

STEVEN P. DINKIN A Path Forward

CENTER CELEBRATES LOCAL AND NATIONAL PEACEMAKERS

Our years are filled with special occasions to celebrate. But this year, the birthdays and bar mitzvahs, the weddings and anniversaries — well, they somehow feel even more special, now that we can gather in person.

Last night was one of my favorite celebrations: the Peacemaker Awards, hosted by the National Conflict Resolution Center. Since our first event in 1989, we have feted individuals and organizations that are waging peace in bold and innovative ways, here and across the country.

We continued the tradition yesterday, honoring a group of committed peacemakers.

One couple has dedicated their lives to serving others, drawing strength from personal challenges. Another honoree has brought hope and joy to people living on the streets of downtown San Diego, through song. And our national award winner — author of the bestselling book, “How Civil Wars Start (and How to Stop Them)” — has said that reclaiming our public discourse is the surest way to create a more hope-

ful future for our country.

Mary and Rolf Benirschke were recipients of the Philanthropy Award. If you are (or were) a Chargers fan, you know that Rolf was their All-Pro and Hall of Fame place kicker for 10 seasons. And you may also know that in his second season with the team, Rolf nearly lost his life to ulcerative colitis.

The pain of that experience — Rolf had multiple surgeries — inspired his next career, as a philanthropist. Rolf started a program called “Kicks for Critters,” making a donation to the San Diego Zoo every time he kicked a field goal. And he partnered with the San Diego Blood Bank to launch the annual Chargers Blood Drive, which has collected more than 140,000 units of blood since inception.

Rolf has also been a longtime supporter and advocate on behalf of the Crohn’s and Colitis Foundation. Along with raising public awareness about these difficult illnesses, Rolf regularly talks with patients, providing the inspiration and hope that can only come with

a shared experience. His Legacy Foundation has raised more than \$7.5 million for CCF and nonprofits in our community.

Mary Benirschke is a philanthropist in her own right. Her personal inspiration grew out of raising four children, three of whom have developmental disabilities. Later in his life, a son struggled with homelessness and addiction. Mary took to the streets of downtown San Diego, launching a program with the Rescue Mission that pairs an unsheltered person with a “neighbor” who can help them get their life together.

The recipient of our Local Peacemaker Award is also working with people experiencing homelessness, but in a very different way. Voices of Our City Choir uses music to change lives. Voices began as an idea in 2016, when co-founder Steph Johnson — a musician and jazz vocalist — saw the struggles of people living on the streets. Talking to them, she learned about their own musical talents.

It led to the founding of Voices

of Our City Choir. Today, Voices has grown to more than 225 members. It operates as a nonprofit, connecting members to resources and housing, with 86 placements so far. The choir rehearses weekly and performs at events all over Southern California, including a successful 2020 audition on “America’s Got Talent.”

Our National Peacemaker honoree was Barbara F. Walter, the Rohr Professor of International Affairs at the School of Global Policy & Strategy at UC San Diego. Walter is one of the world’s leading experts on civil wars, political violence and terrorism. Her meticulously researched book suggests that a second civil war could happen here.

I wrote about Walter’s work last month in a column about Guy Refitt, who threatened to shoot his kids if they revealed his involvement in the Jan. 6, 2021 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. Walter said the willingness to resort to violence (and even turn against your own children) is symptomatic of a new extremism in America that believes modern society is

irredeemable and its end must be hastened.

As terrifying as this sounds, Walter expressed optimism last night about the future of our democracy. She believes that our shared history and ideals can inspire and guide us, reviving our national pride. And she acknowledged that the work of organizations like the National Conflict Resolution Center is critical in combating the factionalism that’s at the root of our problems.

Our honorees — the Benirschkes, Voices of Our City Choir and Dr. Walter — have different approaches to peacemaking. They demonstrate that one needn’t be Nelson Mandela or Mother Teresa to make a difference in our society. There’s a path forward for each and every one of us. We should celebrate the journey.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based group working to create solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. To learn about NCRC’s programming, visit ncronline.com

SNAKES • Wrangler and his group captured and relocated 304 reptiles last year

FROM B1

dry, not slimy. Baby rattlesnakes are not more venomous than adult snakes. Snakes don’t chase people, they just rush to escape past humans when cornered. Snakes don’t jump, either.

“Snakes don’t have legs,” Ireland said. “They strike, but they don’t have any interest in biting humans. They save their venom for their prey.” In his 47 years of collecting and rescuing the scaly reptiles, Ireland said he’s never been bitten by a venomous snake, though he has been nipped many times by frightened nonvenomous snakes. “It’s a hazard of the job.”

On April 11, Ireland got a call from a family in the San Elijo Hills community of San Marcos, who found a harmless gopher snake trapped in some landscaping fabric behind their fence. The agitated snake bit Ireland several times as he was trying to free it, but once the snake was pulled to safety, it became friendly and curious. By the end of his visit to the home, Ireland said the family’s young daughter was holding and playing with the snake.

Last year, the Snake Wranglers captured and relocated 304 snakes in North County. This year’s snake season — which runs roughly from late March to Thanksgiving — is off to a banner start, so Ireland said he expects the 2022 tally to exceed last year’s total. The calls come in for snakes of all varieties, including nonvenomous gopher, garter, king, racer, rosy boa and rat snakes. The wranglers also get many calls for rattlesnakes, particularly the common Southern Pacific rattler and the rare red diamond variety.

At lunchtime on Thursday, Ireland hiked into the hills in an unincorporated part of the county carrying a black plastic bucket with the logo of a coiled snake on the side. He was taking two freshly captured Southern Pacific rattlesnakes to their new homes far away from people.

One by one he lifted the snakes out of the bucket



A Southern Pacific rattlesnake moves between the boots of snake wrangler Bruce Ireland this month. He had removed it from a San Marcos yard and released it in a rural North County area.



Bruce Ireland holds a captured rattlesnake before releasing it.

with long metal hooks and then walked them into brush areas far away from each other to give them each their own hunting grounds. As Ireland placed the first snake in the dirt, it slithered slowly back toward him and quietly nestled itself between his boots in the shade.



Bruce Ireland removes a bucket from his vehicle carrying two Southern Pacific rattlesnakes he recently removed from a residence.

The second snake was more eager to escape into the brush, but neither of the snakes was using their rattle or exhibiting any aggressive behavior.

“This is what people don’t realize about rattlesnakes,” he said. “They don’t want anything to do with

people. They just want to be left alone.”

The son of an oilman, Ireland grew up in England and Connecticut before settling with his family in a remote part of Texas at age 10. With no other kids to play with, he spent most of his free time hunting for “critters,” espe-

cially snakes, which he would capture with a forked stick, bring home in a pillowcase and keep in a large tank that his father set up in their home.

Thirty years ago, he got a job in sales in San Diego, where he has always enjoyed hiking and searching for

snakes. With his wife of 15 years, professional photographer Holly Cruikshank Ireland, and their two daughters, Addy and Brooke, Ireland has adopted four pet reptiles: a Florida king snake, an African ball python, a bearded dragon and a panther chameleon.

Ireland said he started capturing and relocating snakes on his own about four years ago when he saw neighbors posting on the Nextdoor app that they’d found a snake in their yard and called the fire department to remove it. Because fire officials don’t have the tools or time to relocate snakes, they usually are forced to kill them, even snakes that are nonvenomous.

To save these doomed creatures, Ireland began offering his free snake collection services on Nextdoor and quickly became overwhelmed by calls. In 2020, three other North County men who Ireland met on Nextdoor volunteered to help and the Snake Wranglers group (snake-wranglers.com) was born. Ireland’s daughters, Addy and Brooke, are also now training as apprentice wranglers.

The website offers tips on identifying snake breeds and details on when and how to call for relocation services. In snake-prone areas, Ireland recommends people put his name and number in their cellphone’s address book, (619) 204-5117, so they can keep an eye on the snake while they call. Ireland posts all calls on a wranglers text loop and whichever man is available closest to the caller will go out. The wranglers limit their pickups to the coastal North County area where they live.

There are numerous businesses in San Diego County that offer snake removal for a price. But in Poway, handyman Patrick “Trapper Pat” Brady offers free training on how to safely remove snakes, lizards, spiders and gophers. He can be reached by phone at (858) 449-7050.

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SMOLENS Voters could be confused by change

FROM B1

or fewer candidates, the primary election would be canceled for that race and an “instant runoff” would be held among the candidates in November.

A primary is held if there are six or more candidates. Voters would be asked to rank five candidates by preference (first choice, second choice, etc.). The candidate who receives the lowest number of first-choice votes would be eliminated and their supporters’ votes would go to second-choice candidates and so on until five candidates remain. They advance to November. (Under current city elections, the top two vote-getters advance to November.)

In the fall election, the process is repeated until one candidate receives a majority of votes and wins. If a candidate gets a majority in the first round, the election is over. In both the primary

and general election, voters don’t have to use all five rankings; they can still vote for only one candidate if they choose.

In theory, ranked choice voting is more likely to result in consensus candidates because of the incentives to appeal to a broader swath of the electorate rather than a dedicated core. Further, supporters say it discourages political attacks because those might hurt a candidate’s chance of being selected as a backup choice.

Some of the San Diego council members said they support the goals of ranked choice voting but doubt whether that’s the best method to achieve them.

Councilmember Raul Campillo went further, contending that more choice isn’t always a good thing.

“Psychological studies show that more choices doesn’t mean you have more choice,” he said at the Rules Committee meeting on Wednesday. “Oftentimes it means you just have more noise that makes making a decision far more difficult.”

The committee agreed the proposal deserves further study, but a majority of members said they don’t expect to support placing it on the ballot when it comes



San Diego officials are examining a proposal to change to ranked choice voting for some races.

back to the panel, according to Garrick.

Critics say ranked choice voting can be confusing to voters. Then again, any new system can be at the outset, but it seems people have gotten the hang of it elsewhere. Also, candidates can lose even though they received the greatest number of first-choice votes — the “true” votes, according to some skeptics. Yet in the current system, it’s not uncommon for a candidate to gain a plurality in the primary, but lose in the one-on-one general election. Finally, some opponents

say previous changes didn’t deliver what they were supposed to, so there’s no guarantee this one will.

Govs. Gavin Newsom and Jerry Brown both vetoed bills approved by the Legislature that would have allowed general law cities to decide whether to adopt ranked choice voting. Charter cities, like San Diego, don’t need state authority to do so.

“Ranked choice is an experiment that has been tried in several charter cities in California,” Newsom said in his 2019 veto message. “Where it has been imple-

mented, I am concerned that it has often led to voter confusion and that the promise that ranked-choice voting leads to greater democracy is not necessarily fulfilled.”

Advocates would like to see ranked choice enacted in statewide elections.

That would be far from the first big change in how the state conducts elections. Under Gov. Johnson in the early 1900s, California began electing U.S. senators by popular vote rather than by the state Legislature and established the initiative, referendum and recall elections.

Until 1996, California had a “closed” primary system that allowed only voters registered with a political party to vote in that party’s primary. In March of that year, voters approved Proposition 198 to switch to a “blanket” primary (often called an “open” primary) in which voters can vote for any candidate, regardless of political affiliation. The top vote-getter of each qualified party advanced to the general election.

The U.S. Supreme Court ultimately ruled that was an unconstitutional violation of a political party’s First Amendment right of association.

The Legislature modified that law, giving the parties the choice of whether to allow voters not affiliated with a political party (currently “No Party Preference”) to participate in a party’s primary election. Democrats accepted NPP voters, Republicans did not.

Then, in June 2010, voters approved Proposition 14, which created the current nonpartisan, top-two primary in which all candidates appear on the same ballot and the top two vote-getters — regardless of political affiliation — advance to the general election.

At some point, California voters may get to decide whether ranked choice is the next big thing to shake up elections.

Tweet of the Week

Goes to U-T alum Christopher Cadelago (@ccadelago) of Politico regarding Donald Trump’s walkout on Piers Morgan last week.

“Morgan added that Trump initially tried to end the interview by declaring ‘That’s it!’ but remained in his seat to discuss a recent hole-in-one he scored while playing golf.”

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