

The Sundial

Volume 64 | 2024

Uvalde

The Town's Stories of Grief and Healing

The Sundial

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Special thanks to the people of Uvalde
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Published by the
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Volume 64 | 2024



Fragments of Failed Policing in Uvalde	2
A Club No One Wants be a Part of	8
The Monuments of Uvalde	18
The Mental Health Pandemic in Texas	24

Cover photo:
A cross adorned with the word “hero” and an assortment
of flowers among other memorial crosses around
a fountain in Uvalde. (Brenda Larin)

Fragments of Failed Policing in Uvalde

WRITTEN BY JAZ MENDEZ

The Uvalde Police Department has been on the lookout for new hires in recent months.

Near the men's bathroom is a locked entrance for duty dispatchers and command staff. A hand-written poster displays a quote from the Uvalde Dispatch. It reads:

"Sometimes the most real things in the world are the HEROES we can't see..."

There are about 41 sworn officers on the Uvalde police force, according to a promotional flier posted to the UPD's Facebook page. The department is well-equipped, with a fleet of Ford Explorers and Chevrolet Tahoes carrying computers, rifles and traffic radars.



An officer can earn up to \$25.45 per hour, or less than \$50,000 per year.

The minimum wage in Uvalde is just \$7.25.

Eligibility requirements include a high school diploma or GED, a valid Texas driver's license with a good driving record, and online certification from the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement, the regulatory agency for law enforcement officers and standards in Texas. Law enforcement experience is preferred.

The hiring process takes upwards of two months to complete.

Around the holidays, new officers may take part in "trunk-and-treat", a community event where children are given Halloween candy. Last year's "trunk-and-treat" was held at Hillcrest Memorial Funeral Home,

across the street from Robb Elementary School.

Fernando Fernandez is the UPD's public information officer. His LinkedIn profile features a Blue Lives Matter flag. Fernandez said trunk-and-treat and toy drives were part of the department's efforts to rebuild its relationship with the community.

Like many personnel at the UPD, Fernandez is new. He is required to confirm any decision related to public relations with the chief of police, then Daniel Rodriguez.

After several emails and a phone call, Fernandez declined a formal interview and tour of the station, relaying his response through the Eisenberg Group, a public relations agency based in San Antonio, on Jan. 9, 2024.

The agency's president and chief communications

strategist Gina Eisenberg said the department automatically declines to respond to any mention of school shootings and May 24.

Robb, where two teachers and 19 students were gunned down on May 24, 2022, is just a three minute drive from the UPD station. To reach Robb, a police cruiser has to make two turns, a right and left, before reaching the school.

Most responders came from United States Customs and Border Protection in Uvalde, Eagle Pass, Brackettville, or Del Rio, which is 70 miles away.

A total of 26 UPD officers responded.

Soon, about 380 officers from 24 agencies would be on the scene. Despite their numbers, police were unable to stop the shooter, who was barricaded with an AR-15-style rifle inside adjoining classrooms 111 and 112.

It would



Outside the Uvalde Police Department. (Brenda Larin)



Cross shows tattoo of the bullet that
killed his son. (Brenda Larin)



take officers over 77 minutes to finally stop the shooter.

"The most significant failure was that responding officers should have recognized the incident as an active shooter situation," said a report by the United States Department of Justice published January.

The report also details the minute-by-minute breakdown of events.

The shooter arrived inside Robb around 11:33 a.m. after shooting his grandmother and running his grandfather's truck into a ditch behind the school.

Students at Robb had just celebrated an end-of-the-year awards ceremony that morning.

After the ceremony, students in room 111 were handed their favorite snacks—Takis and Hot Cheetos—while their teacher Arnulfo Reyes played a movie as he entered final grades on his computer.

"We were just sitting there and then we heard the loud bangs," Reyes said on an episode of KARMAKORNER, a podcast started by community activists Adam Martinez and James Alvarado.

The podcast features stories from Robb survivors and the families who lost loved ones.

Reyes was shot when he tried to close a connecting door between rooms 111 and 112. He was forced to play dead as the shooter tortured Reyes by pouring water over him and dropping his cellphone, dinging with messages from concerned friends, on his body.

"I fell to the ground and then he came around to the other side and he shot under the tables where my students were at," Reyes said. "I figured that he had, you know, killed them because there were a lot of shots."

All of Reyes' students in room 111 were killed.

UPD Dispatch received a call from inside room 112 at around 12:10 p.m. The call would last less than 30 minutes. An agitated 11-year-old Khloie Torres pleaded with officers to help, confirming that some students and a wounded teacher were still alive.

"Please hurry, there's a lot of dead bodies," Torres whispered.

Students could be heard crying and moaning in the background.

"You need to tell them that they need

to be quiet," the dispatcher said.

"I am. I am. I'm telling everybody to be quiet and now nobody is listening to me," Torres said in despair.

She asked them to hurry because her teacher, later identified as Eva Mireles, was about to die and would not stay quiet. Mireles would exchange several messages with her husband Ruben Ruiz, a former Uvalde CISD officer, who was in the hallway during her final moments.

"They're inside of the building, okay? You need to stay quiet, okay?" the dispatcher said.

Torres continued on the line.

Shot inside the classroom went off around 12:21 p.m. The call dropped at 12:28 p.m.

A border patrol agent eventually killed the shooter around 12:50 p.m. after two teachers and eight students were killed in room 112.

Chaos continued after police let those fateful 77 minutes pass.

The DOJ report found that officers failed to protect the crime scene, provide adequate medical response to wounded victims or convey accurate information to parents.

"The families have not received transparent, trauma-informed, or compassionate communications," the report said. "Several family members expressed that they still do not know what happened to their child, that they still do not have an autopsy report, and that their trust in the leadership of Uvalde is gone."

Brett Cross, father of Uziyah "Uzi" Garcia, says he and his wife Nikki were on the receiving end of miscommunication. Cross says his son loved Spider-man, the color red and Valentine's Day.

Uzi, who dreamed of becoming a cop, was killed by a bullet wound that ripped through his stomach in room 111. He received his first and last honor roll award the morning of May 24 after years of struggling with failing grades, eczema and a stutter from stress.

"He wasn't just a statistic, he wasn't just a number," Cross said. "He was Uzi."

Cross, who initially moved to Uvalde to work on the town's wind turbines, spearheaded a call for officer indictments in the months after the shooting.

From the UPD, 18 officers are no

**THEY FAILED US ON MAY 24, 2022,
THEY WILL **FAIL** US AGAIN!**



Ruben Nolasco



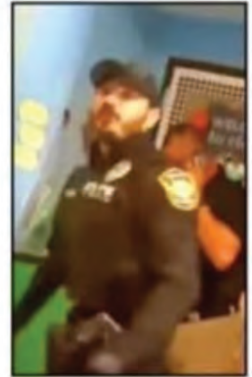
Brandon McCutchen



Emmanuel Zamora



Johnny Field



Max Dorflinger

**Law enforcement officers who fail to protect
and serve don't deserve a second chance.**

ON MARCH 5, VOTE LIKE YOUR LIFE DEPENDS ON IT.

Political ad paid for by Jesse Rizo.

Political advertisement obtained from KARMAKORNER's Instagram story on March 1, 2024.

longer employed. About 14 received Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training, which is an active shooter training. At least three officers were promoted by December 2023, according to the Uvalde Leader-News.

The role of chief-of-police was left to Homer E. Delgado, who previously served in Dilley. Former Chief Daniel Rodriguez, who was out of town during the shooting, left the UPD in April 2024.

Although Austin-based investigator Jesse Prado's report exonerated all UPD responders, Cross, who recently staged a 150 hour sit-out outside the UPD station, and recently elected school board member Jesus "Jesse" Rizo, continued the call for accountability.

"Although the sit-out is done, this fight is never done," Cross said in a TikTok post.

He recently celebrated a day of honor for Uzi on May 13, 2024. Hundreds of people shared photos wearing Spiderman, the color red or their favorite basketball gear.

Cross says he grieves the loss of his son everyday.

"It's a club no parent wants to be a part of," he said.

Underneath the grief and confusion is a community ethnically split in two.

Uvalde's population is about 80 percent Mexican American. White Uvaldeans, who have long dominated the region's economy and politics, make up less than 20%.

"The failures during the response, compounded by the refusal to communicate openly and honestly about the law enforcement response, has weakened many bonds within and between each of these groups," the DOJ report stated.

Host of KARMAKORNER and community leader, Adam Martinez, says police response would have been different if all the students were white.

"How many times have I heard that? But how many times has it been put out there?" Martinez said. "For people to know? They act like it doesn't exist."

A disregard for Mexican lives is not a recent phenomenon in borderland regions.

Intimidation, torture, killing by hang-

ing, shooting, burning and beating were common tactics used by Texas Rangers. During the later half of the 19th century, regions like Uvalde and Rio Grande transformed into political and social boundaries with the arrival of Anglo farm-settlers.

Land values skyrocketed and motivated outside investors to migrate to south Texas, according to Historian Monica Muñoz Martinez. She explains how Anglo settlers initiated a new racial hierarchy in her book, "The Injustice Never Leaves You."

"They ushered in Juan Crow laws of segregation and prohibited interracial marriages, formerly a part of the social fabric in mixed Anglo and Mexican communities," she wrote. "The newcomers moved to disenfranchise Mexican residents and minimize their social or economic influence."

Martinez says Anglos used local and

"This is so uniquely American that I just do not understand."

Brett Cross

Father of Uziyah Garcia

state police to protect their claims to property. They used the Rangers and other police agencies to help wrest economic control from Mexican residents.

"Historians estimate that between August 4, 1915, and June 17, 1916, Texas Rangers and deputy sheriffs killed more than 100 Mexican residents without conducting proper investigations," she wrote.

Today, Cross says Uvalde operates under a good-old-boy system, where power is held by a small group of white elites.

"You have a certain number of people running everything because of the old white money," he said. "So, are you going to speak out against your boss who is paying you minimum wage? No, and they know that so they keep pushing their own narrative onto things."

Social, cultural and political disenfranchisement has left minority communities vulnerable, according to History Professor John Paul Nuño. Nuño teaches at California State University, Northridge and spent eight years in El Paso, Texas to complete his grad work.

"You feel like your Americanness is called into question because you're so close to the border," he said. "People think it's a warzone. So they overcompensate for these native projections that are put on them. You will see American flags, an emphasis on Tejano stuff, and the Alamo."

Nuño believes Texas still upholds a legacy of whiteness.

"Texas had a very violent history towards the Comanches. You had the Texas Rangers," he said. "So you had this imposition of a racial hierarchy that left a lasting impression of the best strategy to appeal to whiteness, rather than to fight and agitate that system."

Change in Uvalde is slow.

Former Uvalde CISD Police Chief Pete Arredondo was fired in August 2022.

Reports revealed that school campus police, who were the first to respond on the scene, received active shooter

training two months before the massacre at Robb but body camera footage from that day showed a confused Arredondo delay a move towards class-

rooms 111 and 112.

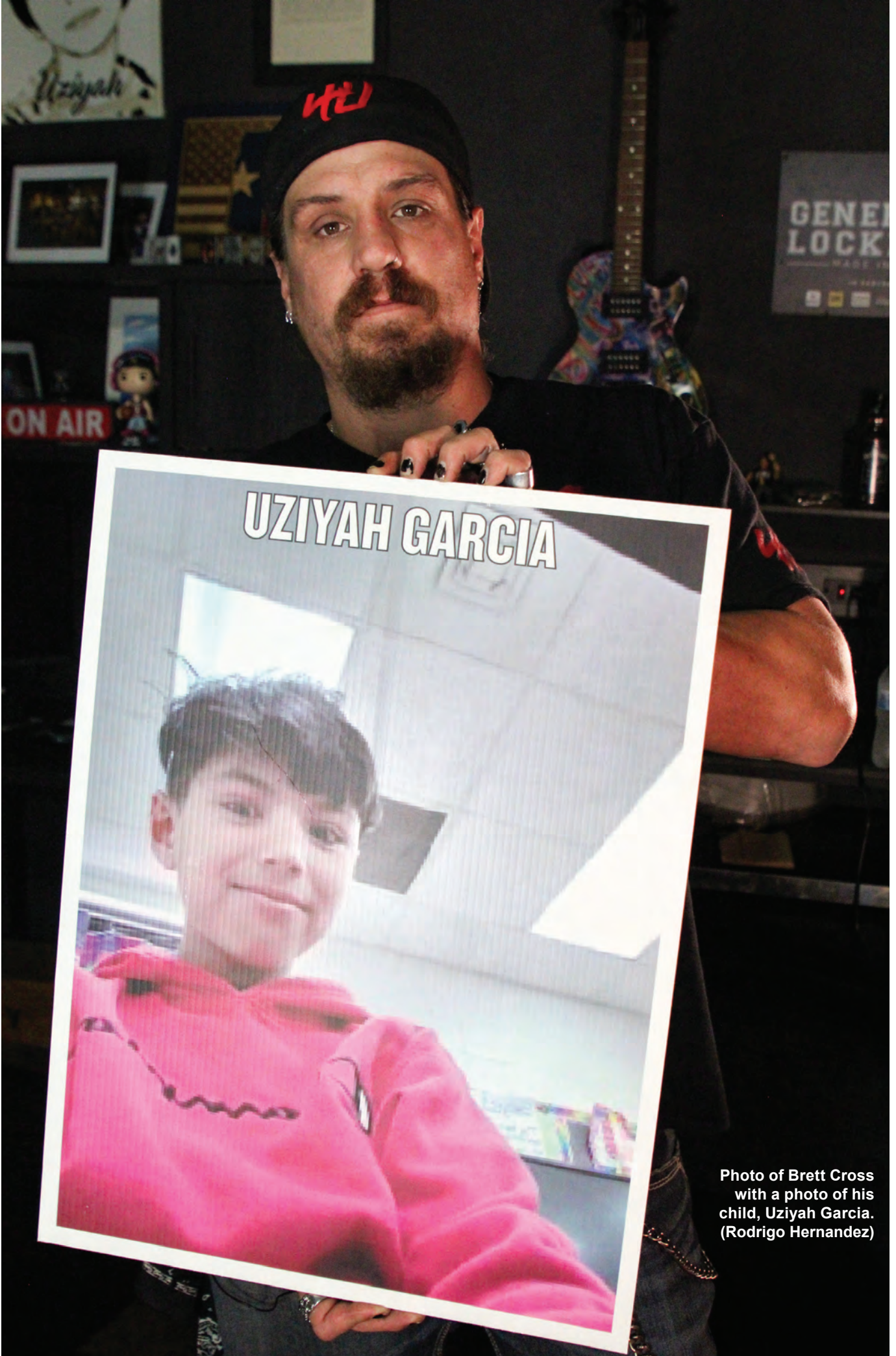
Cross was one of the first parents to organize a sit-out to get Arredondo fired. A handwritten poster, tucked away in Cross's backhouse, remains from those days. It reads: "THERE'S BLOOD'S ON PETE'S HANDS."

Cross has made it his mission to keep the memory of Uzi and the 20 lives lost alive, and to fight for justice and accountability in order to make sure Americans don't forget.

"This is a reality that people across the country have to deal with," Cross said. "This is so uniquely American that I just do not understand."

Nuño says Texas is ground zero of the nation's contemporary political divisions. He is hopeful that political trends may change in the next few years.

"You would hope that events, like the shooting, would maybe energize people a bit more to go out and participate," he said. "I'm still keeping my eye on Texas, because I would like to see what's going to happen in five to 10 years."



UZIYAH GARCIA

Photo of Brett Cross
with a photo of his
child, Uziyah Garcia.
(Rodrigo Hernandez)

A Club No One Wants Wants to be a Part of

WRITTEN BY ELLE LAUR

Grief strikes at the most unexpected times. Never wished for, grief never goes away.

Twenty-one families and dozens more community members in Uvalde, Texas, were forever changed on May 24, 2022, when an 18-year-old went into Robb Elementary School with an AR-15 and killed 19 students and two teachers.

Nothing could've prepared the town of 15,000 for the worst: the pain that comes along with losing a loved one.

Their worlds turned upside down after the police took 77 minutes to enter the classrooms. All the comfort they've ever known and the familiarity of their hometown vanished in those long minutes.

How are the 21 families expected to carry on with their lives now that they have lost their child,

parent, sibling, neighbor or friend? The pain that comes along with grief doesn't disappear the second the funeral is over, or when school goes back after summer break.

After experiencing such a significant loss, simple daily tasks become incredibly overwhelming and seem nearly impossible. Tasks like cooking meals, doing work, getting dressed and even getting out of bed.

Losing someone whose presence is a pillar day-in and day-out brings up emotions and questions too complicated to understand. The unique thing about grief is that no two experiences are alike, even when two parents may be experiencing the loss of their child.

The immense shock of unexpectedly

losing a loved one takes its toll. It is a physical and mental sensation that can be paralyzing. Time begins to move at a different pace and the world looks a little different, even if you've been in the same town your whole life, like many of the people of Uvalde.

Brett Cross lost his 10-year-old son, Uziyah "Uzi," in the shooting. His hands are covered in rings and a chain hangs from his jeans as his glimmering eyes make their way around his home studio, which he has dedicated to his boy. The walls are covered with pictures, posters and graphics all honoring Uzi. Brett's demeanor exudes nothing but a caring soul and a pain to see

but everyone is grieving differently, processing differently and moving forward differently.

The Response

Uvalde experienced a loss so profound and damaging, but the community and greater public weren't always supportive.

After losing their Uzi, Brett and his wife, Nikki, went through what no family should have to experience while grieving.

The Crosses turned to advocacy and protesting. They participated in a sitout in front of the school administration office and after ten days, the district agreed to shut down their school police force.

The Crosses also slept outside of the Uvalde Police Department in mid March for four days to demand termination for officers

Brett Cross
Father of Uziyah Garcia

Landry, Martinez and Canales, who were three of the first eleven officers who entered Robb Elementary and decided not to enter the classrooms to protect the kids.

Last summer, Brett traveled to the Senate Capitol for a six day sit in to demand a vote against assault weapons.

Their protests led to change.

He started protesting downtown a few weeks after Uzi's funeral in June 2022, and the first few days experienced backlash from people passing by him, including getting flipped off and being told to "go back to where you came from."

He is active on social media and gives people a glimpse of what it's like losing a child to gun violence. He is using

"When there is a part of you that is gone for good, there's no getting past that."

change.

He says, through sheer anger, "When there is a part of you that is gone for good, there's no getting past that. You can learn different ways to make it through the day, but that hurt doesn't ever ease up. You just learn how to cope better."

Cross navigates his new normal by remembering Uzi, but also fighting to see change so no other parents experience the pain of losing their child to gun violence.

Grief has no shape. It is abstract. The five stages are a baseline of emotions, but they aren't necessarily experienced in a linear process.

The tragedy that struck the town of Uvalde shook everyone to their core,

his voice to get the message to a wider audience, but the comment section is filled with hate.

“I’ve gotten death threats,” he said. “I’ve had people threaten to kill my whole family and people that use Uzi’s name and picture and say, ‘I hated you,’ ‘I never loved you’ and that ‘he deserved to die.’”

Brett found himself facing reporters every day on his porch and at the town center. They knew where he lived and were looking to speak with him and Nikki.

A few days after the shooting, Brett made his way to the town plaza where 21 crosses were set up to honor those lost in the shooting. Standing in the plaza was a journalist who walked up to him and apologized for his loss, before proceeding to point a camera at his face.

With anger in his voice, Brett told the reporter to put the camera down, to which the reporter replied, “Hey, man, don’t be mad at me. I didn’t pull the trigger.”

Their privacy was stripped away — something they shouldn’t have to worry about after losing their son, who was their light and motivation. They had some initial support after the shooting, but that support quickly fizzled and it became incredibly difficult to find peace in their own home.

Arnie Reyes, the only survivor from classroom 111, lost his nine students that horrific day in May. Reyes sustained serious injuries from gunshot wounds on his left arm and back, leaving his arm paralyzed. Reyes underwent numerous surgeries and still struggles to get his physical therapy and treatment covered financially.

“I didn’t feel support from [the Uvalde Independent School District]. They never called to check up on me,” he says. “So as far as support, I mean, I’ve pretty much been on my own and I feel that way. I don’t think my life matters to them.”

After losing a loved one and experiencing trauma to this degree, others’ actions become significantly more noticeable. Reyes, the families and other teachers who will forever feel immense pain and heartache, were thrown into paralyzing fear and uncertainty.

Nicole Ogburn, a 4th grade teacher of 10 years at Robb Elementary School and Uvalde Elementary, expresses the complex variety of reactions she received immediately following the shooting as the two-year-anniversary of the tragedy approaches.

Ogburn was on campus at the time of the shooting and lost many students that she supported through the ups and downs of 4th grade. She also lost her co-teaching partners and two of her best friends, Irma Garcia and Eva Mireles.

After the shooting, Ogburn struggled to do daily activities and get back into her routine. It was her neighbors and friends who picked her up and helped her, her husband and their two daughters. Ogburn says her neighbors provided food for them for three weeks after the shooting when she was struggling to eat, sleep and do other bare necessities amidst the numbness that took over.

Ogburn found glimpses of support from not only friends and neighbors, but also local shops including H-E-B, Uvalde’s only grocery store. H-E-B recognized the state of distress and provided teachers with gift cards to spend on groceries and gas, as some, including Ogburn, couldn’t go back to work due to anxiety, depression and PTSD.

On the other hand, Ogburn had an influx of negativity online and in person. Ogburn received comments on her social media, with people saying, “just move on,” questioning “why are you so upset?”

She was also told she isn’t a survivor.

The Signs

There are signs. Signals. Messages.

These signs can come at random times, but also appear when needed the most. They are little reminders that loved ones are still present.

After seven years teaching at Robb alongside Eva and Irma, Ogburn felt a huge absence when she returned to teaching — one of the hardest decisions she has had to face. Navigating her return to school included adjusting to leaving her daughters at home, her two best friends not teaching beside her, a new sense of urgency for safety over education and a new class of 4th graders who had the fear of a person walking on



Close up and portrait of fourth grade surviving teacher Nicole Ogburn. (Rodrigo Hernandez)





Memorials of Uziyah Garcia.
(Rodrigo Hernandez)

campus with a gun at any point.

In this new chapter, Ogburn kept her heart open to Eva and Irma in any way she could. Their presence was a lot closer than she realized, until she entered her classroom on a random Friday last year and found a butterfly flying overhead.

Unsure of how the monarch found its way into her classroom, Ogburn knew it was there for a reason. The class tried to catch it to release it outside but Ogburn instructed her students to leave the butterfly alone and to not touch it.

She left for the weekend and when they returned on Monday, the butterfly was still there. It had no food, water or sunlight, but continued to flutter around the space. The butterfly disappeared in a day or two and she hasn't seen it since.

"We always think that it was Eva or Irma flying around our classroom, watching over us," she says.

The day after the butterfly disappeared, Ogburn got her first ever tattoo of two butterflies.

Like Ogburn, Nikki Cross finds signs from her sweet Uzi in nature, including cardinals and spiders.

"I've always been told that cardinals are our visitors, our loved ones," she says. "Last year, especially in the summertime, there's a cardinal that did not leave our house. It flew around the pool, the front porches, like he wants you to know he's there, and that really reminds me of Uziyah so much."

The cardinal, Uzi's favorite bird, found its way to Nikki just about every day last summer and had the energy Uzi exuded in his 10 short years. Not only was its energy similar to Uzi's, but the cardinal was red, Uzi's favorite color, as well as Spider-Man's color, an important note from his mother.

"There are little moments throughout the day where I'm like, 'That was Uzi, that was you baby.'"

Uzi was a brave and caring kid, much like Spider-Man. He wanted to protect those around him and one day become a police officer so he could protect for a living. Uzi introduced Spider-Man to

the people around him, including the people who continue to love him.

Uzi was cremated, but Nikki and Brett decided to lay a headstone to honor him and provide a place for people to visit and pay their respects. His headstone is accompanied by a stone bench with elaborate engravings of things he loved about life.

The wind shakes the windchimes in the trees near his headstone, surrounded by his classmates and teachers who also lost their lives on that horrifying day in 2022.

Resting on the bench, sitting next to Nikki and Brett, is a spider. Rather than being alarmed, Nikki finds comfort in the little arachnid that now reminds her of Uzi's immense love and bravery. One hour, two hours, five hours later, and the spider still sits on the bench.

A little spider has the power to bring Uzi's family back to the 10 years they were graced by his love and light. The spiders they come across may be an immediate reminder of the heart-wrenching pain they must face every day, but are also a connection to him and the legacy of strength he leaves behind.

Signs and messages from loved ones who have passed can be a brutal re-

"I want my son to be remembered."

Brett Cross

Father of Uziyah Garcia

minder that they are gone, but they also bring a sense of comfort knowing that their presence lingers on.

Moving Forward, Not Moving On

"Move on."

"Get over it."

The families and survivors heard these words over and over. They know that "moving on" is not an option; but rather, they will "move forward."

Life continues.

Ogburn returned to the classroom to show her students that they can also go back to school, even if it seems impossible. Her priority has slightly shifted away from teaching and more towards safety. Teaching will always matter, she says, but she's more aware of sounds. She looks out the windows and double checks the doors.

The Uvalde Independent School District closed the Robb Elementary campus after the shooting, leaving many teachers, students and community members feeling like a piece of their town's history was stripped away.

Ogburn wasn't comfortable going back on campus, so the relocation to Uvalde Elementary was welcomed, but she hoped they would keep Robb as the school's name because it played such a large role in the community. Ogburn referred to the close knit community as the "Robb Mob," but the state blocked their chances of keeping the name.

"It's never going to completely go away, but we have to learn to live our lives in this new normal that we have, but it's always in the back of my mind," she says. "Not a day goes by that I don't think about it."

Ogburn finds purpose in keeping the memory of her two best friends alive. She does so by considering what they'd say while making lesson plans for her classes and participating in activities they loved.

Before the shooting, Eva was planning a 5k run for teachers to help them exercise more. Ogburn hopes to train and run a 5k alongside her coworkers, in honor of her best friend.

Jewelry and tattoos are also reminders for Ogburn. She wears a maroon bracelet she

bought for her class after the shooting, which she held a fundraiser for in order to treat her students. She also wears a charm bracelet with angel wings and slogans like, "She believed, so she did," and "Shine bright like a diamond," which was Eva's theme song.

Lastly, Ogburn wears a butterfly bracelet in memory of her student, Makenna Lee Elrod. Makenna used to go up to Ogburn every day and ask her for a hug. This special moment sparked Ogburn to get a butterfly bracelet not just for herself, but also for Makenna's entire family.

Brett and Nikki find their own unique ways to keep Uzi's memory alive amidst the pain.

"I want my son to be remembered," Brett says.



Uziyah Garcia's headstone was ready for Valentine's Day. (Rodrigo Hernandez)

He will never give up fighting for Uzi's legacy and the change that he and the 20 other souls deserved on that dark day.

"A quote I love is, 'You're not truly gone until the last person who remembers you dies.' He wasn't just a number. He wasn't just kid number 19 in the Uvalde shooting. He was Uzi. And that's what above everything else I want to get out there because he didn't deserve that. No child deserves that."

Cross wants to see gun laws changed and restrictions placed on assault rifles so no other parent has to feel the same pain he feels. Cross participated in two

sit-outs in the city to raise attention to the police officers and others who need to be held accountable.

"I'm not fighting solely for Uziyah. He's gone, nothing I do can bring him back," he says to other parents who question why he participates in protests. "I'm fighting so that you don't have to end up in this place."

Cross also honors his son through art. He produces music that reflects his experience as a grieving parent and a parent who lost a child to gun violence. His latest song *Imagine* is a call for people to care about children's

safety. Through his lyrics, Brett asks his listeners to put themselves in his shoes for the song's four minutes.

Alongside his music, Cross expresses his feelings through tattoos he's gotten over the years. Each tattoo reflects a message that is meaningful to his relationship with Uzi, as well as his commitment to ending gun violence.

Both Brett and Nikki continue to include Uzi in any way they can. They get him gifts and decorate his headstone for every holiday.

"As his mom, it's the only thing I can really give him anymore. I don't buy



him shoes or clothes or games or toys so these are the things for him now: flowers and decorations.”

His friends and family left him Valentine’s cards last year, Uzi’s favorite holiday. So this year, Nikki made a box for people to place their cards.

“He was such a fantastic kid. I just want the whole world to know everything about him,” Nikki says.

The Crosses don’t want the rest of the world to remember Uzi as one of the 21 lives that was lost in the Uvalde shooting, but they want their son to be remembered by his kindness and big heart.

Pastor Daniel Myers of Tabernacle of Worship joined Brett and other community members in speaking, demanding change. But he had to take a step back because of the fatigue that came along with the constant rejection and negativity. Pastor Myers continues to show up for the families and helps keep the 21 lives remembered.

“I didn’t push church or religion on them,” Pastor Myers says. It was important to him, as the community attempted to heal, that the families knew he was in their corner. “I don’t know your pain, but I stand with you in your pain,” he told them.

For Reyes, moving forward looked different. While he still works hard in physical therapy two years later, Reyes couldn’t go back to teaching and had to turn to alternative outlets.

“I was the only one that survived in my classroom,” Reyes says. “I’m not too sure yet if I will return because of the environment, and I haven’t been in a classroom setting where I’m in charge of so many students, so I’m not sure yet if I can still handle that.”

Reyes tapped into his love for plants and put all of his energy into running his nursery, a shop he opened before the





Portrait of Arnie Reyes in his nursery and a close up of his bag. (Rodrigo Hernandez)

shooting. His nursery is a bright space filled with luscious plants and hand-made pots. He collects and sells pots that are made in Mexico and also puts his own projects on display.

Running the shop allowed him to work on a schedule that supported him and his family. Creativity became a source of peace for Reyes, whether it's painting or working in the nursery. It became therapeutic.

Reyes saw a decrease in local support after the shooting and his customers shifted more to tourists who wanted to meet him. Reyes continues to run his nursery, paint and sell handmade proj-

ects to support himself through this new journey of recovery and grief.

Moving on will never be an option for the people of Uvalde. But each day, they take a step forward and learn how to live again.

Ogburn has her bracelet and butterflies. But it doesn't take away from the pain of her new reality.

"I don't think people realize we are still going through the motions ourselves," Ogburn says. "This doesn't just go away. This is something that me and these kids will have to live with for the rest of our lives. It will take time to heal but we'll never completely heal from it."



The Monuments of Uvalde

PHOTOGRAPHED BY BRENDA LARIN





Crosses stand around a fountain in Uvalde, each adorned with memorabilia of the victims of the shooting.





All Star

Do what is right and good in the Lord's sight



Murals were painted around the city to commemorate the children.

The Mental Health Pandemic in Texas

The Children of Uvalde Are Not Okay

WRITTEN BY SAVANNAH RAPALLO, YULISSA GARCIA & BRITNEY ORNELAS

On a sunny and windy morning in Uvalde, sun beams illuminate crosses surrounding a water fountain in the middle of the town's central plaza. Some of the crosses have been knocked down by the strong winds that blow through the town.

There are remembrances left by friends, families and strangers who have all felt the impact of the massacre in Uvalde on May 24, 2022, when 21 lives were cut short by an 18-year-old with a military-grade weapon.

Rocks can be found at the base of each cross. Painted different colors, they carry a common message: "Too beautiful for Earth."

The walls of the businesses surrounding the town plaza are painted with

the portraits of the victims. The murals are beautiful, full of color, showing off the victims' personalities. Each has a trifold-shaped memorial with the words "In Loving Memory," adorned with candle-holders and trinkets left by friends and family members.

The mural of Xavier Lopez illustrates his love for music, his excellence in school, and his romance for classmate, Annabell Rodriguez whose mural stands right next to his.

Annabell's mural symbolized her colorful nature by including a blue butterfly. She had a love for creating TikToks and

the cravings for spicy foods.

A heavy feeling is inescapable looking at the children's portraits, as well as the crosses with beautiful messages left by their loved ones. The sound of the water falling from the nearby fountain eases the pain of it all.

There are more than 4,000 students in the Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District in a city with more than 15,000 people. About 7% of Uvalde County's population are children under 5 years old, and about 28% are under the age of 18.

"Children exposed to such traumatic events often experience a heightened state of hyperawareness."

Dr. Arash Javanbakht
Expert in Trauma Research

The psychological effects children endure after a traumatic event are profound, and with Texas ranked 51st in the country for access to mental health, Uvalde was not prepared. Today, the children of Uvalde are not OK. Resources have poured in, but they may not have been enough.

Many Uvalde children are losing sleep, having night terrors and suffering from a loss of appetite, according to Brenda Faulkner, the director of the Children's Bereavement Center, one of the mental health resources available.

Faulkner is a fairly tall woman with

dirty blonde-reddish hair and bangs covering her forehead. Her blue eyes shine with a kindness and compassion that give the impression she is always speaking with a smile.

The students often refuse to go to school, said Faulkner, who also serves as one of the counselors at the center.

"They want to be children again," Faulkner said with tears in her eyes, "and probably one of the big losses is certainly their innocence and their childhood."

The impact of trauma on children

The enduring impacts of gun violence on children — those most vulnerable to the psychological reverberations of gun violence — are profound and multifaceted. Dr. Arash Javanbakht, a leading expert on trauma, has studied those effects.

His work offers a crucial perspective on the issue of post-catastrophe childhood trauma.

Children who have been exposed to traumatic events often experience a state of hyperawareness that can be overwhelming, Javanbakht said. Even the sounds of celebration morph into triggers of profound anxiety.

"A mere backfire of a car or the sharp pop of fireworks can spiral them back into the terror of the moment, a relentless reminder of their ordeal," Javanbakht said.



A mural with doves paired with names in Uvalde. (Rodrigo Hernandez)

But heightened vigilance is just the tip of the iceberg, he added. Pervasive negative emotions can skew a child's perception, casting long shadows over their sense of security.

"The world, through their eyes, becomes a tableau of threats, each more menacing than the last," Javanbakht said.

In Uvalde, just 30 miles from the Eagle Pass border crossing, the wailing sirens and the red, white and blue beams of lights from U.S. Customs and Border Patrol agents chasing vehicles suspected of carrying undocumented migrants can also act as triggers.

The chases are called "bailouts" because when the vehicle eventually stops, or crashes, the occupants bail out and scatter. These incidents put Uvalde's schools in a state of lockdown, the same response it would have for an active shooter.

Prior to the mass shooting, the number of bailouts increased significantly in Uvalde, prompting dozens of lockdowns, including on the morning of the

mass shooting.

Students became desensitized to the frequent incidents prior to the massacre. Today the sirens threaten to retraumatize them.

Psychological burdens don't end with altered perceptions and anxiety. Survivor's guilt emerges as a crippling force, compelling young survivors to wrestle with burdensome questions about why they survived when others perished. "Why me?" becomes a recurring refrain, adding emotional weight to their already fragile psyches.

Dealing with the Emotional Aftermath

Trauma survivors also develop an intense fear of separation, Javanbakht said. "The anxiety of losing another loved one becomes a pervasive specter, one that clings tightly and stirs panic at the thought of parting, even if briefly."

Javanbakht said that these problems can develop from their depression and ultimately interfere with an ability to perform typical childhood activities.

"Trauma-induced depression is par-

ticularly insidious," Javanbakht said, "as it stealthily compromises various aspects of a child's life, from school performance to social interactions."

Given these profound challenges, towns like Uvalde need resources to address the mental health needs of its young people. The community's response, including counseling services and outreach programs, is critical in determining the path to recovery.

"Recovery is communal," Javanbakht emphasized. "Schools and community groups are instrumental in orchestrating a supportive atmosphere that fosters healing. Group-based interventions, in particular, can reinforce feelings of safety and rebuild the sense of control that trauma seeks to destroy."

Javanbakht's work shines a light on the crucial support necessary for the psychological recovery of children post-trauma. In the aftermath of such tragedy, the collective effort to ensure that no child navigates their trauma in solitude is essential.

John Woodrow Cox is a staff writer



HOPE FOR UVALDE

Top left: A monument in Uvalde. Bottom right: Painted rocks in Uvalde. (Rodrigo Hernandez)

at the Washington Post who has studied gun violence and the threat it poses to the country. Cox said the harsh reality of the new American culture, which has seen more than 400 school shootings since Columbine in 1999, can create trauma and fear in children. The anxiety they have to endure just going to school can be devastating, he said.

“There really is nowhere we could go where we feel like we won’t experience that, including churches and movie theaters, obviously schools, malls,” Cox continued, “There’s nowhere a gun might not show up.”

With each new school shooting, the fear that this may happen at any school undermines the idea of school as a place where children feel safe.

“Often we only assess the severity of a shooting or gun violence in America by how many people die. But that number is huge. It’s enormous,” he said. “But it ignores the people who were wounded and didn’t die.

“It ignores all the people who witnessed gun violence,” he continued. “It ignores the people who lost someone to gun violence. It ignores children in schools where lockdowns occur. It

ignores children in schools where actual school shootings occurred, but those kids were not physically harmed.”

Uvalde: Crisis in a Mental Health Desert

Texas is known for issues of access to health services, particularly in rural areas like Uvalde.

The state has one of the nation’s highest percentages of uninsured residents, according to U.S. Census Bureau data.

About 18% of residents are uninsured statewide, which includes nearly 19% of the city of Uvalde, and 24% of Uvalde County, according to Census data. The national average is around 8%.

Data from the Texas Department of State Health found that 98% of all counties in Texas have a shortage of mental health professionals. Two-thirds of Texas’ licensed psychologists and over half of the states’ licensed psychiatrists and social workers work in urban areas.

The people seeking mental health resources in rural areas are left having to travel long distances to get professional care, leaving small towns like Uvalde traveling over an hour and a half to secure the help they need.

Residents’ economic resources are

also a challenge. About 20% of Uvalde’s population lives below the poverty line, including 39% of children. The national average is about 12.5%, according to data from the Census Bureau.

The city received an outpouring of support that coalesced for the children in the form of a therapy center, community events and other activities meant to help the survivors feel normalcy. The Children’s Bereavement Center is a small white building down the block from the plaza lined with the children’s crosses dedicated to this purpose.

The center serves all South Texans between the ages of 3 and 24 affected by a loss of a family member or loved one by providing ongoing support groups, individual and family counseling, and professional education and training programs.

With the help of donors like Georgia Pacific and several communities in the San Antonio area, the center opened up June 23, 2023, a year after the tragedy, in a renovated space near St. Philips Episcopal Church, which donated the building.

Faulkner said the Children’s Bereavement Center expanded its

mission in Uvalde to include anyone who was affected by the shooting. The center provides grief therapy using a counseling model created by psychologist William Worden, she added.

Worden established a framework of four tasks to help people through their grief. The first task is to accept the reality of loss. Next is to process the pain of grief, followed by adjustment to a world without the deceased. The final task is to find an enduring connection with the deceased in the midst of embarking on a new life.

The ultimate goal of the bereavement center is to help people recognize and understand the grief they are going through, to stabilize and preserve family relationships, and develop healthy coping skills after the death of a loved one, Faulkner said.

Healing in Stages

Physical activity and outdoor play has become a crucial part in the healing process for the children.

"We do a lot of expressive arts with them. We'll play games with them. We have journals that we do with them just to get them talking," Faulkner said. "The biggest service we provide is giving them 45 minutes to an hour. And it's all about them. It's not about their deceased cousin or sister or brother or the shooting or school. It's all about them, what's going on."

Faulkner described one shooting survivor who was nonverbal at home, but when the child's mother asked if he spoke during therapy, the answer was always yes, Faulkner said.

"He's getting more and more familiar. He didn't want to be away from his mom the first time. And so it's his time. He comes at 6 p.m. in the evening and he walks in the front door with this huge smile on his

face. I'll ask him something, and he'll go, 'Mmm,' until we get into whatever play activity or whatever art activity," Faulkner said.

Play wasn't originally part of the therapeutic response because many Robb students had to run across a playground to get to safety that day. But outdoor play was added to their recovery journey when the center held a "grief" camp that reunited dozens of children who were students at Robb Elementary.

The four-day camp allowed children to engage in expressive arts, music and sports. NBA point guard, Tre Jones, of the San Antonio Spurs donated \$25,000 to the center during the camp's sports day.

"We expanded our mission in Uvalde to include anybody that was affected by the raw mass violence."

Brenda Faulkner

Director of Programs of the Children's Bereavement Center

The children participated in a half-day basketball clinic held by the Spurs. They shot some hoops with the players and received plenty of memorabilia and autographed goodies.

"The giggling and the laughing — it was just a beautiful thing to see. And their favorite thing to do at a grief camp, because you can imagine, was playing outside. They wore out two wiffle ball sets because they wanted to be together and they wanted to play," Faulkner said with a smile.

Thinking about helping the children left her choked up.

"Very few people get the opportunity to do their life's work, and I'm getting that opportunity. I couldn't be more blessed for it," Faulkner said, as she wiped the tears falling down her

cheek.

Raising Awareness

Hector Gonzales, president of Southwest Texas Junior College, sat in his swivel chair behind a large square desk. Behind him was a framed picture that read, "Restore you and make you strong," something the people of Uvalde have been trying to do for two years now.

Gonzales talked about the camp he created for children and a fair where families could learn about the help that's out there for them.

"Uvalde is a tight-knit community — the shooting hit a small community hard and impacted everybody and everything," said Gonzales.

The college hosted a resource fair in June 2022, intending to help a community grieving and looking for ways to cope, with hundreds of people attending.

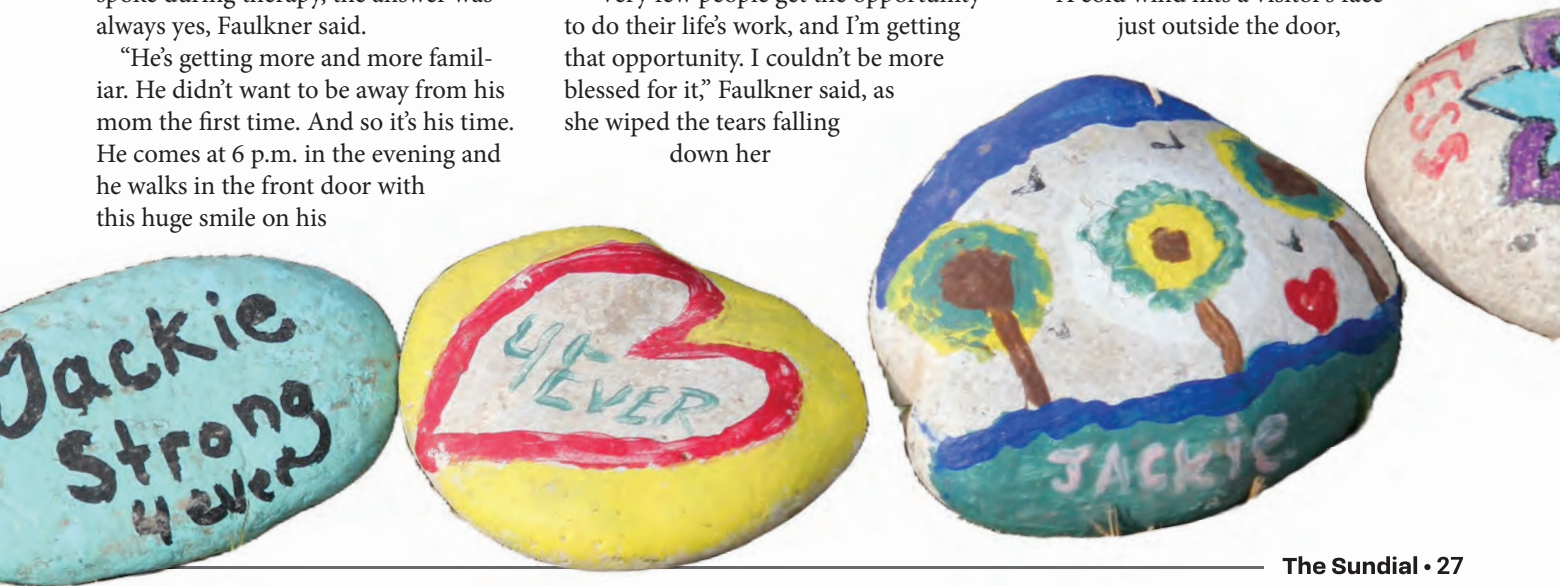
Gonzales said the idea was to make sure the people of the community knew about the resources available.

"We realized that there was no assistance for these families. We tried to bring resources, money for those who couldn't go back to work because their kids couldn't be left alone," he said.

Finding a Safe Space for Survivors, Families

Driving east on Highway 90, which serves as Uvalde's Main Street, fields can be seen on the left, and the Tabernacle of Worship, pastored by the Rev. Daniel Myers, on the right.

A cold wind hits a visitor's face just outside the door,



but warm air envelopes upon entering Myers' tabernacle, where many families of the survivors have found support.

It's a nontraditional church setting — instead of a giant cross on top, the barn-like structure bears a flag on its gate that reads "One Nation Under God."

Inside, the room is divided in half. On one side are tables for people to sit and eat, like a small hole-in-the-wall restaurant, with a few booths and tables in the center.

On the other is where the worship takes place. The podium where the pastor stands is in the middle with chairs surrounding it, leaving an aisle for people to walk through. An American flag hangs on one of the walls

near a huge cross and a thorny crown. Next to that is a picture that reads "Fly High" above the 21 portraits of the lives taken May 24, 2022.

Myers used to be a pastor in Phoenix but moved back to Uvalde with his wife, eventually assuming a voice he never thought he'd have.

After the shooting, Myers was critical of Uvalde police officers, who began to tail him after he started questioning the actions of the police commissioner and the task force that responded on the day of the shooting. "They were following me around," Myers said, adding it took a call to the mayor to get the police to stop.

"I'm the only pastor in Uvalde that sticks out like a sore thumb," he said. "I've lost friends standing up and speaking for the children."

For two years now, Myers has not stopped using his voice for the victims and the survivors, he said. He attends meetings about the massacre and supports the families by making sure they

are aware his services are always available to them whenever.

He did not want to take advantage of their vulnerability or push his beliefs on those that were grieving, he said. He told them that he is there for them and if they want a prayer, or for the pastor to visit their house, he's there.

"I don't know their pain, but I stand with them and their pain," said Myers.

Brett Cross and his wife, Nikki — the parents of Uziyah Garcia, one of the victims — walked into the tabernacle, and once Myers saw them, tears formed instantly.

He hugged them both and said, "This is your house; this is your house."

"I've lost friends standing up and speaking for the children."

Pastor Daniel Myers

Tabernacle of Worship

Myers held a dinner for the survivors and the family members of the victims just to let them know that he, his wife and the church would always be there to support them with anything they needed. He also has hosted professionals, like psychologists, to talk to those who were grieving.

Myers knows the children of Uvalde are still suffering. He hears it from those who have turned to him for words of affirmation through their healing process.

"Kids, 9, 10 years old are wetting the bed," Myers said. "They go out as a family and the child would see somebody that would remind them of the shooter and they would just say, 'I want to go home' — just loud noises, anything, 'I want to go home,' and that hurts," Myers said, with tears in his eyes.

The door to his tabernacle remains open for those who are grieving and are

looking for support as the small town of Uvalde is still on the journey towards recovery.

"Where are we safe now?" Myers asked. "We're not safe anymore."

Healing with Art

Many have struggled to find a safe place, especially the families of the victims and survivors, but they have found comfort around the community in places where they can commemorate those they love and lost.

Abel Ortiz is a Mexican-born artist who lives in Uvalde. He owns an art gallery whose mission is to bring art to rural cities, Ortiz said.

Ortiz strongly believes that images

have power and that they send a message to the heart. He believes that art is therapeutic, which is the reason why he was responsible for the murals painted around Uvalde, com-

memorating the lives lost in the tragic shooting.

"I have to do something about this too," Ortiz said to himself after the shooting, "I want to help the community."

He had the help of artists from around the country who also felt like they needed to do something to help Uvalde recover.

Their contribution became the children's portraits that surround the town plaza.

The murals are intended to help the families heal, and Ortiz feels like they are working. Families are always seen at the murals of their children; some may be having dinner or their morning coffee in front of the murals.

"There is always something new in front of the murals," said Ortiz, "The murals have a lasting power to keep healing."



A mural with colorful illustrations of names in Uvalde. (Rodrigo Hernandez)

