



ROBERT GAUTHIER Los Angeles Times

QUINCEAÑERA dress stores like Leonor Torres' have long been a staple of the retail hub in downtown L.A.

COLUMN ONE

She lured older men online. Some are now dead

A woman who used apps for hookups in U.S. and Mexico now on trial for murder.

By STEVE FISHER
REPORTING FROM MEXICO CITY

The FBI bulletin included a questionnaire and a plea: "If you and/or your loved one(s) were victimized by Aurora Phelps, or have information relevant to this investigation, please fill out this form."

The questionnaire spelled out the modus operandi of a woman who, the agency says, used dating apps to meet men decades her senior to gain access to their bank, Social Security and retirement accounts. Sometimes, she incapacitated the men by drugging them. Sometimes, the FBI says, she killed them.

Authorities describe Phelps, 44, as a fast-talking charmer who cozied up to men in their 60s and 70s looking for companionship. A longtime friend recalled her as short-tempered and quick to lash out at those who she thought had wronged her.

Phelps has dual U.S. and Mexican citizenship and hooked up with men on both sides of the border. All these hookups were going on, authorities say, while she was married to William Phelps of Las Vegas.

"We've known each other for 14 years and she's never shown a sign or an ounce of this," he told The Times last year. "If she did do it, damn, she put one over on me."

Aurora Phelps has been charged with murder in Mexico and indicted in the U.S. on fraud charges and two counts of kidnapping, one resulting in death. The FBI has identified 11 possible victims so far.

"The white-collar criminal, especially when it comes to Aurora Phelps, is no different than a violent criminal," said Christopher Delzotto, FBI special agent in charge in Las Vegas. "They are psychopaths. She truly believes her lies. She visualizes all of this stuff. She believes it. It has become her reality."

The questionnaire released by Delzotto's office asks, "Was anything unusu- [See Mexico, A7]

‘WE’RE IN SURVIVAL MODE’

A year after ICE raids unleashed fear throughout the Fashion District, one couple struggle to save their quinceañera shops

By Ruben Vives

On a recent Saturday morning, Joel Galvez cracked open a spiral notebook and scribbled in the date and a prayer: "Dios bendiga este día. Amen." God bless this day.

The prayer appears on every page, along with the daily log of dresses he'd sold at one of the clothing stores he owns in the Los Angeles Fashion District. In years past, Joel would note dozens sold.

But a year ago, the Trump administration targeted the shopping district, a retail hub driven mostly by immigrant business owners and Latino shoppers, as part of its mass immigration crackdown.

Federal immigration agents targeted at least one business here, arresting more than 40 immigrant workers and triggering civil unrest as they carried out sweeps across Southern California.

The effect on Joel's store, and others owned by members of the Galvez family, was immediate. The stores sell dresses for proms, special occasions and quinceañeras, a Latin American rite of passage celebrating a young girl's 15th

birthday and her transition to adulthood.

Joel, 41, owns two stores that cater to women. His wife, Leonor Torres, 56, has a shop that specializes in quinceañera dresses and, with Joel, she co-owns a second quinceañera shop.

After the raids, the quinceañera shops, normally packed with girls and dotting mothers on weekends, often sat empty. Customers called to cancel ball gown orders.

Saturdays were once the busiest days, and Joel's two shops would each sell 50 dresses or more. Now, they might sell 10 each. Leonor went from selling 20 dresses a week to around three, maybe more on good days.

The raids also affected small businesses orbiting around quinceañeras: makers of embossed invitations, sellers of tiaras and crowns, choreographers, caterers, florists and more.

Leonor said her sister and brother, who co-own a banquet hall in the city of Commerce, soon lost a year's worth of [See Fashion, A11]

EFFECTS LINGER: Detainees speak on anniversary of raid. CALIFORNIA, B1



JUSTIN SULLIVAN Getty Images

GAS tops \$6 in L.A., where an ad promotes cage matches at the White House.

Anxiety rises alongside economy

The state sees growth, but unemployment hits 5.3%

By QUEENIE WONG

California, the epicenter of the artificial intelligence boom, continues to grow its economy faster than the nation, but more people are losing their jobs and the cost of living remains high.

New economic indicators released last week show how the Golden State is grappling with the effects of the war on Iran, as well as an AI explosion, which is driving huge investments as well as layoffs.

The state's unemployment rate reached 5.3% in April, roughly 1 percentage point higher than the nation's. California's unemployment rate is expected to peak at 5.6% later this year, according to the UCLA Anderson Forecast released last week.

The state outpaced the nation in economic growth in the fourth quarter of 2025. It probably continued to outgrow the country in the first three months of this year, the report said.

"Income and output will

continue to grow faster than the U.S. even as employment growth is tepid," senior economist Jerry Nickelsburg wrote in the forecast. "Once past the current weakness, expected by the middle of next year, a tech, durable goods manufacturing, and construction resurgence should lead to superior growth in both employment and income in the Golden State once again."

The state's growth is being bolstered by many local companies that are attract- [See Economy, A14]

Establishment Democrats eke out leads but at crossroads

Even as mainstream candidates advance, party unsure on how to improve its brand.

By JENNY JARVIE

When Nithya Raman stepped up to a podium on the night of L.A.'s mayoral primary election, she thanked her supporters for standing up to the "powerful interests" who spent millions of dollars trying to "preserve this city's broken and unjust status quo."

"At a time when so many people have written Los Angeles off or have lost hope in the future of this incredible city," the democratic socialist L.A. mayoral hopeful said, "you are proof that Angelenos are hungry for change."

But as election results rolled in, the movement for change was underwhelming, or at least divided. Incumbent Mayor Karen Bass was in the lead, advancing to the November runoff. That left Raman locked in a battle for a second spot with Republi-

can former reality TV star Spencer Pratt.

Bass is one of several high-profile establishment Democrats to emerge on top. In California's gubernatorial race, centrist Xavier Becerra, a veteran of the Biden Cabinet, advanced to the runoff after being challenged from the left by billionaire green activist Tom Steyer and Democratic former U.S. Rep. Katie Porter. Steyer is now behind Steve Hilton, a Republican, and battling to make the runoff.

Still reeling from the rise of Donald Trump, Democrats in California and beyond are struggling to figure out the future direction of the party.

Some progressives, inspired by Zohran Mamdani's New York mayoral victory, saw 2026 as an opportunity to move the city further left. But the results have been mixed in key races, with veteran Democrats like Bass and Becerra eking out leads even as polls show dissatisfaction with status quo politics in California.

"This was supposed to be a change revolution, but vot- [See Democrats, A10]

City attorney out, first in 93 years

Hydee Feldstein Soto lacked clear messaging amid a controversial tenure, analysts say.

By SONJA SHARP AND JAMES QUEALLY

The last time Angelenos sacked an incumbent city attorney in the primaries, almost 30% of them were unemployed.

That was May 2, 1933, the nadir of the Great Depression, when sprawling encampments blanketed downtown, King Kong ruled movie theaters and violent crime reached a fever pitch not seen again for nearly half a century.

Incumbent City Atty. Hydee Feldstein Soto's blowout defeat on Tuesday may have little in common with Erwin P. Werner's primary loss 93 years ago, but themes of Depression-era

Los Angeles echo through the contest.

Marissa Roy, a deputy attorney general with the California Department of Justice who leads the race with ballots still being counted, wooed voters with shoe-leather and social media savvy, promising to use the office to fight for wage workers and tenants. But it was the city's powerful unions and its increasingly democratic socialist bloc that propelled her to the top spot, mirroring the coalition that drove California's sharp left turn in the early 1930s.

Meanwhile, county prosecutor John McKinney tapped into voter frustration with homeless encampments, a blighted downtown and general distrust of City Hall to pull off a last-minute heist of the second runoff spot. McKinney only started campaigning in earnest five weeks ago, but managed to win votes with a tough-on- [See Attorney, A9]



TAKING A DEEP DIVE INTO THE WORLD CUP

A special section on the World Cup is part of today's newspaper for print subscribers. It's also available for purchase at latimes.com/store.

Best watch spots in the L.A. area

Bars and restaurants are going all out for the World Cup. Times staff can help you plan. WEEKEND, L5-9

Error feeds vote conspiracy claim

A gap between mayoral tally updates had some erroneously crying fraud. CALIFORNIA, B1

Stadium workers vote to OK strike

Employees at SoFi Stadium vote to authorize a strike on the eve of the World Cup. SPORTS, D4

Weather
Low clouds, sun.
L.A. Basin: 78/61. B8

