

METRO

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2nd N.O. Starbucks set for union vote

Poydras Street store filed request two weeks ago

BY ANTHONY MCAULEY
Staff writer

Workers at the Starbucks outlet in the Pan-American Life building on Poydras Street will take a vote later this month on whether they want to form a union, which, if successful, would make the store the second in New Orleans to unionize.

The organizers at the Poydras Street branch filed their request two weeks ago with the National Labor Relations Board, which will now set a date for voting sometime between May 18-22. The filing required that at least 30% of the 21 nonmanagement workers at the store signed a petition saying they want to form a union.

If a majority votes in favor, it will be the second time in the city and the state that a Starbucks store's employees unionized. The 15 workers at the Starbucks on Maple Street in Uptown New Orleans voted in June to form a union. An effort at the Ambassador Caffery Parkway outlet in Lafayette resulted in a 10-10 vote, thus failing to get

majority support in September.

The Poydras Street move is part of a national effort over the past two years by Philadelphia-based Workers United to unionize Starbucks employees. The first store voting to unionize was in Buffalo, New York, at the end of 2021. So far, about 8,000 workers at 299 locations have voted to unionize, according to the latest board data.

Starbucks has about 235,000 employees working in 9,300 company-

owned stores nationwide, of which 84 are in Louisiana. The New Orleans area accounts for more than half of the state's outlets with 46.

Andrew Trull, a spokesperson for Starbucks based at the company's Seattle headquarters, said the company maintains its long-held position that employees — referred to as partners — are better off dealing directly with the company rather

► See **STARBUCKS**, page 2B

Jefferson deputy shoots man

BY MICHELLE HUNTER
Staff writer

A seven-hour search for a man suspected in a string of West Bank armed robberies ended Thursday night when a Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office deputy shot him as he hid under a house in Marrero, authorities said.

Louis Alexander, 50, was taken to a hospital with multiple gunshot wounds and was in stable condition Friday, said Capt. Jason Rivarde, a spokesperson for the Sheriff's Office. Alexander was expected to survive, authorities said.

Sheriff's Office officials did not say Friday whether Alexander was armed at the time of the shooting nor have they disclosed what led the deputy to open fire.

"The deputy still has to be interviewed. That will occur some time over the weekend," Rivarde said while addressing media Friday afternoon. "Once that interview is done, we can probably provide some more information."

Sheriff's detectives went to Alexander's home in the 800 block of Avenue B about 3:30 p.m. Thursday to serve search and arrest warrants. Alexander had been linked to a house burglary on his

► See **SHOOTING**, page 2B



Smiley Anders

Please do not feed the gators

Dear Smiley: While walking the bike path along Lake Pontchartrain shoreline in Metairie, I saw a man waist-deep in the Lake Villa pumping station canal.

Standing on the shore, two young women with cellphones were filming him. When I was on the bridge over the canal, I looked down to see a 6-foot alligator near where the man was standing in the water.

What a foolhardy thing to do! They were probably posting on TikTok to get a thousand views.

It would have been tragic had the gator attacked the man and the posting gone viral.

RICHARD O'NEILL
Metairie

That's entertainment?

Dear Smiley: Your tales reminded me of when in 1960-61, with three friends I drove from Tierra del Fuego to Alaska in a long-wheel-base Land Rover.

We spent the Christmas of 1960 with the Bridges family near Rio Grande on the east coast of the island. The Bridges family has been there since the 1870s.

After checking on Ushuaia and

► See **SMILEY**, page 2B



STAFF PHOTO BY DAVID GRUNFELD

Dennis 'Maliq' Barnes, 16, announces that he will be attending Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., during a Friday news conference at International High School of New Orleans. Barnes received more than 180 college acceptance letters and nabbed more than \$10 million in scholarship offers, setting a new national record that brought international media attention. He will be enrolling in the university's College of Engineering in the fall.

N.O. senior chooses Cornell

Record-setting scholarship haul gains international attention for 16-year-old

BY LEAH CLARK
Staff writer

After receiving more than 180 college acceptance letters and gaining more than \$10 million in scholarship offers, New Orleans senior Dennis "Maliq" Barnes announced his plans to attend Cornell University in the fall at a Friday ceremony.

Barnes, who attends the International High School of New Orleans, set a new national record for his scholarship haul, which generated international media attention. The previous record was held by a Lafayette senior who received \$8.7 million in scholarships in 2019.

Surrounded by family and friends,

the 16-year-old declared his intention to be part of Cornell's Class of 2027 in a ceremony that was reminiscent of ones usually reserved for five-star athletes.

Barnes plans to enroll in Cornell's College of Engineering to pursue a degree in computer science. He said he hopes to have a career in software development.

According to International High officials, Barnes applied to 200 schools across the country. However, he said he has always seen Cornell as his first choice.

"I've always known that I wanted to go to Cornell, so it was never really optional, to be honest," Barnes said. "Once I saw the admission, I knew where I was going. I wasn't going any-

where else."

Also present at the ceremony were Adierah Berger, Head of School for International High, and college admissions counselor Denise James, who the school said encouraged Barnes to apply to as many colleges as he could.

"We are an International Baccalaureate program that focuses on languages and intercultural appreciation. ... That's the key value we value for our students," Berger said. "We appreciate all the love you've given to us and to Dennis."

At International High School, Barnes has maintained a GPA of 4.98 and holds leadership positions in the National Honor Society. He is fluent in Spanish and recently received the Jose Luis Baños Award for Excellence in Spanish Language by Maria Page, honorary consul of Spain in New Orleans.

► See **BARNES**, page 2B

Bankruptcy judge OKs sale to former landlord

BY JOHN SIMERMAN
Staff writer

Embattled landlord Joshua Bruno is slated to reclaim a slice of his low-income rental empire, after a bankruptcy judge on Friday approved the auction sale of six of his crumbling complexes.

U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Meredith Grabill rejected a challenge to Bruno's high bid for Washington Place, a 25-unit complex he bought in 2007.

Bruno's main lender, the Federal National Mortgage Association, or Fannie Mae, and tenant advocates argued that his \$990,000 offer was the highest but not the "best," based on his troubled history.

But Dwayne Murray, the trustee appointed last year to oversee the bankrupt properties, had qualified Bruno as one of 11 auction bidders

based on financial and other criteria. Describing bankruptcy as nothing if not "the place of second chances," Grabill said she feared more litigation if she opted to upset the bids and oust Bruno.

"For what?" Grabill said, citing hurricanes, a pandemic and a weak economy as factors in the decline of his complexes, which totaled 500 units. "Things went south for very many reasons."

All told, the six rental properties fetched \$9.5 million in high bids, more than half of it for two large Algiers complexes — Oakmont Apartments and Cypress Park — that turned squalid under Bruno's watch.

Pulling them back up has been a struggle, acknowledged Murray in explaining the decision to

► See **BRUNO**, page 2B

Statue to mark conclusion of Severn Avenue project

BY MARIE FAZIO
Staff writer

To mark the completion of a \$15 million, yearslong drainage project along Severn Avenue in Metairie, Jefferson Parish officials unveiled plans for a new addition for the corner near Lakeside Shopping Center: a statue of a "Mardi Gras tree."

The traffic-snarling road project was aimed at improving drainage in the flood-prone area, as well as making Severn more bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly.

Only finishing touches remain, including adding light fixtures along Severn and the construction of the statue, a metal structure that will be hand-painted with odes to Metairie fixed to its branches.

Jefferson Parish Council member Jennifer Van Vrancken, who represents the district, said at a news conference this week that the project was "a long time coming," and pointed to a photo display of cars driving down Severn after a heavy rain with water nearly over their tires.

"When you talk about a street that is the heart of Metairie and right alongside Lakeside Shopping Center, we could not continue to have an impassable flooded street every time we get a heavy rain," she said.

The project broke ground in 2020 and was supposed to be completed in September 2021, but faced delays from two hurricanes, a labor shortage and sup-

► See **SEVERN**, page 2B

STARBUCKS

Continued from page 1B

than through a union. But he noted that the company last year began a bargaining process with employees who have voted to unionize.

“We fully respect our partners’ voices and their right to make a choice regarding union representation,” Trull said. “But we believe a direct relationship with partners so they can share in the success of the company is the right path.”

So far, none of the direct bargaining efforts have come to an agreement, with both sides accusing the other of bad faith.

Workers at the Poydras Street Starbucks said their complaints mirror those of colleagues at other stores around the country, with worries over their safety and erratic working hours topping the list.

Rene Gonzalez, a barista at the Starbucks on Poydras, said the last straw for him came on Mardi Gras when a customer took a swing at him over the amount of whipped cream he was putting in her white chocolate mocha.

“We get rude customers all the time, but she swung a punch at me, and that’s when I lost it,” Gonzalez said, adding that he resolved to join the union rather than quit.

He said conditions had deteriorated since Starbucks closed its other downtown company-owned



STAFF PHOTO BY JERRY DICOLO

Workers at the Starbucks on Poydras Street in New Orleans are seeking to unionize. They said their complaints mirror those of colleagues at other stores around the country, with worries over their safety and erratic working hours topping the list.

store on Canal Street, with the head office citing at the time the unsafe conditions there after an accumulation of threats to staff and customers.

The spillover business from that location, just four blocks away, coupled with reduced hours and fewer employees on shift at Poydras, had meant customer wait times had ballooned, with more incidents like the one he described, Gonzalez said.

“Our store has had record sales since the Canal Street location

closed,” said Serena Sojic-Borne, another Poydras street employee.

“It’s not designed to handle that volume and pretty regularly we have these incidents,” she said, referring to Gonzalez’s encounter with the unruly customer.

Stormy Belozerows, another Poydras Street barista, said that although it was good to see Starbucks voluntarily raise its wage floor nationally to \$15 an hour last year, her hours were simultaneously cut from 30 to 19 a week. That meant she has to work two

other part-time jobs to make ends meet.

She and others at Starbucks said they have had no explanation from management about why they seem to be chronically short-staffed but also had their hours cut.

The labor board has opened nearly 545 cases nationally to investigate alleged Starbucks intimidation, including the firing last May of Billie Nyx, one of the organizers at Maple Street Starbucks in New Orleans. That case is still pending and so far only two cases nationally — one in Michigan and one in Tennessee — have been resolved with the reinstatement of a fired organizer.

“Unfortunately, Billie’s case is an example of how Starbucks has been able to exploit some of the delays in our legal system,” said Sarai King, the Austin, Texas-based lawyer representing both Maple Street and Poydras Street unionizing employees.

Starbucks has maintained that Nyx was fired for closing the Maple Street branch early without permission.

Trull also denied that Starbucks had been using intimidation tactics to deter unionization, including firing some organizers.

“We maintain in those instances there were clear violations of established policies,” he said.

Email Anthony McAuley
tmcauley@theadvocate.com.

SMILEY

Continued from page 1B

the Beagle Channel, we made our way on the ferry to the mainland. (During the crossing they fed us lunch of lamb testicles stew — not something you see every day, but it was that time of year.) When we got to Punta Arenas, Chile, we prepared for our drive north. We reached Fairbanks in December, 11 months later.

Punta Arenas was a small town, and they had just installed their first traffic stop. The locals were driving around and around to experience the stop-and-go.

An otherwise quiet corner of the world.

MARTIN E. HUGH-JONES
Baton Rouge

Smart operators

Dear Smiley: It is hard to believe, but when I worked for the phone company in the ’70s we only had real live operators.

We did everything by hand. If someone called in for a phone number, we actually looked it up in a printed book. We timed each long-distance call with a timer — and, yes, we were aware you used codes for avoiding paying for long-distance calls.

It was not uncommon for a person placing that collect person-to-person call to give a long nervous explanation about why talking only to that one person would do.

People who really wanted to talk to someone did not make person-to-person collect calls.

MISSY GUILLIOT
Lafayette

Party time

Dear Smiley: We had a party line; our ring was two shorts. Later most people got private lines, and the phone company stopped adding new customers to party lines. No one else was on our line.

The phone company tried to get Mom to upgrade to a private line, but she refused. The party line rate was much lower and the service was the same.

Conversations on party lines had to be cautious; someone was always listening in. My girlfriend was always telling a certain lady to hang up.

DON GARLAND
Baton Rouge

Country porch

Dear Smiley: Before we leave the front porch, let me introduce you to the one owned by Earl and Juanita Allen on Bend Road in Watson.

It was occupied many late summer evenings by their five adult children, and her five siblings they were raising.

Grown-ups had the front porch. Little kids played in the front yard, or sat at their parents’ feet (if they fully understood that children were to be seen and not heard).

Teenagers had the back porch, with its barrel of seed peanuts and the water bucket, close to the kitchen with its plentiful supply of Cokes and popcorn.

Livingston Parish business was thoroughly discussed on that front porch. Governors visited. And among those kids were a future engineer, airline pilot, and a pharmacist; along with accountants, teachers, school principals and supervisors, and a bank president.

A good time was had by all — plus an education in NEVER repeating anything heard on that front porch.

SHELLY STROBEL
Watson

Write Smiley at Smiley@theadvocate.com.

BARNES

Continued from page 2B

Barnes is already well on his way to a college degree. He has been dual-enrolled at Southern University at New Orleans and has already earned 27 college credits.

Although he said he will miss New Orleans, Barnes is excited to move to the Cornell campus in Ithaca, New York.

“I love my city, but I do want to get out and experience things. See different things that I haven’t seen before,” he said.

Barnes is set to graduate May 24 at Frederick J. Sigur Civic Center in St. Bernard Parish.

LOTTERY

THURSDAY, MAY 4, 2023

PICK 3: 6-0-5

PICK 4: 4-0-6-2

PICK 5: 9-2-6-0-9

Unofficial notification,
keep your tickets.

SEVERN

Continued from page 1B

ply chain problems. Construction wrapped up late last year.

Jefferson Parish President Cynthia Lee Sheng, who also represented the area as a council member, said half of the funding came from the federal government and half from the parish.

“This project caused me a lot of stress, when you think that people couldn’t access Lakeside mall at Christmastime,” Lee Sheng said, noting that work was stopped multiple times throughout the project for Carnival season and to allow people access to the mall during Christmas shopping season.

The project included underground drainage from Veterans Boulevard to West Esplanade Avenue, and efforts to make it more pedestrian friendly, like brick paver sidewalks, crosswalks and Americans with Disabilities Act-compliant ramps. Bike lanes were installed from 18th Street to West Esplanade that connect Fat City to the Lakefront Path in Metairie.

The bike lanes, which were a requirement for the federal funding and separate bicyclists from cars by concrete lumps, have been a source of consternation for some motorists. They are low to the ground and easy to roll over.

Mark Drewes, the parish’s director of public works, thanked businesses along Severn for their patience while the roadways were torn up.

“Like every construction project, it went longer than expected,” he said.

A new statue

Designed by local artist Christy Boutte, the 11-foot-tall and 11-foot-wide structure will be made of mixed-media metal, aluminum and steel able to withstand 130 mph winds.

Boutte will finger-paint the tree and add embellishments like glass beads, metal leaves and glitter, as well as odes to Metairie, including references to Metairie’s seafood scene — the well-known Drago’s restaurant is nearby — and a peacock, which is symbolic of the Krewe of Argus, which traditionally rolls along the Veterans Memorial Boulevard route on Mardi Gras.

On Thursday, parish officials also unveiled a plaque at the intersection of Severn and Veterans that dedicates the Henry Shane Sculpture Trail, noting businessman Henry Shane’s donations of more than 30 statues around the parish.

He also has donated other statues to Kenner.

Brian Lade, who manages the Lakeside shopping mall, thanked the group for pausing construction during Christmas shopping season and for improving the mall exits.

“We are so thrilled to be adjacent to this corridor,” he said. “These are long-term solutions that help us and help drive the parish’s sales tax revenue.”

SHOOTING

Continued from page 1B

block that was reported on March 30, as well as four armed robberies, according to Rivarde.

The holdups occurred at businesses in Harvey and Marrero starting on March 31. The last armed robberies occurred Thursday in the 1000 block of Barataria Boulevard, some time in the hours before the warrants were served, Rivarde said.

Alexander spotted the detectives and ran from the house, disappearing into the neighborhood. The Sheriff’s Office set up a search perimeter, and deputies went door to door looking for him with help from the department’s helicopter, drones and K-9 officers, according to Rivarde.

Deputies narrowed the search area and finally found Alexander about 10:30 p.m. hiding under a house in the 4000 block of School Drive, Rivarde said. Deputies tried several times to coax Alexander out, and sprayed pepper spray under the house.

“During the apprehension, one deputy discharged his firearm multiple times. Alexander was struck by gunfire,” Rivarde said.

There were deputies on scene wearing body cameras. But it was not immediately clear whether the actual shooting was recorded because it occurred under a house. The deputies wear the cameras on their chests and likely would have been on the ground, Rivarde said.

The video’s release will be dictated by the investigation and what Sheriff Joseph Lopinto determines is appropriate, Rivarde said.

Once released from the hospital, Alexander will be booked on four counts of armed robbery and one count of simple burglary,

according to Rivarde.

Alexander is on parole following a 1998 conviction on five counts of armed robbery, according to Jefferson Parish court records. He was sentenced to 250 years in prison for the holdups.

Alexander served almost 24 years of the sentence before he was paroled on March 16, 2022, said Ken Pastorick, a spokesperson for the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections.

Once released from prison, Alexander was taken to the Orleans Parish jail, where he was booked on first-degree murder, accused in the Aug. 5, 1997, death of Westbank Cab Co. driver Jesse Resendez.

The Orleans Parish District Attorney’s Office refused the charge in June, according to court records.

Including Alexander’s shooting, Jefferson Parish Sheriff’s Office deputies have fired their guns on six occasions in the line of duty in 2023, killing two men and wounding three, according to officials.

Kevin Veal, 26, of Harvey, died after he was shot multiple times Feb. 25 during a violent struggle and exchange of gunfire with deputies inside a Brother’s Food Mart in Terrytown, according to the Sheriff’s Office.

Joseph Riviere III, 50, was fatally shot outside of his Metairie home on April 22 after authorities say he stepped out of his vehicle and pointed a gun at deputies who were there to question him about an earlier incident, the Sheriff’s Office said.

Malcom Richards Jr., 18, of Slidell, was shot Jan. 3 after authorities allege he brandished a gun at deputies who were responding to a rash of 62 vehicle burglaries near Elmwood, the Sheriff’s Office said. Two juveniles, ages 12 and 14, and their mother were arrested that night.

Richards managed to escape but was eventually arrested Feb. 2 and booked on several charges, including aggravated assault on an officer and more than 50 counts of simple burglary, according to court records.

Troy Scott, 27, was shot Jan. 25 during a confrontation with deputies who tried to stop a stolen vehicle in Metairie. A deputy who “perceived a threat” opened fire following a short car chase and crash when the vehicle’s driver and passenger got out carrying handguns, according to the Sheriff’s Office.

Both suspects escaped on foot, and authorities weren’t sure if either had been injured. But Scott sought treatment for a gunshot wound at a New Orleans hospital, telling authorities there he’d been wounded by gunfire in Orleans Parish, Rivarde said.

Investigators, however, used DNA to link him to the chase, according to authorities. He was arrested March 2 and booked on aggravated assault and possession of stolen property, according to court records.

In the sixth incident, a deputy shot at Brandon Porea, 37, when Porea, who was allegedly impaired, fled from a traffic stop and then tried to run from deputies. The Sheriff’s Office said the deputy “perceived a threat” and fired his service weapon at least once. Porea was not injured.

Asked Friday about the department’s use of lethal force this year, Rivarde said deputies don’t go out looking to shoot people.

“They’re responding to the things that happen to them. In those situations, we’re not really in control of the suspects’ actions. The suspects’ actions dictate ours,” he said.

No New Orleans Police Department officer has fired a weapon in the line of duty this year, according to NOPD records.

BRUNO

Continued from page 1B

liquidate.

He cited “a very, very dangerous element” at the 64-unit Cypress Park, where a landscaper he dispatched to beautify it was swiftly “ushered off the property by someone with an AR-15.”

At Oakmont, which the city evacuated last year, Murray said he hired a team to gut 90 units, with the hope of renting them again.

“Within a day or two of when his team finished gutting, we lost 34 units to a fire,” Murray said.

Fires, rats, raw sewage and squatters all have plagued the complex. Murray said Oakmont’s stock of available units has fallen from 336 units to 274 from damage.

Bruno said he bid Monday on all six of the properties he’d placed in bankruptcy last year to stave off foreclosure. Bruno offered a larger payoff before the auction but was denied. He said the high bids on the other properties don’t pencil out.

“I don’t know how the numbers are going to work for what they paid,” Bruno said.

Bruno reclaimed Washington Place for less than half of the \$2.3 million debt Fannie Mae claimed he owed.

“At the end of the day, I could not treat (Bruno) any differently,” said Murray, the trustee.

The high bidder for both Oakmont and Cypress Park was a company owned by Tupac de la Cruz, a Prairieville-based commercial roofer.

The other auctioned Bruno properties included Liberty Park and Forest Park on the east bank and Riverview Apartments in Kenner. Long LLC was the high bidder for both Liberty Park and Forest, with bids totaling \$1.4 million. Ziad Mousa won the bidding for Riverview, at just shy of \$1.4 million.

Edward Arnold, an attorney for the lender, said the \$9.5 million take from the auction was “much higher than most people thought.” Fannie Mae claimed Bruno owed \$30 million.

On Friday, advocates with the Renters Rights Assembly counted the judge’s ruling as a big win after two years fighting Bruno, even if he managed to keep one property.

“Five out of six of the complexes will be developed and managed by capable and competent individuals,” said Y. Frank Southall, an organizer for the group, who noted that each of the high bidders, including Bruno, committed to renter protections.

City Council member Lesli Harris was among those trying to torpedo Bruno’s bid for Washington

Place, urging Murray in a letter this week to reject it. Harris called Bruno “by definition, a slumlord.”

Hannah Adams, an attorney with Southeast Louisiana Legal Services who represents tenants in the bankruptcy, said she hoped the properties will be rehabbed from the ground up.

“They were in such seriously bad condition, it wasn’t possible to stabilize them halfway,” she said. “We are really happy this saga is maybe coming to an end.”

Grabill described the problems at Bruno’s bankrupt properties as “just overwhelming and insurmountable,” saying the trustee “couldn’t even come close to servicing the debt.”

Bruno criticized Fannie Mae and argued that the trustee began to recognize the challenges he faced.

“It wasn’t until back-to-back storms and the CDC and local government took control of private property and businesses and hindered our operation and ability to remove problem occupants, which were a threat to staff and property,” he said of their demise.

The winning bidders have a month to close. In the meantime, Bruno said he would pursue an appeal of Grabill’s order last month moving forward on an auction.

About 80 of Bruno’s former tenants will receive payments of \$1,250 in the bankruptcy, under Fannie Mae’s plan.