



Roberta Walker, whom Donna Jensen from “Erin Brockovich” was based on, at the steps of her old home in Hinkley, California.

PHOTOS BY KYLE GRILLOT FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

## For movie town, the plot isn’t over

As the popular movie “Erin Brockovich” winds to an end, a character named Donna Jensen wins \$5 million from Pacific Gas & Electric, part of a \$333 million legal settlement the community won in 1996 after the utility was accused of contaminating the groundwater here for years, sickening some residents.

What the movie didn’t show is what happened next.

In real life, Roberta Walker, the woman on whom the Jensen character was based, said she received less than \$1 million from the settlement. After decades of living in Hinkley, she believed the contaminated water was making her and her family sick, so she moved out of town, as did hundreds of other Hinkley-area residents who were fearful of ongoing contamination. She said she has had five stomach surgeries and three breast surgeries and many members of her family have struggled with health problems.

Local testing wells continue to detect elevated levels of chromi-

Elevated levels of a dangerous chemical persist in the water where ‘Erin Brockovich’ was based, underscoring how difficult it is to fully clean up decades-old contamination

BY SILVIA FOSTER-FRAU  
IN HINKLEY, CALIF.



Some Hinkley residents believe contaminated water in their town has made them sick; many have since moved out.

um-6, the dangerous chemical that PG&E dumped in local water for more than a decade, according to public reports.

“When you look at the movie, everybody thinks Hinkley got rewarded and saved. But in reality, that was the start of the fall,” said John Turner, 62, who grew up in Hinkley and is one of the few natives who remains.

The lingering presence of chromium-6, also known as hexavalent chromium, in Hinkley illustrates how hard it is to clean contaminated drinking water, even in a case depicted in an award-winning movie that brought national attention to a community.

Cleanup processes for decades-old water contamination crises persist throughout the country: The 1969 Cuyahoga River spill in Ohio that sparked the formation of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970 still has ongoing restoration projects, and the 1989 Camp Lejeune Marine Corps base and Superfund site in North

SEE PG&E ON A12

## Biden pardons his son Hunter, going back on a pledge

PRESIDENT CASTS PROSECUTIONS AS UNFAIR

Younger Biden was guilty of gun-related, tax crimes

BY MATT VISER

President Joe Biden on Sunday issued a full and unconditional pardon for his son Hunter, a controversial decision that reverses his long-standing pledge to not use his presidential powers to protect his only surviving son, who was found guilty of gun-related charges in Delaware and pleaded guilty to tax evasion in California.

Using his executive authority in the waning days of his presidency, Biden lifted the legal cloud that has hung over his son for several years. While the president had pledged several times not to pardon or commute Hunter Biden’s sentences for federal crimes, many close to him had expected the pardon would come, given the president’s loyalty to his

family. The move also comes at a time when Biden will face few political ramifications, given that he is a lame duck and voters have already rendered their verdict on his administration by sending Donald Trump back to office.

In a lengthy statement on Sunday night, released just as he was preparing to depart for Africa that evening, the president said that his son had been “selectively, and unfairly, prosecuted.” He said that he did not interfere with the cases but insisted that they were brought about because of political pressure on federal prosecutors.

“No reasonable person who looks at the facts of Hunter’s cases can reach any other conclusion than Hunter was singled out only because he is my son — and that is

SEE PARDON ON A6

## Speed, extent of Syrian rebels’ gains unexpected

Forces regrouped, seized on distraction of Assad’s allies with other conflicts

BY LOUISA LOVELUCK,  
KAREEM FAHIM  
AND SUSANNAH GEORGE

A lightning advance by insurgents over the past few days in parts of northern and central Syria was the result of better organization by rebel forces, the weakening of President Bashar al-Assad’s military allies and, possibly, luck: Few expected the Syrian army to collapse as quickly as it did.

On Sunday, opposition forces were in control of much of Aleppo, the northern city where Assad’s troops and allied militias vanquished rebel fighters eight

years earlier in what seemed then to be a turning point in the country’s bitter civil war. Video footage suggested government troops had either retreated or melted away, allowing a long-planned offensive to advance further than expected, experts said.

The timing of the operation is one of the central questions looming over the rebel offensive, given that before the insurgents started advancing last week, it had been years since Syria’s front lines had moved.

“This has to do with geopolitics and local opportunity,” said Emile Hokayem, senior fellow for Middle East security at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. “The rebellion at large had regrouped, rearmed and retrained for something like this.”

Jihad Yazigi, the editor of the Syria Report, an online journal covering business and political de-

SEE SYRIA ON A8

## Trump, allies blur lines of politician and influencer

BY DREW HARWELL

A few weeks before he was named to lead the Department of Health and Human Services, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. recorded a sponsored social media video for Boxbollen, an at-home boxing game featuring a head-strapped bouncy ball.

“Boxbollen!” he screamed after repeatedly punching the little ball in a video posted on his TikTok account; the video has since been deleted. Covered in sweat, he praised the product, which retails for \$29.99, as “the ideal stocking stuffer.”

It was an unusual appearance for a recently withdrawn presidential candidate, much less a soon-to-be-incoming Cabinet secretary. But Kennedy — who has won millions of followers with

SEE INFLUENCER ON A5

Kash Patel: Doubts over Trump’s plan to replace FBI director. A4

## Roadside trash turns into holiday cheer

A Baltimore man set out on a confounding journey to collect hubcaps. Then he transformed them.

BY PAUL SCHWARTZMAN

By his own account, Barnaby Wickham is not what anyone would describe as “zany” or “wacky” or any other adjective typically invoked to describe a colorful character.

“Annapolis Micro Systems Achieves AS9100D Certification” was the start of the less-than-lively headline on the news release he recently wrote for his defense electronics firm.

“I am not a kooky person,” said Wickham, 53, an assertion that would provoke no argument from his wife and two grown children — that is, until nearly a year ago when, apropos of nothing, he announced he would start collecting hubcaps during bike rides around Baltimore and bringing them home.

His initial goal was to collect 40 by the end of 2024, a number he said he chose for no other reason than it was the number that popped into his mind. “It sort of came out of nowhere,” he said.

Wickham declared his aspiration to his wife, Kate, a high school

SEE HUBCAPS ON A12



WESLEY LAPOINTE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Kate and Barnaby Wickham stand in front of the giant hubcap wreath in their front yard in Baltimore.

## Some insurers still charging for pills that prevent HIV

BY FENIT NIRAPPIL

Tens of thousands of people most vulnerable to contracting HIV are forced to pay for medication to prevent the virus, despite federal requirements guaranteeing free access to treatment that is critical to ending the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States, according to multiple studies and interviews with medical professionals, activists and patients.

Insurance companies are skirting rules compelling them to pay for pre-exposure prophylaxis treatment, known as PrEP, researchers and HIV advocacy organizations say — leaving patients to shell out hundreds of dollars each year for medication co-pays, doctor visits and screenings required to stay on drugs that reduce the risk of contracting HIV through sex by 99 percent.

Under the Affordable Care Act,

SEE PREP ON A6

## IN THE NEWS

**Back in business** The Commanders ended their three-game losing streak with an impressive 42-19 victory over the Titans to reach their bye week with an 8-5 record. D1

**Plastic pollution** Global talks to forge a landmark treaty aimed at reducing such waste broke down after a week of negotiations. A8

**THE NATION**  
**Palm Beach**, Florida, is the center of the political universe — and not all residents are pleased. A2  
**The Supreme Court** is scheduled to consider the regulation of flavored e-cigarettes. A3

**K Street** wonders: How do you lobby a man like Elon Musk? A4

**THE WORLD**  
**Georgia** has become much less welcoming for Russian political émigrés. A7

**THE ECONOMY**  
**Exasperated** by a trying market, job seekers are getting creative on social media to get a foot in the door. A9

**THE REGION**  
**An Episcopal priest’s** refusal to lead Communion as an act of racial justice protest could lead to his defrocking. B1

**A Virginia man** paid for 40 dog adoptions as a 40th birthday gift for his wife. B1  
**A food bank** is offering groceries at health clinics in the D.C. area. B1  
**A Maryland woman** whose son was killed in an unsolved shooting has launched a foundation to help teenagers. B1

**STYLE**  
**The virtual** town square, once framed by X, is now fragmented as liberals flee to bluer pastures. C1  
**In recent works** for stage and screen, impossible standards for women are enough to make you laugh, scream or both. C1

BUSINESS NEWS.....A9  
COMICS.....C5  
OBITUARIES.....B4  
OPINION PAGES.....A10  
TELEVISION.....C4  
WORLD NEWS.....A7

CONTENT © 2024  
The Washington Post  
Year 147, No. 54053

