



TOMAS OVALLE For The Times

IN THE courtroom, Mariel Colón is a go-to attorney for Mexican cartel defendants. Onstage, she is La Abogada — the Lawyer.

COLUMN ONE

# Lawyer to ‘El Chapo’ makes her case for stardom

Her legal talents and love of music helped her bond with the jailed kingpin, an alliance she hopes will propel her ranchera dreams

By KATE LINTHICUM | REPORTING FROM TRACY, CALIF.

Mariel Colón had just finished law school and was waiting for the results of the bar exam when she replied to a Craigslist ad looking for a Spanish-speaking paralegal to help with translation on a major case. Only later did she learn that she'd be working on one of the biggest trials of the decade, helping defend the notorious Sinaloa drug cartel chief Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán. The inmate Colón encountered deep in the bowels of a

Manhattan prison seemed hungry for human connection after years of isolation in jail. So as Colón explained to Guzmán what the attorneys on his drug trafficking and murder conspiracy case were planning, she looked for ways to bond. “I told him I love singing,” she said. “And he told me he loves music.” Colón learned his favorite songs — banda and ranchera classics — and serenaded him there in the jailhouse. He applauded. [See Singer, A5]

## Disaster status sought for high heat, smoke

By HAYLEY SMITH

The nation's top emergency response agency has long been a lifeline for cities and states struggling with disaster. When hurricanes strike, earthquakes rattle, and tornadoes carve paths of destruction, the Federal Emergency Management Agency moves in to provide vital resources and aid.

Yet for all its assistance, FEMA's official definition of a “major disaster” does not include two threats that are increasingly posing harm to millions of Americans: extreme heat and wildfire smoke. In a rule-making petition filed Monday, the Center for Biological Diversity and more than 30 other environmental organizations, healthcare groups and trade

unions argued that it's time to change that. They are requesting that the Stafford Act — FEMA's animating statute — be amended to include extreme heat and wildfire smoke in its regulations. Doing so, they say, would unlock crucial disaster relief funding that would allow local governments to invest in cooling centers and air filtration systems, work toward

resilient energy solutions such as community solar and storage, and better prepare for emergencies. “These twin climate-fueled catastrophes now consistently, year after year, vastly exceed the economic and technical capabilities of state and local governments to manage them, adapt to them, and mitigate further harm,” the petition says. “Federal action is neces-

sary.” Currently, the Stafford Act defines major disasters as “any natural catastrophe (including any hurricane, tornado, storm, high water, wind-driven water, tidal wave, tsunami, earthquake, volcanic eruption, landslide, mudslide, snowstorm, or drought), or, regardless of cause, any fire, flood, or explosion, in any part of the [See Heat, A9]

“This agreement sets the state on a path for long-term fiscal stability — addressing the current shortfall and strengthening budget resilience down the road,” Newsom said in statement. “We're making sure to preserve programs that serve millions of Californians, including key funding for education, healthcare, expanded behavioral health services and combating homelessness.” The deficit marks a dramatic reversal of California's financial standing from a projected \$100-billion [See Budget, A10]

## Canine rescue group hounded by criticism

Ellen DeGeneres skipped onstage for her talk show that day, beaming, proclaiming: “I can't even tell you how excited I am.” The comedian and her wife had adopted a puppy, a chocolate-brown poodle named Mrs. Wallis Browning. “We got her from a wonderful rescue place,” she told the audience in 2019. “It's called Wagmor.” Just that quickly, Wagmor Pets became famous. The fledgling, little-known organization soon found dogs for Jennifer Aniston, Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson and other celebrities. Local news began showing up at its Studio City location to interview the founder, Melissa Bacelar, a former scream queen actor. “There are shelters everywhere that are full, that are turning away dogs,”

Wagmor Pets became a favorite of celebrities. Then others cried foul.

By DAVID WHARTON



BRIAN VAN DER BRUG Los Angeles Times

DOGS greet visitors to Wagmor Pets, an adoption center in Studio City that suddenly became famous.

Bacelar would say. “So you have to rescue.” All this publicity translated into big business — hundreds of adoptions a year — but other rescue groups grew concerned. The issue? Along with a predictable assortment of mutts, Wagmor seemed to have a lot of puppies, purebreds and popular doodle mixes, the kind not always found in shelters. Some customers also grew skeptical, filing a series of lawsuits that, among other things, claimed Bacelar was buying dogs on the cheap from breeders, then misrepresenting them as rescues and charging high adoption fees. Former employees interviewed by The Times echoed these claims. “It started out kosher,” [See Wagmor, A8]

### Erewhon's tastemaker to the stars

Josephine Antoci's keen sense has made the luxury grocer popular with stars and influencers. BUSINESS, A12

### Gun ruling may affect state bans

Supreme Court decision will reshape firearm laws in California and elsewhere, experts say. CALIFORNIA, B1

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