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Eliza, Amy, Sarah, Jennifer: Memories live on despite deaths

4 murder victims touched the hearts of many in short lifetimes

By Pamela Ward
American-Statesman Staff

They were the girls next door. They were the teacher's pet, sisters, best friends and daughters. Eliza, Amy, Sarah and Jennifer were teen-agers people feel they knew even if they never met. There could have been the giggles coming from the table at the shopping mall corridor, or the cheers coming from the sidelines at the high school football game, or the voices heard at church, singing hymns.

There could have been the giggles coming from the table at the shopping mall corridor, or the cheers coming from the sidelines at the high school football game, or the voices heard at church, singing hymns. Jennifer and Sarah Harrison were sisters; Eliza Thomas and Amy Ayers, their best friends. One minute they were hanging out at the mall, or chatting with customers at a trendy yogurt shop, and then they were gone. A city will remember them for years to come as the four teen-agers victims of a vicious murder at the I Can't Believe It's Yogurt shop in Northwest Austin. Their friends and their families — the people who knew them best — will remember them for much more than that, and those fond memories will endure.

A week ago Friday night, Sarah, 15, and Amy, 13, had been at Northern Mall — a place that attracts teen-agers with its multiple movie theater, ice rink and fast-food vendors. The best friends left the mall and walked the well-lit couple of blocks along West Anderson Lane to the yogurt shop. There, at the popular teen hangout, Sarah's older sister, 17-year-old Jennifer, worked with one of her best friends, Eliza, also 15. "The two girls had apparently come down from the mall to meet them and get a ride home," said Jennifer.

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Sisters Jennifer and Sarah Harrison and their best friends, Eliza Thomas and Amy Ayers, were killed as they were closing the I Can't Believe It's Yogurt shop on West Anderson Lane a week ago Friday night.

Care facility study sparks challenges

7 area nursing homes on non-compliance list

By Mike Ward
American-Statesman Staff

Twenty-two nursing homes in Central Texas, including seven in the immediate Austin area, are among 403 facilities statewide with a history of non-compliance with state rules, according to a list made public Friday by the Texas Department of Health.

The list includes the Fort Worth and Denton state schools for mentally retarded people, seven community homes run by the mental health mental retardation agencies of Dallas County and Tarrant County, and Texas' largest nursing home for children, in Gladewater. Representatives of the nursing homes challenged the Health Department's list, saying it is inaccurate and unfair. They noted that it includes a Fort Worth home that had been cited as exemplary in a gubernatorial report.

"The list is a bunch of baloney," said Sara Spangler of the Texas Health Care Association, which represents 800 of the 1,100 homes in Texas. "Some of the homes on the list ... In trying to get at the bad ones, the state is about to drive the best ones into the ground, too. This is pure insanity." The list was cited in a report commissioned by Gov. Ann Richards, who has started a crackdown on bad nursing homes. When she received the report Wednesday, Richards referred to the list, which shows that 38 percent of Texas nursing homes had a history of violations of health and safety rules. Names of the facilities were obtained Friday by the Austin American-Statesman under the state Open Records Act.

When the Health Department began compiling the list in early October, it issued a memo saying the list would be confidential. The memo, attached to the documents

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Staff photos by Tom Lusk



Brown Santa's littlest helpers

Students at Lake Travis Elementary School, above, along with office Bobbie Hunt, load up a Travis County Sheriff's Department vehicle with the toys they collected for the Brown Santa Christmas program. The children collected so many gifts that a donated Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle had to ride in the front seat with Hunt, left. A volunteer crew and eight kindergarten classes at the school did their part for the Brown Santa project, which distributes gifts to the needy.

Staff photos by Tom Lusk

Fort Worth State School accredited despite Medicaid funding stoppage

By Denise Gammis
American-Statesman Staff

Although the federal government has stopped funding Fort Worth State School because of its worsening deficiencies, a prominent mental retardation council Friday gave its accreditation to the institution after a five-day visit.

The Accreditation Council on Services for People with Developmental Disabilities, a Washington, D.C., group that reviews the qual-

ity of retardation institutions, approved the Fort Worth facility for the second year. "The institution met 81.5 percent of the council's 577 standards. 'This is a red letter day for Fort Worth State School,'" said Leroy Jones, commissioner of the Texas Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation.

The council's approval rating is required at the Fort Worth facility by a 17-year-old state action law challenging the Texas mental retardation system. But court or-

ders also require the 13 state schools to comply with the federal government's Medicaid standards. U.S. District Judge Barbara Hanford, who is considering a proposed settlement to the lawsuit that would close two state schools, has ordered MHMR to explain why the federal government pulled funding from Fort Worth State School.

"I don't know how the court will rule to this," new accreditation, said Garth Corbett, an attorney for the school.

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Parents say teachers are forced to boost grades

By Tim Lott
American-Statesman Staff

SAN MARCOS — Parents upset over the resignation of a high school English teacher will present a report to the school board Monday that they say supports their claims that teachers are being pressured to inflate grades and lower academic standards.

San Marcos Consolidated Independent School District officials vehemently deny the claims.

"But the parents' group, which calls itself the Parent-Teacher Communication Network, said a confidential survey last month — in which 110 school district teachers responded — substantiates the claims. The school district employs 360 teachers, Joe Carney, an assistant superintendent, said. Group member Jo Ann Carney said the survey showed 75 percent of the 110 teachers who responded disagreed with this statement: 'Administrators never place pressure on teachers to raise their passing rate.'"

Carney said the survey also showed 67 percent disagreed with another statement: "Grades assigned in this district are a valid indicator of student performance and ability." Fifty-eight percent of the survey respondents agreed with this statement: "Teachers who fail too many students are given the impression that their job is in jeopardy." Taken as a whole, Carney said those responses and others show

See San Marcos, B5

Location of Bergstrom runways considered

By Stuart Ekenazzi
American-Statesman Staff

An old concept of building an airport runway west of existing Bergstrom Air Force Base boundaries is being dusted off as one way to preserve valuable base structures.

That runway alignment option, however, is not now within the scope of the estimated \$1 million Bergstrom master plan.

Jim Steed, chairman of the citizens Bergstrom Conversion Task Force, said the city should study the feasibility of laying a parallel runway west of U.S. 83, on land now owned by Lockheed.

The runway would be an alternative to a second parallel runway several thousand feet east of the existing 12,500-foot Bergstrom landing strip, on land the city soon expects to own.

The eastern parallel runway, however, would effectively wipe out 719 family housing units that sit in or just beyond its path. Other valuable structures, such as the base hospital, would be in between the two runways.

The two-runway concept as presented right now would destroy or make unusable a half-billion dollars worth of assets," Steed said. "I just can't imagine extensive use or development between two runways."

A western runway, however, would move jets closer to residential areas.

The concept of East Austin and Montopolis also must be taken into consideration," Steed said.

A western runway has been studied before. In 1981, the city examined the feasibility of building a runway west of U.S. 83 as part of an airport plan in which facilities would have been shared with the Air Force. Resistance by the Air Force, however, caused the plan to lose initial support and it eventually was shelved.

Things since have changed. The premise of the 1981 plan — joint use with the military — no longer applies.

Richard Trowell, president for the Legal Aid Society for the Homeless, supports using Bergstrom structures to address three needs for the indigent: drug and alcohol treatment, health care and housing.

"Why are we so restricted in our design at this point that we've rejected alternatives we haven't fully stud-

See Location, B4

Santa's helpers can't leave this toy workshop

By David Mautsch
American-Statesman Staff

BASTROP — One elf robbed a tank. Another got in trouble for taking a nap.

Now both are serving time in Santa's workshop.

Stick horses, vases, trucks and you are among the wooden toys being produced at this North Pole annex behind prison walls.

"Santa Claus hired us," said Nick Baxter, 35, in prison for a federal firearms violation. "We're not doing it for ourselves. We're doing it for the youngsters."

"I hope it makes them smile a little bit," he said. "I know there's a lot who need it."

About 500 toys will be made this year by inmates at the Federal Correctional Institution north of Bastrop for distribution to needy children in Elgin and Smithville.

"It makes me feel I'm doing something good while I'm here," said D.J. Rasmussen, 32, who robbed a Dallas bank. "I'm glad to

See Santa's, B5



Joe David DelGarcia sands a stick horse in the shop at the Federal prison north of Bastrop, where inmates make toys for needy children.