

COLUMN ONE

Ready to be all they can be

With South Korea’s birthrate plummeting, an army of volunteers in their 60s and 70s say they can bolster the military’s ranks.

By Max Kim
Reporting from Seoul

Dressed in borrowed camouflage fatigues, they fumbled with their ammunition belts and K2 assault rifles. Some had white hair and a slow, shuffling gait; their average age was 63, the oldest 75.

It was the most unconventional batch of trainees that the 52nd Infantry Division’s Seocho Reserve Forces Training Center had ever seen, and Lt. Col. Hwang Hyeon-seok received them with a strained smile, desperately hoping that none of them would get hurt.

“I couldn’t sleep at all last night,” Hwang told one of them with a nervous laugh. “Your enthusiasm worries me.”

His concern was met with good-natured chuckles, but no reassurances.

Excluding the two women in the group, most of these retirees or near-retirees had undergone South Korea’s compulsory military service in their youth. But the decades of rust were showing.

“I don’t remember the rifles being so heavy,” said 62-year-old Kang Shin-kwang.

As a young conscript four decades ago, Kang was a machine gunner stationed near the border with North Korea. But today, as the sticker pasted on the right chest area of his shirt indicates, he serves in the Senior Army.

Founded in the summer by a group of civilians with no affiliation with the military, the Senior Army — which has about 500 members — is part senior citizens’ social club and part volunteer organization.

But it also has more profound ambitions as a solution to the effects of South Korea’s dismal fertility rate, which, as the lowest in the world, has spurred fears that the military will soon struggle to fill its

[See South Korea, A4]



ANDRI TAMBUNAN For The Times

STOCKTON community organizer Jeremy Terhune has focused on raising issues about the environment.



SERGIO FLORES For The Times

“WE’RE a diverse congregation,” said Kristen Kallus-Guerra about her church in Texas.

Shades of red, blue in 2 states

Californians and Texans agree more than policies suggest, a poll finds, with one key difference.

By Jack Herrera

NEW BRAUNFELS, Texas — A Californian suddenly transported to this south Texas town on a Sunday morning, just in time for the service at the Tree of Life evangelical church, might be hard-pressed to know she wasn’t in California anymore.

California has more megachurches than any other state, so the nature of the congregation wouldn’t provide the tip-off. Rows of pickup trucks in the large parking lot might be a tell, but the percentage of Texans who drive trucks is actually around the national average.

Even if the Californian began asking for political opinions, she’d still have trouble proving she was in Texas.

“We’re a diverse congregation,” said Kristen Kallus-Guerra, a congregant who serves as a greeter at the church doors. “Around the election, our pastor always reminds us to go out and vote — but he doesn’t tell us who to vote for.”

The most obvious evidence that the Tree of Life Church was in Texas would be the number of Dak Prescott jerseys. At least five congregants wore the Dallas Cowboys quarterback’s No. 4 uniform to church on a recent November morning.

The diversity of Texas can surprise people used to viewing the state through the lens of its very conservative public policies.

The people of the two states do not differ nearly as much as their governance, according to a poll of roughly 1,600 California and Texas residents, conducted by YouGov for the Los Angeles Times.

California versus Texas is a rivalry without parallel. The nation’s two most populous states are political opposites — the liberal bastion on the left coast, and the

[See Texas, A12]



ANDRI TAMBUNAN For The Times

A MURAL in Stockton honors youth organizer Jasmine DellaFosse. Stockton is, by some measures, the most racially diverse city in the United States and it’s more liberal than the counties of the Central Valley.

Schools failing on teen suicide

Many of the systems meant to assist children in crisis have been left to atrophy

By Sonja Sharp

For her 17th birthday, Jeramie Naya Vives Osorio’s family showered her with gifts: a dozen pink roses, a stack of Beard Papa’s cream puffs, a Strawberry Sweet cake from the Korean bakery Tous les Jours and a small silver necklace from Tiffany.

Michelle Vives knew her middle daughter — Jer to her friends, Mia to her family — would never wear the necklace. But she wanted Mia to have it all the same.

“She loves Tiffany, so every birthday I get her something,” Vives said. “This year I bought her the infinity one” — a silver charm on a fine cable chain.

The Tiffany necklace lies with Mia’s ashes in a rose quartz urn in their Alhambra home. Insurance won’t pay for a burial, so her ashes wait in the dining room while her family saves for a niche at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels.

“I buy her little things all the time,” her mother said. “I know you’re not supposed to have a favorite, but everyone knew she was mine.”

Mia died in March — eight weeks shy of her 17th birthday and at the mathematical epicenter of a terrifying new statistic.

This year, for the first time, the median age for teen suicide in Los Angeles County has dropped to 16 — the youngest ever.

[See Suicide, A6]



ROBERT GAUTHIER Los Angeles Times

MICHELLE VIVES looks into a mirror with photos of daughter Jeramie Naya Vives Osorio, who died at age 16.

Fighting fire, even after mild year

Heavy rains in 2023 gave crews a reprieve from battling blazes but shifted them to prevention mode.

By Hayley Smith

On a cool, cloudy morning last week, Albert Rivas approached a pile of dry wood in the Angeles National Forest and set it on fire.

The pile roared to life, and within minutes, it was spewing flames at least 10 feet tall. Rivas, a firefighter with the U.S. Forest Service, paused briefly to admire his handiwork before aiming his gasoline- and diesel-filled drip torch at another pile

nearby.

By morning’s end, he and more than a dozen other Forest Service firefighters had burned about 17 acres’ worth of woody material around the Lower San Antonio Fire Station at the base of Mt. Baldy — a forest management feat they attributed to favorable weather and fuel conditions.

“It’s all about going at it the right way, correctly, with all the techniques,” Rivas said as smoke swirled around him.

This year has indeed been favorable for Southern California firefighters. Heavy rains in winter — as well as a rare tropical storm in August — put an end to three years of punishing drought and made the landscape far less likely to burn.

“It was a fairly mild year,”

said Robert Garcia, fire chief of the Angeles National Forest. “The fire season started later and, throughout most of the state, ended early. That provided us some reprieve from that intensity to our workforce, but also some tremendous opportunity this year to get out there and do more treatment on the landscape.”

In 2023, there were 92 confirmed fires in the Angeles National Forest, the largest of which was about 420 acres. Statewide, firefighters responded to nearly 6,900 blazes that collectively burned about 320,000 acres, according to data from the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

That’s a far cry from 2020 and 2021, the state’s two

[See Wildfires, A7]

How to get an instant EV rebate in California

Qualified buyers of new or used cars soon will be able to use free federal money for their down payments.

By Russ Mitchell

Thinking about treating yourself to an electric car as a winter holiday gift? You might wait until Jan. 1, when new rules kick in that allow your down payment to be paid with free money from Uncle Sam.

If your income isn’t too high, and the car or truck you plan to buy isn’t ultra-luxe, you could qualify for instant cash back of up to

\$7,500 for a new vehicle, or up to \$4,000 for used. The deal applies to electric cars and plug-in hybrids.

The money is actually a federal tax credit, but unlike previous programs, you don’t have to wait until tax time to take advantage. Beware though: If you make more income than you claimed when you bought the car — and it’s over the income limit — you’ll have to pay the money back to the IRS.

The new program is making car dealers happy.

“There’s going to be more cash on the hood,” said Brian Maas, president of the California New Car Dealers Assn. The new incentive program is far more streamlined

[See Tax credit, A9]

Justices seem to back opioid deal

Court notes support for Purdue Pharma’s settlement despite the Biden administration’s criticism. **NATION, A5**

CSU staff strike for higher pay

“We’re not trying to be greedy,” one professor says as faculty picket at Cal Poly Pomona. **CALIFORNIA, B1**

Artful theme park reemerges

Hip-hop artist Drake buys Luna Luna, a forgotten amusement park opening soon in L.A. **CALENDAR, E1**

Weather

Sunny, very warm. L.A. Basin: 82/55. **B6**

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