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JCPenney, a flagship occupant since Pleasanton's Stoneridge Mall opened in 1980, plans to cease operations Feb. 22. (Photo — Leah Silveira)

JCPenney's Stoneridge Location To Close Doors in Late February

Loss of Anchor Tenant Further Clouds Future of Once-Thriving Mall

By David Jen

PLEASANTON — The JCPenney department store has announced plans to close its Stoneridge Shopping Center location, marking another loss leading to the transformation of the once-thriving retail center. The store's doors are scheduled to close to the public on Feb. 22.

"Regretfully, we are unable to continue our current lease terms for this store location and have been unable to find another suitable location in the market," a JCPenney spokesperson told The Independent. "We are grateful to our dedicated associates and the loyal customers who have

shopped at our Pleasanton, California location through the years, and we hope to continue serving them throughout our nearly 650 stores nationwide and at JCPenney.com."

Like other department-store giants, the JCPenney brand rose to prominence during the mid-20th century when the construction of freeways enabled sprawling suburban shopping malls and their associated streams of shoppers.

Pleasanton's Stoneridge Mall opened in 1980 with JCPenney, Macy's and Emporium-Capwell as anchor stores, adding Nordstrom in 1990 and then Sears in 1996.

But changing consumer habits,

such as those favoring the wider selection and ease of online shopping, began to drag on traditional retail businesses in the 21st century.

Sears closed its Stoneridge location in 2018, and in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic dealt a shock to the industry's already struggling sales. The mall's Nordstrom store never emerged from its pandemic closure, and JCPenney filed for bankruptcy in May of that year. Several months later, mall operator Simon Property Group and real-estate company Brookfield Property Partners acquired JCPenney, allowing it to avoid liquidation.

JCPenney's second-quarter

(See JCPENNEY, page 5)

Planning Commission Offers Support For Hidden Canyon Housing Project

Proposed Development West of Pleasanton Will Require Some Improvements

By David Jen

PLEASANTON — Plans from Ponderosa Homes III, Inc. to develop a hilly area west of the city drew some support from the planning commission last week during a feedback session of the project's draft environmental impact report. The city released the report for public review on Nov. 21.

Known as the Hidden Canyon Residences and Preserve, the project proposes to build 28 detached single-family homes on about 24 acres in Devany Canyon, off Dublin Canyon Road and across from the existing Canyon Meadows neighborhood.

The only "significant unavoidable" impact identified by the environmental report was the amount of new traffic the project would cause, which will exceed the city's threshold of 15% below the average number of vehicle-miles traveled in Alameda County, according to the report's analysis.

"You can imagine that the people that might live here, because they're a little farther out from the center of town, will be driving for most of their daily needs so generate more than the average number of daily trips compared to other parts of Pleasanton," Director of Community Development Ellen Clark said.

Current area residents raised concerns about the traffic the new homes would add to a road already stressed by overflow traffic from Interstate 580.

"Dublin Canyon Road, I call '580 Annex' because we have traffic during commute time constantly," said Canyon Meadows resident Sarah Jane Hollister. "You have to hold your breath leaving our complex."

The project has proposed traffic improvements along Dublin Canyon, such as a new traffic signal at Canyon Meadows Drive and road widening for better visibility of bicyclists and pedestrians.

"From what I can tell, the im-

(See HOUSING, page 6)



Sophia Han, founder of Han House in Livermore, shows off her chocolate-chip, candy-cane cookies. (Photo — Kacelyn Clavo)

Local Bakers Offer Christmas Cookie Secrets

Ingredients, Special Shapes and Timing Among Keys for Delivering Holiday Treats

By Jessica Zimmer

LIVERMORE — The best Christmas cookies start with what everyone loves around Christmastime: peppermint, hot cocoa, gingerbread and chocolate. Special shapes, such as Santa hats, can't hurt. Neither can gift boxes ready to go.

Tri-Valley customers are fond of soft-baked, dense cookies, as evidenced by the repeat orders from Butter & Batter and Han House, both in Livermore.

"My tip if you're buying Christmas cookies is to order as early as

Mediation Brings LVJUSD, Teachers to Tentative Agreement

Union Ratification, Board Approval Are Next Steps

By Vivien Wenneker

LIVERMORE — Contentious contract negotiations between the Livermore Valley Joint Unified School District (LVJUSD) and the Livermore Education Association (LEA) apparently reached a resolution Dec. 12 when the sides agreed to a tentative agreement after more than 14 hours of mediation.

The deal, which outlines terms for LEA salaries and benefits over the next two years, includes a 4% salary increase for the 2025-2026 school year, as well as a \$1,600 increase toward health

and welfare benefits. Additionally, for the 2026-2027 school year, there will be a 2% salary raise and the increase toward health and welfare benefits will rise to \$3,000.

LEA had requested a 4.75% salary increase and an additional \$3,500 district contribution to health benefits. Over time, the pay increase will be more than what the teachers had requested, but the district's contribution to health-care costs will be less than the teachers' request.

The union's request was based on a comparison of compensation agreements that LEA made with

(See AGREEMENT, page 9)



Teachers and staff who work at Dublin Elementary, as well as other schools in the Dublin Unified School District, face uncertainty as the district and the teachers' union have reached an impasse in contract negotiations. (Photo — Leah Silveira)

DUSD Reaches Impasse as Budget Deficits Deepen

State-Sponsored Mediation Set for Early January

By Sanestina Hunter

DUBLIN — The Dublin Unified School District (DUSD) and the Dublin Teachers Association (DTA) have reached an impasse after months of contract negotiations, prompting mediation through the California Public Employment Relations Board (PERB) scheduled for Tuesday, Jan. 6.

PERB is an independent state agency under California's Labor and Workforce Development Agency that oversees labor relations between public employers and their employees. As part of the impasse process, PERB assigns a mediator to help both sides communicate and explore possible resolutions.

DUSD Superintendent Chris Funk said the primary areas of disagreement center on salary and health benefits.

"The district is facing a potential \$8.4 million deficit, which requires

us to make reductions in our expenses," Funk said in a statement to The Independent, responding to claims by the teachers' union that the district is withholding funds from employee compensation.

According to the district's 2025-26 First Interim Report, published Dec. 9, the general fund — including both restricted and unrestricted funds — shows deficit spending of \$9.2 million, up from \$6 million when the budget was first adopted.

Within that total, the unrestricted portion of the deficit increased from \$1.3 million to \$6.3 million.

Funk said the \$8.4 million projection is based on the low end of potential cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) increases for the 2026-27 school year, which county officials currently estimate will range from 1.27% to 2.53%. Until the final COLA is set by the state, the district said it is planning conservatively using the lower estimate.

(See DUSD, page 6)

(See HOUSING, page 6)

(See COOKIE, page 7)

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Tri-Valley customers are fond of soft-baked, dense cookies, as evidenced by the repeat orders from Butter & Batter and Han House, both in Livermore.

"My tip if you're buying Christmas cookies is to order as early as

possible. That's especially true for customized cookies," said Lisa Corti, owner of Butter & Batter.

Corti's holiday cookies include sugar cookies in Christmas shapes topped with royal icing, and "scoop" or drop cookies in a variety of flavors. This year's offerings are candy cane, with crushed peppermint candy and white chocolate chips; hot cocoa, with chocolate chunks and marshmallows; sugar cookies with sprinkles; sugared ginger cookies; and vanilla cardamom. Corti also sells gift boxes of baked scoop cookies and boxes of "blank" sugar

cookies with royal icing and sprinkles to decorate.

"My favorite tip for making sugar cookies from scratch, if you're worried about the dough spreading, is to reassess your recipe," Corti said. "Omit all leavening agents, like baking soda, so you can get the right shape."

Corti learned to bake from her maternal grandmother, Sophie Nenick. After years of baking holiday cookies for her family, she took a local class in sugar-cookie decoration. Later, she started her own business. Sophia Han, founder of Han

(See COOKIE, page 7)

PET OF THE WEEK



KATIA

Dashing through the house, Katia's on her way, following her humans close, purring all the day — soft paws patrolling rooms, keeping spirits bright. Oh, what fun it is to curl in a cozy lap tonight. Jingle bells, jingle bells, Katia loves to dwell in a peaceful, one-pet home where everything is swell. Bring this merry, sweet friend home and let your holidays ring bright. Adopt Katia today. Call Valley Humane at (925) 426-8656 or email info@valleyhumane.org to get started with the adoption process. (Photo courtesy of Valley Humane)

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Vandals Cut Down Trees at Dublin High After Tree Lighting

By Sanestina Hunter

DUBLIN — Vandals cut down eight trees on the Dublin High School campus in the early morning hours of Dec. 11, after the school had held its fifth annual Tree Lighting ceremony the night before, according to school and police officials.

Two suspects entered the campus between 12:15 a.m. and 1:15 a.m. through

an unsecured south-side gate and used an electric chainsaw and other tools to cut down multiple trees, police said.

Surveillance video shows the suspects leaving the campus and heading east on Brighton Drive toward Amador Valley Boulevard, Dublin Police Services Capt. Miguel Campos told The Independent.

School officials discovered the damage Thursday

morning and notified the community.

"It is difficult to fully express the level of dismay we feel," Dublin Principal Maureen Byrne wrote in a message to students, parents, staff and others. "We are shocked, saddened and deeply frustrated."

"These trees were part of our campus environment, planted and cared for to create a welcoming, vibrant place for our students to

learn and grow. To see them destroyed so deliberately has been heartbreaking. We are struggling to understand why anyone would do something like this. The incident has left many of us questioning the motivation behind such destructive behavior."

While the vandalism did not disrupt classes or school activities, district officials said the damage has taken an emotional toll on the campus community.

"Students and staff spend a significant portion of their week on campus, and trees and other green spaces are vital to the campus's well-being," said Chip Dehnert, Dublin Unified School District director of communications. "They provide natural gathering places, improve air quality, reduce heat and model environmental stewardship."

"When these spaces are taken away through acts of vandalism, the loss is deeply felt. It leaves the campus less welcoming, disrupts emotional well-being, erases shared landmarks and memories, and sends a painful message that places meant to nurture and inspire are not being respected."

Dehnert said the district appreciates early community efforts to support both a reward and the replacement of the damaged trees, but it is too early to provide specifics on next steps.

Police are actively investigating the incident and working several leads,

Campos said.

Anyone with information about the incident or home surveillance video from the area is asked to contact Dublin Police Services at 925-833-6670. Tips

can also be submitted anonymously through WeTip at 844-714-1490. A \$100 reward is being offered for information leading to the identification of those responsible.



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Hate Graffiti Found at Amador Valley High School

By Sanestina Hunter

PLEASANTON — Amador Valley High School staff reported three instances of hate-motivated graffiti in campus restrooms between late October and early December, district officials said.

The incidents occurred Oct. 30 and Oct. 31 in boys' restroom stalls and again Dec. 2 in a girls' restroom. In each case, school officials immediately closed the affected restrooms, removed the graffiti and reopened the facilities after they were cleaned and restored for safe use.

Amador Valley High School Principal Malcolm Norrington notified families following each incident and outlined the school's response.

During the two October incidents, staff found extensive vandalism in two separate stalls of a boys' restroom on consecutive days. The graffiti included a racial epithet, hate symbols and other hate-motivated statements, Norrington said.

"This conduct is antithetical to our values and does not reflect the Amador Valley community," Norrington said. "I apologize to anyone who was affected by such hate-motivated behavior. We

regret the harm this causes and extend our support to anyone impacted."

A third incident occurred Dec. 2 at approximately 11:15 a.m., when staff discovered additional hate-motivated graffiti in a girls' restroom in the J building. The graffiti included a swastika,

Norrington said students who engage in hate-motivated behavior will be held accountable but also need guidance, education and support to repair harm and learn from their actions.

All three incidents remain under investigation. Norrington said school officials

"As with all matters involving potential student discipline, the district cannot share information about possible suspects, disciplinary actions, whether the incidents are related or whether any students have been identified," Frey said.

District officials said repeated hate-motivated incidents can cause trauma and negatively affect student and staff well-being. Counseling and administrative support have been made available following each incident for anyone needing assistance.

In response, the district has implemented several preventative measures aimed at reducing future vandalism and improving campus safety.

Restrooms are now supervised on a rotating schedule approximately every 15 minutes, with staff checking for graffiti. The school will also pilot a new hall-pass system in January to improve accountability when students are out of class.

Schoolwide instruction has reinforced that Amador Valley is a "No Place for Hate" campus, with additional classroom presentations scheduled for January to address the impact of hate speech and expectations for respectful behavior.

Students have also created

a peer-to-peer video message encouraging classmates to uphold an inclusive school environment.

Staff will receive additional training on identifying and responding to hate-motivated behavior, Frey said.

"These actions reflect the school's and district's shared commitment to addressing hate-motivated behavior with urgency, compassion and accountability," Frey said.

Norrington said the incidents have strengthened the school's commitment to fostering an inclusive campus

culture. He also encouraged families to discuss with their students the impact of hate and shared responsibility for belonging.

Students with credible information related to the incidents are encouraged to contact a trusted adult or site administrator. Reports may be made confidentially, and student identities will be protected, Norrington said.

"It is important to recognize that the actions of a few students do not define the values of our school community," Frey said.



Three instances of hate-motivated graffiti took place in just more than a month at Pleasanton's Amador Valley High School. (Photo — Leah Silveira)

a racial epithet, personal attacks directed at Norrington and a vice principal, and other inappropriate language, he said.

"I am deeply disturbed by this conduct," Norrington said in a message to families. "It violates our values and harms members of our community."

have interviewed several students who have been cooperative.

Susanne Frey, Pleasanton Unified School District's safety and communications coordinator, told The Independent that the incidents violate Board Policy 5145.9 on hate-motivated behavior.

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Dublin Opens Another Public Park in City's Jordan Ranch Neighborhood

By Sanestina Hunter

DUBLIN — The city expanded its park system with the opening of Forest Park, a two-acre neighborhood space in the Jordan Ranch development designed to combine active recreation with nature-focused amenities.

Located at 2150 Central Parkway, Forest Park becomes Dublin's 26th public park. It opened following a Dec. 13 ribbon-cutting ceremony attended by city leaders, including Mayor Sherry Hu.

The park is the city's latest development under its Parks Master Plan, which aims to expand neighborhood open space and enhance quality of life for Dublin residents.

While the city did not provide a total project cost, Shari Jackman, Dublin's communications manager, told The Independent that approximately 95 percent of the park was funded through Neighborhood Park Improvement impact fees.

An additional 4.9% of the funding supported bike- and pedestrian-trail improvements, while about \$900—or 0.1%—came from the city's general fund, Jackman said.

The development was shaped by community input, with residents expressing strong interest in nature-based and family-oriented features, Jackman said. Requested amenities included a pollinator garden, a nature-inspired playground and a multi-use sports court designed for basketball and futsal.

In addition to recreation features, the park includes picnic areas with shaded seating, landscape elements designed to support bees, butterflies and other beneficial wildlife, and pathways connecting its major features.

As part of the park's long-term development, the city launched "A Forest for the Future," a tree-adoption program allowing individuals, families and community groups to sponsor designated trees within the park.

While the adoption period has ended, maintenance of adopted trees will be provided by the city for 10 years beginning on opening day, Jackman said.

In support of the city's sustainability efforts, the Dublin San Ramon Services District is working with the city to finalize the park's recycled water irrigation system.

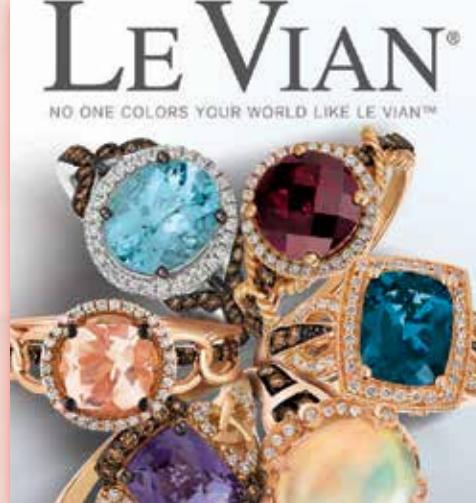
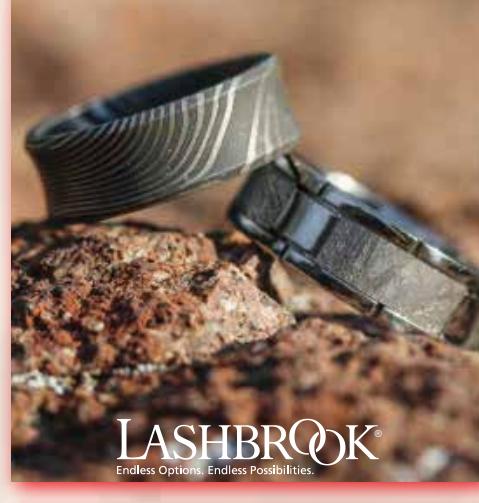
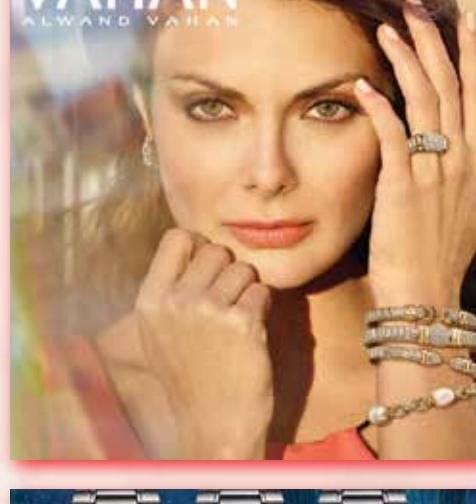
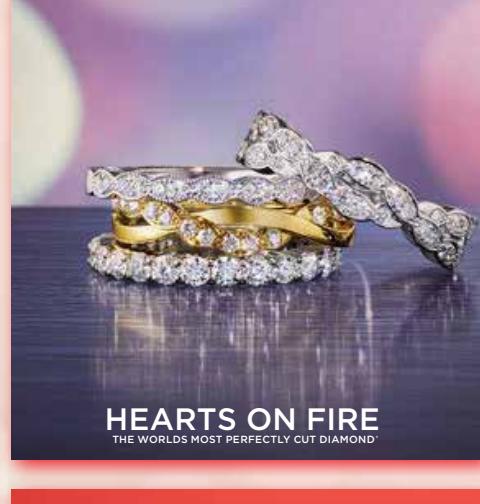
Earlier this year, the city opened Wallis Ranch Community Park, an 8.85-acre site on Rutherford Drive featuring dedicated pickleball courts, a dog park, walking paths and community gathering spaces.

Two additional parks are also planned for opening in

the Francis Ranch development, with opening dates to be announced, according to Jackman.

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EDITORIAL

Hate Speech Is Always Designed To Shock Us, But How We React Is What Really Matters More

Hate speech is always shocking. That's because those who use hate speech are trying to shock and offend us. They're trying to provoke a reaction.

Amador Valley High School in Pleasanton has been dealing with hate speech lately. On three separate occasions since Oct. 30, school officials found racial epithets and swastikas in campus restrooms. Families were notified after each incident, and the school closed the restrooms for immediate cleaning and restoration.

In the grand scheme of things, these are minor events. The perpetrators may eventually be caught and disciplined.

But taken within context, the incidents at Amador Valley appear to be part of a growing national trend in racism, anti-Semitism, anti-LGBTQ incidents and other forms of xenophobia.

The most recent incident at Amador Valley occurred two weeks ago, on Dec. 2. It preceded the shooting of a group of Jewish Australians celebrating the first

night of Hanukkah on the beach, and the shooting at Rhode Island's Brown University, in which the killer has not been caught, nor a motive established.

Taken as a whole, the global rise of hate speech parallels the ascendance of extremist right-wing governments in the U.S. and abroad. But this is also happening when there are more guns in the United States than there are people. Hate crimes are not outliers. Nor are shootings. The two often go hand in hand.

President Donald Trump has in no small manner contributed to the tinderbox that our public space has become, pointing his fingers by turns at transgender people, Black Americans, Haitian immigrants, Latino immigrants from multiple nations and, most recently, Somali immigrants. There will be another target soon enough. He's often the loudest voice on social media, and many people listen to him.

There isn't a lot that we can do about him. Haters are going to

hate. (Although Congress, it must be said, has the power to end this any day it chooses. We're still waiting.)

What we do have the ability to control is how we react. Yes, we need to organize and mobilize to push back against racist policies, fight to maintain our democratic systems and preserve those freedoms we value. We must still remain politically active, in this extremely dangerous time for the country and the world.

But we also need not overreact. This is especially true when there is breaking news of a new apparent hate crime, or just an act of horrific violence with an undetermined motivation.

We need to pause. Breathe. Step away from the keyboard and not post that hot take. No one actually needs that. It may be cathartic in the moment, but only to yourself, and perhaps not for all that long. Many social-media platforms have long realized that inflammatory content receives more engagement, and thus is more

profitable, so their algorithms now prioritize putting shocking content in front of us. We don't have to engage. We can ignore it, or ignore the platforms serving it up to us like a daily meal of spite and grievance.

Better to be more thoughtful and deliberate about our actions in the public sphere, and in private. We should choose which battles to fight based on those that are likely to have positive outcomes, not just garner likes on social media. We all have enough on our plates already. We don't need unnecessary strife.

So, while incidents of hate speech are upsetting, whether minor incidents of vandalism or mass shootings, our reactions may carry more reverberations into the future. We can choose not to escalate the rhetoric, and instead aim for calm. When someone is trying to provoke a reaction, we don't have to take the bait.

MAILBOX

Mailbox Guidelines:

Opinions voiced in letters published in Mailbox are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of The Independent. Anonymous letters will not be published. All letters are required to have the name(s) of the person(s) submitting them, city of residence and phone number, for verification purposes. Letters may not contain advertising. Abusive letters and letters containing ad hominem attacks may be rejected or edited. Letters are subject to verification and may be edited for clarity at the discretion of the editor. We reserve the right to decide whether or not the letter will be published. Headings for all letters may be edited at the discretion of the editor to properly reflect their content. A headline will be added to letters received without one. Frequent letter writers may have publication of their letters delayed or not run at all. Letters should be limited to 400 words or less and should be sent by email to letters@independentnews.com or submitted using the form below. The letters to the editor deadline is Monday at 8 a.m. If you wish to submit a letter pertaining to a special event or meeting taking place on a Monday before any given Thursday print edition—and you would like your letter to run that week—please contact the editor (editor@independentnews.com) as soon as possible on Monday to discuss the content and publication options. Otherwise, all letters submitted after 8 a.m. on Monday must hold until the following week.

THANK YOU!!

Richard Andrews, Livermore

I have been working with various Ukrainian aid groups for over a year now, and currently am collecting medical, education, and living supplies for these victims of a savage and illegal invasion. They are a wonderful people who are in great need of whatever we can send them.

For the last 8 months, I've been working with Hearts for the Ukraine. They are wonderful. And they always have needs, both monetary and physical.

And in that capacity, I have reached out to our community. The response has been overwhelming. You have filled my storage to capacity several times, and they have shipped many pallets of supplies to the Ukraine.

I want to personally thank all of you who have been able to help in this effort, and bless your kind hearts. Livermore and the Tri-Valley is filled with good people, and at this time of giving, I truly want to thank all of you.

God Bless you, and Merry Christmas.

Massacres, Maccabees, and Light
Patricia Munro, Livermore

I am writing this on Sunday night, the first night of Hanukkah. I woke this morning to the news that a father-son team had murdered fifteen people during their Hanukkah celebration on Bondi Beach in Sydney, Australia. Were it not for Ahmed al-Ahmad, an unarmed Muslim and the absolute definition of a hero, more would have died.

Two months ago, on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year, a gunman in Manchester, England shot two Jews on their way to synagogue.

In Colorado, a peaceful march for hostages then held by Hamas in Gaza was firebombed, resulting in the death of a Holocaust survivor. The date happened to be Shavuot, another Jewish holiday, but that was arguably coincidental. The other attacks were not.

And neither was the

October 7, 2023, barbaric massacre perpetuated by Hamas on Israel, an attack that took place on Simchat Torah, the Jewish holiday that celebrates the cycle of Torah — and on Shabbat, the Sabbath.

Jews are being targeted while observing Jewish holidays. The goal is terror, to make Jews too fearful to show up. Hanukkah says otherwise.

Hanukkah takes place at the darkest time of the year. Like so many holidays at this time of year, it brings light into a dark world, celebrating a miracle: a tiny flask of consecrated oil, meant to keep the eternal light burning for one day lasted for eight days. Why was there no oil? The ruling Seleucids had wreaked havoc on the Temple, destroying all the oil but for that one flask. The rabbis at the beginning of the Common Era highlighted that part of the Hanukkah story and, in a world of Christmas lights, it fits well.

The Hanukkah story* is about a war provoked by the tyrannical demands, brutal murders, and religious oppression of the Seleucids. The Jews, led by the Maccabees, ultimately defeated the supposedly more powerful Seleucids and the Maccabees went on to rule Judea (Israel). Unfortunately, they were better fighters than rulers, which is why the rabbis tried to replace their story with one of light and miracles.

The glow of this year's candles are reminders that, just as the Maccabees fought against terrorism and erasure and won, so can we and so will we.

*Fun fact: Because the Hanukkah story was recorded in Greek, not Hebrew, it was not canonized and only appears in the Apocrypha (2 Maccabees).

Tri-Valley Air Quality Improves with Electric Landscaping
Ron Baskett, Pleasanton

In 1995, the California Air Resources Board (CARB) mandated catalytic converters for gasoline-powered vehicles, resulting in a long-term

decrease in emissions and a dramatic improvement in air quality. To us, the residents of the Tri-Valley, improved air quality has meant visibly clearer air, which is associated with a variety of positive health effects.

While air pollution from traffic has decreased due to the presence of catalytic converters and the proliferation of electric vehicles, emissions from small off-road engines (SORE), like gas-powered lawnmowers and leaf blowers, have not decreased. In contrast to gas-powered autos, gas-powered mowers and leaf blowers do not have any emissions controls. A multi-year CARB statewide study published in 2020 projected that major cities in California would experience more air pollution from gas-powered landscaping equipment than from vehicles starting in 2021.

With awareness that emissions from gas-powered landscaping equipment contribute to respiratory and other health problems, 30 cities in the nine-county Bay Area have passed ordinances limiting or banning the use of this equipment (online, see: PIRG interactive-map-of-lawn-mower-and-leaf-blower-policies). The City of Pleasanton was the first city in the Tri-Valley to ban gas-powered leaf blowers beginning on June 1, 2024.

The Tri-Valley Air Quality Climate Alliance (TVAQCA), a non-profit organization originally funded by the Bay Area Air District, supports and encourages landscapers and residents to replace

gas-powered equipment with electric in order to contribute to continued improvement in Tri-Valley air quality. We realize that opting for electric equipment requires investment as well as a change in operations, and we encourage landscapers and residents to transition to electric whenever feasible.

Ron Baskett is a Certified Consulting Meteorologist and a volunteer with TVAQCA.

Welcome to Trump World: Trump by the Numbers

Rosario Milelli, Pleasanton

Donald Trump may give himself an A++++ on the economy, but for whom?

Trump's tariffs were

supposed to punish China. Instead, China's trade surplus just hit a record \$1 trillion, up 5.9%. American farmers paid the price. When China stopped buying U.S. soybeans, prices collapsed from \$14.50 to \$9.30 per bushel, triggering a \$12 billion taxpayer-funded bailout. This wasn't a one-off. In 2018, another \$16 billion bailout followed a 75% drop in exports to China. But here's the problem: taxpayers are footing the bill to help farmers weather the storm of Trump's failed policies, producing nothing in return.

Under Biden, soybean exports exceeded \$120 billion. Now those markets may be gone for good.

China has shifted to Brazil

and Argentina — ironically helped along by more than \$20 billion in U.S. subsidies flowing to Argentina.

The broader economy shows growing strain. The Purchasing Managers' Index has contracted for nine straight months, and the ISM Manufacturing Index

has remained below 50 for over a year — clear signs of an ongoing manufacturing slowdown. Weekly jobless claims recently jumped by 44,000, and unemployment has risen to 4.4%, up from 4.0% under Biden.

Inflation — one of Trump's favorite talking points — has edged higher on his watch, rising from 2.9% in 2024 to 3.0%.

Food costs remain especially punishing, including a staggering 14.7% increase in beef prices. At the same time, household debt has surged past \$17 trillion, and credit-card delinquency rates are climbing to their highest levels

since before the pandemic — evidence that families are increasingly borrowing just to get by.

Financial markets are

flashing warning signs as well. The yield curve has remained inverted longer

than at any time since the 1980s, historically one of the most reliable predictors of recession. Small businesses report persistent pessimism, with hiring and investment plans well below historical norms.

Meanwhile, the national debt has ballooned by \$1.78 trillion to a record \$38 trillion. Tariffs did raise \$170 billion — but that money came from U.S. businesses and consumers, not foreign governments.

So who's winning? America now has roughly 900 billionaires, including 13 sitting in Trump's cabinet. Their combined wealth surged an incredible 18% this year to \$6.9 trillion (Thanks to the Big, Beautiful Bill).

The verdict isn't complicated. While billionaires thrive, farmers, workers, and consumers foot the bill. Trump's economic policies haven't helped "forgotten Americans" — they've enriched a very familiar few.

Earning Respect

Diana McGregor, Dublin

On Dec. 3, the president called Somalia, people from Somalia, and Representative Ilham Omar, "garbage." He said that this is not politically correct, "but I don't care."

This kind of name calling has nothing to do with political correctness. It is mean-spirited and cruel. How can the president expect to be respected when he does not respect others? How can adults teach children to be respectful when the President of the United States disparages countries, communities, and even a duly elected member of congress?

Our country has had many presidents who have been highly respected because they have earned our respect. Our current president is not one of them, nor will he ever be, no matter how many self-aggrandizing medals he pressures others to award him.

Exercising Citizen Rights to Educate Students on Governance

Greg Scott, Livermore

"Turning Point USA [TPUSA] is widely rec-

(See MAILBOX, page 5)

THE Independent

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Floats, marching bands, community groups, musical entertainment, a tree lighting by Mayor Jack Balch and the City Council, and a special appearance by Santa Claus were in the spotlight Dec. 6 during Pleasanton's annual Hometown Holiday Celebration. (Photo — Jacob Clouser)

MAILBOX

(Continued from page 4)

ognized as a far-right political organization that actively promotes conservative ideology on high school, college, and university campuses." (B.J. Reynolds-Koonce, "Does Kaplanis Represent Livermore Schools?", Mailbox, 12/11/2025)

Whatever "conservative ideology" means, I don't know. The word "conservative" is derived from the late Middle English "aiming to preserve." What ideology is TPUSA aiming to preserve? Reynolds-Koonce then lists a number of TPUSA transgressions.

It is far worse than what Reynolds-Koonce portrays, for TPUSA is a corrupt, fraudulent, and morally bankrupt organization. TPUSA consists of a four entity non-profit, 501(c)3, cluster of organizations, which earlier in the year only had one Form 990 posted with the IRS (Internal Revenue Service). TPUSA insists that the IRS neglected to post the other 990s. After criticism from a podcaster, the other three Form 990s magically got posted recently, dated 5/15/2025.

These Form 990s are very revealing. One TPUSA organizational entity, Turning Point Action, has

an independent contractor, Tyler Bowyer, who lives in a massive mansion. The highest paid contractor organization listed for Turning Point Action is 1TEN LLC, with an address given as 18521 E. Queen Creek Rd., Queen Creek, Arizona 85142. There is no such business at that address — which happens to be a strip mall — nor does 1TEN LLC have a website. 1TEN LLC has been paid \$1,456,261 over three years by TPUSA for "SOCIAL/DIGITAL MEDIA/AD PLACEMENT."

TPUSA monies are going to a parking lot? The owner of 1TEN LLC is given as Jake Hoffman — the former TPUSA Communications Director and now is a powerful Republican Arizona State senator — who falsely stipulated eight other businesses at that above address on the financial disclosure form. These instances are just one set of TPUSA's shady financial dealings.

Coincidentally, Charlie Kirk ordered an extensive TPUSA financial audit, while also relieving his Chief Operating Officer of his duties, eight days before he was murdered.

Erika Kirk's "family"

of TPUSA's upper echelon has told numerous lies. One blatant one was by TPUSA Pastor Rob McCoy, father of Charlie Kirk's Chief of Staff Michael McCoy. Pastor Rob McCoy lied about the actions of his son after Kirk was murdered. This is evidenced by the videos.

Not only did Livermore School Board member Deena Kaplanis represent Livermore School District at a partisan TPUSA event, she presented to an unscrupulous TPUSA organization as well.

Praise for Mr. Wonderful (Part 2)

Keith Jackson, Dublin

There is a lot of voting fraud going on. Voting fraud means that any vote which is not for Trump is obviously a fraud. We can all see how this goes. First you give brown or black people, or even women, the right to vote, and the next thing they do is vote against Trump. This has to be stopped. If he is not permitted to be president for life, some kind of fraud is going on. Do not worry, he is working very hard to rid this perversion of voting from our democracy, and with the help of the Republicans in Congress, he will succeed.

All the other leaders of the world support him. Well, not ALL of them, but Putin and Netanyahu do. With the support of these two who like to kill innocent civilians, what could go wrong?

He is the greatest president ever, and has done more than any other president in history, suffered more abuse, stopped more wars, fixed the economy, lowered prescription drug prices by over one thousand percent, and is stopping more old people from getting wasteful health care or social security than any other president. And don't worry if he has not gotten to you yet, he will.

I encourage everyone to get behind our president, "Donald (Bone Spurs) Trump", as he works hard to steal our money, arrest anyone who opposes him, and destroy our democracy.

PS. Did you know Stormy Daniels gave Trump the nickname "Tiny"?

Do you wonder what that means?

The GOP Health Care Proposal Is "CRAPO"

Julie Elfin, Pleasanton

With the Affordable Care Act's enhanced premium tax credits set to

expire at the end of 2025, more than 20 million Americans face premium hikes that could double. Instead of supporting a simple extension, Senate Republicans are pushing an HSA-centered plan that is, frankly, "CRAPO". Their proposal replaces meaningful premium assistance with one-time HSA deposits of \$1,000 to \$1,500 — nowhere near enough to offset premiums that will jump by hundreds or thousands of dollars a month.

Congress must act responsibly and extend the enhanced premium tax credits.

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Light Everywhere: Hanukkah Events Around Tri-Valley

By Jessica Zimmer

TRI-VALLEY — Multiple Hanukkah celebrations by different Jewish congregations are taking place this month throughout the Tri-Valley. The events will include food, games, and menorah lighting.

Hanukkah started at nightfall Dec. 14 and lasts until nightfall Monday, Dec. 22. The holiday commemorates the Maccabees' victory over Syrian-Greek invaders.

The list of events includes:

- Sunol Menorah Lighting at Sunol Community Park, at 5:30 p.m. on Thursday, Dec. 18. This family-friendly event will begin with the lighting of the town's menorah with city dignitaries and refreshments. This free event is organized by Chabad of the Tri-Valley.

- Shabbat Hanukkah at Congregation Beth Emek at 3400 Nevada Court in Pleasanton at 7:30 p.m. on Friday, Dec. 19. This song-filled Shabbat Hanukkah service will be streamed online and celebrated in person.

- Hanukkah Under the Stars in front of the Bankhead Theater at 2400 First Street in Livermore from 7:30-8:30 p.m. on Saturday, Dec. 20. This event will involve city dignitaries, the lighting up of Livermore's menorah, a live Hanukkah music concert, hot latkes and Hanukkah donuts, glow-in-the-dark play and "chocolate gelt" raining down, with the Livermore-Pleasanton Fire Department. The free event is organized by Chabad of the Tri Valley.

Hanukkah occurs relatively close to Christmas but does not hold as much religious significance for Jews as Christmas does for Christians. Hanukkah is not mentioned in the Torah, or Hebrew Bible. Yet the Jew-

ish community worldwide sees Hanukkah as a time to promote togetherness and resilience, especially during times of adversity.

Special Hanukkah foods

The Hanukkah story can be found in the First and Second Books of Maccabees, which are part of the Apocrypha. This is a collection of ancient texts that

At that point, the Seleucid army had invaded a city-state called Jerusalem-Judah, the area now contained in the modern-day nation of Israel. The Maccabees were

fighting the Seleucid army to take back the territory and stop the Seleucid prohibition against the practice of Judaism.

In 165 B.C.E., the Mac-

cabees defeated the Seleucid army and retook the Temple of Jerusalem, which the Greeks had defiled. The following year, 164 B.C.E., the Maccabees restored the Temple. They looked for pure olive oil to light the Menorah, a seven-branched golden candelabra in the Temple. The story goes that there was only enough oil to light the Menorah for one day. Yet a miracle occurred and the oil lasted for eight days.

This is cited as a reason why Jews celebrate the holiday for eight days. It also explains why they added another arm on the candelabra to make a Hanukkah Menorah. Another reason Jews celebrate the holiday for eight days may be because eight was the number needed to celebrate Sukkot. Jews had not been able to observe Sukkot in 165 B.C.E. because of the occupation of the Seleucid army.

For more Hanukkah celebrations around the San Francisco Bay Area, visit: <https://jewishfed.org/events/>



Chabad of the Tri-Valley Rabbi Raleigh Resnick, center, assisted by Dr. Ben Coplan and Antoinette Coplan, celebrated Hanukkah with a menorah lighting in Sunol Community Park on Dec. 30, 2024. (File photo — Doug Jorgensen)

include latkes, potato and onion pancakes fried in olive oil or schmaltz, chicken fat. People usually serve latkes with applesauce, sour cream, powdered sugar or combinations of these toppings. Another favorite is sufganiyot, small strawberry or raspberry-jam filled doughnuts fried in olive oil and dusted with powdered sugar. The oily foods are a nod to the oil that burned in the menorah of the Temple of Jerusalem.

Chocolate gelt, or chocolate coins wrapped in tin foil, are used as prizes in dreidel, a game involving a spinning top. Activities for Hanukkah include listening to and singing Hanukkah songs, playing dreidel and telling the story of Hanukkah.

relate to the Jews but are not contained in the Torah. The Hanukkah story is also discussed in the Midrash, a collection of works that contain interpretations and studies of the Torah.

The Hanukkah story begins with an introduction to the Maccabees. The name "Maccabee," which may mean "hammer" or "destroyer" in Hebrew, describes both a family of Jews and a group of Jewish rebel fighters led by a member of that family, Judas Maccabeus.

During the second century B.C.E., the Maccabees were revolting against the Seleucid empire in Syria. The Seleucid state had been established by Alexander the Great and remained operating after his death.

During the second century B.C.E., the Maccabees were revolting against the Seleucid empire in Syria. The Seleucid state had been established by Alexander the Great and remained operating after his death.

Eagle is the highest rank in the traditional Scouts BSA program of Scouting America.

Phaneendra, a junior at Las Positas Middle College, is the daughter of Phaneendra Ram and Swarna Phaneendra of Dublin.

Sponsored by Las Positas College and the Tri-Valley Regional Occupational Program, Las Positas Middle College allows students to earn college credits while completing their high

school education.

To achieve the rank of Eagle, a Scout must earn at least 21 merit badges and complete a community project.

For her Eagle project,



Saanvi Phaneendra

Phaneendra led Troop 2942 Scouts in building custom wood bases for rocket models and mini-space exploration exhibits now on display at area schools and libraries. She also led the effort to design and create identification labels, informational graphics, brochures and other marketing materials.

A short video of the project is available at bit.ly/saanvi-project.

Chartered in 2019, Troop 2942 is an all-girls troop sponsored by St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church.

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HOUSING

(Continued from front page)

gements that are being made here are going to make the situation significantly better than what it is now," Commission Chair Ken Morgan said.

The overall project would involve the annexation of 131 acres of unincorporated Alameda County land to the city, of which 105 acres would be dedicated as open space. A new public trailhead dedicated to the East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD), plus a new trail would connect the area with existing EBRPD

land immediately south of the project site.

While Pleasanton's urban growth boundary runs through the location, the proposed housing lies within the boundary and no change to the boundary has been suggested.

Commissioners asked to extend the environmental impact report's public comment period by 15 days, now ending on Jan. 20, because of the number of holidays within the review period.

The city first issued a notice of preparation for the re-

port in August 2019. But despite some public feedback and a public scoping meeting the following month, the COVID-19 pandemic stalled progress in 2020.

The city's focus on updating its housing element, adopted in January 2023, then delayed the project further.

"We had to deal with (measures) PP, QQ, and we spent a ton of money and time figuring out what the development area that's allowed out on this property," said Jeff Schroeder, Ponderosa senior vice president of

land acquisition and planning. "All we can do is fit the property into this envelope that meets PP, QQ."

Passed by voters in 2008, measures PP and QQ restrict hillside development in Pleasanton, prohibiting building where the slope exceeds 25% or within 100 vertical feet of a ridgeline.

Once the environmental report's public-comment period closes, the city will compile feedback into a final report, which will then go before the planning commission and city council for

public hearings, tentatively scheduled for the first quarter of 2026, and possible certification.

DUSD

(Continued from front page)

The district said the largest contributor to the deficit increase was a vacancy-savings budgeting error. For years, the district has budgeted for "vacancy savings," which occur when positions remain unfilled for part of a year.

This year, however, those savings were significantly overstated, and internal checks failed to catch the error before the budget was adopted, the report stated.

The district assumed \$3.6 million in vacancy savings that did not materialize, increasing both the current-year deficit and ongoing multi-year expenses by that amount.

Other cost increases cited in the interim report include \$900,000 in solar project close-out costs shifted into the 2025-26 fiscal year, \$316,000 in higher insurance costs tied to Assembly Bill 218, and \$68,000 budgeted for consulting related to a possible parcel tax measure.

The report also cited \$925,000 in added costs for new certificated and classified positions, leaves of absence, salary column movement and other staffing adjustments.

Certified health and welfare benefit costs rose 16%, compared with the 11% originally projected, adding \$310,000 to district expenses.

District officials said the

listed cost increases represent individual contributors within a broader structural deficit and are not intended to reconcile to a single subtotal, as the interim report also reflects revenue adjustments, timing shifts and other budget changes not fully itemized in the summary.

Looking ahead, the district said it may need to identify \$8.4 million in ongoing general fund savings in 2026-27 and beyond to remain financially solvent.

Meanwhile, the Dublin Teachers Association said its initial proposal focuses on compensation, health and welfare benefits, and working conditions, including medical and dental coverage, cash-in-lieu options and reduced class sizes.

"DTA members remain focused on ensuring Dublin students learn from the best educators in the best possible learning conditions," said Brad Dobrzenski, president of the Dublin Teachers Association.

Dobrzenski said the union believes district leadership must reprioritize spending away from outside consultants and toward students and classrooms.

"For over a year, we have asked management to develop a credible revenue en-

hancement plan, and they have refused," Dobrzenski said in a statement to The Independent. "The district has a history of significantly underestimating revenue while allowing spending on consultants and attorneys to grow unchecked."

Dobrzenski said the district budgeted \$11.6 million for consultants and professional services last year but ultimately spent nearly \$13 million.

"Our students deserve to have those funds invested in their future," he said.

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COOKIE

(Continued from front page)

House, is a student at Granada High School in Livermore. She began her business as a passion project, after teaching herself how to bake.

"I only make chunky, fluffy cookies that are tall and thick," Han said. "I'm always thinking about cookies. Sometimes my friends come up with ideas for me."

Her Christmas cookie collection includes peppermint mocha, chocolate-chip candy cane and red-velvet peppermint, with white chocolate chips.

Han's first bit of advice for baking is to use cold butter, cubed.

"My cookies are based on a scone recipe," Han said. "The cold layers of butter give them a croissant-type texture."

She recommends adding a teaspoon of cornstarch to reduce spreading.

Han also advises adding an extra egg yolk to the dough, at a ratio of one egg and one egg yolk for every egg in the recipe.

"This makes the cookie richer, moister and chewier," Han said. "I also encourage bakers not to overmix. You only need a couple of folds."

Cookie makers ice cookies

in different ways. Han uses powdered sugar a great deal, to make glazes. She also makes buttercream icing.

"Consistency is everything," when making royal icing, Corti said. "It takes practice. If it's too loose, add powdered sugar. If it's too thick, spray it with a little water, using a dedicated spray bottle."

Both bakers said preparing cookies helps them stay connected with the community and their customers.

"I started this business as a cottage-food operation from my home in 2019," Corti said.

"In 2023, I began cooking at Amuse Kitchen, a commercial kitchen in Livermore. I also do private workshops where I teach people how to decorate sugar cookies."

Han began her business in September 2024 and bakes at home. She delivers her cookies on campus, to students, faculty and staff at Granada.

"I only run the business during the school year," she said. "I usually do an ad campaign before winter break. People can pre-order, which builds anticipation."

Butter & Batter and Han

House operate at other times

of the year, but Christmas is a very busy period. The month of December invites creativity in recipes, excitement from customers and a great deal of gratitude on both sides.

"I love when customers send me photos of cookie-decorating contests that they've done with family members, using my cookie kits," Corti said. "It always makes me so happy to see what they've done."

She added that she has many "die-hard" clients who order cookies and cookie-making kits every holiday season.

"I wouldn't be where I am today without my customers," Corti said.

Han said her customers keep her especially busy at Christmas. Since her opening day, she has liked hearing ideas for add-ins and toppings.

"Being a business owner is about coming up with inventive combinations," Han said. "But it's great to get inspiration from customers, about what will make them love my cookies more."

For more information, visit: butterandbatter.com and hanhouse.org.

Butter & Batter's Royal Icing Recipe

Lisa Corti (Photo courtesy of Lisa Corti)

Ingredients

½ cup of warm water.
 ½ teaspoon flavoring extract. Lisa Corti uses clear vanilla.
 5 tablespoons meringue powder. Corti uses Genie's Dream.
 5 cups powdered sugar.
 2 tablespoons of clear corn syrup. This softens the bite of the icing.

Steps

1. By hand, whisk together the water, meringue powder and extract in a mixing bowl until it foams. This will take approximately 30 seconds.
2. Attach bowl, using a paddle attachment. Gradually add in the powdered sugar while mixer is on stir/low.
3. Once all the ingredients have incorporated, add in corn syrup.
4. Mix on high for two to three minutes.

Armchair Travelers To Enjoy a Hiking Holiday Featuring England

Kim Grandfield will present an Armchair Travelers program, "A Hiking Holiday on the South West Coast Path in Cornwall, England," at the Livermore Civic Center Library, 1188 S. Livermore Ave., at 1:30 p.m. on Thursday, Jan. 8.

The South West Coast Path is England's longest marker footpath, stretching more than 630 miles along the coasts of Devon and Cornwall, and is considered the country's ultimate challenge for long-distance hikers.

Grandfield and his wife, Charlene, hiked one of the more spectacular sections of the trail in late August and will share photos and stories of their adventure.

This is a free program for adults, and registration is not required.

Dublin Police Conducting a DUI Checkpoint Friday and Saturday

Dublin police will be checking for motorists driving under the influence (DUI) from 7 p.m., Friday, Dec. 19, to 3 a.m., Saturday, Dec. 20, at an undisclosed location, according to Capt. Miguel Campos.

Campos said the checkpoint location will be based on city data showing crashes due to impaired driving.

"Impaired drivers put others on the road at significant risk," Campos said. "Any prevention measures that reduce

the number of impaired drivers on our roads significantly improve traffic safety."

Most impaired driving is caused by alcohol consumption, but Dublin police is reminding drivers that some prescription medications and over-the-counter drugs can interfere with safe driving, and while medicinal and recreational marijuana are legal in California, driving under the influence of marijuana is illegal.

A first-time DUI offense can cost drivers \$13,500 in

fines and penalties, as well as a suspended license.



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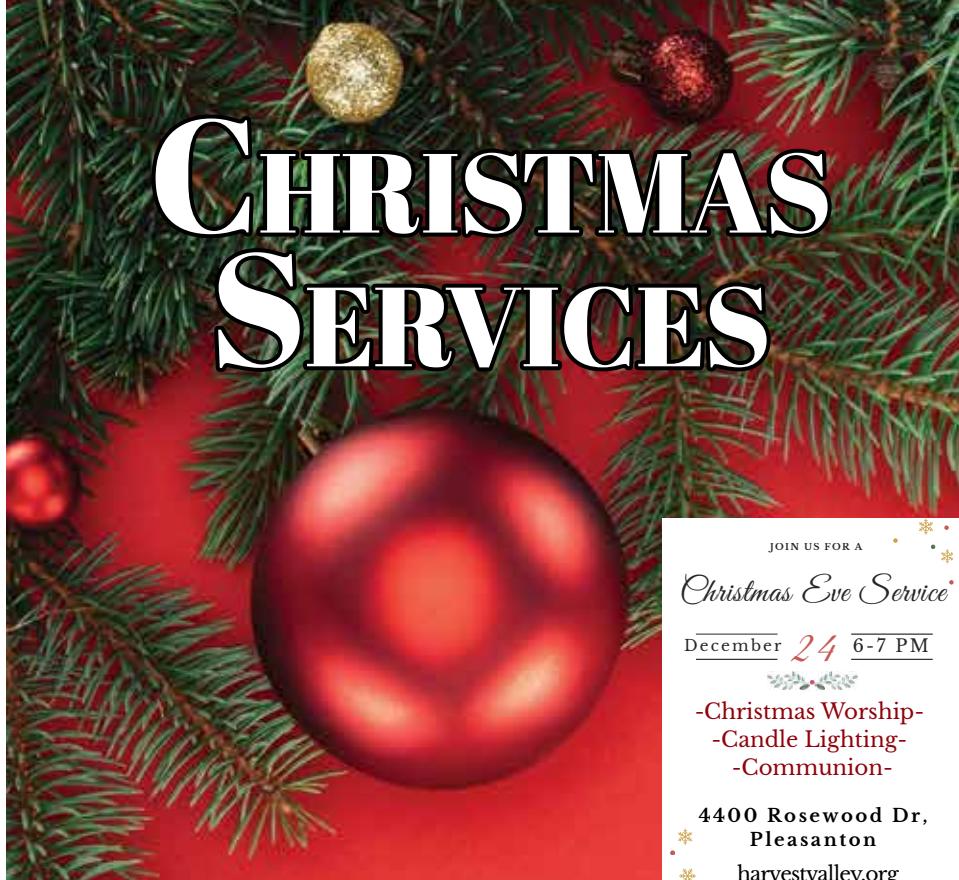
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Refreshments were a big part of the experience during the annual Pleasanton Downtown Spirit and Sweater Stroll on Dec. 13. Participants gathered at the Museum on Main and visited 15-plus downtown locations to partake in "perfect cocktails." (Photo — Jacob Clouser)

Heart of the Valley





A Lesson on Hugging

By Christina Cavallaro

TRI-VALLEY — I was obsessed with a book that came out about 10 years ago called, "Steal Like an Artist: 10 Things Nobody Told You About Being Creative," written by Austin Kleon.

Intended to be a creative manifesto for the digital age offering practical advice to artists, writers and anyone in a creative field, it originated from a talk Kleon gave, which then expanded into the book that became a New York Times Bestseller.

The core premise was that nothing is truly original, and all creative work is a remix or mashup of previous ideas. So instead of feeling burdened by the pressure to create something entirely new, Kleon encouraged creatives to embrace their influences and "steal" from the work of others — not by plagiarizing, but by studying, honoring, transforming and building upon it.

In essence, you are the sum of your influences, and should curate and collect good ideas from people you admire and let those influences shape your own unique voice as you mix them together.

In today's world, the term "influencer" is mostly relegated to modern-day marketers who dwell in the social-media sphere. But I love the idea of there being inadvertent influencers that impact our lives in infinite ways, often unknown to them.

I had the opportunity to speak recently to Ken and Carolyn Mano, who are pillars of the Tri-Valley community for their countless acts of public service. Pleasanton resident Michael Miller reached out to me singing their praises for the kindness and generosity they had shown him personally when he had fallen on tough times nearly 30 years ago.

When I sat with the Manos in their cozy living room and told them how much their acts of kindness had impacted Michael's life, they looked at each other puzzled. They had no specific recollection of the ways he listed that they had helped him. What they did rattle off in great detail were all the wonderful things they felt about Michael and what he had done for the community.

"Michael is quite an amazing guy," Ken said.

This is the time of year that always feels like a mixed bag — and sometimes a sad sack — especially in today's world. For many people, these are not days of extravagance and carefree holiday spending. Hearts can be heavy, minds distracted, thoughts looming.

Knowing how to simply be — or be more simply — at times feels daunting. Because it is still important to embrace moments of joy even in tough times.

My colleague Steve at The Independent said to me, "These days, it's a lot of hit and miss." He said he finds it hard to stay balanced during, as the old song goes, "The Most Wonderful Time of the Year."

Lately, I've been walking around with a different song in my brain on repeat: "Let There Be Peace on Earth." The verse continues, "And let it begin with me."

I saw a quote posted on a friend's Instagram the other day that said: "If your peace depends on everything going right, that's not peace. That's control. Learning to be steady in uncertainty — that's real growth."

And it occurs to me, especially during this time of year, that I still have some growth to do in the peace department.

Enter Sant Gobind Ram Ji: An internationally renowned visionary, spiritual leader and founder of the nonprofit Nadar Gobind Foundation, offering guidance to people seeking calm and meaning in a noisy and uncertain world.

I had the unforgettable opportunity to sit with the certified spiritual counselor lovingly known by supporters as Sant Ji, and absorb lessons from his extraordinary life.

So, lately I've been stealing like an artist from Sant Ji and his wisdom in the ways, and waves, of the heart.

"If you see our heartbeat EKG, there is a wave," he said. And he went on to explain that a wave is like voltage that shows we have electricity inside our bodies. And when we get irritated, stressed or frustrated, that voltage increases and becomes hot until we feel like we might explode. And just like a building infrastructure includes a protective metal grounding rod driven deep into the earth below, our bodies need grounding too.

We have so much voltage inside us, according to Sant Ji, that he recommends taking off our shoes and socks whenever we are overwhelmed, and going barefoot to ground us.

He suggests standing in the green grass or mud or on a bare floor.

"Stand there for two or three minutes and after that just see, you will feel so much better," he said.

Because at the moment, our bodies are not getting grounded.

"Even at home, we wear slippers or socks. Or we are on the phone, laptop, iPad or whatever, so that's a problem we are facing," he said.

And if anyone's looking for a New Year's resolution, how about learning to give a proper hug as taught by a guru.

"When we hug each other, you should make sure that your heart touches that person's heart," Sant Ji said. "We should not hug from right side to right side. If you really want to hug, whenever you meet someone, it should be left side to left side. Your heart should touch that person's heart.

That's called hugging."

Do you have tidbits about the Tri-Valley or know of interesting people, places, events or unique perspectives that should be featured in the Heart of the Valley monthly column or podcast? If so, we want to hear from you. Please email me at christina@independentnews.com.

Dublin Seeks Nominations For Multiple Annual Awards

Dublin is accepting nominations for its 2025 Citizen of the Year, Young Citizen of the Year and Organization of the Year awards through Friday, Jan. 16.

The winners will be announced during a ceremony at the Channon Community Center at 6 p.m. on Wednesday, Feb. 25.

The awards recognize two individuals and one nonprofit that made significant contributions to the quality of life in Dublin.

The Young Citizen award goes to a student in grades 1 through 12.

The Citizen of the Year and Young Citizen of the Year award winners will each receive \$300 to donate

to an organization of their choice. Two runners-up in each category will each receive \$200 to donate to a favorite organization.

The Organization of the Year will receive \$500. Two runner-up organizations will receive \$200 each.

Nominations can be submitted online at tinyurl.com/3n2r6eum.

Mena Earns Rank of Eagle Scout

Sebastian Mena, a member of Troop 999 in Livermore, has been awarded the rank of Eagle, the highest rank in the traditional Scouting America program.

Mena, a senior at Granada High School, is the son of Carlos and Sabrina Mena.

To attain the rank of Eagle, a Scout must earn at least 21 merit badges and complete a community service project.

For his Eagle project, Mena updated the lunch area



Sebastian Mena

at Emma Smith Elementary School in Livermore with the installation of synthetic turf. He coordinated efforts of adults, Scouts and teen volunteers over two weekends to complete the installation.

Mena also received his Bronze, Gold and Silver Eagle Palm awards, each representing an additional five merit badges.

Troop 999 was established 64 years ago and is chartered by Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Livermore.

Valley Dance Theater To Perform 'The Nutcracker' at Bankhead

Valley Dance Theatre will offer five more performances of "The Nutcracker" at the Bankhead Theater in Livermore in a run that will conclude on Sunday, Dec. 21.

The Russian ballet, which tells the story of a nutcracker doll that comes to life on Christmas eve to battle the evil mouse king, was composed by Tchaikovsky in 1892 and is known for its enchanting

music and imagery, including the Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy.

First performed in the U.S. in the 1940s, it has become an American holiday tradition.

The Valley Dance production will feature more than 100 lavishly costumed dancers, accompanied by the ballet company's pit orchestra.

Matinee performances are scheduled for 2 p.m. on

Saturday, Dec. 20 and Sunday, Dec. 21.

Evening performances are scheduled for 7 p.m. on Friday, Dec. 19, Saturday, Dec. 20, and Sunday, Dec. 21.

Tickets start at \$39 and are available online at LivermoreArts.org.

Valley Dance Theater is a professional ballet company based in Livermore. It also offers ballet classes for all ages.

Quarterly Textile Recycling Set in Dublin

Amador Valley Industries (AVI), which provides trash and recycling services for Dublin, will be collecting worn out bedding, towels and clothing the week of Monday, Jan. 5, through Friday, Jan. 9.

Dublin residents should call AVI at 925-479-9545 at least one full week in advance to schedule a pickup.

AVI said unwanted textiles must be in a clear plastic bag and set out on the curb by 5 a.m. on the day of the scheduled pickup.

Bags must be visible at the curb and not on or behind trash carts. Textiles will be collected separately and may be picked up earlier or later than regular trash pickups.

Residents of a multi-family complex must contact their property manager to schedule a pickup with AVI.

Acceptable items include clothing, shoes, stuffed animals, bedding and towels.

AVI schedules quarterly curbside textile recycling in January, April, July and October.

TRI-VALLEY CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Now through Jan. 4

WINTER GLOW EXPERIENCE: A DRIVE-THRU HOLIDAY LIGHT SHOW

The Winter Glow Experience is now open in Pleasanton at Alameda County Fairgrounds and will run until Jan. 4, 2026. Enjoy a mile-long journey of more than 5,000 dazzling holiday light displays from the comfort of your car, while listening to festive music. Go to winterglowexperience.com/pleasanton for more information or to buy tickets.

Sunday, Dec. 21

PLEASANTON SISTER CITY COMMUNITY POSADA

The Pleasanton/Tulancingo Sister City invites the Pleasanton/Tri-Valley community to their holiday Posada. This is a free, family-friendly event, where everyone participates in the traditional Posada and Xmas carols. On Dec. 21, 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. at Veterans Hall, 301 Main Street, Pleasanton. Refreshments to follow the program.

Sunday, Dec. 21

SANTA CLAUS AT DEMITRI'S

Santa will be appearing at Demitri's Taverna, 2235 First St., Livermore, on Dec. 21 from 2:00-5:00 p.m. Kids of all ages are welcome to visit. Visiting is complimentary, with a suggested donation to Santa's Kiva micro-lending account.

Saturday, Jan. 17

LIVERMORE LIONS CLUB CRAB FEED

An all-you-can-eat crab feed will be hosted by Livermore Lions Club on Jan. 17 at 5 p.m. at Bothwell Arts Center, 2466 8th Street, in Livermore. \$75 per person or \$420 for a table of six. Fresh crab with pasta, salad, bread and dessert. No-host bar / no outside alcohol. Proceeds support Livermore Lions charities. For tickets, contact Ann at (805) 405-8742 or Ben at (805) 405-8743.

Sunday, Jan. 18

HOUSE CONCERT: SIXPENNY

The Livermore Jazz Society will host a house concert featuring Sixpenny, traditional Celtic music played on acoustic instruments. Sixpenny gives propulsive energy to the rhythmic beat of jigs, the dance music of reels, and rousing songs and ballads. On Jan. 18 from 2-4 p.m. Details at www.livermorejazzsociety.org/events or email info@livermorejazzsociety.org. If seats are available, you will receive a written invitation with the concert address. Seating is limited, so advance notice is highly recommended. Livestream available. Suggested donation: \$20 per person.

Thursday, Jan 22 and 29

SQUARE DANCING LESSONS

Cactus Corners, a local nonprofit, is offering free introductory square-dancing classes on Jan. 22 and 29 to

new dancers. Lessons will continue through the rest of the year. Anyone age 8 and up is invited. At Sunrise Mobile Home Park, 856 Sundial Circle, Livermore, in the Community Room. For more information and to be placed on the class notification list, email Margaret at mmiller1435@gmail.com or call 925-518-7624.

Sunday, Feb. 8

2026 LIONS SPEECH CONTEST FOR COLLEGE SCHOLARSHIP

The Livermore Lions Club is holding its annual Student Speaker Contest on Feb. 8 at the Civic Center Library in Livermore. The contest provides scholarships for high school students after graduation. Each of up to six students presents a 5- to 10-minute speech on the topic, "Youth Mental Health: Overcoming Barriers to Well-Being." The contest is open to high school students in and around Livermore. For more information and to enter the contest, call Ann at 805-405-8742.

ONGOING OPPORTUNITIES

FOOD RELIEF SERVICES

Local residents can access vital food-assistance services to help meet basic needs. Food relief services can be found at: Children's Emergency Food Bank; 7421 Amarillo Rd., Dublin; appointments M-F, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.; 925-828-5363; St. Raymond Catholic Church, 11555 Shannon Ave., Dublin; third Sat. of the month, 8 to 11 a.m.; Open Heart Kitchen; M-F, 1 to 5 p.m.; 450 N. Livermore Ave., Livermore; Tri-Valley Haven Food Pantry, 150 N. "L" Street, Livermore; 925-449-1664 — M-Th, 1 to 5 p.m.; Fri/Sat 12 to 4 p.m.; Alameda County Community Food Bank; 510-635-3663; M-F, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

ONGOING EVENTS

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

In AA, we don't tell anyone to do anything. We talk about our own drinking, the trouble we got into, and how we stopped. To find a local meeting in person or online, visit valleyservicecenteraa.org or call the 24-hour hotline at 925-829-0666.

SATURDAY PLEASANTON FARMERS MARKET

Open Saturdays, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., at Main Street and West Angela Street. Seniors 60 and over are welcome for specialized shopping from 9 to 10 a.m.

SUNDAY LIVERMORE DOWNTOWN FARMERS MARKET

Open year-round on Sundays 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. in downtown Livermore, on Second St. between J St. and L St.

Park District Issues Warning on Wild Mushrooms

The East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD) is cautioning park visitors that mushrooms popping up during the rainy season may contain dangerous toxins.

Two of the most toxic mushrooms, the death cap (*Amanita phalloides*) and the western destroying angel (*Amanita ocreata*) can

both be found in the East Bay region. Both species contain amatoxins, compounds that can be lethal to both humans and pets.

If the mushrooms are ingested, symptoms usually appear within 12 hours and start with severe gastrointestinal distress, according to EBRPD. The toxins can potentially lead to liver and

kidney failure if treatment is not sought immediately.

The death cap is a medium to large mushroom that typically has a greenish-gray cap, white gills, a white ring around the stem, and a large white sac at the base of the stem.

The western destroying angel is a medium to large mushroom that usually has

a creamy white cap, white gills, a white ring around the stem that can disappear with age, and a thin white sac at the base.

Both species are usually associated with oak trees, but the death cap, which is not native to California, has also been found growing around other hardwood trees.

Deadly toxins can also be found in Galerina and Lepiota mushrooms, which also grow in the Bay Area.

EBRPD said the best way to stay safe is to ensure that no mushrooms from the wild are consumed by humans or pets.

The district is also hosting a fungus festival the last weekend in January

where visitors can learn more about "the fruits of winter."

The Tilden Fungus Fair will be held at the Tilden Nature Area in Berkeley from 10:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. on Saturday, Jan. 31, and Sunday, Feb. 1.

For more information, go to ebparks.org/tilden-fungus-fair.

AGREEMENT

(Continued from front page)

10 neighboring districts, including those in Pleasanton, Dublin, San Ramon Valley and Fremont. Out of the 11 districts, Livermore ranked ninth in total compensation, which includes salary and benefits, according to LEA.

"We are proud of the progress made during our mediation session and look forward to continuing our work together," LVJUSD Superintendent Torie Gibson said in a statement. "As we move ahead, we will need to carefully review how every dollar is allocated and make thoughtful adjustments to ensure the long-term fiscal sustainability of our district, while continuing to prioritize and support our staff and students."

While LVJUSD reported a "positive budget analysis" during negotiations Dec. 9, the district said the tentative agreement will require \$14.7 million in cuts for the 2026-27 school year, which will have to be identified by March 15, and an additional \$1.5 million in reductions for 2027-28, to be identified by March 2027.

The agreement will go to LEA membership for a ratification vote in January, and then to the LVJUSD school board for approval on Jan. 13. If ratified, the 4% salary increase will go into effect Jan. 1, and the 2026-2027 salary and benefit increases will be effective July 1.

Gibson joined cabinet members and site administrators on the LVJUSD

negotiating team. The LEA side consisted of lead bargaining chair Noel Mattern, a Granada High School teacher, fellow teachers Laura Morgan and Erin Peacock, LEA President Aimee Thompson and Vice President Tara Lutz, and Rhem Bell of the California Teachers Association.

Lutz said the bargaining team believes this marks an important step toward the union's stated goal — fair and competitive compensation to attract and retain qualified educators.

"We see this as a necessary step in order to ensure that our Livermore students have the opportunity to receive the best education with the best educators," Lutz told The Independent. "Our students must come first, and LEA will continue to advocate for them, because they are the ones we are here to serve."

The mediation results, coming just before winter break, appear to have cooled much of the tension that had accumulated over three months of bargaining between the district and LEA.

LEA had organized multiple rallies and demonstrations, both at school board meetings and throughout the city, to demonstrate its commitment to ensuring fair pay for Livermore educators. The latest took place outside the district office during the Dec. 9 school board meeting, just a few days prior to the mediation session.

"These last few months

have really shown us how supported LEA educators are by our students, parents and the Livermore community," Lutz said. "It is because of their voices and actions that we feel we were able to reach some form of agreement, and for that we are thankful."

Both district and LEA teams worked with a state-appointed mediator throughout the day and evening to reach the agreement.

"We are grateful to the members of both teams who remained focused on the goal of resolving these negotiations," Gibson said. "Their commitment, patience and unwavering focus on the shared goal of a resolved agreement is truly commendable."

Lutz remains hopeful that if the contract is ratified and approved by the school board, it will help recoup some of the losses LEA staff took this year from increased health care costs, and also put LEA total compensation closer in line to where it was a year ago. Only then, she said, could LEA members look forward to making some progress in those costs for the following year.

"This negotiated settlement represents a meaningful step in the right direction," said Steven Drouin, president of the LVJUSD school board. "Our teachers and specialists dedicate themselves every day to supporting our students, and I am pleased that these negotiations were resolved while prioritizing them."

Valley Humane Performs 69 Pet Wellness Surgeries

The Valley Humane Society (VHS) performed free surgeries on 69 pets during a Bay Area animal wellness drive earlier this month.

VHS was one of nine Bay Area organizations waiving fees for spay/neuter surgeries, vaccinations and microchips during the two-day Champions for Pet Health: Communities Partnering for Wellness and Spay & Neuter event.

More than 600 free spay/neuter surgeries were performed area wide to

promote pet health while reducing the number of homeless animals.

"Valley Humane is proud to join this collaborative Bay Area effort because we believe every pet deserves access to essential veterinary care, not just when adoption is the goal, but as a cornerstone of community welfare," said VHS President and CEO Melanie Sadek. "Families who love their pets shouldn't be forced to compromise on care because of cost or other barriers."

VHS said 30 families brought in pets for free surgeries at the Phil Scholz Surgery Center in Pleasanton on Sunday, Dec. 7.

Also participating in the event were the San Francisco SPCA, Berkeley Humane Society, Humane Society of Silicon Valley and Contra Costa County Animal Services.

The event was sponsored by La Russa Rescue Champions, the Dave & Cheryl Duffield Foundation, Maddie's Fund, and the Bissell Pet Foundation.

Writer Set To Discuss Title Run By Deaf SoCal Football Team

Thomas Fuller, author of "The Boys of Riverside: A Deaf Football Team and a Quest for Glory," will discuss the California School for the Deaf's pursuit of the California eight-man division high school football championship in 2021 and 2022 at the Livermore Civic Center Library, 1188 S. Livermore Ave., at 2 p.m. on Saturday, Jan. 10.

Fuller, a San Francisco-based correspondent for The New York Times,

began following the team as it made an undefeated run for the state title in 2021, only to lose in the championship game. The following year, the team took home the title.

The Cubs were also state champions in 2023 and 2024.

Fuller chronicles the team's championship chase through a series of narratives that follow the personal journeys of the players.

Through their eyes, he of-

fers a portrait of high school athletics, camaraderie and the experience of deafness in America.

The program is sponsored by the Friends of the Livermore Public Library as part of the Library's Authors & Arts Series and is free to the public. The library will also offer ASL interpretation.

A book signing will follow the presentation, and copies of the book will be available for purchase.

Del Valle Hosts Pelican-Palooza

The East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD) is hosting several bird-watching programs this month, including Pelican-Palooza from 1:30 p.m. to 3 p.m. every Saturday and Sunday at Del Valle Regional Park 10 miles south of Livermore.

Park staff will have spotting scopes available for visitors to watch as large American white pelicans congregate near the marina

at Lake Del Valle. Thousands of the birds migrate from their Canadian breeding grounds every year to winter along the Pacific coast from Central Florida to Mexico.

Park rangers will also discuss habitat, how to identify bird species and the ecological role played by different bird species.

There will also be a Family Bird Search at Del Valle from 10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. on

Saturday, Dec. 27.

After learning about bird calls and diets, families will have an opportunity to win prizes by spotting the most species. The walk will follow a short, paved pathway.

Both programs are drop-in activities, and registration is not required.

For more information about winter programs offered by EBRP, go to ebparks.org.

Wineries Gather 2,300 Toys for Tots

More than 2,300 toys and nearly \$2,000 in cash donations were collected during a two-day Toys for Tots event hosted by the Livermore Valley Wine Community (LVWC) at several local wineries.

"Holidays in the Vineyards is a tradition that is dear to locals and travelers from across the region," said LVWC Executive Director Brandi Lombardi. "We are grateful to all of those who donated toys and cash gifts. With these donations, more

children will have a smile on their face this holiday season."

LVWC said visitors to more than 30 participating wineries donated 1,182 new, unwrapped toys and \$982 in cash.

Pacific State Petroleum, which partnered with LVWC in sponsoring the Toys for Tots event, then matched the donations, raising the total contribution to 2,364 toys and \$1,964 to purchase additional toys.

"We are thrilled to have partnered with the Livermore

Valley Wine Community once again on this annual toy drive to ensure that children across the Bay Area have a memorable and joy filled holiday," said Jason Edwards, director of the propane division for Pacific States Petroleum.

The toys and cash donations will be given to the Marine Toys for Tots program for local distribution.

This is the 39th consecutive year that LVWC, formerly the Livermore Valley Winegrowers Association, has supported Toys for Tots.

Wheels Updates Clipper Fare System

The Livermore Amador Valley Transit Authority (LAVTA) has upgraded its Clipper electronic fare system for Wheels bus service to offer more options, instant reloads, transfer discounts and tap-and-ride payments with phone or contactless cards.

LAVTA said the updated system also allows riders to apply for Youth and Senior discount cards online.

Adult riders can now pay

fares using credit or debit cards or contactless mobile devices. However, LAVTA said each rider must pay with their own card or mobile device.

Youth, Senior, Clipper Access (formerly RTC) and Clipper START customers should continue to pay fares using their Clipper cards, since they will not receive a discount with contactless bank cards, according to

LAVTA.

To ensure that the correct card gets charged, riders should remove cards from their wallet before tapping and use the same card during any transfers, the transit authority said.

Riders paying with a mobile device should select their preferred payment in Apple Wallet or Google Wallet.

For more information, go to wheelsbus.com.

Dublin Scouts Set To Collect Holiday Trees

Scouts BSA Troop 905 in Dublin will be collecting holiday trees for recycling on Saturday, Jan. 10, for a \$10 fee.

Trees must be free of flocking and tinsel.

To schedule a pickup,

go to troop905.org.

Amador Valley Industries, which provides recycling services for Dublin, will also be accepting trees from single-family homes on regular collection days from Tuesday,

Jan. 6, through Saturday, Jan. 31.

Trees can also be cut into pieces and placed in Dublin residential compost carts for pickup with yard trimmings, food scraps, and food soiled paper.

OBITUARIES

CELEBRATION OF LIFE

Arleen Joyce (Sogaard) Wood
March 31, 1933 — Nov. 30, 2025



many family trips to Denmark, Norway and Sweden to visit the lands our families came from.

The farm never really left Arleen, who enjoyed gardening, bird watching, and being outside walking in nature. Family was her absolute joy, and Arleen was an amazing Mom who created a beautiful, loving home. She was a woman of considerable grace, always finding the positive in difficult situations and never sharing a bad word about anyone.

Arleen was the last of her generation, predeceased by her parents, Arthur Nels Sogaard and Marie Louise Johnson Sogaard; her siblings (and their spouses) Loren, Roy, Marie Ann, Elton, Dorothy, Merlyn and Geraldine; her husband Burton, his five siblings and their spouses. She is survived by her children Kurt (Debby), Craig (Travis Woodard) and Mark, her four cherished grandchildren Rachel (Crystal Herman) Wood, Miriam (Prabhas) Pokharel-Wood, Daniel (Whitney) Wood, and Erik Wood (and his fiancée Randi Wong), as well as four great-grandchildren (Patti Jo, Kurt Asa, and Mercy Wood, and Anunda Pokharel-Wood) and many, many nieces, nephews, and cousins, all of whom she loved dearly.

A celebration of life service and reception will be held on Monday, Feb. 2, 2026, at 11 a.m. at Holy Cross Lutheran Church, 1020 Mocho St., Livermore, CA. In lieu of flowers or donations, Arleen would want us to find the beauty in each moment and practice random acts of kindness and benevolence.

A celebration of life service and reception will be held on Monday, Feb. 2, 2026, at 11 a.m. at Holy Cross Lutheran Church, 1020 Mocho St., Livermore, CA. In lieu of flowers or donations, Arleen would want us to find the beauty in each moment and practice random acts of kindness and benevolence.

Tri-Dual Meets the Next Big Thing in Girls Wrestling World

By Mitch Stephens

TRI-VALLEY — From the beginning in 2004, with Amador Valley High School's Lauren Neves, to last season, with Granada's S.J. Martin and Dublin's Navjot Waraich, the Tri-Valley has produced some of the best individual girls wrestling talent in the North Coast Section.

The three are among 10 who have been crowned individual champion, with Martin joining Foothill's Rachael Butler (2013, 2014) and Granada's Lauren Nguyen (2023, 2024) as winners of two consecutive individual NCS titles.

Martin, now a senior, won the 115-pound class in 2024 and 120s last season. Waraich, who graduated in June, won the 100-pound class last season.

"The sport has grown immensely over the last 20 years among girls, and we've seen a lot of individual talent locally," ninth-year Amador Valley coach Travis Chubb said. "Now it's time for the girls to experience the team aspect."

In the past, there simply weren't enough girls to boast wrestlers in each of the 14 weight classes. Now many of the top programs have that, and NCS for the first time will hold dual team championships in addition to the individual championships (which tabulate team scores).

The boys have had team dual championships since 2005.

The NCS girls dual-team championships start Jan. 31 at San Leandro High School, with individual NCS championships for both boys and girls Feb. 20-21 at James Logan-Union City.

"It's great, and a long time coming," Dublin coach Jeff Baker said. "We're seeing more and more states introducing dual meets to the girls. Of course, wrestling

came so late that not every school could guarantee fielding full teams.

But any team that builds a resume of matches can apply for one of 10 at-large



Granada's S.J. Martin captured her second consecutive North Coast Section wrestling championship last season.

(Photo courtesy of Livermore-Granada Boosters)

is a great individual sport, pitting one opponent against the other. But when you add the team concept as well, it's fantastic."

Although NCS will run its first dual team championships, not all leagues, including the East Bay Athletic League (EBAL), will have automatic qualifying teams. That's because not all leagues had enough schools that could field full teams.

That's the case with the EBAL, according to Chubb and Baker, partially because NCS's decision to have a postseason tournament

bids, thus the two coaches have organized weekly tri-dual meets, which started Dec. 11 at Dublin. Six teams gather at one venue each week, with each getting in two matches.

Dublin split its two matches last week, with the Gaels losing to California 45-21 before beating Foothill 42-12.

"It was great to get everyone together all under one roof," Baker said. "This was just the beginning, and by the end of the regular season, hopefully a number of our teams will display

enough matches and quality wins to be selected as at-large teams to NCS."

Baker started coaching wrestling at Dublin 25 years ago, gave it up to focus on

females. During his first go-around, female wrestlers were something of a novelty. It's much different now.

"The advice given to me was the way to coach girls is

everyone trains the same."

Chubb, who grew up in Pleasanton, wrestled in the region since he was in fifth grade. He graduated from Amador Valley in 2013 and took over the program in 2017. The Amador Valley boys won the EBAL championship last season and finished fourth at NCS, with Luca Moore (fourth, 175 pounds), Noah Awad (fourth, 190), Nathan Marek (fourth, 132) and Jayden Wood (fifth, 215) all placing.

Chubb helped Amador Valley start a team in girls flag football, which is the nation's fastest-growing sport. Girls wrestling is near flag football in terms of growth, and Chubb sees the expansion to dual meets as a big part of that. Until the EBAL gets full commitment and organization from all its schools to run a season-long dual season, these weekly tri-meets are the best way to build resumes, according to Chubb.

"We want to continue to help grow the girls' experience in the sport," Chubb said. "Obviously, everyone in the sport understands the concept of setting goals to reach their full potential individually. When you add the team aspect, and getting better for even a greater good — the team — the experience is that much richer."

Marionettes Take Center Stage Among Retirement Community

By Dawnmarie Fehr

PLEASANTON — A troupe of marionette dolls is pulling all the right strings this month for residents in Pleasanton's Stoneridge Creek Retirement Community.

The Nutcracker-themed puppets belong to resident Steve Norman, who loaned the dolls for a holiday display in the community's main lobby. Norman said they were some of the first puppets made by his family's puppeteer business in the 1950s.

"My father, Eric, and my uncle, Len Piper, founded the National Puppet Theater, and it was the family business," Norman said. "These puppets are from one of the first shows they made."

Norman said in addition to the Nutcracker, the National Puppet Theater performed many fairytale classics and

operas, including "Peter and the Wolf," "Cinderella," and "The Pirates of Penzance."

"We would travel all over Wisconsin, Minnesota, Ohio, South Dakota a little bit, doing school assembly programs, and we even had a children's television show for a little while in Madison, Wisconsin," he added.

The Nutcracker marionettes on display were boxed up by Norman's father in 2000 when he retired. His daughter and her husband took over then, performing occasional shows with the dolls in San Jose. When the couple relocated to Europe, Steve took the dolls and began trotting them out on stage with his wife, Shannon.

The puppets are made from balsa wood and salsify, a heavy-duty papier-mâché, and each puppet ranges from 18 inches to

three feet tall. Every piece was handcrafted by the family right in its garage or living room. Norman said the dolls bring him back to his childhood, when his earliest memory is being put down for a nap in an open puppet trunk.

Stoneridge Creek spokesperson Susan Filice said the puppets trigger nostalgia for many of the community's residents.

"A lot of people have been by to see them," she said. "They come by and read the story and talk about the puppets and remember something from their childhood and it's been really fun, especially when they bring the grandkids by to see the puppets."

The display is not open to the public. For more information on Stoneridge Creek, visit www.stoneridgecreek.com.



Puppets belonging to resident Steve Norman are entertaining residents at Pleasanton's Stoneridge Creek Retirement Community this month. (Photo courtesy of Stoneridge Creek)

PLEASE HELP BRING MIGUEL HOME



Miguel Lopez left in the photo, next to his son, Julian Lopez, and his wife, Rosa Lopez.

Livermore Wente Winery worker, married father of three and grandfather

Miguel Lopez

remains in Mexico after having been illegally deported in early June.

To donate to a GoFundMe account supporting the Lopez family, visit

<https://www.gofundme.com/f/bring-miguel-back-to-his-loved-ones>

Local Soccer Teams Start Fast

By Mitch Stephens

TRI-VALLEY — The Tri-Valley portion of the East Bay Athletic League has been a haven for soccer fans for decades. By every indication, in early December, there's more promise and expertise than ever.

As of Dec. 13, the five boys teams from Livermore High School, Granada, Amador Valley, Foothill and Dublin were a combined 14-3-3, while girls teams from the same schools were 9-1-3.

The Dublin boys (4-1-1), who play at Las Lomas-Walnut Creek on Thursday, Dec. 18, have been the busiest of all teams, outscoring opponents 14-3. The team's only defeat was 1-0 to St. Mary's-Berkeley on Dec. 9. The top goal scorers for the Gaels are Damon Petithomme and Shishir Bahubali, with three goals each. Luke Hoshi has produced a spark at midfield.

Amador Valley's boys (4-1), who play at Liberty-Brentwood on Thursday, Dec. 18, have also been busy. The Dons have recorded two shutouts, 2-0 over Castro Valley and 1-0 against Arroyo-San Lorenzo. Their only loss was to Fremont-Oakland on Dec. 2.

The boys of Foothill (2-0-1), Granada (2-0-1) and Livermore (2-1) each had won two games entering this week.

More upcoming matches scheduled for Thursday, Dec. 18 are Vintage-Napa at Livermore, and on Saturday, Dec. 20, Foothill at Antioch, Dublin at Pittsburg and Amador Valley at Freedom-Oakley.

Girls Soccer

Dublin (3-0) and Granada (3-0-1) are the winningest girls teams in the early going.

Dublin has piled up 14 goals against four allowed. The Gaels travel to Las Lomas on Thursday, Dec. 18. Granada, which opened this week with a Dec. 16 game at Livermore (2-1-1), has excelled on the offensive end, with 24 goals against just two allowed, and none given up in its past three matches.

A 15-0 win over Irvington-Fremont padded Granada's stats as freshman Layla Twiss, sophomore Delaney Miskella and junior Jazmine Angel had two goals each. Harper Hopcus, Angelina Harris, Katy Hernandez, Cara Cheney and Addison Patubo also scored.

Foothill (1-0-1), the most recent Tri-Valley team to win NCS, in 2004, opened the season with a 4-2 victory over

Heritage-Brentwood as sophomore Alyssa Morales had two goals, and Peyton Hasty and Claire Young added goals.

Livermore rebounded from a tough

2-1 loss at Antioch with a 4-1 win over visiting Alameda on Dec. 13. Sophomore Shelby Sousa scored twice, while Allie Garrett and Kathya Lopez Tapia added goals. Bailey Becerra, Ashley Browning, Sousa and Rhiannon Stewart pitched in assists.

Upcoming matches include Granada hosting Archie Williams-San Anselmo on Saturday, Dec. 20. Dublin travels to Clayton Valley Charter-Concord the same day.

Learning Lessons

As featured here last week, Dublin girls basketball coach Jose Alvarez doesn't mind taking lumps if it translates to immediate progress. After a humbling 66-33, season-opening loss to defending state Division I champion Carondelet, the Gaels came back to dismantle Manteca (68-21) and Mountain House (68-24).

The same thing happened Dec. 11, when nationally ranked San Ramon Valley-Danville dominated Dublin 76-29. Two days later, the Gaels walloped Castro Valley 60-8.

In its three wins, Dublin has allowed 53 total points, or 17.6 per game. Senior guards Adrianna Chacon and Addison Leomiti, along with junior Makeala Beltran, are Dublin's leading scorers. The Gaels host Montgomery-Santa Rosa at 3:20 p.m. Friday, Dec. 19.

Tri-Valley girls teams are a combined 15-15, with the Gaels the only team above .500, though Foothill (3-3), Granada (3-3) and Amador Valley (4-4) had all broken even heading into the week. Megan Hoang (14.0) is Amador Valley's leading scorer, while Elah Clase (steals), Amirah Carrasco (3-point shooting) and Lucie Apar (rebounding) are other stat leaders for the Dons.

More upcoming games: Thursday, Dec. 18: Irvington-Fremont at Foothill; Rodriguez-Fairfield at Granada; Friday, Dec. 19: Washington-Fremont at Foothill; Livermore at Skyline-Oakland; Saturday, Dec. 20: Downey-Modesto at Livermore; Foothill at Tracy; Amador Valley at San Leandro; Liberty at Granada.

Have high school varsity sports news of note? A good human-interest story? Email Mitch Stephens at mitch@scorebooklive.com

Rotarians Host Annual Christmas Party

Dozens of young children and their families attended the annual CAPE Children's Christmas Party this month, hosted by the Rotarian Foundation of Livermore and volunteers from both the Rotary Club of Livermore and the Rotary Club of Livermore Valley.

The Community Association for Preschool Education (CAPE) is a nonprofit that provides early learning, family

services and school-readiness support, including Head Start, Early Head Start and State Preschool programs for families in eastern Alameda County.

During the annual holiday event, the children received personalized gifts and enjoyed the up-close comedy from three ventriloquists and their dummies who went table to table throughout the afternoon.

The children received stuffed animals, toys and

games, as well as books, sweatshirts, underwear and socks. They also had their pictures taken with Santa Claus.

This year's celebration was chaired by Rotarians Mark Hudson and Mary Anne Rosza.

The Rotarian Foundation of Livermore is the nonprofit arm of the Rotary Club of Livermore and the Rotary Club of Livermore Valley.



Santa pays an early visit during the annual CAPE Children's Christmas party hosted by the Rotary Club of Livermore. (Photo courtesy of Irv Stowers)

LEGAL NOTICES/CLASSIFIEDS

LEGAL NOTICES

FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT FILE NO. 619057

The following person(s) doing business as: Tabletop Builds, 1042 Spring Valley Cmn, Livermore, CA 94551 is hereby registered by the following owner(s): Christopher Lawson, 1042 Spring Valley Cmn, Livermore, CA 94551. This business is conducted by an individual. The date on which the registrant first commenced to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above: N/A. Signature of Registrant/s: Christopher Lawson, Owner. This statement was filed with the County Clerk of Alameda on November 19, 2025. Expires November 18, 2030. The Independent, Legal No. 6622. Published December 11, 18, 2025.

FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT FILE NO. 618777

The following person(s) doing business as: VibrantIME, 3842 Enos Ave, Oakland, CA 94619 is hereby registered by the following owner(s): VibrantIME, 3842 Enos Ave, Oakland, CA 94619. This business is conducted by a Limited Liability Company. The date on which the registrant first commenced to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above: 01/01/2025. Signature of Registrant/s: Jessica Hanserd, CEO. This statement was filed with the County Clerk of Alameda on November 10, 2025. Expires November 9, 2030. The Independent, Legal No. 6623. Published November 27, December 4, 11, 18, 2025.

FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT FILE NO. 618881

The following person(s) doing business as: Fresh Cut Christmas Trees, 2005 Valley Ave, Gate 8, Pleasanton, CA 94566 is hereby registered by the following owner(s): Pacific Construction Sales, Inc., 157 La Sonoma Way, Alamo, CA 94507. This business is conducted by a Corporation. The date on which the registrant first commenced to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above: N/A. Signature of Registrant/s: Kevin S. Cuny, President. This statement was filed with the County Clerk of Alameda on November 14, 2025. Expires November 13, 2030. The Independent, Legal No. 6624. Published December 4, 11, 18, 25, 2025.

FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT FILE NO. 619150

The following person(s) doing business as: Nicha Baby Care, 5501 Claremont Ave, APT C, Oakland, CA 94618 is hereby registered by the following owner(s): Nicha Goldman, 5501 Claremont Ave, APT C, Oakland, CA 94618. This business is conducted by an individual. The date on which the registrant first commenced to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above: N/A. Signature of Registrant/s: Nicha Goldman, Owner. This statement was filed with the County Clerk of Alameda on November 14, 2025. Expires November 13, 2030. The Independent, Legal No. 6625. Published December 4, 11, 18, 25, 2025.

FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT FILE NO. 618577

The following person(s) doing business as: 1. Grateful Collectibles LLC; 2. JLG; 3. James Lou Genetics; 4. Loud Clones, 22357 Mission Blvd, Hayward, CA 94541 is hereby registered by the following owner(s): Grateful Collectibles LLC, 1630 N. Main St #225, Walnut Creek, CA 94595. This business is conducted by a Limited Liability Company. The date on which the registrant first commenced to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above: 12/15/2022. Signature of Registrant/s: Jeanette Koskinen, Principal. This statement was filed with the County Clerk of Alameda on October 29, 2025. Expires October 28, 2030. The Independent, Legal No. 6626. Published December 4, 11, 18, 25, 2025.

FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT FILE NO. 618577

The following person(s) doing business as: 1. Grateful Collectibles LLC; 2. JLG; 3. James Lou Genetics; 4. Loud Clones, 22357 Mission Blvd, Hayward, CA 94541 is hereby registered by the following owner(s): Grateful Collectibles LLC, 1630 N. Main St #225, Walnut Creek, CA 94595. This business is conducted by a Limited Liability Company. The date on which the registrant first commenced to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above: 12/15/2022. Signature of Registrant/s: Jeanette Koskinen, Principal. This statement was filed with the County Clerk of Alameda on October 29, 2025. Expires October 28, 2030. The Independent, Legal No. 6626. Published December 4, 11, 18, 25, 2025.

FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT FILE NO. 618955

The following person(s) doing business as: 1. Bayablec; 2. Bayablec Custom Interconnects,

Dublin, CA 94568. This business is conducted by an individual. The date on which the registrant first commenced to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above: 7/11/1997. Signature of Registrant/s: Thomas George Evans, Sole Proprietor. This statement was filed with the County Clerk of Alameda on December 2, 2025. Expires December 1, 2030. The Independent, Legal No. 6631. Published December 11, 18, 25, January 1, 2026.

FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT FILE NO. 618795

The following person(s) doing business as: Crown Thrift, 526 7th St, Oakland, CA 94607 is hereby registered by the following owner(s): David A. Ascencio, 170 7th St, Oakland, CA 94607; Eva Heredia Ambriz, 170 7th St, Oakland, CA 94607. This business is conducted by a Married Couple. The date on which the registrant first commenced to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above: N/A. Signature of Registrant/s: David Ascencio, Owner. This statement was filed with the County Clerk of Alameda on November 10, 2025. Expires November 9, 2030. The Independent, Legal No. 6632. Published December 11, 18, 25, January 1, 2026.

FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT FILE NO. 619172

The following person(s) doing business as: ALT Reporting Services, 6488 Paseo Santa Cruz, Pleasanton, CA 94566 is hereby registered by the following owner(s): Audrey Philippe, 6488 Paseo Santa Cruz, Pleasanton, CA 94566. This business is conducted by an individual. The date on which the registrant first commenced to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above: 7/25/2007. Signature of Registrant/s: Audrey Philippe, Owner. This statement was filed with the County Clerk of Alameda on December 1, 2025. Expires November 30, 2030. The Independent, Legal No. 6633. Published December 11, 18, 25, January 1, 2026.

FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT FILE NO. 619134

The following person(s) doing business as: 645 N Livermore, 645 N. Livermore, Livermore, CA 94551 is hereby registered by the following owner(s): Albert Wilcox, 1201 Creek Trail, Pleasanton, CA 94566. This business is conducted by an individual. The date on which the registrant first commenced to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above: 10/19/82. Signature of Registrant/s: Albert Wilcox, Owner. This statement was filed with the County Clerk of Alameda on November 25, 2025. Expires November 24, 2030. The Independent, Legal No. 6634. Published December 11, 18, 25, January 1, 2026.

FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT FILE NO. 619169

The following person(s) doing business as: Global Education Strategies, 1123 Glen Drive, San Leandro, CA 94577 is hereby registered by the following owner(s): Catherine M. Eagan, 1123 Glen Drive, San Leandro, CA 94577. This business is conducted by an individual. The date on which the registrant first commenced to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above: N/A. Signature of Registrant/s: Catherine M. Eagan, Sole Proprietor. This statement was filed with the County Clerk of Alameda on October 29, 2025. Expires October 28, 2030. The Independent, Legal No. 6635. Published December 4, 11, 18, 25, January 1, 2026.

FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT FILE NO. 619215

The following person(s) doing business as: Off Ramp Music, 7814 Alto Way, Dublin, CA 94568 is hereby registered by the following owner(s): Thomas George Evans, 7814 Alto Way,

business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above: N/A. Signature of Registrant/s: Catherine M. Eagan, Owner. This statement was filed with the County Clerk of Alameda on December 1, 2025. Expires November 30, 2030. The Independent, Legal No. 6635. Published December 11, 18, 25, January 1, 2026.

FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT FILE NO. 619102

The following person(s) doing business as: Shamiyah Plaza, 379 South Livermore Drive, Livermore, CA 94550 is hereby registered by the following owner(s): Anis Shamiyah, PO Box 254, Lafayette, CA 94549; Cheryl Shamiyah, PO Box 254, Lafayette, CA 94549; 3. Tarick Shamiyah, PO Box 254, Lafayette, CA 94549; 4. Michele Gunnert, PO Box 254, Lafayette, CA 94549. This business is conducted by a Corporation. The date on which the registrant first commenced to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above: 1/1/2025. Signature of Registrant/s: Michele Gunnert, General Partner. This statement was filed with the County Clerk of Alameda on December 8, 2025. Expires December 7, 2030. The Independent, Legal No. 6642. Published December 18, 25, January 1, 2026.

FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT FILE NO. 619384

The following person(s) doing business as: 1. D.L. Marketing; 2. Tesla Real Estate Group; 3. All Pro Mortgage, 167 S P St, STE C, Livermore, CA 94550 is hereby registered by the following owner(s): All Pro Mortgage, Inc., 167 S P St, STE C Livermore, CA 94546 is hereby registered by the following owner(s): Christopher Yee, 1626 Vancouver Way, Livermore, CA 94550. This business is conducted by a Married Couple. The date on which the registrant first commenced to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above: 1/1/2025. Signature of Registrant/s: Christopher Yee, General Partner. This statement was filed with the County Clerk of Alameda on December 4, 2025. Expires December 3, 2030. The Independent, Legal No. 6640. Published December 18, 25, January 1, 2026.

FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT FILE NO. 619363

The following person(s) doing business as: Frugal Finds by Arukah, 1072 Batavia Ave, Livermore, CA 94550 is hereby registered by the following owner(s): Arukah, 1072 Batavia Ave, Livermore, CA 94550. This business is conducted by a Corporation. The date on which the registrant first commenced to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above: N/A. Signature of Registrant/s: Joshua Jonas, Executive Director. This statement was filed with the County Clerk of Alameda on December 9, 2025. Expires December 8, 2030. The Independent, Legal No. 6641. Published December 18, 25, January 1, 2026.

FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT FILE NO. 619331

The following person(s) doing business as: Sandra Zavala-Garcia, LCSW Therapy, 4435 First St #261, Livermore, CA 94551-2215 is hereby registered by the following owner(s): Sandra Y. Zavala-Garcia, 4435 First St #261, Livermore, CA 94551. This business is conducted by an individual. The date on which the registrant first commenced to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above: 6/03/1993. Signature of Registrant/s: Mike S. Pauselius, Owner. This statement was filed with the County Clerk of Alameda on December 10, 2025. Expires December 9, 2030. The Independent, Legal No. 6639. Published December 18, 25, January 1, 2026.

FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT FILE NO. 619331

The following person(s) doing business as: 1. D.L. Marketing; 2. Tesla Real Estate Group; 3. All Pro Mortgage, 167 S P St, STE C, Livermore, CA 94550 is hereby registered by the following owner(s): Christopher Yee, 1626 Vancouver Way, Livermore, CA 94550. This business is conducted by a Married Couple. The date on which the registrant first commenced to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above: 1/1/2025. Signature of Registrant/s: Michele Gunnert, General Partner. This statement was filed with the County Clerk of Alameda on December 4, 2025. Expires December 3, 2030. The Independent, Legal No. 6640. Published December 18, 25, January 1, 2026.

FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT FILE NO. 619384

The following person(s) doing business as: 1. Tri-Valley Auto Interiors; 2. Tri-Valley Auto Upholstery, 3723 Old Santa Rita Rd #9-10 Pleasanton, CA 94588. This business is conducted by an individual. The date on which the registrant first commenced to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above: N/A. Signature of Registrant/s: Mike S. Pauselius, 7941 Applewood Ct, Pleasanton, CA 94588. This statement was filed with the County Clerk of Alameda on December 2, 2025. Expires December 1, 2030. The Independent, Legal No. 6638. Published December 18, 25, January 1, 2026.

FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT FILE NO. 619384

The following person(s) doing business as: 1. D.L. Marketing; 2. Tesla Real Estate Group; 3. All Pro Mortgage, 167 S P St, STE C, Livermore, CA 94550 is hereby registered by the following owner(s): Christopher Yee, 1626 Vancouver Way, Livermore, CA 94550. This business is conducted by a Married Couple. The date on which the registrant first commenced to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above: 1/1/2025. Signature of Registrant/s: Michele Gunnert, General Partner. This statement was filed with the County Clerk of Alameda on December 4, 2025. Expires December 3, 2030. The Independent, Legal No. 6640. Published December 18, 25, January 1, 2026.

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TVNPA Program Pushes Collaboration and Cooperation

By Vivien Wenneker

LIVERMORE — The Tri-Valley Nonprofit Alliance (TVNPA) hosted a Dec. 11 presentation at the Bankhead Theater, with leaders from some of the region's largest nonprofits discussing the power of collaboration in building a stronger community.

Led by Melanie Sadek, the CEO of Valley Humane Society (VHS), the presentation was titled, "Stronger Side by Side: The Transformative Power of Nonprofit Collaboration," and was part of TVNPA's monthly education program.

Sadek highlighted the value of forming partnerships and how crucial collaboration is in effecting long-term change, especially legislatively.

"You can't work in Sacramento and advocate without collaboration," Sadek said. "If you're just an individual going in and trying to make an impact, it's pretty impossible. I don't want to say that individuals can't make an impact, but it's really much harder when you're trying to do it on your own, and so a lot of collaboration has to be done to make positive change."

Having experienced every phase of nonprofit life, Sadek also emphasized that making a difference has nothing to do with the size, but rather the strength that comes from partnering with other local nonprofits that share a similar mission and viewing them as allies rather than competitors.

"I believe that regardless of where you are in the nonprofit world, all of us have a relationship with each other," Sadek said. "We can touch each other in some way — we may not all be aligned, but we have some really great examples of partnership going on currently in our own community."

In pointing to examples of collaboration that VHS has conducted with other Tri-Valley nonprofits, Sadek mentioned its partnership with Open Heart Kitchen (OHK) through its AniMeals pet food pantry. The AniMeals program assists low-income pet owners in keeping their animals at home by redistributing donated dog and cat food within the community free of charge in the form of hundreds of thousands of pet meals, according to Valley Humane's website.

Sadek said that often, rather than giving up their much-loved animals, low-income people unable to afford pet food will give their pets human food and are hesitant to seek help in fear that their animals will be taken away.

By understanding the underlying causes of this issue and isolating their area of expertise — supplying pet



Melanie Sadek

food — VHS was better able to tackle it. The organization has been partnering with OHK for several years to get pet food to people in need, and regularly distributes it at OHK locations or alongside their human food services.

"When we work together, we can be more strategic, increase our impact, share the workload and also specialize in the area that we are experts

in," Sadek emphasized. "For example, with our AniMeals program, it doesn't make sense that another nonprofit has a pet-food pantry if their expertise is in feeding humans."

While the Tri-Valley doesn't share some of the issues that affect larger communities, Sadek said that the region still has long way to go in terms of fostering an environment of collaboration, rather than competition. She is often shocked at the amount of nonprofits operating in a single community that share the same mission but are not working together.

In animal welfare, for example, there are more than 200 nonprofit organizations in Alameda and Contra Costa counties, and well more than 4,000 in the state of California, according to Sadek. Even then, however, all of them working collectively cannot stop the homeless animal population crisis.

"We can only make a sizable impact when we work together, and so seeing each other as competition is not effective," Sadek said. "Ultimately, nobody wins, especially in a competitive environment when you're talking

about nonprofits."

The presentation ended with a Q&A session that gave nonprofit leaders and community members the chance to discuss and share useful tips for collaboration.

Livermore Valley Arts (LVA) Executive Director Chris Carter touched on LVA's recent collaboration with SPARC Theater, which will bring The Glass Menagerie, SPARC's first production to be staged at the Bankhead Theater, to Livermore in May.

In other contexts, Carter said that these two companies might be seen as rivals, but through coming together, they can build each other up in ways that are beneficial for both, while still serving the community.

In closing, TVNPA President Kathy Young reiterated the organization's commitment to building a vibrant, inclusive nonprofit community and uplifting its membership.

"This is such a great, well-wounded group of nonprofits here that it might seem unlikely that we could all work together, but we can," Young said. "Nonprofits are tackling some of the biggest issues of our time — homelessness, hunger, animal welfare, education and public health. But the good news is we don't have to face them alone."

To learn more about TVNPA's work and its monthly education program, visit: <https://tvnpa.org/>.



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Registration Open for Tri-Valley's 10th Edition of Special-Needs Prom Night

By Vivien Wenneker

PLEASANTON — Registration for the Tri-Valley's annual "Night to Shine" (NTS) event is officially open, with the date set for Friday, Feb. 13 at the Blue Oaks Church in Pleasanton.

It will mark the 10th year of NTS in the Tri-Valley. The worldwide prom night is for people 14 and older with special needs. The first event was held in 2016 at the Sunset Community Church in Pleasanton.

Since then, the event has expanded significantly, attracting hundreds of participants and volunteers each year. In 2017, NTS Tri-Valley was moved to the Alameda County Fairgrounds to accommodate the increased number of guests and volunteers. It remained there until 2025, when it was shifted to the Blue Oaks Church.

"NTS Tri-Valley is a labor of love that spreads joy to all our honored guests with special needs, as well as the volunteers," Blue Oaks Pastor Joe Hartley said. "It may well be the largest volunteer event in the Tri-Valley, because every honored guest is paired with a buddy volunteer for the evening to enjoy all that the event has to offer."

Now an international event, NTS was started in 2015 by the Tim Tebow Foundation to celebrate and honor individuals with disabilities. What began as a special, one-night event has grown into a global movement for inclusion and is held each year on the Friday before Valentine's Day. Last year, NTS was celebrated by 822 host churches across all 50 U.S. states and 63 countries, according to the foundation's website.

Although NTS events vary

from city to city, common features among many include a red-carpet entrance with paparazzi, shoeshines, limousine rides, karaoke, gifts, a catered dinner, a sensory room, a respite room for parents and caregivers, dancing and king and queen "crownings" for all guests.

"I heard about NTS eight years ago and started volunteering then," said Jaycee Spence, a long-time volunteer for NHS Tri-Valley. "I also recruited my 14-year-old granddaughter, Alissa, who still helps me every year doing hair and makeup. We have a passion for special-needs participants and strive to give them a wonderful experience, and love the joy and smiles on their faces after they see their hair and makeup finished."

Last year, Spence volunteered to become the leader of hair and makeup, and brought for the first time hair and makeup services free of charge from local salons. Wendy Cooper, the owner of "Classic Images" in Livermore, will be hosting again this year, along with Brianna Castro, owner of "Nine to Five" in Pleasanton, and Jerome Fahnhorst, owner of the "Barber Emporium" in Livermore.

"I'm hoping in 2026 to have more middle school and high school participants sign up," Spence said. "It takes a volunteer army to make this happen!"

The church began planning for NTS in September, with more than 20 volunteer teams, according to Hartley. Even though the event is similar every year, Hartley said there are always changes made to try and make the experience even more special for the guests and volunteers.

"The event is 100% locally funded, so we start early trying

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