

THE TOWNE LOCAL

Chula Vista



LIGHTS!
CAMERA!
ACTION!

MARCH 2026 | ISSUE 6

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The Heart & Soul of the
SOUTH BAY

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"Flourish 2" by Vanessa Moreno

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March 2026



JEFF BETTGER
PUBLISHING DIRECTOR

Sometimes, when the present becomes too overwhelming, we have to stop and look to the past and to the future to regain our balance. What was good? What can be good?

Peter Crivello, owner of Napoleone’s Pizza House and Napoleone’s Italian Market told me, “I don’t consider myself as being in the pizza business, I’m in the memory-making business.” Thank you Peter. We need happy memories.

Michael Falcon of Raspados Shave Ice brought together his favorite things--shave ice, ice cream, and art. Raspados provides a chill vibe in which to ponder artists’ work and enjoy sweet treats with friends. Thank you Michael. We need a place to relax.

Take a break. You deserve it. Sit down and enjoy this issue. Painting, athletics, museums, school field trips, film festivals, and a new world of film production. It can all be found in this issue.

Find additional video content on our social media platforms. Search for **Chula Vista Magazine** on Facebook, Instagram and Youtube.

Do you have an idea for a future story? Please feel free to contact me at Jeff@TheTowneLocal.com



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Small, but mighty

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THE MEMORY MAKING BUSINESS

NAPOLEONE'S ITALIAN MARKET

By Jeff Bettger
Photos by Yanelli Zavina Robles

During COVID, dining out at your favorite restaurants became difficult, if not impossible. So we all had to learn to cook. Valuable knowledge was quickly acquired. Overcooking meat makes it dry. Undercooking vegetables leaves them crunchy. But most important of all, poor quality ingredients produce less than desirable dishes. Peter Crivello, owner of the legendary Napoleone's Pizza House on National City Blvd, has solved that problem for us with the newly opened Napoleone's Italian Market.

JEFF BETTGER: Peter, tell us about how both businesses began.

PETER CRIVELLO: My family opened Napoleone's Pizza House in 1958. I'm the third-generation owner from my uncle's to my father to myself. A true family business. My father is 82 and still helps out at the restaurant. It's been something special to be able to work with him for four decades.

JEFF: I'm curious, what is your best selling pizza toppings? I'm a sausage and mushroom guy myself.

PETER: Our three top sellers are pepperoni, the works and the meat lovers, but the new creations are gaining traction. We make everything fresh in house daily, from our dough and sauces to our meatballs and Italian sausage. It's the hardest way possible but for us it's the only way.

Since 1958 our mission has been to honor our Sicilian roots by serving authentic family recipes made with love and quality ingredients. We welcome our guests as family and stay true to what has defined us for generations. Heavy handed portions, top quality food, and welcoming customer service.

I've seen the city grow through the generations and I am excited about the direction it's heading. Throughout all the changes one thing has remained constant and that's the support we receive from our community. We are on the fourth generation of some of the same families coming in and growing up with us. I probably know 60% of our customers by name.

JEFF: I love hearing your story, Peter. I also grew up working for my parent's carpet business. I have so many fond memories. Speaking of changes, it seems to me that the South Bay is really going through a revival these days with the new Gaylord Pacific Resort and Convention Center, and other new projects.

PETER: For sure. The city is moving in the right direction and there is a lot of opportunity in the South Bay for small businesses either starting up or expanding.

JEFF: I want to go back a couple of years. COVID ruined so many great businesses. How did you survive?

PETER: The pandemic was challenging for us like it was for everyone. But we made it through and learned some important lessons. We really looked at our numbers. I think the key was to adapt or die. Being a pizza house, it was easier for us to do deliveries than say a steakhouse. But after the pandemic, I was happy to see that our ratio of in-house to delivery customers was about the same as before the pandemic. I like everybody coming in. I like to see the faces. I like chatting them up and just to see how everyone's doing. I don't feel that I'm in the pizza business at all. I feel that I'm in the memory making business because we've been here for so long.

And now we're in a growth stage. We are moving forward and trying to bring more high-quality products to our customers. They trust our pizza and so now we're going to give them some more Italian fare. We've just opened Napoleone's Italian Market next door.

JEFF: What a great idea. Now your customers can come enjoy freshly prepared food or take home great ingredients and create their own culinary creations.

PETER: Yes, we realized there were no Italian markets in the South Bay. The nearest one being in Little Italy. I had this property adjacent to the Pizza House since before the pandemic. My plan was always to open an Italian market, but with the pandemic, I had to wait and be patient. Now, finally after working on it for the past 18 months, we are open and I couldn't be prouder.

JEFF: Tell us what customers can find here.

PETER: We are an Italian market selling a wide variety of food. We are a full-service deli selling sandwiches and lunch meats by the pound. We offer espresso. We are also a full-service bakery

making Italian cookies, Italian cakes, and desserts. We are excited to begin offering gelato soon and also a breakfast menu.

JEFF: Tell me about the sandwiches.

PETER: We offer a wide variety of Italian subs with imported meats and cheese sliced to order, deli sandwiches, and pressed paninis.

JEFF: Looking at the store shelves, I see a wide variety of imported pastas, olive oils, tomato products and more. Why do you recommend home chefs use these products rather than those found in a supermarket?

PETER: Well Jeff, it's a matter of quality. We are a specialty Italian import store focusing on products you wouldn't find on your typical grocery store shelf. From our imported meats and cheese, freshly baked Italian pastries, Italian cookies and hard to find retail items like olive oil, sauces, tomato products, you name it. You can get our dough balls and catering trays to "take and bake" or you can find all the ingredients you would need to create a real Sicilian Sunday dinner. If we don't have it, we can get it. That's the fun part, creating something together with our customers.

JEFF: It's wonderful seeing your business expand and learning about its history. When I arrived today, I went over to the Pizza House and heard the cashier taking a reservation for a party of 30 later that afternoon! Your staff is so friendly and welcoming. I can see why your customers keep coming back. Thank you again Peter and here's to many more years of success at Napoleone's Pizza House and Napoleone's Italian Market.

PETER: Thank you Jeff. It's been a pleasure talking with you and sharing our story. I'm excited for our regulars to read about our history and I'm excited to meet some new faces and learn some new names.



SOARING WITHOUT SIGHT

PARALYMPIC CHAMPION LEX GILLETTE

By Catrice Chan

Photos provided by Lex Gillette

It is easy to search for someone on social media and learn about their life. You can find a list of facts, dates, and achievements. However, it is a completely different and oftentimes transformative experience when we meet them in person. That is especially true when that someone is Lex Gillette. Lex Gillette is a blind Paralympic long jumper who, within the span of his twenty-plus career, has won a silver medal in the past five Paralympic Games. Within the first few moments of talking with Gillette, you know you will never forget him. His pleasant personality makes talking to him very comfortable, and his tall, thin frame gives the impression of a natural athlete.

Gillette was only eight years old when he became permanently blind. Losing the ability to see would forever change his life, but this did not stop him from soaring past limits. Instead, he has proven that sight is not a requirement for success. Today, he is training at the Chula Vista Elite Athlete Training Center in preparation for the 2028 LA Paralympic Games.

THE START OF HIS JOURNEY

Born in Kinston, North Carolina and raised in Raleigh, Gillette graduated from East Carolina University. In February 2008, he moved to Chula Vista after receiving an invitation to train at the Chula Vista Elite Athlete Training Center, home to some of the nation's most promising athletes. Stepping onto campus for



the first time was a unique and exhilarating experience.

“I’m blind, so it was a lot of just observing, trying to understand the campus, learning, meeting people, learning where all of the facilities were, just understanding the whole ebbs and flow of being on the complex,” Gillette explained.

He soon discovered the abundance of resources and support that the Center provides. Over the years, he has witnessed the evolution of hydration tests, sleep studies, technology, coaching, and equipment.

“Coming to a facility that is fully devoted to helping athletes, having access to the coaches, having access to sports med, to the weight room, to the cafeteria, to all of these different

things in one centralized location, that was amazing,” Gillette said appreciatively. “You have the chiropractors, the massage therapist, the acupuncturist, the physical therapist, all of these people who are helping you to be able to show up to that track or arena or whatever field of play, ready to train at a high level.”



the years before and after the Paralympics. Breaks are typically around September and October. Gillette uses this time to return home while still remaining active by jogging or biking.

Long jump is a track and field event that requires technique, speed, strength, and explosive power. Knowing when to jump without being able to see may seem impossible. His guide, Jerome Avery, and Gillette have worked out a system in which Avery claps and shouts the word “FLY” at an increasingly faster rate as Gillette reaches the board to jump. Landing is another story. “It’s like a guessing game,” Gillette explained. “As someone who can’t see, you don’t know exactly when the ground is

coming, but you have an idea. And so we just work on that technique as best as possible.” He adds that he lands feet first into the sandpit. “As soon as my feet hit the ground, I make sure that I get as close to my feet as possible with the rest of my body.”

As part of his

WHY CHASE THE PARALYMPIC DREAM?

While most high schoolers were living a typical teenage life, Gillette was preparing for his first Paralympic Games. As a teenager, he remembered listening to veterans share exciting stories about traveling around the world, winning medals, breaking records, and representing their country. “You start hearing all of those things and it’s like, listen, I want to experience all of that,” Gillette said. “The idea of standing on the podium at the Paralympic Games is an amazing thought, but it’s also an amazing feeling. And few people get the chance to experience that.” That dream soon became reality.

TRAINING WITHOUT SIGHT

A typical training schedule of a Paralympic and Olympic athlete runs on a yearly basis. Athletes compete in the World Championships, in July or August, which occur in

training, Gillette typically performs a full-out jump about four or five times a week to avoid injury. When he is not jumping, his routine focuses heavily on drills and speed development, including bounds and skips, power skips, single leg hops, and high knees. “All of the other times, you’re doing drills. You’re working on building speed. Super, super-duper drill heavy,” Gillette said.

Despite the intensity of his training, Gillette has sustained only one major injury, a grade two-to-three quad strain, in June 2012. During the next three to four weeks, he used advanced recovery technology called Alter G, an anti-gravity treadmill that provides physical therapy by reducing pressure on the joints. Regarding another helpful technology, Gillette can often be seen wearing meta glasses, which help him navigate his surroundings and assist with daily tasks.

The four-year gap between the Paralympic and Olympic Games is a long stretch of time, and it may seem easy to lose the motivation to train and prepare for future competitions. To keep athletes motivated, each year is segmented to represent a certain theme, such as speed, power, or strength. “Breaking it down into those smaller goals helps you to be able to say, ‘Hey, man, I just had one heck of a week of training, I’m trying to do this again next week,” Gillette said. “And you see those results. And with the technology and data that we get, you’re able to see the trajectory of how your training is going. If it’s trending upward, it’s like, ‘Alright, I’m excited. Yeah, I’m ready to keep this going.”

TRAVEL STORIES

One of Gillette’s favorite places he has competed in was Barcelona, Spain in May 2014. “Amazing time, amazing weather. People are awesome. Food is great. Competition went well. And this is a great touristy area.”

His favorite stadium to have competed in was in London for the 2012 and 2017 World Championships. “That stadium is pretty amazing. In the UK, they have a different type of appreciation for track and field athletes. And so, they go all out when it’s time to host a competition.”

SUCCESS BEYOND THE TRACK

Gillette’s talents extend far beyond the track. As a powerful global inspirational speaker, he works to share his story and empower others to chase after their dreams. His words change people’s perspectives and leave a lasting impact on their lives. His speaking journey began in 2008 through the Paralympic Ambassador Program, where selected athletes shared their stories and spread awareness about the Paralympic movement. Through this program, Gillette learned how to build presentations, craft elevator pitches, and he even took improvisation classes. He honed his speaking skills and soon enough, received an opportunity to deliver a TEDx talk at the Symphony Hall in San Diego. This was a pivotal moment that accelerated his speaking career. The following year, he received several requests to speak to other audiences. In 2017 and 2018, he hired a speaking coach, opened a business account, and launched his career.

“And, I’ll never forget,” Gillette said, “I went to, it’s not there anymore, but I went to the Chase Bank up the street. It used to be by Chick-fil-A. And I went up there

with my money to start my business account. And yeah, the rest is history.” Today, Gillette has delivered more than 1000 talks to a wide range of audiences, including school-age students and Fortune 500 companies.

2028 LA PARALYMPIC GAMES

As the 2028 LA Olympic and Paralympic Games approach, the promise of a thrilling, emotional, and inspiring experience awaits. These upcoming Games are truly special. “It means a lot because number one, the Games are on home soil,” Gillette said. “And then number two, I think that it’s an opportunity for us to continue bringing more awareness to the Paralympic space.”

Gillette points out that a lot of Americans still confuse the Paralympics with the Special Olympics. Hosting the Paralympics in LA will reveal how talented and extraordinary these Paralympic athletes truly are. “Having that opportunity to put on full display what the Paralympics is, who the athletes are, how amazing their performances are, I think that is the exciting piece for sure,” Gillette said.

However, qualifying for the Games is no easy task. “There’s a number of sports where we literally do not know who’s going to make the team until a month or two before the games,” Gillette explained. “You don’t get your official team nominations until a month or so before the games.”



The Chula Vista Elite Athlete Training Center is open to the public, and Gillette encourages community members to visit and show their support. “We do have competitions here that happen occasionally. And being able to have folks come out here and support us, that would be huge,” Gillette said.

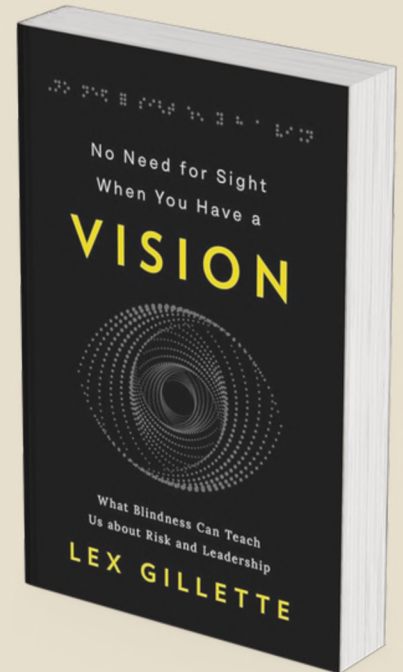
Recently, Gillette and his guide, Jerome Avery, hosted a “Connected Insight” event at the Chula Vista Elite Athlete Training Center in which participants had the opportunity to experience what it feels like to be a blind athlete and also a guide runner. The importance of trust and communication became immediately apparent. Watching the fluid motion in which Gillette and Avery move revealed the years of practice and partnership invested in each other. More importantly, this partnership represents teamwork at its highest level – a skill that they both now share with audiences around the world.

Gillette continues to serve as an inspiration and role model for all. His motto is powerful: “No need for sight when you have a vision.” Visit his website at www.LexGillette.com to purchase his books and clothing, and to book him for a future speaking presentation.

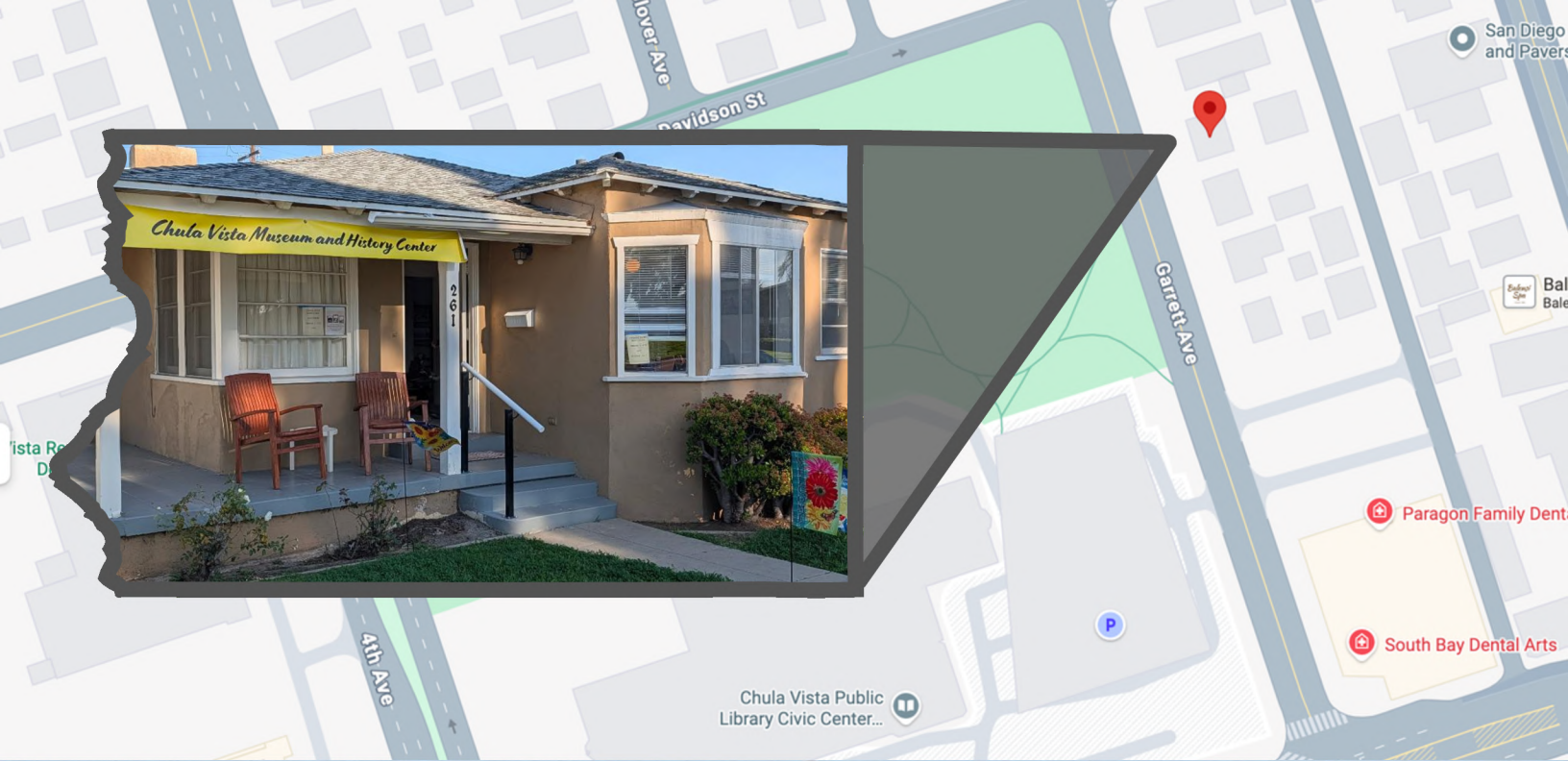


We want to thank Lex Gillette for sharing his inspiring story with The Towne Local Chula Vista magazine. Lex’s story is the second in a series of four stories about our Chula Vista Elite Athlete Training Center. In the previous Feb issue, we interviewed director Brian Melekian about the history and future of the Center. In future issues, enjoy the amazing story of Jerome Avery, Lex’s guide, to learn more about his own Olympic aspirations and what it takes to be a Paralympic guide. The fourth story in the series will be our interview with Olympian Harrison Williams, as he trains for the ten events of the Decathlon for the LA ‘28 games. As always, all past, present, and future issues can be found online at ChulaVistaMagazine.com

Do what you can to support these amazing athletes!



Read more about Lex’s amazing journey by purchasing his books and other merchandise on Amazon or at www.LexGillette.com.



Preserving Our Past: The Chula Vista Museum and History Center

By Yanellia Zavina Robles | Photos by Steve Wood

A time capsule of Chula Vista's past has opened its doors, inviting residents and visitors to explore the city's rich history. The Chula Vista Museum and History Center is located across the street from the Chula Vista Civic Center Library. In its early stages of development, this museum's mission is to preserve the city's diverse past and trace its journey from sprawling farmland to a bustling cultural hub. Pat Aguilar, the museum's Director and President, is making sure the mission is accomplished. "We want to make Chula Vista's history accessible," she states. "There is so much history here that people don't know about."

Aguilar is one of the several board members shaping the museum's vision. She is joined by Earl Jentz, Karen Jentz, Steve Wood, Joan Johnson, John Marsh, Marty Coulson, and Nicko Savala. Members have deep roots in Chula Vista and a passion for preserving local history.

The museum's plans came together not only through leadership but through location. With the help of Earl Jentz, organizers secured a site in the heart of Chula Vista. Aguilar describes this as a temporary home and has plans for a larger, more permanent space for the museum and its growing collection of artifacts, photos and memorabilia.

"Most of the artifacts came from the Board of Director's collection, and a lot came from Steve Wood" said Nicko Savala, 5th generation Chula Vistan and board member of the museum. And what kind of artifacts are the museum organizers searching for? "The City of Chula Vista was established in 1911. But I would like for us



(the museum) to go back further in time," said Aguilar, referring to one of the many goals set by the museum's organizers. They aim to foster a stronger community by encouraging local families to share artifacts passed down through generations. The museum seeks to attract more families, both new and generational, offering them an opportunity to immerse themselves in the deep history of Chula Vista. Exhibits are expected to explore a wide range of topics reflecting the city's distinctive past.

Exhibits will include the Indigenous history, the agricultural development of the area, the 1916 Sweetwater Valley flood, and the 1942 Japanese internment camps following the bombing of Pearl Harbor on Dec 7, 1941. The first exhibit open to the public will focus on the Japanese families that were forcibly removed from their homes here in Chula Vista.

Board member Nicko Savala believes that residents in their 20's and 30's overlook what he describes as a rich and vibrant history. "If this museum can generate even a little bit of interest among the younger generations, then we've accomplished our goal" Savala says. For Aguilar and the board, the museum is only the beginning. Its long-term vision depends on community involvement and on families willing to share their histories, artifacts, and stories, so that Chula Vista's past is not forgotten, but carried forward by the people who call it home.

Permanent or temporary donations can be brought directly to the museum, or items can be lent to the museum to be photographed/scanned and then returned. If you have questions, call director Earl Jentz at 619-316-2642.

Chula Vista Museum and History Center

261 Garrett Ave

Chula Vista, CA 91910

Open Fridays from 1:00pm - 4:30pm and Sundays from 12:00 - 3:00pm



Catching Up With Southwestern College Journalism



Alfonso Julian Camacho, Valeryah Lara-Urrea, Yanelli Robles, Alexa Lima, Natalia Rivera Banuet, Arianna Antillon at the Associate Collegiate Press panel "Diversity in the Collegiate Newsroom." San Francisco

Stories do not necessarily end once they have been published. As such, I wanted to follow up on a few stories, found in past issues of *The Towne Local Chula Vista* magazine, related to the groundbreaking achievements of Southwestern College Journalism students, under the guidance of Dr. Max Branscomb.

DIVERSITY PANEL

Dr. Max Branscomb—Members of the Editorial Board of the Southwestern College student newspaper *The Sun* were

invited by the Associated Collegiate Press to present a panel on "Diversity in the Student Newsroom" at its national convention this month in San Francisco. Panel members included Yanelli Robles, Alfonso Camacho, Arianna Antillon, Natalia Rivera Banuet, Valeryah Lara-Urrea and former Editor-in-Chief Alexa Lima. The students shared their experiences leading America's most diverse newsroom. They discussed the advantages of a multiracial staff with linguistic and cultural talents. Ms. Robles

(featured in the Oct. 2025 issue) spoke eloquently about the power of a polylingual staff and its ability to cover underrepresented communities.

Alexa Lima (featured in our inaugural issue Sept. 2025) pointed out that America is becoming more diverse. America's news media is working actively to diversify, and colleges have the opportunity to contribute to that mission by training more young journalists from underrepresented segments of our population. She is currently the

Editor-in-Chief of the CSU Chico student newspaper the *Orion*. The multi-award winning Ms. Lima said moving from Chula Vista to a less diverse region of the state was a revelation that brought home to her the importance of a diverse news media.

Students at *The Sun* speak at least 11 languages, including Mr. Camacho's use of Augmentative and Alternative Communication devices. Besides race and language, diversity includes religious practices, socio-economic experiences, nationality, ethnic background and more. "Diversity makes the team think better and arrive at better decisions," said Mr. Camacho.

NATIONAL AWARDS

Dr. Max Banskomb--Among the many highlights at the Associated Collegiate Press National Student Media Convention, the Southwestern College student newspaper *The Sun* won Best of Show. The Sun and Southwestern College *El Sol* Magazine were also named California Champions by the California College Media Association and the Journalism Association of Community Colleges. Alfonso Camacho won first place in the nation for Sports Writing for his tribute to former SWC baseball coach Jerry Bartow which was published in The Towne Local Chula Vista

magazine (Jan. 2026 issue). SWC journalism students were awarded national champions for opinion writing, feature writing, coverage of diversity, arts writing and design. *The Sun* was also named by Columbia University as the best collegiate newspaper two years in a row.

THE VISIT

Jeff Bettger--Some stories blossom into a series of beautiful events beyond expectation. In the Jan. 2026 issue, you can find the story of teacher Julie Schneider's 5th grade class from Howard Gardner Community Charter School in Chula Vista and their "Community Heroes" event. Community members were nominated as "heroes" and then were interviewed by the students. Yanelli Robles' presentation about *The Sun* newspaper was such a hit, that SWC invited the 5th graders to visit its Journalism Dept.

Yanelli Robles--Being chosen as one of the "Community Heroes" by the students at HGCS was an honor and incredibly meaningful to me. As Editor-in-Chief of *The Sun*, I found so much joy in sharing our newsroom with them, discussing its functions, introducing them to some of the editors, and even making them press badges. What made the experience even more special was knowing that after my initial presentation to their class, the students were

inspired to create their own student publication, *The Moon*. Seeing their curiosity and excitement reminded me of why opportunities like this matter so much.

When I was young, I knew I wanted to work in journalism, and I remember how powerful it was to imagine myself in those spaces. Who knows which of these young students might one day find themselves working in a newsroom. One student even said during the visit, "I want to come to Southwestern." To see students already thinking about their future and higher education at such a young age is something truly special.



Dr. Max Branscomb, Yanelli Zavina Robles, Julie Schneider, Mark Valen. (clockwise)

This experience also highlighted the important role educators play in shaping young minds. Their teacher, Ms. Schneider, is the dictionary definition of an educator. She clearly has a positive and lasting impact on her students. Teachers like Ms. Schneider inspire students to want to learn. It was a privilege to witness the curiosity and confidence she encourages in her class, and it was an even greater privilege to play a small role in inspiring their journey.

Dr. Max Branscomb--It was such a privilege to have the students and staff of the Howard Gardner Charter School visit Southwestern College. It was inspiring to meet so many bright, hard-working young journalists and story tellers. They asked excellent questions and shared many provocative insights into our community. I was impressed by their maturity, altruism and sense of service. I had memorable conversations with Axel, the Editor-in-Chief of *The Moon*, and Photo Editor Sinay, who took the terrific photos for the press badges made by our design coach Ken Pagano.

My SWC colleagues helped make the day a rousing success. SWC's own "Community Hero" Dr. Sylvia Garcia-Navarette planned the visit and provided lunch for

our guests. Trustee Robert Moreno spoke about his experiences as a journalism professional. Dean Diana Arredondo gave an inspiring message about the wonders of attending college. The Editorial Board of The Sun were gracious hosts. I am glad Mr. Jeff Bettger successfully nominated Ms. Robles as a "Community Hero" and started this connections between HGCS and SWC.

5th grade Student Natalia and Ahinoa--Imagine being a 5th grader experiencing college life in a big newsroom. Well on 3/12/26, we went on a classroom field trip to Southwestern College, and we want to share our experience. We went there because we had several heroes from SWC (Dr. Garcia-Navarette, Yanelli Robles, Sofia Petroulias), and they were kind enough to invite us.

The first room we visited was the newsroom. It was full of tables, folders, computers and whiteboards. Dr. Branscomb, the Journalism Professor, talked about how the newsroom works, while Ahinoa and I were busy writing down notes. Dr. Branscomb and Ms. Robles talked about the many newspaper awards they had won. Ahinoa and I saw that the walls were covered with different awards. Ms. Robles explained how they got into the Hall of Fame and how

they got named the best newspaper out of 100 different college newspapers across the country.

We next went to SWC's new botanical garden. Mr. Mark, who teaches gardening skills, gave us SO much information about gardening. He let us pick fresh strawberries from the garden and we all enjoyed it so much. After washing them, I thought "they look very juicy and taste absolutely amazing." Ahinoa's reaction was "they taste surprisingly good for coming out of dirt." As we were walking around, we saw a huge tree. Mr. Mark explained the tree was planted in 1980 by students who went there, so the tree is now 46 years old.

In a classroom, Mr. Mark talked about teaching students how to do floral design. We saw the computers that students can use to design flowers and bouquets for Quinceañeras. Mr. Mark also showed us landscape blueprints. My thought on this was "Mr. Mark has lots of great planning ideas." and Ahinoa's impression was "that is absolutely amazing."

To sum up our time at SWC, Ahinoa and I learned so many amazing facts, and the whole class loved the field trip deeply. We are thankful to SWC for inviting us to visit.

+++++

To subscribe to *The Moon*, email teacher Julie Schneider JSchneider@hgschool.org

VANESSA MORENO



I am a big fan of local artist Vanessa Moreno. Her paintings are bright, colorful, whimsical and thought-provoking. I was lucky to sit down with Vanessa to find out more about her journey and inspirations.

JEFF BETTGER: Hi Vanessa. Tell me a little about your general background.



VANESSA MORENO: I grew up in Chula Vista and have lived here for over 30 years. I have one younger sister, Cassandra Jordan, who is also an artist. I am married to the most amazing loving husband, and we share a beautiful son together. I have been a professional artist for 5 years but have been creating art ever since I was very little.

JEFF: How/when did your interest in art begin?

VANESSA: My mom told me that I was very interested in drawing and coloring from a very early age. My earliest memory that stands out is when I was about 7 or 8 years old. I did a freehand drawing from my favorite book series Captain Underpants. I realized that art gave me so much creative freedom. As a kid, you are always being told what to do. I liked that I didn't have to go by

certain standards or rules when it came to art.

JEFF: What forms of art do you create--watercolor, charcoal, oil, etc

VANESSA: Most of the time I use acrylic, but I use a wide variety of techniques. A lot of the time it's mixed media, which varies from graphite pencil, posca markers, pens, and other physical resources that are in my studio. I use whatever I need to create an art piece that resembles the image I have in my head.

I take a lot of inspiration from the subject of mental health, either from my own experiences or my observations when I am out in the world. The topic of mental health is something I am really passionate about and I feel the more we talk about it the more we come to understand one

another. I also love to remind viewers of my art that although we are adults, we have an inner child that still needs to be nurtured.

JEFF: Yes, I can see both themes when looking at your paintings. What makes you most proud of your work?

VANESSA: I am most proud that I have found a sense of purpose in my art. That viewers feel inspired by the work I create. It reminds me that everything I have experienced to this point had a purpose. After all those years of



practicing, seeing my work in exhibitions, and hearing how my art inspired others, it helped me solidified my decision to make art my career.

JEFF: What kind of formal training have you had?

VANESSA: I took art classes throughout my school years and audited a painting class at a community college. But for the most part I am a self-taught artist. I learned how to draw and paint on my own. I spend much of my time as a full-time artist in my studio, either creating or brainstorming different ideas to bring my pieces to life visually.

JEFF: What advice do you have for young artists just starting to make art?

VANESSA: Don't be afraid to create. Don't let anyone's opinion deter you from following your dreams as an artist. Even if the road ahead looks uncertain, go for it.

Don't allow the "what ifs" keep you from pursuing something that will make you happy.

JEFF: What is your dream for the future regarding your art?

VANESSA: My dream is to see my art featured in some of the most well-known galleries around the world. I want to share my message with others. I want people to know that art can be beautiful form of therapy that can help nurture mental health.

JEFF: Thank you Vanessa for sharing your art and your message. We look forward to seeing your future work. People can find you at IG @classychickart or at classychickart@gmail.com.

CREATING FILMS IN CHULA VISTA



by Jeff Bettger / Photos courtesy of CVEC

Think of a favorite movie you enjoyed watching on a big screen—Star Wars, Raiders of the Lost Ark, Avatar. How about a live concert with an enormous stage—The Rolling Stones, Taylor Swift. Or that one advertisement that left a lasting impression—Budweiser’s Clydesdales during the Superbowl or Nike’s Just Do It campaign? Each of these memorable productions required a highly trained and creative team. Now ask yourself this question—what if future productions such as these could be created in Chula Vista?

Most stories have a beginning, a middle and then an ending with a big reveal. I will break from that tradition and give the big reveal first. This story is about the Chula Vista Entertainment Complex. An entertainment production juggernaut that has already arrived in Chula Vista. Here is what you need to know:

1. What is the Chula Vista Entertainment Complex?
CVEC is a group of experts and facilities creating films, video/audio recordings, podcasts and more while using leading- edge technology.
2. Is this a big deal?
Yes, a VERY big deal!
3. Is it important for our region’s economy?
Yes, VERY important.

4. Will it provide a wide range of jobs for our future workforce?

Yes, more than you can probably imagine!

In this article, I can provide only an overview of the key components of the Chula Vista Entertainment Complex. For more details, go to YouTube, search for ChulaVistaMagazine, then watch the 17-minute video of CEO Aaron David Roberts describing the impressive plans in more detail.



All massive projects require a dedicated and talented team. Such projects also require a leader with the relevant background, a forward-looking vision, and an unwavering passion. Meet Aaron David Roberts (who was generous with his time to sit down for this interview). Aaron is an energetic producer/director named after his father, Dave Roberts, who ran a commercial production company here in San Diego. This allowed a young Aaron to watch the filming of commercials for local businesses such as the Padres, Barona Casino and other clients. It also gave him knowledge of the lingo and workings of a film set.

Aaron applied this knowledge at school, creating videos instead of written essays whenever his teachers would allow. After an injury in high school derailed his dream of playing baseball professionally, Aaron started his own production company with some of his friends when he was twenty years old. The rest, as they say, is history.

PHASE I

You have likely seen the new massive modern building just south of the Otay Ranch Town Center in the Millenia neighborhood. Level 0 will be the home of the SDSU Nursing Program. Levels 1 & 2 will be the new City of Chula Vista library. According to Aaron,

"We're taking over the top two floors. It's about 37,500 square feet per floor. On the third floor, we plan to put our community creative space or community co-work, essentially building a bunch of turnkey amenities. So that'll be podcast studios, photo studios, content sets, some smaller LED wall studios, edit bays, and also just community meeting spaces."

This space will allow local creatives the tools and resources to make professional-level work. Regarding the cost,

"We're going to be operating that space out of monthly memberships or day passes. If you need the facilities only once for 4-hours or you will be using it often, we will set up a payment system for you."

Aaron became justifiably excited when describing the fourth floor.

"It will be the corporate offices, as well as basically a suite of Hollywood-level, post-production facilities. This would still be open to any local company that wants to use them, but obviously the pricing is going to be naturally a bit higher. So all of that being said, we are on track to have this open pretty much in line with the library around the end of summer or the beginning of fall this year."

PHASE 2

The next major step in the plan will be the purchase of the 8.64 acre vacant lot across the street from the Millenia Building. This will house Hollywood-level sound stages. According to Aaron,

"These will be giant warehouses with 30-40 foot ceilings. This will house 90,000 square feet of virtual production capable soundstage space. So essentially virtual production. It's the new way forward for Hollywood after the green screen. For example, instead of filming Star Wars in front of a green screen and then adding in the stars and outer space after in post-production, now they film all these scenes in front of a very high-end LED wall. The wall can be 100 feet long. It can kind of curve 270 degrees. You can even have a wall that has LED panels over the top of it. So, you're filming the background needed in real time. To the camera, it's going to look like the background is real. This technique is more immersive for the actors as well. They will feel like they are in outer space or in the desert or in a big city. It also saves costs because you could potentially film four different locations in one day, just by changing the background on the LED screens and bringing in some different props."

But there are other applications as well.

"We can use that space with video game companies, people doing augmented reality or XR motion capture. We've even had conversations about applications for military training, simulators, and training for big businesses. One of our favorite applications is major music touring artists. For example, big music acts utilize those same LED screens"

as stage backgrounds. But to prepare for the tour, those tech teams need two to four weeks to rehearse, to build their wall, to figure out the different configurations, and to start testing the show. So then when they're on tour, they've already got it dialed in. We see our facility becoming a leading provider for this type of concert set up and rehearsal. Phase 2 is going to be the economic driver that brings in film and television production to Chula Vista. We are hoping to have Phase 2 completed in two to three years from now."

PHASE 3

But what really excites Aaron and his team is the potential for what they are calling Phase 3.

"If we're able to have the success that we believe we are going to have with Phase 1 and Phase 2, we want to purchase between 20 and 50 additional acres from the city and build real Hollywood backlot studios the size of Warner Brothers and Paramount. One of my favorite ideas is to build a mile stretch of fake freeway. It is so expensive to close a real freeway, especially in California, to film a car chase. With a fake freeway, we could film any time of the day, blow up a car on it or whatever we need. I hope that it will be completed in ten years."



Why Chula Vista?

I asked Aaron why he selected Chula Vista as the location for his project. He first mentioned the great weather, the availability of land, but also,

"It's actually a very homegrown effort that came out of my need and desire. I didn't want to move to LA to go pursue my dreams and my vision. I didn't want to move to New York. I didn't want to move to Atlanta. I wanted to do it right here because I felt that there was so much talent here. I just, I mean, who doesn't love San Diego, right?"

But another important reason was the City of Chula Vista's willingness to work on a big project such as this.

"Chula Vista was in the running for a Netflix studio a decade ago, a large Amazon headquarters, and even in talks with the Chargers to bring the football team to Chula Vista. Recently, Chula Vista has become the home of the newest Gaylord Convention Center. The City of Chula Vista wants to provide more economic opportunities for all of its citizens."

Another attractive aspect was the proximity to Tijuana.

"I know a lot of the creatives who live in Chula Vista but are originally from Tijuana. They still have family there and go back and forth often. And there are so many great, talented creatives who live in TJ. There's so much culturally to work with there, you know, that we really are excited to be in this region."

Benefit to Chula Vista

When evaluating a civic project, it is important to look at the benefits to the city.

"Looking at past data, San Diego had a film studio in Kearny Mesa from the early 1990's to about the mid-2000's. It was called Stu Siegel and had 77,000 square feet. In 2005, there was a study done by the county of San Diego that said this film studio brought over \$100 million of economic impact into the region."

And that was back in 2005! So obviously with inflation, it would be more today."

Types of Jobs Created

For somebody not familiar with the film industry, I asked Aaron to name some of the jobs required on a set.

"Yeah, it's pretty much the whole gamut. Being a production assistant is usually where you get your feet wet on a film set. The production assistant is that ground level problem solver when something goes wrong and you need something. Going from there, there's your camera department, your lighting department, and your audio departments.

We're also going to have a need for more engineer-level specialists, when we're talking about the LED walls and panels and systems and data infrastructure. There's obviously going to be visual effects artists who are going to help populate what's actually on those screens. And then there's also set construction workers, carpenters, electricians, and costume designers. And then there's also post-production with editors and color correctors, and people who need to mix audio. So, there's a ton of different job opportunities in the film industry, in addition to producers, writers, actors, and salespeople."

Workforce Development

My next question to Aaron was, how can local creatives start getting the training they need to have a realistic opportunity of getting one of those jobs? Aaron's answer gave me great hope.

"Yeah, workforce development and training is a real big piece of what we are doing over the next two years until Phase 2 is open. We're going to be doing a lot of that on the third floor of the current building. We will have classes, workshops and intensive trainings. In fact, we've already begun doing those. Some of them have been free, but we want to elevate the level of teachers that we can get, so we're probably going to start charging a fairly nominal fee. Our COO,

Alysha Haran, just taught a two-day screen writing workshop in February. We will be rolling those out this year, aiming for about one workshop per month, to get those wheels in motion. And then, once our facilities are open, near the end of summer or the beginning of fall this year, that's when we're really going to ramp up. We feel it is a great way for us to further integrate ourselves into the community and connect with those young, aspiring entertainment professionals and writers. We have also had conversations with local colleges, especially Southwestern, about possible future collaborations."

To follow up, I asked Aaron how can interested readers find out about the classes and about CVEC in general?

The best way for people to get involved and follow along is to follow us on social media. Our Instagram and Facebook is ChulaVistaEC. Our website is ChulaVistaEC.com From there, they can join our mailing list. That's the best way to find out what's going on, what's happening, what's coming, and how they can get involved."

San Diego Film Initiative

The last topic I will cover is a bit more complicated, but very important. This is the development of a San Diego Film Initiative and tax incentives to bring more film productions here.

"The economic benefits of film and television production, especially when you have tax incentive programs, can really be great for a local economy. There are studies that have been done in Georgia, Minnesota, and New Mexico that found that for states with good incentive programs, every dollar a municipality spends can return between six and eight dollars back to the local economy.

The reason that a lot of film production has left Hollywood, and California as a whole, is because other states and municipalities like Georgia, New Mexico, and New Jersey, really invested in these film incentive programs, right? In these states, your production applies, the state approves you, and then you basically

get anywhere between 20% to 35% back on eligible local expenses. That's paid by either the state or county government back to the production company to encourage them to come and film their movie in that state. California has a program at the state level. At the state level, if you film outside of Los Angeles, you get a 35% base tax return rate, you get 40% back on eligible expenditures, and 45% back on eligible labor. So that alone is already a super competitive program. What we're really trying to do is stack county and city incentives on top of that to create the most competitive place to film in the country. And honestly, probably one of the most competitive places to film in the world, because Canada, the UK, and Australia, have also started to offer heavy incentives to bring productions to their countries.

With the SD Film Initiative, we are working with local unions, such as the IATSE 1.2 to reestablish a San Diego Film Office and Film Commission, which ended around 2010. Major film production areas have a county commission and a county film office that an outside production can first go to when they're looking to film in that region. At the city level, we've been talking about a pilot program to see what a city incentive program might look like. So, we are now collecting signatures to

let the county supervisors know that getting film production here is important."

I asked Aaron to elaborate on how the initiative would help local hires.

"We sometimes see in the press headlines that say Hollywood is coming to San Diego. And a lot of local people will comment that we don't need to bring Hollywood people down here, etc. That makes it sound like production companies from Hollywood are coming down here to do all the work. And to clarify, we are going to be getting business and productions from L.A., but also from all over the country, all over the world, right? But the idea is with those film incentives, all of those companies are going to be incentivized heavily to hire locally. That's how they're going to get their money back. They don't get their money back on labor if they're bringing in people from out of state. They don't get their money back from the city and the county if they're hiring people from L.A. They get that money back by hiring people who live and work in Chula Vista or San Diego County. So, get involved, sign our petition, join our mailing list so you know what's going on and understand that we are really trying to do this thing right for the creatives and economy in Chula Vista and San Diego County."



Community

I hope this article has answered some of the questions regarding the Chula Vista Entertainment Complex. Obviously, this will not be our last article about CVEC. As a strong advocate for the arts in Chula Vista, The Towne Local Chula Vista magazine is excited about the benefits that CVEC brings, especially to our younger generation. One of Aaron's particularly admirable traits is despite the many demands of leading this massive effort, he still loves the creative process. In particular, he loves the community of creatives he has met over his career. He talked about the importance of finding your tribe, i.e., that group of other creatives who motivate you, inspire you, and support you. For local creatives who want to join the film world, CVEC provides an opportunity to meet the people you may collaborate with in the future. But Aaron also provides realistic expectations. Nobody walks into a studio and gets hired to direct a major movie first thing. Aaron's advice is, if you want to be a writer, then start writing now and write as much as possible. If you want to make films, start by making short films now with your phone. The only way to gain skill and knowledge is from practice. Whether your projects turn out good or bad, you will learn something you can apply in the future.

Note from the Editor: The movie "One Battle After Another," starring Leonardo DiCaprio recently won six academy awards and was filmed partly in Otay Mesa and San Diego. Movies live forever and are known worldwide. Movie fans even enjoy traveling to find the exact filming locations of their favorite movies. The Chula Vista Economic Complex is working to bring a wide variety of economic opportunities to Chula Vista and the South Bay region.

Thank you Aaron for taking time for this interview and for the exciting plans you and your team have for Chula Vista and the South Bay!

To the right: renderings of buildings and stages planned for future phases.





Festival Founder Ethan Van Thillo



Official 2026 Festival Poster



Director Antonio Munoz De Mesa

SAN DIEGO LATINOS *ON THE BIG SCREEN*

By Blanca Esthela Castaneda Garcia
Photos courtesy of the San Diego Latino Film Festival

Every year in San Diego, the best new Latino films come to the big screen. This time, the Media Arts Center presented the 33rd San Diego Latino Film Festival from March 18 to 22, from the sleek recliner seats of the AMC cinema in Mission Valley to the alluring glass halls of the Digital Gym Cinema in Downtown.

Established in 1994, the festival was one of the first in the United States to showcase stories told by the diverse Latino diaspora. "I came to San Diego after graduating in Latin American Studies at UC Santa Cruz, with the goal of organizing a student film festival," explained founder Ethan van Thillo. After partnering with the Latin American Studies department and the *Voz Fronteriza* newspaper at UC San Diego, alongside the Autonomous University of Baja California in Tijuana, the festival began as a binational affair amongst college students, which by 1998 had grown enough to move into a mainstream movie theater.

"For this year's edition, instead of just bringing films to San Diego and expecting people to come, we curated films that connect with San Diegans specifically," said Kristian Perez-Franco, Exhibitions Senior Manager from the nonprofit organization that manages the festival.

As a way to engage with a larger community, the festival made sure that subtitles were provided to grant access to different international Latino voices, and created opportunities to meet some of the talented artists behind the cameras. "I always tell people that haven't attended before that this is a way to travel to these countries through cinema. You don't have to be Latino to enjoy it," van Thillo remarked.

To kick-off the festival, the Media Arts Center hosted a party to reveal this edition's official poster. The selection process was determined by a submission competition that awarded not only

a winner but also ten other finalists. "There were 75 submissions from all over the world, artists from Mexico to Argentina," Perez-Franco explained about the annual contest.

Inside the reverberating walls of the Woo Studio in Barrio Logan, Axel Arevalo, a native San Diegan and recent college graduate, was announced as the winner in a wave of cheers and applause. His artwork, which depicts a family immersed in an endearing moment of being entertained by film, is directly inspired by Arevalo's childhood as a cinema lover in a Latino household. "This year's festival is significant due to the current political state. I think it's more important than ever that our stories are shared. There is this want of proving people wrong, especially those in the administration who call us criminals," he emphasized.

The poster contest finalists were all awarded with passes for the entire festival and certificates granted by San Diego County Supervisor for District 1 Paloma Aguirre, whose public service targets the South Bay Area, including Chula Vista. "As an elected official, helping support the arts is very important. What is different this year is that Latinos are being targeted by the Trump administration," she expressed. "Art is such a beautiful way of resistance. I have seen many different community groups come in and out. With the film festival, especially in the age of streaming, it is important to bring people back to the cinema."

Presenting both short and feature length films, the festival's line-up varied across genres and media, "There is a selection committee and a jury consisting of casual movie-goers, professors, and even foreign filmmakers who watch and judge the movies submitted," explained van Thillo, "this year we received over 600 entries, the process consisted of assigning formats and genres, such as comedy and sci-fi, in order to be scored and reviewed and eventually selected." As Luis Martinez, one of the festival's curators, said "Selecting films is a very collaborative and interactive process. This year we got a lot of high-quality movie submissions to pick from, so much that it struck me," he accentuated.

Michael Caro, board member and secretary, also commented on the quality of the film submissions. "There is one film that made the cut called "Arthur Avenue" that I am really excited about. It was directed by Joey Medina," he says about the Bronx-set short-film about mobsters and the local LGBTQ+ community. "The story grabbed me so much, it was so rich and full of components, I was so surprised when I realized it was not a feature-length film."

Celebrating San Diego, of course, comes with acknowledging its transborder culture, "A focus on Chicano stories this year is something that really stands out," Moisés Esparza, Director of Development for the Media Arts Center, explains. "We also are excited about our sports-themed showcase, as we listened to our community members on what types of movies they want to see."

During the festival, issues were raised following a New York Times report regarding César Chávez, prominent United Farm Workers Union organizer, on sexual abuse claims made by Ana Murguía, Debra Rojas, and fellow union organizer Dolores Huerta. As the festival highlighted documentaries and short-films about the farmworkers' rights movements, his figure lingered throughout several screenings of the festival.

"In this time where my heart is broken for Dolores, for the survivors, for the movement, this movie helps me remind me of why I get up everyday", claimed Greg Akili, a San Diego local and one of the subjects of "Against The Odds: The birth of the United Domestic Workers of America", a documentary film that premiered during the festival about the founding of the United Domestic Workers (UDW) in southern California in the late 1970s. The subjects portrayed include fellow union organizers Raquel Beltran, Fahari Jeffers, and Ken Seaton-Msemaji, on their quest to aid and enhance conditions for domestic labor workers. The film showcases the Latina and African-American women, as they

travelled throughout Los Angeles and San Diego to gather people to join their movement under the guidance of then-leader of the United Farm Workers, César Chávez.

Among the many talented film makers present at the festival, there were none bigger than Chicano theater-icon and film-maker Luis Valdez. The PBS funded documentary "American Pachuco" (2026), directed by David Alvarado, presented Valdez's life and work as showcased through enchantingly remastered archival footage of the United Farm Workers' marches, alongside recorded auditions and set recordings of Valdez's films "La Bamba" (1987) and "Zoot Suit" (1981). The documentary also includes exciting interviews with renown singer Linda Ronstadt; activist Dolores Huerta; actor Lou Diamond Phillips; president of the Directors Guild of America, Taylor Hackford; and intriguingly narrated by actor Edward James Olmo.

"It took a woman's sensibility to defend theater within the union," explains Valdez of his involvement with the United Farm Workers, as he initially pitched to Dolores Huerta the idea of integrating theatre into the union to maintain spirit during the months-long

strikes. Given that the documentary heavily relies on archival footage of Chávez and portrays him as a charismatic but agitated leader, "We were one of the first groups to leave the union, but we didn't leave the cause, we didn't leave the Chicano movement, we decided to hike it up even more when the Vietnam War started, we protested for it and we are still protesting."

Overall, the 2026 film line-up succeeded in offering a wider perspective on what it means to be Latino in the United States and outside of it. The challenge of getting these stories picked up by studios and showcased to larger audiences is a matter of not only entertainment, but also education. The San Diego Latino Film Festival wrapped up by saying farewell to the magical halls of the Mission Valley cinema and then hosting a closing night party at the organization's office building on Park & Market in Downtown San Diego. All involved this year look forward to the 2027 edition of the San Diego Latino Film Festival. I want to thank all the participants who took time to speak with me and share their thoughts about the importance of the Festival.



Board Members of Media Art Center with San Diego Latino Film Festival Poster Winner Axel Arevalo



RASPADOS SHAVE ICE

The Neighborhood Hangout

Located at 2168 Logan Ave, San Diego, CA 92113



Raspados Shave Ice is a locally owned dessert shop providing all-natural ice cream and shave ice with house-made, all natural syrups. Flavors are inspired by the local community of Barrio Logan, including mango, tamarindo and guanabana. The shop also continues to be a meeting space and art gallery. Located in the heart of the Barrio Logan Arts District, local artists are inspired by nearby historic Chicano Park. Owned by Michael Falcón, Raspados Shave Ice is open Wednesday-Sunday, 12:30pm-8:30pm.

JEFF BETTGER: Michael, I am loving this shave ice! I can see why this place is so popular! But I think I remember hearing that you were an art gallery to start?

MICHAEL FALCON: Thanks Jeff. Yeah, so the art movement here in Barrio Logan was really huge at the time. In 2017, we got our hands on this space and in October 2018, we opened the front as just an art gallery and my wife was using the back for her consulting business. We had the Barrio Art Crawl, which was the second Saturday of every month, and just tons of people would come out, and it was great for about two years. And then COVID hit and that event has not been the same since. The event still exists and we're still trying to get people out, but yeah, it has not been the same since COVID hit. When COVID hit in 2020, I was in the process of getting the plans approved to add the ice cream shop. So, in a way, that was lucky, because we were going to close for the remodel anyway.

JEFF: And why ice cream? What gave you that idea?

MICHAEL: Well, man, I love ice cream. I talked to Patty and Mary Ellen at Neiderfranks Ice Cream in National City about selling their ice cream. They have been making great ice cream for 18 years and everybody loves it. And so, we opened in 2021 as an ice cream shop/art gallery. Things were going well until the economy slowed down last year. I thought to myself that maybe it was time to reinvent

myself a little bit. Actually, I had always wanted to sell flavored ice like they had in Hawaii. In December 2025, I closed the shop for a month and did the entire renovation on my own. On January 7th, 2026, we reopened as Raspados Shave Ice. I make all the syrups myself. We still have Neiderfranks Ice Cream and homemade cookies.

JEFF: What is your most popular flavor?

MICHAEL: Everyone's really loving the dragon fruit guava and of course the mango. I always try to add new flavors based on the best available fruits.

JEFF: That's terrific. Tell me about the art gallery.

MICHAEL: Back in 2018, when we first opened, I teamed up with Armando Nunez.

He's one of the original muralists from Chicano Park. He did the original historical mural back in 1970. He was one of the first artists we had here and eventually became my resident artist. But my policy is to show art from community members.

JEFF: I am so glad to see this. It is so important for art to be accessible to people in their everyday lives.

MICHAEL: In 2018 when we opened, there were three other art galleries just here on this block. Then after COVID hit, we are the only full-time art gallery on the block. The ice cream and shave ice sustain it.

JEFF: Are you an artist yourself, Michael?

MICHAEL: Yeah, I painted the mural outside, the one with the Jaguar, back in 2022. I also did the graphic art for the new business logo and the sign for the art gallery.

JEFF: Michael, it was a pleasure to meet you. What a cool place to come to enjoy some delicious, sweet treats while admiring some wonderful art. You have created an important community space. Thank you!

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