

# The North Coast

## Wildfire smoke to stick around a while

**SONOMA COUNTY »** Air quality will remain poor through end of the week

By **MADISON SMALSTIG**  
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Air quality is expected to remain at poor levels through the

end of the week as smoke continues to funnel into the region from fires burning in Northern California, weather officials said.

By 11 a.m. Thursday, most of Sonoma County had an air quality index ranging from the lower 100s to about 150, mimicking numbers from the previous day,

according to PurpleAir. Windsor had a citywide average of 160.

Between 101 to 150, members of sensitive groups, such as older adults or those with asthma, could experience negative health effects. At 151, all residents may face adverse effects.

Sonoma County extended its

health advisory, initially issued for Tuesday, through Thursday due to the continued prevalence of the smoke.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District also extended its Spare the Air alert, which bans using wood-burning devices, through Friday.

The smoke was not expected

to dissipate Thursday, National Weather Service meteorologist Sarah McCorkle said. Rather, it was expected to increase due to northerly winds.

More smoke appeared in the area and stuck closer to the ground into Thursday evening.

**TURN TO SMOKE » PAGE A4**

## SANTA ROSA » MONTGOMERY HIGH SENIOR HAS BIG DREAMS



SCREENSHOT FROM YOUTUBE VIDEO BY GUITARSO5000

Ryan Woodard, 16, sings "Gravity" by John Mayer outside of the Anaheim Convention Center in April.

## Teen becomes viral sensation

Young singer catches attention of Grammy-winning artist John Mayer

By **ALANA MINKLER**  
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

In the YouTube video, it's a sunny April day outside the bustling Anaheim Convention Center. A man in a red shirt holding a guitar stands next to a chalkboard sign that reads "sing with me for free."

Ryan Woodard, 16, a Montgomery High School senior from Santa Rosa with autism, approaches.

He asks to sing "Gravity" by John Mayer, his favorite artist. Ryan had traveled to Los Angeles to see Mayer live at the Kia Forum in Inglewood before heading to the 2023 NAMM Show in Anaheim.

Ryan begins to sing and his voice — smooth, free-flowing, confident, almost exactly like Mayer himself — seems to surprise people passing by.

His mom, Laura Woodard, cheers proudly from the side, reveling in the moment.

Afterward, the man in red asks him "So now that you sang, how do you feel?"

"Great," Ryan says, a huge smile on his face.

The moment was caught in a YouTube video uploaded by the man in the red shirt, Reginald Guillaume, a solo musician and YouTuber who goes by his username Guitaro 5000.

Since it was uploaded three months ago, the video has amassed more than 6.5

million views. One of those was from a certain Grammy Award winner himself.

Ryan's story

"When I ask total strangers to sing, part of the fun of it is learning more about who they are," Guillaume says in his YouTube video. "What you'll see here is me meeting Ryan for the first time. However, it was our conversation after this moment that I learned something very interesting about him."

What he learned is that Ryan was diagnosed with autism at age 3 and was nonverbal until age 10, meaning he talked very little. Around 25 to 30% of people

**TURN TO SINGER » PAGE A5**

## Grant funding targets thieves

**SONOMA COUNTY »** DA says \$2M will be used to focus on organized theft

By **SARA EDWARDS**  
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Organized retail theft has haunted big box retailers and business owners across the country.

Videos of groups or individuals smashing display cases and store windows before grabbing as much merchandise as possible and rushing out have flooded social media, leaving retailers wondering what they can do to mitigate these crimes.

Multiple law enforcement agencies across California, including the Sonoma County District Attorney's Office, received grant funding from the State of California's Organized Retail Theft Grant Program administered by the Board of State and Community Corrections.

The Sonoma County District Attorney's Office is one of the 12 prosecutor's offices and 38 law enforcement agencies to be chosen for the grant and will receive just over \$2 million beginning Oct. 1 and lasting through Sept. 30, 2026.

The office announced in a news release Monday that it will receive \$2.05 million in grant money, which will be used to hire a prosecutor focused on organized retail theft cases in the county.

The prosecutor will also work with local law enforcement,

**TURN TO GRANT » PAGE A4**

## Police: Missing woman may be in SF, Sacramento

Valerie McCauley, 64, has disappeared before and may have 'cognitive issues'

By **DON FRANCES**  
PETALUMA ARGUS-COURIER

A Petaluma woman missing since late August is still missing, police say, and the ongoing search for her has widened into a regional one.

Valerie McCauley, 64, was seen Aug. 30 at around 9 p.m., walking in the 1400 block of Mountain View Avenue in Petaluma, according to authorities. At the time of her disappearance, police said McCauley "had spoken about going to San Francisco, without a specific destination."

This week, Petaluma police Deputy Chief Brian Miller confirmed McCauley is still missing, and added that authorities have widened the search to include other California cities.

"We believe she may be in San Francisco or Sacramento based on her previously frequenting those areas," Miller said. "We have assigned the case to our Investigations Team and they have connected with both those departments and their missing person units."

In addition, Miller said, "We have issued a missing person bulletin to all agencies in the region and entered her in the national missing person system."

Miller said McCauley has a history of leaving her residence and disappearing,

**TURN TO MISSING » PAGE A4**



PETALUMA POLICE DEPARTMENT

Petaluma police are asking for the public's help in finding Valerie McCauley, an at-risk woman last seen walking down Mountain View Avenue on the night of Aug. 30.

### CERES COMMUNITY PROJECT

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PHOTOS BY KENT PORTER / THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Ryan Woodard, a Montgomery High School senior, uses a guitar given to him by recording artist and Grammy Award-winner John Mayer to rehearse on Wednesday in Santa Rosa.

## SINGER

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diagnosed with autism are considered nonverbal.

When he was a kid, Ryan's parents, Travis and Laura Woodard, tried everything they could to get their son engaged in something. Nothing really stuck. For a while, Ryan's main interest was trains, something many kids with autism find visually stimulating.

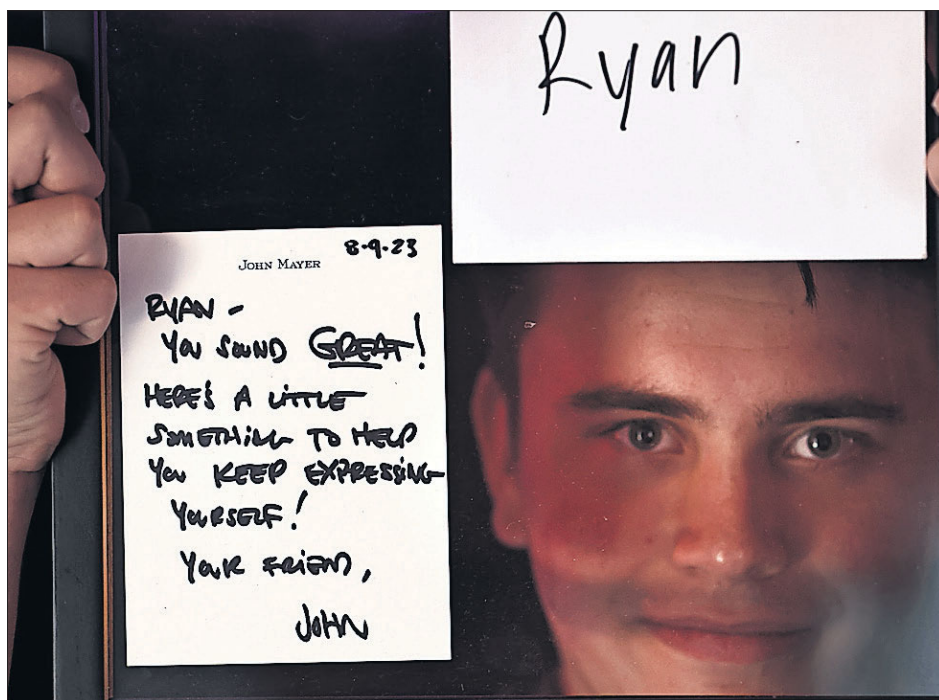
Around age 8, Ryan began to listen to The Beatles obsessively for about a year. Then it was Michael Jackson.

"What helped me a lot was listening to songs and listening to lyrics and that's how music made me feel more verbal and made me feel more confident," Ryan said.

Around age 9, Ryan took off with the video games Guitar Hero and Rocksmith. He got better and better, so his parents enrolled him in guitar lessons, hoping this would be his launching point.

It was. He learned hundreds of songs in a matter of months. His ability to speak also improved and by age 10 he was no longer considered nonverbal, though he still struggles to communicate sometimes.

Since then, Ryan has learned how to play seven instruments: guitar, bass, keyboard, drums, ukulele, harmonica and mandolin. Though he considers guitar his strongest, his vocal abilities are steadily



Ryan Woodard, a Montgomery High School senior, displays a handwritten note from Grammy Award-winner John Mayer, Wednesday at his Santa Rosa home.

improving and gaining more attention.

His dad, Travis, also took it upon himself to learn professional sound and lighting to support his son's music gigs, starting his own sound company Ryan Woodard Rocks Productions. His parents also built Ryan his own home music studio to practice in.

It began to pay off. In 2018, Ryan was invited onstage to jam with blues legend Buddy Guy at Santa Rosa's Luther Burbank Center, a spontaneous performance that received local attention.

Ryan has now done more than 60 gigs between solo performances, the Ryan Woodard Band and the Santa Rosa School of

Rock's House Band. He is now touring the country with the School of Rock's AllStars, a selected group of high-level students.

Travis Woodard says listening, learning and playing music occupies almost every minute of Ryan's life, from morning to late night and weekends.

"He works every day at it, and doesn't do anything else," Woodard said. "He doesn't play video games. He doesn't watch TV. He listens to music and he plays music. There's nothing else he does."

"I never get tired of it," Ryan said.

### A not-so-mysterious package

About two months after

Ryan's April performance, a large package arrived on the Woodard family's doorstep.

Printed onto the cardboard box in green is "C.F. Martin & Company," an American guitar manufacturer that John Mayer has worked closely with for two decades as their signature artist.

His mom caught Ryan's reaction in a video she uploaded to TikTok.

"Oh my gosh," Ryan says as his eyes widen, realizing what the package is. "It's a guitar."

He carefully opens the case, revealing a yellow acoustic guitar.

He picks up the instrument and there's a note. His mom squeals and Ryan



A label inside Ryan Woodard's guitar states it is an original from Grammy Award-winner John Mayer.

shouts "oh, oh my gosh" even louder this time.

The note reads: "Ryan - You sound great! Here's a little something to help you keep expressing yourself! Your friend, John."

In a stunned, happy state, Ryan immediately begins to tune the guitar and strum Mayer's song "Heart of Life."

"That letter meant a lot to me in my life," Ryan told The Press Democrat, "because he's my influence for songwriting."

Ryan has written five original songs for his first EP, which he plans to release this winter.

One of his songs "Heartbreak Fighting" is about Jayden Pienta, the 16-year-old Montgomery High student who died in an on-campus stabbing last March, and someone who was always kind to Ryan. Another song, "Going Once, Going Twice," is about how the world

would be a better place if people treated each other with kindness and respect.

The 16-year-old has big dreams.

He wants to work with other famous artists.

He wants to win a big award for one of his songs.

Most of all, Ryan wants to be an advocate for kids with disabilities.

One of those goals has already been accomplished. Among thousands of comments on videos of Ryan's impromptu performance, many people say his story touched them deeply. Parents with nonverbal children commented that it's given them hope.

"It feels special to sing," Ryan said. "I feel the emotions. It makes me happy."

You can reach Staff Writer Alana Minkler at 707-526-8531 or [alana.minkler@pressdemocrat.com](mailto:alana.minkler@pressdemocrat.com).

## Petaluma woman suspected of punching and strangling dog

By MADISON SMALSTIG  
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

A Petaluma woman was arrested last week in Cotati after a resident witnessed her punching and strangling a dog with a leash, police said.

The Cotati Police Department received a call about 8:40 p.m. Sept. 14 reporting a woman was hurting a small dog in a storage facility in the 400 block of Houser Street, Sgt. Paul Goodin said Thursday.

Police responded to the facility and located the woman, who backed away from officers and refused to give her name.

The woman, later identified as 54-year-old Melis-

sa Schmidt, was arrested on suspicion of a felony charge of animal cruelty and misdemeanor resisting arrest.

The dog was taken to Rohnert Park Animal Services.

Schmidt is being held in Sonoma County jail in Santa Rosa in lieu of \$20,000 bail.

A court date has been set for 8:30 a.m. Oct. 9 in Sonoma County Superior Court. Charges have not been filed by the Sonoma County District Attorney's office.

You can reach Staff Writer Madison Smalstig at [madi-smalstig@pressdemocrat.com](mailto:madi-smalstig@pressdemocrat.com). On Twitter @ [madi.smals](https://twitter.com/madi.smals).

## Law removing guns from people under restraining orders survives

By KEVIN RECTOR  
LOS ANGELES TIMES

A California law that bars people who are under restraining orders from possessing firearms survived a federal court challenge on procedural grounds Thursday, marking a win for gun control advocates.

A split panel of the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled 2 to 1 that Huntington Beach couple Miranda and Richard Wallingford's challenge to the law was moot — or no longer legally viable — because the restraining order at the heart of their case had lapsed and they are no longer barred from possessing guns.

The decision leaves California's law intact at

a time when other state weapons laws are being dismantled in the wake of a U.S. Supreme Court decision last year that upended 2nd Amendment jurisprudence nationwide.

Alexander Frank, an attorney for the Wallingfords, said he and his clients were disheartened that the court had avoided the couple's underlying claim that their "fundamental liberties" under the 2nd Amendment right to bear arms were being violated.

"Obviously we're disappointed that the 9th Circuit decided to punt it on mootness," Frank said. "It's a rights issue that goes beyond the parties in the case."

California Atty. Gen.

Rob Bonta's office, which had been defending the state in the case, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Wallingfords have had a tense relationship with their neighbor Jessica Nguyen for years, and the neighbors have filed dueling harassment allegations in Orange County courts. Restraining orders were issued against both parties in 2019, and the Wallingfords had to give up their firearms as a result — prompting their lawsuit.

The Wallingfords had argued that the state law was unconstitutional because it stripped them of their 2nd Amendment rights without any requirement that they be shown to be a danger.

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