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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2026 | CITIZEN-TIMES.COM

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Asheville business owner indicted

Gudrun Casper-Leinenkugel facing murder charges

Will Hofmann
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

A former Asheville restaurateur and business owner indicted in the death of her daughter and in a 2007 Henderson County cold case faced allegations of fraud in the decade leading up to the charges, according to a 2016 civil lawsuit filed by former business partners.

Gudrun Casper-Leinenkugel, also known as Linda Jean Casper, was charged Jan. 16 with two counts of first-degree murder and two counts of attempted first-degree murder by the Henderson County Sheriff's Office.

Casper-Leinenkugel was a co-owner

of Bean Werks Coffee & Tea on Haywood Road and a variety of other businesses in Buncombe and Henderson counties for more than 20 years. She was sued by her co-partners in the troubled West Asheville restaurant Patton Public House in 2016.

Although the lawsuit was dropped in 2019, the legal complaint outlines a pattern of alleged erratic behavior in the years leading up to the murder charges. In an interview with the Citizen Times, another former business owner described her behavior as "off" and said Casper-Leinenkugel often claimed to be employed in an unlikely variety of professions.

The murder charges against Casper-

Leinenkugel stem from a Nov. 30 Thanksgiving dinner, where she allegedly poisoned three people, Henderson County Sheriff Lowell Griffin said in a video sent to the Hendersonville Times-News on Jan. 28.

Victims consumed wine laced with acetonitrile, an industrial chemical that converts to cyanide after consumption, warrants allege. Two victims — Leela Livis, who died Nov. 30, and Mia Lacey, who survived — are Casper-Leinenkugel's daughters, Griffin said. The poisonings led investigators to link Casper-Leinenkugel to the death of Mischa Schmidt, also known as Michael Schmidt, in 2007, reopening an 18-year-old cold case. Property records show Casper-Leinenkugel received a Henderson County property from Schmidt before he died.

The investigation is continuing with the aid of the Jackson County Sheriff's Office, the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation and the North Carolina Department of Insurance, Griffin said. Livis lived in Jackson County. She is being held without bond in Henderson County Detention Center. A disposition hearing is scheduled for Feb. 26. Casper-Leinenkugel has not yet entered a plea.

"I'm simply unwilling to compromise the integrity of this case by providing further details," Griffin said Jan. 28.

Casper-Leinenkugel's attorney Paul Bidwell told the Citizen Times Feb. 9 that it is too early in the criminal investigation for the state to disclose its evidence against his client.

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WORD FROM THE SMOKIES



Park entomologist reflects on career conserving insects

Frances Figart
Special to the Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

From bears and bobcats to eagles and elk, 22,893 species have been documented so far in Great Smoky Mountains National Park—and nearly half of them are insects. Becky Nichols, the park's long-time entomologist, has dedicated her career to learning about and protecting lifeforms like bees, wasps, moths, and butterflies.

As a child in rural Washington state, Nichols gravitated toward nature and animals of all sorts. She knew from a young age that she wanted a career related to the environment.

"I grew up in a large family, and we all spent a lot of time outdoors — hiking, picking huckleberries, riding horses, raising farm animals, and taking care of the garden," Nichols said. "Our family visited public lands often — even if it was just for a day — and summer

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Synchronous fireflies (*Photinus carolinus*) flash in unison during their mating season at Elkmont Campground, creating a natural spectacle that people travel long distances to witness. PROVIDED BY PAUL DRIESSCHE

AT TOP: Park entomologist Becky Nichols shows an especially interesting specimen to Jim and Leslie Costa, fellow entomologists and the 2025 Steve Kemp writer and illustrator in residence. PROVIDED BY ROBIN PYLE/SMOKIES LIFE

Man released in Guthrie disappearance investigation

KiMi Robinson, Michael Loria and Taijuan Moorman
USA TODAY

More than a week after Savannah Guthrie's mother, Nancy Guthrie, went missing from her Arizona home in a possible kidnapping, law enforcement took a person in for questioning.

Pima County Sheriff's Department deputies "detained a subject during a traffic stop south of Tucson" and questioned the person "in connection to the Nancy Guthrie investigation," according to a statement obtained by USA TODAY. Details about the person have not been made public.

A man who was detained in Rio Rico, Arizona, in connection with the abduction said he was released after questioning, according to the New York Times and Fox News. Authorities said that they detained the person in connection with the Guthrie case during a traffic stop.

The sheriff's department did not share any information about what prompted officers to stop the person on the road.

The development in the case came hours after the FBI released photos and videos of a possible suspect, who was captured on film by Nancy Guthrie's doorbell camera. The person, who wore a ski mask and gloves and appeared to be "armed," per FBI Director Kash Patel, has not been identified by law enforcement.

Authorities have not identified the masked person but Patel did describe that person as "of interest."

"I do believe we are looking at people who, as we say, are persons of interest," Patel said of the surveillance footage taken from a supposedly deactivated Google Nest doorbell camera. "But as you know with any investigation, you are a person of interest until you're either eliminated or you're actually found to be the culprit or the culprits involved."

Nancy Guthrie, 84, was "taken" from her home located outside of Tucson in the early hours of Feb. 1, authorities have said. Savannah Guthrie and her siblings have since

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MOUNTAINS

Asheville to hold workshop for proposed river park concepts

Sarah Honosky
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE - Those wondering what Asheville's rebuilt parks could look like will get their first chance to see design concepts during a Feb. 28 drop-in workshop.

This is the next phase of the city's projects to restore and rebuild infrastructure and parks along the French Broad and Swannanoa Rivers. It follows a wave of community engagement that drew thousands of responses. The respective projects are led by two firms — Boston-based Sasaki over the French Broad riverfront parks, and OLIN, based in Philadelphia, designing East Asheville's Azalea Road properties.

The effort spans miles of riverside. Among the assets are landmarks like West Asheville's Carrier Park, greenways that run the length of the River Arts District, Recreation Park and pool, a soccer complex and Amboy Riverfront Park.

Riverfront recovery was necessitated after Tropical Storm Helene caused catastrophic flooding damage in September 2024. The storm completely submerged over 200 acres of parks, recreation amenities, public facilities and greenways along the French Broad River, causing at least \$25 million in destruction.

Areas along the Swannanoa River and Azalea Road also sustained major damage to parks and other infrastructure — like the Gashes Creek Bridge and dam.

Workshop attendees will move through stations showcasing "concept alternatives" — artistic and technical visualizations — of the proposed park layouts and infrastructure repairs. Project teams are asking for feedback to shape the preferred concept designs.

There will be different ideas for park and infrastructure repair, adjusted layouts, enhanced environmental resiliency and updated recreation offerings, with drawings and visualizations to imagine what is possible in the reimagined spaces, according to a Feb. 9 news release.

As Parks and Recreation Director D. Tyrell McGirt has stressed, while it will take several years to build back, it is a "unique opportunity" to do something better, smarter and more resilient in the city's parks spaces.

"We just have zero interest in just building back what was there before," he told City Council in an update earlier this year.

How will the projects be funded? Cost recovery will be sought through a variety of federal programs, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Public Assistance program, Community Development Block Grant Disaster Relief funds, the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program and other grants and local capital funds.

The design concepts being presented in February are the result of input gathered during the initial engagement phase in late 2025, said the news release. During that period, residents shared their needs regarding park amenities, accessibility and environmental restoration.

A December open house saw more than 200 attendees and an online survey received feedback from 2,350 people.

An engagement summary detailed findings. For Azalea parks, themes included flood resilience as a design standard, pool restoration, nature-first trails and multi-sport hubs. French Broad River parks saw themes like its role as a "transportation backbone," a "third space," safety and visibility and river access.



French Broad River Park in Asheville on April 30, 2025. PHOTOS BY JOSH BELL / ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES



The Gashes Creek Road Bridge at Recreation Park in Asheville on May 16, 2025.

If you go

- **What:** A community design workshop offering a first look at how the project teams have translated the community's priorities into visual plans for a more resilient riverfront.

- **When:** 11 a.m.-2 p.m., Feb. 28.

- **Where:** Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College in the Ivy Building at 9 Genevieve Circle.

- **Format:** Drop-in; come whenever is convenient. Short presentations will occur at the top of each hour for the French Broad area project and at the half of each hour for the Azalea area project.

- **Parking:** Free parking is available at the meeting location, which is accessible on the S4 ART bus route. Complimentary transit vouchers are available to attend via ART buses. Contact neighborhoods@ashevillenc.gov to request one.

Other ways to participate

- **Online Feedback:** A digital presentation of the concepts and a feedback survey will be available on the official French Broad Riverfront Parks and Azalea Parks and Infrastructure project pages starting Feb. 28 and ending March 16.

- **Pop-Up Events:** Keep an eye out for smaller "pop-up" engagement stations at local events and community hubs in early March. Dates and locations will be posted to the French Broad and Azalea project websites.

- **Focused Discussions:** A series of meetings to gather feedback on identified topic areas for both projects will be held in early March.

Learn more at publicinput.com/fbrparks and publicinput.com/azalearecovery.

Sarah Honosky is the city government reporter for the Asheville Citizen Times, part of the USA TODAY Network. News Tips? Email shonosky@citizentimes.com.

Smokies

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vacations involved camping in national forests and national parks. I recall finding aquatic insects in a mountain stream and being intrigued. Little did I know the career path I would end up taking."

As an undergraduate majoring in wildlife at Washington State University, Nichols was inspired by her entomology instructor, who "conveyed his enthusiasm to the students and really opened my eyes to the diversity of insects." During summers she worked with the US Department of Agriculture in eastern Washington, surveying orchards for apple maggot flies and rangeland for grasshoppers — documenting a certain density of these agricultural pests would trigger various control measures. This gave her valuable experience working with scientists.

Her practical entomology experience continued in graduate school at Texas Tech University, where her thesis concerned fire ants and their impact on native ants in central Texas. Next, she went to the University of Missouri for her Ph.D., looking at aquatic insect

diversity in relation to land use in the Ozarks. She had finished her doctorate and was seeking a job when she saw an announcement for the Smokies entomologist position.

"The job duties covered things that I had experience in, so I felt qualified to apply," she said. "I had some federal experience as a seasonal, so that probably helped, and I was fortunate enough to get an interview and land the job." That was 1998.

Synching in the Smokies

Shortly after settling into her position in the Great Smoky Mountains, Nichols heard about an amazing species of beetle that flashes in unison during its late spring-early summer mating ritual.

"The synchronous fireflies were well known by the local community at Elkmont when people still lived in the area," she said. "It was quite amazing to see the display for the first time with just a handful of other local people who knew about it."

Photinus carolinus prefers humid, dark, clean woods for its courtship ritual—and Great Smoky Mountains National Park, a temperate rainforest, is prime firefly real estate. As word of the flashing beetles

spread, people started flocking to Elkmont by the hundreds, parking their cars on the side of the road and tromping through the forest to find a perfect viewing spot.

"There were too many vehicles trying to come in and out of the relatively small area," Nichols recalled. "Cars would be parked in precarious places, headlights and flashlights were interrupting the flashing, and people were going off trail, endangering themselves and likely stepping on the female and larval fireflies."

To protect the lightning bugs and their habitat, in 2006 the park began shuttling people to the site, and later using a lottery system to manage this high-demand viewing opportunity. This change improved the visitor experience and minimized disturbance to the park's 19 different firefly species.

"The bioluminescent communication that occurs among fireflies is intricate and complex, and I find it amazing that so many species coexist in the nocturnal environment," Nichols said. "Every spring I look forward to seeing the first fireflies come out, which to me indicates that there is a healthy habitat for them to complete another year of their lifecycle."

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Citizen Times

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MOUNTAINS

SC officials report lowest number of new measles cases in over a month

Baker Maultsby

Spartanburg Herald-Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK – SOUTH CAROLINA

The South Carolina Department of Public Health (DPH) reported 13 new cases of measles in an update on Tuesday, Feb. 10.

The report brings the total number of cases to 933 since the outbreak centered in Spartanburg County began in October.

There are 235 people quarantined due to exposures to the virus.

Based on the newest infections, DPH has reported possible exposures at Libertas Academy and Inman Intermediate School.

Officials also said that among the new measles cases, a person in Lancaster County has become infected. They are continuing to investigate the source of the exposure.

DPH has been providing updates on measles data each Tuesday and Friday over the course of the outbreak. The latest report is the first since Jan. 2 that reports fewer than 20 cases.

Medical experts say the best protection against measles is the two-dose MMR vaccine.

With South Carolina's measles outbreak in the national spotlight, Dr. Mehmet Oz, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services administrator, recently urged Americans to become vaccinated against the virus.

To facilitate vaccinations, DPH will deploy a free mobile clinic to sites in Spartanburg County including:

- Friday, Feb. 13 — Zion Hill Baptist Church on Blackstock Road in Inman, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.
- Tuesday, March 3 — Grace Community Church on Magnolia Street in Spartanburg, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Trolls to leave Asheville soon

Will Hofmann

Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE - A group of fantastic trolls are soon leaving Western North Carolina.

Thomas Dambo's "Trolls: A Field Study" will depart the North Carolina Arboretum after Feb. 17, leaving visitors just a few days to find the 12 fantastic eco-friendly troll sculptures scattered across the tree museum's campus. The trolls are one of the most popular exhibits in the arboretum's 40-year history, with over 100,000 people visiting the arboretum by mid-January, according to Executive Director Drake Fowler. The arboretum has run at roughly 800% of its usual visitation since their installation in November.

Many of Dambo's trolls are built to reflect the artist's "recycle activism." Made out of reclaimed wood, the trolls — with names like Taks, Larke and Valle — are designed to reflect an element of humanity or an observation about modern life. With over 100 trolls installed across the world, they have become a global phenomenon that has attracted thousands of "troll hunters" to seek them out.

The Arboretum exhibit is made up of smaller "baby trolls," which only range between 7 to 9 feet tall. Dambo's biggest trolls are upwards of 36 feet in height. At a brisk but patient pace, a visitor could see all 12 trolls, which are set to leave the Arboretum after Feb. 17, in about an hour and a half.

Want to go?

"Trolls: A Field Study" will be at the North Carolina Arboretum through Feb. 17. Admission is included with the Arboretum's regular daytime parking fee of \$20.

Visitors will be able to obtain a "treasure map" to find the trolls, including their leader "Taks." A full map of Dambo's trolls across the nation is available at trollmap.com.

"Trolls: A Field Study" was produced by the traveling exhibition company Imagine in



A troll sculpture from the exhibit "Trolls: A Field Study" is displayed Jan. 5 at the North Carolina Arboretum. Created by Danish artist Thomas Dambo, the seven- to nine-foot-tall sculptures are made from reclaimed materials and will remain on view through Feb. 17. JOSH BELL / ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES

collaboration with Dambo, and is being presented by Explore Asheville, Buncombe County's Destination Management Organization. The exhibit made its world premiere on June 21 in the United Kingdom.

Will Hofmann is the Growth and Development Reporter for the Asheville Citizen Times, part of the USA Today Network. Got a tip? Email him at WHofmann@citizentimes.com or message will_hofmann.01 on Signal.

Smokies

Continued from Page 2A

Soon it became Nichols responsibility to synch up the famous lightshows with the humans who wanted to watch them. Now, beginning in early March each year, she tracks air and soil temperatures at Elkmont, then uses these data to calculate degree-day accumulation, which is basically a way to measure accumulated heat, and therefore growth. Firefly scientists Lynn Frierson Faust and Paul Weston first developed the degree-day formula in 2009, and Nichols has used it ever since to determine the timing of the synchronous firefly emergence and set viewing dates for the synchronous firefly show.

Over the years, peak viewing days have ranged from the third week of May to the third week of June. As with any natural event, it's difficult to predict precisely.

"I can help with the planning, but I know conditions can change quickly," she said.

"Nature is ultimately in charge."

The biodiversity of bugs

Lightning bugs are just one of many types of insects that fall under the park entomologist's purview. Nichols' favorites are the ones that remind her of that first sighting in a mountain stream years ago.

"Aquatic insects include the immature stages of mayflies, stoneflies, caddisflies, dragonflies, and many others," she said. "I have worked with aquatics for many years, and we have documented over 1,000 species in the Smokies. The adaptations and diversity in this group are amazing, and they can tell you so much about the environment they live in."

Nichols has been monitoring streams for the past 28 years as part of the Inventory and Monitoring program. The team collects aquatic insects from



Becky Nichols looks for aquatic insects around a cascade in the Smokies. PROVIDED BY BECKY NICHOLS

established sites within certain watersheds, sampling from the highest elevations all the way down to the lowest. The resulting data is then compared to data from previous years. This trend information can tell the scientists if there are problems within the watershed that might require further investigation.

When not working in streams, Nichols might be found identifying insects in the lab, checking on various pollinators, or preparing specimens for the park's natural history collection. She engages in public outreach by giving tours of the collection and leading hikes for community groups. In the winter, when field work is done, she analyzes data, writes reports, and

keeps up a robust correspondence with scientists and educators inside and outside the park.

One of her favorite parts of the job has been working with park partner Discover Life in America since its inception in 1998 on many aspects of the All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory—the endeavor to catalog all the park's species and their relationships to one another. She collaborates with DLIA to determine which taxonomic groups need attention, and the scientific nonprofit then recruits specialists to conduct fieldwork or process collected samples in the Smokies.

"I have always been interested in biodiversity," Nichols said, "so to be involved in a project like this has been a great experience. I've worked with taxonomists, ecologists, and various specialists over the years. I've learned a lot from them, and we've made great progress in better understanding the biodiversity of the Smokies."

Nichols loves sharing about her career path and has given many presentations to students and interns about entomology, natural history, and biodiversity. Often these young people, especially the women, are not aware of the types of job opportunities available to them. She likes to encourage them to pursue whatever interests them and to realize there are no boundaries.

"Women are now well-represented in many scientific fields, which wasn't always the case," she said. "When I was in graduate school there weren't many women studying entomology, and now about half of the graduate degrees are awarded to women. This isn't true in all scientific fields, however, and there is still work to be done to make these career paths more inclusive and equitable for all people."

Frances Figart is the creative services director for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a partner supporting Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services such as this column. Learn more at SmokiesLife.org and reach the author at frances@smokieslife.org.

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