

# HOUSTON CHRONICLE

## Widow remembers soldier as devoted family man

AMANDA CASANOVA

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Ryann Catlett is turning 5 on June 29. Last Saturday, she was already telling her dad what she wanted.

But dad, U.S. Army Spc. Matthew Ryan Catlett, will not be there.

The 23-year-old from Cypress was killed Monday in Afghanistan after a roadside bomb hit a Humvee carrying Catlett. Four other soldiers with the 101st Airborne Division also were killed.

“He was a wonderful person,” said his wife, Brytnee. “He cared about his kids and his family, and he loved being a dad and a soldier. That was most important: his daughters and his career.”

His Facebook profile picture showed him smiling with his arms around Ryann. His other daughter, Stephanie, is 3.

“Before he left, we sat down with the kids and we explained how daddy had to go over there and do his ‘soldier job,’ as they call it,” Brytnee Catlett said.

She said she planned to tell the girls about their father Thursday night.

Catlett was born in Conroe but moved to Houston, where he graduated from Cypress Ridge High School in 2005 before enlisting in the Army. He was deployed to Iraq in 2007 and returned in November 2008. He left for Afghanistan in April.

“From the time he was 12, he talked about enlisting,” said his mother, Jerrie. “From the way he talked, he wanted to make it a career.”

The youngest of four, Catlett has three older sisters, with whom he visited before leaving.

“He would sometimes come to work and surprise me,” Jerrie Catlett said, crying. “I’d look up and he’d be there.”

By Thursday morning, a Facebook group page called “RIP Matthew Ryan Catlett” boasted nearly 70 members and the wall to the page was spotted with condolences and photos of Catlett.

“Matthew was and always will be a great American hero in the eyes of more than just my family,” said Cindy Wheeler, whose husband served with Catlett in Iraq. “He was a great soldier and friend. He loved his family and his country. He will be greatly missed and never forgotten.”

### Dedication to family

The creator of the Facebook group, Emily Griswold, said Catlett's dedication to his family stemmed from the fact that his father left when Catlett was 3 weeks old.

"His goal was to not do that and not be like that. His kids were the most important thing in his life," said Griswold, Brytnee's sister.

"My mind won't calm down," said Brytnee Catlett, pausing to fight tears. "There are a thousand things racing through my brain. It doesn't feel real. I still feel him here."

Catlett is the fifth Houston-area soldier to die in Afghanistan this year. His body arrived Wednesday at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. His wife said his body will be escorted within a few days to Houston. Plans for a memorial service have not yet been made.

"I'm going to try to tell the girls that he is with God and he is watching over them," his wife said. "He died doing something brave for his country. He made a sacrifice for everyone."

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## **Man at Ben Taub Hospital with stab wounds**

By AMANDA CASANOVA  
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A 48-year-old man is in custody in connection with the deaths of three people, including his ex-girlfriend, at a home near Hobby Airport.

Richard Glenn Harris, 48, is currently at Ben Taub Hospital with self-inflicted stab wounds on his throat, Houston Police Department officials said. He was found unconscious in his car early this morning, authorities said.

Houston police responded to a call Friday morning after a man told the victims' neighbor that he had killed them.

Kelly Amason, 45, her sister, Debbie Richardson, 59, and Billy Blessing, 55, were beaten and stabbed, police said. Their bodies were discovered about 11:20 a.m. at their home in the 9300 block of Randolph in southeast Houston.

Blessing's sister, Janice Moon, said Amason's former boyfriend showed up at the home around 11 p.m. Thursday and an argument ensued.

"He's come over and fought with them before," Moon said. "He's come over drunk before and been violent. The last time I saw him he told me he was going to kill them all."

Houston Police officer Dan Arnold said the bodies were found in separate areas of the house, but would not elaborate. The three could have been killed as early as last night, Arnold said.

The sisters' father, J.D. Amason, said they met Harris a couple of years ago and understood he was "very into" drugs.

Relatives added that Kelly Amason had recently moved back into the house.

"Kelly was so beautiful and so sweet," said Melanie McNeil, a friend of the two sisters. "They were both lovely. I just cannot believe it."

Mike Morgan, Richardson's husband for more than 10 years, said they remained friends after a divorce and have one son together.

"She was kindhearted," Morgan said, "almost too kindhearted."

Neighbors and family members stood in the street and outside their homes, eyes locked on the one-story brick residence. Daniel Trout, who has lived in the neighborhood for 10 years, said he did not know the slaying victims well but had heard their past arguments.

"They've had a long history of brawls and the police have been there a lot," he said. "They had more than their share of conflict in that home."

Identification belonging to Harris was left at the scene of an attempted robbery Friday afternoon, Arnold said.

A man wielding a knife tried to steal beer and cigarettes about 2 p.m. at a CVS drug store at Broadway and Bellfort.

Anyone with information should call HPD Homicide Division at 713-308-3600 or Crime Stoppers at 713-222-TIPS (8477).

## **Long-term joblessness takes a heavy toll**

### **Survey finds marital problems, self-image issues, increasing pessimism for unemployed**

AMANDA CASANOVA  
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William Sowell pulls a 2-inch stack of photos from his backpack, aging reminders of his time as a merchant mariner. He shows the snapshots to a handful of people at the Workforce Solutions office downtown, flipping through images of when he worked as a deckhand on deep-water ships and docked at places such as Africa, Israel and Afghanistan.

Then the economy slipped into a recession and shipping stalled. For nearly two years, the 44-year-old has been trying to get back to work and adjusting to a reality of long-term unemployment.

"I was meeting people, working with people and seeing the world," he said. "Now, it just doesn't look too good."

The Houston native is among thousands trying not to let despair and pessimism become overwhelming. In a recent Pew Research Center survey, more than 44 percent of those unemployed for at least six months blamed the recession for major upheaval, including marital problems, self-image issues and an increasing sense of pessimism.

Almost half of those unemployed six months or more reported strained family relationships.

The survey and recent debate in Congress over a bill extending unemployment benefits for about 2.5 million Americans put a spotlight on the long-term unemployed like Sowell, who has started singing for area churches.

His favorite tune is *This Little Light of Mine*. "That's all you can do is let your light shine," he echoed.

Since 2008, Sowell has left his Houston apartment and lost his car. He put most of his belongings in storage and is now staying at a local church. A monthly government check of \$400 and odd jobs, such as warehouse work and a stint as a doorman, allow Sowell to feed himself.

His last job was a month ago, holding a stop sign to direct traffic during construction.

### **Rethinking his plan**

In June, the median duration of unemployment nationally was around 25 weeks with half of those unemployed looking for work for six months or more, the Pew study said. This is the highest duration since May 1983, where the length was about 12 weeks.

Countless days without a regular paycheck forced Sowell to rethink his strategy.

"At this point, it's made me willing to take anything," he said. "It also motivated me to want to serve and to do more, and it has definitely drawn me closer to God."

Three times a week, Sowell visits the downtown Workforce Solutions center, checking his e-mail and exploring job boards.

His passport is current. His Transportation Worker Identification Credential, which allows him to access secure areas of vessels, has been renewed.

But that hasn't been enough to help place the former seafarer.

"Shipping got slow. There wasn't any boats going out," he said. "Everything went downhill from there."

### **Houston's jobless rate**

In June the jobless rate in Houston climbed to 8.8 percent. Statewide, the jobless rate stands at 8.5 percent.

To help curb the effects of increasing unemployment, President Barack Obama recently signed the emergency bill to extend jobless benefits.

"Once people lose jobs, they quit spending money and that makes other people lose jobs," said Joel Wagher, labor market analyst for Workforce Solutions.

In the Houston area, more than 46,000 people received unemployment benefits in June, down nearly 20,000 from the same period a year ago, Wagher said.

About 20,000 people collected benefits for 15 weeks or more in the Houston area in June, a 28 percent decline from that time last year.

"Even though there are fewer people being laid off, the unemployment rate keeps going up because we're not adding jobs for people like college graduates and other people deciding to work," Wagher said.

Meanwhile, Workforce Solutions offices — a state agency providing resources for job seekers - is swamped, with some offices in Houston averaging around 1,000 customers a day, spokeswoman Sue Cruver said.

After logging many hours at unemployment offices last week, Sowell is upbeat that four shipping companies called him back.

But he's been in this position before.

"I'm just going to put it in God's hands and let him lead me," he said. "That's all I can do."

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## **Bolivar Peninsula residents still work for recovery after Ike**

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On Bolivar Peninsula, quiet visitors dot the beaches, dragging their toes in the shoreline and lying in the midday sun. A giggling toddler jumps away from the gentle waves, while the steady hammering of nearby construction on a beach house echoes softly.

Many of the houses boast new paint and "For Sale" signs, while a gutted gas station and a handful of broken homes are reminders of when about 15 feet of water flooded the peninsula during Hurricane Ike.

Residents say a complete recovery for the peninsula is a long way off. Almost two years after Ike battered the Texas coast, Karen Shobert, whose home was damaged in the storm, is still

living in a travel trailer. Her friend, Peggy Buchanan, has a stranded satellite dish sinking in the marshes behind her house.

"We have faith though," Shobert said. "It'll happen sometime. We'll get our houses back."

In hopes of speeding up redevelopment, a committee of business owners and residents teamed to create the Bolivar Blueprint. Unveiled to residents in May, the blueprint detailed plans to rebuild on the peninsula and provide a thriving area for businesses, tourists and residents.

Projects include a housing resource center to inform residents about the status of housing applications, buying out properties, a small business incubator to help launch new businesses and environmental education.

"The recovery projects are moving forward with funding resources and establishing working partnerships with resource agents," said Careen Plummer, the director for the Bolivar Blueprint. "People are still there building and reclaiming their heritage. Bolivar hasn't been wiped off the map."

Plans are long-term, including building parks, putting in new fishing piers and restoring the storm water drainage system on the peninsula.

### **Blueprint 'wish list'**

Galveston County, area businesses and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, among others, have joined together to drum up funds for the 28 recovery projects. Also in May, the organization PenDeCo, Peninsula Development Coalition, was launched to take the blueprint "wish list" and "make something," said Sid Bouse, PenDeCo president.

"We got involved to push buttons and twist arms," Bouse said. "We've had small successes, but we're still a year from doing any real good."

PenDeCo relies on financial support from primarily corporate sponsors and federal grants, but red tape slows the redevelopment process, Bouse said. He estimates the entire blueprint at costing "hundreds of millions of dollars."

"All seven (of the major projects) are going and moving," he said. "When we run into challenges, we write a letter and go to meetings. We keeping attacking officials. We're not waiting on anyone to do this for us."

Before the hurricane, the peninsula had nearly 5,500 homes. Ike knocked out roughly 3,300 houses and damaged another 2,090.

Only some 500 homes have been rebuilt following the storm, Plummer said.

But that is not stopping visitors from flocking to Bolivar's 45 square miles of surf and sand. During the week, there was almost an hourlong wait for the ferry to the peninsula. On weekends, the wait can be as much as four hours, Plummer said.

"It's amazing," said Margo Johnson, board member for the Bolivar Chamber of Commerce. "The people here are resilient. People who at first said they weren't going to come back have come back, and it's because they see progress."

Chamber membership has doubled since the storm with new businesses, such as granite and flooring companies springing to life, said Anne Willis, president of the Bolivar Chamber of Commerce.

"There are not enough houses to go around to rent and buy," she said, as a potential buyer walked in her real estate office. "We're not going to stop building anytime soon."

### **To leave or to stay**

For sale signs and construction signs line the areas shrouded in weeds along Texas 87. In between the spots of desolation, a restaurant or business stands. Half of Bolivar's restaurants have reopened, Plummer said.

"Do you live here?" asked a tourist who stopped at the local grocery store. "Do you know if Steve's Restaurant is still open?"

"No ma'am," said a resident, clad in a fishing cap and swim trunks. "Got destroyed in the storm."

Many businesses chose not to rebuild, Shobert said, lacking the funds to start over. For Shobert, even though she has lived on Bolivar for 10 years, the idea of leaving the peninsula is something she has started to consider.

"I don't think I can live through another storm like this and deal with the government," she said.

"Really?" Buchanan said, turning to face Shobert. "I don't ever want to leave."

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## **Houston boy's prayer answered following hit-and-run**

AMANDA CASANOVA  
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Oscar Almaguer prayed with his mom Friday at the funeral for his neighbor Maria Hernandez, who was sweeping the end of her north Houston driveway last week when someone ran her over.

"God, let the person who did this say 'I'm sorry' and tell them to come out," the 5-year-old boy said.

The next day, the woman police say was driving the car that hit Hernandez surrendered.

Maria Guadalupe Reyes was arrested a day after her 33rd birthday.

She is charged with failure to stop and render aid after her Toyota minivan weaved onto the side of the street and struck Hernandez early on June 20 in the 400 block of Crosstimbers.

"You're in a safe zone," Oscar's mother, Juana Almaguer, said. "You're in your own yard and your own driveway. No one's supposed to kill you while you're there."

Almaguer was the first to call 911 and said she cannot shake the image of the accident. Almaguer nodded to the house across the street, where a broom still rests against a window.

"She was a really nice woman, really talkative, respectful of others and funny," she said. "She would go over next door and talk to the dogs and tease them. It's been hard on us."

Elizabeth Garza, Hernandez's daughter, said her mother's beauty shop was set up in the small house on Crosstimbers. She gave free haircuts on Thanksgiving Day to senior citizens and would pick them up for their appointments.

"My mom was taken too soon," she said. "She wasn't even a grandmother. She just wanted to help people, and that's what she taught us to do."

The speed limit in the neighborhood is 35 mph, but Almaguer said drivers rarely maintain that speed.

"No one respects the speed limit here," she said. "They just don't care."

Reyes remained in the Harris County Jail on Monday evening. Failing to stop and render aid is a third-degree felony, punishable by two to 10 years in prison and up to a \$10,000 fine.

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## **Just back away from gators, officials warn Houstonians**

AMANDA CASANOVA  
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It's warm, there has been little rain and love is in the air, all of which mean it's the perfect time of year for a little alligator romance.

And when that happens in the Bayou City and its environs, the amorous reptiles often move from their murky marshes and slip into backyard swimming pools or prowl city and suburban streets.



For the most part, encounters between alligators and humans are harmless. Already this season in Harris County, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has logged more than 25 calls for nuisance alligators, two of them within the past week, and all have ended amicably — for the humans, at least.

But wildlife officials warn that the reptiles can be dangerous during this active season if provoked.

"A lot of people will throw a piece of bread at the animal and say, 'Come here,'" said Amos Cooper, alligator program leader at the J.D. Murphree Wildlife Management Area in Port Arthur. "The best thing to do is not to mess with it and give it two to three days to move along. If you feed it, they'll lose their fear of humans, and that's the worst thing."

So far this year, 10 of the reptiles have been relocated from Houston streets alone, said Capt. Albert Lynch, a TPWD game warden.

"Springtime is when alligators are most active," said Monique Slaughter, a TPWD biologist who helps run the alligator program in Port Arthur. "Courtship and mating begins in late spring and continues through early summer. April through July are peak months for nuisance gator calls."

Tuesday, TPWD collected a 5-foot alligator from the feeder of I-45 at North Main, and five days earlier, officials killed a 300-pound alligator spotted near the I-10 East feeder road in east Houston.

During the weekend, a 7-foot alligator was pulled from a pool in Missouri City and released in El Campo.

### **Breeding season**

During breeding season, males become increasingly territorial and bellow to attract females. In June, female alligators construct mounds of mud and vegetation, where they lay between 15 and 50 eggs. During the next two months, the female aggressively protects the nest until the young hatch in August and September.

After Hurricane Ike battered the Texas coast, the wildlife management area in Port Arthur saw a dramatic decrease in alligator nests.

"We average 100 to 250 nests every year," Cooper said. "We had five nests last year. This year we don't know yet. I've seen at least that many nests already, so it's going to be definitely more than five."

### **Young and restless**

Young alligators, typically less than 6 feet long, are the ones people most likely will see during the summer.

Cooper said urban development and a lack of rainfall have led to the reptile sightings.

"A lot of these calls we get are situations where people have put their homes in a natural habitat, and you got to expect to have an alligator there," he said. "They have the right to defend themselves, but just because it's there doesn't mean it's a nuisance alligator."

### **What's a nuisance gator?**

A nuisance alligator is one that is at least 4 feet long, approaches people and exhibits aggressive behavior. Cooper warned that feeding an alligator is punishable by a fine of as much as \$500.

"Typically, they're afraid of you," Cooper said, "but when you walk toward the water and it comes straight to you, it's probably looking for a meal."

In 2009, wildlife officials received 544 calls about nuisance alligators from Harris and surrounding counties. About 80 of them were trapped and relocated, while the remainder were killed or left alone. Cooper said moving the animal from its habitat sometimes poses more problems.

"It happens every year," he said. "The main thing is, especially for these people who are on the gator's territory, to be a little patient. Keep your pets away. Give them a chance to move back."

### **Across the state**

Of Texas' 254 counties, alligators are found in 120 of them. Texas is home to more than 350,000 alligators, from the swamps of the Sabine River to the marshes near Corpus Christi.

By September and into the fall, when temperatures dip below 80 degrees, the animals will move back into the marshes and bayous, Cooper said.

"We have encroached upon their habitat, and we're trying to coexist with alligators, and they're trying to coexist and live with us, too," Lynch said.

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