



JACKIE JACKSON, founder of Touched by an Angel Child Care, buckles Oceane Taylor, 5, into her car seat.

ORDER FOR VA HOUSING UPHELD

By DOUG SMITH

The U.S. 9th Court of Appeals has upheld a lower court order requiring the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to build more than 2,500 units of housing on its West Los Angeles campus and invalidating a prestigious private school's lease there.

In a complex decision issued Tuesday, a three-judge panel affirmed most of U.S. District Judge David O. Carter's orders, finding in favor of veterans' claims of discrimination by not having access to housing on the 388-acre campus. It overruled the judge's order invalidating UCLA's lease of a portion of the VA grounds for its baseball stadium.

Citing President Lincoln's "promise to care for those who have served in our nation's military and for their families, caregivers, and survivors," Circuit Judge Ana de Alba opened the panel's opinion with a rebuke of the VA's posture in the case.

"This class action lawsuit, and its numerous appeals, demonstrates just how far the VA has strayed from its mission," De Alba wrote. "There are now scores of unhoused veterans trying to survive in and around the greater Los Angeles area despite the acres of land deeded to the VA for their care. Rather than use the West Los Angeles VA Grounds as President Lincoln intended, the VA has leased the land to third-party commercial interests that do little to benefit the veterans."

The panel held that "the district court did not abuse its discretion by ordering the VA to construct 1,800 permanent housing units and 750 temporary housing units to remedy its discrimination."

The long-awaited ruling, following an April hearing, dismissed the VA's contention that the Veterans Judicial Review Act, setting up a separate court system for veterans benefits claims, precluded the seven veterans who initially brought the case from suing. In their broad claim of discrimination, the plaintiffs were "not attacking the VA's individual benefits determinations," it found.

The VA did not respond to requests for comment.

The decision will allow veterans across the country to sue for housing, said Mark Rosenbaum, attorney with the pro bono law firm Public Counsel, the lead attorney in the case.

"It's the most consequential case for veterans in the history of the country," [See Veterans, A5]

CUTE AND IT TALKS! BUT IS IT SAFE?

AI toys are here and more are on the way, along with concerns about their effect on your kids.

By QUEENIE WONG

Stuffed animals that talk back. Chessboards with pieces that move on their own. And a chatty holographic fairy in a crystal ball.

Your next toy purchase might be powered by artificial intelligence and able to converse with your kids.

Chatbots and AI-powered assistants that can quickly answer questions and generate texts have become more common after the rise of OpenAI's ChatGPT. As AI becomes more intertwined in our work and personal lives, it's also shaking up playtime.

Startups already unleashed AI toys in time for the holidays. More are set to hit the shelves for both kids and adults in the new year.

Some parents are excited to test the toys, hoping the chatty bot interactions will educate and entertain their children. Others don't want the seemingly sentient tech near their loved ones until it has more guardrails and undergoes further testing.

Researchers at the U.S. Public Interest Research Group Education Fund say they already found problems with some toys they tested. Among the issues: an AI teddy bear that could be prompted into discussing sexual fetishes and kink, according to the group.

Toy makers say AI can make play more interactive and insist they take safety and privacy seriously. Some have [See Toys, A11]



AN INTERACTIVE DOLL is ready for its close-up at an expo in China.

A lifeline for Druze under siege in Syria

By NABIH BULOS

JULIS, Israel — Nestled in a quiet corner of a quaint village in Israel's north, the building appears, at the outset, to house an elegant meeting salon with giant chandeliers, ornate but uncomfortable chairs and trays of sweets.

But past an improvised divider made of plywood and a stern attendant who places stickers over smartphone cameras, sits a team of volunteers working amid large screens and laptops: the nerve center of an all-hands-on-deck humanitarian operation to aid the Druze religious minority in Syria.

Druze in Israel have long sent donations to their coreligionists in southwestern Syrian's Sweida province, but since July — when about

1,000 Druze civilians were slaughtered in a sectarian killing rampage — a complex aid operation has emerged to serve tens of thousands of people more than 40 miles of hostile territory away.

"What were we supposed to do? Watch them get slaughtered and be silent?" said Muwaffaq Tarif, the spiritual chieftain of the 150,000-strong Druze community in Israel.

Marshaling family ties in Syria and links to Israel's military and government, the operation headquartered in the salon now provides funds, humanitarian and medical aid, along with logistical and intelligence support — this despite a months-long blockade on Sweida by Syrian forces.

The assistance has become part of a vital lifeline [See Druze, A3]

CRIMES OF THE TIMES

Two major cases, one killer?

Novice sleuth says he's cracked Zodiac code, Black Dahlia slaying

By Christopher Goffard



A REPORTER and investigators examine the scene where the body of Elizabeth Short was found in 1947.

A child-care haven built on one L.A. block

Four women unite to offer families support, including food and school drop-offs.

By KATE SEQUEIRA

When the seven-beat rhythm of "shave and a hair-cut, two bits" resounds in the mornings on a car horn through this South L.A. neighborhood, Jackie Jackson or Guadalupe Andrade is likely behind the wheel, child-care providers who live on a one-block stretch of 115th Street.

The cheerful honk is a familiar greeting among parents, community members and these local child-care workers on their pickup routes. At day's end, the children will be dropped off at their doorstep, an invaluable service to working parents.

In an effort born of their determination to keep their businesses afloat while serving their neighbors, a tight-knit group of child-care providers stands as an unusual, grassroots example of resilience amid a time of struggle for the child-care industry, which is beset by the high cost of providing their service, staff shortages and competition with transitional kindergarten to enroll 4-year-olds.

Jackson and the three other child-care workers who operate on 115th Street lean on one another to keep their child-care homes open. Their secret?

They identified the pain points of parents and focus on addressing those needs — offering door-to-door transportation, tailoring support services to specific family concerns and keeping costs down by sharing resources. They often help families with food and have taken on a civic activist role when needed.

The day-care providers of 115th Street call themselves "the learning village" and swap furniture and toys, send photos of activities they've developed and advise one another on anything from selecting kid-friendly cups to dealing with difficult behavior. Together, they serve 60 children.

"We all have things to share," Jackson said. "Be- [See Child care, A5]

A year in, top cop gets mixed review

Inside LAPD, tension has grown over Chief Jim McDonnell's hands-off style.

By LIBOR JANY

When an LAPD captain stood up during a meeting this fall and asked Chief Jim McDonnell to explain the role of his most trusted deputy, Dominic Choi, other top brass in attendance waited with anticipation for the reply.

Multiple department sources, who requested anonymity to discuss the private meeting and speak candidly about their boss, said McDonnell's answer drew confused looks.

Some officials had begun to wonder how closely the 66-year-old McDonnell, who stepped into the job in November 2024 after recent

work in consulting and academia, was involved in day-to-day operations. Choi is often attached to his hip, and McDonnell has privately advised other senior staff to go through the assistant chief for key matters, leaving some uncertainty about how shots are called, the sources said.

At the senior staff meeting, McDonnell joked about not wanting to talk about Choi — who was not present in the room — behind his back, and told the captain that Choi was simply his "eyes and ears," without offering more clarity, according to the sources.

The awkward exchange reflected the uncertainty that some Los Angeles Police Department officials feel about McDonnell's leadership style.

Over the last year, The Times spoke with numerous sources, from high-ranking [See LAPD, A6]

Risk of floods, slides persists
Rainfall will continue Friday, but weekend weather should be sunny. CALIFORNIA, B1

Crypto company accused of fraud
Former Theta Labs executives allege the CEO inflated NFTs. BUSINESS, A10

What to expect from the Dodgers
After their second straight championship, they're not slowing down. SPORTS, B10

Weather
Cool, with rain.
L.A. Basin: 61/46. B6

Climate A9
Opinion Voices A13

For the latest news, go to **latimes.com**.

