

What she really caught? A hassle

Ohtani's first homer as a Dodger should have been a priceless moment for couple.

BILL PLASCHKE

It was a wondrous Dodgers postcard, a man in a Fernando Valenzuela jersey lifting a woman in a Dodgers bucket hat as she waved a historic home run ball high above a sea of blue.



That was the magical scene Wednesday night in Dodger Stadium's right-field pavilion as Ambar Roman and husband Alexis Valenzuela celebrated Roman's grab of Shohei Ohtani's first home run as a Dodger.

It was a valuable souvenir. It was a frenzied scene. It was a priceless moment.

It was a nightmare. "It started out so good," Valenzuela said. "Then it ended in a hustle."

In a swift and strong-armed reversal of fortune, the young couple were immediately surrounded by security guards and escorted underneath the stands.

"I said, 'Did I do something wrong?'" Roman recalled. "They said, 'No, we want to reward you.'"

Some reward. Roman was persuaded to surrender the potentially lucrative piece of memorabilia for an autographed bat, an autographed ball and two autographed caps.

Roman said she was told [See Plaschke, A10]



GENARO MOLINA Los Angeles Times

CUSTOMERS look for parking and head into a 99 Cents Only store in Santa Monica on Friday. The chain, founded in 1982, is liquidating its assets. It has about 14,000 workers in California, Arizona, Nevada and Texas.

99 Cents Only to close all 371 stores amid 'lasting challenges'

City of Commerce deep-discount chain, once a true 'dollar' retailer, calls it quits after four decades.

BY ANDREA CHANG AND LAURENCE DARMIENTO

99 Cents Only Stores will close all 371 locations and wind down its operations after more than four decades in business, the City of Commerce discount chain announced Thursday.

"This was an extremely difficult decision and is not the outcome we expected or hoped to achieve," interim Chief Executive Mike

Simoncic said in a statement. "Unfortunately, the last several years have presented significant and lasting challenges in the retail environment."

He cited multiple factors, including the "unprecedented impact" of the COVID-19 pandemic, shifting consumer demand, persistent inflationary pressures and rising levels of shrink — an industry term that refers to loss of inventory attributed to shoplifting, theft by employees and administrative errors.

Combined, those issues "have greatly hindered the company's ability to operate," Simoncic said.

99 Cents Only has stores in California, Arizona, Nevada and Texas. The pri-

vately held company, which has about 14,000 employees, said it had reached an agreement with Hilco Global to liquidate all of its merchandise and dispose of fixtures, furnishings and equipment at its stores.

Hilco Real Estate is managing the sale of the company's real estate assets, which are owned or leased.

The announcement by 99 Cents Only reflects a larger weakness in the dollar-store category, said Brad Thomas, equity research analyst at KeyBanc Capital Markets.

Dollar Tree, a Chesapeake, Va., retailer, announced last month that it is closing 600 of its Family Dollar stores this year and an additional 370 in the next few years, he noted.

"It's been trying times for many, many retailers," he said. "What's interesting is that what started out as a boon to retailers in the pandemic, with all those stimulus checks, quickly turned into a very troublesome time."

Rising wages, inflation and higher losses due to shrinkage have reduced profits for retailers in the deep-discount sector, where margins are already extremely low.

99 Cents Only, with its large base of California stores, has been under particular wage pressure, he said. Moreover, it's at a disadvantage compared with larger chains such as market leader Dollar General, which [See Retailer, A10]

Flat fees for work when a life is at stake

Some death penalty lawyers get paid the same amount no matter how long they work on a case.

BY KERI BLAKINGER AND MAURICE CHAMMAH

Brian Dorsey's argument for why he should not be executed by the state of Missouri requires the kind of math familiar to any gig worker.

After Dorsey confessed to killing his cousins Sarah and Ben Bonnie with a shotgun in 2006, Missouri paid two lawyers \$12,000 each to defend him. If they had worked 3,557 hours — the average time spent by defense lawyers in death penalty cases, according to a 2010 report commissioned by the federal courts — they would have each earned \$3.37 per hour.

Dorsey is scheduled to be put to death Tuesday, and a growing number of scholars, lawyers and activists are asking federal courts, along with Missouri Gov. Mike Parson, to stop the execution. They argue that regardless of how much time the lawyers put in, the way they were paid created a perverse incentive: Work less to earn more per hour.

Paying lawyers a flat fee is a common practice across the legal system, in cases from drunken driving to divorce, and has been a way for cash-strapped courts and public defenders to keep costs under control. But it attracts more criticism when a life is at stake.

Though many states, including Missouri and Texas, have turned away from flat fees in death penalty trials, a Marshall Project and Los Angeles Times review of court filings and media reports found they paved the way to death row for at least 20 people in the last four decades. That figure does not begin to capture the scale of the issue, because some of the largest counties in California, including Los Angeles, paid flat fees in death cases for [See Death row, A8]

A REAL DRAMA FOR BRAVO'S ANDY COHEN

The network and the producers of shows such as 'Real Housewives' face lawsuits claiming bullying, harassment and unfair labor practices

BY STACY PERMAN AND MEREDITH BLAKE

As a boy growing up in St. Louis, Andy Cohen was a pop culture fanatic who was obsessed with the soap opera "All My Children."

He loved the beautiful characters in the fictional town of Pine Valley, their over-the-top drama and, of course, Susan Lucci, who starred as the iconic Erica Kane.

In 2006, as a programming executive at the then-fledgling cable network Bravo TV, Cohen transformed his fascination into a new series: "The Real Housewives of Orange County."

But unlike Pine Valley, the show's nonstop drama chronicled the relationships, fights, divorces, infidelities and financial woes of real people who are wealthy and glamorous.

"I didn't know I'd go on to be ringleader to a fabulous galaxy of women starring in a real-life soap opera," wrote Cohen in his bestselling memoir "Most Talkative."

Today, there are 11 "Real Housewives" franchises, from Beverly Hills to Dubai (plus 13 international adaptations currently), as well as spinoffs including the hugely popular "Vanderpump Rules," which have fueled Bravo's voyeuristic unscripted programming and reinvented a genre of television. "Bravolebrity" is part of

the lexicon, and the reality stars' antics have become modern-day water-cooler fodder.

But the very same mascara-streaked moments that have made for ratings gold have come under fire. A slew of allegations and lawsuits claiming bullying, harassment, misogyny, racism and unfair labor practices have been leveled at Bravo and the shows' producers. And Cohen, as the face of the network, has drawn particular scrutiny, portrayed by his detractors in lawsuits and in interviews as a reality TV Svengali who pits women against one another. They allege he fosters toxic workplace conditions in order to create on-screen drama.

Bravo has said it is committed to a safe workplace. Cohen has denied any wrongdoing, with a number of the network's stars and others dismissing the critics as "desperate" sensationalists.

"He's seen as the personification of Bravo and he takes on almost this mythical status and becomes the really high-profile target of whatever grievances people might have," said Alex Baskin, the executive producer of "Beverly Hills," "Orange County" and "Vanderpump Rules."

[See Cohen, A6]



EVAN AGOSTINI Invision/AP

ANDY COHEN, the face of Bravo, denies any wrongdoing.



JEAN CHUNG For The Times

BULDAK "fire chicken" ramen, a spicy concoction, became a lifeline for Samyang Foods, founded in 1961.

How spicy ramen saved a Korean firm

'Fire noodle challenges' sparked interest in the nation's soul food and rescued a storied brand from scandal

BY MAX KIM

SEOUL — In February 2014, a British YouTuber known as the "Korean Englishman" uploaded a video that would change the fate of an instant noodle company halfway across the world.

The video features his friends and family eating a cup of Korean instant noodles against the backdrop of familiar London sights. The noodles, shipped to him by his subscribers, are intensely spicy. The idea is to see if his guests can take

the heat.

Among them is the Englishman's father, whose "really nice" soon turns to "ooh, that's getting hotter." Milk is gulped, then shot out the nose. Tongues are wiped. Noodles are flung. The dad takes off his sweater.

The video accumulated 11 million views, but today it is a forgotten online artifact, one of the era's countless internet challenges.

But for Samyang Foods, the family-owned manufacturer of Buldak "fire" [See Ramen, A4]

Quake rattles the Northeast

No injuries or damage were reported amid weak shaking that was felt from Washington to Maine. **NATION, A5**

Smog check fraud alleged

Twelve people are charged in what feds say was widespread cheating on emissions tests. **CALIFORNIA, B1**

Bronny James set for draft

Son of LeBron says he'll also enter the transfer portal while maintaining his NCAA eligibility. **SPORTS, B12**

Weather

Cool, mostly sunny. L.A. Basin: 65/45. **B8**

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