



## Northern Basketball Assistant Arrested, Fired

By Ari Levin  
SUN Sports Writer

A strength and conditioning coach with the Northern New Mexico College basketball team was arrested on Monday on counts of aggravated assault and battery against a former women's player.

Javier Roper was no longer employed by the College by Monday afternoon after the arrest.

According to the arrest warrant, Roper allegedly pointed a gun at a player

formerly on the women's basketball team on Sunday night. The former assistant coach was arrested early Monday morning, and appeared in a court hearing on Monday afternoon for a charge of aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, a fourth degree felony.

Ryan Cordova, the College's athletic director and men's basketball coach said it was "surprising and difficult" to hear the allegations against his former player and someone he had hired, but he im-

mediately acted Monday morning to fire Roper.

"I was completely disappointed," Cordova said.

Cordova said there had been no signs of any such behavior prior to this week. But Cordova's first thoughts when hearing about the incident went to the health and safety of all students, and that this behavior would not be tolerated at the College.

He said the circumstances of the inci-

dent are not in line with his mission as athletic director, or with the mission of the school.

The woman involved in the incident had played in multiple games this year, but Cordova said she left the program prior to the incident while thinking of transferring schools.

First-year head coach J.R. Giddens declined to comment on the matter when reached by phone Tuesday morning, but confirmed that Roper was no longer

with the team.

Roper was but is no longer listed as the assistant coach with the women's basketball team on the team website, and was with the women's team at games and practices. Cordova said he hired Roper as a strength and conditioning coach, not limited to the women's team.

The former player was at a friend's

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## Lady Lobos Win Twice at State



(SUNfoto by Ari Levin)

The Escalante High School volleyball team celebrates a point in their Nov. 9 first-round home win over Cloudcroft in five sets, advancing to play in Rio Rancho.

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SUN Sports Writer

The Escalante High School volleyball team's match against Capitan was about as thrilling as possible from the very first point.

Both teams had one win and one loss the day before, and their Nov. 13 match would give the winner a spot in the state semifinal. With elimination on the line, every point filled the air with tension for over two hours at the Rio Rancho High

School gymnasium.

The Lady Lobos took a 3-0 lead in the first set, and grabbed a 21-16 lead late in the set. But a long run by the Lady Tigers evened the set, and eventually as both teams battled back and

forth, Capitan wound up on top 29-27.

Set two started with a demoralizing 7-0 run by Capitan, and they led by as many as 10 points late in the set. But the

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## Pojoaque Upsets Gallup, Falls in Quarters

By Ari Levin  
SUN Sports Writer

Down match point in an elimination match, with their season likely coming to a close, Pojoaque Valley High School volleyball coach Joe Rodriguez called timeout to address the team one last time.

"Just I love them," Rodriguez said he told the team. "I'm happy. Every season comes to an end, either with a win or loss. But we move on, and no more regrets."

The fifth-seeded Elkettes finished a 17-win season in disappointing fashion in the state tournament quarterfinals. The cruelties of the championship bracket matched up the Elkettes, after their first two wins, with the No. 1 and No. 2 seeds, sweeping Pojoaque out of the tournament.

Rodriguez said when playing in Rio Rancho, he wanted the team to enjoy the experience in addition to focusing on volleyball.

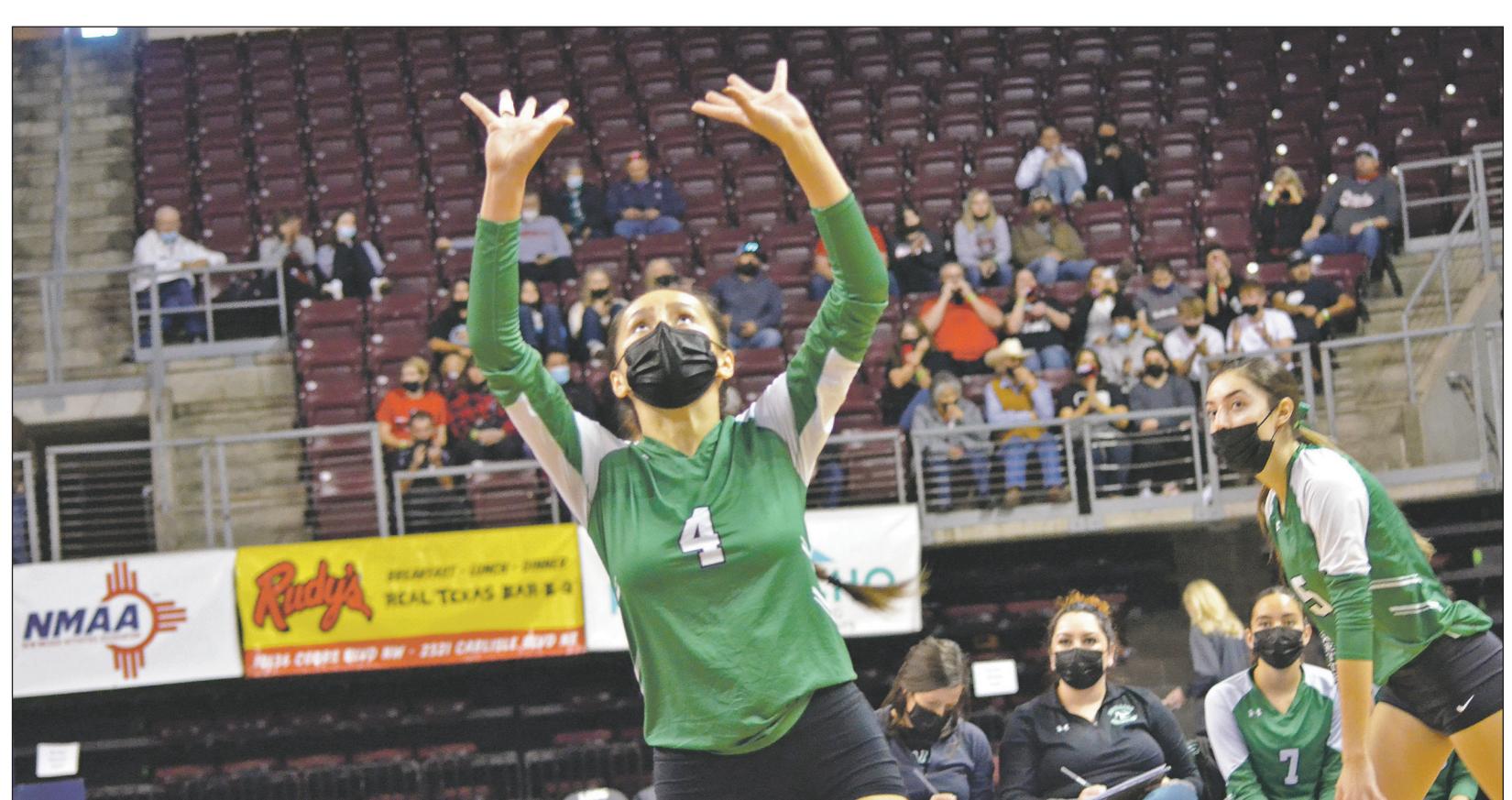
"This is a business trip," he said. "But at the same time, this is part of their lives. So, let them enjoy it."

Pojoaque started off the week easily enough, with a win at home Nov. 9 over No. 12 Kirtland Central, 25-20, 25-19, 25-18, advancing to the weekend's double-elimination bracket portion.

The win let Pojoaque play on center stage at the Rio Rancho Events Center in front of a number of home crowds, and with three other matches played simultaneously on neighboring courts at the massive 7,000-seat arena.

"It's honestly crazy," said senior middle Sonya Quintana. "We've been practicing for so long and we've just really waited for this moment."

After a disappointing 4-4 season while battling the pandemic and its restrictions at every turn (over just 12 days start to finish),



(SUNfoto by Ari Levin)

Pojoaque Valley High School senior Taylor Quintana (4) prepares to set a ball, while senior Aspen Garcia (5) waits for an attack.

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# Escalante Falls in Two Long Matches

Continued from B1

Lobos were determined to battle back, and nearly came all the way back, but a poorly-timed service error ended the set at 25-22 the way of the Tigers, putting Escalante on the brink of elimination.

And an early 5-1 deficit in the third set threatened to end Escalante's hopes just as quickly, but the Lobos battled back to take a lead. Up 21-17, Escalante then gave up seven straight points putting them on the brink of elimination. But they came back on a miraculous service run by setter Emma Maestas, whose 33 assists in that match and 120 over the week made every point count, and took the set at 28-26.

Set four, yet again, was just as close. Capitan took an early lead but not for long. Escalante rallied to go up 20-13 and 22-16 before the Tigers tied the set yet again, forcing Escalante to claw back and win the set 25-23.

But after over 150 points on the morning after five sets the night before, the wheels finally came off for the Lady Lobos, and try as they could, the Lady Tigers took the fifth set and the match at 15-7.

Along with the junior Maestas, Escalante's senior hitters were as strong as ever, with Reina Terrazas at 17 kills in the match and 13 for Kalese Torrez, but fell just short of advancing.

The Escalante Lady Lobos fought every step of the way through the state tournament, winning two matches and coming just a few points away from a semifinal berth while playing matches in four different locations, three (and 14 sets) within a single 20-hour span. After not playing at all in the 2020-21 season, their 20-win year under a new head coach was impressive and a thrill to players and fans.

This year marked Escalante's first tournament appearance since 2018; only senior Kalese Torrez was on the roster both then and now. And the wins were Escalante's first in a state tournament game in any sport since 2017, when the current crop of seniors were still in middle school.

"It's exciting," said libero Sherydan Salazar. "This is the first year we've been down here."

Escalante coach Kathleen Salazar-Valdez declined an interview after any of the weekend matches in Rio Rancho.

The week started for No. 6 Escalante on Nov. 9 in their first-round match at home against Cloudcroft.

In the new format for 2021, the top four teams (Tularosa, Texico, Laguna-Acoma and Santa Rosa in 2A) all get a bye through the first round straight into the double-elimination part of the tournament, in Rio Rancho on Nov. 12 and 13. The other eight teams needed to win a single play-in match with their season on the line to get there.

The Lady Lobos looked dominant in both a 25-15 first set and a 25-10 third set. But in between, they struggled with poor communication and passing and dropped sets two and four. But they rallied for a 15-9 first set, finishing the match on a 10-2 run to pull out the win and advance. Ten total aces by the team were key in winning the match and advancing to Rio Rancho as they were buoyed by a strong home crowd.

"They got us really motivated," Maestas said after the match. "I was really nervous for today. But I just played my game, tried to help my teammates, uplift them so we could get the win."

Coach Kathleen Salazar-Valdez was not thrilled when her team was given the No. 6 seed in the state tournament.

"I was not happy with that," Salazar-Valdez said after the Cloudcroft match. "I don't know how they judged, and how they rank. I don't know what was in their mindframe when all that happened."

The Lobos were 19-3 in the regular season, undefeated in district play (and 27-1 in sets),

and likely would have won 20 regular season games had McCurdy not had to cancel the end of their season (the first matchup of those two teams went 25-17, 25-9, 25-8). With a 13-match win streak to end the year, they certainly seemed to have the record of a top team.

But they were ranked behind five teams all with worse regular-season records, though arguably with stronger strength of schedules.

"I was a little disappointed," Salazar-Valdez said.

As a result of that seeding, Escalante's first match in the double-elimination rounds came against the No. 3 seed, Laguna-Acoma, rather than a lower-seeded team. The Hawks would ultimately go on to win the state championship.

Playing at Cleveland High School, Escalante had a slow start against Laguna-Acoma's

"I think that we really came together and started trusting each other more," Terrazas said. "And the energy was just there, and the chemistry. And the crowd really helped us."

After advancing, Escalante had a quick turnaround, barely 12 hours overnight, to face No. 5 Capitan the next morning at Rio Rancho High School. After the five thrilling sets, Escalante ultimately fell at the end of their season, filling the eyes of Lady Lobos with tears.

Capitan was the only team besides Escalante to win a single set against Laguna-Acoma when they lost in four in the semifinal; the Hawks swept the No. 1 and No. 2 seeds to win their other matches.

Maestas put up an impressive 120 assists on the week in four state tournament matches, adding 15 kills and nine aces. Terrazas was the team leader with

57 kills, and Torrez close behind at 51. Martinez also had 39 kills, and eight aces as her serve was often the catalyst to long runs.

As Salazar-Valdez returns for her second senior, there will be plenty to work with. A talented senior class leaves the team, including Terrazas, Torrez and Salazar, among others. But Martinez and Maestas will be among those returning to lead the team, and players will join from a strong junior varsity team, some of whom saw playing time over the weekend.



(SUNfoto by Ari Levin)

**Escalante High School's Brycelyn Martinez (17) attacks** a ball during the Lady Lobos' loss to Laguna-Acoma at Cleveland High School. Martinez is part of the team's talented junior class that will have to step up next year after a strong senior class graduates.

strong defense and powerful hitters. They gave up multiple long service runs while dropping the first two sets 25-14 and 25-15.

But the offense found its form in the third set, winning the first five points and jumping out to a 12-3 lead. Maestas led the offense with 14 sets in the third set alone as they held on to take the set 25-19.

After going up early in the fourth set, though, Escalante fell behind after a long service run for the Hawks led to a 25-15 win to take that set and the match, sending the Lady Lobos to the "Contender Bracket." Torrez's 14 kills were not enough for Escalante in the match.

"We just lost energy," Salazar said.

That squared Escalante off with No. 7 Tatum in what would prove to be another wild match. That match was played at the Rio Rancho High School auxiliary gymnasium, a significantly smaller setting that was packed with Escalante fans. The condensed and compact venue seemed much louder without hundreds of empty seats off of which cheers could bounce.

Set one went to the Lady Lobos who pulled away early for a 25-15 win. But the middle sets were once again a struggle for Escalante as they lost momentum. The Coyotes pulled away late for a 25-13 win in the second set, while the Lady Lobos took a lead in the third set after trailing early, but fell back behind to 25-22.

But a 9-1 run guided the Lobos back into the driver's seat in set four, and they took over for a 25-18 win. And they carried that momentum through set five, jumping out to the early lead and closing the door early in a 15-6 win.

A stunning 40 assists from Maestas led Escalante to the win, with Terrazas leading the way with 21 kills, and Torrez and junior Brycelyn Martinez both in double figures.

## ATHLETE OF THE WEEK

EMMA MAESTAS

ESCALANTE VOLLEYBALL

120 ASSISTS, 15 KILLS

9 ACES, 1 BLOCK



**Escalante's junior setter** was a highlight for the team throughout their state tournament run, as the Lady Lobos ultimately fell out of the elimination bracket after playing three matches of 14 sets total within a single 20-hour span.

Maestas led the offense, consistently setting up the team's strong hitters, staying composed in tough moments and celebrating the highs while posting impressive numbers.

Playing in her first varsity season after the Lady Lobos did not play in 2020-21, Maestas stepped up as a team leader and formed a bond with first-year coach Kathleen Salazar-Valdez. That bond will be essential to Escalante's future success, as Maestas will be setting a new group of hitters next season after the graduation of a talented senior class, including four of the team's hitters.

## Church Directory

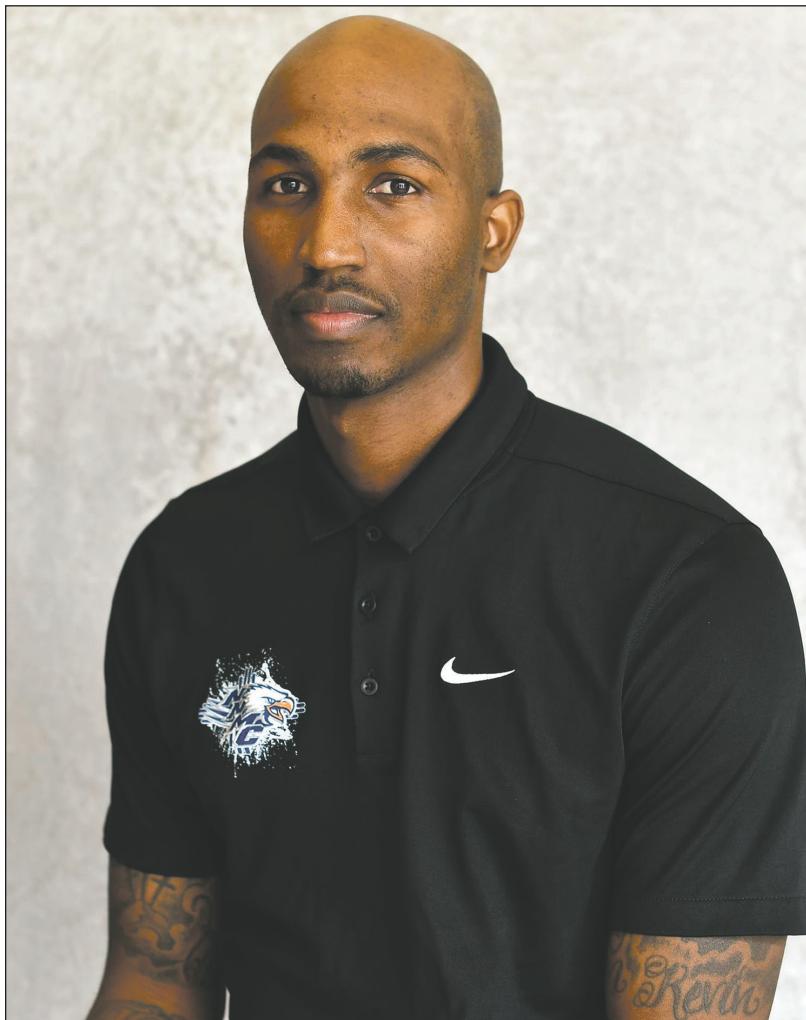
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# Roper Allegedly Pointed Loaded Gun at Player

Continued from B1

home in Ojo Caliente while studying with members of the men's basketball team (it is unclear from the report at whose home the incident occurred) when Roper allegedly entered and began shouting at the people inside.

Cordova said the men's players who witnessed the incident



(Photo courtesy Northern New Mexico College)

**Javier Roper's photo was** on the women's basketball team website until it was taken down along with his biography page on Monday.

were doing OK, and had been concerned about Roper after seeing his behavior. He said they did not know him as someone who would behave in that manner.

The former player told police that she confronted Roper, who began shouting at her and calling her a liar. Then, allegedly, he pulled out and loaded a pistol, and pointed it at her and her friend, and then at himself. She told police that she feared for her life.

Later in the night, the former player said, Roper pushed her to the ground and threw her phone.

At one point, according to the arrest warrant, Roper left the residence and the people inside barricaded the door.

After she left the home, Roper told her to follow his car, and she told police that she did to try to help him. He then allegedly exited his vehicle and walked to a tunnel while pointing the gun at himself and making suicidal remarks, and again pointed the gun at himself after walking to his car.

According to the warrant, the witnesses provided a similar story to the former basketball player's.

Roper had played with the Northern men's team in his senior year in 2019-20, and was with the team the year prior while sitting out due to an injury. Cordova said he had been impressed with the way Roper worked almost like an assistant coach that year.

In 2020-21, Roper was the head basketball coach with Peñasco High School, and Cordova said he showed maturity that led

to him wanting to hire Roper.

Cordova said that because Roper had been hired just three months prior, he was still on a probationary period, which meant he could be fired for such an incident. He said nothing had come up on a background check before his hiring.

The former basketball player told police that Roper had pursued and harassed her, and that



**Pojoaque Valley High School's Larissa Rodriguez (7) celebrates** after a point. Rodriguez, the eighth-grade daughter of coach Joe Rodriguez, made huge strides over the season and will be an important piece of the Pojoaque team for years to come.

## Elkettes Lose Three Seniors, Return Core

Continued from B1

Pojoaque came together despite losing talented seniors for a remarkable season.

Their first matchup came against No. 4 Gallup. The Bengals finished the year with 20 wins and an undefeated district schedule, and were a strong opponent.

A nine-point run brought the first set to Pojoaque at 25-20, but Gallup took an early lead and held on to the lead for a 25-21 win in set two. The Bengals won 11 straight points late in the third set, and took a 25-15 win. But Pojoaque found an answer early in set four, when Sonya Quintana added five blocks, and forced a fifth set. And Pojoaque finished off the fifth set, with Quintana's block on match point her eighth of the match as part of the team's total of 11.

"We all were very pumped up, and we were just ready to dominate," Sonya Quintana said. "Just the adrenaline, when you're up there and blocking. It's just amazing."

Senior Aspen Garcia contributed five blocks less than a week after missing time with an ankle injury.

Those two playoff wins were Pojoaque's first since 2016, when they played at a lower classification. (Gallup, meanwhile, would ultimately win their next two matches over Portales and Santa Teresa before falling in the semifinal.)

"They've exceeded all my expectations already," Rodriguez said after the Gallup win.

The win over Gallup brought Pojoaque into the second dou-

ble-elimination round (nominally called the quarterfinals) against No. 1 Hope Christian. Had Pojoaque won their district — they lost twice to Los Alamos in five sets — they may have earned a higher seed (Los Alamos was No. 3) and avoided the strongest teams for a bit longer. Though, upsets on that side of the bracket may have proven otherwise.

In all, the Elkettes struggled to compete with the talented Huskies, the eventual district champion, though they actually led at various points in all three sets (as late as 15-14 in the first set, 5-2 in the second and 2-1 in the third).

The first set was by far the closest, tied late but going the way of the Huskies 25-20. After that, the team seemed to fall apart offensively, unable to find the floor against Hope Christian's defense, falling 25-11 and 25-13.

"They're mentally tough," Rodriguez said of the Huskies.

"That's really it. We matched up with them. They'd make errors or whatever and they'd roll on to the next one, then would roll off three, four, five points in a row."

The next day brought another tough matchup in the "Contender Bracket" with No. 2 Goddard, a powerful offense for another 20-win team. And the Elkettes had barely 12 hours to turn around from their previous loss for an 8 a.m. match — a tough ask for any high school student. The Rockettes, because they lost their first match, had an extra four hours, enough for a much better night's sleep as

they sought a spot in the semifinal.

"No one likes morning games," Garcia said.

And the Rockets had no trouble racing out to an early lead, going up 11-2 and then 20-7 before closing out the first set 25-8, leaving the Elkettes looking defeated. (Rodriguez was unaware that the day prior, Goddard had won their first set 25-6 before losing the next three to Artesia.) The second set was similar, going the way of the Rockets 25-12.

Pojoaque came in to the third set much stronger, determined to extend their season as much as they could. But they could not hang in, and fell behind.

"They have nothing to be ashamed of," Rodriguez said. "We played the top two teams within 12 hours of each other."

Though they ultimately fell in the match, Pojoaque should be able to continue to build on a very strong 17-10 season.

"We worked as hard as we can," Garcia said. "It was a great season. We win some, we lose some, but we're still together as a team. And I'm glad to be a part of that."

The middle blockers were

dominant throughout the weekend. Sonya Quintana registered 19 blocks to lead the team, and the combination of her, Garcia and eighth-grader Larissa Rodriguez won 31 blocks total in the four matches. Garcia said they call themselves "the wall."

Urioste led the team with 39 total kills on the week, and Quintana added 28. Brianna Johnson contributed five aces on a strong service game as well as important defense, and Taylor Quintana led the offense with 68 assists.

Taylor Quintana, Garcia and Johnson are the three seniors leaving the team. But many of the strong hitters will remain with the team. And if they can find a strong setter (and vocal team leader) to replace Taylor Quintana, the Elkettes will be in shape to make another deep run.

Especially because one of the biggest strengths Pojoaque had this year was talent from top to bottom, with few particular standout players.

"They all have their role," Rodriguez said. "If we lose a kid, we just put the next kid in. They're hard to replace, but as you see, we're able to replace them every year."

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