



THE DAILY SENTINEL

GRAND JUNCTION, COLORADO

Monday
August 13, 2018

\$1.00

Your community news source since 1893

Questions, anger linger

State closes case, as FBI investigates funeral home

By ERIN MCINTYRE
Erin.McIntyre@gsentinel.com

Before Harold Cressler died in 2015, he told his family he wanted his body donated to science, in the hopes he could help provide a cure for the lung cancer that took his life.

The former uranium miner from Nucla felt good about having his body used for cancer research and he didn't want to be buried in the family plot, said his daughter, Judy Williams of Grand Junction. But now the family wonders what, in fact, happened to the 84-year-old man's body.

At the time, Williams said the family was told her dad's body was going to be picked up by a company, that it could be gone for up to two years, and that remains



MEGAN HESS

would be returned to the family eventually. The whole situation seemed a little suspicious to her.

Forty-five days after Cressler's death, her stepmother received cremains from Sunset Mesa Funeral Directors, after complaining about errors on his death certificate to the owner, Megan Hess.

When the family asked what happened to Cressler's body, they were told the corpse never left the Montrose funeral home. "I did my own research," Williams said of Hess.

Family members were confused and angry that Cressler wasn't sent to a university and never reached a cancer research institution. They wondered what sort of experiments had been performed.

The signed agreement with Hess' Donor Services, Inc., a nonprofit corporation associated with Sunset Mesa, classified his body as a "donated gift" that could be used for educational, scientific or medical purposes "both domestically and internationally." Sunset Mesa had advertised a \$195 cremation in the past where families were told they would not receive returned cremains, but Williams said she



PHOTOS BY CHANCEY BUSH/The Daily Sentinel

Sisters Layna and Janet Hutt hold photos of their father, Raymond Hutt, who died in 2016 at the age of 96. Sunset Mesa Funeral Directors handled the funeral arrangements after Raymond died, and the Hutt family filed a complaint with the state afterward because his body was embalmed without permission, among other incidents that happened during his funeral.

FBI ACCEPTING CALLS

The FBI is still accepting information from anyone associated with the Sunset Mesa Funeral Directors case at its dedicated email address. Please contact sunsetmesa@fbi.gov if you would like to get in touch with investigators, provide information or have cremains tested.

doesn't believe her family paid Hess at all for handling her father's body.

Months after Cressler's death, Williams filed a complaint with the Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies. She filed the complaint in April 2016 after reading a story in The Daily Sentinel about Hess' management of another Montrose funeral home that accumulated more than 100 containers of cremains in its basement from people who died and never had their final wishes carried out. "Megan Hess took possession of our beloved Harold Cressler and treated his 95-pound body like a science experiment," Williams wrote in the letter to the state agency. "There wasn't much left of Dad after cancer ravaged his body but skin and bones. We believe that Hess may have harvested his skin and bones for her own profit."

Williams got busy with the problems of the living, instead of the dead, and she feared nothing would ever come of the situation. The only response



Sunset Mesa Funeral Home in Montrose was shut down after agents used a federal search warrant in February and the state suspended the business' license to operate.

she received from the state indicated her complaint had been sent to the attorney general, but she never heard anything more from DORA.

Now, Williams is one of hundreds of loved ones watching and waiting to see what comes of an FBI investigation involving Hess and Sunset Mesa. The funeral home shut down after agents used a federal search warrant in February and the state suspended the business' license to operate. Public records indicate Sunset Mesa is suspected of shoddy record-keeping, mixing up cremains or giving families dry concrete instead of

port the body of decedent HC to a cancer research facility to be used for scientific research, per the family's wishes. Respondent cremated decedent HC without first transporting his body to a cancer research center for scientific research."

The more Williams learns about the situation, the more she feels her fears were confirmed. But there are still so many unanswered questions for her and other family members who used Sunset Mesa's services and trusted Hess and her family to care for their loved ones' final arrangements.

"It feels like my dad was murdered after he died," she said. "I know where his soul is, but I want to know where his body is."

The agreement signed by Hess ends the state's disciplinary proceedings involving the funeral home and crematory, though the FBI's criminal investigation continues.

In the final order, the state stipulated conditions that Hess agreed to — she permanently relinquished the registration to operate Sunset Mesa and agreed to never submit another application for any funeral establishment or crematory for which she is the designee.

Hess, though, never was the

See FUNERAL, page 6A ➤

Amid probe, CMU students gain experience

By ERIN MCINTYRE
Erin.McIntyre@gsentinel.com

Usually Bill Hood uses the lab at Colorado Mesa University for analyzing rocks. The drawers of samples for projects on Mancos shale and analyzing selenium levels give visitors a clue as to what the geologist works on with students in Wubben Hall Room 152.

But the X-ray fluorescence spectrometer, used for detecting the elements in a sample material, is getting used for a slightly different purpose these days.

It's still being used to detect levels of iron, potassium, phosphorous, calcium and other elements. But this time, the samples aren't geological. They're all from families who had their

loved ones' remains taken care of by a Montrose funeral home currently under investigation by the FBI.

The business operated as a body-parts broker, crematory and funeral home under one roof, which was allowed in Colorado until a recent change in state law. The establishment is suspected of giving families the wrong cremains, substituting dry cement for cremains, embalming bodies without permission and other illegal practices, leading the state to suspend its license to operate. The business owner later agreed to surrender her license.

Sunset Mesa shut down in February after the FBI searched the business. While the investigation is ongoing, hundreds of

families who used the funeral home for their relatives are in limbo, wondering if they have their loved ones' cremains or something else.

The public response to the investigation was so overwhelming that the FBI established a dedicated email address, directing potential victims to fill out a survey and screening their responses. Then last month, staff and students connected with CMU's forensics, criminal justice, biology and social work programs held two days of appointments with families who had contacted the FBI wanting their cremains tested to see if they were human.

See CMU, page 4A ➤



CHANCEY BUSH/The Daily Sentinel

Geologist Bill Hood is helping test human remain samples for families in the Sunset Mesa investigation to determine if the samples are in fact bone. Hood and his assistant are testing more than a hundred samples.



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Mourners embrace Sunday as they remember Heather Heyer who was killed during last year's Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Extremist rallies small; protesters in thousands

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN
and SARAH RANKIN
Associated Press

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Va. — A year after a deadly gathering of far-right extremists in Charlottesville, Virginia, a few dozen white nationalists marched Sunday across from the White House, their numbers dwarfed by thousands of counterprotesters, while the mother of a woman killed at last summer's protest said the country continues to face unhealed racial wounds.

The events, largely peaceful though tense at times in Charlottesville and Washington, were part of a day of speeches, vigils and marches marking the anniversary of what was one of the largest gatherings of white nationalists and other far-right extremists in a decade.

In Washington, dozens of police in bright yellow vests formed a tight cordon around the small group of white nationalists, separating them from shouting counterprotesters within view of the White House.

President Donald Trump wasn't at home — he has been at his golf club in New Jersey for more than a week on a working vacation.

Jason Kessler, the principal organizer of last year's "Unite the Right" event, led what he called a white civil rights rally in Lafayette Square.

Kessler said in his permit application that he expected 100 to 400 people to participate, though the number appeared lower. Just before 4 p.m., a contingent of fewer than 30 white nationalists began marching through the streets.

Counterprotesters who assembled ahead of the rally's scheduled start vastly outnumbered Kessler's crowd. By midafternoon, more than 1,000 people had already gathered in Freedom Plaza, also near the White House, to oppose Kessler's demonstration and also march to Lafayette Square.

Makia Green, who represents the Washington branch of Black Lives Matter, told Sunday's crowd: "We know from experience that ignoring white nationalism doesn't work."

By about 5 p.m., those in Kessler's group packed into white vans and left, escorted by police.

On Aug. 12, 2017, hundreds of neo-Nazis, skinheads and Ku Klux Klan members and other white nationalists descended on Charlottesville, in part to protest over the city's decision to remove a monument to Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee from a park.

CMU: Team wants to help families get answers about the remains of their loved ones

► Continued from Page One

Melissa Connor, professor of forensic anthropology and the director of CMU's Forensic Investigations Research Center, headed up the project to support those connected with the case.

"We're here to assist families that the FBI will not be providing answers to," she said, noting that students and staff see their role as part of a humanitarian project to help those connected with the situation. "(The FBI's) focus is on the legal proceedings, their focus is not necessarily on making sure everybody has the answers."

Connor said while she isn't expecting most of the samples brought to CMU to be involved in the criminal case, students were taught best practices in maintaining a chain of custody with evidence and other procedures that would be used in a criminal investigation. FBI agents were available for families that wanted to give information or had questions beyond what CMU representatives could answer.

Some family members who brought remains samples carried them in their original urns, in boxes or grocery bags, and each one of them was met by a student who respectfully took the container to obtain a sample, assigning an ID number to it, taking a photo of the contain-

er and recording the information associated with it.

Students performed a physical analysis of the samples, sifting them, running magnets over them and extracting items like zipper teeth, looking for anything unusual or items that could be used to potentially identify a body that was cremated. Professors said the experience their students gained is invaluable. Having the chance to interact with a real-world situation, help people who really need it and develop empathy was important for students considering jobs in these fields.

"They kind of forget the dead person's not the only victim," Connor said. "They need to bridge the gap between 'I want to be on CSI' and 'these are real victims.'"

"We need to remember these were real people with families," said Gabrielle Lopez, a CMU student majoring in biology, who helped accept cremains samples and catalogue them. Lopez is interested in a career in crime-scene investigation after she completes her degree.

Pamela Lozano, a senior majoring in social work, said she valued interacting with families who expressed grief in different ways, through sadness or even humor in this uncomfortable situation. She learned that sometimes just being there for someone, sitting next to them and sharing the moment is

what's needed.

"There were times when I had to just sit there for two minutes straight, in silence, which was hard," she said. "There were other times when they would just tell me all about their loved one and their life story."

Students were able to experience a wide range of emotions and connect with those who are struggling with what may have happened to their loved ones. They discovered what it's like to listen and be there for families.

"They took their loved ones to this trusted place, and then it came into question," said Lisa Rickerd Mills, CMU adjunct professor of social work. "Hopefully we can help mend that."

Sunset Mesa, licensed to conduct business in Colorado in 2010, marketed its services using words like "integrity."

"At a time when personalized, professional service and respect is of the utmost importance, let our family take care of your family," Hess wrote on the company's website, which is no longer operational. "We'll be here when you need us."

Mills said feelings of guilt, anger and sadness are to be expected in this situation, where those who had already grieved their loved ones' deaths have had the emotion resurface in the uncertainty introduced by the allegations.

"They're experiencing another trauma," said Mills. "It's

wounds that were re-opened."

Mills and her students focused on providing emotional support to family members during the appointments and gave them information on grief counseling programs they could consult as they process the ongoing situation with the Sunset Mesa investigation. Altogether, about 20 students helped gather samples and information, support families and communicate what could be answered with the analysis.

Mills said many of the family members she encountered are envisioning their loved ones with body parts missing. Many are frustrated, confused, angry and upset, and that might last a long time, even after the investigation is over. "But the underlying feeling is still loss," she said. "They do feel betrayed and they feel they let their loved one down."

At this point, those involved in the project at CMU are focused on helping the individuals who are struggling with the unknowns after Sunset Mesa came under scrutiny, and on being a trusted source for help.

"Having families come to a place where they felt safe and comfortable was smart for the FBI," said Mills. "We take this as seriously as they do."

Unfortunately, some of the questions families and friends have are not answerable, no matter how many tests are con-

ducted. Because DNA is most often destroyed at the high temperatures used for cremation, it's highly unlikely that any of the samples received would be candidates for DNA analysis that would identify a particular individual, Connor said.

"We cannot tell them that this is your loved one," she said.

For 84-year-old widow Elaine Babcock of Montrose, that's OK. "I just want to know if it's human," she said. "It's going to know that." Babcock's husband, Rick, died in 2015, and she said she chose to use Sunset Mesa at the suggestion of a hospice nurse who helped care for him at the end of his life, who advised her the funeral home was cheaper than other options in town. Though the family planned on scattering his ashes at Anvil Points, she kept them in a closet and brought them for testing at the university, and hopes to know the answer soon.

Hood is expecting to process more than 100 samples, as more than 100 appointments were made at CMU with families who contacted the FBI. With each sample, he has a goal of determining if the elements and minerals in the sample are consistent with bone ash or likely to be something entirely different.

"We were told they found kitty litter, cement and tile grout in the basement of the funeral

home," said Hood, an adjunct professor who has worked in some capacity at the university for 22 years.

His method involves analyzing the elements in each sample and comparing those against the ratios of elements found in those substances, as well as with known ratios provided by human bone ash and a sample from a cremated dog. A high ratio of silica might indicate kitty litter could be a closer match than bone ash, for example.

As each sample is analyzed, Hood tracks the ratios of each element and flags it if it seems suspicious. If the sample is flagged, a second analysis is performed with an X-ray diffractometer, which will indicate the minerals present and provide further information.

In the lab, Hood's lab assistant, Brianna Trump, a geology major, helps prepare samples and keep track of them during testing in an assembly line, returning the gray powder to each container as it is processed and recorded. Though she may be paid a small amount for her work as his assistant and feels honored to help with the project, Hood, like many others at CMU, is volunteering to do the work.

"We hope that this brings closure to some people," Hood said. "If we do find some that are not human, then we hope there's justice."

NASA spacecraft rockets toward the sun

By KENNETH CHANG
The New York Times

Atop three columns of flame at 3:31 a.m. Eastern time, NASA's Parker Solar Probe lifted toward space Sunday. The launch was the second attempt to carry the spacecraft, which NASA touts will "touch the sun" one day, into orbit after a scrub early Saturday.

The probe — which will study the sun's outer atmosphere as well as the stream of particles known as solar wind — was carried on top of a Delta IV Heavy rocket built and operated by United Launch Alliance, a joint venture between Boeing and Lockheed Martin. It is one of the most powerful rockets currently available. Its third stage gave the probe the extra kick it needs to escape Earth's gravity at a high enough velocity to put it on course for Venus in November, and eventually the sun.

The Parker Solar Probe is designed to expand our understanding of the sun, measuring electrical and magnetic fields, cataloging the ingredients of the solar wind and photographing the corona — the outer atmosphere that is millions of degrees hotter than the sun's surface. Instruments on the



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Mobile Service Tower is rolled back to reveal the United Launch Alliance Delta IV Heavy rocket with the Parker Solar Probe onboard Saturday at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in Florida.

spacecraft will be able to detect details that cannot be seen from farther away, and hopefully fill in many of the blanks in human understanding of our star.

The spacecraft will eventually pass within 4 million miles of the sun's surface, close enough to skim through the star's outer atmosphere. Four million miles

is about one-tenth the distance between the sun and Mercury, the innermost planet of the solar system.

At its closest approach, the

outside of the spacecraft will reach 2,500 degrees Fahrenheit, or about the melting temperature of steel. But an 8-foot-wide carbon composite shield will absorb the intense heat and keep the spacecraft and its instruments cool. The foam in the shield is so fluffy — 97 percent empty space — that it adds only 160 pounds of weight.

Solar wind is the stream of charged particles — primarily protons and electrons — that continuously flows outward from the sun through the solar system at a speed of about 1 million mph. Earth's magnetic field generates a bubble that deflects the solar wind around our planet and results in the beautiful aurora borealis, also known as the Northern and Southern lights, that flicker at night in the polar regions.

Understanding the solar wind is of importance to scientists and policymakers because of its potential to devastate civilization.

Occasionally, a huge explosion, called a coronal mass ejection, erupts from the sun, sending a larger-than-usual deluge of particles into space. In 1859, one of those explosions made a direct hit on Earth, disrupt-

ing telegraph wires in America and Europe. If the same thing happened today, it could cause continentwide blackouts, potentially requiring months to years to repair.

In 2012, one of NASA's sun-watching spacecraft, Stereo-A, detected an explosion comparable to the 1859 explosion. Fortunately, it was not aimed in Earth's direction.

During its first plunge to the sun, the probe will pass within about 15 million miles of the sun. That's close enough for the instruments to collect some useful data, but the greater excitement will come later.

The probe will also zip close to Venus, using that planet's gravity as a brake to sap energy from its motion and allow it to spiral inward, closer to the sun. After seven such course changes, the probe will be in an 88-day elliptical orbit of the sun, with a closest approach of about 3.8 million miles.

In total, the spacecraft will complete 24 orbits, and the mission is to end in 2025.

During its later orbits, the strong pull of the sun's gravity will accelerate the probe to 430,000 mph, which will be the fastest human-made object ever.

THE ACES BOBBY WOLFF

"Opinion is ultimately determined by the feelings, and not by the intellect."

— Herbert Spencer

This deal dates from a time when North was able to bid clubs naturally at his second turn. These days, some would play a three-club call as showing a second negative, with two no-trump natural.

The double of the Blackwood response doesn't affect South's plans. In Key-card Blackwood, the first step that isn't a signoff asks for the trump queen. When North denies it, South settles for the small slam.

South wins the opening diamond lead and plans to cash the spade ace and king, then pitch the diamond loser on the hearts. When the first round of trumps draws the jack from West, this does not have to be a true card (West might have one, two or even three trumps), but in almost all eventualities, the spades can probably wait. Declarer takes two top hearts to pitch dummy's diamond loser, and East ruffs in.

He plays back a diamond, which declarer ruffs in dummy, then pitches his last diamond on the club ace. When he leads the spade 10 from dummy, East follows low, and declarer is faced with a guess in trump. Should he play for West to have begun with the bare spade jack or the doubleton queen-jack?

Since West appears to have three or four diamonds and five hearts, while East has five or six cards in those two suits, it feels right to me to finesse. And the percentages indicate that too (reinforced by the Principle of Restricted Choice, which I'll discuss later this month).

After finessing in spades, declarer can draw trumps and claim the rest.

NORTH 08-13-A
♠ 10 9 6 2
♥ 4
♦ 8 3
♣ A J 10 7 5 4

WEST
♠ J
♥ 9 8 6 5 2
♦ 10 6 5
♣ K 8 3 2

EAST
♠ Q 7 5 3
♥ 7
♦ K Q J 9 4
♣ Q 9 6

SOUTH
♠ A K 8 4
♥ A K Q J 10 3
♦ A 7 2
♣ —

Vulnerable: North-South
Dealer: East

| The bidding: | | | |
|--------------|----------|-------|------|
| South | West | North | East |
| 2♠ | Pass | 2♦ | Pass |
| 2♥ | Pass | 3♠ | Pass |
| 3♠ | Pass | 4♠ | Pass |
| 4NT | Pass | 5♦ | Dbl. |
| 5♥ | Pass | 5♠ | Pass |
| 6♠ | All pass | | |

Opening Lead: Diamond five

LEAD WITH THE ACES 08-13-B

South holds:
♠ J 2
♥ A Q 6 5 3
♦ Q 2
♣ 10 7 6 4

| South | West | North | East |
|----------|------|-------|------|
| Pass | 1♣ | Pass | 1♠ |
| Pass | 2♠ | Pass | 4♠ |
| All pass | | | |

ANSWER: With no attractive side suit to lead from (since both diamond and heart leads could easily cost a trick), I'd reluctantly lead a club. Yes, the suit has been bid, but it has not really been shown yet. A fourth-highest club four is as likely as anything not to cost me, and partner won't necessarily think I have shortness.

TODAY IN HISTORY

Monday, August 13

Today is the 225th day of 2018. There are 140 days left in the year.

On August 13, 1961, East Germany sealed off the border between Berlin's eastern and western sectors before building a wall that would divide the city for the next 28 years.

In 1521, Spanish conqueror Hernando Cortez captured Tenochtitlan, present-day Mexico City.

In 1792, French revolutionaries imprisoned the royal family.

In 1846, the American flag was

raised for the first time in Los Angeles.

In 1910, Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing, died in London at age 90.

In 1932, Adolf Hitler rejected the post of vice chancellor of Germany, saying he was prepared to hold out "for all or nothing."

In 1942, Walt Disney's animated feature "Bambi" had its U.S. premiere at Radio City Music Hall in New York, five days after its world premiere in London.

TELL ME ABOUT IT

CAROLYN HAX

Adapted from a recent online discussion.

Carolyn: My sister-in-law, "Mary," has always been a mess. She has two kids with two different men who never see them, don't pay child support, and she doesn't work. Mary and her children lived with my mother-in-law, "Kate," until Kate moved into a 55-plus community and told Mary she was on her own. Mary has been living with her boyfriend since then.

A few weeks ago — not for the first time — Mary unexpectedly dumped the kids (5 and 3) on my husband, "Dan," and me, saying she was going on a trip. This week she texted us that she's staying where she is and we should send the kids to live with her mom. Kate, of course, can't take them.

Now Dan is talking about assuming permanent custody.

They are sweet but energetic, and love it here since they have a yard and stability. Mary will jump at the chance to get rid of them.

I know these little ones need us but this is not how I saw us building our family, and will delay our having our own children. While I am trying to do the right thing I am crying inside. If I turn these children away I'll feel like a monster, but if I take them in I'll feel like a martyr. What to do?

— **Crying Inside**
I feel for you, and know exactly how hard it is when something you've counted on, even lived for, won't happen. It's a kind of grief.

But I disagree your only choices are monster or martyr. "Mom" is available.

And I've come to see "how I saw us [blank]," whether it's "building our family" or

In 1960, the first two-way telephone conversation by satellite took place with the help of Echo 1.

In 1967, the crime caper biopic "Bonnie and Clyde," starring Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway, had its U.S. premiere; the movie, directed by Arthur Penn, was considered shocking as well as innovative for its graphic portrayal of violence.

In 1979, Lou Brock of the St. Louis Cardinals became the 14th player in major league baseball history to

"starting our careers" — or any future we envision — as a false promise at best. We can want and dream and plan, but life always gets its say. Always.

And so I see the path to happiness not as the milestones we strive for but as a mind open to the opportunities, even beauty, in what we receive.

This "will delay ... our own children" — yes — but these can soon become your own children, too, thereby accelerating versus delaying your promotion to parent. These kids need you and are attached to you already, and their chance to grow up in a loving and safe environment isn't just a gift for them.

It's a gift for you. It will get you outside of yourself, it will give you sharply illuminated purpose, it will produce two planets to your sun — at least until they are independent,

reach the 3,000th career hit plateau as his team defeated the Chicago Cubs, 3-2.

In 1981, in a ceremony at his California ranch, President Ronald Reagan signed a historic package of tax and budget reductions.

In 1989, searchers in Ethiopia found the wreckage of a plane which had disappeared almost a week earlier while carrying Rep. Mickey Leland, D-Texas, and 14 other people — there were no survivors.

which is also a gift to you in the form of a sense of accomplishment.

Is it Plan A? No. Will it be easy? No. These kids have been raised indifferently and can expect some emotional fallout. But everything worth doing takes a piece out of us — that's what makes it so, the investment of an essential part of you.

Absolutely do go cry it out with friends or a therapist even — but when you're ready, please open yourself to the possibility that life just gave you more than it took away.

Re: Kids:
Please get legal advice. Protect yourselves and them in case Mary decides she wants to take them back even for a limited time.

— **Anonymous**
Of course, thanks.

Nucla area wildfire grows

By ERIN MCINTYRE
Erin.McIntyre@gsentinel.com

A lightning-caused fire burning northwest of Nucla continued to grow in hot, dry weather over the weekend.

The Bull Draw Fire spread through tinder-dry brush and vegetation, growing to more than 20,000 acres by Sunday afternoon. Almost 300 firefighters were on-scene, according to Mike Smith, fire information officer. The fire was about 12 percent contained on Sunday afternoon.

"It grows as fast as we're building line around it," he said. No structures had burned in the fire as of Sunday afternoon, though a camper trailer was destroyed on Friday, Smith said.

The wildfire, which started on public lands, reached private property in Mesa

County over the weekend at an area called Campbell Point. Crews are building fire lines in the area of an old burn area caused by a fire in 2004, on the southeast side of the fire in Montrose County, to help with containment.

Crews have also focused on placing additional water resources in areas using large, portable water catchment basins, called "pumpkins" by fire crews because of their orange color.

These devices, also called blivets, hold thousands of gallons of water and can be used with sprinkler systems to protect structures and provide water to crews or air resources.

A 17-mile section of Divide Road remained closed on Sunday due to the fire. For updates on the road closure, call 242-8211.

Cooler weather helps crews fight wildfires

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LAKE ELSINORE, Calif. — Aided by slightly cooler temperatures, firefighters made steady progress Sunday in battling a wildfire that destroyed 16 structures as it raged through Southern California's Cleveland National Forest.

The Holy Fire was 41 percent contained Sunday afternoon after burning across 35.5 square miles of dry timber and brush, said Lynne Tolmachoff of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

"The weather out here in California seems to be cooling down today and over the next couple

days, and that should hopefully help firefighters get even more containment," Tolmachoff said. "They should make better progress over the next couple of days."

They'll need to, with temperatures, expected to again reach 100 degrees or more by the end of the week.

The Holy Fire — named for Holy Jim Canyon, where it began last Monday — is one of nearly 20 blazes burning across California as the state sees earlier, longer and more destructive wildfire seasons because of drought, warmer weather attributed to climate change and home construction deeper into forests.

With firefighters beginning to get a better handle on the blaze, they began to lift evacuation orders over the weekend for areas previously in its path, said Tolmachoff, who did not have exact numbers. More than 20,000 people were reportedly told to evacuate at one point.

Aircraft have made flight after flight, dumping water and bright pink retardant on the blaze to protect Lake Elsinore and other foothill communities near the flames.

The man accused of deliberately starting the fire appeared in court on Friday, but his arraignment was postponed. Forrest Clark, 51, made several outbursts, claiming his life was being threatened.

FUNERAL: Despite agreement, Hess says there are ways to stay in the mortuary business

► Continued from Page One

designee for Sunset Mesa, according to the state. She left a man named Greg Huffer, a former business partner and owner of the funeral home building, as the designee for the license with the state.

Though Hess had a right to a hearing, representation from an attorney in that hearing, and to defend herself and present evidence refuting the accusations and cross-examine witnesses that would have testified on behalf of the state, she waived those rights.

Hess said the attorney general's office prepared the agreement, and "there was no need to proceed with a hearing when I did not intend on reopening," she wrote an email to the Sentinel.

She said the agreement only says she can't be the designee of another funeral home or crematory, and that there are no employment or ownership restrictions, meaning she could still work for another funeral home or start a new one.

The end to the state's disciplinary actions provides little comfort to families involved, including the children of Raymond Hutt, who died in September 2016 at age 96.

"I kind of wish there had been more consequences," said Hutt's daughter, Janet, when told of the resolution.

The state agency used a complaint submitted by the Hutt family in suspending Sunset Mesa's license in February. They reported he was embalmed without their permission only hours after his death.

Family members said they found dealing with Sunset Mesa bizarre and unprofessional. They said Hess didn't provide a price list for services or caskets and dodged questions about options that were clearly cheaper. They were also perplexed by the behavior of Shirley Koch, Hess' mother, who described in intricate detail the embalming process when they visited the funeral home to make arrangements the morning after he died.

"She just kept going on and

on about how good Dad's veins were," said Lanah Hutt, Janet's sister. "It was crazy."

When family members confronted Hess about embalming Hutt without their permission, which is illegal, she got angry with them but conceded she wouldn't charge them for it — under one condition.

"She said if we opened the casket she would charge us full price," Janet said.

And so, they didn't open it. They proceeded with the funeral, agreeing to hire Hess to transport family from the funeral home to the cemetery for graveside services.

Family members said the funeral didn't go well. They accused Hess of retaliating against them for the embalming incident.

They suspect Hess sabotaged the sound system, ruining the music for the memorial service. They recounted running after her as she drove away from the cemetery in her limousine, leaving funeral attendees stranded at the cemetery and not fulfilling her agreement to transport mourners.

Now, the Hutt sisters wonder what is in their dad's casket after all, given the investigation and Koch's remarks about the condition of his circulatory system.

The Hutt sisters said they would give permission to have his body exhumed if it helps the investigation, but no one has asked.

The behavior they reported about Shirley Koch isn't surprising, according to a third party who was connected with Sunset Mesa who asked to not be named.

Hess employed her parents at the funeral business. Her mother handled the back room where embalming and body-parts dissection took place, and her father, Alan, helped with cremation.

Orders were received for specific body parts nearly daily, sometimes for a dozen heads, 18 wrists or a torso with a head attached. At one time Sunset Mesa received orders from a company in Arizona, and later on another one in Michigan, the source said.



Janet Hutt talks about her father, Raymond Hutt, who died in 2016 at the age of 96.

When dealing with families, Hess often characterized body donation as a humanitarian effort, rather than a moneymaking harvesting scheme.

"She always said we were cremating miracles," the person said. "That was her tagline. Those body parts could be used for research to create cures for things."

Koch delighted in learning new techniques for dissecting bodies and separating parts for orders, and found YouTube to be particularly helpful when she was having trouble extracting a spine from a cadaver.

Because not many families specified they wanted to do viewings at memorials, it's possible that bodies that were buried in caskets also had parts harvested from them without permission, the person said. Those who worked at the funeral home had a practice of asking families if their dead family members had said they wanted to be organ donors, asking for copies of drivers' licenses with the heart symbol on them to justify they wanted their bodies donated.

"Megan thought she was bulletproof," according to the source. "She just had this big, crazy ego. At first, I thought it was that she really felt like she was doing good, but then it became this whole body parts thing and it just became more about money."

More questions than answers exist for those who had loved ones taken care of since Sunset Mesa opened in Montrose in 2010.

Many people are angry, frustrated and overwhelmed with a resurgence of grief, as if their

loved one died all over again. And some are furious to see Hess continuing to do business in town as the investigation continues.

Recent incidents indicate some locals have reached a boiling point, including an altercation with a man at the Montrose County Fair last month.

There was an incident in March, in which Hess was ticketed for a traffic offense after she allegedly chased two women who had come to the funeral home to confront her about cremains. According to Montrose Police Cmdr. Gene Lillard, Hess chased the women off the property, followed them into town, blocked their vehicle and bumped one of them with her car, causing bruising.

Hess has continued to operate several of her businesses, including Signature Events and a catering company called PF Franks, named after her daughter's one-eyed stuffed animal. She's also hosted wine and cheesecake events at her home in Montrose, launched the Roaring Fork Spice Co. and started a cupcake business called Truffles & Company, which offers a flavor called "death by chocolate."

When she set up two booths at the fair, the McCarthy family was furious. Hess handled funeral arrangements for David McCarthy, a disabled veteran who died after having a heart attack at age 46 on Father's Day last year.

One of McCarthy's sons, Zachary, arrived at the fair and recorded Hess at her booth, sitting in a chair where he had a clear view and remarking to onlookers about the ongoing investigation and the allegations, protesting the fair's decision to allow her to do business.

A video posted on social media shows law enforcement arrived and he was escorted from the area after the incident.

"Let's just say she chopped up my dad and sold him instead of giving us anything," he said to spectators drawn to the scene. "Montrose thinks this is nothing."

"I have a right to support my family," Hess responded when asked about the incident.

McCarthy's widow, Danielle, declined to comment on what happened at the fair, but said the family is frustrated with a lack of response from the community and shocked that Hess can continue to do business in plain sight.

"Why are we not getting any support from the community?" she said. "There are families that are suffering and the deafness of the community in re-

sponse to this is not OK."

McCarthy said nothing weird happened when they used Sunset Mesa for her husband's arrangements, but she filled out FBI paperwork after the raid on the funeral home as a precaution. She said the FBI later contacted the family, asked for DNA samples from her four sons and told them they believed they had found body parts that were her husband's.

While she's trying to be patient with the FBI's investigation and wait for an outcome, she's upset by the lack of response from the community she's lived in for the past seven years.

"If you know someone is a victim, step up and start talking to them," she said. "We need to have the community wrap around these families."

The FBI will not comment on the ongoing investigation, how many people are involved or possible charges that could stem from the inquiry. But it's clear the effects of the allegations have been far-reaching, and that Colorado provided a regulatory environment that allowed Hess to broker body parts under the same roof as her funeral business and didn't require her to be licensed as a mortician or funeral home operator besides the business license from DORA.

The Sunset Mesa investigation spurred a change in state law making it illegal for businesses like Hess' to use a funeral home as a body-parts broker.

The Human Remains Disposition Sale Business Act was signed by the governor after being sponsored by two Montrose Republicans, making it illegal for someone to own a funeral home or crematory while also owning an interest in a non-transplant tissue bank. The bill also requires non-transplant tissue banks to register with DORA as funeral homes and crematories are required to do and keep detailed records of the donated bodies and track where those remains end up. There are also requirements for the business to "handle human remains in a safe and sanitary manner" and not "commingle unidentified or unharvested human remains."

Records must be kept on-site for at least three years. Establishments must also notify donors or their families that human remains may be distributed and the business will be compensated.

This change in state law is a small comfort to those who still don't know what happened to their loved ones. Some have al-

ready signed up to be represented by a Denver personal injury law firm, Burg Simpson, which currently has clients involved in an Arizona case stemming from another federal investigation into body parts brokering by Arthur and Elizabeth Rathburn.

A 2016 federal indictment alleged the couple rented infected body parts for medical and dental training, used unsanitary methods for harvesting, storing and transporting body parts and concealed that bodies had tested positive for diseases including hepatitis and HIV. The indictment alleged heads were transported in coolers and plastic bags and leaked bodily fluids, which Arthur Rathburn told investigators was mouthwash.

Ultimately, federal prosecutors pursued charges related to wire fraud and transporting hazardous materials. Elizabeth, who divorced Arthur, pleaded guilty to fraud and received probation. Arthur was convicted by a jury and sentenced to nine years in federal prison, according to the Department of Justice.

One family has already filed a civil suit against Sunset Mesa in Montrose County District Court, alleging Hess gave them the wrong cremains and sold their loved one's body parts.

But it's too soon for that, said attorney Michael Burg. He said he's asking clients who have signed up to have his firm represent them on a contingency basis to be patient.

"We're not going to file until we at least can get what we can from the FBI and get enough information on — no pun intended — where the bodies are buried," Burg said.

"We're investigating it ourselves and getting documents and getting what we can through our own sources."

Burg said it's too early to tell what a possible court case or charges could involve, though they could include fraud, racketeering and conspiracy.

"It's a hard case but we believe it's an important case to go after them," he said. "We may not get a dime out of them but we're going to fight like heck to find their assets."

He invites anyone who might like to join a potential lawsuit to contact his firm, but said he's clear about not getting anyone's hopes up if they agree to be represented.

"We tell them, number one, that we could be successful in a lawsuit and get no money," he said. "But we're going to pursue it because you people have been wronged."

the daily sentinel e-edition HOW-TO TRAININGS AT THE MESA COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY



The Daily Sentinel wants the transition to the e-edition to be as easy as possible for you. We understand everyone has different levels of comfort with computers and technology. If you need assistance or have questions, The Daily Sentinel will be offering trainings on how to access the e-edition at the **Mesa County Public Library Central Branch - 443 N. 6th Street** on the dates and times listed below. **IF YOU CAN'T MAKE ANY OF THESE SESSIONS, PLEASE CALL 242-1919 AND WE CAN WALK YOU THROUGH THE PROCESS**

MONDAY, AUGUST 13 at 10:30 - 11:30 a.m. in Mesa/Monument Community Rooms
open session to learn about signing up, signing in and subscribing to the e-edition

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 15 at 5:30 - 6:30 p.m. in Mesa/Monument Community Rooms
open session to learn about signing up, signing in and subscribing to the e-edition

THURSDAY, AUGUST 16 at 5:30 - 6:30 p.m. in computer lab, downstairs
computer lab time available with sign-up

FRIDAY, AUGUST 17 at 9-10 a.m. computer lab time available with sign-up

Give a little
TENDERNESS
— Save 75%* on Omaha Steaks —

The Family Gourmet Buffet

- 2 (5 oz.) Filet Mignons
- 2 (5 oz.) Top Sirloins
- 2 (4 oz.) Boneless Pork Chops
- 4 Boneless Chicken Breasts (1 lb. pkg.)
- 4 (3 oz.) Kielbasa Sausages
- 4 (4 oz.) Omaha Steaks Burgers
- 4 (3 oz.) Potatoes au Gratin
- 4 (4 oz.) Caramel Apple Tartlets
- OS Seasoning Packet (.33 oz.)
- 51689WSC
- ~~#\$99.99~~ separately **Combo Price \$49⁹⁹**

*Savings shown over aggregated single item base price. Limit 2 51689 pkgs. Your 4 free burgers and 4 free kielbasa will be sent to each shipping address that includes 51689. Standard S&H will be added per address. Flat rate shipping and reward cards and codes cannot be used with this offer. Not valid with other offers. Expires 10/31/18. All purchases acknowledge acceptance of Omaha Steaks, Inc. Terms of Use and Privacy Policy. Visit omahasteaks.com/terms-of-use/OSI and omahasteaks.com/info/privacy-policy or call 1-800-228-9872 for a copy. ©2018 OCG | Omaha Steaks, Inc. | 18M0094

Plus, get
4 more Burgers and
4 more Kielbasa
FREE!

1-888-653-3676 ask for 51689WSC
www.OmahaSteaks.com/meals103