

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Immunity falls short

A variant, vaccine hesitancy and a rush to unmask hamper herd effort.

BY IAN HODGSON
Times Staff Writer

Herd immunity may be slipping further and further out of reach.

President Joe Biden set an aspirational goal to immunize 70 percent of the adult population against the coronavirus by July 4. But Independence Day came and went, and 33 percent of U.S. adults still haven't received even a single vaccination shot.

In Florida, 65 percent of adults

have been at least partially vaccinated, and 56 percent have been fully vaccinated.

Public health experts say the White House set that goal under optimistic conditions: continued social distancing, a rapid vaccine rollout and the absence of a highly infectious variant of the COVID-19 virus.

Now all three factors have changed for the worse:

- The delta variant is more infectious and dangerous, and is

spreading quickly.

- Large pockets of the population remain stubbornly unvaccinated, and partial vaccination isn't good enough against the delta variant.

- Mask and social-distancing orders may have been lifted too soon, accelerating the spread among the unvaccinated.

"Conditions on the ground have changed," said Dr. Michael Teng, a virologist at the University of South Florida. "Every time we have a more transmissi-

ble variant, the number of people that need to be fully vaccinated to get to herd immunity goes up."

Experts no longer fear large outbreaks.

But the delta variant could fuel mini outbreaks in areas with low vaccination rates. So as long as the coronavirus continues to circulate, it will continue to infect, sicken and kill thousands of Americans, primarily the unvaccinated and immunocompro-

See IMMUNITY, 3A

At shore, Red Tide odor of the day

St. Pete's bayside is permeated by stench of fish killed by bloom, keeping patrons away.

BY GABE STERN
Times Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG — The 9 a.m. bayside air reeked of dead fish.

Megan McDonald smelled it as she approached the park with her friend's two dogs, and walked up to the concrete seawall and looked down at the water. There were thousands of tarpon and snook floating sideways.

"I didn't expect it to be like this," said McDonald, 27.

The six volleyball courts, usually full, had only two in use.

"Where is everybody?" a passerby asked between points.

"Red Tide," replied a player.

Normally packed on a Saturday morning in July, the stench was strong and the scene was quiet at Vinoy Park as thousands of dead fish lined the seawall, spread out into the bay and turned St. Petersburg's bayside into one of the state's epicenters for Red Tide.

The scattered blooms of the organism that causes Red Tide, *Karenia brevis*, is concentrated near St. Petersburg's beaches and parks. Of the 15 tons of dead fish the city has collected in the past 10 days, city officials believe nine were blown in by Tropical Storm Elsa, St. Petersburg Emergency Manager Amber Boulding said at a Friday news conference.

Crews stood on the edge of the seawall, scooping fish in their nets, adding to the nine tons of fish they collected in the previous 24 hours. The volleyball nets soon emptied. A biker sped along the sidewalk, one hand on the handlebar and the other on her nose.

One couple walked over to see the damage. Morgan Janssen had told Freddy Hensley about the strong stench and closed businesses that Red Tide blooms from 2017 to 2019 had caused along the Gulf Coast. Hensley visited to see a widespread outbreak for the first time.

"I wanted to show him this morning because I was like, 'No, you have to believe me. There's fish everywhere,'" Janssen said as Hensley scooped at the fish with a net. See FISHERY, 4A

A TAMPA BAY TIMES SPECIAL REPORT



JOHN PENDYGRAFT | Times

THE NEW RECRUITS

PART I

They know they will be criticized, targeted, hated. But after last summer's protests over policing, more people than ever signed up to become Tampa Bay law enforcement officers. The *Tampa Bay Times* wanted to know: Who wants to be a cop now? How are they trained? And once they learn what they're facing, will they still want to do this job? Reporter Lane DeGregory and photographer John Pendygraft spent six months at St. Petersburg College's police academy, following three cadets on their path to the thin blue line.

SPECIAL SECTION INSIDE

Encounters

'He helped shape my life'

After 57 years, Sherry Sacino has a reunion with the man who taught her about kindness.

BY CLAIRE MCNEILL
Times Staff Writer

CELEBRATION — Was he a little early? Sherry Sacino hoped not, because she still had to decide where to hide.

"Any minute," she said, scanning the restaurant's rain-fogged windows. At each blurred silhouette, she fidgeted.

She wondered if she'd recognize him after so long. Then her hus-

band said, "I guarantee you that's them."

"Oh God," Sherry said. "Wait!" A server in a white apron rushed over. "There's a gentleman with 14 people at the door," she said. Sherry threw up her hands and hurried into the Columbia Restaurant's kitchen.

Willie James Bryant — because she had always called him by his full name — ambled through the

dining room, to a cozy, wood-paneled nook where tables were draped in white cloth. His wife, daughter, sisters and brothers and godchildren took their seats, amused. They'd driven a slow eight hours from South Carolina, where Sherry and WJ, as he's known now, first met.

His family lifted cameras as Sherry emerged and WJ opened his arms wide. They wrapped each other in a hug, swaying, chest to chest. Last she'd seen him, she'd hardly come up to his waist. See REUNION, 4A



MARTHA ASENCIO-RHINE | Times

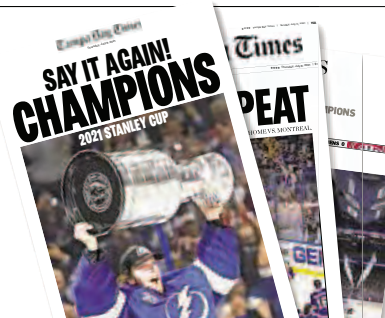
Sherry Sacino and Willie James Bryant see each other for the first time in decades during their reunion at the Columbia Restaurant.

ARMED ANGLER TESTS BOUNDS OF GUN LAW

Exploiting a loophole in Florida's open-carry law in an effort to promote his Second Amendment rights and attract YouTube viewers, Michael Taylor takes to area beaches toting a fishing pole and an assault rifle. **Local, 1B**

TWICE CHAMPIONS; WORTH REPEATING

When the Lightning won the Stanley Cup on Wednesday — for the second straight season — we devoted six pages to the feat. But that was the e-Newspaper, so we're republishing them today in print. **Pages 14A-19A**



P.M. storms

8 a.m. Noon 4 p.m. 8 p.m.
80° 86° 90° 80°

60% chance of rain
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FISH continued from 1A

tree branch.

Others continued their normal routines. Along his favorite breezy spot at the park, Al Nixon sat on his bench, resting his arm on its back and greeting passersby like always.

He visits Vinoy Park every day, a friendly face to some and a confidant to others, but lately, he's seen less foot traffic than normal. He noticed people "just trying to get through the walk" because of the smell. For some people who stopped to chat, the conversation often led to the stench of the water.

"It doesn't change my mood. I'm just a play-it-by-ear, why-be-sad, type of person," he said. "It's somewhat disappointing because you don't see the people that you normally see and have normal chats with."

Pinellas County helped city efforts in cleaning up waterways and beaches in St. Petersburg, Mayor Rick Kriseman said in a Saturday morning Facebook post. The city called on a debris removal contractor that usually helps with storms to clean the debris. It also sought assistance from the state.

Dead fish are also popping up in Treasure Island, scattered mostly one-by-one instead of in groups, sev-



DIRK SHADD | Times

Red Tide leaves the water littered with dead fish at North Shore Park in St. Petersburg on Friday.

eral people who lead beach cleanups said. The Bay Side Yacht Club, a cleanup group from a cul-de-sac on Bay Plaza, met for free eggs and bacon at Caddy's Treasure

Island before starting their monthly beach cleanup.

City crews picked up the dead fish, but what bothered Richard Harris the most was what had caused

one of the more pervasive problems from storms: the cigarette butts that Elsa had pushed to the high tide line.

"Last month, during the month of June, when I did

the cleanup, I picked up 271 (cigarette butts)," he said just after 10 a.m. "Today, I'm up to 535." (He ended the morning with 821).

As noon approached

in Vinoy Park, Daniel Larouche sat in his hammock, next to a candle he lit to keep the flies away. He sleeps in the hammock most nights by a lake, then walks 30 minutes each morning to the edge of the park, where there's a bathroom he can use and cold water fountains. He grew up in St. Petersburg, working various jobs, but ended up homeless. Vinoy Park is his go-to spot.

"A lot of people you see walking, they're in air conditioning most of their lives. So they come out here for 20 minutes or 30 minutes to walk," he said. "And they don't really feel that smell. You just get used to it."

He set up at the edge of the park, far enough where if the air is still, coffee and cigarettes can help dull the smell of the water. It was "kind of, sort of" less crowded than normal away from the main sidewalk, he said.

Fitness classes came and went. It would clear out more as the afternoon heat approaches. Crews would continue to net the fish. Eventually, the smell would return to normal.

But not on Saturday.

"There's only so much (the city) can do," Larouche said.

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REUNION continued from 1A

"Listen to your voice!" Sherry said, touching his bearded face. "Listen to your voice, oh my gosh — 57 years!"

"My little Shirley Temple," he said.

They sat for lunch, with whole lives to share. Sherry and her husband, Ron, lived in Pass-A-Grille. Willie and his wife Beatrice still lived in Aiken County. They'd chosen to meet on this Friday in June, because after the turmoil of 2020, Sherry needed her old friend to know how he'd once made her feel.

She propped up an iPad slideshow. In black and white, her dad hunched by a cash register, looking a little overwhelmed. He'd taken over a gas station and roadside shop in rural South Carolina, where a young WJ worked. "You started in 1961, right?" Sherry asked. "Mhmm," he said.

Sherry was 5 or so when her family moved down to run the place, and Willie James Bryant may as well have been 100. His 15-year-old frame towered over her as he changed oil and gassed up cars, but he had a gentle way about him.

Sherry scrolled through faces he might remember — including hers, with a toothy, trusting smile. WJ slapped a hand on her forearm and turned to his wife. "She was a sweet little girl," he said.

"She'd be following me around," he remembered. "I would go pump the gas, and she'd stand around and watch me, like she was waiting for me to give her instructions."

He'd tuck an oily rag in her back pocket, so that she would feel like the real deal. He'd been taught to look out for the least, and sometimes, when Sherry looked up at him, he knew she could feel it. That she wasn't a nobody.

"She would ask a thousand questions," he went on. "But I never got tired of her."

"Excuse me," his daughter Linda said. "Do you mind if we say grace?"

Sherry had moved back north in third grade, when running the shop proved an uneasy fit for her mathematician dad. She went on to study journalism, business and law, move to Florida, and marry Ron, who runs a family formalwear business. Sherry, an entrepreneur, built a globe-trotting life rooted in philanthropy. Her Youth Empowerment Alliance compiles dual-language books for young readers around the world.

All these years, she had kept a photo of her buddy on her desk. "Good morning, Willie James Bryant," she'd say, remembering his kindness, how quiet yet potent it was. Still, she had never gone back.

This winter, she sat at her desk, writing holiday cards. Now 61, she was recovering from a bout of sepsis after a surgery, a scare so intense that a priest had performed last rites. She caught herself looking at his face again.

She looked up his name and found an obituary. She looked up relatives, too, and wrote a letter.

"I don't remember much about his life, but I remember how safe I felt when I was with him," she said. "I should have told him myself how he helped shape my life."

Soon after, she got a voicemail. "This call is for Miss Sherry. I hope I have the right number..."

It hadn't been his obituary after all. And as it turned out, WJ's family came to Florida as one year. Sherry and WJ, now 73, traded incredulous texts and waited through the worst of the pandemic. Now, Beatrice stirred sugar into her bitter tea, and Willie's brother teased Sherry about cooking her some fatback, and conversation came easy.

They remembered the neon clock that hung in the crowded store, on which



Sacino and Bryant pose for a photo with their families during the lunch at the Columbia Restaurant on June 25.



Photos by MARTHA ASENCIO-RHINE | Times

Sherry Secino, center, alongside Willie James Bryant, center left, snaps a photo of Bryant's brother Robert Lee Bryant and sister-in-law Vesta Bryant during the reunion.

WJ counted his hours as it got dark. He'd heard all kinds of things in that store, things he never told Sherry. "Can I help you, sir?" he'd ask. "No, go help your own kind." Even so, it was an upgrade from the work he'd started as a little kid, when trucks scooped him and his siblings up and ferried them deep into the swamps to pick cotton.

Yes, the store had a water fountain he couldn't drink from, and around town, he had to pick up sandwiches from restaurants' back windows. Whatever this little girl made of her segregated world, she didn't seem to show it.

Over the clinking of forks, Sherry's excitable voice mixed with WJ's low drawl. They compared family trees and puzzled out a criss-cross in their genealogy, making them half-cousins.

They remembered Sherry's grandmother's particular ways, like wrapping her furniture in plastic and propping her taxidermied chihuahua on the coffee table.

"I wasn't gonna say a word about that stuffed dog," WJ said.

He laughed, too, with bittersweetness. He sure couldn't afford a dog. "We needed

every little piece of bread."

Linda wondered how he'd put up with a little kid's persistence.

"Well, he was on the job," Ron said, and the table laughed.

"Well, that's true," WJ said. "But she was interesting."

He leaned forward, forearms on the tablecloth.

"Even if she asked them every day, even if she asked the same questions," he said.

He had been asked recently about those years and what that relationship had felt like. A Black teenage boy, a white little girl, and hatred that hung in the air around them, thick as Southern humidity.

"It's funny how somebody can bring something out of you that you never thought about before," he said.

"I almost got a little emotional 'cause I remember thinking, this is such a precious little girl. She's so innocent. I wonder how long before she'd be corrupted with the way people think."

The table was quiet.

"I never said that to you," WJ said, turning to Sherry, who looked at his family.

"He taught me how people should be,"

Encounters

Encounters is dedicated to small but meaningful stories. Sometimes, they play out far from the tumult of the daily news; sometimes, they may be part of it. To suggest an idea, contact editor Maria Carrillo at mcarrillo@tampabay.com or call (727) 892-2301.

she said. "You gotta understand, my grandmother didn't want me around. My parents didn't want me around. He wanted me around. He was my best friend. He was *my best friend*..."

"He was the one who was so kind to me, and I'll never forget that. It transcends. All I know is that if you're kind to somebody, it matters."

Servers cleared their salad plates, and WJ told Sherry he couldn't believe she had still sent that letter when in her mind he was as good as dead. "You were thinking about my family," he marveled. He wasn't used to that.

He was used to being the provider, the man who worked his way up to solving human relations issues at the nuclear facility, the same one that had displaced his community years before. He was used to telling his kids what he'd lived through, how far they'd come, and teaching them, "Treat people right, trust in the Lord and I promise you will overcome." He was used to taking on the heavy things, like grieving quietly for his two grown daughters who died of brain cancer months apart. He could give kindness all day long but receiving it was not always easy. He'd had to be convinced to come down for this visit.

"That's your heart, baby," he told Sherry.

Half of the family was crying by then, and WJ stood to comfort a sister, whose tear-streaked face she buried in her lap. Sherry tucked a white napkin in WJ's back pocket.

"Look, y'all, she gave it back to me," he said, laughing, and strutted around. "You gave me a nicer rag than I gave you."

He kept showing it off until he made sure everybody was grinning, then took it out of his pocket and dabbed his shining eyes.

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