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Nonprofit at center of rift in City Hall

Amid audit, top aide intervened on behalf of antiviolence group

By Alice Yin
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Mayor Brandon Johnson's top aide intervened in a heated dispute this year between Johnson's health commissioner and a politically connected antiviolence group that receives millions in public money despite concerns over how the nonprofit tracks its workers.

The clash unfolded after the Chicago Department of Public Health's 2025 review into the recipients of its community violence interruption grants found issues with collecting data from Acclivus Inc. It followed health Commissioner Dr. Olusimbo Ige's complaints that the organization sought to circumvent the city's required contracting and payment protocols before she was pushed out of the administration.

Acclivus executives spent months staunchly protesting the audit's findings with officials at the health department, which manages the city's antiviolence grants. The conflict played out under the watchful eye of Johnson's senior adviser, Jason Lee — an unusual involvement for a high-ranking mayoral staffer, given that the \$8 million grant is administered by a separate department.

Johnson's ties to Acclivus include a donation his campaign made to the nonprofit, which also employs a well-known South Side activist whose consulting business has done political work for him as well as Ald. Pat Dowell, the mayor's handpicked Finance Committee chair and ally until last year.

During a back-and-forth with Ige's team this March over how much the city was paying the organization, Acclivus Chief Operating Officer Sheila Regan went over the health commissioner's head and appealed to Lee by cc'ing him on an email the Tribune received via a public records request.

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'Unimaginable'

Agonized families await answers after remains recovered from funeral home on South Side

By Gregory Royal Pratt, Tess Kenny and Olivia Olander
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

The Young family hired South Chicago Chapel to prepare Keith, one of seven siblings, father of three and garage door installer, for his visitation. They gathered at a Baptist church on the West Side Thursday and waited to receive his body.

As the hours ticked by, the family grew anguished. They called the funeral home director, Johanna Morgan, who told them there was police activity in the neighborhood blocking the way but promised to deliver Keith for visitation.

He never made it.

Deja Young, left, hugs Corrine Young as they wait for news on their deceased relative, Keith Young, at the Cook County medical examiner's office on Friday. Keith's visitation had been planned for Thursday, but his body never showed up to the church. **ARTHUR MAIORELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

"They had us under the impression that there was some kind of investigation going on outside the funeral home which hindered them from being able to move around," recalled Leetonie Young, Keith's older brother. "We were under the impression the police would finally let them do what they were supposed to be doing, not knowing the police presence was about them."

The family's experience came after authorities recovered 56 bodies from South Chicago Chapel, removing them slowly throughout the night and into the morning and driving them to the morgue for the painful process of reuniting them with their families.

Records obtained by the Tribune reveal a harrowing scene at the funeral home and a history of problems at a previous crematorium run by its owners. Nearly five dozen decomposing bodies were discovered during a walkthrough of the business at 2939 E. 95th St. after a complaint was filed reporting that remains were not being properly stored at or below 40 degrees Fahrenheit, in accordance with state regulations, according to a police incident report.

Inside the funeral home, sources told the Tribune, authorities encountered bodies on gurneys but also on shelves alongside equipment. Some of the bodies were not bagged, and some appeared to have severed limbs.

Late Friday, a police spokesman said Calumet Area (Area 5) detectives are conducting a criminal investigation.

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Experimental pancreatic cancer drug may be 'game changer'



Rachelle Gardner and her fiancé, Tom Perlongo, smile as they walk out of an exam room at City of Hope Cancer Center Chicago in Zion on July 30. **STACEY WESCOTT/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

New treatment won't cure deadly disease, but it could extend patients' lives by many months

By Lisa Schencker
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

When she heard about a new, experimental drug to treat pancreatic cancer, Rachelle Gardner tried not to get her hopes up.

She wondered: Would she be eligible for the medication? Would her hospital be allowed to give it to her? Would she live long enough to get it?

In late July, her questions were answered. In an exam room at City

of Hope Cancer Center Chicago, Gardner shook three light blue pills out of a bottle and, sipping water, swallowed them one at a time.

"To good health and getting rid of that cancer bug!" Gardner exclaimed cheerfully after downing the last pill.

Gardner, a 59-year-old Milwaukee teacher for students who are visually impaired, said the medication has given her "a new sense of hope."

Gardner is one of dozens of

patients in Illinois and across the country who in recent weeks have started receiving the experimental medication, which has been heralded as a breakthrough. The drug, called daraxonrasib, does not cure pancreatic cancer, which is one of the deadliest and most difficult-to-treat cancers, but it gives many patients the next best thing: more time.

Typically, once pancreatic cancer spreads in the body beyond the pancreas, patients may only have months to live. But in a recent clinical trial, the drug was given

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"This is the thing that changes what we can offer patients. It's the first targeted therapy we're able to offer them, the first thing other than just giving chemotherapy."

DR. EVAN PISICK, a medical oncologist at City of Hope Cancer Center Chicago

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Italy connoisseurs choose leisurely Lucca



Rick Steves

On a sunny summer evening in Lucca, Italy, I was inspired by the simple joy of watching an old man bicycling with his granddaughter atop the wide, fortified wall that once protected this proud city from its enemies — and now corrals its Old World charm. Then, on rented bikes, a group of chatty tourists frolicked by. Their enthusiasm was contagious. Squinting at the energy in their smiles, surrounded by dazzling sunshine, it struck me that the sun in Italy seems to have a special glint. It's as if it's telling visitors, "Embrace life!"

Lucca has no single monumental sight. It's simply a uniquely human and well-preserved city. Despite being seen as the "touristic" center, the mostly traffic-free old town actually feels more local than touristy (aside from a few cruise excursions from nearby Livorno that pass through each day).

Lucca began as a Roman settlement. In fact, the grid layout of the streets (and the shadow of an amphitheater) survives from Roman times. As was typical for Roman towns, Lucca's two main roads quartered the fortified town, crossing at what was the forum — the main market and religious/political center (today's Piazza San Michele). The amphitheater sat just outside the original Roman walls.

The city is a bit of a paradox; while it has Europe's mightiest Renaissance wall, it hasn't seen a battle since 1430. A friend once explained to me the difference between a Renaissance wall and a medieval wall: Medieval walls are thin, because with weapons like arrows and stones, there was no need for thick



Unique, simply human Lucca has no single monumental sight in Italy. Perhaps because of this, it feels more local than touristy. **RICK STEVES' EUROPE**

fortification. But in Renaissance times, the advent of powerful cannons introduced the need for thicker, more substantial walls — like Lucca's.

These days, locals treat their ramparts like a circular park. And, with plenty of rental bikes available, visitors can enjoy a lazy pedal around its two-and-a-half-mile circuit. It's a wonderfully smooth 20-to-30-minute ride, depending on how fast you go and how crowded the wall-top park is. The best people-watching — and slowest pedaling — is during "passeggiata" time, just before dinner, when it seems all of Lucca is out doing slow laps around the wall.

In its heyday, Lucca packed 70 churches and over 100 towers within its

walls. Each tower was the home and private fortress of a wealthy merchant family, and offered a safe, all-in-one structure to live, work, and garden.

Interiors were single rooms stacked atop each other: shop, living room, and then the kitchen, all connected by exterior wooden staircases. The rooftop was generally a vegetable garden, with trees providing shade. Later, the wealthy city folk moved into the countryside, trading away life in their city palazzos to establish farm estates complete with fancy villas.

Among Lucca's towers, Romanesque churches seem to lurk around every corner, as do fun-loving piazzas filled with soccer-playing children. The main pedestrian drag here is Via Fillungo, which

connects the town's two busiest squares: Piazza dell'Anfiteatro and Piazza San Michele. Between the two, you can get a taste of Lucca's rich past, including several elegant, century-old storefronts.

At delightful Piazza dell'Anfiteatro, you'll feel the architectural ghost of the town's Roman amphitheater. With the fall of Rome, the theater (which seated 10,000) was gradually cannibalized for its stones and inhabited by people living in a mish-mash of huts. The huts were cleared away in the mid-19th century to better show off the town's illustrious past and make one purely secular square for the town market (every other square is dominated by a church). While the arena's long gone, its oval

shape is a reminder of the city's classical heritage.

Piazza San Michele also has ancient roots. It's hosted a market since Roman times, when it was the forum. Today it's dominated by the Church of San Michele. Towering above its fancy Romanesque facade, the archangel Michael stands ready to flap his wings — which, thanks to a crude mechanical contraption, he actually did on special occasions.

Nearby, the Church of San Giovanni hosts nightly concerts celebrating the music of hometown composer Giacomo Puccini. One of Italy's greatest opera stars, Puccini is the genius behind the likes of La Bohème, Madame Butterfly, and Tosca. His delightful arias seem to capture the spirit of this wonderful

corner of Italy.

While neighboring Pisa has the famous tipsy tower you can climb, lesser-known Lucca is a favorite stop for many Italy connoisseurs. It's just a 30-minute train ride from Pisa and an hour's drive from Florence — but just because you can easily tack Lucca onto a day trip doesn't mean it should be rushed.

If you have time for more than a touristy quickie at nearby Pisa, consider slowing down, grabbing a gelato, and basking in Lucca's genuine charm.

Rick Steves (www.ricksteves.com) writes European travel guidebooks and hosts travel shows on public television and public radio. Email him at rick@ricksteves.com, and follow his blog on Facebook.

CELEBRITY TRAVEL

Astronaut yearns to explore Patagonia

By Jae-Ha Kim
TRIBUNE CONTENT AGENCY

Former NASA rocket scientist Aisha Bowe made history last year as a member of the all-female Blue Origin crew.

"The mission was about so much more than going to space," Bowe said. "As a science payload operator, I helped conduct research on how plants respond to microgravity and radiation. The work could one day help us feed astronauts on long-duration missions and support humanity's future beyond Earth. But when I looked back at our planet, I wasn't thinking about the research. I was thinking about the journey. I thought about my teachers, mentors, family members and the student who once struggled in math and never imagined she'd one day look down at Earth from space. For me, the mission wasn't just about reaching space. It was about expanding who gets to see themselves there."

This interview with Bowe was edited for clarity and length.

Q: Are regular trips mundane now that you've been to outer space?

A: Space makes Earth better. Every new place still fills me with even more curiosity. What changed after space is how I see Earth. When you look down at this planet from 100 kilometers up, every destination looks impossibly precious. If anything, space made me want to explore more of this world, not less.

Q: Many children dream about becoming an



Former NASA scientist Aisha Bowe returns to the Bahamas to reunite with family members. **FARRENO FERGUSON**

astronaut. What was your dream?

A: Space was absolutely the dream. As a kid, I was fascinated by exploration. I wanted to visit exotic places, experience different cultures and see what existed beyond the horizon. More than anything, I wanted a life bigger than the circumstances I was born into. I wanted to see what was out there, what I was capable of and how far I could go. In many ways, going to space was the realization of that dream, but the dream itself was always about exploration, growth and expanding what I believed was possible.

Q: Are there plans for you to go back to space?

A: The mission isn't finished. Stay tuned.

Q: How has your heritage impacted who you are?

A: Becoming the first person of Bahamian heritage to travel to space was incredibly meaningful because I knew I wasn't just carrying my own dreams with me. I was carrying the hopes of a nation that has always dreamed big.

Q: What was the first trip you took as a child?

A: The Bahamas. I remember staring out the airplane window as the water turned from deep blue to every shade of turquoise imaginable. Then there was the smell of salt in the air, sandy feet and long days spent in and around the ocean. The ocean was

my first introduction to wonder. I didn't know it then, but I've been chasing that feeling ever since. My grandfather just celebrated his 94th birthday, so family is a big reason I return home. ... Fresh snapper, conch salad and water so blue it doesn't look real don't hurt either.

Q: What would be your dream trip?

A: A Michelin three-star tour of the world that ends in Patagonia. I love discovering places through food, so I would happily chase extraordinary meals across continents. But I would want the journey to end somewhere wild and humbling. Patagonia is the kind of place that makes you feel small in the best possible way. ... After all the movement, all the cities and all the excitement, I can't imagine a better place to pause, reflect and remember just how big the world really is.

Q: Do you get car or air sick?

A: Thankfully, no. I've pretty much done everything possible to test my limits from fighter jets, to centrifuges, skydives and spaceflight. At this point, my inner ear and I have come to an understanding. I'm a scuba diver, mountain climber and long-hike enthusiast. I've always been drawn to adventure, whether it's underwater ... or 62 miles above Earth.

For more from the reporter, visit www.jaehakim.com.

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

Turo charges renter for damage to vehicle despite photo evidence

By Christopher Elliott | KING FEATURES SYNDICATE

I recently rented a car through Turo in Los Angeles. I delivered the car a day early because I had to catch an earlier flight home.

The next day, I received a text from Turo saying the owner claimed that I had damaged the car.

Turo sent photos, one of which showed a scratch on the fender and a small hole in the bumper.

Fortunately, I had taken photos when I took possession of the car. I sent Turo my photos, which clearly showed that the scratch was already there.

Turo reviewed the evidence and told me that the claim had been dropped because it was "normal wear and tear."

A week later, Turo reopened the claim and charged my credit card \$660, but I was never shown an itemized bill.

Then, earlier this month, it sent me another invoice for \$1,678. Turo claims that there's now "hidden" damage to the car. It sent a photo of a larger hole that I've never seen before.

This feels like a scam. I've disputed the charge with my credit card company, but I'm not hopeful.

Can you help me get my money back?

— *Georgina Montalvan, Birmingham, Alabama*

A: Turo should've stuck to its original decision. You had the evidence to prove that the damage was preexisting, and the company correctly identified it as "wear and tear." Reopening the claim and charging you \$660 — and then piling on another \$1,678 for "hidden" damage — was wrong.

Peer-to-peer car rental platforms like Turo can be tricky. Unlike traditional car rental companies, you're dealing with individual owners who may be very protective of their vehicles or — in rare cases — are looking to have existing damage fixed at a renter's expense.

The supplemental claim is a common pain point. This happens when a repair shop takes the car apart and

finds more damage than was visible in the initial photos. While this is a legitimate industry practice, it can feel incredibly unfair to a renter who has already left the state and doesn't have a way to verify the new damage.

You did the right thing by taking photos of the car when you picked it up. This paper trail is your best defense against frivolous damage claims. It's unclear why Turo ignored your photographic evidence after initially accepting it. (The photos get uploaded to the Turo app, so it has access to them.)

You could've also appealed your case to someone higher up at Turo. I publish the names, numbers and email

addresses of the Turo executives on the consumer advocacy site, Elliott.org. Your case is a reminder to always take photos of the car at pickup and return. This evidence is the only thing standing between you and a massive repair bill.

I contacted Turo on your behalf. The company reviewed your case again and dropped the claim. You have received a full refund of the \$660, and the additional invoice of \$1,678 has been canceled.

Christopher Elliott is the chief advocacy officer of Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps consumers resolve their problems. Contact him at elliott.org/help or chris@elliott.org.