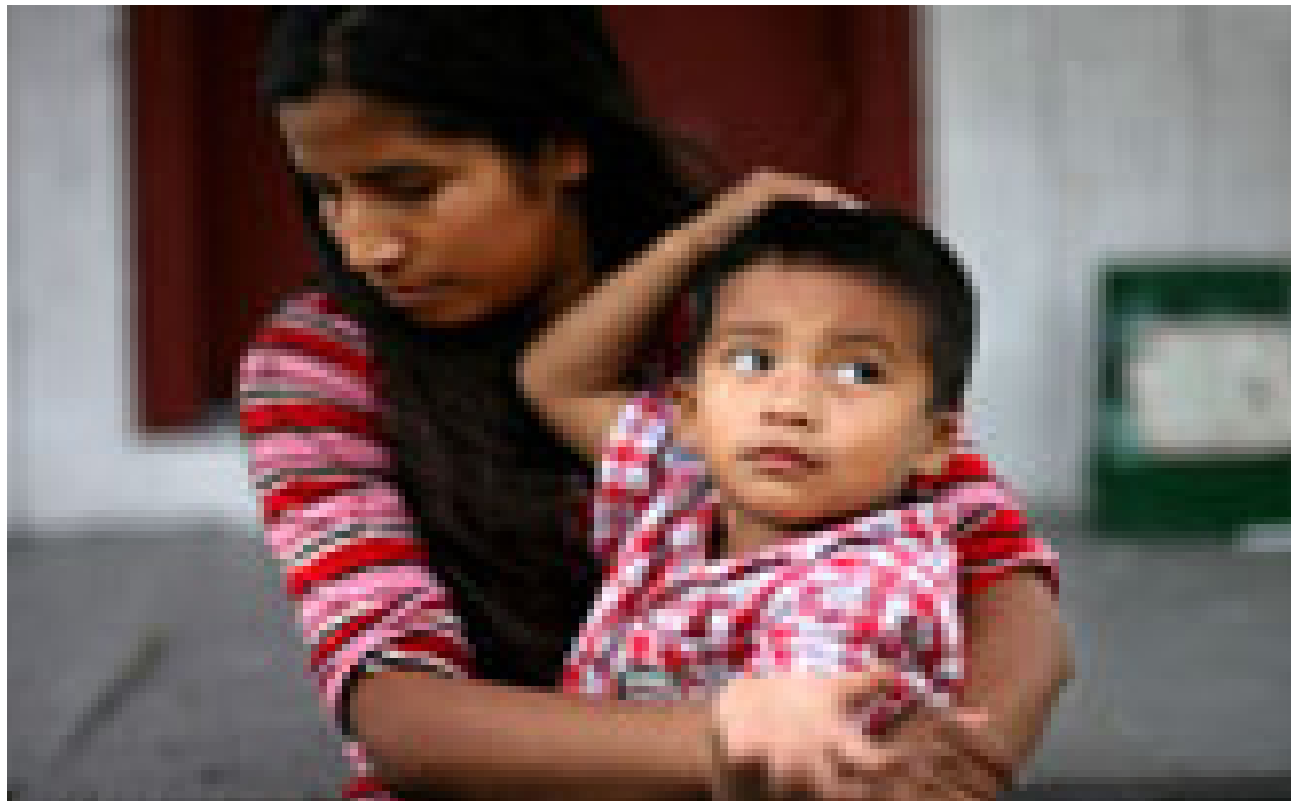


## A new harvest of sick children

Three new lawsuits filed on behalf of Florida farmworkers have rekindled a debate.



Gary Coronado/The Palm Beach Post

**Nazaria Francisco and her son Yiovanni at their home in Immokalee, Fla. Yiovanni had complications with water in the cranium while in the womb.**

By **CHRISTINE EVANS** and **JOHN LANTIGUA**

IMMOKALEE — The children with the medical problems - a malformed ear, a cleft palate, a brain defect - live tucked away in trailers and cabins down dusty roads in this poor farming town. Their immigrant parents do some of the country's hardest and most humble work, picking tomatoes for a per-bucket price. They are sometimes called the "invisible people," here one day and gone with the harvest the next. But now that low profile is about to change. Lawyers have filed a trio of

suits claiming the children were born this way because their parents labored in the fields - and were exposed to toxic pesticides. "Yes, I blame the pesticides," said one of the mothers, Cristina Matias, whose 3-year-old son Juan has had multiple surgeries for a cleft lip and palate. His speech is delayed and, according to the lawsuit, he has brain damage. "When the tractors passed by to spray, it was very near. The smell would become strong, and I would vomit. He has had so many operations already, and the doctors say they will not leave him alone until he is older. He is very behind mentally, about

one-half the level of where he should be." Nazaria Francisco, whose son Yiovanni, also 3, was diagnosed at birth with a congenital brain malformation, Dandy Walker Syndrome, said she sometimes had to reenter freshly sprayed fields when they were still wet with pesticides. "The smell was strong. My face would itch, and my arms." And Maria Pedro, whose little girl, Dahlia, was born with a deformed ear and a defective liver, said she worried about working in the fields during her pregnancy because **SEE HEALTH, 9A**

### Sunshine Sunday

## 16-year-old accused of killing ice cream man

By **JASON SCHULTZ**  
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

LAKE PARK — A 16-year-old accused of shooting and killing an ice cream man during an attempted robbery in December is being held without bond.

Frank M. Collins was charged Friday with murder and attempted robbery in the Dec. 3 shooting of 32-year-old Fresnel Atilus.

Collins did not make it into the court room for first appearance Saturday morning by the time Judge Richard Oftedal began considering his case.

Wearing an orange jumpsuit and crosses tattooed above each cheekbone, Collins appeared in the doorway as Oftedal was wrapping up. The judge sent him away saying, "We don't need to bring him out."

Collins had been in police custody since shortly after the slaying after his mother turned him in on an unrelated charge. Palm Beach County Sheriff's deputies say Collins shot Atilus five times.

"I feel happy they caught him. I want to ask him why he killed my fa-

ther," said Elidia Atilus, 16, the oldest of Atilus' seven children.

Atilus had moved here from Haiti and began working in construction, but after getting laid off he started to work as an ice cream man.

"He didn't like the job," his nephew Dieudonne Atilus, said in the days after his death. "He had to feed his family."

**SEE ICE CREAM, 6F**



Gary Coronado/The Palm Beach Post

**Frank Collins, 16, is held back from appearing in front of Judge Frank Oftedal in the courtroom at the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office in West Palm Beach Saturday.**

### Local News

## Pedestrian struck, killed in West Palm Beach parking lot

By **VERONICA MARTINEZ**  
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

WEST PALM BEACH — An 80-year-old woman was struck by an SUV and killed this morning as she walked across a busy shopping center parking lot on Southern Boulevard.

Juana Inés Vitaliani, who was originally from Argentina but lived in West Palm Beach, was hit as she was leaving the Publix Super Market shopping plaza in the 800 block of Southern Boulevard at about 8:45 a.m.

Angel Ricardo Solís, her live-in companion of 10 years, said he and Vitaliani went to the store every Saturday morning for their groceries.

Every time they would follow the same routine: he would wait at the register to pay, while she left and walked across the parking lot and then cross Southern Boulevard to get the Spanish-language newspapers she liked to read from the racks there.

But this time, she didn't make it. She was struck by Gisele Pena, 46, who was driving a crimson-colored Lincoln MKX SUV.

"We don't know exactly how the crash happened. We just know that they were both trying to exit the parking lot and somehow the two collided," Karl Seifel, homicide investigator with the West Palm Beach police.

Vitaliani suffered severe internal injuries and was pronounced dead at the scene, according to Seifel.

It is unknown whether any charges will be filed against Pena. The accident is still under investigation, but there were no drugs or alcohol involved, Seifel said.

### Local News

## Chinese drywall poses risks to Florida homes

By **BRIAN SKOLOFF**  
The Associated Press

PARKLAND — At the height of the U.S. housing boom, when building materials were in short supply, American construction companies used millions of pounds of Chinese-made drywall because it was abundant and cheap.

Now that decision is haunting hundreds of homeowners and apartment dwellers who are concerned that the wallboard gives off fumes that can corrode copper pipes, blacken jewelry and silverware, and possibly sicken people.

Shipping records reviewed by The Associated Press indicate that imports of potentially tainted Chinese building materials exceeded 500 million pounds during a four-year period of soaring home prices. The drywall may have been used in more than 100,000 homes, according to some estimates, including houses rebuilt after Hurricane Katrina.

"This is a traumatic problem of extraordinary proportions," said U.S. Rep. Robert Wexler, a Florida Democrat who introduced a bill in the House calling for a temporary ban on the Chinese-made imports until more is known about their chemical makeup. Similar legislation has been proposed in the Senate.

The drywall apparently causes a chemical reaction that gives off a rotten-egg stench, which grows worse with heat and humidity.

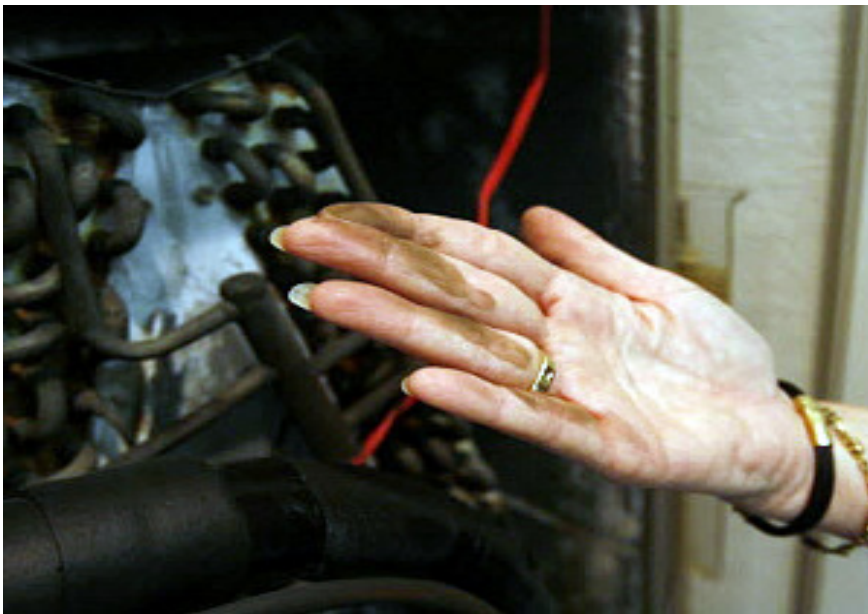
Researchers do not know yet what causes the reaction, but possible culprits include fumigants sprayed on the drywall and material inside it. The Chinese drywall is also made with a coal byproduct called fly ash that is less refined than the form used by U.S. drywall makers.

Dozens of homeowners in the Southeast have sued builders, suppliers and manufacturers, claiming the very walls around them are emitting smelly sulfur compounds that are poisoning their families and rendering their

homes uninhabitable. "It's like your hopes and dreams are just gone," said Mary Ann Schultheis, who has suffered burning eyes, sinus headaches, and a general heaviness in her chest since moving into her brand-new, 4,000-square foot house in this tidy South Florida suburb a few years ago.

She has few options. Her builder is in bankruptcy, the government is not helping and her lender will not give her a break.

**SEE DRYWALL, 7F**



Craig Litten/AP Photo

**Mary Ann Schultheis displays the black dust that is covering the copper tubes in the air conditioner in the second story of her Parkland home.**



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Police investigate shootings in two towns by the man. 2A



Marlins 6  
Nationals 9



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