

**CRIME**

## Police investigate reports of internet blackmail

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Police are urging residents to avoid sending intimate photos of themselves to strangers online, as these situations can lead to blackmail.

In one case reported Dec. 11, a juvenile complainant told Kerrville police that on or about Nov. 25, they began corresponding with a person through a social media messaging app.

"The complainant stated that they and this person exchanged intimate photographs of one another," reads an email from Sgt. Jonathan Lamb, Kerrville Police Department spokesman.

In a Dec. 11 message, the unknown user told the complainant the photos would be publicized unless payment was given. The criminal threatened to "embarrass and ruin the complainant's life," according to Lamb. The complainant used CashApp to send money.

In another case reported the same day, an adult complainant told police they accessed an adult website or chat room and began messaging a person identified on the website as an adult female.

"The complainant stated they sent intimate photos of themselves to the user they believed to be an adult female," reads Lamb's email. "Subsequent to the complainant sending the intimate photos, the user messaged the complainant and stated that they were in fact a 16-year-old male. The unknown user then demanded the complainant send money via CashApp or the unknown user would report that they had sent explicit photos to a child to the authorities."

The complainant ended the conversation and did not send money. The complainant wishes to pursue charges if the unknown user can be identified, according to Lamb.

Both cases, which involve incidents that happened weeks apart, were forwarded to investigators.

Police don't believe the two cases involve the same offender, and it appears to be a coincidence that they were reported on the same day.

The typical scam of this type follows this pattern, according to Lamb: Scammers will contact people through instant messaging apps on social media or through internet chat rooms or forums. The scammer will often pretend to be someone else, and will induce the victim to send intimate images of themselves to the scammer. Then the scammer will threaten to show the images to friends or

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**HOLIDAY SEASON**

## 'The light dispels the darkness of hatred'



The lighting of the Menorah took place Sunday evening on the grounds of the Kerr County Courthouse. (Times photo by Tony Gallucci/photo@dailytimes.com)

## Community lighting of the Menorah honors Judaism

**THE JCHC TORAH**

- More than 150 years old
- From Czechoslovakia
- Seized by the government and sent to the Jewish Museum in Prague in the years following the 1938 Munich Agreement
- Was in one of the 40 warehouses that housed seized Jewish property.
- Was transferred to a damp warehouse along with some 1,800 Torah scrolls after the Communist coup of 1948.
- Was among 1,564 scrolls purchased for £30,000 and transferred to the Westminster Synagogue in 1964.
- This Torah was evaluated professionally in February 2013 and was found to be in good shape, given its age.
- Written in Moravia, now Slovakia, from 1863 to 1883. The script is Beit Yosef.
- The Torah scroll has been patched and in some areas relettered, rendering it "not kosher."

\*From the website of the Jewish Community of the Hill Country

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Members of the Kerrville community gathered on a frigid Sunday evening to honor one of the most ancient religions and to support one of the United States' smallest minority groups: Jews.

The menorah lighting ceremony took place on the courthouse lawn near the 12-foot-high, electric menorah and featured songs in Hebrew and English and a recounting of the story of Hanukkah. There also was live music from the New Buddy Holly Band.

At the climax of Sunday's event, attendees watched as each electric light kindled on the menorah, one at a time.

"The theme of light is very common to all religions," said Jewish Community of the Hill Country president Don Burda, who addressed attendees during the ceremony. "It displaces the darkness and replaces it with the light of hope. To me, every time we see the menorah lit,

that's what it is for us. The light dispels the darkness of hatred. For us it's what replaces that which is negative. ... Instead of hatred, it's love."

Burda expressed appreciation for those who attended the ceremony.

"We really like to do it for the public, so they can join in with us," Burda said. "Doesn't matter if they're not Jewish. Love is universal, and to us, that's what the menorah represents."

The Jewish Community of the Hill Country has approximately 10-15 members, according to Burda and board member Greg Bitkower. Most members are local, but two families drive in from Boerne for services, and a San Antonio couple recently joined. Most members are retired, although one woman currently is a college professor.

"We have one gentleman that was in advertising, we have a couple of lawyers with us, and we have a lady that

was an interior designer, so it's (people) from all walks of life," Burda said.

Burda, 76, has been with the Jewish Community of the Hill Country for five years and moved to Kerrville in 2001 after a career as a surgeon overseas. He was born in San Antonio.

"When you get older, you sort of look for what will bring meaning in your life," Burda said. "When you work, you've got your job to hold you on course, but then when you retire, you're looking for something that's meaningful. And that, I've found, was with the JCHC scene. They're a wonderful bunch. We're very small."

**THE CONGREGATION**

The Jewish Community of the Hill Country incorporated as a nonprofit in 1983, according to Bitkower, who owns a real estate and property management business and is the sole remaining

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**REMEMBRANCE**

## Wreaths laid at VA Cemetery honor deceased veterans

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U.S. military veterans, residents and others, from toddlers to seniors, gathered at the Veterans Assistance Cemetery on Saturday morning to recognize all the deceased veterans by placing an evergreen wreath on each gravesite in a Wreaths

Across America ceremony. "It's just so touching to come out here and do this. It's such an honor," said Edie Spalding, of Kerrville.

It was Spalding's first time attending the Wreaths Across America ceremony, and she said she was there to lay a wreath on the graves to honor her husband, who was in the U.S. Navy, and

her uncle, who was a World War II veteran, had survived the Bataan Death March and was a prisoner of war.

Wreaths Across America was founded by Morrill Worcester of Harrington, Maine, owner of Worcester Wreath Company. At Christmastime in 1992, Worcester found himself with a surplus of wreaths

► For more photos of the annual Wreaths Across America ceremony, go online to [www.dailytimes.com](http://www.dailytimes.com).

and had the idea to donate them to honor veterans buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia.

For some time, the ceremony occurred quietly at Arlington National Cemetery but received national attention in 2005 when photos of the graves bedecked in holiday wreaths went viral on the internet.

Starting in 2006, Wreaths Across America teamed up with CAP and other civic organizations to host wreath-laying ceremonies, all held simultaneously at the same time on the same day, adjusted for time differences, across the country.

To these sites, Wreaths Across America donates one ceremonial wreath for every

See **WREATHS**, page 3



Matthias Ramsay, 4, lays a wreath at the grave of Ernest F. Winkler at the Veterans Assistance Cemetery during a Wreaths Across America ceremony Saturday. (Times photos by Jillian Smith/photo@dailytimes.com)

**Ed Jackson** lays a wreath for all veterans of the U.S. Navy buried at the Veterans Assistance Cemetery during a Wreaths Across America ceremony on Saturday.



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# Menorah

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cofounder of Jewish Community of the Hill Country. He also plays guitar for the New Buddy Holly Band.

For the last 14 or 15 years, Jewish Community of the Hill Country services have been held at the local Unitarian Universalist Church, and there's some membership overlap between the congregations. It's not unusual for Unitarian churches to provide space for Jewish congregations, according to Bitkower.

"We had our own building before that for about seven years, and it was really much larger than we needed," Bitkower said. "They (Unitarians) approached us right when we were selling our building, and it was perfect, so good timing all around."

Services at Jewish Community of the Hill Country aren't the same as other Jewish congregations, having been tailored to the members, but this variance among groups isn't unusual, he said. The general vibe of the group is closest to Reform Judaism and even "further open than that," Bitkower said, in contrast with conservative Judaism or orthodox Judaism.

"There's no particular level of observance that you have to have," he said. "We just created what is comfortable and what gives us a satisfying feeling."

But the congregation still celebrates Passover, Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah and more and meets every second and fourth Fridays of the month for services.

Next year, Passover will be held at the Y.O. Ranch Hotel and Conference Center on April 7, Burda said.

Being so small, the Jewish Community of the Hill Country is a very tight-knit community.

"I can stand up in front of the congregation and look

out and tell you everybody's name and something about them," said Burda, who also serves the congregation as a cantor.

"I never envisioned myself up there doing the singing and everything," Burda said.

His late uncle served as a cantor at a synagogue in San Antonio and had always wanted Burda to follow in his footsteps.

"It's a joy — I don't know what other word to use," Burda said. "A lot of people say, 'gotta go to church.' Me, I say, 'Hot dog, it's time for Shabbat.'"

Being part of a tradition that goes back millennia is a "wonderful feeling," Burda said.

It's not just about a religious heritage, but also a personal/family heritage, he said.

"Judaism is also ethnic," he said. "It's DNA, like if I send my DNA to 23andMe, it will list Ashkenazi Jew. And it's something that goes beyond the religions in a Christian sense. It has that ethnic component to it. So it's much more to us — literally in our blood."

That doesn't prevent people from converting and being seen as equally Jewish, however, he said.

"There are converts to Judaism, and we don't look at them as being any different," Burda said. "A Jew is a Jew; you're a Jew in your heart."

The congregation's Torah, originally from Czechoslovakia, is more than 150 years old. Its history can be found at <https://thejhc.com/pages/ourTorah.php>.

"There have been times I've gone to Shabbat, and I could walk in there feeling just lousy, and when that service starts, everything changes," Burda said. "That's it. It's a big, big part of my life."

### ANTISEMITISM

Burda and Bitkower said antisemitism hasn't affected them personally very much.

Burda said he's encountered very little antisemitism.

"When I was a kid — kids are mean, and you know, walking down the street, 'Hey, Jew boy,'" Burda said. "But other than that, no."

Bitkower recalls no antisemitic incidents from his time as a child and young man in Los Angeles. There were a small number of incidents in the Hill Country, where he moved with his wife and children in 1982.

"When I first moved here, I had a guy come into my office trying to sell me something, some kind of advertising," Bitkower said. "He had great big swastikas on his arms, and so we certainly didn't do any business."

And then early on in the Jewish Community of the Hill Country's existence, the congregation received a couple dollar bills in the mail "with some really nasty things written on them," he said.

"And that's really been it," Bitkower said. "Well, I do know of a couple other cases, but they were very small, and they were from small-minded people, and they never recurred, and so I just let them go. So I've never felt threatened here or anything else like that."

About seven or eight years ago, a "white supremacist," "nazi" group planned an event on the courthouse lawn, but it was cancelled after a "backlash from all over the community," Bitkower said.

"It was basically they wanted to throw a party but

nobody was going to show up, and so they canceled it," Bitkower said. "And so I think everybody who was a decent person was happy.... I think that says a whole lot about the people that live in the Hill Country. I don't care what their backgrounds are, they weren't going to put up with something so negative and nasty."

Bitkower declined to comment directly on recent public statements about Jews or Judaism made by a prominent rapper and a well-known basketball player. The statements were addressed during a much-watched "Saturday Night Live" stand-up routine by Dave Chappelle in recent weeks.

"We see a lot of people making comments about various subjects as opposed to hearing the person say it themselves or getting an understanding of the actual context," Bitkower said. "There are media outlets, whether they're some newspaper, some radio, some social media (platform), that it's clear that there are things that get blown way out of proportion, that can be more of a problem than the actual thing that somebody might say."

The definition of antisemitism varies among individuals and organizations. For Bitkower, antisemitism comes largely from "people

who hate Jews because they're Jewish."

For him, expressing political disagreements with actions of the government of Israel is not antisemitism, he said.

"The country and state of Israel aren't necessarily the same as all people that are Jewish — there's the political side, and there's the social side," Bitkower said. "So I don't think it is fair and reasonable to put them together, so if somebody doesn't believe in something that's going on politically in Israel, it doesn't necessarily mean they're antisemitic — it's a political thing. And that's where I think there's some gray areas that get blown out of proportion."

Bitkower said antisemitism does exist and probably will never go away as long as there are negative people.

In a similar fashion, Burda

said, "Hate existed since the first human being existed."

"And so did love," he added.

"You keep your eyes open and you certainly watch your back and hope for the best, but I think we live in a community that's very much against that kind of hatred," Bitkower said.

Burda said he's seen a negative change in the social and political climates as he's gotten older. But much of it may be an illusion, he said.

"It's always been there, and I think the reason I say why it may appear that it's increased is, it's because of communication — now you can go onto some platform and start ranting, and it goes throughout the world," Burda said. "It wasn't like that when I was a kid. We had no computers; the only thing we had was newspapers."

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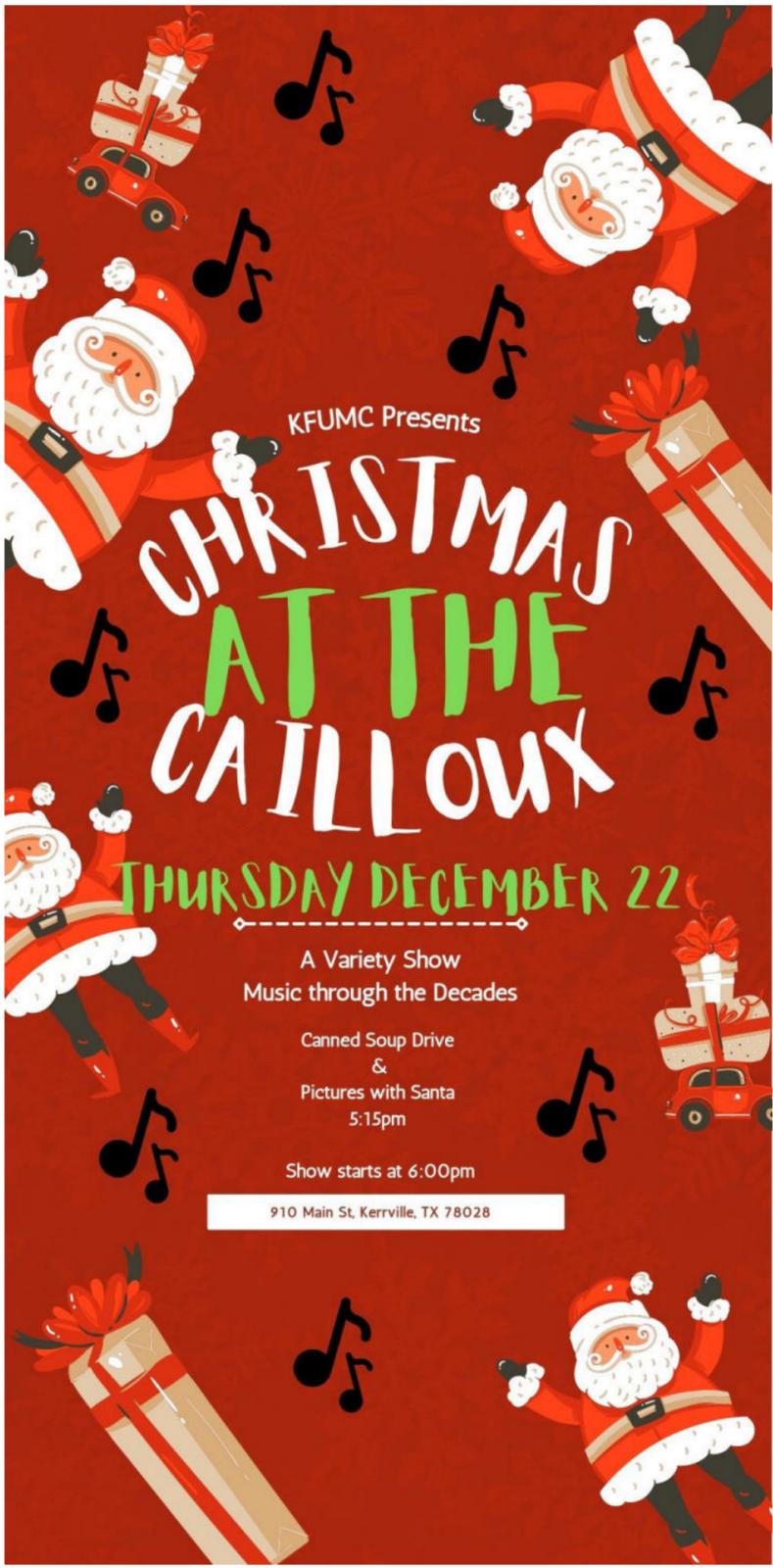
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