



A VOLADOR closes his eyes as he soars, tied to a rope, around the tree for the city’s patron saint’s festival in Cuetzalan, Mexico.

COLUMN ONE

In Mexico, a kid can learn to fly

Voladores leap off and then glide around a 100-foot tree in a death-defying ritual

BY LEILA MILLER  
REPORTING FROM CUETZALAN, MEXICO

Ricardo García kneels before the towering tree in the middle of town and, like his brothers and father before him, prepares for a journey taking him 100 feet up and 2,500 years into the past.

He places one foot on a wooden step nailed into the spine of the tree trunk shorn of branches. He hoists himself up, a hand on one plank, then another. Wind ruffles the gold fringe at the hems of his red pants and the feathers on his headdress as he climbs with no safety harness.

At the top, almost parallel with the bells of the church tower, he sits alongside three other *voladores* — fliers — on a square, mounted frame. He ties a



ACROSS MEXICO, hundreds of people in Indigenous communities practice the *voladores*’ ritual.

thick rope that’s attached to the trunk around his waist. People in the square below lift their faces to watch.

Ricardo, 25, has been making this climb since he was 15 and his chest “cold” with nerves. For years, as a child, he had watched with envy as his two brothers took part in ceremonies central to the identity of this town and its people.

Now, he sits with his legs dangling, taking in the church’s spire, the spectators below, the cluster of houses giving way to central Mexico’s lush green mountains.

Ricardo hears the whistling of a flute and the beat of a drum played by a fifth volador stomping inches away at the top of the trunk, his back arched and face tilted toward the sky.

Then on the count of three, Ricardo and three others lean backward to fall

[See Voladores, A4]

Kern County rethinks farming

As water restrictions take hold, a longtime center of agriculture is banking on a different industry: warehousing.

BY REBECCA PLEVIN

Season upon season, watermelons, carrots and corn have sprouted from Daniel Rudnick’s 255-acre farm along Interstate 5 in Buttonwillow, Calif.

Now, the ground lies unplanted. In the next year, it will be cleared and graded to build a 4-million-square-foot warehouse complex.

“Our plan all along was that we were going to leverage the value of this huge trade route ... and its location to do something more than just grow field crops,” Rudnick said.

Similar transformations are happening across Kern County, the southern gateway to the San Joaquin Valley, which is poised to become the next frontier for Southern California’s warehouse industry, valued at hundreds of billions of dollars.

Farmland once heralded for its high-quality soil is now being eyed for its location in the heart of the state, near major highways. Land owners like Rudnick, frustrated by new state laws that will severely limit access to groundwater, are selling or converting their properties.

Land is being rezoned for industrial use, and massive warehouses are being built on speculation near traditional farming communities like Buttonwillow and Shafter, so goods coming through the Southern California ports can be shipped

[See Warehouses, A7]

Blame ketamine for killing ‘Friends’ star? It’s also a lifesaver

ANITA CHABRIA

Every day for the last eight months, someone I love dearly has strained to find a reason to live.



There is no trauma that caused this, no single reason that can be fixed, not even really a desire to die. It’s just nothingness. My loved one has serious depression, and being in this world feels like a burden. They would prefer not to exist.

There are about 21 million American adults who experience a major depressive episode each year, so my person is not alone. But they feel as if they are.

We have tried (and continue to try) therapy. We have tried (and continue to try) antidepressants. We’ve tried unconditional love and tough love, exercise and eating right. Depression is stubborn, and cruel.

Faced with consuming fear that this will go on for years, or worse, end in suicide, we started looking outside the rigid and exclusionary boxes of mental health treatment that define our broken system of care. That search brought us to ketamine therapy,

which my person (who is OK with me sharing their story) started a few weeks ago.

And then came Matthew Perry, and a ruling by the Los Angeles County coroner’s office that the death of the beloved “Friends” actor was primarily due to “acute effects of ketamine.” When I read the headline in this paper, I couldn’t breathe.

Was I about to find out the treatment we had turned to with equal parts desperation and hope was more dangerous than the disease, like one of those Big Pharma commercials in which the disclaimers are so dire they seem absurd?

But after reading the autopsy report and speaking with experts and patients who use ketamine, it turns out the truth is more complicated, as most things with mental health are. Perry did not die because he was using ketamine to treat depression or addiction, and for the sake of a therapy that is both effective and only just making it into the mainstream, it’s important we get the facts in full.

“People shouldn’t be frightened away from treatment because of this,” Dr. John Krystal told me.

He’s a professor at Yale School of Medicine and its

[See Chabria, A10]

Lecturers struggle with big class loads, low pay

BY DEBBIE TRUONG

Olga Garcia is devoted to the East Los Angeles community where she’s lived most of her life. A graduate of Garfield High School, she’s spent nearly half of her teaching career — nearly 11 years — in the College of Ethnic Studies at Cal State L.A.

But in the Cal State system, her role is considered temporary. Garcia is among the thousands of lecturers

who make up a majority of the teaching force in the sprawling 23-campus system. As “contingent” faculty members, they work on contracts that can run as short in duration as a semester and are not eligible for tenure.

Garcia, who is currently on a three-year contract with the university, has taught a full load of five courses nearly every semester of her career in the system, scaling back to four

classes at times for mental and physical health reasons.

“I am not a temporary employee, but the university putting me under that category allows them to give me less benefits, less pay,” she said.

Support for lecturers and other contingent faculty — including counselors, librarians and coaches — was a driving force behind one-day strikes held by the California Faculty Assn. union at four Cal State campuses this

month. They lamented the realities many lecturers face. Without predictable raises based on experience or the promise of consistent work, many faculty members must teach at multiple campuses to survive, or live in financial uncertainty.

The union has announced a weeklong, statewide strike to take place next month, but said the system could avoid a walkout by “presenting serious, fair and

[See Lecturers, A10]

Little interest in proposal to end Gaza war

As Egypt unveils its plan, Israel’s prime minister warns of a long battle and Hamas fighters keep up their rocket barrages. **WORLD, A3**

Ensuring L.A. hits energy goal

Mayor Bass soon will face a major decision in picking a new general manager for the Department of Water and Power. **BUSINESS, A6**

**Weather**  
Partly sunny. L.A. Basin: 66/50. **B6**  
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BLUE CHRISTMAS FOR LAKERS

Anthony Davis of the Lakers goes up against Boston’s Al Horford during their game at Crypto.com Arena, won by the Celtics 126-115. **SPORTS, B10**



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