldest of the old, people 85 and up. America currently has about 7 million people in that age range; by 2050, it will more than double, to 18.6 million. Within that group, the number of Americans age 100 and older is expected to more than quadruple, from about 90,000 today to nearly 400,000.

My colleague Andre Mouchard has done a lot of jaw-dropping report-

ing on this phenomenon, which is already reshaping Southern California.

Over the past decade, the number of people age 65 and older ballooned 34% in Los Angeles County, 41.6% in Orange County, 40% in Riverside County and 45.4% in San Bernardino County. That will keep going up.

The new statistics are alarming and demand our attention, McAleer said, and underscore the urgent need for increased awareness, resources and support for those affected by dementia and their families.

“We face a public health crisis requiring immediate action,” he said in a prepared statement. “The impact of these conditions extends far beyond the individuals themselves, affecting their families, caregivers and communities. It is imperative that we work together to increase awareness, provide support and resources, and advocate for policies that address the needs of those living with dementia and their loved ones.”

There’s a great deal of research on Alzheimer’s happening here in Southern California, and we wish them Godspeed. The next decade promises to be one of great progress, though there most likely will not be one magic bullet, but multiple therapies to address brain toxins and their outfall in different ways.

“Once you hit 50 and 60, you’re staring into the mouth of the lion, and the research has a little more immediate impact,” McAleer recently told us. “If you can stop the first couple of dominos from falling, you’ll chip away at the larger problem.”

Please, science. Do your stuff.

# Blakespear

FROM PAGE 1

where she said it was “clear ... there was no obligation for anybody — city, county or state — to eliminate or prevent homelessness.”

“I identify homelessness as the state’s top problem,” Blakespear said. “I don’t look around at our systems right now and believe we are going to reduce home-

lessness because all of the current systems provide money or help for people but doesn’t have the goal of reducing homelessness to zero.”

The state already hands out housing goals to cities throughout California for the number of homes, including mandates



Blakespear

at various levels of affordability, they have to plan for over the next decade. This process is called Regional Housing Needs Allocation, or RHNA.

Cities aren’t the builders; they just have to have the local planning in place that would allow developers to build to that capacity.

While most cities got to work identifying in the required local planning where developers could build what the state figured

is needed to meet housing needs, pushback in other localities has been quick and loud.

Huntington Beach, for example, is entangled in a legal battle with the state over housing mandates.

Blakespear notes her bill comes with a funding stream, recognizing “cities don’t have money in their general funds to solve homelessness, and the state needs to provide help for them to do that.”

And when it comes to homelessness, Blakespear said, “We need to do things differently.”

“Cities and counties need to take ownership of the problem,” she said.

The bill cleared the Senate Governance and Finance Committee last week in a 6-2 vote, with Republicans (including Sen. Kelly Seyarto, whose district includes Yorba Linda) opposed. Earlier in April, it passed the Senate Housing Committee with Seyarto also in opposition.

In other news:

- Many O.C. legislators marked “Denim Day” in the Capitol last week, typically held at the end of April, which is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. The campaign aims to combat victim blaming — specifically combatting the notion that what a person was wearing could contribute to a sexual assault or somehow

imply consent — and educate people about sexual violence.

- Sen. Tom Umberg’s bill to require zero-emission vehicle charging and fueling signage to be placed along state highways got a unanimous green light from the Senate Transportation Committee last week.
- Legislation from Assemblymember Tri Ta, R-Westminster, capping electricity rate increases to the rate of inflation, passed the Assembly Utilities and Energy Committee with bipartisan support. It would allow for higher rates, however, if the Public Utilities Commission determines the costs are directly related to safety enhancements or modernization or if a majority of customers OK the increase. Southern California Edison and Pacific Gas & Electric Company are among the opposition.

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