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Vietnamese sisters give thanks, pay it forward

The Tran sisters, refugees as children, make Thanksgiving special at First Senior Center of Georgia, hosting American and Vietnamese feasts.



ABOVE: A costumed server brings a platter to senior guests during the Thanksgiving celebration at the First Senior Center on Nov. 20 in Norcross. BELOW: Von Tran, CEO of First Senior Center, speaks during the dinner. Von Tran and her sister Linda Tran, who escaped communist Vietnam with their family, operate the First Senior Center. PHOTOS BY JASON GETZ/AJC

By Danielle Charbonneau | danielle.charbonneau@ajc.com

The classic Thanksgiving origin tale tells the story of a group of courageous pilgrims who sailed across the ocean in search of freedom and a new beginning. Along the way, the travelers are aided by the kindness of strangers in a strange land.

The story resonates with many of the Vietnamese seniors who will celebrate Thanksgiving at First Senior Center of Georgia in Norcross this week. Many of the 500 seniors who will attend the nonprofit day center's Thanksgiving festivities have personal tales of crossing seas, surviving hardships and building new lives as refugees or veterans.

The story also resonates with the two Vietnamese women who largely run First Senior Center: the Tran sisters — Von (the center's founder and CEO) and Linda (the center's food bank and kitchen manager).



A tale of survival

In 1983, when they were just 9 and 6 years old growing up in Communist Vietnam, the Tran sisters' parents woke them in the dead of night and brought them to the edge of the sea. They were instructed to crawl down into the bottom of a fishing canoe, where they were hidden by a blanket of fishing nets.

They fit snugly alongside their three older siblings while their parents loaded into a second boat behind

Thanksgiving continued on A10

TRUMP GA. CASE TOSSED

Judge dismisses Fulton's election interference probe.

New prosecutor: Georgia 'not the appropriate venue' for the case.

By Tamar Hallerman
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The Fulton County judge overseeing the 2020 election interference case against President Donald Trump and more than a dozen others agreed Wednesday to kill the probe after a Georgia prosecutor said the alleged criminal conduct amounted to more of a federal, not state, case.

In a brief, one-page order, Superior Court Judge Scott McAfee dismissed the sprawling racketeering case first brought by Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis more than two years ago. "This case is hereby dismissed in its entirety," the judge wrote.

Once seen as among the most promising criminal prosecutions of Trump, the case collapsed amid scrutiny of Willis' romantic and financial ties to the special prosecutor she hired to help lead it. Although the development isn't a surprise, it places a capstone on the last criminal prosecution of Trump and one of the most sweeping, divisive cases in Georgia history.

Dismissal continued on A8



"LAW and JUSTICE have prevailed," President Donald Trump posted on social media after learning the election interference case in Georgia has been dismissed. DOUG MILLS/NYT

TURNING THE PAGE THE AJC'S DIGITAL FUTURE

In 1959, a girl found a way to get hired as a 'newspaper boy'



In the early 1960s, Marie George Myers was the only girl to deliver The Atlanta Journal, the newspaper's afternoon edition. From age 13 to 15, she had to do so under her older brother's name, MIGUEL MARTINEZ/AJC

Marie George Myers took over some of her older brother's Atlanta paper routes. She recalls being the only girl on the roster of deliverers back then.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

As The Atlanta Journal-Constitution looks to its digital future and prepares for its last printed edition, we are reflecting on 157 years of history—your memories, our memories and our history together.

Turning the Page will run each Sunday — and then daily starting after Thanksgiving — to celebrate the years of print and to help readers prepare for the AJC's digital-only future.

By Danielle Charbonneau
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When Marie George Myers, 79 of Lawrenceville, was 13 years old and entering the eighth grade, her older brother, Charles George, got his first paper routes delivering The Atlanta Journal, the city's afternoon paper. She wanted in.

Her father, Clarence George, a 20-year career serviceman who fought in both the Korean and Vietnam wars, had always taught her to be a hard worker.

"You give 10 hours of work for eight hours of pay," he always said. During the summer, Myers spent several weeks at her maternal

grandparents' farm in Dallas, Georgia. She accompanied her grandfather as he delivered milk and eggs produced by the cows and hens on their farm. She found a sense of satisfaction in completing a day of deliveries with her grandfather, and decided she wanted to deliver newspapers like her brother.

At that time though, newspaper delivery routes were marketed to boys.

Myers decided to go for it anyway. Her mother, Myrtle George, supported her go-getter spirit, and allowed Myers and her brother, Charles to split up their routes

Myers continued on A6



MOVIES & MORE, B1
The films we can't wait to see this holiday season

From now until the end of the year is one of the best times to catch a movie. See what's coming to a theater near you.



GEORGIA, A3
Will a data center be developed near you?

New rules should make it easier for the public to learn where the huge computing centers have been proposed.

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The IRS said this month that the maximum contribution an individual can make in 2026 to a 401(k), 403(b) and most 457 plans will be \$24,500, up from \$23,500 this year. AP FILE

IRS ups contribution limits for 401(k) retirement savers

Americans can put \$1,000 more in their plans in 2026.

By Alex Veiga
Associated Press

Americans will be allowed to contribute more of their money to 401(k) and similar retirement saving plans next year.

The IRS said this month that the maximum contribution an individual can make in 2026 to a 401(k), 403(b) and most 457 plans will be \$24,500. That's up from \$23,500 this year.

People aged 50 and over, who have the option to make additional "catch-up" contributions to 401(k) and similar plans, will be able to contribute up to \$8,000 next year, up from \$7,500 this year. That's means a 401(k) saver who is 50 or older will be able to contribute a maximum of \$32,500 to their retirement plan annually, starting in 2026.

Workers between the ages of 60 and 63 will be allowed

catch-up retirement plan contributions of up to \$12,500 annually, unchanged from this year.

The IRS also raised the 2026 annual contribution limits on individual retirement arrangements, or IRAs, to \$7,500, up from \$7,000 this year. The IRA "catch-up" contribution limit will include an annual cost of living adjustment of \$100, increasing it to \$1,100 in 2026.

The changes, among others announced by the IRS, make it easier for retirement savers who use these types of tax-advantaged plans to set aside more of their income toward building their nest egg. That's especially helpful for older workers who got started saving for retirement later in life and can benefit from higher contribution limits.

By boosting the contribution rate on a 401(k) or IRA plan, even by 1%, can make a big difference over 10 or 20 years, assuming the saver remains employed and making contributions the entire time.

The IRS also increased for 2026 the income ranges for determining whether someone is eligible to make deductible contributions to traditional IRAs. Roth IRAs or to claim the "saver's credit," also known as the retirement savings contributions credit.

Taxpayers can deduct contributions to a traditional IRA if they meet certain conditions. If during the year either the taxpayer or the taxpayer's spouse was covered by a retirement plan that year, the deduction may be reduced, or phased out, until it is eliminated, depending on filing status and income.

The IRS said that employees who have opted out of a plan are also eligible for the deduction. The IRS has outlined the details on these and other retirement-related changes for 2026 on its site.

The average balance on a 401(k) account was \$137,800 in the second quarter, up 8% from a year earlier and 32% from the same quarter in 2020, according to Fidelity Investments. The increase reflects record-high savings rates and strong stock market gains so far this year.

Unfortunate first in Iceland: Mosquitoes

Pesky perturbers not seen on island until recently.

By Amelia Nierenberg
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Iceland lost the distinction last month of being one of the last places in the world without a confirmed sighting of wild mosquitoes. And their presence was discovered only because of a rope in a garden doused in sugary red wine.

A bug enthusiast named Bjorn Hjaltonson has spent years attracting insects to his property using a method known as "wine roping," in which fabric dipped in sugared wine is used as a lure. Usually, the wine draws moths, according to Matthias S. Alfredsson, an entomologist at the Natural Science Institute of Iceland who occasionally collaborates with Hjaltonson on projects.

But on Oct. 16, Hjaltonson noticed an unusual bug, said Alfredsson. Could it be a mosquito? He sent a photo to Alfredsson, who went to look in person. (Hjaltonson did not respond to requests for comment.)

Soon, Alfredsson confirmed Hjaltonson's hunch: Three mosquitoes — two females and a male — were eventually discovered at the property.

"This is the first time" that mosquitoes have been found in the wild of Iceland, Alfredsson wrote in an email. The Natural Science Institute announced the discovery in a statement last month.

The question for Icelandic scientists is whether they will be short-lived tourists or the beginning of a new, native population. But either way, mosquito experts say the discovery is a sign of how rapid climate change and global-

ization are changing Iceland.

"We should not be surprised that we see mosquitoes popping up in very strange localities," said Bart Knols, a Dutch mosquito expert and a founder of MalariaWorld, which gathers and shares malaria research.

Iceland has seen a spike in insect life over the past four decades or so, said Gisli Mar Gislason, a professor emeritus at the University of Iceland who studied aquatic insects and is writing a book on Icelandic insect identification with Alfredsson and another entomologist.

Recently, that growth has coincided with the skyrocketing number of international travelers visiting the geographically isolated nation. The torrent of planes, cruise ships and cargo boats give insects more chances to hitch a ride, Gislason said.

At the same time, climate change has transformed the country. One Icelandic glacier, Okjokull, has completely melted away while some native plants are at risk of extinction as temperatures rise and invasive species arrive.

"Insect numbers increase with increasing heat," said Gislason, who until now had the honor of having caught the only mosquito in Iceland. (In the 1980s, at the main airport, he trapped one flying in a plane that had just arrived from Greenland.)

"With increasing temperatures," he continued, "there are more opportunities for species from warmer areas to colonize Iceland."

Enter the mosquitoes. Given that these three were found near Reykjavik, the capital, and an international harbor, they most likely came from abroad, experts said.

"With only three specimens found," Gislason said,

"I would guess it's a very recent arrival."

But with the climate warming, it is plausible they could survive in Iceland, according to Knols. "We should not be surprised if — maybe just for a short period — mosquitoes manage to establish themselves and produce the next generation," he added.

Gislason, who reviewed photos of the three specimens, said a mosquito population could spread quickly, pointing to no-see-ums (Ceratomyzidae). Those bugs, which also cause itchy bites, appeared only a decade earlier, he said. Now, he added, they are present throughout the country.

"If this population establishes itself, as I presume it will, it may spread as fast as the no-see-ums," he said.

These specific mosquitoes could also be able to endure the harsh Icelandic climate. Alfredsson identified them as *Culiseta annulata*, a variety of mosquito that can survive long periods of freezing temperatures and already lives in the Nordic region, the Natural Science Institute said in a statement.

While it is impossible to know if they are truly Iceland's first mosquitoes, the country has extensive insect monitoring, meaning a previous population would have most likely been detected, Alfredsson said. If there were a few more in the past, he added, they probably died out without establishing a foothold.

It is not yet clear whether this triad is a fluke or a sign of a new reality; Alfredsson said more monitoring would be needed to see if they have "truly become established in Iceland."

For now, the three are sticking around. Currently, Alfredsson wrote, all three "are stored in my freezer."



LEFT: Linda Tran works with staff to prepare large platters for each table during the Thanksgiving celebration at the First Senior Center on Nov. 20 in Norcross. Linda and her sister Von Tran, who jointly operate the First Senior Center, are refugees with a harrowing escape from Vietnam. RIGHT: A costumed server helps put together platters of food during the Thanksgiving celebration. A separate celebration features Vietnamese comfort food. PHOTOS BY JASON GELTZ/JC

Thanksgiving

continued from A1

them. They had not been told in advance of their parents' plans to leave their homeland, nor what to expect from the journey.

Von Tran remembers the weight of the nets over her — about 5 inches thick, she said — and how the canoe was stopped by inspectors who used the barrels of their long guns to poke down into the boat.

The inspectors found no one. All seven members of the Tran family made it to a larger ship, where roughly 65 refugees were stowed away for what would be a harrowing six-night journey.

They quickly ran out of water and food. They ate dried vomit and drank urine to survive, not knowing how long the trip might take.

"I was in and out of consciousness," Von Tran said. "All I was thinking, hallucinating, was about a cold glass of ice water."

The threat of pirates was real. Oftentimes, boats suspected of carrying migrants

were targeted because they carried the gold bars and jewelry refugees used to pay their passage.

"Fishermen turned into pirates because it was more lucrative to rob refugee boats," Von Tran remembered. "When encountering pirates, women were often raped. Men thrown overboard. Everyone threatened. Von Tran has heard the stories from many Vietnamese seniors."

"By the grace of God," Von Tran said, "our boat did not suffer (such atrocities)." Instead, they encountered true fishermen who shared their rice, fuel and water on the final leg of the journey. A violent storm nearly sank the boat on the fourth day, but by the fifth, "the ocean was calm again," Von Tran said. The storm pushed their vessel close to the shores of a remote island off Malaysia. They swam to land, where they are coconuts and tide pool fish.

The Malaysian Coast Guard showed up and transported the group of refugees to a United Nations Vietnamese refugee camp on another

island, where the Tran family stayed for roughly 18 months. During that time, Von and Linda's mother gave birth to a baby boy.

As a family of eight, the Trans had trouble finding a sponsor abroad. Eventually, a Catholic church in Dallas, Texas, agreed to sponsor them and help them move to America.

Their father, Thien Tran, got a maintenance job earning \$3.54 an hour. He stayed employed by the same man for 30 years. That employer, a kindhearted Italian American, helped the Tran family get established and move into a Section 8, two-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment. The family was approved for food stamps and used local food pantries. Von's father's employer also helped them graciously.

"It was very much inspired by what my father's employer did for us," Von Tran said.

In reflection, she added, perhaps the generosity of the fisherman, the food banks and her father's employer seeded in her a spirit of altruism. Decades later, she would start First Senior Center of Georgia to serve vulnerable

Vietnamese seniors, many of whom also fled their home for the U.S.

Giving back

Von Tran, now 52, founded First Senior Center of Georgia in 2017. The nonprofit operates a free health day center for seniors and a large food bank.

The day center serves roughly 300-450 Vietnamese and other minority seniors. Many are medically frail and receive Medicaid. A fleet of vans picks up seniors each weekday and brings them to the center, where they are provided meals, bilingual health services, translation help, transportation, benefits enrollment aid, wellness programs, end-of-life care, social events and a sense of community.

The food bank, operated in partnership with Atlanta Community Food Bank, distributes more than 200,000 pounds of food to roughly 3,200 households per month and is the second-largest food pantry in the state.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, First Senior Center offered home grocery delivery and became a vaccina-

tion site, which ultimately increased the organization's reach in Norcross. After the pandemic, the organization moved into a larger, 26,000-square-foot facility to accommodate a growing community.

Linda Tran, 49, moved to Georgia in 2020 to help her sister run the center. Her mother, Lisa Luong, is also actively involved, mostly as an adviser and helper in the kitchen.

"We go all out for holidays," Von Tran said. "Thanksgiving is particularly festive. Every year since the center opened, it has hosted an extravagant, multi-day celebration."

On the Thursday before Thanksgiving, the center hosts its traditional American feast with poultry, gravy, mashed potatoes, corn, green beans and pumpkin soup. The dining room is decorated floor-to-ceiling in autumn decor. Many guests dress up in pilgrim costumes.

Hosting an American Thanksgiving is important, Von Tran said, because it connects seniors to their present home.

"Thanksgiving is a chance

to celebrate and reflect on the new life they have been given here in America," she said.

First Senior Center member Be Nguyen, 78, agreed. "Thanksgiving at First Senior Center is a chance for us — older adults who have lived through many years of wandering in a foreign land — to gather together, to remember our earliest days in this new country, and to bow our heads in gratitude for the kindness that carried us through," she said.

On another day during the Thanksgiving season, First Senior Center prepares a Vietnamese feast in the form of an enormous batch of bun riêu (crab noodle soup). The soup, native to northern Vietnam, is a comfort that reminds seniors of their roots and offers the familiarity of Asian flavors.

"It brings good feelings and good memories," said Von Tran, who stresses that holidays are a time to not only care for seniors physically, but emotionally. "We take care of our elders with all our heart and soul ... It is the spirit of the season to be thankful, and we have much to be thankful for."

