

STEVEN P. DINKIN A Path Forward

SWIMMERS FIND COMMUNITY AND CELEBRATE BEST DAY EVER

“It’s the first time we’ve seen each other in clothes.”

Lest you think I had a different sort of Thanksgiving, I heard this from someone who’s a member of the Del Mar Buoy Girls, a group of mostly women who share a love of the ocean, and swimming.

The Buoy Girls gathered at my home on a recent Sunday morning. My wife, Tara, a member, talks about the special bond the swimmers have formed, which goes beyond the water’s edge. I was eager to learn how the group started and why it’s endured — especially at a time of increasing disconnection in our society.

The Buoy Girls came to be in 2007 — the result of a happy accident. Founders Barbara and Janice literally bumped heads while swimming in the ocean near Del Mar. Barbara asked Janice, “Do you swim here often?”

It was the unofficial founding of a group that’s attracted dozens of swimmers over the years, ranging in age from 8 to 90 years old.

Members have just one rule: to circle the buoy when they reach it. The first buoy is one-quarter mile from shore; the second buoy is a half-mile away.

Ocean swimming is full of challenges: creatures (some friendly, like sea lions; some less friendly, like sharks), unpredictable weather, a strong undertow. For safety, the Buoy Girls swim in pairs, coaxing each other when the going gets tough. Maggie, Barbara’s daughter, is the de facto group leader and head cheerleader. Barbara provides encouragement from the shore. Their outings conclude with a head count and a “best day ever” declaration by Darcie, who’s swum with the group for more than 10 years.

Their affinity for the ocean aside, members agreed — to a person — that the group is about friendship first. And social interaction. For some, the swimming and camaraderie have filled a deep personal void, including the loss of a spouse. They faithfully gather, having seen the dark side

of life, to move and to laugh and to support each other.

There is also a shared accountability that comes with knowing that others are pulling for you. But for the Buoy Girls, that accountability is judgment free: Be it the weather or just feeling like you want to stay in bed (swimming begins at 7:30 a.m.), absences are always excused. No one is tracking who shows up and who doesn’t, nor how quickly a swim is completed. It’s not a competitive group.

The durability of the Buoy Girls speaks to the power of community: People with different backgrounds and perspectives who come together, believe in and motivate each other, and find collective strength to navigate challenging issues. To them, swimming is anything but a solitary sport.

I learned from Jerri-Ann, a longtime Buoy Girl, that their love of swimming had revealed other mutual interests, like cooking and gardening. During the pandemic, the Buoy Girls helped

local fishermen, distributing what couldn’t be used by restaurants. And they swam — finding refuge (and sanity) in the ocean, and vigor from their fellow swimmers.

Two hours into our conversation, there wasn’t a single mention of politics — and the midterm elections were just two days away. I couldn’t resist the temptation to ask the group if they ever “go there.”

Turns out they do. But Maggie said the conversations are respectful. Differing perspectives are welcome. “We listen, and we hear each other,” she said. When one of the members told the group she wouldn’t get a COVID vaccination, Maggie simply replied, “Please don’t hug my mother.”

In his seminal 2000 book, “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,” Robert Putnam wrote about the disintegration of our social structures at the end of the 20th century. As a country, we had become less involved and engaged — bowling alone, when

we once bowled in leagues — straining the social capital needed for a happy, healthy and safe society.

Social capital is built on trust. It enables us to more easily resolve our collective problems, because we understand that our fates are linked. As Putnam said, “People who have active and trusting connections to others — whether family members, friends or fellow bowlers — develop or maintain character traits that are good for the rest of society. Joiners become more tolerant, less cynical, and more empathetic to the misfortunes of others.”

Healthy democracies depend upon social connectedness. And so does our personal well-being. With every swim and buoy turn, the Del Mar Buoy Girls live this truth.

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 ncrconline.com

SCENE

San Ysidro Health’s Founding Mother

Carmen Martinez is recognized during benefit golf tournament

BY U-T STAFF

Carmen Martinez, San Ysidro Health’s last living Founding Mother, celebrated her 99th birthday and a legacy of activism at the annual Clasico de Golf Tournament on Sept. 26 at the San Diego Country Club.

Seeking medical services for their children, Martinez and six other mothers came together in 1969 to establish the first clinic with four

volunteer physicians in a little white casita. Today, San Ysidro Health has more than 50 program sites and continues the goal of its Founding Mothers to improve the health and well-being of the community with access for all.

Coinciding with Martinez’s birthday celebration, was the annual Clasico de Golf Tournament. It hosted 144 golfers and raised \$233,000 in support of senior health services.

If your organization has held a philanthropic event, you’re welcome to email a high-resolution photo along with information on the event to society@suniontribune.com. Please clearly identify those in the photo, make them aware their image might appear in print and online, include the photographer’s name for credit and be sure to include the who, what, where, when and why information on the event.



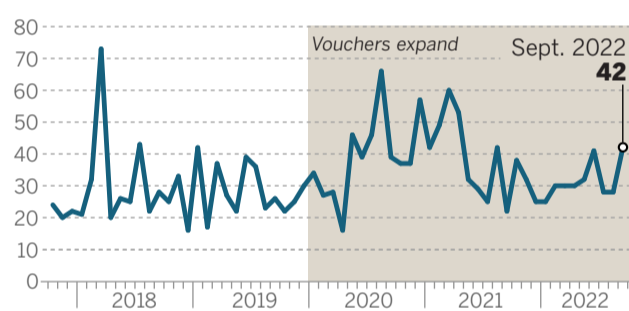
From left: Terry Whitaker, SYHealth senior VP of Facility Dev.; Yolanda Santana, board trustee; Reynaldo Perez, trustee; Carmen Martinez; Gloria Ramirez, trustee; Mercedes Bernal, trustee; Veronica Dela Rosa, exec. VP; Ana Melgoza, VP, External Affairs; Brian Wallace, VP, CFO.

EL CAJON

FROM B1 rests at or within 500 feet of the hotels for the past five years, allowing for a comparison between periods when there were few vouchers and years when there were many.

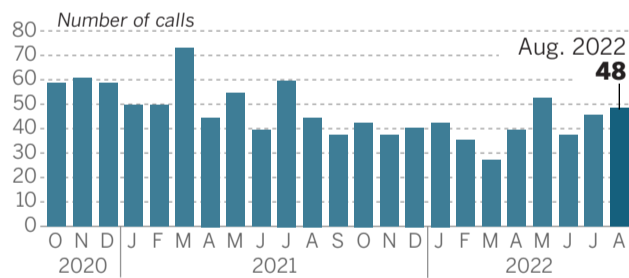
Arrests near El Cajon hotels accepting high numbers of homeless vouchers

While arrests within 500 feet of seven El Cajon hotels did increase when more homeless people began renting rooms in 2020, the numbers did not continue to climb even as more vouchers were issued.



Calls for service at El Cajon hotels accepting high numbers of vouchers

Even as more homeless people used vouchers to rent rooms at seven hotels, the number of times police were called to each has somewhat declined in the past two years.



Data on arrests as of Sept. 28, 2022. Source: El Cajon Police Department

BLAKE NELSON & KARTHIKA NAMBOOTHIRI U-T

months with periods when vouchers were not widespread. But calls have somewhat dropped even as voucher use rose.

Crime has also increased regionwide, including in cities not accepting vouchers, according to an April report from the San Diego Association of Governments. Throughout El Cajon, major crimes rose 1 percent overall from 2020 to 2021, the most

recent year available, records show. City officials have run separate analyses using similar data. Spokesman David Richards confirmed their review showed the largest crime surges at the hotels occurred in late 2020 and the first half of 2021. Averaging out recent years shows “steady crime at these motels,” he wrote in an email.

The city also looked at two hotels not participating in the voucher program. While crime also rose at those places, it didn’t rise as fast as at locations accepting vouchers, Richards said.

In an interview earlier this year, El Cajon Police Chief Mike Moulton said officers had noticed “drug activity” around some hotels in early September. Several people using vouchers were found to have felony warrants, including one person arrested Nov. 12, according to police.

Officials have also objected to people staying in local hotels who are not from El Cajon.

While numbers can change day to day, county data offers one recent snapshot.

There were at least 98 people using vouchers on Oct. 10, according to County Supervisor Joel Anderson’s office. Thirty-five said their last permanent housing was in El Cajon, while some reported places around East County, including Santee, data show.

Ten were from San Diego, and one was from Texas.

However, many had more recently been staying elsewhere. Nearly half said they’d spent the previous night in unincorporated parts of El Cajon, meaning places that fall under the county’s jurisdiction. About a quarter came directly from Spring Valley and 16 had been in Lakeside. Only one person said they’d spent the previous night in the city.

The seven hotels are The Travelodge, Relax Inn & Suites, Rancho San Diego Inn, America’s Best Value Inn, The Quality Inn & Suites, Clarion Pointe and El Cajon Inn & Suites.

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PILLS

FROM B1 report is disturbing because we have been tracking this problem,” said Dr. Roneet Lev, an emergency and addiction physician at Scripps Mercy Hospital who sits on the county’s prescription drug abuse task force.

“The bottom line is there is no safe illicit drug supply,” she said. “Unless you are getting pills from the pharmacy with your name on it, you cannot trust the pills.”

With illegal fentanyl flooding the illicit drug market, teens and adults need to be told that any drug experimentation is dangerous. Lev said anyone who is around friends or family members experimenting with drugs should be sure to have naloxone on hand. The medication can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose if administered promptly.

“Years ago kids would make a mistake, would experiment and would be forgiven,” Lev said. “Nowadays it can be a death sentence, and that is very scary.”

According to the task force’s annual report, there was a 44 percent decrease in the annual number of dispensed prescription opioid pills per resident in San Diego County over the past seven years — from 36.5 pills dispensed in 2014 to 20.6 in 2021.

But the firehose supply of illicit fentanyl flowing in the region remains a problem.

Earlier this year, officials dubbed San Diego County a “national epicenter” for fentanyl trafficking, reporting that more than 5,000 pounds of the drug had been seized in San Diego and Imperial counties by U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents in the first nine months of 2022. While drug trafficking organizations ini-

tially were adding small amounts of fentanyl to drugs like methamphetamine, they now are moving significantly larger quantities of fentanyl pills and powder across the border, authorities said.

“A decade ago, we didn’t even know about fentanyl, and now it’s a national crisis,” U.S. Attorney Randy Grossman said in statement released in August. “The amount of fentanyl we are seizing at the border is staggering. The number of fentanyl seizures and fentanyl-related deaths in our district are unprecedented.”

As work continues to address the fentanyl and methamphetamine problem, more needs to be done removing the stigma associated with addiction so people will feel more open to seeking treatment, said Dr. Joe Sepulveda, medical director for substance use disorder services at Family Health Centers of San Diego, who sits on the Prescription Drug Abuse Task Force.

It is a chronic medical condition like diabetes, Sepulveda said, but too many still continue to treat it as a moral failing.

He said he’d like to see fentanyl test kits readily available for those who use drugs, and more effort to meet users “where they’re at” with things like street health clinics and programs that allow drug users to exchange used needles for new ones. Despite the rising number of deaths — and the fact that 2022 fentanyl deaths clearly will exceed the 2021 total — Sepulveda sees reasons for optimism, noting that the county expects to receive \$100 million from an opioid court settlement that can be spent to expand services.

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CHRISTMAS

FROM B1 Japan, South Korea, Australia and throughout the United States. The only year he went dark was the first winter of the COVID pandemic in 2020.

Christmas lights hold special meaning for Gilfillen, whose Grove City, Ohio, family was so poor in the early 1940s that he and his siblings spent several years in a church-run orphanage because their mother couldn’t afford to care for them. Walking through the snow to admire the holiday décor was the one present the Gilfillen siblings could give themselves.

After the Gilfillens moved with their four children from Chula Vista to San Marcos in 1986, he bought several strings of lights and other items to

decorate their front yard. But his then-10-year-old daughter Jennifer was so disappointed by the display that her parents vowed to wow her — and their neighbors — in the years to come. Gilfillen’s holiday display planning became his year-round hobby and today, he has three storage lockers and a backyard shed filled with holiday decorations and lights.

After taking down his decorations each January and taking a few weeks’ rest, Gilfillen starts shopping for new decorations and plotting out how he will change the layout of the next holiday display. Around June he starts unpacking and separating the decorations by theme. During the summer months, he tests and fixes lights and replaces worn-out decorations with new items. And by September the work begins on assembly. During



Bill Gilfillen decorates his San Marcos yard yearly for Christmas. Here he is among last year’s display.

the fall months, Gilfillen said he spends seven to 10 hours each day working outside on the project.

This year, he’s dedicating his display to his longtime friend and former employer Richard “Dick” Templin of Encinitas, who passed away

Oct. 26.

While San Diego has dozens of elaborate holiday light displays featuring digital LED lights and projections synced to holiday music, Christmas on Knob Hill is a more traditional, old-school display. Santa’s sleigh, com-

plete with two new reindeer, sits on the Gilfillens’ roof and the front yard is chockablock with illuminated and animated sculptures that include dogs, a koi pond, a moving merry-go-round, motorized Santas, Cinderella’s pumpkin carriage, a flying pig with flapping wings, a four-foot Statue of Liberty, an Iditarod-style sled team on the roof, a purple peacock, elves, Star Wars characters, a pirate ship, a nutcracker and an icicle tree. Other new items this year are some oversized candy canes, a new mouse and a new dog that looks like Chief, the Gilfillen family’s old Australian shepherd.

Gilfillen’s longtime favorite yard decorations are a pair of Santa Claus sculptures. One is a lifelike Santa seated under the tree in the front yard. The other is a 5-foot-tall Santa near the mailbox that was part of his

first yard display at the San Marcos house in 1986.

For most of the past 34 years, Gilfillen has dressed up like St. Nick to take Christmas wishes and hand out up to 2,000 candy canes for children from 6:30-7:30 p.m. Dec. 13 to 23. But this year he may take a raincheck on the Santa tradition, due to the possibility of a spike of respiratory virus, flu and COVID cases.

Gilfillen said he’ll be listening for Dr. Anthony Fauci’s public health advice on social gatherings before he decides to pull out his Santa suit. But he said he hates letting people down.

“This year especially I’ve had more people driving by stop and tell me how much they appreciate us doing this after the pandemic,” Gilfillen said. “They’ve been really kind about that.”

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