

THE KEYS

COMMENTARY
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Allowing kids to die as adults

Lionel Tate, 12, deserves the right to belly up to any bar in Florida and demand a shot of 121 DDT. He should be able to walk into a polling place and vote, though he'd have to stand on his tiptoes to reach the ballot.

The kid from Pinehick Park should be issued a driver's license. And granted immunity from curfews. And certainly there should be no question about his attendance at R-rated movies.

Lionel deserves all the privileges of adulthood. He shouldn't admit responsibility.

In 1978, Florida became the first state to allow prosecutors to recommend that kids be tried in adult court. But it was the Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 1984 that truly set Florida apart.

In 1994, the decision was left completely up to prosecutors. Since, Florida has accounted for a third of all juvenile offenders recommended to adult court. In 1998, 6,629 Florida juveniles were housed in adult courts.

And the assumption of maturity doesn't stop in the courtroom. Florida can claim at least 70 percent of all juvenile inmates nationwide who are doing hard time in adult prisons. Last year, 60 juveniles serving time in Florida's prisons were 16 or younger (the average just 14). Compared to New York, with 110 juveniles in adult prisons, none under 16.

In 1996, in a memorable example of getting tough on kids, Broward sent a slight, pale, 15-year-old mentally disturbed sex offender named Michael Myers off to adult prison and stuck him in a cell with an adult career criminal. His cell mate soon added murder to a rap sheet that included robbery, burglary, assault and theft convictions.

The official death sentence conferred on Michael Myers compares to the 23 juveniles Florida officially has sent to Death Row since the death penalty was reinstated in the 1970s, including three from Miami-Dade and one from Broward counties. Undesirability for the death penalty reverts, the appeals courts have been a bit more hesitant about actually stripping kids into Old Spiky. Currently, only four inmates sentenced as juveniles remain on Death Row (none from South Florida).

Florida's not such an aberration. Despite a steady drop in juvenile crimes, especially violent crime, some 46 states have now amended their laws to allow kids to be tried as adults. And several state legislatures have bills pending that would make their states an draconian Florida. Nationwide, 65 juvenile offenders languish on Death Row. In the past two years, the U.S. has been the only nation in the world to execute people who were juveniles at the time of their crimes.

So if we're going to jail 'em or kill 'em, or let 'em vote and drive and hit the bus, Lionel's buying.

Warning posted

KEY WEST — Health officials once again are advising against swimming at South Beach.

A water-quality test performed Tuesday showed elevated counts of fecal bacteria at the Key West swimming area, near the Beach and Casa Marina hotels. The Monroe County Health Department on Thursday issued an advisory warning people against swimming or any other water-related activities until tests show the water is safe.

Monroe County Health Department administrator Stephanie Walters said advisories will be lifted only after 10 acceptable tests over 30 days.

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GROWER'S VIGIL: Sam Accorsio checks temperatures in his South Dade tomato fields as the sun rises Tuesday.

Cold spares threatened groves, crops

BY CHARLES SAVAGE AND PHIL LONG
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Exhausted farmers from Orlando to Homestead exhausted tonight, eight of relief Thursday as the rising sun heated off a potential later freeze, saving winter crops worth more than a billion dollars.

"The weather forecast, yesterday was almost gloom, but I guess we had a miracle," said Kirby Johnson, a farmer at Five Brothers Produce. The Homestead company could have lost 2,000 acres of eggplants, tomatoes and beans.

Across western Miami Dade, where fragile and lucrative winter vegetable crops are in full production, temperatures dropped to the freezing point just before dawn. But a five-to-seven-mile-per-hour breeze throughout the night had kept the ground dry.

At 6:45 a.m., Sam Accorsio stood at Southwest 334th Street and 187th Avenue. Looking to the north, he called in temperatures from the 20 white Taylor Thompsons had scattered among his 1,200 acres. The men had been awake all night.

"The temperature fell to 36 degrees, then 34 as he waited for the sun. At 6:59 p.m., it hit 32 — the freezing point."

"Thank God we had a slight breeze keep up all night, which helped us, because it doesn't let the frost settle," Accorsio said, exhaling condensing vapor with every breath into the cold air.



WARM FEELINGS: Emilio O. Carrero, 81 of Miami Lakes smiles up to his mother Thursday at Palm Springs, Fla.

Museum to honor Flagler's railroad

BY LISA FISS
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KEY WEST — The Overseas Railway, long regarded as an engineering marvel, will be showcased in a new museum attraction in Key West this weekend.

The Flagler Station Overseas Railway Historical Society is the public Sunday in honor of the railroad's 100th anniversary, honoring the island-hopping railroad's developer, Henry Flagler.

and a model depicting how sections of the railroad bridges were built also are a part of the display.

Key West resident Ruby Whitlock was one of the schoolchildren given a holiday to celebrate Flagler's arrival by train nearly 88 years ago. Ed Swift, president of Historic Town of America Inc., which built the historic station, said Whitlock, now in her 90s, will attend Saturday to share her eyewitness account.

Seven years in the making, the museum is located on the original site of the Margaret Street railway stop at the entrance to the Key West Historic Support. Swift counts its opening as one of the city's most historical events.

"Key West was living in the age of ships when the rest of the country was living in the age of railroads, but Flagler changed all that — when he was approaching his 80. That's extraordinary," Swift said.



KEY WEST — Key West police detectives have been unable to identify a man found dead on Sunbeach Beach two weeks ago and are turning to the public for help.

Police working to identify body

BY LISA FISS
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KEY WEST — Key West police detectives have been unable to identify a man found dead on Sunbeach Beach two weeks ago and are turning to the public for help.

Detective Bill Larkin released a photograph of the dead man Thursday after a description of the man, including an unusual tattoo, failed to yield any leads.

The man was also released in an effort to help identify the man. "Maybe he's a friend of his," Larkin said. "We'll take anything on this point. This is the first time in my career we haven't been able to identify a body."

Posted by police Jan. 14, the man was white, six feet tall, 210 pounds and had brown hair. He had a beard with about four days' growth and was wearing blue jeans and a black shirt with a picture of an eight ball. A pair of Hot Topic brand hiking boots was found nearby. There was a three- or four-inch-long, partially faded, blue tattoo on the man's upper right arm.

Larkin said there were no obvious signs of trauma to the body. "Anyone who may have information, or saw anything suspicious around Sunbeach Beach between 9 p.m. Jan. 13 and 1 a.m. Jan. 14 is asked to call Larkin at 305-282-8117."

MAN'S FRIEND? This photo was found on the dead man's body.

Ads urge opposition to airport

BY CIVIL S. JAMES
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Conservationists launched ad campaigns in both English and Spanish in hopes of increasing public opposition to the proposed commercial airport at the former Homestead Air Force Base.

In full-page ads in The Herald and El Nuevo Herald, the Sierra Club and Natural Resources Defense Council call on people to attend a series of public hearings on the plan next week and to write President Clinton and the Air Force to express opposition to the proposed airport.

Environmentalists have been battling the proposed airport since they first learned of it in 1995. The plan would build a 2,000-acre airport on the site of the former Homestead Air Force Base, which was closed in 1995. The plan would also build a 1,000-acre parking lot and a 1,000-acre terminal building.

The series of ads are planned to run in the Miami Times and Diario las Americas in addition to The Herald and El Nuevo Herald. Ads have also begun airing on Spanish-language radio. The ads will continue until March 7.

Fargo said the ads will get increasingly political and "hard hitting" as the campaign continues. He said the campaign is costing more than \$100,000.

The Air Force will hold five public hearings next week on the base redevelopment project, beginning at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday at South Dade Senior High School, 2825 SW 19th Ave.

The meetings begin with a 90-minute "open house," during which federal officials will answer technical questions about the environmental study; it will be followed by public comment beginning at 7 p.m.

FLORIDA SEE GOLF.

Officially called the Florida East Coast Railway's Key West Extension, the \$430 million railroad became known as the Overseas Railway because its track stretched more than 100 miles into open water. Its bridges and viaducts linking the islands of the Florida Keys — including the old Seven Mile Bridge — were regarded as an engineering feat.

Among Flagler's attractions are The Last Train Arrived, a film featuring rare motion picture footage and still photographs of the railroad's construction.