Mexican Americans' fight for equality not over

ELAINE AYALA
Commentary

The U.S. Civil Rights Commission hearings held in San Antonio in 1968 produced more than 1,300 pages of testimony about the status and struggles of Mexican Americans.

Some 75 people testified about discrimination in education, employment, voting, housing and the justice system. About 500 people attended the sessions at Our Lady of the Lake University.

The six days of hearings came at a critical juncture. War was raging in Vietnam. Young Chicano activists walked out of schools to protest inadequacies in education. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated.

Among the most essential of all workers – farm workers – were on strike. César Chávez's hunger strike had brought attention to their plight and inspired many to support their demands for social change.

The Civil Rights Commission hearing marked the first time the federal government had taken notice of Mexican Americans' political grievances and made them a national concern.

The evidence collected created a baseline of information about Mexican Americans.

In 2018, 850 people gathered at Our Lady of the Lake for the 50th anniversary of the hearings.

That gathering came about in part because J. Richard Avena, former Southwest regional director of the Civil Rights Commission, brought together several scholars and activists to plan it. They and other 18 authors and academics pored over transcripts of the hearings, along with other documents and data.

From their efforts emerged a new book that documents a half-century of change for Mexican Americans. The editors are Avena and Robert Brischetto, a former sociology professor at Trinity University and former executive director of the Southwest Voter Research Institute.

The book's matter of fact title – "Mexican American Civil Rights in Texas" – belies its importance.

Published by Michigan State University Press, it's an interdisciplinary study of race relations and social change, focusing on a people who still face barriers at the ballot box despite (or perhaps because of) their population growth, who still don't graduate from college at the rate of Anglos, and who struggle to own homes and gain access to health care.

The book, rich in history, research and footnotes, is written for use in high schools, colleges and law schools and in graduate studies. It has much to offer policymakers and activists, too.

Though the authors see a long haul ahead, the book points to evidence of progress.

In the chapter on population growth, demographer Rogelio Sáenz of the University of Texas at San Antonio notes that in 1960, the poverty rate for Latinos was 62 percent overall and 69 percent for children.

By 2018, the Latino poverty rate had dropped to about 20 percent, demonstrating "that programs associated with President Lyndon B. Johnson's War Against Poverty were effective," Sáenz writes.

The book includes critical assessments of the status of Mexican Americans, none as important, in my judgment, as the emergence of "a professional and academic voice" among Latinos and the rise of major institutions to advocate for Mexican Americans and defend their rights.

Many of those institutions were born in San Antonio, including the Intercultural Development Research Association, an educational policy think tank; Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, which has won major lawsuits on behalf of Mexican Americans; the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project, the nation's largest nonpartisan Latino voter participation organization; and COPS Metro, which has trained generations of community activists.

"Mexican American Civil Rights in Texas" makes clear that daunting obstacles lie ahead, such as continued attacks on voting rights and the persistence of economic policies that privilege the few at the expense of the many.

Each chapter makes policy recommendations for academics, policymakers and activists.

Avena and Brischetto wanted to inspire a new generation to continue fighting for equal opportunity for Mexican Americans.

That struggle couldn't be more urgent, especially given the attacks on our democratic institutions and on our diversity.

Brischetto pointed to the 2019 mass shooting in an El Paso Walmart, in which 23 people were killed by a domestic terrorist who drove 10 hours from North Texas to "stop the Hispanic invasion of Texas."

This isn't mere polarization, he said. It's an extremist backlash against change in America.

It's a backlash we see reflected in the banning of books and in efforts to delegitimize critical race theory as a field of study.

"Richard (Avena) and I are of a generation that has some knowledge of what took place," said Brischetto, who has served as an expert witness in more than 40 voting rights cases.

They had no intention of taking that knowledge to their graves.

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Staff file photo

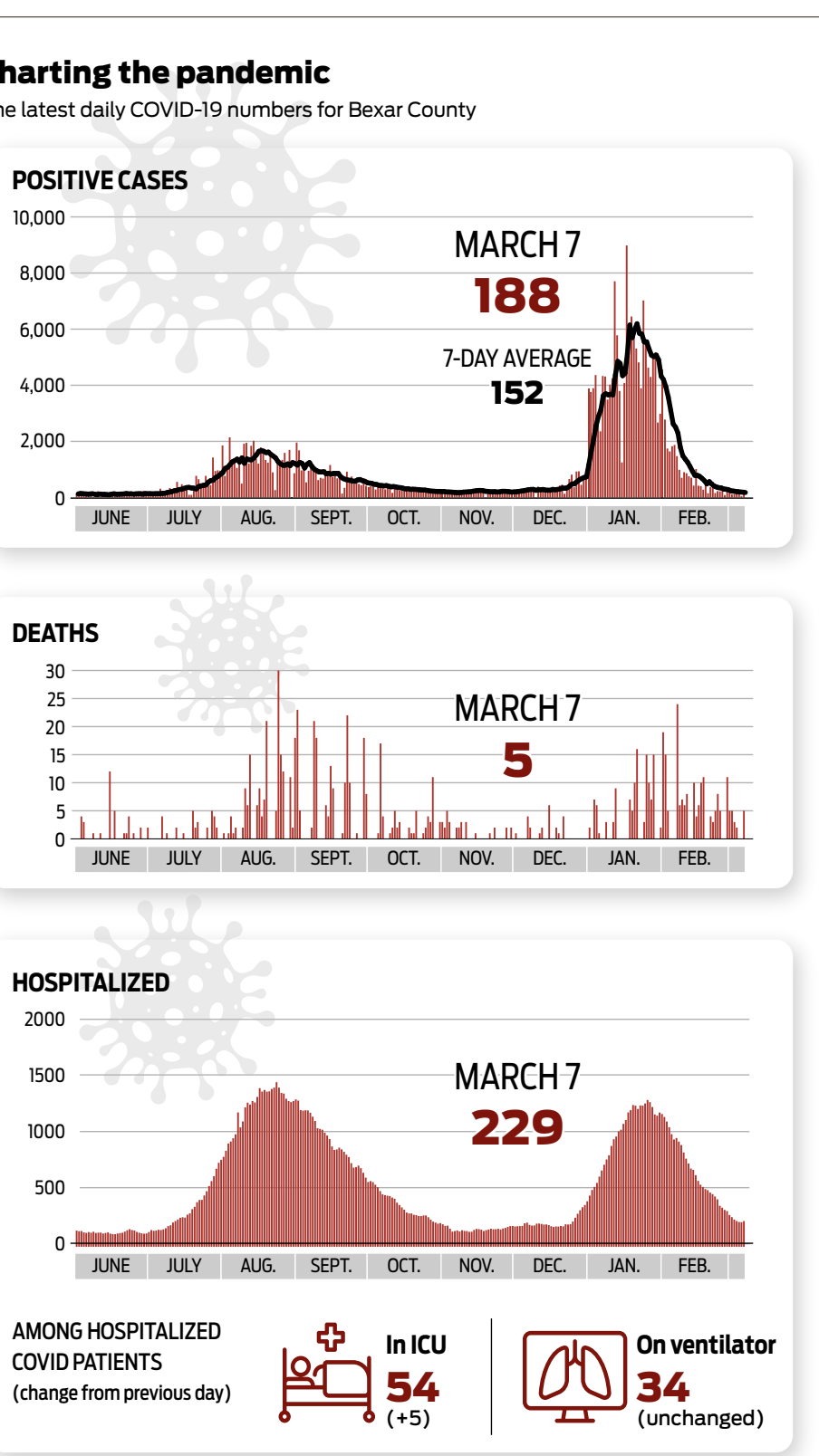
Albert Kauffman, a law professor at St. Mary's University, speaks at a 2018 conference on the 50th anniversary of U.S. Civil Rights Commission hearings on discrimination.

Associated Press file photo

Leader of the United Farm Workers Cesar Chavez claps during a rest break in a 1,000-mile march through California in 1975.

Charting the pandemic

The latest daily COVID-19 numbers for Bexar County



Source: San Antonio Metropolitan Health District

Staff artist

A&M runs disaster scenario to prepare student response

By Tyler Hoskins
BRYAN-COLLEGE STATION EAGLE

Michael Miller / Bryan-College Station Eagle

Texas A&M medical student Andrew Wang, left, and Timothy Fan present her "newborn" to "survivor" Dominique Paderin during a disaster drill Friday.

More than 750 Texas A&M University students got a lesson in disaster preparation during an annual Disaster Day simulation.

The 14th annual training exercise held by Texas A&M University's Health Science Center was designed to prepare students for the pressure of a disaster scenario.

Participants included students from the Texas A&M College of Medicine, College of Nursing, Irma Lerma Rangel College of Pharmacy, School of Public Health, College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences, athletic training, psychology and the Corps of Cadets, as well as agencies such as the Texas Department of Emergency Management, Texas State Guard and the American Red Cross.

Each year a new scenario is selected to provide students the experience of a real-life situation, said Dee Dee Grays, a spokeswoman for Texas A&M Health. This year's scenario was a forest fire.

Friday's training exercise began with a "search and rescue" operation in a forested area at the back of Texas A&M Engineering Extension Service's Disaster City training facility. Once found, "patients" in the simulation are taken to a triage area.

From there, said Dr. LeRoy Marklund, clinical assistant professor at the Texas A&M College of Nursing, those that need immediate life-saving treatment will be sent to a field hospital or a mobile medical unit.

Veterinary students were dispatched to help take care of family pets that were affected by the wildfire, Marklund said.

Over at the field hospital, people portraying injured patients mimicked injuries and demonstrating trauma by screaming, limping or crying.

If patients life-threatening injuries don't receive the care they need in a timely manner, they'll die, said Gerard Carrino, department head and instructional professor at Texas A&M's School of Public Health.

Carrino said management policy and health administration students were also included in the exercise, to simulate processes that would safeguard public health.

Justin Dugie, a first-year student in Texas A&M University's College of Medicine, served as the incident commander during the event, coordinating the scenario and dispersing information to the various groups.

"We don't get to intermingle as much as I would like and so this is one of those situations where you get a firsthand view of what nurses do and their responsibilities versus what doctors do versus what pharmacist do," Dugie said. "For a lot of these people, it's their first chance to work in a setting that's relatively high stress, and so trainings like this are the only way they can discover what you need to work on and how to improve, so when it actually happens you're not wasting time losing people."

Dugie said he hopes students in the exercise recognize the importance of working with other disciplines and breaking down preconceptions they may have had.

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