

**OPINION****San Antonio Express-News**

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# As years pass, pride in heroes of 9/11 deepens

More than 20 years later, the memory remains as vivid as the reality that spawned it.

A clear, sunny morning turned dark when two planes slammed into the twin towers on Sept. 11, 2001, in New York City. The attack was followed by two more, in Pennsylvania and the Pentagon in Virginia. Millions of Americans saw it on television, stricken with horror, grief and disbelief.

The numbness, the emotional paralysis, lasted days. And then it happened — tragedy galvanized unity. Love and hope emerged from the ashes. The nation came together, unified by a sense of compassion for the victims and their loved ones and by the bond that makes us who we are — Americans, all of us, Black and white, rich and poor, liberal and conservative. It was the country at its finest.

It has been 22 years since the two planes slammed into the World Trade Center in New York. Since passengers overpowered terrorists over the skies of Shanksville, Pa., forcing another plane to slam into an empty field. Since yet another plane crashed into the Pentagon in Arlington.

9/11. All three planes were commercial flights hijacked by terrorists in the worst attack on U.S. soil since Pearl Harbor. Almost 3,000 people were killed, men and women made of flesh and blood. But something more ephemeral, more transitory, died that day — our sense of peace and security.

If we were assaulted on a working day, a day like any other, could we ever feel safe again? This was the fear that invaded our minds that day. This was the fear that made America, the most powerful nation on the planet, feel small and vulnerable.

It did not last, that feeling of hopelessness. And on the anniversary of 9/11, we remember the tragedy and the reaction to the tragedy: the courage that represented the best of this great nation.

America showed what America can do; in one of our darkest hours, our brothers and sisters delivered.

Of the more than 2,800 who died that day, more than 400 were first responders, mostly firefighters and police officers. They rushed into a fiery tomb, aware of their likely fate. Their nobility grows as the years pass.

Americans donated millions of dollars to help survivors and loved ones, including free counseling.

Others extended their help beyond the victims of 9/11, including the parents of Peter C. Alderman, who was killed while attending a breakfast conference on the top floor of one of the towers.

The Aldermans received \$1.4 million through the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund from the federal government, money they used to help



Getty Images file photo

**New York City firefighters embrace during rescue operations at the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001. Their courage represents the best of America.**

set up a foundation for victims of depression and mental illness throughout the world.

"This is something we've found tremendously helpful," Dr. Stephen Alderman, a retired radiation oncologist, said, calling his work for the foundation a full-time job. "I think of my son all the time while I'm doing this. My son Pete was a terrific guy, and he would love this."

For Durrell "Bronko" Pearsall, a firefighter with Ladder Company 133 in Queens, 9/11 was the only day of his career. Pearsall died trying to save others during his first day on the job.

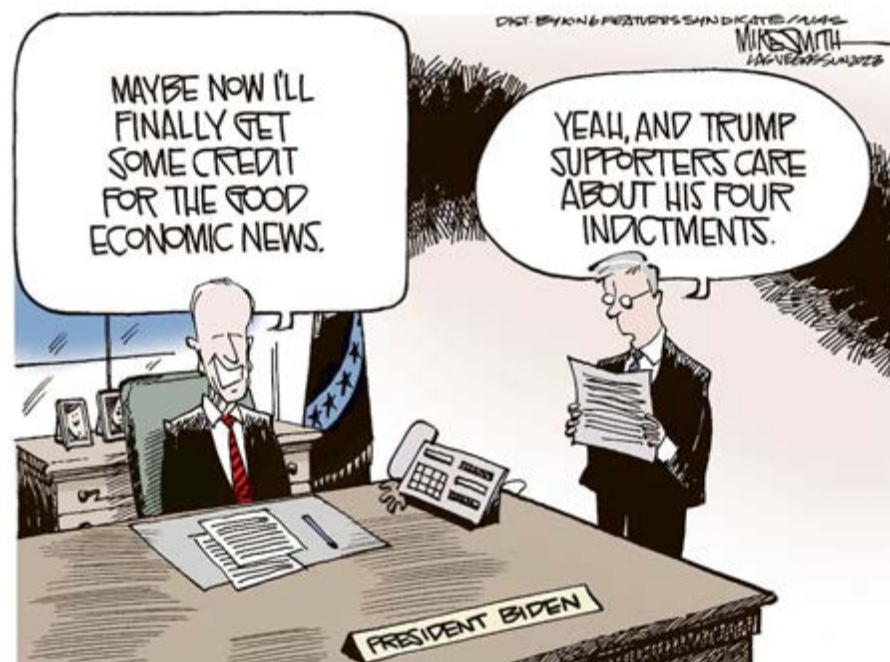
Today, we are justifiably proud of Pearsall and his fellow first responders, along with the millions who responded in their hour of need. But one of the great tragedies of 9/11 is that the unity that linked the nation did not last.

We have devolved into a nation at war with itself; political division infects our discussions, a toxic environment in which differences are settled by violence and mayhem — witness the Jan. 6, 2021, assault on the Capitol.

A catastrophe united us 22 years ago. Perhaps we can rekindle the love, empathy and wisdom in the aftermath of 9/11 to foster a renewed sense of unity.

We hope so.

In one of this nation's darkest hours, its people delivered

**YOUR TURN****What voters deserve**

Recent polls show that duly elected President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump in a virtual tie for the 2024 presidential election.

Trump, twice impeached, also faces four criminal indictments, has authoritarian tendencies, is an anti-democracy advocate, asserts conspiracy theories, incites insurrections and is morally deficient. However, 40% of American voters are his ardent supporters and are convinced he won the 2020 election.

If a majority of swing, undecided, independent and Green Party voters cower and are convinced that Trump is better qualified to be elected president in 2024, then Americans deserve what they get.

So much for the great American democratic experience.

Juan Serda

**Where did leaders go?**

Re: "A right to criticize justice," Your Turn, Sept. 3:

The letter writer is to be commended for his comments concerning the

unethical behavior of a member of our highest court.

Wonder if there is a pattern of such aberrant behavior among those who believe their "special" title exempts them from living up to the highest standards expected by the citizens.

When I was younger, I looked up to our leaders in Washington, D.C., as the "best of the best." Today, I wonder where they all went.

Tom Staley

**Not Senate material**

Re: "Biker lawyer" joins race to unseat Cruz," News, Wednesday:

The story in Wednesday's paper concerning Nueces County District Attorney Mark Gonzalez was interesting, but not complete.

The district attorney, who resigned, was facing a citizen-led petition to remove him from office. Concerns included dereliction of duty, high rate of criminal dismissals, mishandling of murder cases, mishandling of evidence and failing to pursue charges against violent offenders.

Now he wants to be a senator?

Richard Tondre



Verónica G. Cárdenas/New York Times

**A reader points out the controversy surrounding former Nueces County District Attorney Mark A. Gonzalez, who is now running for the U.S. Senate.**

**GUIDELINES FOR LETTERS**

Send letters to: Letters@express-news.net. Letters may also be mailed to Letters, Express-News, P.O. Box 2171, San Antonio, TX 78297. Include your address and daytime phone number. Length? The shorter, the better — long enough to make your point. All letters are subject to editing for length and clarity.

**ANOTHER VIEW**

# New law empowers those who fight human trafficking

By **Adriana McKinnon**  
FOR THE EXPRESS-NEWS



After a Texas legislative session rife with political maneuvers, the victims of human and sex trafficking, and those aiding

their recovery have reason to see a silver lining.

This session's omnibus human trafficking bill, SB 1527, filed by state Sen. Joan Huffman and sponsored by Rep. Senfronia Thompson and others, survived the rigors of debate and the governor's pen. The law took effect Sept. 1 and includes four key changes that will serve this vulnerable population.

Human trafficking includes labor or sexual exploitation by force, fraud or coercion, or the

commercial sexual exploitation of a child, according to the Texas Human Trafficking Prevention Task Force. Though an underreported crime, human trafficking statistics included nearly 1,000 case reports in Texas in 2020, the majority involving sex trafficking, according to the task force.

This law offers hope for greater prevention and legal remedies for those working with trafficking survivors, including at the Youth Center of Texas, where I serve as president and CEO of a residential program for young women who have survived sex trafficking.

The bill adds two agencies to the task force created in 2009 to address the state's human trafficking crisis. The Texas Education Agency and the Texas Department of Transportation will help examine the link be-

tween trafficking and massage businesses.

Already, the law stipulates that massage parlors cannot locate in a school zone, but it is well-known that recruitment for sex trafficking can occur within a school among peers. A common pattern is for the trafficker to convince those being trafficked to recruit friends. Educators must know the warning signs and how to take action.

TxDOT is also an essential addition to the task force since human trafficking, including sex trafficking, is a transitory crime. Victims are often moved around to make the crime more difficult to track.

Related to the mobile nature of the crime, another protection built into the bill is to flag the driver's license of anyone convicted of trafficking, which

could help identify repeat offenders.

The bill also elevates to a first-degree felony the trafficking of victims with significant disabilities, either physical or intellectual, whether or not the perpetrator knows of the disability at the time of the offense. This would help protect those most vulnerable to victimization.

An individual in a wheelchair may not be able to escape. Someone with an intellectual disability — including PTSD, schizophrenia or bipolar disorder — may not be able to communicate what's happening to them. Most of our clients at the Youth Center of Texas who have survived sex trafficking have a mental health diagnosis.

The final advancement in this law creates a new penal code offense for "child grooming,"

Grooming, such as enticing, persuading or coercing a child to engage in sexual conduct, can happen months or years before the abuse or trafficking offense occurs. This new offense importantly recognizes a component of abuse and trafficking that had never before been defined as a crime in Texas.

With this new law, the public still has a role to play. Together, we can recognize the signs of trafficking to protect our most vulnerable citizens. By strengthening the connections between systems, as this law does, and educating ourselves, the network will more likely prevent these crimes.

Adriana McKinnon is president and CEO of the nonprofit Youth Center of Texas, a specialized support program for sex trafficking survivors in San Antonio.