

# HIGHLANDS NEWS-SUN

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YOUR HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER SINCE 1919

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FILE PHOTO

Circuit Court Judge Peter Estrada conducts virtual court in Highlands County.

## Court expects challenges seating Xaver jury

By John Guerra  
STAFF WRITER

SEBRING — The upcoming trial of Zephen Xaver, the man who allegedly shot and killed five women in SunTrust bank in 2019, will present a challenge to the courts and jury pools of Highlands County.

During a pretrial status hearing on the five-victim death penalty case Thursday, Circuit Court Judge Peter Estrada told Xaver's defense attorney, Jane Allie McNeill, and 10th Judicial Circuit prosecutor Paul Wallace, that COVID-19 restrictions could require him to summons as many as 500 potential jurors. From that group, prosecutors and defense attorneys must retain at least a dozen jurors and alternates. The Florida Legislature in March 2014 changed the law to require only a 10 juror-supermajority to issue a sentence of death. Other states require a unanimous declaration

JURY | 2A

## COVID numbers continue to decline

By KIM MOODY  
STAFF WRITER

Florida saw its sixth straight week of dropping COVID-19 numbers, according to the weekly update from the Florida Department of Health. The state saw 25,792 new cases for the seven-day period between Oct. 1-7. Florida has now had a total of 3.6 million cases.

There were 1,368 deaths reported for the seven days, with 147 occurring during the week and the others having happened earlier but were classified as COVID deaths during the week. Florida has now seen a total of 56,667 deaths.

Hospitalizations continue to drop, with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services showing the state with 3,945 COVID-19 hospitalizations, which is just 6.78% of all hospitalizations. There are 1,081 ICU cases.

Of the state's new cases, there were 4,140 in children age 11 and younger, with an additional 2,580 cases in the 12 to 19 age group. The state's positivity rate of 4.8% was the third straight week Florida has been under 10%.

The state has now seen 27 deaths in those age 15 and younger, with 389 deaths in those ages 16 to 29. The majority of deaths (42,790) have occurred in those age 65 and older.

There were 311,720 vaccine

DECLINE | 7A



JIM ERVIN/CORRESPONDENT

Leslie Hollandy gets excited as he watches the Mobile 1 12 Hours of Sebring Pace Car pull up at his work place. He was given a ride in the Corvette in celebration of his birthday.

## Friends revved up for big birthday

SPECIAL TO THE HIGHLANDS NEWS-SUN

AVON PARK — Car enthusiast Leslie Hollandy received the dream of a lifetime Friday as he celebrated his 80th birthday by riding in the Mobile 1 12 Hours of Sebring Pace Car.

Hollandy, a consumer with disabilities at Ridge Area Arc, was totally

surprised as he walked outside in front of the Arc Workcenter on Friday afternoon with more than 50 consumers and staff to welcome in his surprise. Hollandy loves all sorts of cars but especially loves the racing cars. He can tell you just about any make and model of car just by

FRIENDS | 2A

## Christmas shoboxes change lives

By KIM MOODY  
STAFF WRITER

AVON PARK — Every year, many residents pack a shoebox full of necessities and toys for children all over the world through Samaritan Purse's Operation Christmas Child. Since 1993, Operation Christmas Child has sent more than 188 million shoeboxes to children in over 170 countries.

It's that time again. While it's true we haven't heard our first "Trick or Treat" or carved the Thanksgiving bird, Christmas is just around the corner. Now is the time to fill the boxes as they have packed and shipped across the globe. The National Collection Week is Nov. 15-22.

Do you ever wonder if anyone actually gets the boxes and do they make a difference? Yuri "Judy" Lopez, received her gift box when she was just 6 years old as an orphan in Honduras. She recently spoke of that life-changing event at First Baptist Church of Avon Park. Some 75 people from various churches and individuals attended to hear her testimony.

Lopez was separated from her family, including her twin sister at he age of 2 and was placed in an orphanage, several in fact. The shoeboxes arrived by helicopter one day and she said she would never forget it.

Lopez, like many shoebox recipients, had never received a gift in her life. Opening the box, she "screamed as loud" as she could when she saw the set of 10 pencils. She explained the orphanage gave students one pencil and one notebook to last them the entire year. It was like striking gold.

"I remember experiencing hope for the very first time when I received one of these colorful shoeboxes from Operation Christmas Child at the age of 6," Lopez said. "Everything inside my box was special."

She also received a new toothbrush, which may not sound like much to most people, but to her it meant not having to share one toothbrush between 25 other girls any more. She slept with her shoebox like many children sleep with a teddy bear.

"Knowing that I had my own (toothbrush), I was full of joy," Lopez said.

Among the hygiene products in the box, the most special item was a hand written note from a little girl who packed the box. She held up the original note that said "Jesus loves you" on one side and "I love you too" on the back.

Lopez said at her age, she was more excited about the items than the note until she hit a low point in her life at 13 years old. No longer allowed to attend school or play soccer because of her sex, she became "angry at God for the life I was living" separated from her family. She said she felt hopeless. After asking God for a sign of his



COURTESY PHOTO

Yuri Lopez spoke to an audience at First Baptist Church of Avon Park on Monday about her personal experience with Operation Christmas Child. She is holding cookies made and decorated by Jackie and Starlett Lackey.

love and presence, she came across the letter again. Lopez she said in the middle of her pain and struggles, God reminded her that he loved her and was always there for her and someone else who had never met her loved her too. The same day, she received a Bible.

After leaving the orphanage and moving to Eternal Family Project in 2004, she was able to continue her education and serve her community. In 2005, she met her would-be adoptive parents and would move to Dayton, Tennessee in 2008. She graduated from college and is now a full-time missionary and shares her testimony with Operation Christmas Child.

Highlands and Hardee counties usually collect about 9,000 boxes,

according to Lori Bell, a volunteer coordinator with OCC.

"This year our goal is 9,500 boxes," she said.

Bell said the boxes are delivered to many difficult places to reach and by different ways of transportation. Some are sent in airplanes, boats and even by camel or donkey.

Bell has been on a trip to deliver the shoeboxes in Tanzania.

"The pastors and missionaries are very appreciative for the shoeboxes to reach the boys and girls in their communities," Bell said. "Many of the children have never received gift in their lives. So they're learning how to receive a gift but also the free gift of

CHANGE | 5A



Business..... D1 Obituaries..... A5 TV Listings ..... B8  
Classifieds..... B5-7 Puzzles ..... C5-7 Viewpoints..... A6  
Lottery ..... A2 Real Estate Sunday..... C1 Weather..... A10

Good morning To  
Hazel Wells  
Thanks for reading!



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