

STEVEN P. DINKIN A Path Forward

HOLIDAY SEASON HEIGHTENS OUR BASIC NEED TO BELONG

When you think about it, this most wonderful time of the year is all about connection: to family and friends, to beloved traditions, to fond memories — old and new.

It's also the time of year when people can feel most alone.

Last year, I wrote about the loneliness epidemic affecting people of all ages in our country, made worse by the pandemic. Mental health professionals define loneliness as a gap between the level of connectedness that a person wants and what they have.

Our brain considers social interaction to be a basic need — just as our bodies need food to survive, according to Julianne Holt-Lunstad, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Brigham Young University. She was commenting on a study, published in *Nature Neuroscience*, that found similarities in brain scans between participants who had been socially isolated or deprived of food for 10 hours.

Their brains “lit up” in a similar manner — for the isolated person, when shown a picture of people laughing together; for the hungry

person, when shown a big plate of pasta.

Holt-Lunstad is often cited for describing the risk effects of loneliness and isolation as the equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

I've started thinking about loneliness from a different perspective. Each of us has a fundamental need to belong. The psychologist Abraham Maslow, who defined a five-tier hierarchy of human needs, placed “love and belonging” right in the middle. Physiological (survival-related) needs are at the base of the hierarchy.

Belonging is more than just our emotional need for interpersonal relationships. It also refers to our need to be part of a group. That type of connection has many benefits: It gives us a strong sense of identity and self-worth, and drives us to seek out stable, long-lasting relationships with other people.

When the need to belong is unfulfilled, there can be societal implications. In our work at the National Conflict Resolution

Center, we find that youth who become entangled with the criminal justice system most commonly share one trait: a sense of social isolation.

James Densley and Jillian Peterson have written extensively about the perpetrators of mass public shootings. In their book, “The Violence Project: How to Stop a Mass Shooting Epidemic,” they point out that being angry, hurt, isolated or resentful makes people vulnerable to radicalization and extremism — often a precursor to acts of violence. The authors also recommend preventive measures: the first is building relationships.

And so, NCRC is working with students in school districts across San Diego County to forge connection and a deeper sense of belonging. The work is being funded, in part, by a grant from the California Department of Social Services through its “Stop the Hate” initiative. Catalyst of San Diego and Imperial Counties leads the effort in our region.

Our work in the schools has a dual focus — preventing incidents

of hate and intervening if they occur. Of course, belonging isn't something you can teach; it's a feeling that takes time and trust to develop. We are equipping students with communication skills that enable deep conversations, to build understanding and empathy. The school culture changes as a result: Everyone feels valued and welcome for who they are and what they can contribute, despite differences.

NCRC is also addressing the other side of the belonging coin, known as “othering” — when we look at someone and decide, “they are not like me” or “they are not one of us.” When we “other” a person, we attribute negative characteristics to them and create an aura that they are less worthy of our respect.

It's misbehavior that's not unique to students. We other people when we gossip about them or make unkind remarks on social media. When we do, it can cause them to feel devalued, disrespected or even angry.

Like schools, workplaces have begun to recognize the impor-

ance of creating a sense of belonging among their employees. Extensive research by Coqual, a think tank in the diversity, equity and inclusion space, found that a focus on one identity group (such as Black employees) can feel exclusionary to others — as though it comes at the cost of their own career interests and workplace well-being.

Instead, Coqual concluded, companies are better served by creating a culture where every employee feels that they belong. According to their definition, we belong at work when we are “seen for our unique contributions, connected to our coworkers, supported in our daily work and career development, and proud of our organization's values and purpose.”

For most workers, that sounds like a holiday wish come true.

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.

CHRISTMAS TREE BY THE SEA



MEG MCLAUGHLIN U-T
Micaela Maldonado, of San Diego, and Miles Delis, of Encinitas, embrace this month near the Christmas tree at Cardiff State Beach in Encinitas.

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VOLCAN MOUNTAIN FOUNDATION RECEIVES 684-ACRE SANCTUARY

Gift comes from estate of Ann Peckham Keenan

BY LINDA MCINTOSH

JULIAN

The Julian-based Volcan Mountain Foundation has received a gift of a 684-acre wildlife sanctuary near Volcan Mountain from the estate of Ann Peckham Keenan.

Keenan, who died in May, had lived in La Mesa and Borrego Springs. She wanted the land she loved to be a sanctuary for animals and plants.

She bought the land with her late husband, Tom Keenan, in the 1990s. It is a refuge for mountain lions, bobcats, coyotes, southern mule deer and gray foxes along with badgers, striped skunks, granite spiny lizards and Pacific tree frogs. More than 100 bird species have been spotted on the property, including the federally endangered least Bell's vireo and Southwestern willow flycatcher.

To ensure the land re-

mained as a haven for animals, Keenan, who was an avid volunteer at the Anza-Borrego Desert State Park Visitor Center, established a permanent conservation easement in 2018 to prohibit hunting and trapping on the property. The land includes mountainous terrain and rolling hills, grasslands, chaparral, oak and conifer forests along with creeks, springs and ponds.

The conservation easement is owned by the Humane Society Wildlife Land Trust, which protects wildlife by “permanently preserving habitat and providing humane stewardship.”

Conservation easements are legal structures willingly added to property deeds by property owners. They give up certain property rights that are described in a contract with the easement holder, which in this case is the Humane Society of the United States. The idea is to restrict future uses, such as building roads and houses, and in Peckham Keenan's case, hunting.

The underlying property is still held in title by the

owner while living, and can be sold or given as a gift. The conservation easement passes with the title to all subsequent owners in perpetuity.

The Volcan Mountain Foundation protects more than 53,000 acres around Volcan Mountain.

The Wildlife Land Trust is under the umbrella of the Washington, D.C.-based Humane Society of the United States, which oversees more than 165 land trusts nationwide, where wild animals can live in their natural habitats.

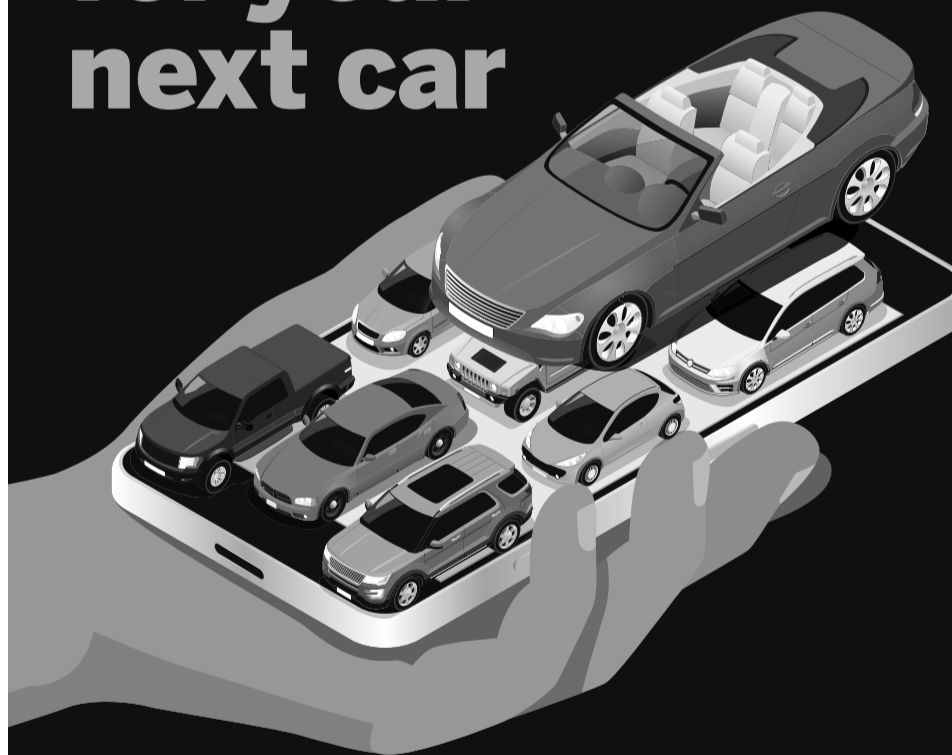
No public trails are on the land. To prevent poaching, the exact location of the land is not made public.

The sanctuary is part of a network of connected open space and wildlife corridors around Volcan Mountain, which are publicly protected lands, including the San Felipe Valley Wildlife Area and neighboring Anza-Borrego Desert State Park.

The gift was finalized in November and includes funding to manage the wildlife sanctuary.

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SMOLENS

FROM B1
quarter-century, according a new study

The three main federal programs for the neediest renters — public housing, Section 8, and Housing Choice Vouchers — serve 287,000 fewer households than they did at their peak in 2004, according to the analysis by the Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies that was requested by The New York Times.

“That was an eye-opener, even for me,” Chris Herbert, managing director of the center, told the Times.

This happened over decades when other safety net programs such as food stamps and Medicaid grew dramatically.

The notion that money can help people who are struggling isn't exactly revolutionary. Research by a San Francisco-based nonprofit and the USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work suggests direct payments with no strings attached can achieve positive results.

Under their study, 100 homeless people are to receive \$750 a month for a year. The results were so promising that the researchers decided to publish results after only six months, according to the Los Angeles Times.

Recipients spent 36.6 percent on food, 19.5 percent on housing, 12.7 percent on transportation, 11.5 percent on clothing and 6.2 percent on health care. That left 13.5 percent unclassified.

Those who got the stipend were less likely to be unsheltered after six

months and were able to meet more of their basic needs than a control group that got no money, and half as likely as the control group to have an episode of being unsheltered, the Times wrote.

At least one of the researchers said the study dispels the myth that people will use the money largely for “illicit purposes.”

The city of San Diego on Wednesday touted using a portion of a \$2.45 million grant from the state to clear out homeless encampments near the downtown U.S. Post Office and the old central library.

The city issued a lengthy news release that featured before-and-after photos of once-cluttered and then-cleared sidewalks, along with comments from Mayor Todd Gloria and Gov. Gavin Newsom.

The urban core has been a priority target for moving people out of encampments for months. The downtown homeless population hit a two-year low in November, according to data from the Downtown San Diego Partnership.

The organization counted 1,712 homeless people in the city's urban core, just over half the number there six months ago.

It's not clear where these people went, but Blake Nelson of The San Diego Union-Tribune reported that nonprofit groups noted an increase in homeless people seeking help or shelter.

Meanwhile, in November the number of people falling into homelessness was more than the number moving into housing for the 20th month in a row, according to

the Regional Task Force on Homelessness.

The state and cities across California have been cracking down on unauthorized homeless camps. The city of San Diego approved a public camping ban in June. But rulings by the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, which has jurisdiction over the western United States, generally prohibits enforcement of such bans unless there's adequate shelter space available.

On a parallel track with their crackdowns, San Diego and other cities have sought to expand shelters and other housing.

That 9th Circuit standard is being challenged at the Supreme Court, which could take up an appeal by Grants Pass, Ore., over a lower court ruling against its anti-camping ordinance.

A high court decision in favor of Grants Pass would give governments a freer hand in getting rid of encampments. More money likely would be directed toward that cause.

Still, officials almost certainly would pledge to keep providing more shelter space, not just for the sake of homeless residents but society at large.

But there no longer would be the legal hammer requiring them to do so.

What they said

Max Rexroad (@MattRexroad), California political consultant on X (formerly Twitter).

“Prediction: Trump will be on the ballot in all 50 states.”

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NELVIN C. CEPEDA U-T FILE
San Diego Mayor Todd Gloria and other city leaders unveiled the city's new Safe Sleeping site for homeless people at a parking lot in Balboa Park in October.