

WISE COUNTY

MESSENGER

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WISE COUNTY

‘The kids are all right’

DECATUR

District extends supt.’s contract



SIBLINGS THANK COMMUNITY — Stacy Hernandez (from left), Tony Hernandez and Danny Hernandez survived a horrific car crash in 1992 that killed their parents. They recently met one of their rescuers, Cary Moncrief of Newark.

Siblings who survived 1992 wreck reunite with rescuer

BY KRISTEN TRIBE
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Four-year-old Danny Hernandez huddled on the bank of Elizabeth Creek, his body battered and bloodied.

Fire ants threatened to overtake him. His parents lay nearby, dead in the water.

“I feel like I have an image of what was down there,” said Danny, now 27. “I feel like I always knew, even when I was told my parents passed away.

“I always knew, but it was something that I never really came to terms with the way we do as adults,” he said. “So now it’s kind of like mourning this, in a way, for the first time.”

Sabino and Francisca Hernandez, both 26, were killed June 14, 1992, in a violent crash on Farm Road 718 in Newark. Everyone was thrown from the vehicle into a creek bed 100 feet below the roadway.

Somehow Danny and his two siblings survived.

Two-year-old Stacy was found on her father’s chest. Tony, only 8 months old, was

near his father, teetering on his back in the water. Their mother lay nearby, her face barely visible above the surface of the water.

The orphaned children spent a night stranded in the creek bed before being rescued early the next morning. They were flown to a Metroplex hospital with various injuries, including several broken bones and vicious bug bites — not to mention emotional scars.

They went on to be raised by their aunt and uncle. Although the story of that tragic night was never kept from them, Danny said it was broad — one that never felt like his own.

“It wasn’t beyond a very brief thought,” he said. “It was something we grew up with, but the reality is that there were other people in-

volved.”

The true scope of it was indeed overwhelming for children. But Danny and his siblings recently decided they needed more details from that night, and that they wanted to thank those who were in-



HEALING — Danny Hernandez (from left), Tony Hernandez and Stacy Hernandez were raised by their aunt, uncle and grandmother following the accident that killed their parents. They’re pictured here some time after being released from the hospital, still wearing casts.

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EMOTIONAL MEMORIES — Cary Moncrief of Newark was one of the men who rescued the Hernandez children in 1992. He said it’s a day he’ll never forget.

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FRANCISCA AND SABINO HERNANDEZ

BY BRIAN KNOX
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Decatur ISD Superintendent Rod Townsend received a vote of confidence from the school board Wednesday night.

After meeting in closed session for more than four hours for the annual superintendent evaluation, the board emerged to take action on his contract.

“The consensus of the board is, we are very pleased with Mr. Townsend’s performance,” said board President Kevin Haney. “We appreciate the work he is doing for the district. We feel like he’s doing an outstanding job for us and hope he sticks around for a while.

“We didn’t want anyone to have the perception that since we were back there

See Townsend on page 9A

DECATUR

Dog thieves?

Missing pets leave owners sad, suspicious

BY BOB BUCKEL
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Three large dogs that went missing in the same Decatur neighborhood the Saturday after Christmas have raised suspicions that someone may be picking up dogs and reselling them.

Martin and Jana Woodruff, who live on College Avenue, had a Great Dane and a pit bull visiting along with their daughter, Althea, who lives in Austin. When they were let out of the house that morning, Dec. 27, one jumped the backyard fence, and the other went after him.

“We heard the Great Dane bark twice,” Jana said. “The pit bull went around the cor-

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LIFETIME CONNECTION — Virginia Carrillo (from left), Danny Hernandez, Cary Moncrief, Tony Hernandez and Stacy Hernandez will always share a special bond. Moncrief had not seen the Hernandez siblings since he handed them off to emergency responders at an accident scene 22 years ago.

Rescued: Passers-by plucked children from watery grave

Continued from page 1A

volved in their rescue.

Pulled from the creek

Cary Moncrief of Newark said the last time he saw the Hernandez children was when he handed them over to emergency responders.

The siblings, along with Virginia Carrillo, the aunt who raised them, recently met Moncrief for the first time.

“It’s closure that I never thought I needed,” Danny said. “We’ve been very fortunate. My aunt adopted us and raised us to be respectful and honest and ambitious, and we’ve turned out to be good adults.

“But it goes back to that night, and we’re very grateful to you for stopping and for lifting us up out of that creek,” he told Moncrief. “You saved our lives, and we’re very grateful for that.”

Moncrief is reluctant to be called a hero.

“Y’all were a lot smaller the last time I saw you ...,” he said, smiling.

Moncrief and Tracy Darter, also of Newark, were on their way to work about 7 a.m. that Sunday morning when they noticed a car along the roadside.

That stretch of roadway was the site of numerous accidents, Moncrief said, most of which weren’t too serious. He pulled over that morning, assuming someone had simply slid off the road and might need help to get going again.

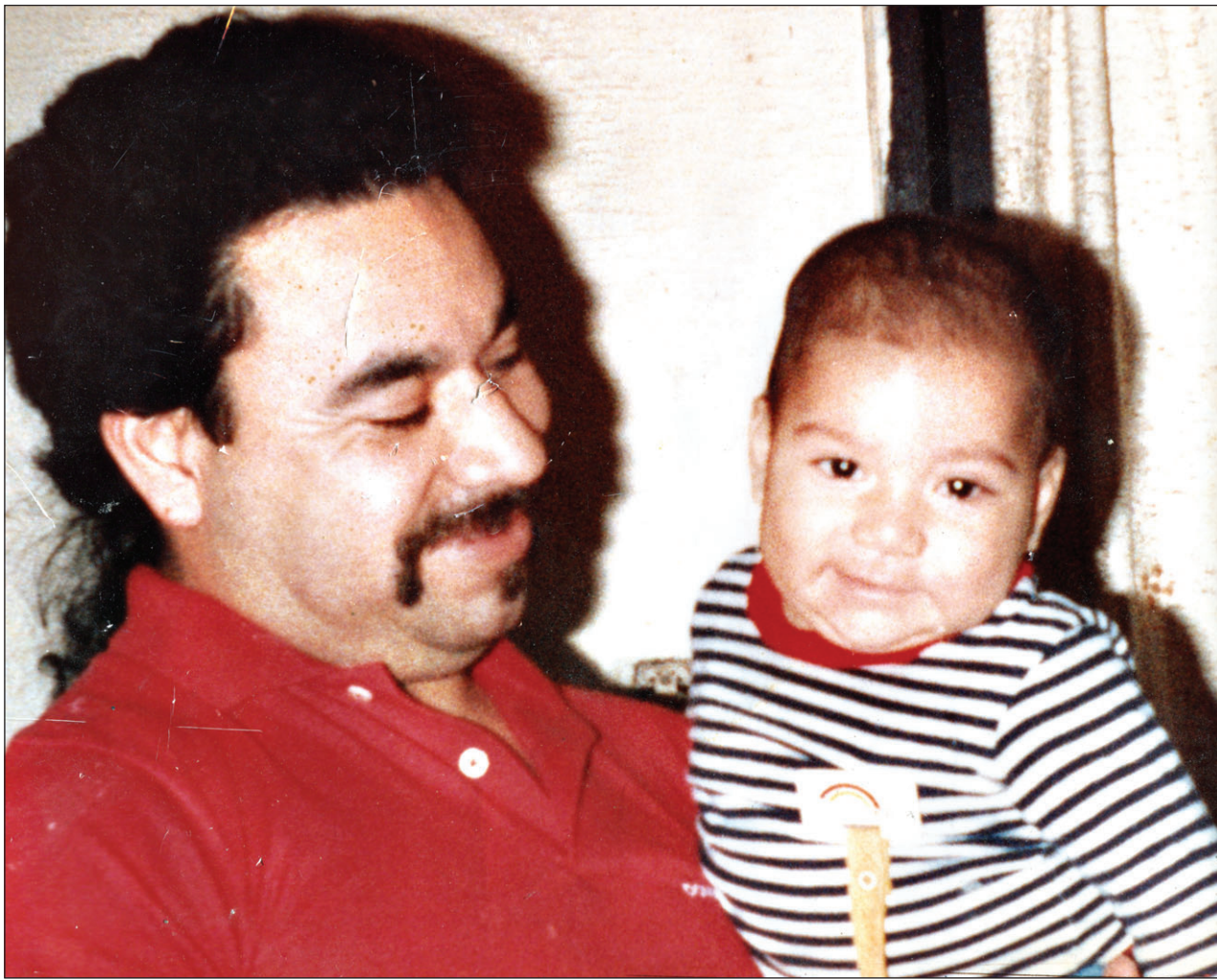
Instead, he discovered a watery grave.

“It looked like the car slid off the road, and they hit a willow tree sideways,” he said. “It split the car in two. Everybody just popped out.

“I saw all those bodies down there, and I just ran back to the truck, threw it into reverse and went back up to Eagle Grocery and told them to call 911.”

He ran into another friend — Larry O’Quinn — and brought him back to the crash site. When they reached the water’s edge, they realized the children were alive.

“I grabbed the baby, Tracy grabbed the little girl and Larry picked you up,” he told Danny. “You were just sitting over in the bushes, and the fire ants were just having a heyday with you.”



Only the baby was crying. “They were all in shock,” Moncrief said. “You could tell by Danny’s eyes. He wasn’t there ... he was somewhere else.”

According to the 1992 *Messenger* story and family accounts, it’s believed the accident occurred about midnight. The couple was returning to their home in Newark after leaving a family party in Boyd. They were

young daughter on top of him to save her from drowning.

“We were just glad to see that someone had made it because the car was in really bad shape,” Moncrief said.

The front end of the car and the engine were next to the tree, but the body of the car was in the creek bed, about 100 feet below the roadway. Moncrief said as they carried the children to

kind of numb to stuff like that, but the things you remember are the scenes.

“But it’s nice to see them,” he said. “To see that they’re doing good and surviving, and they’re an asset to their family.”

Thriving against all odds

Danny is a 2005 graduate of Paradise High School and a 2009 graduate of Texas A&M University. He’s a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps, and he lives in Phoenix, Ariz., where he works for a non-profit organization.

Stacy, 25, is a 2007 graduate of PHS and lives in Runaway Bay. She works at a doctor’s office in Bridgeport.

Tony, 23, graduated from Paradise High in 2009. He’s also a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps. He currently lives in Paradise and works in Bridgeport.

“They say it takes a village to raise a child; this county built three,” Danny says in an essay he posted online. The essay is a tribute to not only his aunt, but also all the other people who helped him and his siblings through the years.

“Our story is a testament to this community and how it came together to help neighbors in need,” he says. “The fact is, we wouldn’t be

here without the men who stopped their car to rescue us, without the people who held us in their arms, without the first responders who arrived on the scene and without the community and educators who fed us, looked after us and cared for us throughout our years.

“I wouldn’t blame you for wondering then: will those kids ever recover from this tragedy?

“Good news,” he says. “The kids are all right.”

Danny, Stacy and Tony credit their Aunt Virginia with their recovery, both physically and emotionally, and for enabling and encouraging them to move forward and beyond their tragic circumstances.

Danny says in his essay that she “deserves every mother-of-the-year award that exists,” and although it wasn’t always an easy road, Virginia said she has never second-guessed her decision to raise her nieces and nephews.

In fact, as she faced the loss of her brother and sister-in-law, it was the children that kept her going.

“It was my duty, and it was my family calling,” she said. “Like I told them, I’d do it again. There’s nothing that I regret. I never looked

See Hernandez on page 3A

MEET THE MESS
WISE COUNTY MESSENGER

JAKE HARRIS
EDITORIAL

WISE COUNTY
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Hernandez: Aunt kept kids together

Continued from page 2A

back and said, ‘Oh, my gosh. Why did this happen?’
“I’d do it again in a heart-beat.”
Virginia was only 21 at the time of the accident with no children of her own. Her instinct said to keep the

acted out the events of that night while playing.
“He would be role-playing, and he would reenact that scene ... the accident,” she said. “We’d be in the living room — my mom, dad and me — and we’d be watching him. It was hard to see him and watch him reenact

of that time with her father, but until now, she didn’t know if it was real or a figment of her imagination. Between Mr. Moncrief’s account and reading the *Messenger’s* story on the accident, her memory was confirmed.

“Where it said I was with my dad ... that was something I had never seen anything about,” she said between sobs. “I didn’t know if it had really happened or if it was something that I just thought up.”

Tony said they’ve always heard the story of the accident, but to have details confirmed has been emotional.

“When I read the newspaper article ... it was very emotional for me because I didn’t know my parents,” he said. “But to know what actually happened and what went on ... like Danny has always said, ‘We’re really grateful to still be here to this day and be the people we are.’”

Moncrief told them it’s of-

kids together.

“My first thought was holding onto those kids because they’re a part of my brother, and I lost him,” she said. “I was making sure the kids stay together because that’s all they had — each other.”

In survival mode and trying to piece back together what was left of her family, she doesn’t even remember how long the kids were in the hospital.

“I don’t remember a lot of that,” she said. “I didn’t have time to grieve for my brother. I don’t remember funeral details or anything like that. I was focused on the kids.”

All three were injured. Danny had a broken arm and leg, Tony had a fractured hip and broken leg, and Stacy had a broken leg. They all came home in casts. Virginia moved back home with her parents, so they could help, and she also received support from other family members.

She had a boyfriend at the time, but she figured that relationship wouldn’t last long under the circumstances.

“Honestly, I figured he’d get scared and leave, but he didn’t,” she said.

She and Roberto Carrillo married in the late ‘90s and eventually had six children of their own.

“There’s nine of them, and they’ve all been raised like brothers and sisters,” she said. “They don’t see each other like cousins.”

Virginia said she chose not to legally adopt her nieces and nephews because she wanted them to keep the Hernandez name.

“They know their mom and dad,” she said. “We have pictures of them everywhere. We never tried to hide them from them. It’s a reality.”

“I didn’t give birth to them, and they know that,” she said. “They had a birth mom and birth dad. We’re just finishing off what they started.”

Virginia said they attempted to keep things as normal as possible for the kids and remain flexible, especially in the months immediately following the wreck, allowing them to do what was necessary to heal.

“Nothing was hidden from them,” she said. “They were free to talk about it, and no one would hush them up because it was their life.”

She said Danny regularly

it, but he was there and had the missing piece that we didn’t know. He had the visual.

“He would do the burial, everything,” she said. “And we would just let him, and all of a sudden, he just stopped.”

Missing pieces

Danny said he doesn’t remember much about his life before the accident. He

“My first thought was holding onto those kids because they’re a part of my brother, and I lost him.”

Virginia Carrillo

recalls getting a puppy one Easter and not much else.

But he does remember that long night in the bottom of the creek bed.

“I remember seeing my brother ... seeing my sister with my dad ... they’re all snapshots, nothing’s extended,” he said. “The only thing extended is me laying there and hearing cartoons in the background. I found out a week ago that there’s a house really close by so that might have explained that.”

Danny said he had a dream that night in which he was in the creek and surrounded by mannequins. Although he knows that isn’t real, it may be the way his young brain processed the tragic scene before him.

Once he was carried away, his memories become fuzzy.

“I remember nothing from being rescued on,” he said. “The next thing I know I’m in a hospital bed, I’m watching ‘All Dogs go to Heaven,’ my pre-k teacher is there. That’s it.”

Stacy, who was only 2, said she did have a memory

ten the terrible things that stick with people.

“So we treasure the good times and family is probably the most important thing I can think of,” he said. “It was nice that y’all could stay together.”

Danny said only recently has he begun to realize the number of sacrifices that were made on their behalf.

“I’ve always been grateful, and I try not to take these little things for granted,” he said. “But to think of where we could have been — just a few more hours in the middle of a Texas summer in a creek.

“It’s a new perspective and a mix of emotions, and today I’m excited to say thank you.

“Thank you for stopping,” he wrote in his essay. “Thank you for calling for help. Thank you for saving our lives; my parents would be grateful.

“No words or actions will ever be enough, but I hope you know that the life your actions provided me with has been a life full of love. I am forever grateful.”

Man who kept kids together

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