

# The Show for April 4, 2026

## Groundwater ruling, Mormon wrestlers and more

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**MARK BRODIE:** Good morning, it's The Show on KJZZ 91.5. I'm Mark Brodie.

**LAUREN GILGER:** And I'm Lauren Gilger. Don Leo Jonathan was better known as the "Mormon Giant," a second-generation professional wrestler in the mid-20th century. And he was quite literally giant: he stood at 6 feet, 6 inches tall and weighed more than 300 pounds.

The "Mormon" part of his moniker he inherited from his father, a wrestler who went by Brother Jonathan and played off of Mormon stereotypes to get boos from the crowd.

**DAVID WALKER:** So he had an oversized Book of Mormon that he would hit you with. He started carrying around a 7-foot rattlesnake onto whose head he grafted a fake horn to make it look more menacing, and which he described as the snake from the Garden of Eden. He would bring women around and introduce them as among his wives.

**LAUREN GILGER:** That's David Walker, an associate professor of religious studies at the University of California Santa Barbara. He tells the whole story of the "Mormon Giant" and his father in a new live documentary that he'll be performing at ASU tonight.

And he told me the "Mormon Giant" was coming to fame as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was becoming more mainstream. And it all reveals a lot about how religion and entertainment influence and reflect each other. I spoke with Walker more about wrestling, religion, the "Mormon Giant," and Brother Jonathan.

**DAVID WALKER:** He would dress in the sort of the attire of a 19th-century Mormon missionary to play a sort of old-school Mormon missionary precisely again at this moment of the church's turn towards a respectability politics.

He was playing its shadow side, and he did so precisely to get the boos of the crowd. He would come in and he would say, you know, "Are there Mormon brethren among us? You know, fellows, I come to do the faith, honor and justice," and then he would proceed, you know, to do something bad. Oh, so he would just get, you know, booed vociferously and including by the Mormons in the audience who loved to sort of see this own part of their tradition that had been sort of swept under the rug represented in this particular way, either to sort of live vicariously through its continued representation or to just cheer when it just has its, you know, snot beat out of it.

**LAUREN GILGER:** So he played the villain in the wrestling scheme, which has always got a good villain, right? But it sounds like it was a little different when it came to his son, who became known as the "Mormon Giant." Like, he was a little, it sounds like, ambivalent about his moniker?

**DAVID WALKER:** Yeah, absolutely. So when Don Leo Jonathan—Don Leo Heaton was his birth name, but he took on his father's ring name, Brother Jonathan, to Don Leo Jonathan, and then started becoming known as the "Mormon Giant."

And he first sort of didn't know what to do with the moniker. It was a way of him sort of inheriting and being brought up into the sport by his dad, but he not only wanted to get away from his dad's legacy but also had a sort of ambivalent feel about being called endlessly the "Mormon Giant," too.

He sort of embraced that moniker, he learned how to roll with it, but he found two things: first, that he had an ambivalent relationship to the church, too, and he wanted to be known beyond that. But also, frankly, that the church itself in the 1950s and '60s context of its own cultural mainstreaming and indeed sort of international growth was known differently in different times and places.

And thus also the "Mormon Giant" moniker played differently in different times and places. Sometimes it would mark him as a heel, sometimes as a hero, sometimes it played sort of ambivalently or, you know, neutrally. And so I'm trying to tell also the history of the church itself by way of the way that that gimmick was both sort of thrust upon people but also the way that it either played or did not play in different times and places.

And thus again to sort of map these gimmicks alongside and as a way to understand the reception of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints itself in the 20th century.

**LAUREN GILGER:** That's fascinating. I want to back up for a minute, David, and talk about the way that you present this. Right? It's very innovative and sort of, I guess, genre-busting in terms of academia. You're calling it a "live documentary" and there's music involved, you're narrating the whole thing live, it's on a screen but you're in the room. How does this work?

**DAVID WALKER:** Yeah, so when I started this project, I started working on a documentary component. I worked on actually a number of different outputs: both a written component, a sort of lecture component, and then a documentary component.

Eventually, I sort of pushed pause on the documentary component and pulled a lot of those materials into this sort of live presentation. So what I do is I deliver what would otherwise be sort of the voiceover of a documentary along with these sort of clips that I've edited to that purpose that have their own soundtrack or their own audio as people themselves give their own histories of wrestling or the church itself or give a sort of theory of religion.

I interact with them, and then I have all of this sort of production live-soundtracked by a good friend and extraordinary musician named Tim Albro. So this is, I mean, it's a different mode of academic presentation. I wanted to keep it as an academic presentation and indeed sort of own my own status as an academic, as a professor of this material, but also play with genre and form a little bit in a way that I hope also gives us the opportunity to think more critically not only about the forms and the presentations and the performances of scholarship but also indeed the way that wrestling itself has its own presentational theories and cultural dynamics and think of a way of being able to sort of mimic as metaphor the one to the other in order to comment a little bit more on both.

**LAUREN GILGER:** What kind of reaction have you gotten? Like, I mean, you're doing this live documentary at universities, you know, it sounds like around the country. Are people excited about this, especially in academia, when it feels and looks a little different?

**DAVID WALKER:** Yeah, I mean, to use a wrestling term, it's been getting over pretty well. And it has been getting over differently in front of different audiences, too, and that's been really fun to track with.

So we'll riff a little bit differently if we're speaking at Brigham Young University than we will at a bookstore in Santa Barbara. I don't change the argument in front of any of these audiences, whether they be sort of institute groups from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints itself or, again, sort of different audiences in a bookstore in California.

But really, I find that the stories, they resonate. They resonate with different groups in different ways. Latter-day Saints themselves often sort of appreciate some of the stories about church leadership at a particular time, a particular transitional moment in the church itself called "correlation"—a movement during the 1950s and '60s led largely by the church president and prophet named David O. McKay to really sort of standardize the aesthetics of the church and really sort of push a certain respectability politics as well at that time.

Church audiences will learn, for instance, that David O. McKay was actually a closet wrestling fan—a huge wrestling fan. And he loved actually some of the work, the cultural work, that these, even these Mormon heels did because he understood what wrestling was all about. He understood that it was a "sport" in quotes that proceeds through portraying certain stereotypes and ideals that it simultaneously questions as such.

So even though these folks are playing like bad Mormon stereotypes, they're also doing so in a space that's specifically designed to invite questions about whether that stereotype is really real and thus whether things might be otherwise.

So he realized, not only in a sort of all-press-can-be-good-press kind of way, but also in a very like smart ritual theorist kind of way, that this could be a space to really sort of play out these ideas and get people talking.

**LAUREN GILGER:** That's fascinating. All right, we'll leave it there for now. David Walker, writer, narrator, executive producer of "The Mormon Giant: Wrestling with Religion in 20th Century America." He's also an associate professor of religious studies at the University of California Santa Barbara. David, thanks so much for coming on. This is fascinating stuff.

**DAVID WALKER:** My pleasure. Thank you.

**MARK BRODIE:** And that'll do it for this Thursday edition of The Show. Thanks as always for getting in the ring with us here to find out what's going on around the Valley and around the state. Thank you very much.

**LAUREN GILGER:** That was nice. You can always follow us on Instagram. We are @KJZZTheShow. If you'd like to subscribe to our weekly newsletter—it's a great read—you can sign up. It's called Radio Heads at [theshow.kjzz.org](http://theshow.kjzz.org).

**MARK BRODIE:** For Lauren Gilger, I'm Mark Brodie here in Phoenix. Have a terrific rest of your day. Hope to have you right back here tomorrow.

**LAUREN GILGER:** Thanks for listening to The Show's podcast. The Show is produced by Sativa Peterson, Nick Sanchez, Amber Victoria Singer, Athena Ankrah, and Ayana Hamilton. The Show was created by Jon Hoban, and our executive producer is Amy Silverman.