

Photographs by GARY CORONADO Los Angeles Times

AFTER getting help in an evangelical program, a gang member changed his life in Santa Ana, El Salvador.

Freed by the church, imprisoned by politics

Gang members turn to evangelical pastors for rehabilitation, but then are netted in El Salvador's crackdown on L.A.-born criminal organizations

BY LEILA MILLER
REPORTING FROM SAN SALVADOR

The MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs fought on the street outside Eben-ezer Baptist Church for years. Neighbors lost children. Pastor Nelson Moz led prayer services over the crackle of gunshots.

When a young man just out of prison came to Moz in 2012, saying he'd found God and wanted to leave his gang, the pastor agreed to help. Moz put a mattress in his church office so the budding evangelical could stay out of the gang's path.

Word soon spread, and others seeking to abandon their

criminal lives started showing up at the church, in a working-class San Salvador neighborhood. Mattresses crowded the floor, eventually replaced by bunk beds. The men, covered in gang tattoos, made pastries and garlic bread out of a makeshift bakery in the church's basement. They walked gang neighborhoods, preaching the Gospel through megaphones.

Twenty-five men at a time stayed at the church. Dozens more filtered through, seeking redemption.

Last spring, it all came to an

abrupt halt.

Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele declared a crackdown on gangs, directing lawmakers to pass a state of emergency suspending some constitutional rights. Police started arresting anyone who might be connected to a gang, including former members in rehabilitation programs such as Moz's.

Bukele's crackdown is a hit with his compatriots. With more than 67,000 people arrested and a sharp drop in homicides, Salvadorans today

[See El Salvador, A4]



FRANCISCA de Jesus Rivas weeps for her imprisoned husband, José Elvis Reynoza, pictured with her at right. Reynoza broke ties with a gang after he began attending church.



Say a prayer for Texas' public schools

Republicans are pitching voucher programs to combat 'woke agenda'



GENARO MOLINA Los Angeles Times

BRIC TURNER, superintendent of Meadow Independent School District, doesn't buy assurances that a voucher program wouldn't affect public school budgets.

BY NOAH BIERMAN

MEADOW, Texas — Dozens of public school students spend their lunchtime with a guitar-playing Baptist minister, bowing their heads in prayer under a tree by the playground. English classes read Shakespeare and Steinbeck, avoiding works that might draw them into contemporary controversies. Most parents consent to corporal punishment for misbehaving students, though the superintendent says he rarely swats kids with the paddle.

This tiny district in west Texas is hardly a hub of liberal indoctrination.

Yet Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican, is hoping that fear of a "radical woke agenda" in places like this will help him secure a long-elusive goal: a voucher-style program that would award

[See Texas, A8]

A TIMES INVESTIGATION

Lawyer used justice reform to lift inmates' families' hopes

Desperate relatives paid dearly in an often futile effort to free them

BY HARRIET RYAN

When California enacted landmark criminal justice reforms several years ago, inmates and their families saw a chance at freedom.

Aaron Spolin saw a business opportunity.

After the laws went into effect in 2019, the then-33-year-old attorney incorporated a law firm in West Los Angeles and began marketing legal services to the incarcerated and their loved ones.

Spolin, a Princeton-educated former McKinsey consultant, bought up online search terms so that people googling the laws saw ads touting the firm's expertise. He mailed pitch letters directly to some of the state's 100,000 prisoners, introducing himself as a former prosecutor now "in the top 1% among California criminal lawyers" and informing them they might be eligible for "sentence shortening under various new laws."

Nearly 2,000 individuals signed on with Spolin, according to the online resume



Aaron Spolin

SPOLIN denied exploiting inmates and families.

Advertisements raise questions

Spolin calls himself a "top-ranked habeas attorney." Where's the evidence? **CALIFORNIA, B1**

of a former office manager. He became a celebrity inside prisons, his name passed around in exercise yards from Folsom to Calipatria, and in Facebook support groups for wives and children. Families of limited [See Lawyer, A10]

Small-town mayor ascends in House

How did Pete Aguilar, the former leader of Redlands, become one of Congress' most powerful Democrats?

BY BENJAMIN ORESKES

Rep. Pete Aguilar felt the threat rising.

As the House prepared to confirm Joe Biden as the nation's next president on Jan. 6, 2021, and put an end to Donald Trump's false claim that the election was rigged, Aguilar had a great view of the doors Capitol security would barricade to ward off the rioting insurrectionists.

Just before he left the chamber floor and fled for

safety with the rest of House leadership, Aguilar scratched in a little red notebook he had picked up on a trip to Peru something that many members and congressional staff felt that day.

"I'm a little scared."

The Yucaipa native already was a rising star in the Democratic Party and climbing up the leadership ranks. That infamous day supercharged his ascent, first with an appointment to the House committee formed to investigate the attack on the Capitol and then with his election as chair of the House Democratic Caucus. Aguilar is now the third-highest-ranking Democrat in the House of Representatives.

How the former Redlands mayor [See Aguilar, A13]



VIKTORIA CICHÓN For The Times

DISNEYLAND DETAILED

Our great big (highly specific) guide goes in depth to help you plan your happiest visit yet — including how to propose. **WEEKEND, L1**

School book bans on rise in GOP states

Group warns of nearly 30% more incidents as conservatives target materials on LGBTQ, racial issues. **NATION, A6**

U.S. Embassy staff evacuated

In embattled Sudan, the American military has relocated all of the workers, President Biden says. **WORLD, A3**

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Weather

Mostly sunny; cooler. L.A. Basin: 77/57. **B10**



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CALENDAR

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BASQUIAT IN L.A.

THE N.Y. ARTIST HIT
A CREATIVE SPARK
ON THE WEST COAST.
A NEW EXHIBITION
TELLS HIS STORY. E4

Untitled work by Jean-Michel Basquiat from "King Pleasure." Photograph by CHRISTINA HOUSE Los Angeles Times

'Blood In Blood Out' creators look back. E2 | Modern love for Rachmaninoff. E6 | David Grann's new book hits the high seas. E8

LEE HALVERSON

CONG CATCHERS

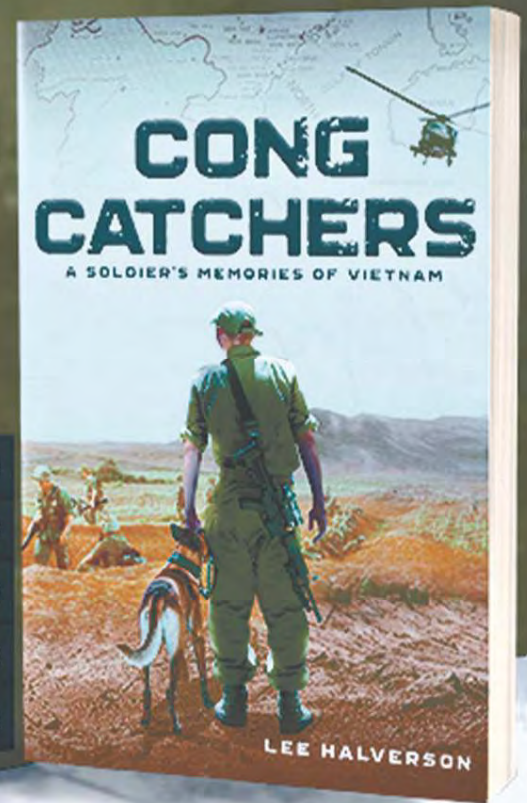
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Wars can make or break a person, and growing up with deeply ingrained Christian values, Lee Halverson rose up to the challenge that was the Vietnam War. As he stated in the foreword of his book *Cong Catchers*, “Most books about Viet Nam deal with troop strength, weaponry, battles, body counts and so on. Not this one.”

In this book, Halverson focused on the good things that happened during his Army tour in Vietnam—from organizing football games, drinking sodas, and helping in repairing orphanages. With *Cong Catchers*, readers get a glimpse of another view of the Vietnam War—one that is filled with hope and optimism.

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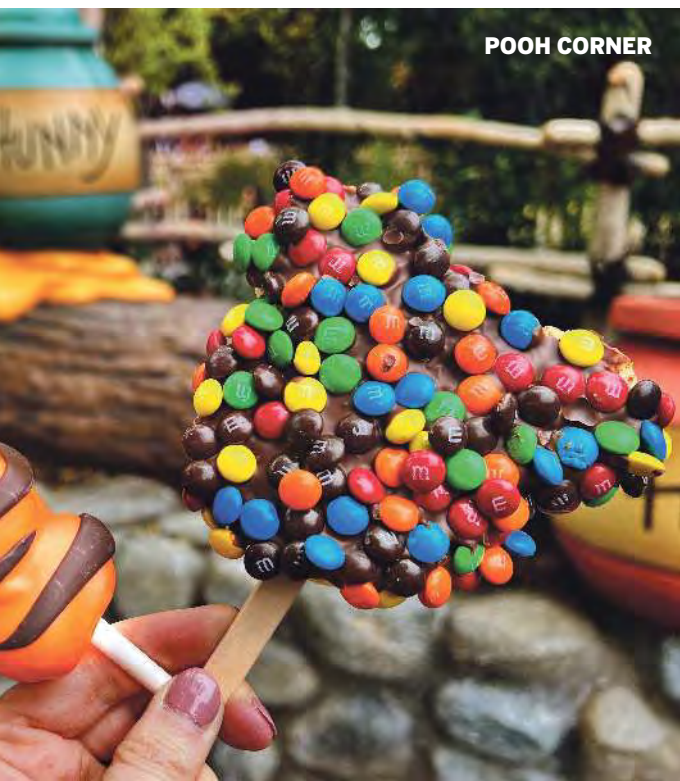
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RIVER BELLE TERRACE

STEPHANIE BREIJO Los Angeles Times

price may seem steep for one cookie, but it's big enough to share with a friend or two. If you're gluten-intolerant, you can opt for the Incredi-Cookie, a shortbread-like treat filled with blackberry jam. — A.W.

LUCKY FORTUNE COOKERY

The ramen at Lucky Fortune Cookery, a sort of pan-Asian-themed restaurant on Pacific Wharf, was a nice surprise — flavorful broth and great noodles with a satisfying bite. Be sure to spring for the extra toppings: a soft-boiled egg, sautéed mushrooms and a spicy miso paste. The Impossible banh mi sandwich is good, as is a beef bulgogi burrito that is slightly rice-heavy but has that distinct sweet, smoky taste of marinated meat from your favorite Korean barbecue place. Boba fans will want to check out the very decent black milk tea with sea salt cream. — L.K.P.

OGA'S CANTINA

Fans of the "Star Wars" universe spent decades longing for an IRL incarnation of Mos Eisley's seedy watering hole at the edge of the galaxy. Oga's Cantina, Batuu's own version found in Galaxy's Edge, is far and away less dangerous than the cantina we saw in "A New Hope," but it's still got some grime. Every so often the generator powering the bar will falter, causing lights to dim and the staff to grab hammers and beat the hyperdrive engine that keeps it all humming; and there's just the right patina of wear on the bubbling vats of colorful liquids behind the bar. The vibrant cocktails are the obvious draw, with concoctions like the peachy, vodka-soaked Fuzzy Tauntaun crowned by tingly foam or the tequila-lime-me-granate Outer Rim, garnished with black salt; some come smoking, some come foaming, some arrive in commemorative glassware. But the food here is surprisingly thoughtful:

the kind of cuisine one might find in a gastropub in a galaxy far, far away. Full meals aren't available, but the snack portions are ample. The Batuu Wilds Bounty involves pastrami and whipped cheese garnished with pansy petals, mustard seed and curled wisps of cucumber alongside a loaf of bread for dipping, tearing and sharing, while the spiced Wroshyr pods (edamame and cucumber) come served with a citrus-and-gochujang dip, and the five-blossom bread is a plate of fluffy pretzel knots with cheese sauce. Give the resident droid DJ — R-3X — a nod hello while you're there. — S.B.

PLAZA INN

The fried chicken at the Plaza Inn reminds me of the excellent chicken at Dulan's Soul Food, a longtime Black-owned kitchen with locations in South L.A. The meat is juicy with a light, crisp, craggy coating. The vegetable side, like the penne pasta, is often overcooked. Order your chicken with a double side of mashed potatoes instead, with plenty of gravy to dip your chicken in. — J.H.

POOH CORNER

Critter Country is a low-key favorite territory, located on the farthest shores of the Rivers of America. Deep in Critter Country is Pooh Corner, a shop and bakery dedicated to A.A. Milne's beloved anthropomorphic teddy bear. In the back of the shop, confectioners dip Mickey Mouse-shaped Rice Krispies treats in chocolate and skewered marshmallows in caramel. Those marshmallows are the foundation for Tigger Tails, their texture somewhere between extra fluffy and gooey, dunked in caramel and orange-and-chocolate coating, meant to resemble the springy appendage of Pooh's stuffed-tiger bestie. Trays of them are slid into the bakery case. The cashier says, "These are orange-flavored, are you OK with that?" Yes, yes you are. The chocolate-peanut-butter sandwich is also highly recom-

mended. As you exit the shop, get in line for a photo with Winnie-the-Pooh and Eeyore. — B.H.

PYM TEST KITCHEN

I haven't seen "Ant-Man," but my colleagues tell me this restaurant, found on the Avengers Campus, has something to do with that Paul Rudd vehicle, hilariously offering alternately teeny-tiny or super-sized versions of various foods. Let's start with breakfast: The Ever-Expanding Cinna-Pym Toast, while a little dry, has good flavor. Your best choice will be the non-meat option: the Impossible Quantum Garden Breakfast. A butterpecan-flavored cold brew adds a shot of nutty, sweet creaminess to your morning caffeine.

Now let's get into lunch, where I had, if not the best-tasting dish of my time in the two parks, certainly the most delightful. The Compound Crustacean, a seafood salad of sorts, commits hard to the big-and-small joke of the restaurant. There are big, juicy head-on shrimp and small salad shrimp; sliced full-sized and smaller cherry tomatoes; quinoa and couscous. Nearly every item has a smaller version of itself somewhere in the dish. And it all works together surprisingly well.

The Not So Little Chicken Sandwich, with a large cutlet and comically small bun, is another good choice. And you'll probably see plenty Quantum Pretzels, a very large 1-pound version of the pastry. — L.K.P.

RIVER BELLE TERRACE

River Belle Terrace anchors Frontierland near the Rivers of America; you might see the Mark Twain Riverboat chug by if you select a seat on the gated patio with tasseled umbrellas. The interior of the restaurant feels like a grandmother's living room that hasn't been redecorated since at least the '80s. The comfort-driven menu might have been created by that same grandmother, including bites like cornmeal-coated catfish nuggets served with house tartar sauce, and pimento mac 'n' cheese with chunks of tender brisket topped with an herb crumble. The buttermilk fried chicken is the most popular sandwich option, a perfectly balanced combination with fried cherry peppers, cooling slaw and a tangy barbecue aioli, served with tater tots — the menu calls them "potato bites." This is a popular sit-down option; reservations are recommended. — D.D.

RONTO ROASTERS

You'll find Ronto Roasters as soon as you spot the behemoth hanging morsels of faux meat, some being turned by droids under an old ship engine to "cook" them. The quick-service food stand in Galaxy's Edge specializes in ronto wraps, but don't worry, you're not eating flatbreads filled with Tatooine's ridable pack animals — here, the ronto is pork in both sausage and roasted form, and it's executed well. The standard ronto wrap includes sliced pork, peppercorn sauce, slaw and the snappy, thin signature sausage — which also can be found in a breakfast version with eggs and cheddar — but the rotating ronto-less options, one of which swaps pork for an Impossible-based sausage, are even more flavorful and add sauces and spices such as tahini, gochujang and chickpea slaw. — S.B.

ROYAL STREET VERANDA

If this New Orleans Square quick-service pit stop with outdoor-only seating is on your Disneyland checklist, it's likely for the Mickey-shaped beignets. A fresh batch can be luck-of-the-draw: In most cases, the beignets have already been fried, powdered with sugar and placed in paper bags under a heat lamp. Eat the first one immediately for maximum enjoyment and save the other two for Instagram shots. The other main menu item here — steak or vegetable "gumbo" in a sourdough bowl — tastes more like a generic thickened stew than the canonical dish of Louisiana's Cajun and Creole cuisines. — B.A.

SHAWARMA PALACE

There are three varieties of flatbread wraps at Shawarma Palace, a small stand in the Avengers Campus. I'd pass on the breakfast wrap with a somewhat odd, spiced maple syrup, but the other two — falafel and chicken — are good for a quick snack. Make sure to get plenty of the tzatziki-like coconut-yogurt tahini sauce to spread on whatever option you choose. — L.K.P.

TIKI JUICE BAR & DOLE WHIP

The menu at the Tiki Juice Bar is extremely simple: Dole Whip, pineapple juice, Dole Whip float (and bottled water, I suppose, but I'm not counting that). I love the

tangy, fruity Dole Whip float — pineapple-flavored soft serve swimming in pineapple juice. At the nearby Tropical Hideaway, you can get this treat in two additional flavors, strawberry and mango, but this is the place to go if you know what you want and don't want to deal with the line there. Place your mobile order, get in and out and enjoy what is, for me at least, the best thing at Disneyland. — L.K.P.

TROUBADOUR TAVERN

The Troubadour Tavern in Fantasyland, where you might expect a medieval-slash-Oktoberfest motif, has been serving a special "Lion King"-themed menu since last year: items like Hakuna Matata sweets and a Simba-shaped bucket with berbere-spiced popcorn. I found this place to have some of the better dishes in the park.

The chermoula chicken and rice, with a tangy, spiced sauce and crispy kale bits, is a fantastic break from the park's deep-fried or super-sweet treats. The reliable loaded baked potato, with bacon bits, sour cream and chives, is a decent bang-for-your-buck deal. — L.K.P.

TURKEY LEG CARTS

I am not the biggest fan of these things, but I do see their appeal; they're fairly sui generis as far as theme park foods go. Where else can you chow down on a piece of meat as big as a bodybuilder's forearm? Where else is that not only appropriate but expected?

There are at least four places between Disneyland and California Adventure to get turkey legs, and I tried three of them. They were all much the same, except that Edelweiss Snacks in Fantasyland had a flavored turkey leg — Buffalo — that I liked better than the normal version. The drenching of the leg in a mild Buffalo sauce not only kept it moist (at their driest, these can resemble a mummified body part) but also cut the sodium slightly.

You probably won't finish one of these things without help. But you can, like our audience engagement editor Amy Wong, wrap it up and take it home and give it to your mom, who will make a pot of delicious, smoky jook from it. — L.K.P.

For more information about specific food and drink establishments at Disneyland Resort, visit disneyland.disney.go.com/dining/disneyland

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