



**SPENCER** Sullivan, left, hugs Abdulhaq Sodais after his former interpreter’s arrival in Chicago on Dec. 17. JIM VONDRUSKA For The Times

# HIS LONG CAMPAIGN FOR A BATTLEFIELD PARTNER

CHICAGO — Barely half an hour had passed since the flight landed at O’Hare International Airport, and the Army combat veteran’s palms were already sweating.

Spencer Sullivan, 38, situated himself at the front of a crowd of people waiting near the exit for international arrivals. He knew it could be hours before his friend got through customs.

Still, he said, “I’ve been waiting so long for this moment. I don’t want to miss it.”

American veteran worked for years to help his Afghan interpreter enter the U.S. At last, the friends did reunite.

By Andrea Castillo

It had been just over 13 years since Sullivan, who now works in corporate development, first began helping his former interpreter in Afghanistan petition for a visa to live in the U.S.

The process had been full of big hopes and bigger letdowns. Then, after they finally secured the visa in September, an Afghan immigrant was accused of shooting two National Guard members in Washington.

In the politicized aftermath, Sullivan wondered: Would his

[See Sodais, A12]

# Path widening for a Vance run in 2028 race

Turning Point USA backs vice president, but many Republican voters are undecided.

By Michael Wilner

WASHINGTON — When Charlie Kirk was killed by an assassin this fall, Republican leaders credited the organization he founded for enabling President Trump’s return to power.

Now that organization is mobilizing behind Vice President JD Vance.

Uninterested in a competitive Republican primary in 2028, Turning Point USA plans to deploy representatives across Iowa’s 99 counties in the coming months to build the campaign infrastructure it believes could deliver Vance, a Midwesterner from nearby Ohio, a decisive victory, potentially short-circuiting a fractious GOP race, insiders said.

It is the latest move in a quiet effort by some in Trump’s orbit to clear the

field of viable competitors. Earlier this month, Marco Rubio, the secretary of State previously floated by Trump as a possible contender, appeared to take himself out of the running.

“If Vance runs for president, he’s going to be our nominee, and I’ll be one of the first people to support him,” Rubio told Vanity Fair.

After Kirk’s widow, Erika, endorsed Vance on stage at Turning Point USA’s annual conference in Arizona last week, a straw poll of attendees found that 84% would support Vance in the coming primaries. Yet, wider public polling offers a different picture.

A CNN poll conducted in early December found that Vance held a plurality of Republican support for 2028, at 22%, with all other potential candidates, such as Rubio and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, registering in single digits.

The remaining 64% told pollsters they had “no one specific in mind,” reflecting an open field with plenty of

[See Vance, A8]

# What officials did as park smoldered

Texts and depositions detail state’s actions between the Lachman and Palisades fires.

By Jenny Jarvie and Alene Tchekmedyan

An hour after midnight Jan. 1, as a small brush fire blazed across Topanga State Park, a California State Parks employee texted the Los Angeles Fire Department’s heavy equipment supervisor to find out if they were sending in bulldozers.

“Heck no that area is full of endangered plants,” Capt. Richard Diede replied at 9:52 a.m. five hours after LAFD declared the fire contained.

“I would be a real idiot to ever put a dozer in that area,” he wrote. “I’m so trained.”

The exchange between the state and LAFD employees is part of a batch of newly-released text messages and depositions from

California State Parks staffers that offers new details of the state’s actions and interactions with firefighters in the critical days after the Lachman fire ignited and rekindled Jan. 7 into the deadly Palisades blaze.

The Los Angeles Fire Department has faced criticism for not fully extinguishing the Lachman fire. In October, The Times reported that a battalion chief ordered firefighters to roll up their hoses and leave the burn area Jan. 2, even though crews warned that the ground was still smoldering. The LAFD also decided not to use thermal imaging technology to detect heat underground.

But Palisades residents have also sued the state, which owns Topanga State Park, alleging it failed in the week between the two fires to inspect the burn scar after firefighters left and make sure a “dangerous condition” did not exist on its property.

LAFD was the agency re-

[See Lachman, A7]

## COLUMN ONE

# The beauty I couldn’t see in a burn scar

The first two miles were pleasant enough. The grade was mild, the forest serene. It was what lay ahead that worried me:

A 2,500-foot descent to Jordan Hot Springs, a spot in California’s High Sierra backcountry that has long had a hold on my imagination — an idyllic meadow with rock-dammed bathtub-hot pools.

Given my age and lack of recent high-altitude exertion, I could easily need a helicopter to get out.

But that was a secondary concern. I was most anxious about what I might see along the way. Would it be an affirmation of nature’s power of renewal or an omen of irreversible decline?

I was retracing my steps

20 years on, a return to the Sierra reframes loss, finds resilient life

By Doug Smith | Reporting from Golden Trout Wilderness, Calif.



**A STANDING** dead tree, an ecologist explained, is vastly more important to wildlife than a live tree. DANIEL FLESHER LA Times Studios

of 20 years earlier to a scene of mass death I had never been able to erase from my mind. At a small plateau alongside Ninemile Creek in the Golden Trout Wilderness Area, I had stood in a forest of black sticks standing on both sides of a steep canyon like whiskers on a beast too large to comprehend.

I had hiked to Jordan Hot Springs and the burn scar of the 2002 McNally fire to probe big questions of fire ecology: Are Sierra forests overgrown? Is fire management the unintended cause of destructive crown fires? Do forests reduced to blackened earth and charcoal trees recover?

At that time, the questions proved too big. I never wrote a story.

[See Beauty, A9]

# Gens Z, Alpha feast on TV comfort food

Young people are looking for nostalgia as they dig deep into streaming libraries.

By Stephen Battaglio

John Campbell is a senior vice president at Walt Disney Co. who oversees streaming ad sales solutions. He also coaches his second-grade daughter’s basketball team, and recently asked her teammates to name their favorite TV show.

“Eleven out of 13 girls said ‘Hannah Montana,’” Campbell said in a recent interview, citing the popular Disney series starring Miley Cyrus that produced its last episode in 2011, before his players were born.

Campbell was pleased they selected a show from the Disney library, but wasn’t all that surprised

based on the advertising demand he’s seeing for the company’s vintage shows.

A recent study from National Research Group found that 60% of all TV consumed is library content. Among Gen Z, 40% say they watch older shows because they find them comforting and nostalgic. Disney’s own research finds that 25% of the programs kids call their favorites were made before 2010.

While newer cutting-edge series typically win critical kudos and accolades, Gen Z and Gen Alpha viewers are binge-watching programs that became hits on the broadcast and cable networks in the pre-streaming era. They are also devouring holiday movies and specials, even on traditional TV.

“We do see, especially around the holiday time, that people are looking for that comfort, that sense of ease,” Campbell said.

[See TV, A15]

**L.A.: The Year in Photos**

A look at 2025 as captured by Times photographers, from the fires to the immigration raids to a Dodgers repeat title. **A10**

**Tornado lands in Boyle Heights**

A twister with winds up to 80 mph swept through the neighborhood on Christmas. **CALIFORNIA, B1**

**Chargers fall to Houston**

L.A.’s hopes of an AFC West title vanish with a frustrating 20-16 loss to Texans. **SPORTS, D1**

**Weather Sunshine.**

L.A. Basin: 65/52. **B6**

**Opinion Voices ..... A16**

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

7 85944 10300 9

# Thieves filching leaves from Southland agaves

Torrance neighborhood wrestles with mystery of mutilated plants

By Andrew J. Campa



**A HACKED-UP** blue agave plant in a Torrance frontyard. Someone made off with leaves in the night. ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

The unidentified white van slowly and stealthily pulled up outside the million-dollar-plus homes under the cover of darkness, grainy surveillance footage showed.

The thief or thieves parked on the street at such an angle that they were hidden from neighbors’ doorbell surveillance cameras. Then they went to work.

It was only in the morning light that victims realized what was stolen.

For the second time over a three-year period, someone had chopped off and carted away the waxy, 2-to-4-foot-long serrated leaves from picturesque agave plants lining homes in east Torrance.

Homeowners and residents are baffled by the attacks upon their beautiful — but otherwise seemingly useless — plants.

“Why on Earth would anybody steal these leaves?” Torrance homeowner Steven Maier, 72, asked. “A couple of years ago, another neighbor warned me about this agave, and I joked that I wasn’t ‘going to be protecting this with a gun or any-

[See Agave, A8]